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Cover Page Footnote

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Malintzin: La Mujer Americana

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*I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing (...) I will overcome the tradition of silence.*²⁴⁰

Malintzin is a notoriously hated Indigenous feminine historical figure who embodies the phallogentric acts of violence the White cisheteropatriarchy imposes on American women and femmes of color through masculinist social constructions of gender and race. When addressing these issues, one must recognize the White cisheteropatriarchy as a violent system of power that marks cisgender, heterosexual men, masculinity, and Whiteness as superior identities within an intersectional hierarchy of race, sexuality, and gender.²⁴¹ Throughout my essay, I use the word “American” as an overarching term to address the largely present Indigenous population within *The Americas* (the total landmass of North and South America) and all women and femmes of color who reside within this space. Through Malintzin’s story, we recognize the interpretation of womanhood as a dehumanized identity that society freely abuses, exploits, polices, and silences, thereby showcasing gendered issues as a cultural concern rooted in misogynistic and anti-Indigenous settler colonial principles.²⁴² Colonization’s femmephobic agenda is one of the oldest withstanding frameworks that continue to play powerful societal roles instigating gendered violence against American women and femmes of color.²⁴³ Thus, Man’s²⁴⁴ settler colonial patriarchal ideologies villainize

²⁴⁰ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, “‘How to Tame a Wild Tongue’ (1987)” in *Available Means: An Anthology of Women’s Rhetoric(s)*, eds. Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001): 357–365.

²⁴¹ Masculinist: an aware model of conditioned desire to dominate women, or those with feminine identities, by sexually objectifying them for the sake of male gratification and pleasure of domination, excluding the femme from their male homosocial bonding, harassing women to enforce the reorganization of social order and to maintain male superiority.

²⁴² Settler Colonialism: a system of oppression based on racism and white supremacy that enacts genocide, colonialism, displacement, theft, and exploitation of people, their lands, and resources (oftentimes from Indigenous people) and replacing it with a new settler population.

²⁴³ Femmephobia: the devaluing, hatred, and fear of anything associated with femininity.

²⁴⁴ Man: The capital “M” highlights people who identify as men and embody systemic violences against those around him, especially against femmes and women. This distinction helps differentiate Man from men who do not subscribe to socioculturally conditioned “male ethics.”

Malintzin for marrying a Spanish conquistador, Hernán Cortés, and, thereafter, rendering her an effective agent catering to the projects of her conquest and that of *The Americas*. However, feminist and intersectional philosophies, aided by Judith Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, invite investigation for humanizing Malintzin's life as an enslaved Indigenous woman by explaining how her experiences epitomize that of women and femmes of color in the 21st-century *Americas*.

With respect to those silenced and persecuted, it is necessary to acknowledge the cruel irony of spotlighting an underrepresented voice in academic spaces built upon stolen land. In retouching and analyzing Malintzin's archival existence, we must expose the institutional, historical violence towards Indigenous people and their total exclusion from the classroom and the histories taught within them. As she is a woman with many names, I have decided to use her honorific name, Malintzin, as a stance against the curated misogynistic anti-Indigenous colonial narratives used to perpetuate bigoted White cisheteropatriarchal structures of gender, race, and history. I seek to reintroduce Malintzin without doing further violence unto her, Indigenous communities, or the feminine identity by bringing her story into the masculinist White supremacist and exclusive structure of academia. As I draw from Adriana Cavarero's concept of stealing²⁴⁵ and Saidiya Hartman's "Critical Fabulation," these methodologies grant an opportunity to work through the complicated task of reviving histories to reclaim new narratives in the archive and humanize the dehumanized.²⁴⁶ To institutionalize Indigenous history or to use it for the benefit of the academy is to perpetuate marginalization and violence; instead, the goal is to ensure that Malintzin is accurately represented and respected within the archive, to make visible the historical exploitation and demonization of Indigenous women, and to highlight the urgent need for the retribution of Indigenous communities.

As a feminine entity and political force, Malintzin unveils masculinist and ongoing patterns of regulating women and femmes' autonomy within the confines of Manhood. The imposed sociocultural and legislative curation of gendered social codes enforce misogynistic and abusive principles that promote the normative art of silencing and erasing women and femmes of color—a corrupt practice we must challenge and eradicate. Butler and de Beauvoir's feminist scholarship on gendered

²⁴⁵ Stealing: "My strategy (...) consists of stealing figures from the phallogocentric imaginary and relocating them in anomalous ways so they are made to react differently, thus changing their significance. More simply, I could say that I work on stereotypes, seeking to decontextualize and reposition them in a game of resignification through unscrupulous and irreverent decodifications"; Adriana Cavarero and Elisabetta Bertolino, "Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with the Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero," *Differences* 19, no. 1 (May 1, 2008): 128-167.

²⁴⁶ Critical Fabulation: the combining of historical and archival research with critical theory and fictional narrative to fill in the blanks left in the historical record; Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no.2 (June 1, 2008), 11; Cavarero and Bertolino. "Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference," 134.

otherness, coupled with my radical philosophy on racial and gender inclusivity, conceptualizes society’s misogynistic social hierarchies that prevent the self-determined femme from existing in *The Americas*.²⁴⁷ Malintzin does not represent a traitor; instead, she represents the patriarchal bargain within *The Americas*: a woman of color intimidated into collaborating with her abusers to attain a promised illusion of agency.²⁴⁸ While it is inarguable that Malintzin partook in the success of the Spanish conquest, it is necessary to recognize that, as an enslaved Indigenous woman, she lacked the freedom to make her own choices. Malintzin’s story parallels how women and femmes of color in *The Americas* develop a limited agency against the deafening White cisheteropatriarchal societies insidiously fixated on unapologetically silencing the shared experience of Malintzin: *La Mujer Americana*.²⁴⁹

In the early 16th century, Malintzin was born to an Aztec *cacique* (a chief of an Indigenous population in Mexico and the West Indies), thus granting her access to education—an asset she employed as an enslaved guide and interpreter for the Spanish. After her father’s death, Malintzin’s mother sold her, at age ten, into Xicalango’s slavery system, where the traders then sold her to the peoples of Potoncha’n. The child was then trafficked, repossessed, and married to Hernán Cortés, a Spanish conquistador who sexually abused and exploited Malintzin and other Indigenous bodies. After purchasing twenty Indigenous women, including our controversial female protagonist, Hernán Cortés confronted a language barrier when encountering Moctezuma, the ninth Aztec emperor of Mexico. Malintzin had initially spoken a variant of Nahuatl, and during her slave trade, she learned the Maya language of Tabasco; thus, her skills reified her social identity from slave to an embodiment of colonial opportunity for the Spanish under the exploitative male ethics of conquest. Promptly, Malintzin became Cortés’s sole interpreter and soon learned Spanish furthering her social capital by aiding the communication between the Indigenous peoples and conquistadores. Cortés and his male phallocentric entitlement interpreted Malintzin’s skills—a trilingual Indigenous woman—as a dehumanized, opportunistic gain that he could exploit as his weapon of war against the Indigenous. Cortés then promised her “more than freedom” if she vowed to be his faithful *lengua* (tongue or language carrier, translator) and *farute* (negotiator or messenger).²⁵⁰ As a woman enslaved at age ten, the perception of freedom was a concept Malintzin could not recognize beyond abstract thought; therefore, the offered freedom was an illusion designed to manipulate her corrupted sense of

²⁴⁷ Cordelia Candelaria, “La Malinche, Feminist Prototype,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 5, no. 2 (1980).

²⁴⁸ Deniz Kandiyoti, “Bargaining with Patriarchy,” *Gender & Society* 2, no. 3 (September 1988): 274–290.

²⁴⁹ *La Mujer Americana*: In Spanish it means “The American Woman”; not only a label, but a shared experience lived by American women and femmes of color when engaging with immoral Manhood in a White cisheteropatriarchal society.

²⁵⁰ Gloria Arjona, [LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes], “La Malinche: Not a Traitor, but a Survivor with Gloria Arjona PhD, Audiovisual Storyteller | 6/8/22,” Video, *YouTube*, June 9, 2022, 32:20–32:30.

self-determination into helping preserve the masculinist agenda of conquest. As Cortés's human compass, interpreter, and negotiator, she became a scapegoat for Mexican and Chicax cultural imaginaries by allegedly enabling the successful Spanish conquest of the Aztecs.²⁵¹

An awareness of Malintzin's history, aligned with Judith Butler's definition of the social construction, consequence, and performance of gender, legitimizes Malintzin's identity as a feminist emblematic figure trying to regain selfhood within an exploitative White cisheteropatriarchal society. Butler notes that "[f]eminist theory has sought to understand the way in which systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices, and how the analysis of ostensibly personal situations is clarified through situating the issues in a broader and shared cultural context"; therein, imploring that we must use feminist theory to practice being unsettled by the amplified voice of knowledge production in an amoral masculinist White history.²⁵² If we contextualize individual acts within their socio-historical context as separate and focus only on individual agency, as if it existed in a vacuum and could be assessed as such, then we deprive ourselves of realizing that the individual and the social-historical are mutually constitutive. By utilizing Butler's definition of feminist theory, and its underpinning claims of relationality, Malintzin's narrative becomes a foundational piece of history in which scholars may cultivate new perspectives on her livelihood, ones that do not villainize her decisions or promote femmephobic, anti-Indigenous rhetoric. Butler clarifies that "gender identity is an accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo (...) Hence, as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished."²⁵³ Ergo, one must understand that the predominantly recognized "science and philosophy" of gender within *The Americas* have built a bigoted White cisheteropatriarchal structure that delineates gender as a fixed biological and innate quality that people must uphold to qualify as human. However, the illusion of gender, and its restrictions, grow from the coerced reiteration of culturally interwoven femmephobia used as a fear-mongering tactic against those who might stray from a masculinist, detached sociocultural interpretation of "humanness." Butler states that gender is not something people can do as individuals, rather it is a reaction to the set norms cultural powers reinforce making gender a *thing* people interact with to actualize their "gender"; I believe that gender holds a more powerful identity than the consequence of society. In addition to Butler's ideology, I would add that gender is a spiritual, psychological, experiential, and experimental identity

²⁵¹ Arjona, "La Malinche," 5:00- 48:00.

²⁵² Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 522.

²⁵³ Butler, "Performative Acts," 520 and 522.

nourished, felt, decoded, and self-defined per the individual. Nevertheless, insidious dominating cultural powers (e.g., politics, legislation, religion, communities, culture) arbitrarily police and impose these natural elements performed subconsciously and consciously. Therefore, gender is a diachronic metaphysical identity, an erotic form of expression materialized through intentionally dehumanizing political frameworks deciding who is worthy of life and voice; a materialization that gives Man, in this case, Hernán Cortés, the entitlement to strip the life and voice of Malintzin.²⁵⁴

Moreover, Butler claims that living “in a culture in which the false universal of ‘man’ has for the most part been presumed as coextensive with humanness itself, feminist theory has sought with success to bring female specificity into visibility and to rewrite the history of culture in terms which acknowledge the presence, the influence, and the oppression of women.”²⁵⁵ Hence, the White cisheteropatriarchy promotes anti-woman rhetoric acclimating femmes into the social reorganization where Male homosocial bonding and its “raw male-supremacist eroticism” denotes Man as an entitled person definitively correct by nature; meanwhile, justifying the denigration of the Brown feminine entity as flawed and wrong for not being a White Man.²⁵⁶ These active methods of power preservation are masculinist and, therefore, flawed and violent. The relationship between Malintzin and Cortés, or colonization and the Indigenous, is the oppressive consequence of a violent hierarchy that condemns the feminine identity to the bottom of the masculinist social order that praises that of Man. Unlike feminist principles that encourage the curious human nature of questioning and challenging institutional and social works to promote pivoting from fixed mindsets that limit one’s openness to progressive change, masculinist social orders thrive in uninterrogated spaces while remaining blind to the violence of Man’s entitlement. Malintzin, as an Indigenous feminine entity, began at a disadvantage in which Man perceived her presence as something that he must conquer and exploit. And by using feminist theory to bring “female specificity into visibility and to rewrite the history of culture in terms which acknowledge the presence, the influence, and the oppression of women,” we must reinterpret Malintzin as an Indigenous woman forced to survive within the confines of racism and sexism.²⁵⁷ As co-creators of social realities, analyzing Malintzin’s survival methods not as traitorous but as reactions to a restricted agency within a vulnerable position of being the socialized “Other” is feminist in nature.

²⁵⁴ John Stoltenberg, *Refusing to Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice* (New York: Plume, 1990).

²⁵⁵ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 523.

²⁵⁶ Homosocial: relating to social interactions between members of the same sex, typically men; usually a mechanism and social dynamic that explains the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity; Hammarén, Nils Hammarén and Thomas Johansson, “Homosociality,” *SAGE Open* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 2014); Stoltenberg, *Refusing to Be a Man*, 21.

²⁵⁷ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 523.

Simone de Beauvoir articulates the sociocultural masculinist view on womanhood by explaining that,

“A man’s body has a meaning by itself, disregarding the body of the woman, whereas the woman’s body seems devoid of meaning without reference to the male. Man thinks himself without woman. Woman does not think herself without man.” And she is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called “the sex,” meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex, so she is it in the absolute. She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.²⁵⁸

By existing within a racialized and gendered society that reduces women and femmes of color as separate, different, and nothing without their male counterparts, social norms alienate the “Other” from humanness. To be human is to have gender, and to have gender is to subscribe to discriminatory keys of social order. Cisheteropatriarchal settler colonial theory perpetuates the existence of American women and femmes of color as sexualized, othered, and essentialized bodies available for the benefit of White supremacy and male domination. The patriarchy views these identities as subordinates with no existence without relation to Man. Throughout Malintzin’s captivity under Cortés, she was laboriously exploited for her linguistic and diplomatic skills, objectified, and sexually abused for militant social movements. Her experience as an Indigenous woman explains the consequences of attaching expectations to gender, which creates cultural rifts making “men” and “women” entities on opposite ends of humanness. Ergo, behaviors become categorical assessments where active patriarchal societies curate distinct terms of what the behaviors are, how they work, and who must adhere to these required identities through an illusion of difference. And with the formerly addressed imposed philosophy that views women as wrong and Man as right, it teaches Man that masculinist codes of conduct and their instilled repertoire of behaviors grant them entitled privileges to demand, often women, for what they want—similar to the foundations of the violently exploitative relationship between Cortés and Malintzin.²⁵⁹ Malintzin’s story speaks on how women’s existence is integral to Manhood, precisely mirroring the dynamic and importance enslaved people held in relation to their masters.²⁶⁰ Cisheteropatriarchal settler colonial foundations narrowed Indigenous women’s importance to pleasure and productivity; their exploitative views created the conditions for women’s sexual abuse as a means of transaction, exploitation, and weapons of war. Their presence

²⁵⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex, 1st ed, Vol. 3* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012): 26.

²⁵⁹ Stoltenberg, *Refusing to Be a Man*, 12.

²⁶⁰ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 112.

is penalized, perpetually and habitually, for not being a White Man. Though it is important to note that the same social punishment induced by White masculinist codes also lead to violence against Indigenous men, though it takes different forms, has different stakes, and takes on different meanings in historical memory. Nevertheless, women and femmes of color still stand at the vanguard of cultural revolutions curating social growth within society, yet they bear the burdens of the exact change they seek through the systemic forces that intentionally uphold the Brown feminine identity as inferior to the White Man.

Without a feminist framework, Mexican and Chicax national imaginaries, primarily those who identify as Man, view Malintzin as a traitor who helped the Spanish conquer the Aztecs.²⁶¹ However, this assumption completely disregards Malintzin’s disadvantaged life chances and counterintuitively utilizes misogynistic anti-Indigenous logic to discern the life of an Indigenous woman.²⁶² In Octavio Paz’s essay “The Sons of La Malinche,” he writes: “As a small boy will not forgive his mother if she abandons him to search for his father, the Mexican people have not forgiven La Malinche for her betrayal.”²⁶³ He then mentions “the contemptuous adjective *malinchista* recently put into circulation by the newspapers to denounce all those who have been corrupted by foreign influences.”²⁶⁴ The derogatory term, derived from her name, illustrates the demonization of her character as someone traitorous. Man’s entitlement and the persistent need for Whitening history are reasons for why Malintzin is remembered as a traitor in contrast to Cortes’s legacy as a “great” conqueror. However, approaching Malintzin with a feminist lens when reviewing the historical, political, cultural, sexual, religious, and psychological connotations, we recognize that Malintzin was not a traitor, but a betrayed enslaved person forced to use her linguistic skills and womanhood to survive in an uneven and hierarchical distribution of life chances. Patriarchal views on Malintzin depict how misogynistic value systems normalize blaming women for their decisions while disregarding the systemic involvement of a White cisheteropatriarchy in its methods of coercing women’s decision-making. De Beauvoir quotes Montaigne as saying, “it is easier to accuse one sex than to excuse the other”; thus, one echoes oppressive principles that intentionally accuse and isolate women to avoid humanizing and sympathizing with the feminine identity.²⁶⁵ Rather than perceiving Malintzin’s actions as traitorous, a feminist outlook helps discern her decisions as an agential action toward self-determination against a dehumanized identity made to serve the White cisheteropatriarchy. Nevertheless, when surviving against Man,

²⁶¹ Octavio Paz, “The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico.” *Internet Archive* (1959). <https://ia802907.us.archive.org/32/items/labyrinthofsolit0000pazo/labyrinthofsolit0000pazo.pdf>.

²⁶² Life chances: a theory in sociology which refers to the opportunities each individual has to improve their quality of life.

²⁶³ Paz, “The Labyrinth of Solitude,” 86.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁵ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 31

women and femmes of color are criticized by those who have manipulated the hostile project of knowledge production that is not just anti-woman but anti-human. The male-dominated efforts to silence *La Mujer Americana* is a systemic and conditioned ethic denigrating American feminine identities into a fixed, dehumanizing secondary status.

As indicated through the works of Butler, de Beauvoir, and other feminist dialogue, Malintzin's involvement was not malicious; instead, she is a vilified historical figure in need of a humanizing recontextualization. Malintzin represents the 21st-century experience of womanhood—a demonized identity whose existence challenges masculinist sociocultural curations of gender, history, and knowledge production that forces the feminine identity as second to Man. Furthermore, hyperfixating on her personal motivations as the sole relevant piece of information when allocating blame is a distraction to the larger social context of masculinist violence. With the careful integration of feminist theory, Malintzin challenges the misogynistic anti-Indigenous narrative by reconfiguring the phallogentric Mexican psyche and its identity while simultaneously nurturing the wounded nature of the feminine entity in opposition to the adverse effects of patriarchal, manipulative control, and censorship. Feminine, Brown, and Black bodies historically reside within an immoral intersection of oppression—a forged position manipulated by masculinist philosophies of White supremacy and male dominance. As inheritors of the most harmful effects of bigotry through ongoing gendered and racial acts of aggression, femmes of color become susceptible to the violent realities of hate crimes against themselves and their communities. Ergo, I denounce the anonymous body and seek to humanize the livelihood and experiences of Malintzin and her daughters! The insidious convergence of discrimination within a power-hungry political system dismissive of humanitarian issues renders femmes of color victims to an epidemic of brutality and injustice. Malintzin could hardly be a traitor to the Mexican nation when no such country existed, yet the humanity that *did* exist was stolen and violated. The pathos of Malintzin's existence as a policed, exploited, and sexualized identity is indisputable and epitomizes the historical nature between Spanish conquerors and Indigenous women—today's Man and *La Mujer Americana*.

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