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Introduction

The story of La Malinche has pervaded Mexican nationalist discourse for the dichotomous relationship that has simultaneously mystified and demonized her. The woman behind the story is Malintzin, an Indigenous Aztec woman who had contact with the first Spanish settlers in what is known today as the Yucatán Peninsula. Discussions regarding her absence in the struggle against the Spanish settlers have, in turn, villainized her story. Contrastingly, Chicana feminist scholars have attempted to reclaim La Malinche’s narrative by providing a historical alternative to the story, one which views her as a victim of the Spanish stronghold and patriarchy replicated by colonialism.

The present paper aims to construct the historical figure of La Malinche within a postcolonialist framework. Utilizing Malintzin’s story as a case study illustrates the deeper colonial structures that have created the figure of La Malinche as a dishonorable and treacherous woman. Although the various nuances of her story will be discussed, my overarching question intends to answer in what ways the metaphor of La Malinche has been utilized as a form of abstraction to both uplift and oppress the Mexican woman who is either “traditional” or “sexually treacherous.” Scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa have addressed La Malinche’s positionality within contemporary Mexican and Mexican-American society, questioning the replication of the traditional/treacherous binary. However, I expand on this scholarship by observing this case study from a postcolonial lens, particularly by conceptualizing language as an object of weaponization, bridging, and Catholic conversion.

Furthermore, La Malinche’s narrative will be constructed under Dr. Sankaran Krishna's theories of "willful amnesia" in international relations (IR). Under this theory, Krishna posits that strategies of abstraction and deferred redemption are weaponized to minimize the effects of colonialism in the past, present, and future of IR. Instead of placing more emphasis on the structural effects of colonialism, La Malinche is blamed for the downfall of pre-Hispanic civilization and subsequent settler-colonized relationships.
The framing of my research paper will firstly be supported by a historical background of La Malinche and the complexities of her relationship with the Spanish Crown. Next, I aim to begin answering my research question through analyzing how abstraction and similar methods of “willful amnesia” fit into the context of Spanish colonization. This will then be followed by a discussion of how La Malinche’s story has been weaponized to provide a blanket-statement explanation of Indigenous communities’ downfall. Finally, La Malinche’s story will be translated into a contemporary context: the pervasive nature of gendered violence in Mexico. Recognizing the connection between a harmful narrative of women deemed as La Malinche and the rising rate of feminicides illustrates the importance of deconstructing the aforementioned binary.

Background and Clarification of Terms
La Malinche

It must firstly be noted that this paper’s use of La Malinche and Malintzin is not interchangeable. La Malinche refers to the abstract narrative that mystifies and demonizes the actual person named Malintzin. Not separating the semantics perpetuates the oneness of the terms, thus furthering the erasure of the person. In addition, Chicana scholar Cordelia Candelaria highlights the importance of detaching the Spanish conquest from La Malinche’s narrative, despite the events contributing to what is now the permanent reality in Mexico. Nonetheless, the conquista consisted of a “destruction of a way of life, (...) the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Native peoples; and the subjugation and enslavement of the survivors.” Despite this paper's acknowledgement of colonialism's detrimental effects, centering the conquista to Malintzin’s story detracts from the contemporary structural effects caused thereafter.

Although there are not many first-hand sources of Malintzin, most of them being written by the Spanish, historians have weaved together various sources to construct an idea of who she was. Candelaria writes that Malintzin lived in a time of political contention regarding the Aztec ruler, Moctezuma, who exercised tyrannical order over the region that is now known as Mexico City and neighboring regions. Moctezuma’s rule (1502–1520) caused political rupture amongst the Natives, which later proved to be a point of weakness against the Spanish colonizers. By the time Hernán Cortés arrived, the Aztec Empire was already beginning to decline. Candelaria emphasizes this attribute, since Malintzin has been used as a scapegoat for the successful Spanish conquering of the Natives.

191 Ibid. 3.
192 The conquest is widely known in Spanish as la conquista.
Malintzin formed part of a noble family situated in present-day Yucatán, Mexico. Her status as a chief's daughter presented her with opportunities for education. However, her father's death and mother remarrying caused a shift in her family dynamic. Her mother sold Malintzin into slavery to keep her inheritance and even held a false funeral to explain her daughter’s disappearance.\textsuperscript{194} Malintzin was sent to the ruling tribes in Tabasco, where she practiced various Indigenous languages and later Castilian Spanish when Cortés arrived in 1519.\textsuperscript{195}

When Hernán Cortés arrived in the Yucatán Peninsula, he was given twenty young women to serve as domestic laborers, one of those being Malintzin. Due to her educated background and polyglot abilities, Malintzin quickly distinguished herself from the other subjugated women. Cortés began to use her abilities to survey the land and populations he aimed to conquer, thus bridging the gap between the Spanish Crown and the settler-state formed by Cortés. Malintzin thus served as a sort of cultural diplomat for Hernán Cortés, by translating for the Spanish and the Indigenous peoples of the region for over ten years. Historical accounts also specify that Malintzin warned Cortés of Indigenous plots against him and ultimately gave birth to Cortés’ son.\textsuperscript{196}

Her objectification and bestowal has caused her to be a symbol of subjugation before the Spanish and Native men. The subsequent Spanish conquest and mixing of the races furthered damage toward women’s image. The mixture of races, also known as mestizaje, was elemental in continuing the subordination of Indigenous women as it made the offspring envy their Spanish father and despise their Indian mother.\textsuperscript{197} The image of \textit{La Malinche} has been molded to fit a number of mestizo narratives, due to her relationship with the colonial Spanish power. On one hand, she is seen as a traitor to her people, while on the other, she may represent resilience by adapting to the Spanish colonization processes.

\textit{Willful Amnesia and Abstraction}

As mentioned previously, the theories constructed by postcolonialist scholar Dr. Sankaran Krishna will be utilized to understand \textit{La Malinche}’s narrative in a presence and absence framework. Krishna firstly argues that the IR discipline is based on a willful amnesia on questions of race; furthermore, it weaponizes the strategies of abstraction and deferred redemption to maintain its ideological coherence.\textsuperscript{198} Focusing more so on the strategy of abstraction, it is defined as the choice to “theory build” rather than rationalizing the effects of land, violence, and

\textsuperscript{194} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{195} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{196} “The Figure of La Malinche in Chicana Literature: Between Betrayal and Redemption,” \textit{Scottish Centre for Global History}, 2021.


slavery. Oftentimes, the desire to include these in the study of IR results in a referral to other humanities disciplines such as anthropology or history. Abstraction has been weaponized by renowned scholars, such as Martin Heidegger or Michel Foucault, to conceal the nuances of knowledge production. In other words, the double-edged sword of knowledge production consists of exposing hidden truths as well as concealing and “unknowing” the deep-rooted layers of larger concepts.

Krishna applies the strategy of abstraction to the Spanish colonization of the Americas, specifically how the Spanish utilized the cleansing of Indigenous languages to promote Christianity and justify the sacking of resources and people. Not only was Castilian employed to consolidate the Spanish Crown, but it was further used to fragment the already-established political systems of Indigenous civilizations. This aspect of abstraction can extend to lingual formation that has spread the history of La Malinche as a traitor, rather than a survivor of Spanish colonialism. Furthermore, Krishna attempts to ameliorate the problem of willful amnesia by referring to Edward Said's method of contrapuntality. Said posits that, “by looking at different experiences contrapuntally, as making up a set of (...) intertwined and overlapping histories [one can] try to formulate an alternative both to a politics of blame and to the even more destructive politics of confrontation and hostility.” The mere consideration of La Malinche’s duality could be considered as a contrapuntal analysis, given the vast scholarship that has villainized her actions. However, this paper goes further in considering the colonial implications behind the framing of La Malinche’s narrative. Feminicides

Finally, the clarification of feminicides must be noted. Although widely known as femicides, this paper opts to use the term feminicides. The latter refers to the killing (or homicide) of women, whereas a femicide includes the element of hatred toward women and the subsequent impunity of men on a cultural, judicial, and law enforcement level. The Mexican National Citizen Observatory for Feminicides (OCNF) clarifies that feminicides are motivated by the perpetrators’ sexist beliefs. Furthermore, the pervasive nature of feminicides results from the state's permissiveness of the culture of violence against women. Human rights organizations and other experts attribute violence against women as a truncation of systemic violence from organized crime and the drug trade, unemployment,

199 Krishna, “Race, Amnesia, and Education,” 2.
200 Ibid: 3.
201 Ibid: 12.
204 Ibid: 1.
women in the labor market, and a lack of judicial impunity. Overall, from 1990 to 2020, reports demonstrate that there have been 60,509 women dead at the hands of femicide. In 2022, 1,015 per 100,000 women died as a result of femicide. In other words, over sixty women were victims of femicide for every month of 2022. The pervasiveness of this issue has called for a number of protests and social media campaigns, namely the Ni Una Menos (not one more death) movement. Despite legislative concessions, the normalization of femicides continues to blame women for their deaths. Although La Malinche’s narrative cannot be construed as the sole contributor to the culture of femicides that is present in Mexico today, it can entertain the idea that a traditional/treacherous binary furthers violence against women who do not fit in it.

Discussion

La Malinche’s story and the threat of femicides in Mexico are not directly nor explicitly related; however, the lens of Krishna’s abstraction theory allows us to understand the culture of female subjugation in pre-Hispanic and present-day times. Weaving the historical and contemporary offers a different perspective on scholarship that has villainized Malintzin. Language–Indigenous or colonial–is the central object of abstraction. I argue that language has been used as an object of bridging, weaponization, and Catholic conversion for Malintzin as a traditional woman and against her for betraying her compatriots. Furthermore, Krishna's theory of abstraction allows us to see how Malintzin is both revealed and concealed, thus trapping her in an absence and presence framework. Abstraction has allowed for a funneled version of Malintzin to exist within the settler-colonized narrative, disregarding the dual implications of being sold into slavery and being confronted with the leader of the colonial mission.

Bridging, Weaponizing, and Converting

Indigenous languages faced the same dilemma as Malintzin: assimilation or annihilation. Language, either Indigenous or Castilian, was at the centerpiece of the colonization process. Furthermore, it allowed Malintzin to both thrive and perish under the colonial stronghold. Krishna draws on scholar Walter Mignolo to explain how an alphabetized language facilitates the acquisition of lands, calculation of

debt, and further subjugation of Natives. Based on my observations, I argue that
tongue can be materialized, namely by conceptualizing it as an object: a bridge,
weapon, and a Catholic cross. Malintzin was able to use language to her advantage,
however, the Spanish were the ultimate benefactors of the erasure of Indigenous
languages and the establishment of Castilian.

There are several nuances that can be associated with the weaponization of
language. Due to the violent nature of Malintzin’s subjugation, first by her slave
owners and later by Cortés, she was forced to use her advanced intelligence to
survive. As such, her polyglot abilities were used as a military strategy against
Moctezuma’s empire, further partitioning loyalties for Moctezuma. Language, with
Malintzin as the medium, was aimed back at Natives. This was a step towards
alphabetization and gradual eradication of Indigenous languages. Furthermore,
Mignolo asserts that language was able to simultaneously consolidate an imaginary
Spanish Crown in the Americas and fragment the existing political structures.

The stretch of this strategic dis-memberment process extends further than
the immediate contact with the Spanish. One of the most known narratives of
Mexican culture and its histories, The Labyrinth of Solitude, is written by famed
Mexican poet Octavio Paz. Essentially, Paz writes about Mexican culture from a
postcolonial perspective. In it, Paz describes the meaning of the word chingar. A
versatile word in Mexican lingo, chingar is used in many contexts and
intonations. Overall, chingar implies the use of force enacted on another, whether
it be ripping something open, breaking, or wounding. Chingar also has sexual
connotations, giving it a “masculine, active, [and] cruel” meaning. Its raunchy
nature adds an element of taboo, even though it is sometimes used loosely among
men or in casual settings. One of its uses, hijo de la Chingada, may translate to son
of a whore; thereby Chingada refers to the “Mother forcibly opened, violated or
deceived.” Paz then connects Chingada with Malintzin, who he argues became a
figure representing Native women who were violated by the Spanish. He adds,
“[a]nd as a small boy will not forgive his mother if she abandons him, the Mexican
people have not forgiven La Malinche for her betrayal.” Chingar in any

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212 Krishna, “Race, Amnesia, and Education,” 15.
214 Dis-memberment refers to scholar Sabelo Gatsheni’s theory in which colonized peoples humanity, history, and lands are taken apart, or dis-membered, by colonial forces
215 Chingón (macho); chingoncito (deceptive); chingadera (rash behavior); vete a la chingada (to swear someone off).
216 Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude; The Other Mexico; Return to the Labyrinth of Solitude; Mexico and the United States; The Philanthropic Ogre (New York: Grove Press 1985): 77.
217 Ibid.
218 Ibid.
219 Ibid: 79.
220 Ibid: 86.
contemporary context is ultimately weaponized against Malintzin, who takes the fall for the colonization of her people. More dangerously, the narrative of *La Malinche* is generalized, almost as a cautionary tale for women to not fall into. Furthermore, the usage of the word against women serves as an example of the treacherous/traditional binary posed earlier.

Secondly, language is used as a bridge that allows Malintzin to cross between the Indigenous and colonial realms. Although Malintzin is not biologically *mestiza*, she still does the labor of linguistically and culturally translating between both realms. Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa would conceptualize this endeavor as a metaphorical borderland that is “not restricted to physical spaces [and] includes the psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderlands.”221 As the only one being able to access either realm, Malintzin is also the only inhabitant within this borderland. The other perspective of language as a bridge perceives Malintzin as the link between the “old” and “new” worlds, thus opening her world to foreign influence. Paz sees this opening, both in the 16th and 20th centuries, as contrary to the way things should be: “[¡Viva México, hijos de la chingada! [expresses] our desire to live closed off from the outside world and, above all, from the past.”222 This perspective not only echoes the desire to revert to pre-Hispanic contact but also to abandon Malintzin in the process.

The final use of language in the colonization process is through Catholic conversion. As mentioned previously, Spaniards systematically cleansed Indigenous languages to further establish themselves in the territory. However, they also learned the Native language to facilitate conversion into Catholicism.223 The clearest use of the Catholic cross to “purify” and “sanctify” was to dilute the Natives’ paganism to figures that were accessible to them. This figure comes in the form of the Virgin of Guadalupe, although she was known by the Natives as the maternal Aztec goddess *Tonantsi. Tonantsi* represented a benevolent feminine figure in Aztec culture, however, catholicization transformed her into a more palatable symbol.224 The purified image of the Virgin of Guadalupe thus replaced *Tonantsi* and offered natives protection and maternal affection. The Roman Catholic Church later named her as Mexico’s patron saint, and her emblematic visual attributes continue to be used in popular culture.225

The purification of *Tonantsi* implies a villainization of *La Malinche. La Malinche*’s narrative as treacherous is juxtaposed with the projection of the Virgin as a traditional woman. The Virgin is everything *La Malinche* is not: *La Malinche*

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222 Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, 86.

223 Krishna, “Race, Amnesia, and Education,” 12.


betrayed her people and opened her world to colonization, while the Virgin protects and consoles her children.\textsuperscript{226} Catholic conversion also deemed all Indigenous deities as works of the devil, further exterminating Natives’ morale.\textsuperscript{227} The Malinche/ Virgin binary serves as an example of the colonial discourse permeating in the patriarchal conception of women as either traditional or treacherous. Returning to Krishna’s theories, the conceptualization of language as a colonial object serves as a contrapuntal analysis to mainstream discourses.

Presence and Absence Framework

La Malinche is present and very much alive in Chicanx discourse that aims to revise and remember Malintzin differently than traditional historians have. Anzaldúa has formed La Malinche within the constructs of mestizaje to explain that “metaphor has the power to restructure the collective unconscious through both linguistic and visual means.”\textsuperscript{228} This is reminiscent of Krishna’s strategies of abstraction as nationalistic narratives have shaped La Malinche’s narrative by placing her in a treacherous or traditional binary. Although Anzaldúa is referring to Chicanx culture, she posits that males have established the metaphors upon which cultures are built.\textsuperscript{229} Anzaldúa conceptualizes the Chicana woman within the patriarchal framework that splits her into the figures of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the myth of the Weeping Woman, and La Malinche.\textsuperscript{230} Contrastingly, Chicana literature has posited that Malintzin, “deliberately chose to be a survivor (...) [who] cast her lot with the Spaniards to ensure survival of a race.”\textsuperscript{231} This is despite historical accounts estimating that Malintzin was only fourteen when she was acquired by Cortés as a mistress and translator.\textsuperscript{232} The drawback of Chicanx literature thus gives too much autonomy to Malintzin, instead of accepting her victimhood as a result of the patriarchal colonial structure. Nonetheless, it offers a subaltern perspective that departs from the treacherous or traditional binary.

Arguably, the absence framework is more damaging than the autonomous Malintzin constructed by Chicanx literature. The actual person (Malintzin) is absent from La Malinche’s discourse, despite the prescriptions assigned to her. Paz’s voice in The Labyrinth of Solitude echoes a 20th-century patriarchal lens that reduces Malintzin to nothing: “she loses her name; she is no one; she disappears into nothingness; she is Nothingness. And yet she is the cruel incarnation of the

\textsuperscript{226} Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude, 85.
\textsuperscript{227} Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 28.
\textsuperscript{228} Aigner, “Metaphors of a Mestiza Consciousness,” 7.
\textsuperscript{229} Ibid: 3.
\textsuperscript{230} Ibid: 5; “The ‘Weeping Woman,’ who wanders through the streets late at night, weeping and crying out for her lost children.”
\textsuperscript{231} Elizabeth Rodriguez Kessler, “She’s the Dreamwork Inside Someone Else’s Skull: La Malinche and the Battles Waged for Her Autonomy,” Chicana/Latina Studies, 2005.
\textsuperscript{232} Ibid: 10.
feminine condition.” In fact, Paz equates *La Malinche*, not Malintzin, to one who has been *Chingada*. In other words, Paz erases her personhood to someone that has accepted passive sexual violation. Paz describes Malintzin as a mistress who “gave herself voluntarily to the conquistador” and was disposed of when she was not of use anymore.

Paz’s derogatory interpretation of *La Malinche* reflects Mexican discourse of the Native woman. Paz was an influential figure in Mexican and international spheres and was awarded numerous accolades, including the 1990 Nobel Prize in Literature. His perception of Malintzin as passive, submissive, and a traitor against her own people fosters and perpetuates the negative connotations associated with *La Malinche*. Paz erased her identity even when the only significant historical remnants of her were recorded by the Spanish. Arguably, Paz’s award-winning work contains elements of what Krishna is advocating through Said’s contrapuntal analysis. Krishna writes, “one has to restage contrapuntally, the encounters between the West and the rest, (...) that produced the originary alienation that inaugurated the modern (post-Columbian) world and necessitated the discipline of IR to suture it.” Although Paz’s work could be considered contrapuntal, he manages to erase and belittle one of the main figures of Mexican nationalist discourse. Paz’s work lacks the further consideration of *La Malinche* as a multifaceted figure, even though her identity has been distorted by colonial forces. Chicanx scholar Elizabeth Kessler asserts that Paz’s hegemonic and misogynistic interpretation is consistent with Mexican culture that reprimands women from deviating from traditional gender roles. The presence and absence framework within Mexican/Chicanx discourse thus presents *La Malinche* as a malleable figure. In whichever circumstance, Malintzin can be erased and made visible. This juxtaposition presents a dilemma that can only be ameliorated by recognizing Malintzin as a person possessing multiple identities while *La Malinche* can live within the sphere of open interpretation.

**Relevance to Feminicides**

As stated previously, my aim is not to attribute *La Malinche*’s narrative to the reason behind present-day feminicides in Mexico. However, *La Malinche*’s story fits within the culture of blame towards women who fall outside of the traditional and subservient narrative. The binary of *La Malinche* and the Virgin of Guadalupe can be paralleled to the current rhetoric that places the blame on women for their deaths. For example, *La Malinche* is believed to be at fault for the fall of pre-Hispanic civilization. In a similar manner, women who fall outside of the non-

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235 Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, 86.
234 Ibid.
236 Kessler, “She’s the Dreamwork,” 8.
traditional perception by “[finding] themselves in risky situations” or who get drunk are “looking for trouble.” Instead of holding the governmental structure accountable for its impunity, Mexican women are left with a false sense of autonomy.

Concretion, rather than abstraction, counteracts the mainstream approach taken by the IR discipline in erasing “themes such as theft of land, racism, slavery, and colonialism.” The extrapolation of La Malinche’s story to feminicides provides a strategy of concretion because of its sociological consideration of violence. Without accounting for the historical context of victim-blaming in Mexico, assertions by scholars such as Octavio Paz would continue to reduce La Malinche and “similar” women to nothingness. As such, weaponizing sexist language towards non-traditional women only continues the cycle of feminicides. However, language has dual implications. Language can also serve as the catalyst for sparking conversation and igniting change, as long as the language shifts from blame to understanding.

Conclusion

This paper has dealt with the central claim that La Malinche has been utilized as a form of abstraction to both uplift and oppress her and other non-traditional women. Extending claims from scholar Sankaran Krishna allowed me to observe the duality of Malintzin and La Malinche through a postcolonialist lens. This came in the form of analyzing the nuances of language when applied to different contexts, namely the weaponization, bridging, and Catholic conversion of Natives. In addition, I was able to uncover how strategies of abstraction have erased Malintzin from the narrative of La Malinche. Such strategies have only allowed for La Malinche to exist in the confines of the patriarchal and colonial lens, instead of viewing her as a victim of slavery and colonialism.

Putting the writing of Octavio Paz and Gloria Anzaldúa in conversation with one another revealed an asymmetrical discourse about La Malinche, despite the former being highly regarded in Mexican culture. Paz simultaneously introduced La Malinche within a presence and absence framework. Ironically, however, Malintzin is presented as a symbol of betrayal as a result of her passivity. On the other hand, Anzaldúa connects Malintzin as a person who inhabits the colonial and Indigenous in-between. Analyzing the nuances of both authors helps explain the implications of presence and erasure.

The narrative of La Malinche left unchecked presents serious problems to the culture of victim-blaming present in the femicide discourse. More specifically, the normalized nature of offensive words such as chingar and its connection to La Malinche represents a larger problem within the language that discusses traditional

237 Becerra, Prevalezte Visión Misógina.
238 Krishna, “Race, Amnesia, and Education,” 7.
239 Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude, 86.
and non-traditional women. *La Malinche* also forms part of the IR discourse since her narrative has been formed by Spanish, Mexican, and Indigenous spheres. In addition, the aforementioned strategies of concretion allow for the conceptualization of other female figures impacted by colonialism.
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