Behind-the-Scenes of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico

By Thaithao Nguyen

During the early 15th century, a Triple Alliance developed in the Valley of Mexico between the city-states Mexico-Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan. Ultimately, the Mexica rose to military dominance and ruled from their capital of Tenochtitlan for a century until a coalition of Spanish and native forces toppled the Alliance in 1521. After their final victory, the Spanish claimed the conquest of Tenochtitlan for themselves. However, by doing so they essentially wrote the massive contributions of their indigenous allies out of history. Endemic warfare for the sake of appeasing the gods and acquiring sacrificial victims caused widespread misery under Mexica rule. Indigenous men and women therefore participated in the Spanish conquests as a means of survival and a potential end to continual warfare in the region. The contemporary genre of the New Conquest History attempts to redefine the conquest by addressing misconceptions about the invasion and its consequences utilizing the Lienzo de Tlaxcala (LTD) and Florentine Codex as original primary sources that retell the conquest from a native perspective.[1] Matthew Restall's Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest is a big contributor to this contemporary genre and demonstrates in his work that indigenous people fought on the Spanish side as soldiers and fulfilled other roles such as interpreters, war brides, cooks, and laborers as ways to serve their nations and themselves.[2]

Spanish accounts of the conquest of Mexico tell of the victors of war such as Hernan Cortes and Bernal Diaz del Castillo. These men used a particular style of writing called probanza (proof of merit), intended for none other than the King of Spain.[3] The letters represent first-hand accounts of their experiences and activities. Cortes' letters document his expeditions into Mexico.[4] Ultimately, they took on a life of their own, as they circulated widely and amassed a fan base back in Spain that eagerly awaited his adventures. Not surprisingly, his letters give credit only to the author, himself. On the other hand, Bernal Diaz de Castillo wrote his account, The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico 1517-1521, thirty years post-conquest with the intention to discredit Cortes' account and write Cortes' men back into the story.[5] He provides more details than Cortes does of local allies and their contributions. However, in the end both narratives are biased because the intended audience is the

King who rewarded flattery and embellishment of the conquistadors over details of the contributions of native peoples.

Probanzas were also created by many indigenous people post-conquest. The Lienzo de Tlaxcala (LTD) was created by the town council of Tlaxcala in their attempt to gain concessions from the King in 1552.[6] The original work was a long cloth that depicted the Hapsburg Coat of Arms along with the entire conquest painted in pictures separating each battle. Each scene, depicted in small squares, builds up to the next small square. These squares are read from left to right and top to bottom. The LTD must also be considered with caution as it is another probanza that favored Tlaxcala's role as a Spanish ally in the conquest. Another local source created post-conquest proved to be a mediator between the worlds of probanzas. The Florentine Codex was a manuscript conceptualized by the Friar Bernardino de Sahagun, but written by Nahua scholars and artists starting in 1550.[7] The document is a trilingual text: Nahuatl, pictorial, and Spanish. The text spans over 12 books, Book XII representing a Nahua, or more precisely Mexica perspective of the Spanish conquest. Therefore even the Florentine Codex remains biased, as it was written under the supervision of a friar by the Tlatelolca, who were the Nahuatl-speaking survivors of the conquest and thus the ultimate target of the Spaniards.

The militaristic regime of the Mexica that dominated ancient Mesoamerica conducted continuous warfare to expand their domain and appease their gods. The Mexica gods required blood sacrifices; warriors were encouraged to capture enemies for sacrifice. Across Mesoamerica, indigenous communities hated the Mexica and their gods as they continued the cycle of warfare to no end. People lived precarious lives, and their limited control over their existence made the Spaniards an attractive ally and a new beacon of hope for overthrowing the current regime. In Sorenson's dissertation, the author describes the fears and frustrations of individuals subjected to Mexica fighting and tribute.[8] Important primary sources of Sorenson are the Cantares Mexicanos and the Romances de los Senores de la Nueva Espana, collections of Nahuatl songs of the 16th century. People performed these songs live, and Franciscan friars later recorded the songs into poems and translated them to Spanish. The frustration, anger, and disparity felt by many city-states forged Spanish-native alliances as indicated by a verse from the Cantares Mexicanos, "Give aid to our lords! With iron weapons they're wrecking the city, they're wrecking the Mexican nation!"[9] During the siege of Tenochtitlan, an indigenous person cheered for their Spanish ally and the destruction of the Mexica. The frank statement reveals the eagerness of native peoples to dethrone the Mexica and end the Triple Alliance. In a world ruled by the gods,

many experienced their lives as destined to end at the top of the great pyramid in Tenochtitlan, their heart cut out as an offering to Huitzilopochtli.[10] At the cost of their own lives, thousands of people raised their weapons and shields and marched alongside the Spaniards to fight against the Mexica in an effort to change the cycle of warfare.

Spanish probanzas purposefully underrepresented native military forces. The Tlaxcalans countered this narrative with their own probanza in the form of the LTD. For example, according to Oudijk and Restall, in their version of the conquest of Mexico, the Tlaxcalans claim to have saved Cortes during the siege of Tenochtitlan.[11] In Figure 1, Cortes launched an attack on the anniversary of the Noche Triste (the Night of Sorrow, when the Spanish-native forces were driven out of Tenochtitlan), but enemy forces attacked and injured Cortes (depicted as wearing full armor) in the midst of battle. Native allies surrounded Cortes, two native warriors supported Cortes, and two additional warriors defended the party with their spear and obsidian sword.[12] Cortes' account of the siege of Tenochtitlan overlooked this moment of Spanish reliance upon their Tlaxcallan ally for safe passage for a wounded Cortes.

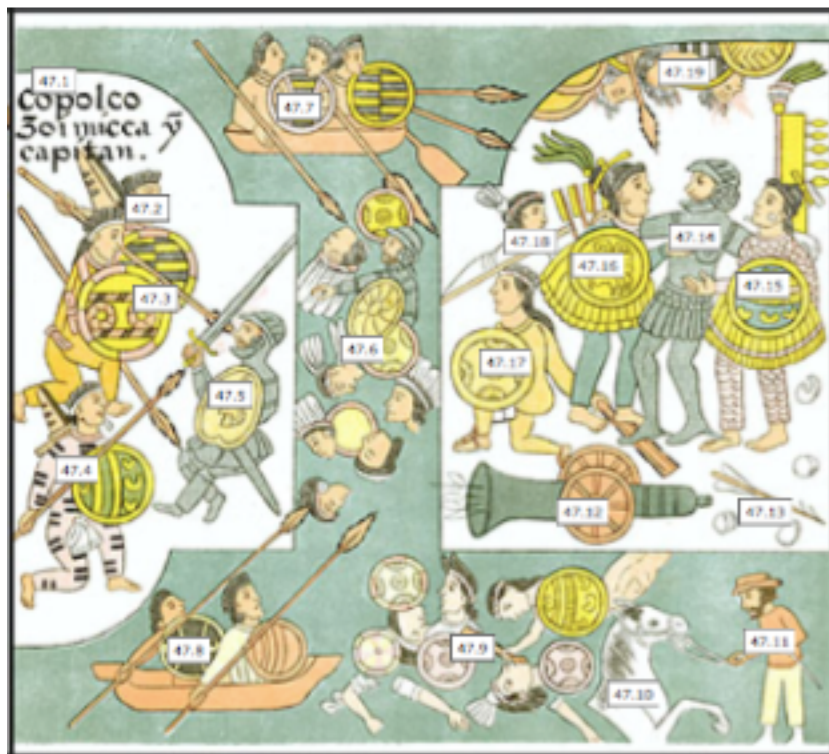

Figure 1: June 30, 1521, Cortes orders an attack on the anniversary of the Noche Triste in cell 47 of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala. ("Lienzo de Tlaxcala," Mesolore, Brown University,

Asselbergs argues in “The Conquest of Images,” that alliances over time led to a series of awards and privileges given by the Spaniards to their native allies.[13] These gifts included the usage of the Hapsburg Coat of Arms at the top of the LTD, weapons such as the steel sword allocated to proven warriors, and in rare cases horses for caciques (local leaders). In figures 2 and 3, Tlaxcalan warriors are depicted wielding Spanish swords next to their Spanish counterparts in the battles at Totolan and Colihpan. As the Spanish-native alliance fought many local enemies, the Spaniards rewarded native warriors who performed well in battle with steel swords. In both scenes, the Spanish-native coalition stands together with their swords and shields held up high as they faced streams of flying arrows and various enemies.[14]

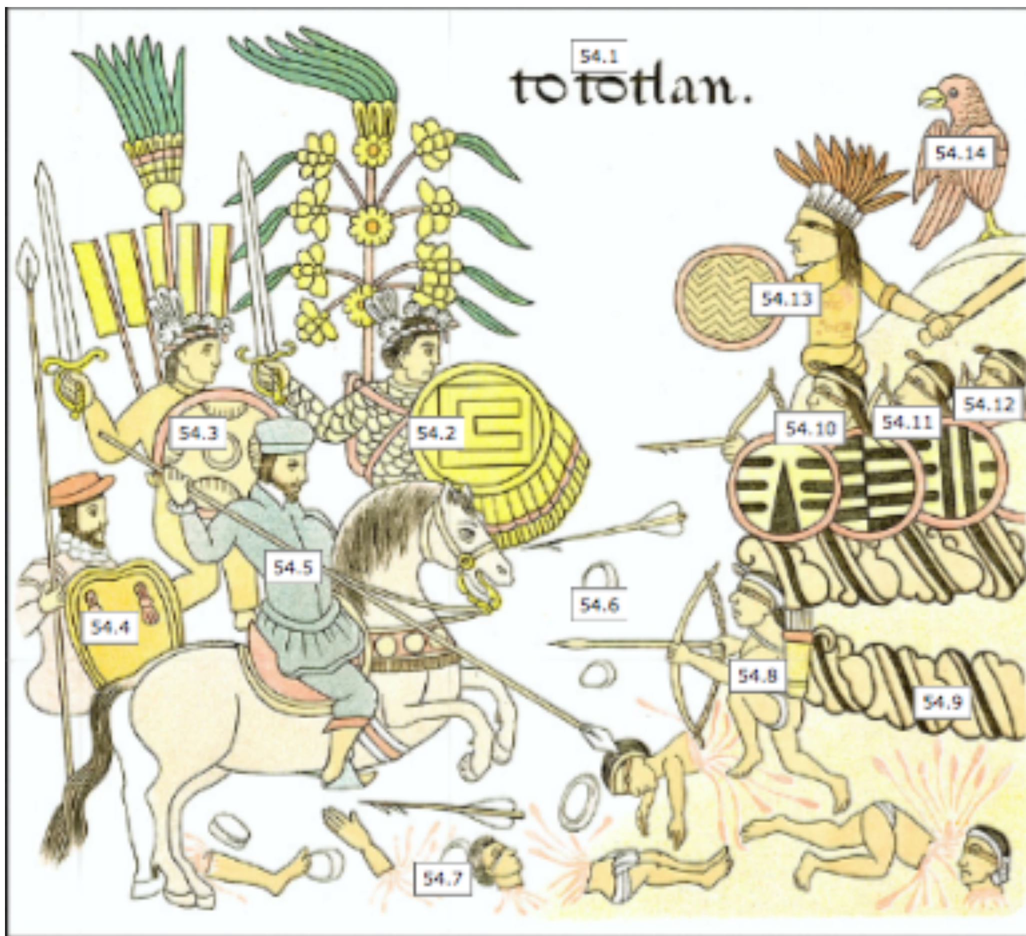

Figure 2: Tlaxclans wield metal swords in a battle fought at Totolan in cell 54 of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala (“Lienzo de Tlaxcala,” Mesolore, Brown University,

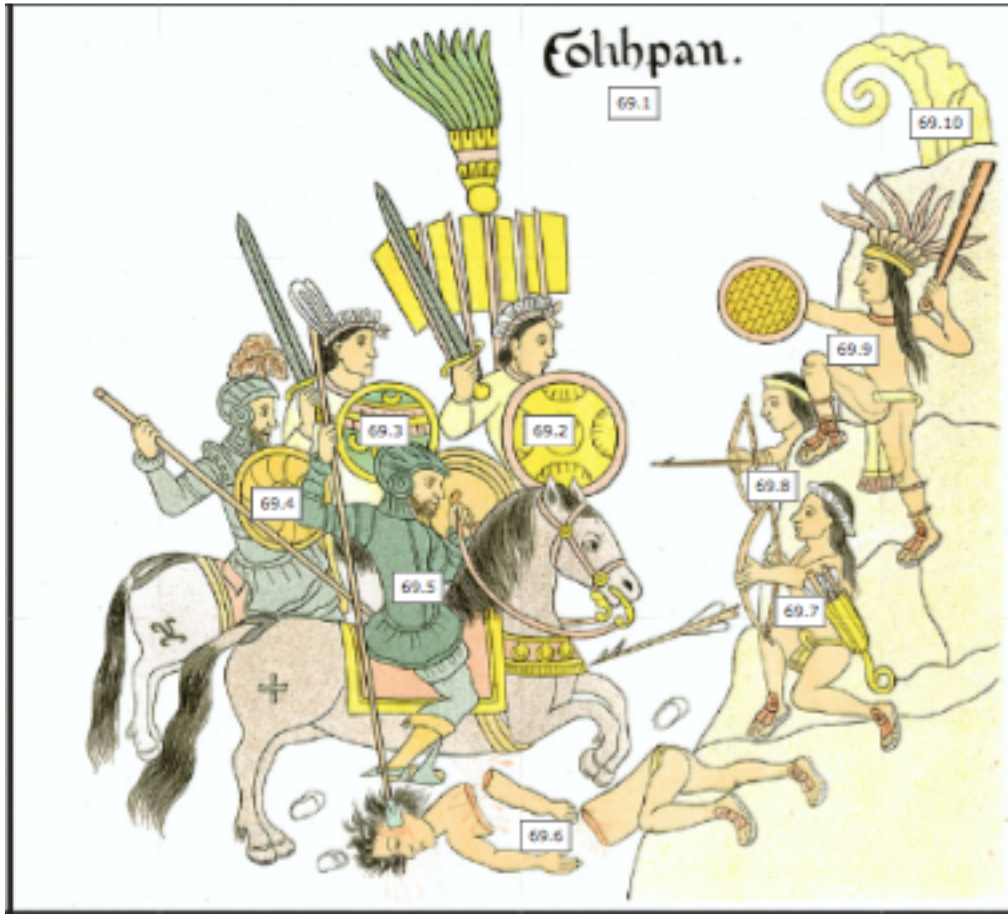

Figure 3: Tlaxclans wield metal swords in a battle fought at Colihpan in cell 69 of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala ("Lienzo de Tlaxcala," Mesolore, Brown University,

These depictions of native warriors in battle with European swords refute the Spanish claim to sole ownership of the conquest of Mexico. Spanish accounts omitted much of the native military auxiliary, a tendency which poured over to the role of indigenous interpreters.

One of the seven myths of the Spanish conquest of Mexico contested by Matthew Restall in Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest regards the Spaniard's exemplary linguistics.[15] The Spaniards, well-rehearsed in conquering foreign territories, established a standard of procedure that prioritized the recruitment of native interpreters as high as provisions such as food and water. Native interpreters were crucial to diplomacy and survival in a new world.[16] In the Florentine Codex, the Spaniards marched inland towards Tenochtitlan along with their new allies the Tlaxcalans. As their expedition headed closer to Tenochtitlan, Montezuma, aware of the foreigner's growing presence, dispatched an envoy to intercept and hopefully reverse the

expedition's tracks. The Mexica emissary met the Spanish-native party along the two mountains pass (Popcatepetl and Iztactepetl) and produced gifts for the Spaniards. They also attempted to pass Montezuma's most trusted nobleman, Tzihuacpopoca, as Moctezuma. However, the Tlaxcalan interpreter warned the Spaniards that the nobleman is an imposter, so the Spaniards continued on their march. Figure 4 depicts the native interpreter as larger than the Spaniards to show that this person was necessary as dictated by the native artistic style.[17]

Figure 4: March onto Mexico. Book XII of the Florentine Codex. (Image provided by Lockhart, We People Here, page 97.)

Although native interpreters performed crucial roles and essentially expedited Spanish diplomatic relations with local indigenous groups, Cortes only mentioned one interpreter in all of his letters.

The most famous interpreter who participated in the Spanish conquest of Mexico was Malintzin (also known as Dona Marina).[18] Camilla Townsend describes Malintzin as a dynamic person who represented all native interpreters as she spoke three languages (Nahuatl, Mayan, and Spanish) and traversed among different cultures with ease.[19] Malintzin's turbulent childhood taught her to adapt to change quickly and to persevere in the face of danger. She symbolized the resiliency that all interpreters amassed while they

faced extreme threat and trekked the cultural obstacles that rose during battles and meetings between leaders of opposite sides.[20] In Cortes' letters, he explicitly mentioned his native translator to the King in the most forthcoming passage "la lengua…que es una India desta tierra" (the tongue, the translator… who is an Indian woman of this land).[21] On the march to Tenochtitlan, the Spanish-native expedition stopped in Cholula. During this time, Cortes learned of a conspiracy set up by the Cholulans to ambush him and his troops after the locals slowly distanced themselves from the Spaniards and provided them with fewer provisions as their stay extended. Malintzin's efforts foiled the ambush as noted in Cortes' writings when he referred to her as the "Indian woman from Puttuchan."[22] Malintzin's role during the conquest exposed the importance of translators for the Spanish-native alliance in their fight against the Mexica and also showed how dangerous it was for Malintzin and other interpreters during those times. Malintzin's contribution to the conquest extended further than interpreter as her role as a woman of noble status bore additional responsibilities.

Frances Karttunen describes Malintzin's career as a translator as spanning over eight years, and indigenous people often referred to Cortes as Malintzin for the two were inseparable.[23] Other women that took part in the conquest solidified the Spanish-native alliances as their betrothal to Spaniards adhered to traditional political alliance building. These women acted as wives, mothers, tributes, and bonds between their home city-state and native warriors who departed and fought. [24] Tlaxcalan princesses (and sisters) Dona Lucia Xicotencalt and Dona Luisa were two out of the five noble women from Tlaxcala who were promised and wed to Spanish conquistadors. Xicotenga, the ruler of Tlaxcala, and other caciques brought their daughters to Cortes. Bernal Diaz recalled Xicotenga's insistence on the marriages, "If they wished to be our brothers and to have a true friendship with us so that we should willingly accept their daughters and take them…for wives."[25] Cortes accepted these women and an army as part of the newfound Spanish-Tlaxcalan alliance and then bestowed these women to his most trusted conquistadors. At Dona Luisa and Pedro Alvarado's official union, Diaz recounted the reaction of the Tlaxcalans: "When they gave her to him, all the greater part of Tlaxcala paid reverence to her, and gave her presents, and looked on her as their mistress."[26] These women represented the newfound bond between Spain and Tlaxcala. They followed their Spanish benefactors wherever they went, even to dangerous areas such as Tenochtitlan. Their presence bonded the Tlaxcalan warriors to the Spanish expedition as indigenous culture revered and placed power in the hands of noble women. The Tlaxcalan women represented a recurring process of marriage alliance

building that helped form other Spanish-native alliances and some of the roles that these women occupied as they found a new home in the midst of war.

To join native warrior and noble women in the rebellion against the Mexica were also ordinary people, in particular cooks and laborers.[27] During wartime, the Spanish expedition could not have spared men to go hunt or fish because foraging and cooking different crops and animals proved too risky and inefficient.[28] Therefore, Spaniards valued local cooks as they fed the army and were well versed in preparation of local foods such as corn. For instance, Diaz recounted Tlaxcalan warriors tasked to guard native cooks as "we left the women who cook bread for us in Tacuba."[29] He also described Cortes' jubilance at the sight of food: "Cortes received these things with a cheerful goodwill and with many expressions of thanks."[30]

As for laborers, they spearheaded the production, transportation, and implementation of the brigantines during the siege of Tenochtitlan, representing a tremendous contribution on behalf of the allies to the fall of the Mexica. After the Noche Triste, the injured Spanish-native alliance retreated to Tlaxcala with fewer people than they had started out with. But the Spaniards regained their strength in the safety of the Tlaxcala empire in a matter of six months. A new plan to occupy Tenochtitlan required ships to be built. These brigantines would traverse Lake Texcoco to escort aid and warriors more quickly as the plan required three simultaneous attacks. Cortes commissioned 13 ships for his upcoming attack, and Tlaxcalan artists learned from the head shipbuilder Martin Lopez to execute the required parts.[31] In the Florentine Codex, laborers carried the ship parts "on their backs" from Tlaxcala to Tetzcoco and assembled the ships in the water.[32] These vessels provided a faster method of transportation for warriors, weapons, and aid that proved to be an indispensable tool for the final Spanish victory.

Ultimately, the Spaniards' native allies in the conquest of Mexico remained forgotten for centuries to come. In fact, the 16th century narrative proliferated by men like Hernan Cortes remain widely-read to this day. Indigenous accounts, however, tell a different tale, highlighting the important roles of the Spaniards' many indigenous allies. As Mexica warriors terrorized the local natives, they turned to the Spaniards and formed new alliances in open defiance of the Mexica empire. Native people took an active stance in their quest for freedom and mobilized to aid the Spanish expeditions. Indigenous contributions included military support, interpretive and diplomatic aid, marriage alliances, as well as the hands-on help of cooks and laborers. Each position and the people who occupied those roles influenced and contributed directly to the Spanish conquests. The New Conquest History finally has found

a way to amplify the indigenous voices and re-write the history of the Spanish conquests in Mexico from indigenous perspectives.

Notes

[1] In pre-conquest Mesoamerica, writing was pictorial. The pictorials shown in the Lienzo de Tlaxcala and the Florentine Codex therefore are to be read as historical texts and equivalent to any alphabetically written document provided by Spanish conquest sources.

[2] Matthew Restall, Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003

[3] Ibid., 12.

[4] Anthony Pagden, Hernan Cortes – Letters from Mexico, New Haven; London: Yale Nota Bene, 2001.

[5] Bernal Diaz Del Castillo, The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico 1517-1521, Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2004.

[6] Liza Bakewell and Byron Hamann, "Lienzo de Tlaxcala," Mesolore, Brown University, Accessed October 17, 2017

[7] James Lockhart, Bernardino and Jay I. Kislak Reference Collection, We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico, Repertorium Columbianum ; v. 1, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

[8] Peter Sorenson and David Sheinin, "Anger," In "Are There No Social Rules in Our Home?" Fear, Anger, Power and the Aztec Empire, 105-133, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 2012.

[9] Ibid. 130.

[10] Ibid. 117.

[11] Michel R. Oudijk and Matthew Restall, "Mesoamerican Conquistadors in the Sixteenth Century," In Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica, edited by Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk, 28-64, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007, 36.

[12] Bakewell and Hamann, "Lienzo de Tlaxcala," cell 47.

[13] Florine G.L. Asselbergs, "The Conquest in Images: Stories of Tlaxcalteca and Quauhquecholteca Conquistadors." In Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica, edited by Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk, 65-101, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007, 74-79.

[14] Bakewell and Hamann, "Lienzo de Tlaxcala," 54; Ibid., 69.

[15] Matthew Restall, Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest.

[16] Ibid., 85.

[17] Lockhart, Bernardino and Kislak Reference Collection, We People Here, 97.

[18] Malintzin is not just the most famous interpreter of the Mexican conquest, but also a unique case. Gender stratification in the Spanish social system propelled men and reduced women to limited roles. For Malintzin to have commanded respect and eventually positioned herself as a prominent translator makes her an ideal but unique person of interest in history. She often is presented in historical scholarship as a symbol for all interpreters during the Mexican conquest because information about Malintzin as a translator appears frequently in indigenous sources.

[19] Camilla Townsend, Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico, University of New Mexico Press, 59.

[20] Ibid., 121.

[21] Anthony Pagden, Hernan Cortes – Letters from Mexico, 73.

[22] Ibid., 73.

[23] Frances E. Karttunen, "Three Guides: To the Valley of Mexico: Dona Marina, "La Malinche"," In Between Worlds: Interpreters, Guides, and Survivors, 1-23, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994, 3-4.

[24] Ibid., 9.

[25] Bernal Diaz Del Castillo, The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico 1517-1521, 224-225.

[26] Ibid., 227.

[27] Frances E. Karttunen, In Between Worlds, 5; Camilla Townsend, Malintzin's Choices, 114-116.

[28] Bernal Diaz Del Castillo, The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico 1517-1521, 123.

[29] Ibid., 547.

[30] Ibid., 181.

[31] Camilla Townsend, Malintzin's Choices, 114.

[32] Lockhart, Bernardino, and Kislak Reference Collection, We People Here, 187.

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