Key sites critical to the alliance of doña Marina and Hernando Cortés
Rethinking Malinche

Frances Kafttunen

Marina/Malintzin/Malinche. There was no one remotely like her then, nor has there been since in the semimillennial history of the Americas after Columbus. Pocahontas and Sacajawea run distant seconds. Like these other women, she is now enclosed within an edifice of myth, a construction all the more fantastic and obscuring because it has had more centuries to develop and because many different groups have an investment in it. While the myth of Sacajawea was erected almost entirely by the American women's suffrage movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the idea of Malinche has different resonances for Europeans and for Mexicans, for Latin American men and for feminists, for Mesoamerican Indians and for mestizos, for Mexican nationalists, historians, sociologists, writers, and artists. Her myth is pervasive within Mexico and beyond its edges, but, understandably in light of how long ago the events of the conquest took place, it is much embroidered. It is time to set aside the accretion of colonial and postcolonial ideas about her that are, from our point of view, old (although not nearly old enough to be credible) and to try to think about her anew.

Her name, like her person, was handed back and forth and in-
vested with multiple significances. When she was given to Hernando Cortés and his party in 1519, she received the baptismal name of Marina. Nahuatl speakers, who recognized no distinction between $r$ and $l$, thereafter addressed her reverentially as Malintzin. The Spaniards in turn heard Malintzin as Malinche, a name that in the course of Mexican history has become synonymous with selling out to foreigners. Yet to the old conqueror Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who made her the heroine of his account of the conquest of Mexico, she was always “doña Marina,” the respectful Spanish doña being the very equivalent of the Nahuatl honorific -tizin.

The Nahua's Malintzin

Indigenous Mexico has represented Malintzin in myriad ways. She appears in pictorial documents and maps from the sixteenth century on. In 1552 the Indian city of Tlaxcala, which had allied itself with Cortés against the Aztecs, commissioned a painted record (lienzo) of the events of the conquest, and she figures again and again in its eighty-eight scenes, versions of which have proliferated like fragments of the True Cross (fig. 14.1).¹

What appears to be the oldest surviving piece is not a lienzo at all but four scenes painted on native paper and heavily annotated in Nahuatl. Both the handwriting and the style of personal and place-name glyphs indicate that this version dates from the mid to late sixteenth century. Two scenes are of the meeting of Cortés and the lords of Tlaxcala on the road outside the city. One is of Cortés parleying with the lord Xicohtencatl in his palace, and one is of Xicohtencatl and the other Tlaxcalan lords presenting their daughters to Cortés and his soldiers in a sign of their alliance with the Spaniards against Moteuczoma and the Triple Alliance of Mexico Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan. Marina (so labeled) mediates each scene.²

It was Nahua colleagues of fray Bernardino de Sahagún who wrote and illustrated the Florentine Codex, a grand project undertaken in the third quarter of the sixteenth century. Book 12 tells of the conquest of Mexico in parallel columns of Nahuatl and Spanish, and already in the frontispiece there Malintzin is, interpreting on the beach even as the Spaniards unload their crates, firearms, and livestock. She appears in half a dozen more illustrations within the text, and book
12 ends with her interpreting for Cortés as he addresses the defeated rulers of the Triple Alliance.

Dramatically, she is a central character in folk theatricals that have survived to the present. At some point after evangelization was under way, pageants were devised in which Malintzin and “the Captain” (Cortés) are the agents of the triumph of Christianity, and these enactments live on both in indigenous languages and in Spanish as the Dance of the Conquest. In some versions of the danza de la conquista, Malintzin dispenses with the Captain altogether, and in other versions, a single actor with a double-faced mask plays both Malintzin and Cortés.3

This is no new thing, for Bernal Díaz tells us that Nahuatl speakers addressed Cortés himself as “Malinche.” To Díaz, this was simply ellipsis for “Marina’s Captain,” since Cortés and his inter-
preter were always together when negotiations were conducted. Yet if we consider the long Mesoamerican tradition of two-headed and two-faced figures and the Aztec tradition of ixiptla, "representation," there may be more to this matter of Cortés being "Malinche." In Aztec religious practice chosen human beings served as temporary embodiments of deities, providing them with a conduit through which to speak and act in the world inhabited by humans. At the end of their service some of these stand-ins would be flayed, and priests would dress in their skins in order to speak and act through them in yet another way. Perhaps the Aztecs and their neighbors perceived the NahuaI-speaking woman as the ixiptla, "representative," of something behind both her and Cortés, the mouthpiece of some poorly understood and mysterious "Malinche" making itself manifest for the first time in Cemanâhuac (the Nahua’s own name for their world), where no Malinche had ever been known before.

Much has been made of the notion that the indigenes initially perceived the European men as gods. So far as I know, nothing has been made of the possibility that their interpreter was perceived as the ixiptla of a supernatural force. Yet it might help us to understand her remarkable nerve in situations of sheer terror. For the Spaniards, the most horrific fate imaginable was to be taken captive by the Aztecs and sacrificed before their pyramid-top temples (as some of them in fact were). For a person from within Mesoamerican culture acting out the sort of mediating role doña Marina had assumed, the final trip up the pyramid steps to the waiting sacrificial knife was inevitable and not without honor. The good ixiptla had to live each day for itself, performing his or her role to perfection.

Ixiptla refers to both one’s “representative” and one’s “likeness”; xayacatl is both “visage” and “mask.” Collectors of Mexican dance paraphernalia catalog scores of Malintzin masks. Many are red. Many bear lizards and snakes on cheek and brow, creatures associated with rain. Some are lovely, and some are hideous. Some are militant: as a participant in the conquest Malintzin may wear an ostrich-plumed European helmet or stare out from the open beak of an Aztec eagle-warrior’s headdress. Perhaps the most striking indigenous representation of her, and certainly a very common one among the dance masks, is as a pink-cheeked, blue-eyed European woman, perhaps with devil’s horns or a ruff of butterfly wings or both. In
one drama she weaves among the dancers threatening them with a 
snake, as one by one they fall to the ground, her victims. Here Mal-
intzin merges with the intimidating Mesoamerican deity Coatllicue 
(Her Skirt Is Snakes) and the biblical Eve.

Indians of Mexico's central highlands associate her not only with 
deficiency of pigment and with reptiles but also with mountains. For 
people who live today in the states of Tlaxcala and Puebla, the vol-
cano from which the rains descend on their valley is Malinche. In the 
Nahua communities within the Valley of Mexico, Malintzin stories 
are told about the snowy volcano Iztaccihuatl, "White Woman," that 
looks so much like a sleeping woman. In these stories she is provider 
and protector rather than traitor, a presence whose resolute slumber 
guards agricultural folk just as the neighboring volcano Popocat-
tepetl guards her, a theme that has made its way onto hundreds of 
thousands of Mexican calendars and velvet paintings.

According to Bernal Díaz, in 1526, after Cortés had taken her off 
to be his interpreter among the Mayas, rumors flew among the Span-
ish residents of Mexico City that doña Marina had died and been re-
vealed in the night burning with Cortés in hell-fire. But they were 
reported back alive soon after. That was a false alarm, but in time she 
became firmly associated with la Llorona, the wailing woman who 
haunts Mexican nights grieving for her children and leading unwary 
men to their deaths. At the very beginning of book 12 of the Florentine 
Codex a wailing woman appears as an omen of the coming destruction 
of Aztec Tenochtitlan. The identification of the inconsolable 
and dangerous Llorona with Malintzin/Malinche came sometime 
later and continues to this day in Mexico among Indians and non-
Indians alike.

Sixteenth-century indigenous representations of Malintzin por-
tray her not as evil or immoral but as powerful. Her garments are el-
egant, her hair coiled in the distinctive horns of the proper Nahua 
matron, her demeanor serious. The Nahua writers of the Florentine 
Codex do not fail to accord her name the honorific -tzin every time 
they mention her, while they only occasionally write "Moteucó-
matzin" [sic], especially after the point in their narrative when 
Cortés and his party occupy Moteucóma's city. Later Cuauhtemoc 
Enter's account and shares with Marina the courtesy of consist-
tent, unfailing -tzin. Thus it is clear that neither resistance to the
Spaniards nor ultimately surrender deprived an individual of honor in the eyes of Sahagún's assistants; both "Quauhtemochtzin" and "Malintzin" are spoken of with deferential respect, and "Motecuāoma" is not, a subtle matter of Nahuatl morphology that does not survive translation into English or Spanish.

The Construction of Malinche

According to Bernal Díaz's account of the conquest, doña Marina was beautiful and intelligent, capable and loyal, admired and well liked by the men whose lives were on the line in the conflict. He credits her with repeatedly saving them all from disaster. Cortés himself is almost silent about the woman who not only interpreted for him but also bore him a son whom he named Martín after his father. But his men and their children and grandchildren corroborated Bernal Díaz's testimony. At the very end of the sixteenth century, in a probanza (petition) seeking a reward in recognition of her father's services, Isabel Pérez de Arteaga assembled the testimony of witnesses that her father had attached himself to doña Marina and been the first Spaniard to learn to speak Nahuatl. The witnesses agreed among themselves that Juan Pérez de Arteaga, like his leader Cortés, was also called "Malinche," a statement in accord with what Bernal Díaz had also written far away in Guatemala. Not least among the individuals who raised probanzas elaborating doña Marina's role in the conquest were her own daughter by Juan Jaramillo and her grandson, the son of don Martín Cortés.

So it was that among creoles, much as in the Dance of the Conquest, she was celebrated for her crucial aid in defeating all who opposed Cortés and for bringing Christianity to the heathen. Bernal Díaz places in her mouth a speech in which she asserts that she considers herself fortunate to be a Christian and saved from the worship of idols and moreover to have had the honor of bearing a son for Cortés and to be married to Juan Jaramillo.

But this comfortable tradition of doña Marina as cheerful philanthropist was not to last. Elizabeth Salas has exactly pinpointed the sea change: "Her status as a great conquistadora declined at exactly the same time that the Mexicans threw out the Spaniards in 1821."
The casting of great bells traditionally requires some human blood, and so it seems to be in the forging of national identity. A scapegoat was needed for three centuries of colonial rule, and one was easily found in doña Marina, who was sexualized as the Indian woman who could not get enough of the white man.\textsuperscript{15}

In a wink she was demoted from crucial interpreter and counselor to lover and wily mistress of Cortés, traitor to her race, mother of mestizos. To this day it seems that hardly any writer, male or female, can describe her in any terms but sexual. Patricia de Fuentes identifies her as “Cortés’s mistress and the mother of his bastard son,” and Frans Blom refers to her as “a tender morsel.”\textsuperscript{16} In her book on doña Marina, Hilde Krueger writes, “For these young Indian women, so animal-like in their approach to sex, the idea of chastity or virginity had no meaning at all.”\textsuperscript{17} It is a relief that Peter Gerhard describes doña Marina simply as “the interpreter and early companion of Cortés.”\textsuperscript{18} In contrast, in his influential \textit{Labyrinth of Solitude}, Octavio Paz styles her the original “chingada” and the Mexican nation as “hijos de la chingada.”\textsuperscript{19}

This preoccupation is now well into its second century. Already in 1845 in a contribution to a Yucatecan literary journal, V. Calero portrayed her as an ambitious woman more “ardent, passionate, impetuous” than wise who had to be tutored by the Spaniard Jerónimo de Aguilar and rescued from errors resulting from the “defects of her basic education.” According to Calero, Cortés fell captive to the charms of this woman “in the morning of her life,” and it was her enchantment rather than any action on his part that “resulted” in their son, don Martín.\textsuperscript{20}

After the revolution, at the height of the Mexican mural movement in 1926, José Clemente Orozco painted Cortes and Malinche naked together, the corpses of Indians beneath their feet, he reaching across her in a gesture of negation, she voluptuous, low of brow and dull of eye, a veritable Neanderthal (fig. 14.2). Today in the calendar art and velvet paintings of Mexico, she has been trivialized into a swooning scantily clad blond bombshell, half Barbie doll, half Anita Ekberg.

In \textit{La interminable conquista de Mexico}, the cartoonist Rius could think of nothing else to do with Malinche than to make her into the
doxie whose success depended on being able to speak three languages and “kiss in three more.” 21 Again in 500 años. Fregados pero cristianos, published for the Columbian quincentenary year, Rius describes her as one of “20 estupendas mozas” and already able on first meeting to speak Spanish as well as two local languages. Despite Cortés’s existing matrimonial ties, leers Rius, “it might be suspected that this Marina was something more than a bilingual secretary, since she subsequently gave señor don Hernán two children. And when he tired of Marina, he lent her to Hdez-Portocarrero and then made her marry Juan Jaramillo in 1524.” 22 These popular comic-book treatments of the conquest are aimed at exposing to a mass audience the abuse of Mexico’s indigenous peoples. As distressing as their bungled history is the sheer misogyny in what passes for social satire.
Rethinking Malinche

Searching for the Person within the Myth

Most of what we think we know about doña Marina we owe to Bernal Díaz del Castillo. Cortés in his letters to Spain mentions her just twice, once as "my interpreter, who is an Indian woman" and once by name as "Marina, who traveled always in my company after she had been given me as a present with twenty other women." His biographer, López de Gómez, devotes a paragraph or so to her history and the discovery by Cortés of her multilingualism. He says that Cortés "offered her more than her liberty" if she would be his interpreter and secretary. He concludes, "This Marina and her companions were the first Christians to be baptized in all New Spain, and she and Aguilar were the only trustworthy interpreters between our men and those of the country." Christian though she had become, López de Gómez refers to her in the very next sentence as "the slave girl." For a fuller story we must turn to Bernal Díaz, but with caution. Despite its convincing tone and detail, his account of the conquest has come in for its share of debunking. In particular, we should take with a grain of salt the speech he attributes to doña Marina in which she expresses her heartfelt satisfaction with her situation and says she would not exchange her place for a realm all her own. Since her words were supposedly addressed to her kin, they would have been uttered in Nahuatl, so how could Bernal Díaz know for certain what she had said? Verbally facile as he claimed she was, she might have said something quite different to her relatives and then given an altered translation pleasing to Spanish sensibilities. Or Bernal Díaz may have composed the speech himself decades later in the course of writing a good story in which doña Marina figured as the heroine. Or, then again, it might be an accurate report of her sincere sentiments. We cannot know.

López de Gómez says she was born into a noble Nahua family in the community of Oluta; Bernal Díaz says it was Painala. In any case, it was near Coatzaualco in the transitional area between Nahua central Mexico and Maya Yucatan. Andrés de Tapia and Francisco López de Gómez state that as a child she was stolen by merchants and sold into the Maya area. Bernal Díaz weaves a more dramatic story of her being handed over secretly by her mother and stepfather to people of Xicalanco so as to clear the inheritance of her younger
half-brother. In this story, too, she changed hands again and ended up in the Chontal Maya area at the base of the Yucatan peninsula, where she was given to Cortés in a group of twenty women.28

There can be no doubt that her childhood experiences made her bilingual, an unusual condition for a woman of noble lineage, for such women lived extremely circumscribed and sheltered lives.29 She was able to communicate with Jerónimo de Aguilar, who had been marooned in Yucatan for many years and had learned Maya through a total immersion experience comparable to her own. And she spoke her native language with central Mexican Nahuatl speakers, including Moteucóoma himself.

There are two pieces of evidence that her linguistic accomplishment extended well beyond simple survival bilingualism. First, dialect differences apparently troubled her little. Although she had learned Maya among the Chontales and Aguilar had learned among the Yucatec Mayas, she was able to work with him from the first. Later, she interpreted between Cortés and the Itza Maya ruler Canek in the heart of the Peten district, although Itza Maya is treated by some Mayanists as a separate language from Chontal and Yucatec Maya.30 Moreover, although she came from the Tabasco region, far from the central highlands of Mexico, she was able to converse with Moteucóoma’s emissaries on the Veracruz coast. Then she interpreted negotiations with the Tlaxcalans, whose Nahuatl was and still is distinct in a number of ways from the Nahuatl of the Valley of Mexico. As the conquest closed in on Moteucóoma and the Triple Alliance, she interpreted in the valley itself, in Tenochtitlan, and in the other cities surrounding Lake Texcoco. And some years after that, she had no difficulty with the Nahuatl of communities far off in Honduras. According to López de Gómara, “The messengers were very glad to talk with Marina, because their language and that of the Mexicans were not very different, except in pronunciation.”31 Yet it is exactly these differences in pronunciation that more often than not lead Nahuatl speakers to claim that their regional dialects are mutually unintelligible.

Apparently doña Marina had an unusual ability to screen out superficial differences that many find daunting and to attend to deeper commonalities. But the second piece of evidence of her linguistic versatility has to do with something she had to learn. Namely, she was
able to understand a certain register of Nahuatl known as těcpil-
lahtōlli, "lordly speech."

Lordly speech is a style of speaking, the only style that would be
used in the presence of Moteucōma, the greatest lord of all. A
speaker of mundane Nahuatl would be as helpless in dealing with it
as someone ignorant of the rules of Pig Latin would be in trying to
understand and speak the apparent gibberish that results from just a
pair of reversal rules applied to English.32 In těcpillaholtli indirection
and reversal are all-pervasive. Elaborate courtesy requires that one
say the opposite of what one means, and one adorns one’s nouns and
verbs with prefixes and suffixes until they resemble grammatical
equivalents of the churrigueraesque columns of eighteenth-century
Mexican churches.33 Native intuition cannot help with this; one must
be schooled in it. That doña Marina could communicate with Mo-
eucaoma’s representatives, negotiate with the lords of Tlaxcala, in-
vestigate a plot in Cholula, and ultimately interpret between Cortés
and Moteucōma himself supports the claims of Bernal Díaz, López
de Gómara, and others that she had been born and raised within a
Nahua noble family before people began to hand her around as a
piece of disposable property.

Her ability to acquire languages did not stop with Maya. Doña
Marina and Aguilar worked together as an interpreting team through
the fall of Tenochtitlan, but by the time Cortés launched his expedi-
tion to Honduras, Aguilar was out of the picture, and doña Marina
was functioning as a trilingual interpreter, translating directly be-
tween Spanish and Nahuatl in central Mexico and Honduras and be-
tween Spanish and Maya in Acalan and the Peten. The Nahua histo-
rian don Fernando de Alva Ixtlixochitl claims that she learned
Spanish in a “few days,” which is surely an exaggeration, but there
can be no doubt that her dependence on Aguilar was short-lived.34

Her unique gifts were as yet unrecognized, however, when the
Chontal Mayas gave her as part of a package to the Spaniards. The
twenty women, together with male slaves, ornaments, and other ma-
terial goods, were a bribe to Cortés to get him to move on, to leave the
Maya area and go prey on Moteucōma. Resorting to euphemism,
Calero says the women were given to Cortés “para hacer tortillas.”35
Once in Spanish hands, the women were summarily baptized and
distributed to provide the men with sexual services. This juxta posi-
tion of a Christian sacrament with rape is jarring to our sensibilities, but the sixteenth-century Spaniards, Bernal Diaz included, were quite frank about it.

A piece of myth is that prior to this experience, doña Marina’s indigenous name had been “Malinalli Tenepal.” We owe the “Tenepal” to the Nahua historian Chimalpahin, who added a marginal note to his copy of López de Gómara that her full name was Marina or Malintzin Tenepal, Marina/Malintzin being her Christian name and Tenepal her lineage name. “Tenepal” may be a construction developed in hindsight. Teneh means “that which possesses an edge or lip,” and according to the sixteenth-century lexicographer fray Alonso de Molina the metaphor teneh tilaltóle, “one who possesses a lip, one who possesses speech,” refers to one who speaks vociferously. The postposition -pal adds the sense of “by means of.” Hence “Tenepal” would be a close equivalent of la lengua, the Spanish sobriquet for doña Marina.

The idea that Aguilar (the only one who could have done so) engaged the group of women in conversation in Maya prior to their baptism, learned that the calendrical name of one had in a previous life been malinalli (grass, a NahuaBL day sign that would have been meaningless to him), and chose “Marina” for her as a close approximation is profoundly unlikely, although that story has been accepted as gospel since the nineteenth century. In the aftermath of combat, with hostile Chontal Mayas doing all they could to deflect the Spaniards from their shore, there was hardly time to get acquainted. As soon as the sacrament had been bestowed, Cortés divvied up the women, and Marina fell to one of his lieutenants, Alonso Hernández de Puertocarrero. It was only later, on another shore, that Cortés discovered her unique usefulness and reclaimed her for himself.

The Spaniards’ first encounter with Nahuatl was on the coast of what they named Veracruz. Aguilar, who had served the party well in Yucatan and Tabasco, was suddenly faced with an unfamiliar language. It was then that Marina was observed speaking with the most recently encountered indigenes. Since she, and she alone, could translate for Aguilar, who could then translate for Cortés, she was transformed on the spot from Puertocarrero’s drudge to Cortés’s pearl without price.

The men who had asked doña Marina in Nahuatl to identify the
leader of the Spanish forces were emissaries of Moteúcçoma, sent by him to the coast to investigate the strange beings who had arrived from across the sea. They brought with them painters to make a record for their ruler, and so it was that Cortés and doña Marina sat for their first portrait not long after they met and perhaps only hours after Cortés had taken her back from Puerto Carrero. Word went inland to Moteúcçoma that the Spaniards were on their way to his city with a Nahuatl-speaking woman called Malintzin.  

The Gulf of Mexico coast was not then, nor is it now, a mainly Nahuatl-speaking area. The first mainlanders Cortés and his men encountered on their home turf were Totonacs, whose language was equally unfamiliar to Aguilar and doña Marina. But doña Marina had the presence of mind to ask for Nahuatl interpreters, who were readily available, since the Totonacs, like so many Mesoamerican peoples, were tribute payers to Moteúcçoma. Here the chain of interpretation grew attenuated to the point that it is a wonder any communication was accomplished at all. Cortés spoke in Spanish to Aguilar, who translated his words into Maya for doña Marina. She in turn translated from Maya to Nahuatl. The local interpreters then translated from Nahuatl to Totonac. The process was then reversed for conveying information back to Cortés.  

Among the Totonacs, the Tlaxcalans, and the Cholulans, doña Marina was set the task of assisting Cortés in playing people off against each other, misleading them to keep his potential enemies off-balance and acquiring allies through a mix of sweet talk and intimidation. The duplicity was mutual, and, according to Bernal Díaz, it was in part through doña Marina’s perceptiveness that the Spaniards avoided traps laid for them as they relentlessly pressed on to the interior in search of Moteúcçoma.

The characterization of her as Malinche the traitress turns on just such circumstances. López de Gómara, Bernal Díaz, and Cortés himself all concur that the Cholulans planned to entrap the Spaniards within the walls of their city and slaughter them but that a noblewoman of Cholula revealed the plot to doña Marina and urged her to flee from the Spaniards to the protection of the noblewoman and her family. According to Bernal Díaz, the woman offered immediate marriage to one of her sons. Doña Marina, both sources say, pretended to go along with the scheme in order to learn more details
and then informed Cortés. Bernal Díaz adds that doña Marina had also through bribery and astute questioning learned of the plot from two Cholulan priests. Cortés then seized the initiative and with the assistance of his Tlaxcalan allies slaughtered the Cholulans in their own plazas and temple precincts and sent Moteuccōma’s agents back to their ruler with a message of bloody intimidation.41

Again we must beware of taking these men at their word. The story of the Cholulans’ intended treachery serves the Spanish case well, and the implication of Moteuccōma in the affair serves to justify the way Cortés made an example of Cholula. But while we may question whether the plot was real or invented by Cortés, there is no doubt that a terrible slaughter befell the city, and blood would seem to be on doña Marina’s hands.

Yet we must ask whether, if she were indeed invited to change sides, doña Marina had any reason to trust the Cholulans. She was not one of them. Perhaps the woman who urged her to save herself was deceiving her to separate Cortés from his interpreter. Or if the woman was sincere in her proposal to make doña Marina her daughter-in-law, for doña Marina that would have meant being handed on to yet another strange man.

It does not appear to me that a question of ethnic loyalty can legitimately be raised here. At this time in Mesoamerica the indígenas had no sense of themselves as “Indians” united in a common cause against Europeans. They identified themselves as Mexihcah, Tlaxcaltecah, Chololtecah, and so on. As she was none of these, how could Malintzin be a traitor to all or any of them? By all reports, she saw her best hope of survival in Cortés and served him unwaveringly. Rather than the embodiment of treachery, her consistency could be viewed as an exercise in total loyalty. The problem for Mexican national identity after Independence was that the object of her loyalty had been a conquistador.

From Cholula Cortés and his party continued up over the saddle between the volcanoes Iztaccihuatl and Popocatépetl, from whence lay revealed the floor of the Valley of Mexico with its great lakes and shoreside cities. They headed directly for the city that lay out in the lake, connected to its edges by causeways. All his efforts to divert them having failed, Moteuccōma finally came forth from his city (as the Tlaxcalan lords had done) to meet Cortés on the road.
According to the Nahua writers of the Florentine Codex, Moteucçoma addressed Cortés and his interpreters in flawlessly honorific speech, drawing on all the devices of polite rhetoric, all the metaphors of stewardship and hospitality. They represent Cortés's reply, transmitted through Malintzin, as utterly plain and devoid of honorific markers. Then, according to the writers, the Spaniards touched Moteucçoma (for this they use two paired Nahuatl verbs) and examined him freely with their eyes (another two verbs). For Moteucçoma, a ruler in whose presence his subjects never raised their eyes from the ground, this was unimaginable. But no physical blow could have fallen as hard as the handful of Nahuatl sentences the writers say came from Cortés through Malintzin.

We can no more trust the speech Sahagún's assistants place in her mouth than the one Bernal Díaz did, but we can certainly appreciate the enormity of the situation. The Mesoamerican societies she knew, Nahua and Maya, observed elaborate rules of behavior, and by word and deed she was implicated in heart-stopping violations. Nor was this initial meeting the most challenging of her interpreting chores. Once within the city, Cortés used his interpreting team to demand that a chapel to the Virgin Mary be set up on top of the city's main pyramid, and it also fell to doña Marina to advise Moteucçoma that he was being taken into custody, a prisoner of his unwelcome guests.

From the time Moteucçoma was forced to reside among the Spaniards, Cortés and his lieutenants spent a great deal of time whiling away the hours with him. They learned to play one of the Mesoamerican games of chance, Moteucçoma's treasures passing back and forth among them. Once, to demonstrate their easy superiority over his subjects' war canoes, they built and rigged sailboats and took their royal prisoner out skimming over the expanses of Lake Texcoco. During all these hours of contact, a Spanish boy who served Cortés as a page was absorbing Nahuatl and became a second conduit of information exchange between the Spaniards and Moteucçoma. Bernal Díaz relates that he made use of the boy, Ortegaúll, to importune Moteucçoma for "a very pretty Indian woman," and indeed Moteucçoma responded by giving him a noblewoman with a dowry. She was baptized doña Francisca, and we do not hear of her again.
The more Ortegailla came to understand Nahuatl, the more alarmed he became, according to Bernal Díaz. Present but ignored at discussions between Moteucçoma and other lords from the Valley of Mexico, he knew enough to know that he did not understand what was going on. At his call, Cortés brought doña Marina and Jerónimo de Aguilar, to whom Moteucçoma issued a warning that the Spaniards should withdraw immediately if they valued their lives. According to the account, Ortegailla—having come to share doña Marina’s direct knowledge of their situation—was reduced to helpless tears, in dramatic contrast to doña Marina’s steadiness.46

During this uncertain time, Bernal Díaz also tells us that Moteucçoma proposed a marriage alliance by offering one of his daughters as wife to Cortés (see also Pedro Carrasco’s discussion of bride donation for political alliance in chapter 3). Cortés, we are told, explained that he could not enter into marriage with the girl since as a Christian he was permitted but one wife and he already had one. But he accepted the girl into his safekeeping.47 Various sources seem to show that Cortés in fact took three of Moteucçoma’s daughters into his keeping. They were baptized Isabel, María, and Marina, and Isabel bore Cortés a daughter.48 By López de Gómara’s reckoning, by the end of his life Cortés had fathered four children by his (second) Spanish wife, one by a Spanish woman to whom he was not married, his son Martín by doña Marina, and three daughters by three different Indian mothers.49 One of those mothers was Moteucçoma’s daughter. His sexual activities, we see, were not confined to doña Marina, much less to his marital bed.

The situation of the Spanish party within Tenochtitlan was precarious and grew more so over time. Cortés had to leave his forces there under his next-in-command, Pedro de Alvarado, in order to deal with the challenge of a new group of Spaniards who had arrived on the coast, and by the time he had settled the matter and returned with reinforcements, Alvarado—later notorious for his brutal conquest of the peoples of Guatemala—had committed slaughter within Moteucçoma’s city that echoed the Cholula massacre in ferocity but had none of the prior action’s strategic value. On the contrary, it undermined what little authority the Spaniards commanded by virtue of holding the person of Moteucçoma. As the situation deteriorated, Moteucçoma was killed. There are conflicting accounts of how it hap-
pened: Spanish sources claim he was struck by a stone thrown by one of his own subjects; indigenous sources say he met his death at Spanish hands. Then insecurity turned to rout as the Spaniards attempted to flee the city under cover of night and rain.

According to Bernal Díaz, doña Luisa, daughter of the Tlaxcalan lord Xicohténcatl (who on baptism had been given to Pedro de Alvarado), and doña Marina were placed under the protection of thirty soldiers, who were also responsible for a group of valuable hostages. The attempted withdrawal was immediately discovered, and in the dark and wet a ferocious attack descended on Spaniards, prisoners, allies, and horses. When the survivors regrouped at a safe distance from Tenochtitlan, they found that doña Marina and doña Luisa had escaped with their lives, as had some of Xicohténcatl's sons. But doña Elvira, daughter of the Tlaxcalan lord Maxixcatzin, had perished together with some of the sons and daughters of Moteucóma. Doña Isabel was not among her dead siblings, however. She survived the conquest and three Spanish husbands to eventually die in 1551 (see also Pedro Carrasco's treatment of doña Isabel in chapter 3).

Now began the siege of Tenochtitlan. Cortés attacked over water with ships and artillery, while smallpox raged within its walls. The city that had enchanted the Spaniards with its beauty and orderliness was ravaged and reduced to stinking rubble. From time to time the Spaniards demanded capitulation in exchange for an end to the destruction. A witness testifying in court proceedings years later related that during the siege a Spanish soldier who had learned to speak Nahuatl was interpreting, but the Aztecs insisted on having doña Marina instead, and Cortés had to send soldiers by boat to the city of Texcoco to fetch her before the negotiations could go forward.

By high summer 1521, Tenochtitlan no longer existed. Its last ruler, Cuauhtémoc, gave himself up to Cortés, who immediately began through doña Marina and Aguilar the same sort of flattery and expressions of affection that he had previously laid on Moteucóma. The end would come out the same. After an extended period of captivity Cuauhtémoc would die, and there would be conflicting accounts of his death as well.

Only now, after two years of sexual use in Spanish hands, was doña Marina pregnant. Having been in the thick of armed conflict and having avoided death by sacrifice, drowning, and smallpox,
doña Marina gave birth to Cortés’s son. Young Martín would remain his potential heir, for a long time. At age six he would accompany his father to Spain. His father would successfully petition for his legitimation, the boy would become a knight of Santiago, and eventually, according to Cortés family history, he would die fighting Moors in the War of Granada. But the birth of a half-brother, also Martín, deprived him of the marquisate he would otherwise have inherited.54

In what circumstances doña Marina lived between the summer of 1521 and the autumn of 1524, who attended her through her pregnancy and assisted at the birth of her son, we do not know. Cortés at this time was involved in domestic difficulties. His wife, whose existence he had invoked to block a marriage alliance between himself and Motecuhzoma, came from Cuba and took up residence with her husband in his new palace at Coyoacán, south of the massive construction site where Tenochtitlan was being rebuilt as Mexico City. She arrived in August 1522. Before the year was out, she was dead and Cortés was under suspicion of choking the life out of her with her own necklace, although charges were not brought against him until seven years later. By then doña Marina was dead too.

In the autumn of 1524, when little Martín was just beginning to walk and talk, much too soon for him to form a lasting memory of his mother, Cortés called on her to interpret on an overland trek to Honduras. The child was left in the care of one of Cortés’s kinsmen, and the expedition began. At the very beginning of it, doña Marina was married to his lieutenant, Juan de Jaramillo. In a tantalizing vignette, López de Gómara remarks that Jaramillo was drunk at his wedding and Cortés was criticized for letting the union take place, since he and doña Marina had children [sic] together.55 It is after this that Bernal Díaz has doña Marina make her statement to her relatives in Tabasco about her satisfaction with her good fortune to be Christian, the mother of Cortés’s son, and the legitimate wife of Jaramillo.

Then it was off with horses and pigs, musicians and jugglers, trunks and firearms into a rain forest world amenable only to canoes and blowguns. Men and animals wallowed and drowned or perished of hunger. The royal hostage Cuauhtemoc, who had been brought along, was put to death for unclear reasons. According to her grand-
son, whose probanza sought to maximize her contribution to the conquest, doña Marina had uncovered a plot against the Spaniards by Cuauhtemoc and his fellows. The Chontal Mayas claimed credit for the discovery by their leader, Paxbolonacha of Acalan. Bernal Díaz says two Aztec hostages came forward to warn Cortés, while López de Gómara, repeating Cortes’s own account, says the plot was revealed by a note written on paper in hieroglyphs. In view of all this conflicting testimony, we cannot be sure doña Marina denounced Cuauhtemoc, but she undoubtedly interpreted at his summary examination and trial, and Bernal Díaz states that she assisted the Franciscan friars in confessing him before his execution. Cuauhtemoc, the chronicler says, at the last spoke bitterly to Cortés of the degradation to which he had been brought. For his words to reach Cortés, doña Marina would have had to translate and deliver them.

When the expedition reached the ruler Canek in his fastness of Tayasal, the Maya lord advised Cortés through doña Marina that they should make straight for the coast and continue their travel by sea, but Cortés persisted in traveling overland. By the time the survivors of his folly reached their goal in Honduras, they found that the punitive mission they were on had long since been made pointless by the death of the rebel Cortés was after.

At great loss of life, nothing much had been accomplished. But doña Marina, whose powers of survival had again carried her through while others expired on every side, was pregnant again, and on or soon after the sea trip back to Veracruz she gave birth to Jaramillo’s daughter, who was baptized María. It is the testimony of doña María, given more than twenty years later, that tells us what little there is left of her mother’s story.

Doña Marina did not long survive the birth of her second child. Within the year, Jaramillo remarried. This time his wife was a Spanish lady, and doña María grew up a mestiza stepchild in a Spanish household. When her mother had been married to Jaramillo, Cortés had endowed the marriage with the encomienda of Xílotepex. Some twenty years after doña Marina’s death, nearly as many years after his remarriage, Jaramillo died and left doña Marina’s dowry not to their daughter but to his Spanish wife. This outrage touched off a lawsuit that simmered for years until the sides agreed to split the inheritance and give up the litigation.
Conclusion

There is nothing more to doña Marina's personal story. Within ten years of falling into the hands of the Spaniards she was dead. She had survived longer than many Indian women and men during that fatal decade, and like so many women who lived and died anonymously or nearly so she gave birth to mestizo children. She did not have a chance to be with her children, and they were deprived of any memory of her. Contrary to the romantic stories, she did not go to Spain, was not presented at court, did not have a palace in Chapultepec, was not alive in the 1530s. She was not the only Indian woman impregnated by Cortés, and surely he was not her love slave. It seems to me that their relationship was pragmatic in the extreme. They needed each other to survive, but all the power lay with Cortés.

When she was given to him, she may have been very young, truly in the morning of her life as Calero put it. Clearly she was not barren, since she eventually bore two children, yet there was a significant lapse before she became pregnant for the first time (a convenient one in terms of her night-and-day interpreting duties). If adolescence seems incompatible with her accomplishments as counselor and negotiator, one need only consider the case of Eva, a young woman of the Khoikhoi, who played a similar role in mediating between the indigenous peoples of the Cape of Good Hope and the Dutch in the seventeenth century. Bilingual by virtue of being taken as a child into the household of the Dutch governor, she served as his adviser and interpreter in settling a war between the Khoikhoi and the Europeans and thereafter went into seclusion, apparently on the occasion of her first menses. Fecundity, when it finally arrived, was her undoing and led to her abandonment by both the governor's family and her Khoikhoi relatives. Sacajawea, too, was an adolescent when she walked across the continent with Lewis and Clark. She and her co-wife had been acquired while still children by the expedition's Canadian French interpreter, Toussaint Charbonneau, a man with a taste for very young Indian women. All these competent, cheerful, enduring young interpreters can be viewed as child survivors of chronic sexual assault.

To reiterate, doña Marina's inevitable fate was rape, not the making of tortillas. She had absolutely no choice about whether she
would be sexually used, and very little control over by whom. When she was given to Cortés she had no one to turn to, nowhere to flee, no one to betray. She was not Aztec, not Maya, not "Indian." For some time already she had been nobody's woman and had nothing to lose. That made her dangerous, but it says nothing about her morality.

With no hope of escape from a group of men, in the face of inevitable rape, doña Marina managed to do what today's women's survival books advise. Exploiting her only asset, her multilingualism, she succeeded in attaching herself to what primatologists would call the alpha male (Cortés), who would not willingly share her with the others. (When he did relinquish her to Jaramillo, it was with a legitimate wedding and an income.) She worked hard at making herself one of the men, ever ready day or night to serve, always helpful and outgoing. Bernal Díaz characterized her as cheerful and "without embarrassment." For a woman in her situation, any other strategy would have been suicidal.

Today in Mexican popular imagination her reputation has fallen victim to the blame-the-(sexual)-survivor syndrome. Like many a woman who has so suffered, her own character has come into question, her survival become distasteful, her collusion with her rapists reprehensible. In many ways, her fate resembles that of Patty Hearst, a less gifted young woman who fell into the hands of minor league terrorists, was sexually brutalized, survived, and ended up in prison.

But if we are in the blame-the-victim business, there is another place to look. What put doña Marina into the hands of strangers before Cortés ever came on the scene? In book 12 of the Florentine Codex she is represented as haranguing the citizens of Tenochtitlan from a rooftop. Throughout his account, Bernal Díaz praises her cleverness and ability to manipulate people through her talk. This is a far cry from the ideal described by Alonso de Zorita.

Many daughters of rulers never left home until the day of their wedding. . . . A ruler's daughter went about in the company of many elderly women, and she walked so modestly that she never raised her eyes from the ground. . . . She never spoke in the temple, save to say the prayers she had been taught; she must not speak while eating, but must
keep absolute silence. . . . The maidens could not go out to the gardens without guards. If they took a single step out the door, they were harshly punished, especially if they had reached the age of ten or twelve.63

Is it possible that by the time she reached the age of ten or twelve this particular noble daughter had proven herself constitutionally unfit for such a life? And lest her vociferous ientli, her lengua that would not be quiet, bring shame and ruin on them all, her harsh punishment had been what Bernal Diaz describes, to be secretly given away by her own family and mourned as though dead? We cannot but speculate.

Doña Marina’s invaluable multilingualism distinguished her from the other women who fell into the hands of Cortés and his men. She was not branded on the forehead, gambled for, fought over. She survived to be made the legitimate and dowried wife of a conqueror, and her name, in all its forms, has survived four and a half centuries. Without her services the European conquest of Mexico would inevitably have come, but not as soon and perhaps not to Cortés. Yet in another sense, her fate was like the other women’s. She was caught up in an adventure the likes of which the world has not seen again. She was impregnated by two different men and contributed children to the first generation of mainland mestizos. Before middle age her life was over.

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.

17. As they put it, “la mujer ha sido la causa de todo que a informado mal” (the woman has been the cause of all the misinformation); AMS, PM, c. 42, exp. 8, 1790.

18. “Una pobre mujer cargada de familia y de tierna edad.”

19. AMS, PM, c. 42, exp. 9, 1790.

20. AMS, PM, c. 51/1, exp. 40, 1799.

21. The relevant passage reads, “por el privilegio que como hijos de pueblo nos hayamos por gracia que nuestro natural señor y sus antecesores no tienen conferida entre otras que como tales hijos nos hayamos como debe constar de sus reales sabias resoluciones en que no quieren no tan solamente de que se nos multe pero ni aunque paguemientos real derecho de alcabala ni menos diezmos y primicias”; see AMS, PM, c. 55, exp. 3, 1804.

22. Ibid.

23. See Asunción Lavrin’s “In Search of the Colonial Woman in Mexico: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in *Latin American Women: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Asunción Lavrin (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978), esp. pp. 40–47. Clearly widowhood provided greater opportunities for women of means who could rely on hefty dowries and shares of their deceased spouses’ estates for their subsistence; such economic independence was probably beyond the reach of San Esteban women. But the legal independence was a reality nonetheless, and it appears that this gave weight to the complaints of the two women treated here.

**Chapter 14. Rethinking Malinche**


2. The document has recently been transferred to the rare books collection of the Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin.


5. For more examples of Malinche masks, see Cordry, *Mexican Masks*, 38, 172, 207, 228.


12. The Pérez de Arteaga manuscript is in the collection of the Jay I. Kislak Foundation, Miami Lake, Florida. For corroboration of the claim, see Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera*, 1:219.


14. Elizabeth Salas, *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military: Myth and History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 14. Salas is right about the beginning of the decline of doña Marina's reputation, but she is mistaken about details of her life. On page 15, for instance, she states that Cortés was separated from doña Marina when he made his expedition to Honduras, but in fact she accompanied him there as his interpreter, and it was at the outset of the expedition that Cortés married her to Jaramillo and endowed the couple with an encomienda (a grant of Indians for tribute).


29. For a description of the upbringing of well-bred Nahua girls, see Zorita as quoted below.
32. The first rule of Pig Latin applies to English words that begin with consonants. One transports the initial consonant to the end of the word and adds the diphthong [ei]. Different “dialects” of Pig Latin depend on the second rule, namely, how one handles words that begin with vowels.
33. For the conventions of polite Nahuatl speech, see Frances Karttunen, “Conventions of Polite Speech in Nahuatl,” *Estudios de Cultura Nahuatl* 20 (1990): 281–96. For this reason, one should not take the speech of Moteuczoma to Cortés as reported in book 12 of the *Florentine Codex*, 42, at face value. What may strike us as hospitable to the point of servility was required by the conventions of técpillihtollī.
37. Orozco y Berra attributes the idea that prior to baptism her name had been “Malinalli” to Fernando Ramírez; *Historia antigua*, 116.
38. Fuentes, *The Conquistadors*, 24; Simpson, *Cortés*, 56–58. Not so long after this, Cortés commissioned Puertocarrero to return to Spain where he fell into political webs and tangles and eventually died in prison.


42. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, bk. 12, 44–45.

43. Bernal Díaz agrees: “And it seems to me that Cortés, through doña Marina, offered him his right hand, and Montezuma [sic] did not wish to take it, but he did give his hand to Cortés...and those great Princes who accompanied Montezuma held back Cortés by the arm so that he should not embrace him, for they considered it an indignity”; Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1956), 193. Cortés himself reports that Moteuczoma’s attendants blocked him from touching their ruler; Pagden, *Hernán Cortés: Letters*, 84.


45. Ibid., 302–03.

46. Ibid., 330–32.

47. Ibid., 328.


55. Simpson, Cortés, 346.
57. Díaz del Castillo, Historia verdadera, 2:205
58. Gerhard, Historical Geography, 383; Somonte, Doña Marina, 144.
60. Díaz del Castillo, Historia verdadera, 1:203, 121.
61. Nor were the sixteenth-century Mesoamericans more generous than we toward their ravished women. Bernal Díaz tells of how, after the fall of Tenochtitlan, Cuauhtémoc requested that women who had been taken by the Spanish soldiers be permitted to return to their fathers and husbands. Few could be located, he says, and of those hardly any would go back because so many of them were already pregnant; Díaz del Castillo, Historia verdadera, 2:69.
62. Sahagún, Florentine Codex, bk. 12, 49.

Concluding Remarks

1. We are following Latin American usage by employing "indigenous" (in lieu of Indian) as the English-language equivalent of indígena.