

## Malinche and Matriarchal Utopia: Gendered Visions of Indigeneity in Mexico

**M**exico's matriarchy' is what they call Juchitán, a city in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. It's a place where women light up the streets like flowers; but if you cross them, they'll cuss you out," remarks Maureen Gosling, writer, codirector, and producer of the documentary film *Blossoms of Fire* (2000). In *Blossoms*, Gosling sets out to discover how this Zapotec region of Oaxaca has gained a reputation over the centuries as an unabashedly welcoming place to grow up gay or transgendered (*muxe'* for a gay or woman-identified man and *nguín'* for a lesbian-identified woman in Zapotec), a place where women are visible and vocal within the most public spheres of society and, at the same time, a place synonymous with grassroots political struggle. Outsiders are drawn to the Juchitecas' elaborate blouses, flowing skirts, ample bodies, and the dignified way that women (and men dressed as women) move through space with something Istmeños refer to as *gracia* (grace) and *presencia* (presence; see fig. 1).

Non-Zapotec artists and writers have often celebrated Zapotec women of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and most notably of the market city of Juchitán, as paragons of Mexican female beauty and independence. To get a sense of the sultry naturalism that infuses these iconic visions of Isthmus Zapotec femininity, we can draw upon Sergei Eisenstein's classic unfinished film, *¡Que viva México!*; the travelogues of Miguel Covarrubias and Elena Poniatowska; the paintings of Covarrubias, Diego Rivera, and Frida Kahlo; and the photographs of Tina Modotti and Graciela Iturbide. These images of a lush southerly enclave with a proud monopoly on an exuberantly feminine, gay, and independent existence have fueled some rather enticing myths of the place as a matriarchal utopia.

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**Figure 1** Women dancing at a fiesta. Still from *Blossoms of Fire* (2000). Courtesy of Maureen Gosling. Reprinted with permission.

While these representations celebrate Isthmus Zapotec women for their charisma and self-reliance, they have also fed myths about Isthmus Zapotec sexuality and social behavior that Istmeños will tell you are untrue and degrading. As a challenge to the highly eroticized images created by non-Zapotecs, we find the work of Isthmus Zapotec writers and artists who playfully (or scornfully) engage the wanton gaze of outside observers. For this work, several generations of Isthmus Zapotec artists, writers, musicians, and cultural critics have gained a measure of national and international recognition unmatched by that of any other indigenous group in Mexico. According to Marinella Miano Borruso (2002, 96), since Andrés Henestrosa first led the Academy of the Zapotec Language and the New Society of Juchitec Students in the 1930s, Isthmus Zapotec artists and writers have worked to affirm cultural pluralism in Mexico, refusing to let their regional particularities be absorbed by the homogenizing mestizo (mixed-race) ideal of political and cultural subjecthood promoted by postrevolutionary elites.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Beginning in the early 1970s, Isthmus Zapotec cultural production came to be synonymous with ethnic-political struggle for autonomy from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI), which had controlled municipal, state, and national politics for nearly seventy years. By 1981, a grassroots movement called the Coalition of Workers, Peasants, and Students of the Isthmus (Coalición Obrero Campesino

Using the documentary film *Blossoms of Fire* as my primary context for analysis, in the first part of this article I examine the ways in which Isthmus Zapotecs playfully deconstruct and reconfigure the myths created about them by outsiders. The portrait that emerges is that of a society in which socially coherent configurations of sex, gender, desire, and social relations exist outside what Judith Butler refers to as the “heterosexual matrix” (1990, xxviii). From the film’s extensive interviews and scenes of daily life with gay, lesbian, and transgendered Juchitecs and their families, we can appreciate that what is normative in terms of gender and sexuality in the isthmus is not necessarily heteronormative. Shot over a period of ten years, the film explores relationships among the following three elements: the valorization of women in their different roles as breadwinners, family members, and transmitters of culture; the capacity for Istmeños to resist the pressures of outside domination, specifically since recent free trade initiatives have set transnational developers’ sights on the region; and finally, the multiple options available for socially coherent gender and sexual identities within family and community. The film’s representation of Isthmus Zapotec women as savvy entrepreneurs and respected community leaders provides an inspiring contrast to the ways in which women’s economic and sociopolitical agency have been consistently euphemized and made invisible within debates on national identity and political imperatives in Mexico.<sup>2</sup>

My second concern is with what might be gained or lost if we buy into the idea of an alluring gynocentric paradise in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. To what rule, exactly, are Isthmus Zapotecs considered the exception? What might these images of gender and sexual freedom limited to one specific, remote region tell us about how national identity has been imagined—gendered, sexualized, and racialized—within a wider field of Mex-

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Estudiantil del Istmo, or COCEI) led the first successful campaign to oust the PRI from municipal government. The *ayuntamiento popular* (popular government) pursued an ambitious course of socioeconomic and cultural transformation based on the restitution of peasant lands, use of the Zapotec language as the lingua franca of political struggle, and the nurturing of Isthmus Zapotec cultural and intellectual life. Along with this flowering of Isthmus Zapotec art and culture, Zapotec and non-Zapotec social scientists have sought to understand the historical and socioeconomic factors that lend credence to the pervasive myths of Isthmus Zapotec exceptionality. See Campbell et al. 1993; Campbell 1994; and Miano Borruso 2002 for in-depth discussions of the relationship between the COCEI movement and Isthmus Zapotec cultural production in the 1970s and 1980s.

<sup>2</sup> For a timely analysis of women’s participation and representation in national political arenas throughout the twentieth century in Mexico, see Rodríguez 2003. For a theoretically and historically rich analysis of the intersections of gender identity and national identity in Mexico, see Serret 1999.

ican visual and literary production? The vivacious image of an empowering, woman-centered culture among Isthmus Zapotecs that seduces the viewer of *Blossoms of Fire* contrasts deeply with the central metaphors with which cultural nationalists have constructed the foundational myths of modern Mexican identity. I am referring specifically to the myth of a passive, pliant indigenous femininity embodied in the historical figure of la Malinche. Malinche, more affectionately known as Malintzin, Malinalli, or doña Marina, was Hernán Cortés's translator, intercultural interpreter, and mother to his child, and has been symbolically assigned the role of scorned and abject mother of the Mexican people.<sup>3</sup> Like the biblical Eve, Malinche is the scapegoat, the ambivalent accomplice who "opened" Mexico to conquest and subjugation. The image of Malinche as an object of pity and rage, *la chingada madre*, the raped Indian mother with downcast eyes and restrained body, and Cortés as the domineering and scornful European father, *el chingón*, are central motifs in the writings of Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes as well as the murals of Rivera and of José Clemente Orozco. Here I will focus specifically on Orozco's 1926 mural titled *Hernán Cortés and la Malinche* and Paz's 1950 essay, "The Sons of La Malinche" (1985c). With these and other examples, I aim to highlight the ways in which artists and writers associated with national popular state formation following the revolution of 1910 have considered their national identity to stem from a gendered *mestizaje* (miscegenation)—that is to say, from the genetic and cultural mixture and absorption of (female) indigenous traits into (male) Euro-Iberian ones. Mestizo nationalist constructions cast Malinche and Cortés as racialized and gendered icons of the two halves that together embody the volatile foundation of modern Mexican nationhood, one half female, Indian, and dominated, the other half male, European, and power hungry.

Thus, the notion of a matriarchal utopia, of powerful indigenous women who, as Poniatowska describes them, "walk like towers" (1994,

<sup>3</sup> According to Frances Karttunen, the multiple valences implied by the many names for doña Marina/Malintzin/Malinche stem from the different resonances she has among those who name her: "Her name, like her person, was handed back and forth and invested with multiple significances. When she was given to Hernando Cortés and his party in 1519, she received the baptismal name of Marina. Nahuatl speakers, who recognized no distinction between *r* and *l*, therefore addressed her reverentially as Malin-tzin. The Spaniards in turn heard Malintzin as Malinche, a name that in the course of Mexican history has become synonymous with selling out to foreigners. Yet to the old conqueror Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who made her the heroine of his account of the conquest of Mexico, she was always 'doña Marina,' the respectful Spanish *doña* being the very equivalent of the Nahuatl honorific—*tzin*" (1997, 291–92).

82) and are “very proud to be women” (1994, 77), presents us with an appealing counternarrative to the disempowering mother-whore myth of Malinche. The question I seek to answer is not whether the characterization of Isthmus Zapotec culture as matriarchal is true or false. Rather, I ask whether this myth, by projecting an image of indigenous women’s empowerment onto one specific region, may serve to legitimize nationalist discourses that imagine women, especially indigenous women, as passive and powerless yet paradoxically self-serving and treacherous. The question then becomes this: Is our ability to take note of women’s, gay people’s, and indigenous people’s social agency in regions of Mexico other than the isthmus foreclosed by nationalist myths that equate femininity and indigeneity with the resigned acceptance of imperialist domination over home and body? I would like to suggest that the myth of Isthmus Zapotec society as a matriarchal utopia may indeed be appropriated as a strategy of containment, as the proverbial “exception that proves the rule” when seen through a romantic lens. However, I also wonder about the possibility of accessing this mythology beyond the region. Could we see past the binaries of masculine and feminine, modernity and tradition, public and domestic realms of life, as well as productive and reproductive labor, in our understanding of how gender and sexual identities are lived in Mexico and elsewhere?

#### **Fact from fantasy: Engendering the city of women**

As we hear in the opening segment of *Blossoms of Fire*, National Public Radio (NPR) reporter Katie Davis proclaims that “the women of Juchitán work, drink beer, dance, and make love all in a day. Then they get up at dawn and do it again. And do it again and again. That’s the way things have always been in Juchitán, Oaxaca.” Gosling’s task of sifting out fact from fantasy is further complicated during the week she begins filming when a scandal breaks out involving the foreign media: As the Juchitecs interviewed in *Blossoms* tell it, the fashion magazine *Elle* has recently published an article depicting the women of Juchitán as hypersexualized, carousing bullies who pay young lovers and prostitute themselves while their meek husbands have to beg for beer money.

Yet the *Elle* article and the NPR segment are only the most exaggerated among a slew of instances in which travelers, journalists, artists, and writers have found in the isthmus an ideal location for their own longings for a space outside the confines of patriarchal domination and capitalist alienation. In the 1930s, Eisenstein depicted Juchitán as a protosocialist, erotic utopia in his classic film *¡Que viva México!* While the camera lingers on

sensual bathers frolicking in a river, Eisenstein muses, “You are pursued by the idea that Eden was not located between the Tigris and the Euphrates, but here, between the Gulf of Mexico and Tehuantepec” ([1932] 1979). Eisenstein’s magical realist aesthetic playfully draws on Rivera’s early paintings of bathing isthmus maidens with pendulous breasts and on Kahlo’s defiant self-portraits in traditional Tehuana matrimonial dress. Iturbide’s exoticized photographs of Zapotec women compose yet another surreal archive of a woman-centered spirituality and poetics of daily life. Her photographs reveal a self-conscious reworking of these and other images of Juchitán as a land of abundance and leisure. These images of a land and people outside history draw mimetic relationships between animals and humans, between the rhythms of the natural world and those of people. They suggest that the bounty of the sea, the fertility of the soil, and the electricity in the relentless warm breezes all contribute to the unique sensuality of isthmus culture. In Eisenstein’s film the flirtatious rituals of parrots and monkeys are juxtaposed with scenes of young lovers anticipating their honeymoon. In Iturbide’s photos, Juchitec goddesses strike provocative poses with iguanas and fish, organic extensions of their own bodies.

Poniatowska’s titillating travel essay, “Juchitán de las mujeres,” which includes a photo-essay by Iturbide in the collection *Luz y luna, las lunitas* (Poniatowska 1994), further mythologizes the region as a languid and lusty garden of earthly delights, where public space, economic exchange, and erotic humor are exclusively feminine domains. “Man is a kitten between their legs, a puppy they have to admonish, ‘Stay there’” (Poniatowska 1993, 133).<sup>4</sup> Poniatowska breathlessly speculates on the “unending sexual activity” of Juchitecs, which she suggests is inspired by the howling of cats, dogs, mares, and every type of wild animal in heat: “The he-turtles come to spend themselves on the she-turtles; they make love until death finds them. . . . Juchitán is in heat all year long. . . . The wind spreads ocean musk upon the land of Juchitán, musk that inflames desire. And hope” (1994, 95).

For Poniatowska, Juchitán is “not like any other town,” not only because it presented the first and only successful challenge to single party rule by the PRI throughout its nearly seventy-year governance but also because women own the streets and their own bodies:

You should see them arrive like walking towers, their windows open,  
their heart like a window, their nocturnal girth visited by the moon.

<sup>4</sup> Translations in Campbell et al. 1993 by Cynthia Steele. All other translations are mine unless noted.

You should see them arrive; they already are the government, they, the people, guardians of men, distributors of food, their children riding astride their hips or lying in the hammocks of their breasts, the wind in their skirts, flowered vessels, the honeycomb of their sex overflowing with men. Here they come shaking their wombs, pulling the *machos* toward them, the *machos* who, in contrast with them, wear light colored pants, shirts, leather sandals, and palm hats, which they lift high in the air as they shout, “Long live Juchitec women!” (Poniatowska 1993, 133–34)

Many artistic, literary, and mass media approaches to Isthmus Zapotec culture envision the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as a matriarchal society, yet in doing so they conceptualize matriarchy as a simple inversion of patriarchal domination, painting a picture of Isthmus Zapotec women as brawny Amazons who lord it over meek and subservient men. *Blossoms of Fire* departs from previous treatments by pointing to the abyss between sex and gender, refusing to go along with those who would see the world in terms of some kind of “—archy” (patriarchy, matriarchy, or otherwise). Instead, it reaches beyond these binary oppositions that conflate male and female with dominant and subjugated, active and passive, modern and traditional, public and domestic, productive and reproductive labor to focus on traditional Zapotec gender roles as they are locally understood.

The question “Why do women seem so powerful here?” is posed at the outset of the documentary. *Blossoms of Fire* leads us to conclude that the answer is not to be found in some spiritual essence or environmental determinism. Instead, it lies in the material base of Isthmus Zapotec culture as it has developed and changed over time. Gosling observes that traditional gender-specific roles dictate that women be entrepreneurs, managing community and household affairs, while the men carry out the behind-the-scenes labor in the fields and at sea as fishermen. Through conversations with men and women, the viewer gets the sense that public and private realms are certainly “gendered,” such that men and women perform distinct sets of tasks. Juchitec sociologist Marina Menenses (1997) contrasts Isthmus Zapotec notions of gender complementarity with Euro-American feminisms’ emphasis on gender equality. The difference, she explains, is that the distinct tasks men and women perform are considered equally valuable within society, providing both with income, prestige, and independence. Yet from the vantage point of the central market, what Gosling calls the “pulsing heart of the local economy” (*Blossoms of Fire* 2000), which dominates the main square and

spills out onto side streets, these realms do not appear to be gendered in quite the same way as in Euro-American or “Western” social practices. Women are associated with public space, with community planning, and with cultural survival in the face of national and international threats to local autonomy. Within this apparently rigid separation of gender domains, however, it is understood that male and female children will grow up to define their own gender roles in keeping with their own unique desires and aptitudes.

Hence, the second major question this film poses, regarding the social position of gays and lesbians, proves to be intimately related to the question of feminine empowerment, namely, How does one account for the relative openness about lesbian, gay, and transgendered social identities in the isthmus? Many of the men and women interviewed in *Blossoms of Fire*, and others with whom I spoke, draw connections between the central roles that women play in public spheres and the Isthmus Zapotec tradition of openness about nonheterosexual social identities. In the film, Vicky affirms that “lesbianism is something one is born with.” She says that unlike in Mexico City or the United States, there is no such thing as “coming out” in the isthmus. “When did I realize I was gay? . . . as soon as I realized I exist in the world,” remarks Manuel. Vicky suggests that since identifying oneself as gay or lesbian does not imply an alteration in one’s potential status in the social structure, nonheterosexual social identities do not carry the same stigma or connotations of shame as in other cultures. Being gay or lesbian is not considered a threat to community or family cohesiveness; it is a matter of reconsidering how household and community duties will be taken care of effectively.

In *Blossoms of Fire*, the community’s struggles for political autonomy are linked to traditional gender roles and sexual norms, even if these roles and norms might not appear “traditional” to outside observers. There are some concrete ways in which gender is a more fluid category in the isthmus; the Juchitecs who reflect on their lives in this film emphasize that gender identification stems from *oficio*, that is to say, from the work roles with which one is associated rather than from real or perceived sexual difference. One scene from the film illustrates this point well: Felina, a sought-after beautician, seamstress, and paragon of fashion, sits with her mother and father near the family’s cornfield, striking coy poses as her father despondently reflects on his son’s position within the family. With resignation he concludes that “if he were not *muñe*, he would be here, helping me with my work, but what can I do, this is the way he was born.” Felina’s mother, on the other hand, smiles indulgently, with the knowing satisfaction that her son provides income for the family and





**Figure 2** Manuel embroidering. Still from *Blossoms of Fire* (2000). Courtesy of Maureen Gosling. Reprinted with permission.

companionship for her in her domestic activities. In my own travels in Juchitán, I met a couple who had been married for forty-seven years, Catalina and Eusebio (not their real names). I talked with Catalina as she lay in her hammock, weak and in pain from cancer. She told me that, like many older women in Juchitán today, she takes great pride in having worked hard, managed her income well, and financed her five children's university educations. Eusebio ceased his sweeping to join our conversation, explaining with a tender smile that since his wife had become ill, he had become *muje'*. By this it was clear that for him being *muje'* had more to do with the kind of work he was engaged in than with sexual difference. To be *muje'*, a femme, is to be keeper of the house, he implied. These examples illustrate that individuals arrive at gendered identities by performing certain tasks and only secondarily by outward appearance or sexual identification (fig. 2).

The Juchitecs featured in this film also link their current struggle for political and cultural self-determination in the face of neoliberal development plans for the region to their long history of fending off invasion from Aztecs, Spaniards, French, the Mexican government, and now transnational development interests. As Gosling describes the current situation, "the Isthmus region's strategic location between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific, along with its significant oil reserves, makes this area very attractive to investors. Now, massive development projects threaten to

alter the way of life here” (*Blossoms of Fire* 2000). At the same time, the wry editing, which creates some poetic juxtapositions and subtly divergent points of view, allows the viewer to construct an image of isthmus culture that is far from static, hermetic, or idealized. Instead, the viewer is able to appreciate the ways in which social identities are dynamically constructed and concepts of tradition and social mores are not necessarily conservative or heterosexist. The film thus concludes that the search for an island of cultural authenticity in a sea of global homogenization is a search that is bound to lead to yet more fantasy and projection.

Ironically, the myth of a powerful and erotic feminine essence in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the myth of Malinche as raped and humiliated mother of the Mexican people both have their roots in postrevolutionary nationalist cultural production. By juxtaposing these two myths, we can begin to see the fissure between how social identities and agency are constructed in nationalist discourses and how they might actually be lived and imagined within indigenous communities in Mexico.

#### **Malinche, the conquerable sign**

According to Estela Serret, the emergence of a cohesive state-directed discourse of national identity in Mexico stems from two interrelated historical factors, “the triumph of the political project which grew out of the Mexican Revolution and the political, economic and ideological cohesion of the Mexican nation-state” (1999, 256). Although a thorough treatment of official or mestizo nationalism in Mexico is beyond the scope of this essay, it is important to note how, within the circuits of visual and literary production patronized by postrevolutionary state institutions, the figure of the mestizo is cultivated as the symbol of national unity and is therefore the privileged referent in the construction of political and cultural subjecthood.<sup>5</sup> It is through this privileging of cultural homogeneity—of assimilation of the peripheral to the dominant, the feminine to the masculine, the indigenous to the Hispanic, the traditional to the modern, by hook or by crook, as the necessary path to modernization and social equality—that the historical figures of Malinche and Cortés are recast as mythical mother and father. As Cortés’s translator and concubine, Malinche has been invoked by practitioners of mestizo nationalist ideology as the archetypal abject mother of mestizo national identity and used to legitimize the subaltern status of indigenous women in Mexican society.

Natividad Gutiérrez (1999) provides a succinct description of the in-

<sup>5</sup> See Alonso 2004.

trinsic ambivalence with which official nationalist thinkers and policy makers endeavor to construct a culturally and linguistically uniform nation. While they trace the origin of the nation to a mythic past, they also foster centralized cultural and social institutions aimed to integrate ethnically and linguistically diverse peoples into the mainstream of the state. According to Gutiérrez, one of the major ethnic myths of national integration is that of common descent, which constructs the figure of Malinche as the mother of the Mexican people, thereby creating the illusion of a homogeneous collective indigenous identity, clearly gendered female, that fuses romantically with an equally homogeneous collective Spanish identity construed as masculine. This fictitious genealogy, she argues, is reinforced through standardized primary school textbooks that teach children in public schools to think of Malinche as the mother who gave birth to the nation. As such, this foundational myth has far-reaching effects on contemporary political rhetoric: “In Mexico the symbolic creation attributed to Malinche—the mestizo race—still plays a key ideological role in modern politics; politicians believe that mestizaje is the ‘antithesis of racist discourses and it has the capacity to incorporate differences and to reject racial puritanisms’” (Gutiérrez 1999, 149).

At the present moment, however, we must recognize that mestizo nationalism as an ideology capable of shaping national political imperatives is at an impasse. Two interrelated factors have rendered this ideology anachronistic in times of globalization: first, the emergence in recent decades of indigenous movements for autonomy that have put pressure on the state to both recognize Mexico as a pluricultural nation and grant collective rights to indigenous communities and, second, the federal government’s dismantling of its populist economic and social development model in favor of an export-oriented, social austerity model as a means of reducing the mountains of foreign debt the nation has incurred over the past four decades. The bottom line here is that even as women’s economic roles and burdens have shifted in these times, such that work outside the home is no longer an option but an imperative, mainstream perceptions of a woman’s place have remained anchored in the narratives of mestizo nationalism. Since indigenous women especially face a double negation of their economic identity, it is important to look again at the myth of Isthmus Zapotec exceptionality, this time using the myth to question the ways in which our understandings of gender and ethnic identity have been imagined within nationalist cultural configurations that equate *mexicanidad* with *mestizaje*. When Comandante Esther (2001) of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, or EZLN) addressed a nearly empty National Congress on

March 28, 2001, after facing extreme hostility from the right-wing National Action Party (Partido de Acción Nacional, or PAN), she stated that she was not coming to the national political process as a Zapatista but as an indigenous woman, an identity that for her is synonymous with the poorest of the poor. Her portrait of indigenous women's place in national society is painfully stark: "The mestizos and the wealthy mock us indigenous women because of our way of dressing, of speaking, our language, our way of praying and of curing, and for our color, which is the color of the earth we work. . . . The bad government taught us this entire situation. We indigenous women do not have good food. We do not have dignified housing. We do not have health services or education. . . . We, in addition to being women, are indigenous, and as such, we are not recognized."

In marked contrast to Comandante Esther's address, in *The Other Mexico* Paz sketches a portrait of indigeneity as not only poor and marginalized from modern national life but also as truly other in a spiritual and physical sense:

The otherness eludes the notions of poverty and wealth, development or backwardness: it is a complex of unconscious attitudes and structures which, far from being survivals from an extinct world, are vital, constituent parts of our contemporary culture. The other Mexico, the submerged and repressed, reappears in the modern Mexico: when we talk with ourselves, we talk with it; when we talk with it, we talk with ourselves. . . . By it, I mean that gaseous reality formed by the beliefs, fragments of beliefs, images and concepts which history deposits in the subsoil of the social psyche, that cave or cellar in continuous somnolence and likewise in perpetual fermentation. (1985b, 287)

For Paz, indigenous marginalization is not considered to stem from institutionalized structures of inequality, "poverty and wealth," but rather from intractable cultural differences. Paz describes "Indianness" as a central though disembodied part of the Mexican social psyche, an absent presence or ambivalent agency that conjures up the figure of Malinche. Paz constructs indigeneity as an aesthetic and spiritual underground stream, the feminized other through which the modern (non-indigenous or de-Indianized) masculine self is articulated as the subject of national identity.

This vision of Mexican identity as a gendered binary play of powerful indigenous and Hispanic elements is not unique to Paz. It also echoes the sentiments of José Vasconcelos, the architect of Mexico's postrevolutionary public education system and author of the influential essay *The*

*Cosmic Race*, who trumpeted that “we are Indian, blood and soil: the language and civilization are Spanish” ([1925] 1997, 37). For Vasconcelos and for Paz, “Indianness” is equated with the earth, the lower body, the semiotic, embryonic, unformed, primordial, feminine, and irrational; Hispanic Mexico is equated with the universal, the upper body, the semantic, the adult, the civilized, evolved, masculine, and rational. Just as patriarchal discourse deems *woman* a collective singular noun, an empty vessel or an empty signifier and therefore a site for multiple and conflicting articulations, here the indigenous other is assigned a similarly passive role, as cultural raw material whose being and meaning surface only when articulated through “hispanicity.” In the words of Bartolomé Alonso Camaal, a Yucatec Maya teacher and civil servant, “When Indian knowledge is appropriated, it is called mestizaje” (quoted in Gutiérrez 1999, 153).

In Paz’s assessment, indigeneity is not a sign of backwardness but a “gaseous” collective unconscious, a repressed alter ego that forms the substrate of Mexican identity (1985b, 287).<sup>6</sup> Although indigenous peoples, and especially indigenous women, are often socioeconomically (as well as geographically and linguistically) marginalized from the modern white- and mestizo-controlled state, mestizo nationalist discourse constructs Indianness as an abstract entity or essence that forms the dark feminine core of identity in all Mexicans, regardless of whether they have indigenous ancestry or meaningful contact with living indigenous peoples. Thus, in “The Sons of La Malinche,” Paz constructs a metonymic relationship between Malinche and all Mexican women: “In effect, every woman—even when she gives herself willingly—is torn open by the man, is the *Chingada*. In a certain sense all of us, by the simple fact of being born of woman, are *hijos de la Chingada*, sons of Eve. But the singularity of the Mexican resides, I believe, in his violent, sarcastic humiliation of the Mother and his no less violent affirmation of the Father” (1985c, 80).

For Paz, Malinche as mythical mother figure has an alter-ego relationship with the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico’s revered brown-skinned virgin. Within mestizo nationalism, feminine identity is codified in and caught between these two figures, one mother who orphans her child

<sup>6</sup> Hence for Paz the obsession with death, which is ritualized in the Day of the Dead, is actually an obsession with origin, with temporarily recapturing that part of “ourselves” that has been banished to “that cave or cellar in continuous somnolence and likewise in perpetual fermentation” (1985b, 287). Paz argues that bringing that repressed element to consciousness for one magical day aids in the task of keeping it repressed the rest of the year. See Paz 1985a.

because he reminds her of the rape she has suffered and the other who adopts and consoles the child orphaned by his rejecting mother.

In contrast to Guadalupe, who is the Virgin Mother, the *Chingada* is the violated Mother. . . . Guadalupe is pure receptivity and the benefits she bestows are of the same order: she consoles, quiets, dries tears, calms passions. The *Chingada* is even more passive. Her passivity is abject: she does not resist violence, but is an inert heap of bones, blood and dust. Her taint is constitutional and resides, as we said earlier, in her sex. This passivity, open to the outside world, causes her to lose her identity: she is the *Chingada*. She loses her name; she is no one; she disappears into nothingness; she *is* Nothingness. And yet she is the cruel incarnation of the feminine condition.

If the *Chingada* is a representation of the violated Mother, it is appropriate to associate her with the Conquest, which was also a violation, not only in the historical sense but also in the very flesh of Indian women. The symbol of this violation is doña Malinche, the mistress of Cortés. It is true that she gave herself voluntarily to the conquistador, but he forgot her as soon as her usefulness was over. Doña Marina becomes a figure representing the Indian women who were fascinated, violated or seduced by the Spaniards. And as a small boy will not forgive his mother if she abandons him to search for his father, the Mexican people have not forgiven La Malinche for her betrayal. She embodies the open, the *chingado*, to our closed, stoic, impassive Indians. (1985c, 85–86)

For Paz, neither Malinche nor Guadalupe is a subject of Mexican national identity; instead, together they exemplify the essential dichotomy between good and bad woman that creates the conditions for the Mexican psychic state of solitude. The Mexican condition, he affirms, is centered on this drive to transfer affection from the rejecting biological mother to the adopting, accepting mother, she who is “pure receptivity.”

These discursive constructions conflate ethnicity and gender, gendering ethnicity and ethnicizing gender, but it is important to note how they also function to displace class determinations from the field of possible symbols from which national identity is constructed. Manuel Gamio, considered the father of modern Mexican anthropology, set a precedent for the rhetorical conflation of ethnic and class categories when he stated in his influential *Forjando patria* that the mestizo is “the eternal rebel, the traditional enemy of the class of pure blood or foreign blood, the author and director of uprisings and rebellions and the class which has best un-

derstood the just lament of the Indian class" ([1916] 1960, 95). For Gamio, mestizo identity is equivalent to class identity, and to be mestizo is to be the revolutionary protagonist of twentieth-century Mexico. Of course, Indian identity is also equated with social class, but the active (gendered male) role belongs solely to the mestizo, the offspring and foundation of the nation, who is cast as the ideal mediator between a besieged Indian class and a predatory "class of pure blood or foreign blood." In *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development*, María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo (2003) argues convincingly that Gamio's revolutionary nationalism constitutes a strategy for minority rule, as he casts the Indian as the wellspring of latent revolutionary energies and national culture and the mestizo as the national hero capable of channeling and interpreting this raw potential in order to create a mature national culture and national economy. Saldaña-Portillo argues: "By conflating blood with ideas, industries, virtues and vices—the very stuff of culture—Gamio biologizes a cultural metaphor for citizenship in the nation. Only the mestizo is capable of producing a national culture by virtue of his mixed blood, blood that draws him sympathetically toward, though always at a critical remove from, all things Indian and drives him away from all things 'foreign'" (210).

As Saldaña-Portillo has noted, Gamio constructs Indian difference as a dormant potentiality to be absorbed and refined by the revolutionary mestizo subject. For Gamio, indigeneity is "anachronistic and inappropriate" until it is effectively interpreted by the "class of mixed-blood" and protected from the "class of pure blood or foreign blood" ([1916] 1960, 95). In Gamio's *Forjando patria*, as well as Vasconcelos's *The Cosmic Race*, the protagonist, the central historical subject of the newly unshackled nation, is unmistakably mestizo. While the antagonist is the fair-skinned and bloated capitalist, the afflicted yet dignified transitional figure, the element to be incorporated, is the modern-day Indian. As a "cultural metaphor for citizenship" then, *mestizaje* resolves the question of ancestry, of the biological origins of the pueblo, by activating the myth of Malinche and Cortés as national mother and father; citizenship is thus gendered at the same time as it is racially codified. The hegemonic relation established through the mestizo-as-citizen formulation locates the drama of national origins at the key site of Spanish conquest as well as the center of revolutionary nationalist reconstruction, in the metropolis of ancient México-Tenochtitlan and modern-day Mexico City.

In the 1920s and 1930s, commissioned by Vasconcelos and other powerful administrators of the postrevolutionary state to cultivate uniquely Mexican art forms, Orozco, David Álfaro Siqueiros, Rivera, and others

produced monumental works that inscribed a national-populist vision of the past, present, and future of ethnic identity and ethnic-social relations directly onto the urban architecture, and specifically onto the most important government buildings. Yet in that postrevolutionary visual production, representations of indigeneity and of the myth of national origins depart from Gamio's and Vasconcelos's formulations in important ways. In the works of Orozco, Siqueiros, and Rivera, the image of the abject and subordinated Indian coexists with the image of the Indian as dignified and self-actualized, often within the same work. Though commissioned by the postrevolutionary state in order to create a mestizo art for an emerging mestizo nation, these murals illustrate conflicting notions regarding the place and power of indigenous peoples and indigenous being within a seemingly cohesive revolutionary nationalist imaginary.

These artistic renderings provide material from which we may draw conclusions regarding my second question, which asks what is at stake when Isthmus Zapotec culture is considered anomalous in the context of Mexican national culture. In several murals and paintings by Rivera, Orozco, and others indigenous people are portrayed with sealed lips and an enigmatic, impenetrable gaze downward and out into oblivion, a furtive or blind gaze that eschews contact with the viewer. Rendered in earth tones that blend into shadowy backgrounds, indigenous bodies appear formless and flaccid, conveying stillness, silence, annihilation. Consider these representations in contrast with the bold images of Isthmus Zapotecs, which invariably center upon the piercing gaze of self-assured Indian women.

While for Rivera Indianness is depicted as an ebullient repository of utopian longings, springing from a dark, rich soil, for Orozco Indianness is depicted in abject tension, painfully outlined against a parched earth. In contrast with Rivera's deep reds, rich ochres, and mellow brown tones, Orozco's frescoes depict immobile indigenous figures in dismal, monochromatic tones and stark plays of darkness and light, taut and flaccid muscles. The indigenous figures appear rooted to the earth in agonized resignation. Indigenous bodies are frozen and crouching in their nakedness, their movement restricted by the bodies of white men.

Of particular interest here is Orozco's fresco, *Hernán Cortés and la Malinche* (fig. 3), which is painted on a stairwell at the Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso in Mexico City. In this fresco Cortés gently squeezes Malinche's left hand in his while he holds his sinewy right arm across her torso, as if to prevent her from using her right hand to touch the dead, emaciated body lying face down at their feet. Desmond Rochfort describes the triangular relationship between Cortés, Malinche, and the figure below in the following terms: "In Orozco's portrayal, the couple are joined hand





**Figure 3** José Clemente Orozco, *Hernán Cortés and la Malinche* (1926). Escuela Nacional Preparatoria San Ildefonso, Mexico City, D.F., Mexico. Photo: Schalkwijk/Art Resource, New York. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

in hand in an act of union. This union, however, is seemingly contingent upon Cortez's subjugation of the Indian, represented in the fresco by a prone and naked figure under the Spaniard's right foot. Cortez's left arm both prevents an act of supplication on Malinche's part and acts as a final separation from her former life. The image of Cortés and Malinche symbolizes synthesis, subjugation and the ambivalence of her position in the

story of the nation's history of colonial intervention" (1993, 44–46). While both seated figures are naked and occupy the same plane, connoting a parity between them, the light cast on Cortés's body makes him appear invulnerable, as if he were covered in gleaming armor. With his right knee pressing against her legs, he prevents her from planting her feet firmly on the ground; only her toes anxiously grip the earth. In this position, she cannot move. Although her body is robust and muscular, only the muscles in her neck, face, and toes are active. While she looks down and askance, Cortés keeps a watchful and menacing eye on her. His muscles are taut, his left foot firmly resting on the thin naked figure below. The focal point of the composition is Malinche's breast; while her eyes, darting apprehensively under lowered lids, appear to struggle to avoid Cortés's menacing gaze, her one exposed nipple (the other is covered by Cortés's arm) stares out at the viewer like a large astonished eye.

In *Franciscan Monk* (fig. 4), also by Orozco, a skeletal indigenous figure kneels before an enormous friar, who stoops to press his face into him, kissing him in a stultifying embrace. It is almost as if the friar were strangling the Indian, whose thin arms are thrown back helplessly. Like Malinche, he cannot move; his body is both exposed and enclosed by the friar's suffocating grasp. Is he being held up or pushed down to the ground by the friar? The closed eyes and deeply furrowed brows of both figures meet tenderly, symbolizing, in the words of Rochfort, their common humanity; yet the Indian's blurred face, his androgynous naked body—with its exposed ribs, ankle, and hip bones—contrast with the friar's expressive facial features and the billowy folds of his cloak, which hangs loosely on his enormous, energetic frame. Depicted as germinal moments in an endless cycle of dehumanization and redemption, subjugation and salvation, these frescoes evoke Orozco's ambivalent vision of biological *mestizaje* and religious conversion as both inexorable trauma and utopian dream.

This leitmotif of *mestizaje* as *pharmakos*—as the original problem and the ultimate cure for all that ails modern Mexican society—signals a profound anxiety about the foundational narrative that casts Malinche and Cortés as mother and father of the nation. When we examine this postrevolutionary refashioning of the historical figure of Malinche alongside the myth of matriarchal utopia among Isthmus Zapotecs, we can begin to understand how the latter might function as a safe repository for those heterogeneous, unconquerable elements that threaten the state's limited imaginings of the national body.



**Figure 4** José Clemente Orozco. *Franciscan Monk* (mural). Escuela Nacional Preparatoria San Ildefonso, Mexico City, D.F., Mexico. Photo: Schalkwijk/Art Resource, New York. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

### **Conclusions**

In Mexican visual and literary production, Zapotec culture in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec has been celebrated as at once a locus of women's social power, a place where homosexuality and transgendering are embraced as an integral aspect of society, and finally, a perennial vanguard of grassroots political organizing. This image of indigenous, gay, and women-centered empowerment among Isthmus Zapotecs contrasts deeply with the offi-

cially sanctioned narratives of Mexican national identity. Within these narratives, the figure of Malinche has taken on a notoriety that stretches far beyond her historical role in the sixteenth-century conquest of central Mexico. As Cortés's multilingual interpreter, consul, and mother to his child, Malinche has been invoked in twentieth-century visual and literary production as the archetypal abject mother of a modern mestizo nation. In locating the origins of modern Mexico in the sexual union of the historical figures of Malinche and Cortés, mestizo nationalist imaginings negate the pluriethnic composition of pre- and postconquest Mesoamerican society. At the same time, they inspire a series of binary oppositions in which the feminine is associated with indigeneity and subjugation while the masculine is associated with "hispanicity" and conquest. As an object of scorn, her name, which isn't really even her name, has been invoked to negate the agency of indigenous women in Mexican society. The historical figure of Malinche is conjured up today when one is accused of being a *malinchista*, of selling one's people out to foreign interests, as it implies accepting subaltern status in exchange for a modicum of personal benefit in the context of colonial or neocolonial domination. Yet as Frances Karttunen writes, "This is no love story, no tale of blind ambition and racial betrayal. It is the record of a gifted woman in impossible circumstances carving out survival one day at a time" (1997, 312). Today in Chicana and Mexican feminist thought Malinche has become a symbol of the postcolonial condition, or, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would have it, of finding oneself in the ambivalent position of having to "critique a space one inhabits intimately" (1990, 228). It is not only Malinche's real name and origins that are irretrievable but, more important, her agency. Was she raped? Did she willingly participate in the conquest of Mexico? Jean Franco delves into the complexities of how Malinche's elusive agency constitutes the hegemonic relation established through her image:

As Spivak says: "Neo-colonialism is fabricating its allies by proposing a share of the center in a seemingly new way." That is to say, neo-colonialism constructs its allies by proposing a new way to participate in the center. In the 16th century, participation in the center was sealed by various "contracts" that gave Malinche a letter of inclusion. . . . But as Margo Glanz has aptly noted, Malinche acts in the process of conquest each time she tries to negotiate instead of fight. It is not that Marina "chooses" this option, as Todorov affirms, but that she covered a catachresis brought about by a previous act of violence (Cortés had defeated the Tabascan chief who then gave Malinche to him as a "present"). It follows

that Malinche–doña Marina marks the hegemony that replaces brute force, a hegemony based on a contract that functions as a result of previous violence. Hegemony has to operate *as if* subjects were to freely choose their subaltern position. Malinche does not represent Indians in the sense of *vertreten*, but of *Darstellung*, that is, in the sense of representation as that which instantiates hegemony. (Franco 2001, 206; translation mine)<sup>7</sup>

I have attempted to contrast two of the best known representations that feed on and feed into the nationalist myth of feminine indigeneity symbolized by the historical figure of Malinche with several examples of visual and literary representations that have shaped the myth of Isthmus Zapotec exceptionalism. We can trace the emergence of both myths to the visual and intellectual culture promoted by the postrevolutionary state throughout the twentieth century. On the one hand, we have a nationalist discourse that constructs gender, ethnic, and national identities along a rigid binary opposition between dominator and dominated, masculine “hispanicity” and feminine indigeneity and, on the other hand, a revolutionary discourse that looks to a horizon of the possible onto which it can project its utopian longing for a location where past, present, and future are free of social injustice and upheaval. Positing an alter-ego relationship between these two myths allows us to glimpse an internal ideological struggle within the initial moment of revolutionary nationalism, namely, whether to acknowledge that Mexico is a pluricultural society struggling collectively to overcome Spanish and then Creole minority rule, the path alluded to by Ricardo Flores Magón (1977), or to assimilate its heterogeneous elements into a Spanish-speaking mestizo ideal, as Gamio ([1916] 1960) would have it. Between the myth of Malinche and the myth of matriarchal utopia there are some fundamental differences. First, Malinche as a historical figure is central to the mythology of modern Mexican national identity. The Tehuana maiden of Rivera’s and others’ reveries, however, is envisioned as an ideal type, a utopian figure echoing the promise of what Mexico would be like if it had not been conquered and what it might be like if and when the promise of the revolution is fulfilled. The myth of Isthmus Zapotec matriarchy, as it has been elaborated within state-sponsored circuits of visual and literary production, represents the wild or premodern element that has yet to be domesticated,

<sup>7</sup> In her assessment of the contemporary appropriation of Malinche, Franco distinguishes between two ways of understanding the term *representation*: “*vertreten* or representation in the political sense, and *Darstellung* or symbolic representation” (2001, 201).

Paz's "underground stream" or Gamio's "blood and soil." The strong and elegant Istmeña is a symbol for that which is exterior to Mexican national identity but which the postrevolutionary state must capture and incorporate; in contrast, Malinche symbolizes the central yet disembodied interior core of Mexican national identity.

The ideology of mestizo nationalism has left no space within which diverse groups of indigenous people might advance their own understandings of gender, sexual, ethnic, and national identities. Instead, it has cast "the Indian" as a mute collective singular entity whose "incoherent" local economic, cultural, and political forms of organization present obstacles to modernization and progress. Forged in the revolutionary struggle as a means of unifying an ethnolinguistically diverse group of peasants and workers against the landed oligarchy, mestizo nationalism was then rearticulated by postrevolutionary elites in their bid to construct a centralized state with which this diverse group might come to identify. Within this configuration, Isthmus Zapotec culture then becomes that indissoluble element, that other against which Mexican national identity may be defined.

Today, as global markets eclipse national governments as producers of "cultural metaphors of citizenship" (Saldaña-Portillo 2003, 210), mestizo nationalist cultural production is being replaced by a government discourse of multiculturalism and promotion of ethnolinguistic diversity (Taylor 2005). The cancellation of assimilationist policies and the creation of government-sponsored circuits of indigenous cultural production as a response to indigenous movements for cultural autonomy, particularly since the 1994 Zapatista revolt, attest to this shift in the federal government's approach to the question of ethnic and linguistic plurality. This apparent move away from the coercive tactics of cultural assimilation must be analyzed within the broader context of the neoliberal economic policies behind the North American Free Trade Agreement and the proposed Plan Puebla-Panamá, which threaten the livelihood of indigenous peasants and indigenous women in particular. Mestizo nationalist discourses of normative citizenship and their corollary *indigenista* policies of ethnolinguistic assimilation have lent a benevolent veneer to the nationally oriented agroindustrial development projects of the twentieth century. These projects have subverted indigenous peasants' attempts to implement land reform and have worked to forcibly incorporate indigenous communities into relations of increasing dependence on wage labor and export-oriented agriculture. As Saldaña-Portillo argues, the Zapatistas "were not somehow left out of Mexico's discourse of development" but instead "have emerged from within revolutionary policies of agrarian reform and agricultural development" (2003, 213). As Comandante Esther affirms in her address



**Figure 5** Women in a *vela* parade. Still from *Blossoms of Fire* (2000). Courtesy of Maureen Gosling. Reprinted with permission.

to the National Congress, it is imperative for indigenous women to have access to political channels that would allow them to represent themselves and to challenge the role that mestizo nationalism has reserved for them in national state formation, a role that dictates that women—and especially indigenous women—exist only insofar as they exist for others.

We can appreciate the contrast between this formulation and the portrait Gosling (*Blossoms of Fire* 2000) paints of Juchitec women's and *muxe's* relationships to the public sphere, where feminine identity is synonymous with the capacity to earn a livelihood and to determine the conditions of personal and collective dignity (fig. 5). But here I must insist that many of the purportedly matriarchal elements found in Isthmus Zapotec culture can also be found throughout Mexican society. If we look, we can see that women all over Mexico serve as administrators of family finances and informal networks of community organization. Much of what we point to as evidence of matriarchy among Isthmus Zapotecs can be found in other parts of Mexico, but we have been conditioned to turn a blind eye to it, to notice only the machismo that Paz considered synonymous with *mexicanidad*.

By presenting a politically, sexually, and economically liberating portrait of a specific ethnic group within Mexico, representations of Isthmus Zapotecs as exceptionally gynocentric run the risk of tacitly feeding into mainstream representations of Mexican society as inherently *machista*. In the service of the postrevolutionary single party state, both the myth of Isthmus Zapotec matriarchy and the myth of abject indigenous femininity embodied in the figure of Malinche have enabled the perpetuation of mestizo nationalist hegemony.

At the same time, as cultural metaphors of the Indian woman as non-citizen, they have also contained within them the terms most useful for dismantling patriarchal and racist models of citizenship. Nationalist discourses that construct gender, ethnic, and national identities along a rigid binary opposition between dominator and dominated, masculine “hispanicity” and feminine indigeneity, have become anachronistic at the present moment of globalization. The feminization of labor that has characterized the transition from an import substitution model of economic development to the export-oriented, socially austere model also transforms the face of labor such that, as Serret affirms, “we are witnessing a pulverization of identity referents that, it would seem, will inevitably give way to the existence of multiple feminine identities in a collective sense” (1999, 273). What would Mexican national identity look like if the myth of Malinche no longer dominated primary school history textbooks and political discourse? Perhaps the libidinal energies trapped within the myth of Malinche and the countermyth of Isthmus Zapotec exceptionality could then be channeled into the recognition of Mexico’s pluricultural and sexually multivalent reality. Turning around these myths, as Comandante Esther asserts, can only begin with the constitutional recognition of the rights of diverse groups to pursue cultural, economic, and political horizons that depart from those favored by the federal government and international capitalist interests.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> U.S.-based Wal-Mart, the largest retailer in Mexico, with revenues of over \$13 billion a year, has broken ground on a new megastore in Juchitán as well as one in the largely Purépecha city of Pátzcuaro, Michoacán. This news comes on the heels of the opening of a Wal-Mart under the name of Bodegas Aurrera, half a mile from the ancient Pyramids of Teotihuacan near Mexico City. *Blossoms of Fire* director Gosling and many local and international activists are seeking to bring our attention to the threat these stores present to cultural and economic autonomy. See [http://matriarchy.info/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=91](http://matriarchy.info/index.php?option=com_content&view=91).



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