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TITLE: Dueling Portrayals of La Malinche in Twenty-First Century Mexican Historical Fiction

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ABSTRACT: La Malinche, the indigenous adolescent who served as Hernán Cortés's interpreter and concubine during the Conquest of the Aztec Empire, is a foundational figure in the Mexican cultural imaginary who continues to inspire literary explorations of her life nearly five centuries after her death. This article explores her characterization in two recent Mexican historical novels: *Malinche* (2006) by Laura Esquivel and *Isabel Moctezuma* (2008) by Eugenio Aguirre. These novels naturally enter into an intertextual conversation with other texts written about Malinche in the extensive bibliography of works that hypothesize about her life and perspectives. I argue that the key textual interlocuter for both novels is Octavio Paz's influential essay, "Los hijos de la Malinche" (1950), in which he solidifies her reputation as "La Chingada," or the passive, yet violated, symbolic mother of mestizo Mexico. I further contend that Esquivel and Aguirre engage with Paz's pronouncement on Malinche in starkly different ways, yet both aspire through their novels to help her mestizo children reconcile with their symbolic lineage.

KEYWORDS: Malinche, Octavio Paz, Laura Esquivel, Eugenio Aguirre, Isabel Moctezuma

RESUMEN: La Malinche, la adolescente indígena que sirvió de intérprete y concubina de Hernán Cortés durante la conquista del Imperio Azteca, es una figura fundamental en el imaginario cultural mexicano que continúa inspirando exploraciones literarias de su vida casi cinco siglos después de su muerte. Este artículo explora su caracterización en dos novelas históricas mexicanas recientes: *Malinche* (2006) de Laura Esquivel e *Isabel Moctezuma* (2008) de Eugenio Aguirre. Estas novelas entran naturalmente en una conversación intertextual con otros textos escritos sobre Malinche en la extensa bibliografía de obras que proponen hipótesis sobre su vida y sus perspectivas. Sostengo que el interlocutor textual clave para ambas novelas es el influyente ensayo de Octavio Paz, "Los hijos de la Malinche" (1950), en el cual se solidifica la reputación de Malinche como "La Chingada," o la pasiva, aunque violada, madre simbólica del México mestizo. Además, arguyo que Esquivel y Aguirre responden al veredicto de Paz sobre Malinche de maneras completamente diferentes, aunque ambos aspiran a través de sus novelas a ayudar a sus hijos mestizos a reconciliarse con su linaje simbólico.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Malinche, Octavio Paz, Laura Esquivel, Eugenio Aguirre, Isabel Moctezuma

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Dueling Portrayals of La Malinche in Twenty-First Century Mexican Historical Fiction

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Nearly five centuries after her death, La Malinche, the indigenous adolescent who served as Hernán Cortés's interpreter and concubine during the Conquest of the Aztec Empire, continues to capture the imagination of Mexican writers and their readership. She is a figure about whom relatively little is known, and, over the centuries, a multitude of writers have endeavored to fill in the many blanks left by her contemporaries. One of the most influential literary reflections on Malinche is the mid-twentieth century essay by Octavio Paz, "Los hijos de la Malinche" (1950). In it, Paz famously frames Malinche as "la Chingada," a passive rape victim who aligns herself with the Spaniards during the Conquest of the Aztec Empire, thus earning her the disdain of her symbolic children: mestizo Mexicans. Most subsequent publications on Malinche have in one way or another engaged with Paz's verdict on her life and ongoing importance in Mexican identity politics. Over half a century after the publication of Paz's essay, one might surmise that any lingering debate over Malinche's place in the Mexican cultural imaginary would have been settled. Here, though, I argue that the opposite is the case as can be seen in two of the most recent entries into the ever-expanding bibliography of works on her life: *Malinche* (2006) by Laura Esquivel and *Isabel Moctezuma* (2008) by Eugenio Aguirre.

While Esquivel's historical novel focuses almost entirely on Malinche and responds to Paz's accusations with a vigorous defense, Aguirre's novel, as the title suggests, focuses primarily on another young indigenous woman, Isabel Moctezuma, the first-born daughter of the Aztec Emperor, Moctezuma II. Rather than casting Malinche as

the protagonist of his novel, as Esquivel does in *Malinche*, Aguirre casts her as la Chingada and the antagonist to the noble Isabel. These two starkly different portrayals reflect an unsettled debate in Mexican society about Malinche's role in the Conquest and her place in the symbolic lineage of the Mexican people. The object of this study is to elucidate the dueling portrayals of Malinche in both novels as intertextual interlocutors with Paz's work as Esquivel contests and Aguirre confirms her characterization as la Chingada.

Before embarking on an analysis of the competing portrayals of Malinche in the novels in question, it seems fitting to offer some biographical information on this little understood figure, a task made challenging by what historian Georges Baudot has aptly called "la parquedad, la pobreza y la fragilidad de la información disponible" (54). Malinche is the mestizo name of the adolescent slave whose indigenous name is believed to have been Malinalli, or Malintzin (zin being an honorific suffix), and whose Christian name was Marina (Karttunen 292). It is largely thanks to the chronicles of one of Cortés's soldiers, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, that we know of Malinche's pivotal role in Cortés's expedition. In *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, Díaz del Castillo relates how doña Marina (the name that he invariably uses to refer to Malinche) was handed over to Cortés, along with nineteen other young women, by the Chontal Maya during his march toward Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital. In his chronicles, Díaz del Castillo does what Cortés failed to do in his letters to the king: he credits Malinche with having played a crucial role in the enterprise of conquest by pointing to her bilingualism as the key to the

formation of alliances with indigenous rivals of the Aztecs: “sin ir doña Marina no podíamos entender la lengua de la Nueva España y México” (76). Without these alliances that were made possible by Malinche’s linguistic collaboration, Cortés and his men, who were vastly outnumbered, would likely have met with annihilation (Restall 84-5).

In addition to lauding her linguistic skills and strategic importance, Díaz del Castillo recounts a dramatic tale of riches to rags and back to riches. In short, he relates that Malinche was the firstborn daughter of a powerful Nahuatl cacique. As such, her privileged future should have been assured, but following her father’s death and her mother’s remarriage, Malinche’s fortunes changed dramatically. Her mother abandoned her with traveling merchants from another tribe in order to assure her son’s (the product of her new marriage) noble inheritance, which should rightfully have belonged to Malinche. Thus at a young age, Malinche is believed to have gone from minor nobility to slavery, possibly at the hands of her own people. While it is impossible to confirm Díaz del Castillo’s account, it is easy to surmise that however Malinche came to live with the Chontal Maya, who handed her over to Cortés, it was because of her existence in different indigenous communities that she became bilingual, a reality that made her indispensable to the Spaniards. In spite of her critical role in the Conquest, very little is known of her life after the fall of Tenochtitlán. We know that she bore Cortés a son, Martín, and later was given in marriage to one of his officers, Juan de Jaramillo, with whom she had a daughter prior to her death. Historians postulate that she died in 1527 or 1528, but the circumstances of her death are unknown (Karttunen 309).

While Díaz del Castillo’s account of Malinche’s life rescued her from anonymity, it raises as many questions as it answers. In spite of the importance of her spoken words during the Conquest, Malinche herself left us no letters or testimonies that reveal her perspectives

or true feelings. As Mexican feminist scholar Margo Glantz observes,

[e]n las crónicas españolas, Malinche carece de voz. Todo lo que ella interpreta, todos sus propósitos se manejan por discurso indirecto. (Glantz 124)

Because of the dearth of verifiable biographical information about Malinche, it is not surprising that many writers have hypothesized about her life in their works. Such hypothetical renderings, however, are colored by the writers’ varying ideological stances with regard to the nature of her role in the Conquest. As Rachel Phillips puts it, those who have sought to capture her likeness have essentially used her “as an empty vessel ready to be filled by their formulations” (98-99). This is due in no small part to the fact that because of her subaltern status, we have no way of knowing Malinche’s own views of her role. As Matthew Restall reminds us, this historical silence

has allowed her to become many things to many people: a symbol of betrayal; an opportunistic sexual siren; a feminist icon; an Aztec goddess in disguise; the mother of the first mestizo, and thus of the Mexican nation; the ultimate rape victim of the Conquest. (86)

Over the past five centuries, depending on the particular bent of the writer, she has been portrayed as all of these characters in literary reconstructions of her life. It is doubtlessly this ongoing project that prompts Ricardo Vivancos Pérez to affirm that the subject of Malinche’s role in Mexican history is “un conflicto no resuelto en el seno del imaginario nacional” (113).

The roots of this ongoing conflict extend back to the years of the Conquest when indigenous artists recorded Malinche’s presence in codices. While her position in these artistic renderings is a privileged one and denotes her status and importance (Karttunen 295), later representations of her were often less

flattering. This was especially true during and after the years of struggle for independence from Spain when Mexicans sought to distance themselves from any identification with Spaniards or their allies. As Todorov puts it,

the Mexicans, since their independence, have generally despised La Malinche as an incarnation of the betrayal of indigenous values, of servile submission to European culture and power. (101)

It was the post-independence context of nation building, according to Roger Bartra, that birthed “la leyenda negra de la Malinche” (2261), and in that legend she was portrayed as “Desirable Whore/Terrible Mother” (Messinger Cypess 9). This caustic portrayal has to varying degrees waxed and waned over the past two centuries, but it has never entirely disappeared. One would think that after five centuries of intertextual hypothesizing about the role and character of one figure, the verdict would be in about her role in Mexican history and present-day identity politics. However, as the twenty-first century novels that are the focus of this study demonstrate, she continues to be a divisive and contested figure whose controversial case remains unsettled, at least in the popular imagination.

While all texts written about Malinche naturally enter into an intertextual dialogue with other works that have been written about her, for the purposes of this study it is important to consider a text that was doubtlessly present in the minds of both Esquivel and Aguirre as they wrote their novels: Octavio Paz’s (in)famous mid-twentieth century essay, “Los hijos de la Malinche.” In his essay Paz solidifies Malinche’s reputation as “la Chingada,” which he defines as “la Madre abierta, violada o burlada por la fuerza” (103). Paz emphasizes the passive nature of la Chingada: “Su pasividad es abyecta: no ofrece resistencia a la violación, es un montón inerte de sangre, huesos y polvo” (103). According to Paz, it is this passive response to the violence visited upon herself and the indigenous peoples of

Mexico that condemns Malinche in the eyes of her symbolic children, the Mexican people:

Y del mismo modo que el niño no perdona a su madre que lo abandone para ir en busca de su padre el pueblo mexicano no perdona su traición a la Malinche. (110)

In “Los hijos de la Malinche,” Paz offers a literary diagnosis of the root cause of Mexicans’ deepest psychic wound—their symbolic, unresolved filial relationships:

La extraña permanencia de Cortés y de la Malinche en la imaginación y en la sensibilidad de los mexicanos actuales revela que son algo más que figuras históricas: son símbolos de un conflicto secreto, que aun no hemos resuelto. (111)

Paz argues that the unresolved internal conflict with “vestigios del pasado o fantasmas engendrados por nosotros mismos” traps Mexicans in shameful solitude (96). He cites an understanding of history as important in the process of identifying and confronting these phantoms, but he is not optimistic about its power to overcome them: “la historia podrá esclarecer el origen de muchos de nuestros fantasmas, pero no los disipará” (97). Instead, as Norma Alarcón reminds us, Paz and other influential Mexican writers, like Carlos Fuentes and Rosario Castellanos, have proposed that literature is the true agent of change that can propel Mexicans forward in their process of identity negotiation and reconciliation with their symbolic heritage:

In suggesting that their literary production is a theory of history, these Mexican writers also appear to suggest that it is capable of effecting historical changes. (67)

These writers implicitly or explicitly point their readers toward alternative interpretations of history in their texts, something that

Paz was clearly aiming to do in his essay and that others have endeavored to do in their literary responses to his theory of history vis-à-vis Malinche.

Since its publication in 1950, “Los hijos de la Malinche” has functioned as the primary textual interlocutor of subsequent characterizations of Malinche. For some, his essay solidified her reputation as a traitor, but for others his work served as a gauntlet that provoked vigorous literary defenses of the woman who was never able to defend herself. In the novels of Aguirre and Esquivel, we see examples of both postures: conformity with Paz’s description of Malinche as la Chingada in *Isabel Moctezuma* and a defense of her as both victim and powerful mother in *Malinche*. Not surprisingly, Esquivel’s approach has much in common with that of other Mexican and Chicana feminist writers who have responded to Paz’s essay by way of what Elba Birmingham-Pokorny calls “revisions, re-formations, reinterpretations, and rewritings” (122). In *Malinche*, her sixth novel, Esquivel continues her own trajectory of novelistic productions with a feminist bent and at the same time joins her voice with that of a chorus of other Mexican and Chicana feminist writers who have risen to Malinche’s defense in their works.

Perhaps the most prominent Mexican feminist writer to take up Malinalli’s cause was Rosario Castellanos, who defends her in essay, poetry and dramatic prose. In her essay on the triumvirate of Mexican feminine archetypes, “Otra vez Sor Juana,” Castellanos points to Malinche as “uno de los personajes claves de nuestra historia. Traidora la llaman unos, fundadora de la nacionalidad otros” (446). In the poem, “Malinche,” Castellanos makes clear her position in the debate by inverting the narrative that Malinche was a traitor to portray her as the betrayed. She lends Malinche what she was denied in history: a voice. The poem, narrated from the first-person perspective, recounts the suffering that Malinche endured, not at the hands of the Spaniards, but rather of her

own people. She is “vendida,” “esclava,” “arrojada,” “expulsada.” Likewise, in the play, “El eterno femenino,” Castellanos defies traditional representations of Malinche as a traitor, this time by highlighting her nationless status. The play also counters any ideas of Malinche as blinded by infatuation, or as Paz suggests in his essay, “fascinada” (110). In fact, when Malinche’s character is queried on the topic of her relationship with Cortés, she is bewildered and asks, “¿Cuál romance?” (92). In Castellanos’s recasting, Malinche is neither a traitor nor an enamored subaltern. She is a pragmatic survivor, serving her new master in a way that might best ensure her own survival, which, of course, is inexorably linked to his.

Another important Mexican feminist writer who challenges Paz’s formulation of Malinche is Margo Glantz. In her essayistic reflections she frames Malinche as a savvy and talented survivor who owes loyalty to no one, save herself. In her aptly titled essay, “Las hijas de la Malinche” (a pointed response to Paz’s “Los hijos de la Malinche”), Glantz accuses Paz not only of participating in a marginalization of Malinche, but of Mexicans in general. According to Glantz, from Paz’s perspective, “ser mujer y mexicana no sólo implica una doble marginalidad, sino también la desaparición” (298). Basing her arguments in part on the chronicles of Malinche’s contemporaries, Glantz refutes Paz’s assertion that Malinche was—and that women in general are—passive. She points to the proliferation of female-authored texts in Mexico from the late 1960s onward as evidence that the Mexican woman is neither passive nor silent, but rather that she has claimed her voice and seeks her identity through texts, a privilege that Malinche was denied (313). Glantz’s view of Malinche represents a general consensus among Mexican intellectuals in the second-half of the twentieth century and beyond, as evidenced by the host of writers, historians and cultural critics who lent their voices to a defense of Malinche in Glantz’s edited volume, *La Malinche, sus padres y sus hijos*.

While Mexican feminist writers like Castellanos and Glantz have tended to defend Malinche by portraying her as a victim and astute survivor rather than a traitor, the tendency of Chicana feminist writers has been to focus on Malinche not as a victim or an accused traitor, but rather as a powerful mother-figure. As Messenger Cypess notes in her chapter on Chicana feminist writers' reclaiming of Malinche, these women "view themselves as [her] symbolic daughters" (142). Their focus is on redeeming Malinche by not shying away from their symbolic lineage since, for them, she is not a source of shame, but of pride. They reject Paz's assertion that her mestizo children will not forgive her and instead assert that there is nothing to forgive. Likewise, they reject his view that they are ashamed of their raped mother and instead paint her as a powerful figure who was not used or raped, but rather an active agent in the birth of a new world. One example of a Chicana feminist response to Paz's essay is Carmen Tafolla's poem, "La Malinche," where she calls her "interpreter, advisor and lover," but not victim. The poem, narrated by Malinche in the first-person voice, mocks the label "la Chingada." Tafolla's Malinche is a strong, confident survivor, not the naïve young woman who Paz claims represents all Indians who are "burladas" or "fascinadas" (110). Instead, like Cortés, she has an objective: "Another world... la raza." This approach to framing Malinche as the proud mother of a new race of people also forms part of the strategy that Esquivel employs in her own vindictory portrayal of the figure.

It is Esquivel's deployment of both the Mexican and Chicana feminist defenses of Malinche that distinguishes her text from its predecessors. In her novel, Malinche is both victim and powerful mother-figure, and, in this sense, "Malinche se sitúa en una posición intermedia o mediadora entre las dos tendencias feministas, mexicana y chicana" (Vivancos Pérez 121). Esquivel adopts this hybrid approach to distance herself from Paz's condemnatory assessment of Malinche, or as Osvaldo Estrada notes in his incisive assessment

of the novel's portrayal, "[n]ada más alejado de la madre abierta y violada, retratada por Paz hace más de cincuenta años" (633). In the same article Estrada makes mention of Eugenio Aguirre as one of the lesser known authors of Mexican historical fiction whose works, like those of the more widely known Esquivel,

revelan reescrituras históricas autoconscientes, cuyo propósito principal es replantear cuestiones de identidad que surgen durante la conquista y siguen vigentes en el México de nuestra era. (Estrada 618)

However, in stark contrast to Esquivel's approach, Aguirre seems to use Paz's essay as the very basis for his portrayal of Malinche. She is *la Chingada*, a complicit victim of outsiders who forfeits any claim to the title of symbolic mother of the Mexican people. In his novel, Malinche's past as a slave of the Maya, who was given away by her own people, is never referenced, and she is portrayed in a manner that is almost indistinguishable from Paz's conception of her in "Los hijos de la Malinche."

While Esquivel's novelistic portrayal of Malinche echoes that of both Mexican and Chicana feminist writers, Aguirre's depiction more resembles that of canonical Mexican male writers who have responded to Paz's essay with their own nuanced rewritings of Malinche. Writers like Carlos Fuentes, Rodolfo Usigli and Celestino Gorostiza, to mention only a few, primarily harness the medium of theatre to respond to Paz's challenge of using literature as a vehicle to resolve the inherited conflict with Malinche. In *Doña Marina (La Malinche) y la formación de la identidad mexicana*, Cristina González Hernández provides summaries and analyses of their works and frames them as efforts toward innovative reformulations of the Malinche myth, but she concludes that they fall short: "no consiguen su propósito de renovación y, si bien con su sello personal, recrean los viejos arquetipos y

paradigmas” (164). The same may be said of Aguirre, whose characterization of Malinche does not represent “renovación,” but rather confirms Paz’s formulation and offers a new figure for consideration as symbolic mother: Isabel Moctezuma.

In Aguirre’s prolific literary production, which includes more than thirty novels that span a breadth of genres including western, testimonial, mystery and historical (Medina 148), the one that bears the most resemblance to *Isabel* is *Gonzalo Guerrero* (1980). In it, Aguirre explores another vilified figure from the Conquest era, Gonzalo Guerrero, a Spaniard who arrived at the coast of the Yucatán in 1511 as the result of a shipwreck. He was taken captive by a group of Mayans and initially lived among them as a slave, though he eventually married and had children with a Mayan woman. His assimilation into the Mayan culture was so complete that he not only refused to join Cortés’s expedition, but also fought against the Spaniards and was killed in battle (Medina 148). In his novel, Aguirre contradicts texts from the Conquest and Colonial eras that paint Guerrero as an antihero or traitor:

La novela revisa esta posición, y Gonzalo Guerrero representa un luchador temerario, padre de familia dedicado y hombre muy honesto. (Medina 154)

Aguirre mythologizes Guerrero as a noble warrior who defends his adopted homeland and, significantly, displaces Cortés as the symbolic father of mestizo Mexico. This project of displacement extends to Malinche, as well, as she is replaced by Guerrero’s Mayan wife:

Gonzalo Guerrero brinda una versión diferente a la de los discursos de la Conquista al trazar el origen del mestizaje a Gonzalo Guerrero y su esposa en vez de a Hernán Cortés y la Malinche. [...] [E]sta historia de amor y de heroísmo reemplaza la de violación asociada con Cortés y la Malinche. (Medina 158)

In *Gonzalo*, Aguirre’s overt intention is to rescue a little-known figure of the Conquest and to reframe his relationship and children with a Mayan woman as the true origin of Mexican mestizaje. In *Isabel*, his intention is similar. While Isabel has not been the victim of historical character assassination as has Guerrero, Aguirre mythologizes her in his novel to replace the figure of Malinche as the symbolic mother of Mexicans.

Although Esquivel and Aguirre address accusations of Malinche’s treachery in starkly different ways, both offer a solution to the identity issues raised by Paz and subsequently decried by many scholars as a scapegoating of the woman who came to be considered the mother of mestizo Mexico. According to Zinam and Molina, this scapegoating is to blame for “the negative self-image” and “so-called ‘burden of heritage’ which torments some Mexicans and Chicanos up to the present time” (4). Both novels attempt to lighten this burden of heritage, but in radically distinct fashions. Esquivel’s novel might be called a practice in apotheosis as she tries to humanize the mother-figure who is more myth than woman and defend her actions as those of a subaltern who finds ways to navigate untenable realities in order to survive the Conquest. Aguirre’s goal, on the other hand, is to present these tormented Mexicans and Chicanos with an alternative to Malinalli in the form of Isabel Moctezuma. Aguirre presents Isabel as the legitimate symbolic mother of Mexicans because she was the daughter of an Aztec emperor, not a slave whose noble ancestry was lesser and never verified.

Both novelists have been candid in interviews about the motives behind their characterizations of Malinche (whom they refer to primarily as Malinalli in their novels). For his part, Aguirre openly reveals that Isabel is Malinalli’s “antítesis ética” in the novel (*La Jornada*). He goes on to describe Isabel as “una mujer activa, de convicciones, informada, una princesa Mexica con una amplia educación, arraigada en su cultura” (*La Jornada*). Meanwhile he portrays Malinalli as

the counterpoint to these laudable qualities. For each of Isabel's good and noble characteristics, Malinalli has a correspondingly bad character flaw. While many writers have sought ways to rescue and redeem the memory of Malinche from her scapegoating, Aguirre continues with the process and uses her as the antagonist to Isabel who, according to Aguirre, "merecía una novela histórica para reivindicarla a ella y a otras mujeres como una imagen positiva de lucha" (*La Jornada*). Ironically this is precisely the language that many Mexican and Chicana feminist writers use to talk about their portrayals of Malinche, who is not the beneficiary of any measure of vindication in Aguirre's novel. Instead, she is the heroine's monstrous double, and the clear message is that she should be cast aside in favor of Isabel who holds the key to easing any burden of heritage created by the Conquest. For Aguirre, Isabel (significantly, not Malinalli)

es símbolo de mestizaje, de la resistencia cultural, pero también, pasados los siglos, bien podría sintetizar la necesidad urgente de reconciliación de los mexicanos contemporáneos consigo mismos. (*La Jornada*)

Esquivel has expressed similarly lofty goals with regard to her novelistic representation of Malinche. However, in *Malinche*, instead of dismissing her as an irredeemably flawed mother who must be replaced, Esquivel proposes seeing her as a complicated figure who struggles to survive while being true to herself. The novel portrays a woman who is intelligent, sensitive, deeply spiritual and innocent of betrayal. Instead of placing the blame for any burden of heritage on Malinche, Esquivel proposes a reexamination of a society that would shift blame to an adolescent slave for the fall of an empire:

La Malinche no fue una traidora ni existía el concepto de nación, es un absurdo. Pero, ¿qué nos lleva a querer culparla? ¿Qué no nos perdonamos para culparla a ella? (*La Jornada*)

While Esquivel's tack is radically different than that of Aguirre, she also aspires to more than simply another retelling of Malinche's role in the conquest; she too hopes to inspire Mexicans to reject an inferiority complex birthed of myths and misplaced blame: "más que la reivindicación de un personaje es la revaloración de todo lo que somos los mexicanos" (*La Jornada*).

One way that Esquivel writes toward repairing Malinche's tarnished reputation (and the psyches of her children) is by focusing parts of the novel on her early life as a slave who was given away multiple times. This approach distinguishes her novel from Aguirre's, in which all details of Malinalli's early life are conspicuously absent. In *Isabel*, Malinalli's first appearance is in Tenochtitlán and information about her history, including how she came to be part of the Spaniard's expedition, is never brought to light. Esquivel, on the other hand, recounts Malinalli's life from birth onward, dedicating time to describe her special relationship with her paternal grandmother and highlighting the rejection and abandonment that she suffers at the hands of her mother, who, in accordance with Díaz del Castillo's version of events, turns her daughter over to traveling merchants (124). In these pages, interlaced throughout the novel, the reader comes to know a sensitive and intelligent child whose sense of loss is at times overwhelming. It is clear from the outset that Esquivel's intention is to present Malinalli as "a sympathetic and complex figure" (Gillespie 178), and that the purpose of the novel is that of "distancing her from the cultural icon and historical stigma of la chingada" (Gillespie 193).

As Esquivel's Malinalli matures into an adolescent in the hands of her Mayan masters, she is portrayed as introspective, religious and a farmer at heart. She spends her days tending a garden, reminiscing about her grandmother and communing with the gods (16). Esquivel uses the space of Malinalli's reflections to show her protagonist's pride in the expressions that she

associates with indigenous culture, including the detailed and symbolic embroidery of her huipil and the sacred Mayan and Mexican calendars (39-41). Once she is handed over to the Spaniards, Malinalli continues to express delight in the indigenous world. In Tenochtitlán, she slips away from the palace in order to wander in the vast marketplace where she marvels at the exquisite artwork and revels in the smells of the seemingly limitless culinary options (127-28). These interjections serve to counter the accusation that Malinalli viewed Spanish culture as superior to the indigenous cultures of Mexico, a belief so deeply ingrained in Mexican society that it became part of the popular lexicon, with the term *malinchista* being used to describe a person who esteems foreign things above all things Mexican (Paz 110).

In addition to making the point that Malinalli does not favor the accoutrements of Spanish culture over her own, Esquivel's Malinalli does not abandon her faith for Catholicism, but rather adopts the latter as another manifestation of the pantheon of Aztec gods. In a transcultural take on her new faith, Malinalli accepts conversion because she believes that the Christian god is Quetzalcoatl in another guise and likewise that the Virgen Mary is a new manifestation of the maternal Aztec deity, Tonantzin (44-45). As if these explanations were not sufficient to the task, in an internal monologue Malinalli directly refutes the accusation that her conversion was a betrayal: "En ningún momento había traicionado sus creencias" (50).

Another accusation that Esquivel directly addresses in her novel is that Malinalli's primary motives for helping the Spaniards were greed and ambition for power and status. (While this is not a characterization that arises in Paz's essay, it does form part of Aguirre's portrayal, as will be seen below.) Esquivel's defense of Malinalli echoes the work of Zinam and Molina who insist that "branding her as a selfish person seeking her own personal gratification" is "unjust" and that such accusations must be refuted in order for the Mexican and

Chicano peoples to embrace, rather than revile, their symbolic mother (13). Esquivel goes about refuting the characterization of Malinalli as greedy and ambitious in two ways. First, she frames Malinalli's personal goals as humble in nature: "Lo que más deseaba, era tener un trozo de tierra que le perteneciera y en donde pudiera sembrar sus granos de maíz" (66). A second refutation comes in the form of Malinalli's repeated condemnations of the greed of the Spaniards: "el interés que los españoles y Cortés en particular, mostraban por el oro, no le parecía correcto" (68). Rather than focusing on access to power and fortune, Malinalli's thoughts in the novel are almost invariably oriented toward her painful past, her faith and her uncertainty about her role in the Conquest.

Rather than ambition for wealth and status, Malinche proposes alternative motivations for Malinalli's participation in the Conquest: self-preservation and freedom. The Malinalli of the novel expresses loyalty to neither the Spaniards nor the Aztecs, but rather to herself:

Lo más preocupante para Malinalli, independientemente de si los españoles lograban su propósito de derrocar a Moctezuma o no, era que su vida y su libertad estaban en juego. (69)

Malinalli is aware of her power to help or hinder the Spaniards, and she is simultaneously aware that her fate is inextricably tied to theirs because of her position as a slave. Much like the indigenous enemies of the Aztecs who allied themselves with the Spaniards against Moctezuma, Malinalli has no loyalty to the monarch, but rather fear of his cruelty. This combined with her own vulnerable situation makes her decision to serve Cortés an easy one:

Conocía perfectamente la crueldad de Moctezuma y sabía que si los españoles resultaban perdedores en su empresa, ella estaba condenada a la muerte. (66)

In such candid reflections, Esquivel does not shy away from addressing aspects of self-interest in her portrayal of Malinalli, but she does so in a way that makes her protagonist's decisions seem logical given her circumstances, thus justifying rather than condemning her.

Malinalli's participation in the Conquest (both in the novel and in real terms) can easily be interpreted as both loyalty to herself and to Cortés as a survival strategy. As Camilla Townsend points out in her insightful study of Malinalli's life and historical context,

[s]he did what almost anyone in her situation would have done. Overnight, she was accorded a new level of respect; some of the men even began to refer to her as *doña Marina*, just as they referred to noblewomen in Spain. (Townsend 42)

In very little time, Malinalli rose from the position of anonymous slave to valued interpreter. As such, her fortunes unarguably changed for the better, which, as Frances Karttunen reminds us, might well have inspired true loyalty toward the Spaniards, if only for reasons of self-preservation:

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. (304)

Moreover, according to Townsend, there was no one for Malinalli to betray, least of all Moctezuma:

She could not possibly have harbored any loyalty to Moctezuma or desire to shield him from these well-armed newcomers. Any assertion that she should have entertained such feelings would literally have confused her. (42)

Thus it makes perfect sense in the narrative thread of Esquivel's novel that her protagonist

is loyal to herself, and she quite rightly understands the success of the Spaniards as a way of assuring her own survival.

Of course, as a Mexican woman, Esquivel is well aware that loyalty to oneself is not sufficient defense for a woman. It is loyalty to her children that is the Mexican woman's ultimate defense. Thus Esquivel follows a traditional Mexican recipe for vindicating Malinche—turning her into a Marianist mother who sees her entire purpose in maternity:

Esquivel's Malinche is less radical than the defiant Malinches of the earlier works of many Mexican and Chicana feminist writers. In fact, in the end she conforms rather well to the Marianist model of the good, self-sacrificing woman who does all for her children. (Tate 89)

As Alarcón reminds us, this approach is necessary because by speaking and actively participating in the Conquest, Malinalli broke all cultural taboos, and the only possible vindication is to use her voice to speak up in defense of her children:

To speak independently of her maternal role, as Malintzin did, is viewed in such a society as a sign of catastrophe, for if she is allowed to articulate her needs and desires she must do so as a mother on behalf of her children and not of herself. (63)

Esquivel's Malinalli conforms with this societal rule by only taking a firm position vis-à-vis Cortés when it involves their child, Martín. She does not stand up to Cortés for herself or for any of his victims along the way to victory in Tenochtitlán, but she is finally willing to do so in defense of her child. It is Cortés's insistence that she separate from Martín in order to accompany him on yet another expedition that prompts Malinalli to assume agency and demand respect for the needs of her child, the only

demands that a woman may make without societal censure.

At the end of *Malinche*, Malinalli's thesis about her life is that her purpose and the purpose of the conquest were to usher in a new people, the Mexican people:

Ellos, que no pertenecen ni a mi mundo ni al de los españoles. Ellos, que son la mezcla de todas las sangres—la ibérica, la africana, la romana, la goda, la sangre indígena y la sangre del medio oriente—ellos, que junto con todos los que están naciendo, son el nuevo recipiente para que el verdadero pensamiento de Cristo-Quetzalcóatl se instale nuevamente en los corazones y proyecte al mundo su luz, ¡que nunca tengan miedo! ¡que nunca se sientan solos! (179)

In this closing admonishment to her children, Malinalli exalts mestizaje, both racial and cultural, and declares herself the proud mother of a new people. This symbolic maternal role is almost universally accepted by scholars, though, as anthropologist Cristina González-Hernández points out, Malinalli's place in Mexican history remains complicated:

se trata de un ser que se ha instalado en la memoria colectiva como un símbolo maldito y ambivalente: es el arquetipo de la traición a la patria y al mismo tiempo la madre simbólica de los mexicanos, el paradigma del mestizaje. (41)

In *Malinche*, Esquivel privileges Malinalli's maternal role over other contested aspects of her story and frames it as the redeeming facet of her biography. As Ryan Long puts it,

Esquivel's novel transforms Paz's misogynistic view of "La Malinche" as traitor into the affirmative construction of Malinalli, a symbol of reconciliation and unity, of honorific mestizaje. (204)

Malinche urges the Mexican people to make amends with their symbolic mother who, in the novel, sees them as her *raison d'être*. In addition to proclaiming her children the purpose of her role in the conquest, Malinalli's parting declaration engages directly with "Los hijos de La Malinche" since "la soledad" is one of the consequences of Mexican orphanhood, according to Paz (112). By imploring her children to be fearless and not to feel alone, Esquivel's Malinalli challenges Paz's fatalistic viewpoint and urges her children to shed the last vestige of shame, as she herself does in the novel.

While the Malinalli of Esquivel's novel is redeemed by her past suffering, pride in her culture and, most importantly, maternity, Aguirre's Malinalli is guilty—guilty of submission to foreign invaders, greed and, at least from the Aztec perspective, treachery. She is the Pazian version of Malinche come to life in historical fiction. As Aguirre stated in the previously cited interview, she is the "antítesis ética" of the titular character, Isabel. All of the good qualities that define Isabel find their opposite in Malinalli. This antagonistic portrayal of Malinalli has roots that go far back in Mexican history. In fact, Alarcón has suggested that there is sufficient evidence in Mexican and Chicano folklore to conclude that Malinalli was reinvented as the "monstrous double" of the Virgen of Guadalupe, "especially when she is viewed as the originator of the Mexican people's fall from grace and the procreator of a 'fallen' people." Alarcón concludes that in this binary of Mexican identity, Guadalupe came to represent the Virgen Mary, while Malinalli came to be seen as the embodiment of Eve (58).

In "Los hijos de la Malinche," Paz brings a similar binary to bear in his exploration of Mexican identity vis-à-vis Malinche: "[p]or contraposición a Guadalupe, que es la Madre virgen, la Chingada es la madre violada" (110). According to Paz, it is Malinche's willing victimhood, her passivity and her sexuality, that condemn her in the eyes of her mestizo children. In his formulation,

which echoes that of many before him, Malinche consorts with the enemy, and her actions lead to the downfall of her own race of people. This, of course, is the same judgement leveled against Eve who was seduced by the serpent and whose actions led to the downfall of mankind and their expulsion from Paradise. As is often said of the treatment of Eve in the Judeo-Christian creation myth, Malinche is framed as the villain to distract from the ignominious defeat of the Aztec Adam, or, as Roger Bartra puts it in *La jaula de la melancolía*, “[e]n nuestro edén subvertido—habitado ya por un Adán agachado—hacía falta una Eva mexicana” (2323). Both Eve and Malinche are often portrayed as tainted and ignoble mothers who find their opposites in holy virgin mothers, the Virgen Mary and the Virgen of Guadalupe, respectively. In a chapter titled, “A la chingada,” Bartra also sees la Malinche y Guadalupe “como dos encarnaciones de un mismo mito original” (2082), or, as he more memorably puts it, “la Chingalupe” (2364).

In Aguirre’s novel, another Manichean binary is established: that of Isabel/Marina or Tecuichpo/Malinalli. Malinalli is portrayed as the monstrous double of the Aztec princess whom she displaces temporarily as the most powerful indigenous woman in the New World. Aguirre’s Tecuichpo (Isabel’s Aztec name) is portrayed throughout the novel as loyal to her roots, noble in character and dignified in her interactions with Cortés, in spite of being raped by him and, like Malinalli, bearing him a child. Meanwhile, Malinalli is portrayed as la Chingada who dishonors herself in her alliance with outsiders and is debased by her relationship with Cortés. While Aguirre perpetuates a Pazian myth of Malinche, he constructs a new mythology around Isabel who, as a little-known figure, does not carry the centuries of baggage that come with Malinche and her surrounding myths. Isabel is *tabula rasa* that Aguirre uses to write a new story of Mexican lineage. It is a story about an Aztec warrior princess who does not appear in any *lienzos* or chronicles

as a warrior and who lived most of her life, not as a princess, but as a subject of the Spanish crown. Historical documents testify to her devotion to the Catholic Church and marriages to three Spanish husbands, with whom she had five children, yet in *Isabel*, her conversion is framed as a survival strategy and at the end of her life she returns to and embraces her indigenous roots.

Aguirre ignores and contradicts historical accounts of both Malinche and Isabel, but to different ends. As regards Malinche, his narrative intention is to paint her in a negative light, while he clearly writes in favor of Isabel and advocates for her as a superior mother-figure. For instance, in *Isabel*, Tecuichpo becomes a warrior and fights alongside Aztec men in several battles during the Spanish siege of Tenochtitlán. However, there is evidence to the contrary that indicates that her importance as heir to Moctezuma would have meant that she would not have been risked in battle. As Inga Clendinnen reminds us in *Aztecs*, “[w]omen were handed about to cement alliances” (157). In the case of Tecuichpo, we know that she was married at least twice to Aztec noblemen prior to the fall of Tenochtitlán—to her uncle, Cuitláhuac, and her cousin, Cuauhtémoc, (Chipman XX). It is clear that both marriages were politically motivated and intended to insure the smooth transfer of power since Tecuichpo was Moctezuma’s first-born legitimate child.

Another point in the novel that contradicts historical evidence is the contention that Isabel’s conversion to Catholicism is a survival strategy rather than a sincere embrace of her new faith. In reality, there is evidence to suggest that Isabel’s conversion was indeed sincere. Unlike in the case of Malinche, where we have no historical documents that reveal to us her loyalties or feelings from her perspective, in the case of Isabel, we have access to her last will and testament, a document in which she bequeaths a fifth of her wealth to the church (Sagaón Infante 755-56). There are also records that show that such largesse

preceded her death. According to historian Charles Gibson, her contributions to the church were so exorbitant that the Augustinians asked her to restrain her generosity. Such liberality, which appears to have been “wholly voluntary” (Gibson 124-25), likely reflects a sincere devotion to her new faith. In *Isabel*, however, she reflects upon her new faith as one that was imposed by conquerors and accepted by the conquered as a survival strategy (1073). While she expresses gratitude to certain frailes for their role in her education, Aguirre’s fictional account dismisses the idea of any true conversion of faith, and, in the closing pages of the novel, Isabel casts off the name assigned to her upon her conversion to Catholicism and reverts to her indigenous name.

Another, and perhaps the most telling, act of historical revisionism in *Isabel* is Aguirre’s treatment of Isabel’s relationship with Leonor Cortés Moctezuma, her daughter with Cortés. Isabel’s last will and testament reveals that she disinherited Leonor and divided her assets solely between her legitimate children. (Sagaón Infante 756). We also know from historical record that Leonor was raised by a cousin of Cortés and likely had no contact or relationship with her mother (Sagaón Infante 755). In the novel, however, Isabel sends her daughter to be raised by one of her sisters—a decision that is portrayed as difficult because of her mixed feelings for Leonor. The implication is that Isabel would have continued to have some kind of relationship with her daughter since she was being raised by a dearly beloved sister (8033). This revisionist history is necessary if Aguirre’s ultimate goal is to replace Malinche as symbolic mother with Isabel. After all, how could Isabel be a superior mother if she rejected her first-born mestizo child?

While most of *Isabel* focuses on the life of Tecuichpo, or Isabel prior to her conversion, the final chapter suggests that she was just as noble and praiseworthy as Isabel as she was as Tecuichpo. Her assimilation is not portrayed as a betrayal, but rather as a survival strategy that she reluctantly, yet gracefully,

adopts. While Malinalli arguably took the same approach, the novel does not grant her any measure of clemency. The first mention of her serves to show that she is viewed by the Aztec nobility as deceitful and vile, as demonstrated by Cuitláhuac’s (Moctezuma II’s brother) warning, regarding her and Cortés:

—¡Pídele que no se deje engañar de nuevo por las argucias y zalamerías de Malinche ni por las intrigas de su lengua y compañera Malinalli! (607)

(Cortés was referred to by the indigenous peoples as Malinche because of her role as his interpreter.) Tecuichpo similarly condemns Malinalli as untrustworthy and dismisses her diplomatic efforts as further evidence of her perfidy: “Malinalli, ducha en el arte de engañar, tradujo sus palabras de tal manera que no ofendiesen al huey tlatoni” (4170). The distrust of Malinalli and her conflation with Cortés are key factors in her characterization in the novel and contribute to her condition as Tecuichpo’s monstrous double since, as Alarcón asserts,

[i]n the eyes of the conquered (oppressed), anyone who approximates la lengua or Cortés (oppressor), in word or deed, is held suspect and liable to become a sacrificial “monstrous double.” (59)

From beginning to end, *Isabel* offers no respite in the characterization of Malinalli as a vessel of character flaws. In another warning about the dangers posed by Malinalli, one of Tecuichpo’s sisters calls her a “prostituta” and compares her to a snake in the grass:

es más peligrosa que la culebra xicalcōatl cuando engaña a los caminantes con su jícara y, una vez que los tiene encandilados, los ahoga. Debemos tener cuidado con ella. (6787)

Not surprisingly, Tecuichpo does not warm to the woman who essentially displaces her, if

only temporarily, as the most powerful indigent woman in Mexico. When she is placed under Malinalli's authority, she describes the interloper as haughty and disrespectful:

Detestábamos la forma altanera con que nos trataba, sus extravagancias para hacerse notar y los constantes berrinches que hacía cuando se sentía desairada por Cortés o éste destinaba sus requiebros a una nueva manceba. (7075)

Such descriptions paint Malinalli as an arrogant, petty and shrill person whose insecurity regarding her fragile position is a defining characteristic.

In addition to being portrayed as treacherous and haughty in the novel, Malinalli is also described as greedy and singularly self-interested. When Cortés demands that Tecuichpo hand over her jewelry, he immediately gives it to Malinalli who accepts the gift "con codicia" (4438). This is the first of several instances in which Malinalli covets the riches of the Aztec Empire, and all of her interactions with Cortés are portrayed as ways to ingratiate herself with the conqueror so that she can share in the wealth of the Conquest. This extends to her sexual encounters with Cortés, a topic that has essentially been an obsession of writers over the past two centuries. Perhaps the most telling sign of Aguirre's adoption of Paz's declaration of Malinalli as *la Chingada* are the sex scenes between Cortés and Malinalli:

La mujer sufría, entre los gemidos y babas que arrojaba Cortés, los embates de un sexo que más que prodigar amor y sensualidad se comportaba igual que un ariete que arremete contra un muro con la intención de hacerle un boquete. (3763, 3772)

Similarly, in another scene from the novel, Cortés calls Malinalli a "puta desagrada," and he reminds her that she is an

object that has been given away before and can be given away again:

¡Te voy a regalar otra vez a Alonso Hernández Portocarrero para que le hagas a él tus pucheros! ¡Vamos a ver si te quiere de nuevo y si te da lo mismo que yo te doy en la cama! (7087)

Again, in conformity with Paz's characterization of Malinalli as a willing victim, she not only accepts the abuse but then tries to placate Cortés in a scene recounted by one of Tecuichpo's sisters:

No, pues se soltó chillando y le pidió perdón de rodillas. Luego, se le prendió de la entrepierna y... No, no les puedo contar lo que hizo porque es demasiado vergonzoso. (7087)

As is the case with Malinalli's characterization in general, there is significant divergence between the two novels as regards her relationship with Cortés. Since Mexican Independence, there has been an excessive interest in Malinalli's role as Cortés's concubine and less interest in her role as his interpreter. As Gladys Ilarregui points out, traditionally the sexual relationship between the two has been characterized as a consensual relationship, not rape, in spite of the fact that historians have generally contested this characterization (24). Karttunen, for example, is unequivocal in her estimation of the sexual relationship between the two:

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. (310-11)

In spite of this, Malinalli is ridiculed in Aguirre's novel as a prostitute and portrayed in Esquivel's as if she were a character from a romance novel:

se enamora perdidamente de Cortés, sufre por su indiferencia, y se muestra con las contradicciones y los conflictos personales de cualquier ser humano. (Estrada 630)

Thus Esquivel portrays her as a woman in love while Aguirre's Malinche is la Chingada who is sexually submissive in order to secure her position.

In *Isabel*, Malinalli's submissive posture with Cortés is portrayed as pathetic and undignified, and there is no indication that her feelings for him go beyond the mercenary. Tecuichpo and her sisters mock her pettiness and jealous outbursts, but the implication is that Malinalli is fearful of losing her position of privilege, not, as in the case of Esquivel's novel, that she suffers as a spurned lover. Her sexual encounters with Cortés are described as violent and his liaisons with other women are referenced repeatedly. Meanwhile, Esquivel (in line with her reputation as a romance writer) represents the relationship as consensual and, at least in the beginning, mutually satisfying. The description of their first sexual encounter in the novel is material worthy of a novela rosa. Malinalli is bathing in a stream when Cortés happens upon her and is unable to control his wild desire (76). Malinalli expresses her own desire for Cortés both in the moment and later as she reflects upon the encounter (85). As is often the case in romance novels, the scene includes elements of violence, of which only Malinalli is victim. On the same page that the narrator assures us that the experience was pleasurable for Malinalli, we are also told that this pleasure is "a pesar de haber recibido esa violencia" (76). While both authors include violence in their descriptions, it is clear that Esquivel is harnessing a problematic device common in romance novels while Aguirre is positioning her as la Chingada.

In keeping with their divergent portrayals of Malinalli, the character finds radically different ends in the novels. The last we are told of Malinalli in *Isabel* is that she died

"bastante joven" (8044), after being married off by Cortés to one of his captains in what is described as a drunken orgy because the conqueror "ya no sentía atracción alguna" (7602). This ending echoes Paz's conclusions about Malinalli: "Es verdad que ella se da voluntariamente al conquistador, pero éste, apenas deja de serle útil, la olvida" (110). Thus the novel ends with Malinalli being discarded by Cortés since he no longer needs her services, linguistic or sexual. With this final insult, Malinalli disappears from the novel and is not mentioned again. Meanwhile, Isabel finds a happy ending with her husband and children, and, in the last years of her life, she is fulfilled as a wife and mother.

Ironically, in *Malinche*, Malinalli experiences an ending that almost perfectly mirrors that of Isabel in Aguirre's novel. While Aguirre may have intended for Isabel Moctezuma to be the pioneer of mestizaje, Esquivel's Malinalli proudly and intentionally adopts this role. In spite of Malinalli's often contradictory positions in the novel, in the end she finds clarity in her role as the mother of children who bridge two worlds. At the end of her life she is a happy homemaker, living with her two children, Martín and María, and her husband, Juan Jaramillo (179). She is at peace with herself and sees her life as one that birthed a new race.

Esquivel and Aguirre offer competing counternarratives in their novels. In *Malinche*, Esquivel counters the twentieth century conception of Malinche as la Chingada, while in *Isabel*, Aguirre confirms Paz's narrative construction of Malinche and offers a counternarrative of mestizaje that centers around Isabel Moctezuma. It is the daughter of Moctezuma, according to Aguirre, who holds the keys to freeing mestizo Mexico of the shame and solitude that Paz contends holds them captive. Aguirre perpetuates the myth of Malinche as a source of shameful solitude and proposes a new myth of noble motherhood. Esquivel, meanwhile, continues the work done previously by both Mexican and Chicana feminist writers by proposing that

the best approach to dispelling old myths is through revised mythologies that run counter to the patriarchal myths of the past. For Esquivel, Malinche is a misunderstood blessing, while for Aguirre, she is an incurable curse who must be dismissed and replaced by an untarnished mythical mother.

As is often the case in works on the life of Malinche, *Malinche* and *Isabel Moctezuma* are novels that promote the ideological agendas of their authors. While Esquivel advocates for Malinche as the rightful mother of the Mexican people, Aguirre brings a historical condemnation of the figure into the twenty-first century and promotes the adoption of a new and less maligned mother. Such divergent characterizations and the novelistic rehashing of unresolved issues bring to mind a verse from a poem written more than four decades ago by Chicana poet Adaljiza Sosa-Riddell about the life of Malinche, a woman who lived five centuries ago: "Pinche, como duele ser Malinche."

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