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## She Who Speaks: Malintzin and Indigenous Women During the Conquest of Mexico

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Amongst the metal of the Spanish armor and the strange deer they rode, stood a woman dressed in a huipil. She went by many names, doña Marina, Malinche, or Malintzin. All words went through her. When Moctezuma II, the *tlatoani*, spoke, so did she, transforming his words into the language of the strangers. When Cortez, the Spanish captain spoke, so did she, transforming his words into the ancient language of the empire. Many factors contributed to the Spanish conquest of Mexico including the alliances that were made with enemies of the Aztecs, Moctezuma II's inclination towards superstition, and the indigenous interpreters that broke the language barriers for the conquistadors.

In Mexican history, Malintzin is a deeply maligned woman. She represents betrayal of one's culture, a traitor who sides with colonizers and other outside forces; she is the root of the word *malinchista* for this reason. She is Mexico's Eve, the one responsible for the entire downfall of Mexico. These views of her as a malicious and traitorous collaborator obscure a more complicated history of the conquest. Malintzin's role as Cortez's translator overshadows the experiences of other indigenous women in narratives about the Spanish conquest of Mexico. However, when recentered as a victim and survivor of the conquest, Malintzin's experiences and choices shed light on the methods of navigation, negotiation, and resistance indigenous women



Fig. 44, from Chapter 16, Book XII of *Florentine Codex*.  
"Marina interprets for the Spanish when Moctezuma meets Cortez."

utilized to ensure the survival of their kin and culture during colonization.

Malintzin was not Aztec or Mexica and her knowledge of various languages were acquired under traumatic circumstances. It is believed that she was born into a noble family of Nahuatl speakers near Coatzacoalcos in northern Veracruz. At an early age, after her father died and her mother remarried, Malintzin was sold into slavery and was purchased by a group of Chontal Mayans. Under them, she learned both the Chontal and Yucatec Mayan languages. When the Spanish arrived, she was one of twenty slave women that were given to Cortez, forcibly baptized, given new names, and then distributed amongst the other conquistadors. When Jeronimo de Aguilar, a Franciscan friar who knew Chontal Mayan, could not translate Nahuatl, Malintzin spoke up.

The portrayal of Malintzin as a traitor emerged in Mexico's post-independence era and has persisted ever since. In the centuries after the creation of codices like the *Florentine Codex* and the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, there was hardly any mention of her, let alone accusations that she betrayed her people. However, after Mexican independence, any person that was closely associated with the Spanish was looked down upon and heavily scrutinized. As a result, Malintzin was thrust into the cultural and national imagination of Mexico. The first time she was depicted as a seductive traitor was in the anonymous 1826 novel *Xicotencatl*.<sup>1</sup> Independence from Spain, the publishing of this novel, and her proximity to Cortez proved to be a potent formula in which Malintzin was reexamined and reimagined as a light-skinned, seductive woman in Cortez's armored arms. Racism, misogyny, and resentment for her role in the Spanish colonization of Mexico defined the creation of this new narrative. Centuries later during the 1970s, through the lens of the Chicana/Mexican-American experience, the narrative of Malintzin was reexamined again, but within a more empathetic, feminist, and hybrid framework. As the world around her shifted and swirled with chaos and uncertainty, Malintzin took action to preserve her own sense of self -- actions informed by her own experience with violence and servitude.

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<sup>1</sup> Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices: an Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico), 2.

However, in Mexico, she continued to exist as a black bruise, a deep wound. In the 1980s, a statue of her, Cortez, and their son Martin was erected in Coyoacan, igniting protests from students. In their minds, she remained too close to the outsiders that dominated and colonized Mexico. In their minds, she was synonymous with betrayal.<sup>2</sup> As long as Malintzin is viewed as a traitor, it becomes imperative to further deconstruct her presence in narratives of the conquest, to try to piece together her truth and the truth of other indigenous Mesoamerican women.

Malintzin left behind nothing that contained her own authentic voice; no diaries, no memoirs, no letters, no autobiography. As a result, she entered historical narratives of the conquest as a mythologized version of herself. Her mythology is rooted in the ways the conquest was described by indigenous and Spanish scholars, thus it needs to be deconstructed. By the time Spanish chroniclers sat down to write the history of the conquest, their distance to the events of the conquest enabled them to write a version of Malintzin to fit their agendas.<sup>3</sup> In many ways, Malintzin's personality, her motives, her actions could be interpreted as projections of whoever is writing her. Alva Ixtlilxochitl's portrayal of Malintzin in his chronicle of Tetzaco during the conquest might have been influenced by anonymous Nahuatl sources. Malintzin was too closely related to the Tlaxcala and the events that brought about the fall of Tenochtitlan and his Tetzaco ancestors, thus coloring her in an unfavorable light in Ixtlilxochitl's eyes.<sup>4</sup> The ways in which the events of the conquest were described by various people not only contributed to the events' staying power, but also shaped the legacy of Malintzin. Deconstructing this mythology not only addresses how narratives continue to echo into the present day, but also the issues that continue to deeply define the experience of people marginalized

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<sup>2</sup> Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices*, 3, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Kellogg, "Alva Ixtlilxochitl's Marina and Other Women of Conquest," in *Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl and His Legacy*, ed. Galen Brokaw and Jongsoo Lee (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016), 218.

by colonization. The history of colonization deeply impacts issues of migration, diaspora, and violence.<sup>5</sup>

It is also important to understand the role gender played in constructing Malintzin's presence in narratives about the conquest. Just as it is equally important to acknowledge the methods indigenous women utilized in resisting subjugation and creating records of themselves in colonial archives. Within narratives about the colonial project in the Americas, indigenous women are rarely, if ever, mentioned.<sup>6</sup> In highlighting the lack of Mesoamerican women in the historical narrative of colonization, recentring the historical lens on the cosmological center of the Nahua-speaking world, the home, becomes imperative. This recentring enables a deeper understanding of Nahua gender relations, how devastating the Spanish invasion was, and how indigenous women navigated that chaos. The Spanish colonial system sought to reshape their entire world, uprooting ancient concepts of gender, sexuality, and cosmic order. As a result, it affected the ways they entered narratives and the colonial archives. The nuances of feminine sacred power and even their names became buried under hundreds of years of colonialism, like layers of sedimentary rock. This process began with the conquest, these new concepts of race, gender, and citizenship were introduced to Mesoamerica the moment the Spanish arrived.

Book XII of the *Florentine Codex* contains a subversive narrative that directly accuses the Spanish of committing acts of violence against the Mexica. As a result, Malintzin's role as Cortez's translator can be inferred as a consequence of conquest. Compiled by Friar Bernardino de Sahagun in collaboration with indigenous scholars, the *Florentine Codex* is an ethnographic study of the Mexica people. The writing for Book XII began in 1555, thirty-four years after the end of the war. Thus, the indigenous scholars that collaborated with Sahagun either remembered the conquest or knew someone who witnessed it. The

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<sup>5</sup> Karin Velez, *The Miraculous Flying House of Loreto: Spreading Catholicism in the Early Modern World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), 22.

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Sousa, *The Woman Who Turned Into a Jaguar and Other Narratives of Native Women in Archives of Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2017), 4.

closeness of the *Florentine Codex* to the events of the conquest contribute to its uniqueness as a historical document that contradicts the imperial, triumphant, Christian narrative.

In their description of the Toxcatl Massacre, Nahua artists and authors implicate the Spaniards as the main perpetrators of the violence.<sup>7</sup> This narrative was a departure from other chronicles of the conquest, such as the ones by Cortez's personal chaplain and friar Diego Duran, that sought to support the conquest as a 'just war' and exonerate Cortez from greed and murder.<sup>8</sup> The violence in Book XII speaks to the concept of mutilated historicity. In the archive, marginalized women are often presented in violent conditions, their bodies appear disfigured, violated, and in unimaginable pain.<sup>9</sup> When indigenous Mesoamerican women entered the archive through narratives that chronicled the Spanish invasion, their bodies became inscribed with the violence that came with colonization. The image of the lone healer crying out for help, surrounded and overwhelmed by the bodies of smallpox victims illustrates the horrors that indigenous women endured and witnessed.<sup>10</sup>

Malintzin is not a major presence in the text of Book XII; she is mentioned in Chapters Nine, Eighteen, Twenty-Five, and Forty-One. However, her sparse presence does not make her an unimportant person. When she first appears in Chapter Nine, she

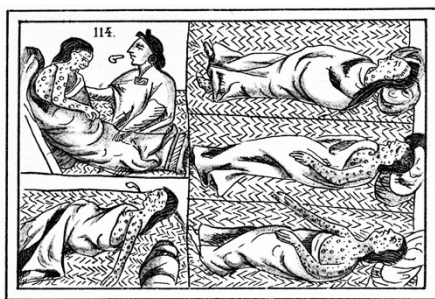


Fig. 114, from Chapter 29, Book XII of *Florentine Codex*. "Smallpox plague."

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Terraciano, "Nahua Memories of the War in Mexico Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco," (presentation, Getty Center, Los Angeles, CA, October 4, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Terraciano, "Nahua Memories."

<sup>9</sup> Marisa J Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 16.

<sup>10</sup> Bernardino Sahagun, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain, Book XII - The Conquest*, trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Santa Fe: Monographs of the School of American Research, 1955), figure 114, unmarked page, Chapter 29.

is described as: “A woman of our people ... Her name [was] Marina; Tetipac [was] her home. There at the coast they had first come upon and taken her.” The language used describes her as a victim of the conquest as she was taken by the Spanish. Here, one of “our people” could be the authors acknowledging that she was not Spanish, thus grouping her with other indigenous women who were affected by the conquest. The footnote in regard to her place of origin reveal additional information. She came from a town called Painalla, “a town now disappeared.”<sup>11</sup> Book XII does not contain a true biography of Malintzin’s life prior to the arrival of the Spanish. The indigenous politics it does chronicle mostly pertain to the intrigue surrounding the omens, the Mexica allies and enemies that encountered the Spanish, and discussions between Moctezuma and other nobles. Malintzin’s life has been scattered throughout time, leaving historians to find the pieces and put them together like a great, yet tragic puzzle.

Within the text of Book XII, Malintzin occupies different roles, depending on the circumstances. At times she is an interpreter, relaying Cortez’s words to the Mexica. In the text, Malintzin often begins her sentences with “My master saith” or “the Captain,” as seen in Chapter Twenty-Five: “My master, the Captain, saith: ‘Whence have they come? Where [is] their home?’”<sup>12</sup> At times, she is a negotiator, the text giving her centrality and authority as an interpreter when speaking to the Mexica nobles and messengers. A remarkable moment in Chapter Eighteen demonstrates this:

“And when this had been done, when all the gold had been gathered, then Marina summoned, and ordered called, all the noble-men. She got upon the roof-top, on a parapet. She said: ‘O Mexicans, come hither! The Spaniards have suffered great fatigue. Bring here food, fresh water, and all which is needed. For they are already tired and exhausted; they are in need; they are spent and in

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<sup>11</sup> Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, 25.

<sup>12</sup> Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, 69.

want. Why do you not wish to come? It appeareth that you are angered.”<sup>13</sup>

Malintzin was not merely an interpreter, she was also a mediator, someone who had to quickly read a tense situation and act. Other indigenous women played important roles in Book XII, as agents of resistance against the Spanish. Indeed, while violence was inflicted upon women during the conquest, they were not passive actors. The warning call from the Mexica woman about the Spaniards’ attempted escape on Noche Triste demonstrates a powerful moment of agency and resistance.<sup>14</sup> It disrupts the notion of the passive indigenous woman, for she acted with autonomy and showed no fear in exposing the fleeing Spanish soldiers.<sup>15</sup> These moments demonstrate the ways in which indigenous women, not just Malintzin, had to navigate the events of the conquest.



Fig. 51, from Chapter 18, Book XII of *Florentine Codex*. "Marina addresses Mexican noblemen."

While she is a minor presence in the text, Malintzin’s depiction in the painted images of Book XII dress her in agency and authority. The image preceding the text depicts the arrival of the Spanish and the various things they brought with them: strange new animals, enormous ships, and soldiers. On the right side, she is seen speaking to an indigenous person while Cortez remains seated, writing.<sup>16</sup> Malintzin is seen in many of the images speaking, as identified by her position next to Cortez and the speech scrolls emerging from her mouth. Additionally, her role as interpreter gives her centrality in the composition of these images

<sup>13</sup> Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, 47.

<sup>14</sup> Translated as “the Night of Sorrows,” or “the Sad Night,” Noche Triste was the night in 1521 were the Aztecs pushed the Cortez and the Spaniards out of Tenochtitlan, their capital.

<sup>15</sup> Citlali Anahuac, “See What the Cithuatl Saw: How Sixteenth Century Nahua Women Shaped and Monopolized Sacred Power,” (Master’s thesis, California State University, Los Angeles, 2019), 43.

<sup>16</sup> Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, figure 1, unmarked page, preceding text.

and the authors have given her authoritative hand gestures. The image in Chapter Sixteen demonstrates this centrality with her in the middle of the image, right in between Cortez and Moctezuma.<sup>17</sup> It is clear from these images that Malintzin played an important role in these negotiations, so much so that it remained in the memory of the authors of the Book XII. Indeed, the Florentine Codex often portrays her in conversation with indigenous noblemen, either beside Cortez or from rooftops.<sup>18</sup> An image in Chapter Eighteen portrays her speaking from a rooftop next to Cortez, a flurry of speech scrolls from her mouth towards Mexica noblemen.<sup>19</sup> Yet there are also speech scrolls coming out of the nobleman's mouth, the two of them clearly in conversation as Cortez looks on. These images demonstrate the ways in which Malintzin navigated these spaces of negotiation.

The *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* gives Malintzin more importance in their narrative than Book XII of the *Florentine Codex*. Where Book XII was authored by indigenous Mexica scholars as a text that documented the events of the conquest, the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* was authored for the Spanish crown in the late sixteenth century, under the supervision of Diego Muñoz Camargo, who was a mestizo interpreter. The imagery of the emblem of the Spanish crown sitting above the sacred mountain was an acknowledgment of Spanish authority and enabled Tlaxcala to establish itself as New Spain's cosmic center of Christianity.<sup>20</sup> The Tlaxcalas adhered to their own narrative traditions when they



Fig 1., preceding text, Book XII of *Florentine Codex*.  
"Landing of the Spanish."

<sup>17</sup> Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, figure 44, unmarked page, Chapter 9.

<sup>18</sup> Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices*, 123.

<sup>19</sup> Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, figure 51, unmarked page, Chapter 18.

<sup>20</sup> Federico Navarrete Linares, "The Tlaxcalan Conquest," (Presentation, Getty Center, Los Angeles, CA, October 4, 2019).



submitted the *Lienzo*, a complex work of art that was neither a written document in Spanish or Nahuatl.<sup>21</sup>

The authors of the *Lienzo* gave authority to Malintzin as she appears in the center of multiple panels. Plate Nine features the most striking image where she is seen with an authoritative gesture amongst the violence during the massacre at Cholula. The events depicted in the *Lienzo* are given more depth when compared to a letter Cortez wrote detailing how a Cholulatega tried to warn Malintzin of their ambush against the Spanish. Despite the two women acting against one another with Malintzin refusing the Cholulatega's invitation and alerting Cortez to the ambush, this event demonstrates that these two indigenous women acted with autonomy. They independently analyzed their situation and took the best course of action they saw for themselves and their survival.<sup>22</sup> In other panels, her centrality in the composition places her at the main point of contact between Tlaxcalans and the Spanish, giving great importance to her role as translator.<sup>23</sup> In Plate Eight, she is standing beside Cortez as they witness the conversion of Tlaxcalans to Christianity.<sup>24</sup> This proximity not only to Cortez but to Tlaxcalan leadership illustrates her importance to the Tlaxcalan victory over the Mexica since she helped facilitate that relationship. Malintzin's centrality in the narratives places her a



*Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, plate 9.

position of agency, a creator of words, relationships, and even leadership. Her depiction in the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* reflects the duality of her position and the various ways in which people viewed.

<sup>21</sup> Navarette, "The Tlaxcalan Conquest."

<sup>22</sup> Anahuac, "See What the Cithuatl Saw," 51.

<sup>23</sup> *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, Plate 9, 1892, Fray Angelico Chávez History Library, University of New Mexico Digital Collections, Accessed November 19, 2019, <https://nmdigital.unm.edu/digital/collection/achl/id/1527>.

<sup>24</sup> *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, Plate 8.

In many ways, the true Malintzin occupies the space between Book XII and the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*. One acknowledges her as a victim that had some agency, but not enough to truly incriminate her as a traitor. The other acknowledges her as an active agent that facilitated important relationships between the Spanish and Tlaxcalans, thus becoming an instrumental element in defeating the Mexica. The truth is a complicated one, for Malintzin occupied many roles throughout the events of the conquest: victim, agent, and survivor. As a translator, Malintzin occupied a unique space, one that enabled her to exercise control over how words were understood by both parties, the Spanish and the Mexica. Yet, she also had to choose her words carefully, to ensure her own survival. Historical actors often embody the role of narrator and operate within specific historical contexts.<sup>25</sup> As the story of the conquest was repeated, the drama of its main characters overshadows the indigenous politics, pre-contact realities, the immense loss of human life, and the destruction of the environment. As a result, historical silences are produced. No single event enters the historical record with all of its parts and perspectives intact. Silences are built into the



*Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, plate 8.

production of history.<sup>26</sup> In the case of the conquest, many silences were created; the most comprehensive sources that exist of the event were created decades afterwards and in the midst of a colonization project. Thus, the complex choices indigenous Mesoamerican women made during the events of the conquest became flattened in favor of a much larger narrative. More importantly, the nuances of indigenous visual and textual metaphors and cosmology were silenced by colonial institutions that played an instrumental role in constructing these narratives.

<sup>25</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 22.

<sup>26</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 49.

In the generations after the conquest, indigenous women had to navigate and negotiate with the colonial system and the cosmology of their colonizers. Their interactions with the colonial system enabled them to create records of themselves in which they asserted their gender and citizenship as colonial subjects. Under the pressure of the colonial system, the maintenance of indigenous culture depended on the survival of fundamental aspects of Mesoamerican social organization. In these spaces, indigenous concepts of gender clashed with the patriarchal Spanish society that operated on a distinct gender binary, especially within the realm of marriage. Franciscan friars engaged in a 'spiritual conquest' that utilized methods of violence and coercion to enforce Christian marriages, attacking indigenous concepts of sexuality and gender. However, many of these negotiations happened under circumstances of trauma, such as sexual assault. Many cases in the colonial record contain violence against indigenous women in highland Mexico.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, women in the Spanish Empire continued to use the law as a realm in which gender was shaped and contested well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, practicing the spirit of Enlightenment more than their European counterparts. As civil legal subjects under colonial law, female litigants brought forth formal suits that focused on their independence and material lives.<sup>28</sup> In many ways, indigenous women in Mesoamerica established a precedent in which the law and colonial court system could be engaged as a realm of negotiation and historical record keeping. Women used the court system as a way to enter the legal archive and leave behind a record of their negotiations, lives, and ideas about gender and citizenship.<sup>29</sup>

Not all indigenous Mesoamerican women experienced the conquest the same way, nor did they engage in uniform methods of resistance. In the Yucatan, Maya women engaged in both violent and nonviolent acts of insubordination, contesting Spanish concepts of race and gender. Like their Nahua counterparts, the

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<sup>27</sup> Sousa, *The Woman Who Turned Into a Jaguar*, 13, 59, 14.

<sup>28</sup> Bianca Premo, *The Enlightenment on Trial: Ordinary Litigants and Colonialism in the Spanish Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 122.

<sup>29</sup> Premo, *The Enlightenment on Trial*, 95.

actions of Maya women disrupt narratives of indigenous women as passive victims of colonization; they were prominent actors in the disputes over relationships and gender under the new colonial system. At the same time, Maya women became subjected to historical anonymity in both Spanish and indigenous sources during the conquest and afterwards when the colonization project was just beginning. While ethnocentric dismissal by Spaniards resulted in depersonalization of Maya women, they remained anonymous even in regions populated mostly by indigenous people. In their anonymity, Maya women became sites of disputes over race and land. While they themselves did not file suits or approach the courts independently, they became the subjects of these disputes, placing them at the center of these arguments that were central to the colonial nation building project. By the late colonial period, Maya women shifted from being anonymous victims to being cited by name in abuse cases.<sup>30</sup> The court and the law continued to be spaces in which Maya women could exercise resistance and contest their subordination in the eyes of the Spanish.

Indigenous people were at the center of discourses about race and national identity. In other colonizing projects, such as the Portuguese in Brazil, the attempts to integrate indigenous populations resulted in the violent exploitation of their labor and bodies. Slavery was viewed as the only acceptable way to integrate the indigenous Brazilian population into the new colonial Portuguese society.<sup>31</sup> In post-colonial Brazil, discourses of mestizaje, indigenismo, and miscegenation reveal that their primary goal was not the inclusion, rather it was racial exclusion of living indigenous Brazilians, thus perpetuating the myth of the “disappeared Indian.”<sup>32</sup> To the colonial state, indigenous people

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<sup>30</sup> Mathew Restall, “‘He Wished it in Vain’: Subordination and Resistance Among Maya Women in Post-Conquest Yucatan,” *Ethnohistory* 42, no. 4 (1995), 580, 579, 585.

<sup>31</sup> John M. Monteiro, *Blacks of the Land: Indian Slavery, Settler Society, and the Portuguese Colonial Enterprise in South America*, edited and translated by James Woodward and Barbara Weinstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 39.

<sup>32</sup> Yuko Miki, *Frontiers of Citizenship: A Black and Indigenous History of Postcolonial Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 103.

posed a direct problem, obstructing their ability to fully claim ownership of history and land. In post-colonial Mexico and Brazil, the elite and ruling classes readily claimed neo-indigenous genealogy as they crafted a new national identity and endorsed the mestizoization of the indigenous population.<sup>33</sup> Within the mestizaje project, the indigenous person was a means to an end whose fate was to be molded into a model citizen. These ideologies were predicated on the erasure of indigenous people. Malintzin was no exception. Her proximity to Cortez contributed to her whitewashing and her inevitable portrayal as a traitor.

By recentring Malintzin as a victim and complex actor during the conquest of Mexico, a more nuanced portrait of indigenous women emerges. From the very beginning of the conquest, indigenous Mesoamerican women had to quickly navigate a new cosmology and create spaces in which they could negotiate and resist. These women, Malintzin included, exist in between the spaces of the narratives constructed by sources like the *Florentine Codex* and the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*. Recovering their voices, their names, and their motivations requires reading against the historical grain and looking at the ways other indigenous people navigated colonization. Time has buried these legacies and some women like Malintzin have been subjected to reimaginings and mythologies that place the blame of colonization on them. It is imperative that historians and scholars continue to deconstruct these harmful narratives and acknowledge the difficult decisions many indigenous women made to ensure the survival of themselves, their families, and their culture.

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<sup>33</sup> Miki, *Frontiers of Citizenship*, 121.