

The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States

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La Malinche,

also Malinalli Tenepal, Malíntzin, and Doña Marina (1502–1527?), guide-translator-mistress of Hernán Cortés during the conquest of Mexico, 1519–1521. Born in Aztec-ruled Coatzacoalcos in central Mexico, she grew up on the Yucatan coast after being given to itinerant traders by her mother. Her native speaker's knowledge of Náhuatl (Aztec language) and Mayan dialects and her rapid grasp of Spanish made her indispensable to Cortés, the father of two of her sons. Although most of what is known about her comes from Bernal Díaz del Castillo's (1492–1584) famous eye-witness chronicle (*The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, 1632), his single account forms the basis of countless views of her historical role, including those written by writers such as historians William H. Prescott (1842) and Mariano Somonte (1969), social scientist Adelaida R. del Castillo (1979), and literary scholars Cordelia Candelaria (1980) and Sandra Messinger Cypress (1992). This historiography is central to an understanding of her actual life, debased image, and twentieth-century recuperation by feminists. It explains the evolution of her iconography from victim of both conquerors and caciques (leaders of her indigenous societies); to victor as Doña (lady) Marina, the title conferred by the Spaniards because of her wise and loyal service; to the conqueror's mouthpiece, *La Lengua* (Tongue), and later Malíntzin (-tzin denotes honor) revered by the native peoples; to the abhorred symbol of political treason and cultural betrayal identified by Nobel laureate Octavio Paz as "*la chingada* (whore) *de México*" and blamed for the conquest; to a woman of remarkable achievement unfairly scapegoated by sexist history. Because of her sui generis role as Cortés's interpreter, she was perhaps the first post-Columbian American to confront on a public stage such gender, RACE, and CLASS issues as intercultural identity, bilingualism, and competing loyalties between contrasting cultures. Considered the historical source for the LA LLORONA legend, she appears frequently as an archetypal traitor and/or scapegoat in Mexican, Chicana/o, and other literature and art.

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