



Looking for interpreter zero: (4) Marina/Malintzin/La Malinche

Marina appears in sixteenth-century indigenous records of the conquest of Mexico as a powerful figure. Her status, however, faltered with independence and today she continues to engender controversy.

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The woman who came to be known as La Malinche was given to Hernán Cortés early in his 1519 expedition to Mexico; she was baptised Marina and he then presented her to Alonso Hernández de Puertocarrero - but that proved to be a short-lived arrangement. Cortés had some use for her: unlike Geronimo, she could speak Nahuatl, the Aztec Language, and could communicate with Moctezuma's emissaries from Tenochtitlan. Their working method had Aguilar interpreting Cortés into (Yucatec) Maya, Marina putting his words into (coastal) Nahuatl and interpreting the emissaries into her (Chontal) Maya for Aguilar to interpret into Spanish. Some understandable scepticism has been expressed as to the reliability of this system but it marked a turning point in the Conquista because "it made possible a kind of communication on a quite different level ... from exchanges previously carried out in the Indies by the Castilians" [\[1\]](#).

Role during the conquest

Marina interpreted for Cortés at key points in the conquest of Mexico and is mentioned regularly in the chronicles of the years 1519-1526. Bernal Díaz refers often to the well-born Doña Marina; Nahuatl chroniclers added their honorific to their version of her name and referred to her as Malintzin. Marina's command of Mayan and Nahuatl dialects and pragmatic approach made her a central figure during those years of conquest and warfare marked by negotiations, alliances, treachery and fighting as the peoples of the region responded to the Spanish presence. Talks with the Tlaxcalans, leading to an alliance against the Aztecs, were commemorated in the [Lienzo de Tlaxcala](#) in which Marina figures prominently. Her status as intermediary between the Spaniards and the peoples of Mexico was confirmed in October 1519 by her role in Cholula, a city-state allied to Moctezuma. She gleaned news of a planned attack and informed Cortés. The ensuing Cholulan massacre demonstrated the power of Cortés and his allies.

Moctezuma resisted Cortés' attempts to visit Tenochtitlan; he met with the Spaniards as they were approaching the city. Marina coped with the formal register of Moctezuma's 'lordly speech' and concomitant demands of this unprecedented meeting.[\[2\]](#) She was in Tenochtitlan for the first period of Spanish occupation during which a chapel was built and Moctezuma was placed under house arrest. She left the city with Cortés in May 1520 when he returned to the coast to deal with a challenge to his authority. On their return in June, the city was in chaos following Pedro de

Alvarado's massacre of celebrants at a religious festival. Moctezuma was killed that month, and his successor died of smallpox before the end of the year. (The disease was devastating Mexico.) The Spaniards withdrew, Cortés negotiated with his allies and their forces returned a year later to destroy Tenochtitlan and seize the last emperor, Cuauhtemoc.

Marina survived. In 1522 she bore Cortés' child, Martín. Her last appearance as Cortés' interpreter was on his labourious overland journey to Honduras to confront yet another insubordinate conquistador. She could speak Spanish by then, so dealt with communication between the Spaniards and Mayan speakers as well as their dealings with Cuauhtemoc and the thousands of Aztec people who had been swept into the expedition. She fades from the record after reports of her 1525 marriage to Juan Jaramillo and the birth of their daughter, Maria, the following year.

Her legacy

Marina appears in sixteenth-century indigenous records of the conquest of Mexico as a powerful figure who also appeared in the Dance of the Conquest. Her status faltered with independence, however. After 1821, her story became one of systematic treachery by a woman whose preference for foreigners led to her siding – and sleeping - with the enemy. The mother of one of the first *mestizo* babies was held to have betrayed her people and the terms '*malinchismo*' - preference for the foreign - and '*malinchista*' – traitor - were added to the Mexican lexicon. They provided an easy way to summarise the complexities of the colonial period. "After all, she was a woman, an Indian, and dead." (F. Karttunen, personal communication, 29 April 2013.) That attitude informed the approach of the mural movement of the 1920s and persists in popular culture today.

Recent scholarship has shown renewed interest in the way Marina's image has been affected by the tendency to view (famous) women as archetypes. Since she was no Virgin of Guadalupe, she was a traitor and a prostitute. The introduction of some nuance into our understanding of her story has been accompanied by recognition of her exceptional role as a linguist and interpreter. It is a nice touch that AIIC contributed to this trend by establishing the Malintzin prize in 2005.

Read previous chapters: [1](#), [2](#) & [3](#)

[\[1\]](#) Thomas, H. (1994). *The Conquest of Mexico*, p171. London, Hutchinson.

[\[2\]](#) Karttunen, F. (1994). *Between Worlds*, pp11-12. New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press.

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