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Review / Reseña

Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006.

Contextualizing Malinche

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Camilla Townsend's meticulously researched narrative of the Spanish seizure of power in sixteenth-century Mexico ably places a much-maligned historical figure back into her proper historical context. The woman in question, "Malintzin" in the language of Moctezuma, was the interpreter for the Spanish expedition leader, Hernando Cortés. Townsend makes her come alive as one who played an essential role through an epic transitional period in Mexican history. Whereas nineteenth and early twentieth-century authors have demonized "Malinche," as they call her, for aiding the

Spanish conquerors, Townsend reminds us that the adolescent indigenous girl started her new life among the invaders as a slave “who had no choice in the matter” except to do as she was told (2).



Figure 1. Photo by Stephanie Wood (©2002), of the murals in Tlaxcala, showing Malintzin as a central figure in her historic role as interpreter for Hernando Cortés.

This book also fits within a context. Revisionism surrounding Malintzin has grown steadily since the 1970s, when feminists particularly in the United States began deconstructing the paradigm that made her a scapegoat for the Spanish conquest. Revisionists recast her first as a victim, then as a survivor, and finally as a bridge between cultures, as Townsend recognizes. Townsend makes an effort to return to the manuscripts and glean every verifiable detail that she can from the historical record, apparently with the similar intention of giving Malintzin's place in history a more fair-minded treatment. Works of art and poetry, not explored in Townsend's book, have also endeavored to return some agency and positive attributes to the denigrated interpreter. Where relevant, I will point to promising directions for comparisons that could be made between *Malintzin's Choices* and these other revisionist works.

Ironically, the consummate interpreter who bridged the Atlantic world cannot speak directly to us from the past; historians lack a single document from Malintzin's own hand. The best we can do is to try to capture Malintzin's unique perspective on pivotal events by retracing her steps through all the sources that either mention her or that might help us reconstruct indigenous views of that period more generally. Townsend is a scholar especially well situated to write this new narrative of the age of contact. She is one of a growing number of academics who recognize the importance of utilizing indigenous-language manuscripts for a more balanced history of Mexico. Her expertise lies with Nahuatl annals, chronologically-based listings of historical events, some of which stem from the Spanish invasion. Townsend is also an adept reader of Spanish-language accounts, able to weigh the evidence when records differ and read between the lines of texts, seeking to understand what came before certain situations and what influenced decisions made on the ground. Perhaps unfortunately, Spanish-language sources lie behind the bulk of the story told here, but Townsend's paleographic skills blaze a magnificent trail and her story-telling ability lets this account read like a novel.

Townsend admits that a traditional biography of Malintzin is impossible, due to the limited nature of the sources. But neither will she allow the young woman's life to be a blank page upon which observers can write anything of their own invention. The resulting book emerges, in large part, as a new version of conquest events. It regularly pauses for the consideration of Malintzin's place in it all and what her motivations may have been, alongside the Spaniards and thousands of indigenous people who provided the bulk of the forces that wrestled power from Moctezuma. We also follow her children and grandchildren to the extent the sources will allow.

To flesh out this story Townsend utilizes, in addition to her own work in annals and other histories, the growing body of research

into the Nahuas' ways of living and thinking as extracted from mundane documents, such as testaments and land records, plus songs in Nahuatl. Incidentally, in her translation of one song, Townsend speaks to potential readers who speak Nahuatl (275 n.1), quietly acknowledging the growing number of Nahua scholars who are part of this marvelous conversation. Townsend also consulted James Lockhart, whose scholarship has advanced Nahuatl studies immensely, among that of other Nahuatlato. Lockhart's *The Nahuas after the Conquest* (1992), in fact, provides a solid backdrop to Townsend's study.

From sources such as these Townsend extrapolates, for instance, that Malintzin's name prior to Christian baptism (when she was dubbed "doña Marina"—the name that was "Nahuatlized" as Malintzin, Malintziné, and Malintze, and then re-Hispanized as Malinche) was most likely one of the typical Nahua names for girls: "Firstborn, Middle Child, Younger, or Youngest" (12). Townsend agrees that her original name could not have been Malinalli, already debunked linguistically by Frances Karttunen, and yet an appellation that has a stubborn resiliency in the drive to insist upon an indigenous name in revisionist portraits of her.

Drawing from recent research in quotidian records, Townsend reconstructs the girl's household, referring to its symmetry and populating it with the hearth, griddle, pots, reed mats, and weaving implements that were central to women's lives. She is sensitive to cultural differences between the Nahua and Maya spheres where Malintzin lived, and she vividly evokes the aromas and flavors of the coastal setting on the gulf where the Spaniards acquired the slave girl. She recalls the words women said to one another upon birthing their children, challenging them to be brave warriors. She also conveys the important place all women held and their roles complementary to men's in native society, just as she is cognizant of the stratification internal to the indigenous world.

Townsend understands the weak position of the slave as well as the impressive power of the *tlatoani*, or ruler (literally “he who speaks”) among the Nahuas. For Malintzin to transition from a slave girl to a woman with a commanding voice, even if she were not a *tlatoani*, is tremendously significant for understanding native pictorial representations of her, which often show her paired with the imposing figure of Cortés and gesturing with authority. Occasionally, speech scrolls even emerge from her mouth in such pictorial manuscripts. The author also recognizes the import of Malintzin’s having received an *encomienda*, or grant of tributes and labor from other indigenous people, and an arranged marriage to a fairly prominent captain. And yet, as Townsend reminds us, the Spaniards apparently kept her from riding on horseback and the Nahuas prevented her from entering the great temples when she and Cortés arrived in Mexico (Tenochtitlan). As important as she was, any woman operated within certain boundaries in both worlds.

“Mistress” to Cortés is a label Townsend applies to Malintzin in conjunction with discussions about the limitations of her status. I would quibble with this choice of terminology. Without a doubt, there were sexual relations between the two, for a child resulted. Townsend also convincingly shows some degree of “energy and gusto” (153) behind Malintzin’s facilitation of Cortés’s conquering expeditions to Mexico City and beyond. That she worked at his side, was effective in her job, and bore a child, however, does not discount the possibility that sex was taken from her against her will. Or, sex may even have been proffered with her consent, as something relatively meaningless, without the creation of a personal relationship of the type we conjure up when we think of a “mistress.” The term is laden with Western and modern meaning, harkening back even to the romantic nineteenth century portraits, which may not have been appropriate in the sixteenth-century context. Sexuality among the early Nahuas, documented in records in their own

language, is a research area only relatively recently under exploration, with the work of Pete Sigal being notable.¹

Townsend does offer, in her appendix, a translation from the Nahuatl of the “Chalca Woman’s Song”, which provides a window onto Nahua male thinking about women captured in war who became the sexual partners of their new masters, their lives full of “agonizing pain and regret” (215). In the discussion and translation, Townsend uses the terms “concubine” and “lover,” rather than mistress, along with the more generic “sexual partner.” One longs to see further examples and discussion of these concepts and their implications for native women in the colonial context. Besides capturing the anguish, the song conveys considerable tenderness and emotion, as well as a sexual playfulness, particularly in the flowery language and metaphors.

Another small doubt I have with this otherwise admirable book is the interpretation that reads “hostility” (122) toward Malintzin in Mexica accounts from the 1550s. It is certainly plausible that the residents of Mexico City would be upset with Malintzin for helping bring down the capital, but does a veiled remark about “some woman” (not necessarily Malintzin) hiding gold intended for Cortés under her skirt sufficient evidence of this? Similarly, the interpreter’s speaking and gesturing from rooftops is described as “screeching” (123). I would like to see some text quoted that justifies this translation. Finally, a reading of resentment in Malintzin’s presence at a savage dogging, where she holds out rosary beads, may also be a stretch. Her action could be construed alternatively as wish to teach a Christian lesson either to an “evil” Cortés or, more probably, some “misguided” indigenous captives. As Townsend recognizes elsewhere in the book, that kind of Christian zeal does emerge in native

¹ See, for example, his recent essay, “Sexuality in Maya and Nahuatl Sources,” at <http://whp.uoregon.edu/Lockhart/Sigal.pdf>.

pictorials. Even those people most likely to denigrate her, battling over her estate in 1560, tried to impugn her memory by soliciting from witnesses some confirmation of their charge that she had been a “traitor” (184–85) of some kind, but they were hard pressed to find people who would say anything negative against her. Furthermore, by using “traitor,” they probably were implying some anti-Spanish move on her part.

The timing of the appearance of a negative portrayal of Malintzin, and whether it came from the dejected Mexica in the sixteenth century, Spaniards who were vying for her considerable estate, nineteenth-century nationalists, twentieth-century anti-imperialists, or, I concede, possibly all of them, is significant in surveying the various treatments of her role in history. Townsend refers to Mexican political activists of 1982 who showed animosity toward Malintzin as a perceived enemy, removing a statue dedicated to her in Coyoacán, part of the capital today where she once lived. Townsend appeals to the student protestors to understand that, in reality, Malintzin was probably a “frightened slave who through a twist of fate found herself in a potentially very bad spot” (4). If it was not just nationalists fresh from throwing off the yoke of Spain who denounced Malintzin for supposedly allying with the colonizers, but also the Nahuas of her own time who saw a misdeed in her alleged enthusiasm for Cortés’s project, Mexican students might feel more justified for their wrath against her as a “traitor” to indigenous people and their Mexico.

Although it was not Townsend's intention to pursue the “traitor” theme any further, it is a nagging topic that will not be easy to dispel. Popular culture contains a number of examples that we might explore. Gabino Palomares’ “La Maldición de Malinche”, or the Curse of Malinche, a song that was still being sung in folkloric bars in Mexico City in the early 1980s, stirs deep resentment for her perceived misdeeds. It rails against her having opened doors to the

evil demons, the bearded men, for the blood they spilled, the grandeur of the past they defeated, the resulting three hundred years of “slavery,” and the habit of “sharing with the foreigner our faith, our culture, our bread, our money” in exchange for trinkets. To humble oneself before a foreigner and become arrogant with the brothers of one’s pueblo, calling the “Indian” a foreigner in his own land, is the sick curse of Malinche, according to this heart-wrenching song.

In a more recent song that borrows from Palomares, the Chicano musician El Vez is willing to acknowledge that Malinche may have been a “language master,” that she may have been thinking of the future of her baby, and that she may have fallen in love. But El Vez also echoes the earlier sentiment that she opened the doors to the “Euro-man” who “came from Spain to change history with beads, blankets, disease and misery.” She was Cortés’s “whore” and she “slept and lied.” He concludes, in a nod to some of the recent revisionism, “maybe she shouldn’t take all the blame, but I think she should.” From a comedian/musician, the ethno-nationalistic venom is considerable.

It is no wonder that Chicana poet Adaljiza Sosa-Riddell speaks about how much it hurts to be associated with Malinche (“Como duele”, 1973) and to be one of the cursed “hijos de la Malinche”—a reference to Octavio Paz’s interpretation. Paz (*El laberinto de la soledad*, 1950) was one of the especially vitriolic twentieth-century voices against Malinche, “la chingada” (the “screwed one”). Rather than seeing her sympathetically as a violated one, Paz blamed her for inviting the violation and laid the legacy of that abuse at the feet of all Mexicans.

Clearly, Malintzin’s *mestizo* children were not the first mixed-heritage babies born in what is now the republic of Mexico. Europeans who survived shipwrecks initiated that phenomenon in the Yucatán peninsula some years before the landfall of the Cortés

expedition. But Malintzin has become the symbolic “mother of *mestizaje*,” in the view of several revisionists. Lucha Corpi’s “The Marina Poems” (1976) open with “Marina Mother” and decry the switch from “mamá” to “whore,” as her child is imagined to grow up and call her. Ina Campiano (“Yo, La Malinche,” 1994) conjures an image of Malintzin “washing the child’s bloody white skin” in river water after his birth and tenderly folding him in her native blouse (*huipilli*). Alicia Gaspar de Alba (“Malinchista, A Myth Revised,” 1989) sees Malinche “wet [the baby’s] fine curls with her saliva to make them straight,” while his father is cursing “the native seed in that first mixed son.”

Fertile imaginations have embellished the story of Malintzin's children, as we see above. Townsend is aware of these points of view. She mentions, for instance, the association of La Llorona with Malintzin, correcting the misconception held by many that Malintzin's children died as babies.

Although Malintzin’s children, don Martín (fathered by Cortés) and doña María (apparently fathered by Juan Jaramillo, the man Malintzin married) were products of mixed heritage, Townsend’s accounting of their lives shows how they lived with considerable privilege and largely within the Spanish world, whether in Mexico or in Spain. Townsend's reconstruction of their lives is meticulous and fascinating.

One of several children born to Cortés outside of wedlock, don Martín enjoyed a special favor for a time as the eldest son. Cortés personally took him to Spain when the boy was only six years old, to live a life without his mother and her influences. As a page to the future king of Spain, granted entry into the knightly Order of Santiago, and decreed legitimate of birth by the Pope, don Martín was well positioned near the center of Spanish power. His mother’s native heritage was not a stain, we are told, since she was considered to be of high birth. Nevertheless, his place as heir to his father’s

estate was overtaken by a subsequent son, another don Martín, born of a wedded Spanish mother.

In fact, in Cortés's will, "legitimate" children inherited much more than "illegitimate" ones—it was this difference, Townsend argues, more than any perceived racial difference that counted in the division of wealth and access to status. If Cortés had only married Malintzin, perhaps her children would not have had to endure any slight whatsoever. The reason he did not marry her could be that he felt himself worthy of some of the highest noblewomen of Spain and not some woman who had spent time as his slave. We do not know to what extent his decision not to marry her might have derived from that fact that she was an indigenous woman, and Townsend does not speculate. Certainly, other noble indigenous women were sought after by Spaniards to be their marriage partners.

As we learn from Townsend, the younger child, doña María, stayed in Mexico. But her mother died when she was three, leaving her to be raised by her Spanish father and his ambitious new Spanish wife. Doña María had to endure the insults they heaped upon her mother as they battled over her mother's considerable estate, but most people had respected her mother and thought of her as a noblewoman, Townsend informs us. No one dared to omit the "doña" when they referred to the daughter, even if opponents occasionally did so when referring to the mother. Doña María received an education, learning to sign her name, which was rare for women. She also forgot her mother tongue, the language that had been her mother's vehicle to some degree of power and fortune.

The don Martín and doña María we see in *Malintzin's Choices* were so privileged and removed from their indigenous surroundings that they were practically Spaniards, and their lives probably little resembled the vast majority of mestizos who peopled New Spain as time wore on. The cosmic race ("la raza cósmica"), as imagined in the twentieth century by observers such as José Vasconcelos, combines

the best of the Spanish and the indigenous cultures (and, we might add, the African, when it was recognized in Mexico). An extension of this concept, the "la raza" comprised of Chicanas/Chicanos, seeks similar pride in a multicultural heritage. Townsend's portraits of Malintzin's children may serve to temper the specter of Malintzin as mother of mestizaje and of her children as typical mestizos, despite the worthy intention behind such revisionism.

In "Yo Soy La Malinche" (1978), Carmen Tafolla imagines Malintzin as having a grand design as she produced her mestizo child (the italics are Tafolla's): "I *saw* and I *acted*.... Not tricked, not screwed, not traitor.... I saw a dream and I *reached* for it. *Another world...la raza.*" Malintzin is given the foresight to envision a new world that combined the best from both sides of the Atlantic and to answer Octavio Paz's charge. Poetic license imbues Malintzin with a vision that would be difficult to document historically, and Townsend's book stays close to the documentary record.



Figure 2. Photo, by Stephanie Wood (©2005), shows a street sign in Coyoacán, Distrito Federal, Mexico, commemorating the famous interpreter, a resident there in the 1520s.

While students may have removed a statue of Malintzin in Coyoacán in the 1980s, they were selective in their opposition. An avenue named for "Malintzin" (not Malinche, but the reverential version of her name) still remains in Coyoacán, and one may also see a store named for her, apparently founded in the 1930s (see figures 2 and 3).



Figure 3. Photo, by Stephanie Wood (©2005), showing a store in Coyoacán named for "Malinche."

As possible evidence of softening attitudes in the twenty-first century, we find another statue to Malintzin that has not been removed. The town of Oluta, Veracruz, which claims the interpreter as a native daughter, dedicated a statue on June 23, 2000, the 500th anniversary of her possible birth date, memorializing her "intelligence and beauty."² This representation is reminiscent of similar efforts to celebrate the cultural intermediary Sacagawea in the United States. The reference to Malintzin's "intelligence" recalls

² See: <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/monuments/malinche-2.jpg>.

the portrait Frances Karttunen put together for a 1997 anthology. This story of her life struck a chord with a group called "Nuestra Familia Unida" in the United States, which invited Karttunen to read it aloud in her own voice and published the podcast on line.³

The town of Oluta's reference to Malintzin's "beauty," may be a nod to the romantic, sexualized vision of her held by some of the conquerors, or it may be influenced by her treatment in other, recent works of art. Some pieces go well beyond the Oluta statue, transforming Malintzin into a saint or goddess figure, creating a new, more positive, but still mythical figure. Chicana artist Santa Contreras Barraza, for instance, gives us a painting (completed in 1991) of Malintzin as an indigenous Eve/Madonna, her *mestizo* infant cradled in a *maguey* cactus, and the disarmed Cortés longingly admiring the mother and baby from afar.⁴ Saint-like, this Malintzin has a halo of hand-woven, colorful fabrics from a native woman's loom.

Andrea Arroyo (Mexico City-born, but New York City-based) has also lovingly depicted the redeemed Malinche, in one of a series of three portraits of her, as an earth goddess or lyrical person extending a gesture of friendship to an anonymous, disembodied, fair-skinned hand. The friendship she offers is more about her generosity and hospitality than it is about the European, who is barely visible. Arroyo's Malinche in this rendition, like the historical personage, has no mouth today from which she can speak; she only holds a symbolic speech scroll at her womb. The work implies that her children would be her principal legacy, not her job of interpreting.

This contrasts with the historical view we gain from *Malintzin's Choices*. Bernal Díaz stated, "If it wasn't for her, we wouldn't have won this land," and "Without her, we couldn't do

³ See: <http://nuestrafamiliaunida.com/podcast/mujer.html#fk>.

⁴ See: <http://www.csupomona.edu/~plin/women2/barraza.html>

anything,” as Townsend quotes (107). But Townsend puts her contribution in perspective, “A few hundred Spaniards [and, we might add, their indigenous interpreter] became an unbeatable force only when combined with thousands of indigenous pouring in behind them” (113). Why are the Tlaxcalan fighters not “blamed” for the conquest, if someone must be, by those who revile Malintzin? To reproach the young woman—who is only speculated to have welcomed Cortés’s sexual advances—for the fall of an empire certainly smacks of misogyny. She felt no loyalty to the Nahuas as an ethno-national entity, for no such thinking existed in her day. As Townsend notes, Malintzin could not have stopped the Spanish advance even if she had wanted to, and she certainly saved lives at times by conveying the indigenous people’s wishes to the invaders.

Some of the heaviest charges against Malintzin, historically, derive from her alleged role in 1519 in uncovering a plot against the Spanish invaders at Cholula, prior to their final advance to Mexico City. From Townsend we learn that at least three Spanish accounts put forward Malintzin as the one who enlightened Cortés, who in turn directed his men (and the Tlaxcalan allies) to fall upon and massacre the Cholulans. The slaughter was brutal by even his contemporaries’ accounts; historians have concluded that he wanted to create a frightening specter that would reach Moctezuma. But if Cortés was simply being ruthless, he may have tried to deflect some of the potential criticism by suggesting that he had to act upon the conspiracy that Malintzin brought to light. Townsend carefully sorts through the sources on the massacre and sheds doubt upon the angles of the story that implicate Malintzin.

In the revisionist view represented by *Malintzin’s Choices*, Townsend exhibits skill and finesse as she pulls together diverse threads gathered from archival and published accounts. The tapestry she weaves highlights the significance of one woman’s life in arguably its most complete and judicious depiction yet. The book provides a

counter-current to the hostile myths about Malintzin that have held sway for all too long, and even some of the revisionist myths that swing the other way, as Townsend repositions Malintzin with an even hand as a crucial personality and placing her within the context of a string of historic and momentous episodes whose implications have not always been well understood. In the process, Townsend discloses very real, completely human stories behind the trans-Atlantic conflict and accommodation that was inherent in the Spanish invasion and occupation of Mexico. In so doing, the author has crafted a volume that will make excellent reading for a wide, educated audience.