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# “La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas”: Gender, the Burden of Blame, and a Re-examination of the Myth of La Malinche

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# “La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas”: Gender, the Burden of Blame, and a Re-examination of the Myth of La Malinche

## **Abstract**

This paper explores Elena Garro’s short story “La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas.” Supplementing close readings with analyses drawn from relevant authors and theorists, I highlight the key ideas regarding gender, identity, memory, and history that Garro weaves into her text, and I consider Garro’s emphasis on patriarchal control, the internalization of female culpability for the Spanish Conquest of Mexico, and women’s role in constructing and reconstructing historical discourses. By travelling into her own and Mexico’s past, Laura Aldama, one of the main female protagonists in the story, not only challenges gendered histories but also reveals how patriarchal thought continues to influence contemporary realities. In addition, by paralleling Laura’s guilt and feelings of betrayal with the La Malinche myth, Garro’s work restructures this cultural symbol. Ultimately, I argue that “La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas” redefines women’s role in history and society; valorizes female solidarity, voice, and perspective; and encourages women to challenge the limitations of masculinist discourses.

## **Keywords**

La Malinche, Garro, gender, feminist analysis, myth, memory

## **Disciplines**

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Latin American Literature | Latina/o Studies

## **Comments**

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“La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas”: Gender, the Burden of Blame, and a Re-examination of the  
Myth of La Malinche

Erin Lanza

## Introduction

Elena Garro (1916–1998), a prolific Mexican writer, was born on December 11, 1916 in Puebla, Mexico. Though many consider Garro to be one of the most important Mexican writers of the 20th century, her work has been widely underappreciated in the English-speaking world (Biron 2012:2). Despite her vibrant political activism and acclaimed publications, many know her solely through her marriage, divorce, and public intellectual conflicts with renowned author Octavio Paz (1914–1998). Over the course of her career, Garro published more than twenty-two theatre pieces, eight novels, five short story collections, numerous essays, and an autobiographical memoir. In much of her writing and activism, Garro explores the plights of women and other marginalized communities in Mexico (Stoll 1990:199). Like Paz, Garro often incorporates a sense of magical realism into her writing, fusing mystical elements with everyday scenarios; yet Garro's work maintains a critical perspective on issues of gender, race, and class to create socially-grounded stories which explore the interaction of patriarchal control, the internalization of female culpability, and the role of women's voices in history (201).

During the period of Garro's major publications, Mexican writers were debating the extent to which Mexico was a "model of modernity" and exploring how to represent Mexican identity in modern literature (Biron 2012:1). In fact, Mexico's cultural identity, and the emerging idea of *mexicanidad*, was a central discourse during the first half of the twentieth century, as many Mexican artists turned away from modeling European styles to find inspiration in Mexico's Indigenous roots (Brodman 2011).

Mexican writers approached Mexico's relationship with Indigenous populations and the question of modernity in various ways. For instance, in *El laberinto de la soledad*, Octavio Paz examines the national psyche of Mexico by discussing how the modern Mexican population is

essentially the offspring of Indigenous women raped by Spanish conquistadors (Paz 1950). Another famous figure of the time, José Vasconcelos (1882-1959), argues that Mexico's contemporary *mestizaje* is a superior form of existence, and he uses the mixed-race history of Mexico to encourage a mixing of races on the global scale<sup>1</sup>. Elena Garro, however, shifts the critical focus toward “those who would claim to be spokesmen for the collective desire to be modern” and challenges modern patriarchal perspectives (Biron 2012:1). Garro's emphasis on examining the “spokesmen” for society is critical to her work.

As a female Mexican writer, Garro is cognizant of the marginalization, systemic silencing, and domination of women throughout history; as such, “she insisted on exposing the masculinist, elitist, cultural practices of those who defend modernity's supposedly liberating, democratic ideals” (Biron 2012:9-10). However, Garro's critical perspective expands past the “modernity” issue, and her work often interrogates the masculinist control of historical discourse, demonstrating its detrimental and pervasive impact on women's lived experiences. In “La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas,” Garro uses magical realism and myths as important strategic devices to challenge hierarchies, expose historical failures, and center the voices of the silenced.

### **Magical Realism**

The term “magical realism” first emerged in the early twentieth century in response to a new movement in German artwork that centralized neo-realistic, dream-like images (Faris 2004). Soon after, Latin American literature began to reflect this movement, as writers incorporated “magic” into otherwise typical settings or situations. Latin America's use of magical realism challenges the “realism” of the West by incorporating the “fantastic” as a naturally emerging phenomenon. By blending myths, dreams, and magic into everyday scenarios, magical realism disrupts binaries which are central to Western thought and values. This “remystification of

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<sup>1</sup> José Vasconcelos elaborates on this concept in his essay *La raza cósmica* (1925).

narrative” in Latin American fiction has strong cultural roots—particularly within the context of postcolonialism (Faris 2004:3). Magical realism operates within a decolonized space that opposes Western realism and exemplifies transculturation by complicating the split between ancient and modern cultures and inserting Indigenous myths into contemporary life.

Some scholars argue that magical realism incorporates a distinctly postmodern feminine voice. Due to the essential hybridity of this style and its challenge to “rationality,” linear time, and binary conventions, some assert that magical realism corresponds with feminist calls to challenge false dichotomies and limited, singular identities. As Faris (2004) articulates, one can locate the existence of a feminine style in its “structures of diffusion, polyvocality, and attention to issues of embodiment, to an earth-centered spirit world, and to collectivity” (170). Others argue that magical realism also perpetuates patriarchal narrative tropes, such as the use of “female bodies as a bridge to the beyond” (4). Garro’s use of magical realism contributes to her mission to insert the feminine voice into history and into contemporary Mexican existence. Garro employs this literary style to centralize female characters’ voices, memories, and experiences and to empower women’s perspectives. Rather than reduce their presence to symbolic plot points, Garro highlights women's power as active agents in society.

According to Jacqueline Nanfity (2003), Latin American women writers often employ textual strategies such as cyclical time, feminine spaces, and an interrogation of identity “with the objective of deconstructing and reconstructing engendered subjectivities in an act of resistance” (137). By utilizing magical realism as a key textual strategy, Garro’s text not only calls for a reconsideration of La Malinche, but it challenges the norms and limitations of patriarchal thought and employs an understanding of time and history that predates the European influence of *conquistadores*. Garro's use of magical realism challenges occidental and patriarchal

assumptions and thereby alienates readers who refuse to adapt to alternate perspectives and understandings.

### **Historical Context**

The “Tlaxcaltecas” were a group of Indigenous people of Nahua ethnicity who allied with the Spanish during the time of the Conquest. According to extant historical documents, the Spanish-Tlaxcalteca alliance was formed in 1519 (Asselbergs 2014). Their alliance was a strategic move for both parties: the Spanish sought to defeat the Indigenous populations to establish their political rule, while the Tlaxcaltecas desired more power over other tribes and lands. Moreover, while documentation is limited, historians explain that the Spanish rewarded the Tlaxcaltecas with “tribute exemptions, divisions of conquered land, and equal distribution of the spoils between Spanish and Tlaxcalteca warriors” (Schroeder 2014:20). Even after the Conquest, the Tlaxcaltecas were said to have received “special privileges” from the Spanish as a result of their alliance in battle (Asselbergs 2014). It was largely due to the Tlaxcaltecas’ alliance that Spain was able to win the key battle of Technotitlán and defeat the Aztec empire.

### **“La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas”**

Garro published “La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas” in 1964 as part of her *La semana de colores* collection. In this short story, Garro engages themes of history, myth, identity, and the difficulties of navigating the patriarchal landscape of Mexico. This work tells the story of a young woman, Laura Aldama, who travels between two worlds and identities: that of an Indigenous woman during the Spanish Conquest and that of a contemporary Mexican woman in middle- to upper-class society. Though Laura primarily bases herself in modern Mexico, she spontaneously travels back in time to her existence as an Aztec woman during the period of Hernán Cortés’s conquest (1519–1521). Thus, throughout the story Laura embodies the

conflicting identities of a privileged, contemporary woman married to a wealthy Mexican man and, as she states, “la otra niña que fui” [*the other girl that I was*] (Garro 1964:5). The reader gains access to this story of bifurcated identities and worlds through Laura’s narration of events to her confidante and (presumably) Indigenous cook, Nacha. Travelling back in time, Laura reunites with her Indigenous *primo marido* [*cousin husband*]*—*a man for whom she still cares deeply. In this world, she witnesses her community’s devastation and the hopeless defeat of her loved ones to the Spanish *conquistadores*. In contemporary society, her jealous and angry husband Pablo aims to control and prevent her from escaping to join her *primo marido*. In both situations, Laura confronts violence: both personally from Pablo and at the hands of the Spanish and their allies.

The story begins in a distinctly feminine space: the kitchen. Arriving home alone and at night, Laura signals to her cook, Nacha, to let her in the house as quietly as possible. Laura tiptoes into the house, settling into the quiet and waiting energy of this space. Laura quickly breaks this silence with a provocative statement: “¿Sabes, Nacha? La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas” [*You know, Nacha? It’s the Tlaxcaltecas’ fault*] (Garro 1964:4). By initiating this dialogue with Nacha, Laura reveals her intent to explore both historical and personal negotiations of culpability, and her choice to include Nacha in this experience. Over the course of the story, Laura shares with Nacha her time-traveling experiences, her frustration with Pablo, and her desire to unite permanently with her *primo marido*. In addition, she repeatedly seeks affirmation of her memories, experiences, and feelings from Nacha: “¿No estás de acuerdo, Nacha?” [*Don’t you agree, Nacha?*] (4), “¿Te acuerdas?” [*Do you remember?*] (10), and “¿Tú me entiendes, verdad?” [*You understand me, right?*] (22); it is thus Nacha’s encouraging responses and memories that advance the narration, invite Laura’s confessions, and allow their solidarity to



progress. In fact, as Laura travels between worlds, it is Nacha who answers the door, opens the window, or reminds Laura of where she must go to meet with her *primo marido*. At the end of the story, Nacha hears Laura's Indigenous husband come near, and she opens the window for Laura to escape. When Laura leaves, Nacha quietly cleans the house, hides all evidence, and quits without pay the following morning. The relationship between Nacha and Laura is thus essential to the short story; Nacha serves as a bridge between two cultures—literally and figuratively allowing Laura to travel between worlds. Their final twin exits from the confines of the Aldama household at the end of the story confirm their strong connection; their relationship inspires one another to leave their environment in search of something more fulfilling.

As Laura travels between her Indigenous community in the past and her modern Mexican household, Garro utilizes historical shifts and Laura's gender and ethnic identities to explore the discourse surrounding the Indigenous Mexican woman. Garro not only reveals the historical patriarchal control of discourse regarding Indigenous women, but she highlights its influence on contemporary gender identities. Because Laura occupies both contemporary and pre-colonial Mexico throughout the story, Garro is able to examine and critique the patriarchal domination of both the modern Mexican woman and the Indigenous woman who, like Nacha, has "ojos viejísimos" [*ancient eyes*] and seeks to find her place in a world of masculine control (28). In her work, Garro urges women to claim authorship of their own lives, histories, and identities. Garro crafts her narrative to retell history, redefine gender, and complicate identity within the context of Indigenous myths and Mexican cultural figures, such as La Malinche.

### **Cultural Context**

La Malinche refers to the Indigenous woman—*Malinal* or *Malintzin*—who was Hernán Cortés' slave, translator, and mistress during the period of the Spanish Conquest (Cypess

1990:118). The Malinche figure is a prominent symbol in Latin American culture (especially Mexican) and a female archetype that is widely perceived in a negative light. Blamed for the downfall of Indigenous society during the Conquest, many historians and theorists suggest that La Malinche serves as “the Mexican Eve” (117). As such, La Malinche’s role continues to have contemporary ramifications; in fact, she inspired the contemporary Mexican term *malinchismo*: “a disparaging term that means to exalt anything that is foreign and to undervalue anything that is native to Mexico” and the word “malinche” is synonymous with “traitor” in the Honduras (118). Despite its negative connotation, her existence as a cultural symbol has been significant in history, fiction, and visual interpretation alike (Cypess 2009).

Perhaps one of the most well-known paintings of La Malinche is *El sueño de la Malinche* [The dream of La Malinche] (1939) by Antonio Ruíz, which depicts the body of a sleeping Malinche as the ground for a modern Mexican community:



Like the enigmatic figure herself, this painting suggests multiple, contradicting meanings. As Rudyard Alcocer (2011) questions, does Malinche’s position as the foundation for a Mexican town indicate a “maternal role” in the development of Mexico, or does Ruíz construct La Malinche as a passive “generatrix” of colonialism? (117). These dual interpretations are complicated by a visual fusion of time, which according to Edward Lucie-Smith, implies “that

Mexico's Indian past still slumbers beneath the trappings of the European present." Thus, *El sueño de La Malinche* embodies the complex and pervasive influence of La Malinche on Mexican society; the many discourses allow her role to permeate history, art, Mexican culture, and even national and gender identities.

Although Malinche did not write a personal account of events, historians generally agree that she was born around 1502, was sold into slavery at a young age, and could speak both the Nahuatl and Mayan languages (Cypess 1990:118). As such, when her people gave her away as a gift to the Spanish in 1519, her skills proved valuable in assisting Cortés socially, politically, and linguistically. As stated, Latin American society generally blames La Malinche for the destruction of Indigenous cultures because of her key role in aiding Cortés's successful domination. However, with the increasing availability of feminist analysis, scholars have begun to question the extent to which contemporary society should perceive La Malinche as a traitor. Feminist writers and literary scholars consider the context of La Malinche's story and ask: "¿Porqué, entonces, Marina [Malinche], la de la voz, nunca es la dueña del relato?" [*Why, then, Marina (Malinche), the one with the voice, is never the owner of the story?*] and seek to rediscover her voice in the face of patriarchal discourses (Glantz 2001:108). In "La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas," Garro ensures that La Malinche not only commands her own narrative, but she actively investigates it, shares it, and changes it according to her own desires.

### **Laura as La Malinche**

"La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" repeatedly parallels the feelings, actions, and circumstances of Laura with the La Malinche figure. For example, as I will discuss later in greater depth, Laura expresses a powerful sense of having "betrayed," and she repeatedly emphasizes or remembers a sense of culpability. Laura's guilt becomes linked with the ways that

Mexican society blames La Malinche for the Indigenous defeat in the Spanish Conquest. Furthermore, both Laura and Malinche occupy the difficult location of “traveling” between vastly different cultures: the Indigenous and Spanish for Malinche, and between modern Mexico and 16th-century “Mexico” for Laura. Moreover, both La Malinche and Laura have unclear histories.

La Malinche was unable to tell her own story and shape her own identity, and the *conquistadores* and masculinist historians have thus dominated and manipulated her narrative (Cypess 1990:129). Unanchored by personal accounts or explanations, historians can more easily reduce La Malinche to a symbolic feminine figure and blame her for Tenochtitlán’s fall. Though Laura actively controls her own narrative, Garro reveals the power of dominant discourses when Laura’s husband, Pablo, prevents her from traveling back in time to punish her for her continual escapes. During this period of isolation and surveillance, Laura turns to the *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (1576) by Bernal Díaz del Castillo. Garro’s choice to present this text as Laura’s great literary interest is significant. According to Cypess (2009), Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1492–1581) was one of Cortes’ foot soldiers during the Conquest, and his accounts provide the foundational descriptions of La Malinche. However, many also contest the veracity of this work. While historian Camilla Townsend (2003) explains that all the chroniclers exaggerated and plagiarized, many question Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s accuracy—to the extent that she writes in a footnote: “[a] few have even argued that he fantasized his own participation in the conquest, given that he situates himself at the heart of all the action and that his name fails to appear on one list of participants housed in the Archive of the Indies in Spain” (664). Nonetheless, Latin American society has largely accepted this work.

Why does Laura read this narrative relentlessly? As stated, when Pablo forbids Laura to leave her home and travel into the past, Bernal Díaz's story becomes "lo único que le interesa" [*the only thing that interests her*] (Garro 1964:22)—and Pablo adds in frustration that Laura "no habla sino de la caída de la Gran Tenochtitlán" [*does not talk about anything except the fall of the Great Tenochtitlán*] (23). Without the freedom to engage history directly in her time-traveling, Laura can only make sense of the past through the mainstream, male-written, history books of the Spanish *conquistadores*. Her loss of freedom and the increased internalization of Bernal Díaz's words—words that glorified the Spanish Conquest and romanticized the role of La Malinche—renders her depressed and confused about her *own* history and her relationship with the past. In fact, her obsession becomes so intense that, in a state of confusion, Laura uses its narrative for her own origin story.

Referring to a conversation with a local doctor, Laura states: "me preguntaba por mi infancia, por mi padre y por mi madre. Pero, yo, Nachita, no sabía de cuál infancia, ni de cuál padre, ni de cuál madre quería saber. Por eso le platicaba de la conquista de México" [*he asked me about my childhood, about my father and mother. But I, Nachita, did not know of which childhood, nor of which father, nor of which mother he wanted to know. For that reason I spoke to him about the Conquest of Mexico*] (22). Laura's substitution of the Spanish Conquest—as articulated by Bernal Díaz—for her childhood memories and personal life serves as a parallel to La Malinche. Because La Malinche did not leave behind her own account of events, the historical victors (the conquistadors) have largely constructed her identity, and generations of patriarchal thought in Latin American society have further manipulated her image. Just as Laura uses the words of a Spanish conquistador to discuss her identity and early memories, contemporary society must also resort to these works to gain insight into La Malinche. Because

she cannot define or explain herself, she becomes an “objeto de una mitificación” [*object of a mythification*]. Inevitably, limited perceptions and gendered discourses have been layered over her in this process (Glantz 2001:13).

While locked in the patriarchal environment of her home in modern Mexico, Laura’s obsessive consumption of Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s words causes her to internalize the dominant masculinist perspective on women and history. Consequently, Laura seemingly “forgets” her own perspective and draws on the authority of the conquistador while speaking to the doctor. Thus, Garro not only elucidates the power that history holds on one’s present identity, but she underlines the way that dominant discourses can overpower and silence earlier voices. Like Laura, La Malinche lost her power to portray her own account of events and instead became a subject of the masculinist, European narrative of Conquest, which narrowly defined her and contributed to her devaluation over time. Although Laura exists in modern-day Mexico, the voice of the *conquistadores*—a violent, oppressive, and invasive group—is able to usurp her individuality and silence her own memory because she can no longer engage her past independently. As a result, Laura becomes a modern-day Malinche.

### **La Doble Malinche [*The Double Malinche*]: Nacha and Laura**

While Laura’s position as a symbolic reimagining of La Malinche is more immediately evident due to her active role in time-traveling, Nacha also represents an embodiment of the La Malinche figure. The text implies Nacha’s Indigenous ancestry: Laura asks Nacha about her memories of her Indigenous past, and the narrator refers to “los ojos viejísimos” [*the ancient eyes*] of Nacha (Garro 1964:28). According to Linhard (2002), Nacha “representa en los ojos de Laura la herencia poscolonial de aquellos con los que anhela reconciliarse” [*represents in the eyes of Laura the postcolonial legacy of those with whom she longs to make peace*] (153). As

such, Laura constantly seeks Nacha's affirmation, and Nacha repeatedly encourages Laura's memory and validates her experiences. In fact, it is Nacha who allows for Laura's successful traveling between worlds: she begins the story by opening the door for Laura, and she ends the story by opening the window for Laura's final escape.

Though Nacha's solidarity allows for Laura's ultimate reconciliation with her Indigenous past, some argue that Nacha's sole role in the story is to assist Laura. In fact, some postcolonial feminist theorists observe that Nacha becomes "la proyección del 'informante nativo' que consolida la individualidad y subjetividad de Laura" [*the projection of the 'native informant' that consolidates the individuality and subjectivity of Laura*] (Linhard 2002:154). That is, some argue that by amplifying the voice of Laura, Nacha's own voice is silenced, and her experiences and memories are only relevant when beneficial to Laura's identity formation. Unlike Laura, who continually shares memories from both her Indigenous and modern-day Mexico selves, some argue that Nacha exists only to assist and comfort Laura. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999) explains in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, a native informant is "denied autobiography," and the readers' comparative ignorance regarding Nacha's own life highlights her potential to embody the role of a native informant (6). By minimizing Nacha's autobiography and emphasizing her ability to reinforce Laura's identities, Garro constructs a second La Malinche figure in the text. Like La Malinche, Nacha operates as a bridge between two cultures: as La Malinche's language abilities opened communication between the conquistadors and Indigenous tribes, Nacha's memory consolidates Laura's past and contemporary selves.

Though both Laura and Nacha embody the La Malinche figure, Garro's determination to rewrite the Malinche myth challenges the extent to which Nacha should be seen as strictly a "native informant." Svetlana Tyutina (2008:7), a scholar in Modern Spanish Literature writes:

La otra alusión al mito de la Malinche y su percepción tradicional es el silencio que envuelve a los personajes....las dos únicas personas que hablan en el relato son Laura y Nacha. Siendo partes integrantes de la doble Malinche, son ellas las que activamente rompen con el canon patriarcal de la percepción de la mujer.

*[The other allusion to the myth of La Malinche and her traditional perception is the silence that surrounds the characters...the only two people that talk in the story are Laura and Nacha. Being integrated parts of the double Malinche, they are the ones that actively break with the patriarchal canon regarding the perception of women.]*

Tyutina astutely acknowledges that only Nacha and Laura have speaking roles in the story, and this analysis challenges the postcolonial implications of Nacha's role as a silenced, subaltern voice. That is, it is the dialogue between Nacha and Laura that progresses the story, and their voices often criticize, interrupt, and take priority over the words of the other characters. By valuing their perspectives in this way, Garro centralizes the importance of female solidarity. In fact, it is their mutual solidarity that allows both women to free themselves from the Aldama household and to seek a new destiny. Though Spivak (1988) writes that subaltern voices typically exist on the margins, or "the silenced, silent center," Garro ensures that both Nacha and Laura break with social expectations of their mutual silence with constant and transformative conversations (78). Consequently, their symbolic roles become critical: Laura experiences shifting timelines and directly engages her history, and Nacha becomes the figure responsible for sharing and integrating this history into future discourses. As Indigenous communities rely largely on oral tradition, so must Nacha share her and Laura's memories to future generations after Laura escapes permanently into the past. Thus, Nacha and Laura's active communication challenges the silence surrounding La Malinche and offers her new voices—voices which are valuable, influential, and central to the story.



### Challenging Silence: Nacha and Laura

Despite her emphasis on feminine expression and vision, Garro repeatedly alludes to a powerful silence that permeates the spaces in which Laura exists. Garro establishes this theme from the beginning of the story. When Laura first enters: “Nacha oyó que llamaban en la puerta de la cocina y se quedó quieta” [*Nacha heard knocking on the kitchen door and stayed quiet*] (3). Then, “Laura apreció con un dedo en los labios en señal de silencio” [*Laura appeared with a finger on her lips in a signal for silence*]. Nacha and Laura cohabit this distinctly feminine space, seemingly separated from the world by “un compás de espera” [a holding pattern] and a profound silence (4). Attempting to disrupt this state of limbo, Laura asks: “¿Sabes, Nacha? La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas” [*You know, Nacha? It’s the Tlaxcaltecas’ fault*]. Stunned by the question, Nacha finds herself without words, and the water she puts to boil underlines the rising tension in their silence—one which initially represents their solidarity. When Nacha decides to speak, the water reaches its boiling point. The breaking of this silence by Nacha’s choice to engage Laura’s question sparks the narration of the story, and the rising bubbles of the water symbolize a resurfacing of the past into the present—both ancient truths and traumatic memories of the Conquest emerge to be experienced and analyzed by the two women. Paralleling the Indigenous practice of oral histories, Laura and Nacha successfully communicate, listen, and intuit each other; their capacity to find understanding repeatedly contrasts the communication failures between Laura and the men in the story.

While prolonged silences emerge throughout the text, they erupt primarily as a result of violence, force, or fear that strips Laura of her voice. For instance, Laura often becomes silent while facing her *primo marido* and confronting her internalized feelings of guilt. In addition, she becomes silent toward Pablo after his violent efforts to control her, and she keeps secrets from all

but Nacha to avoid punishment. Explaining to Nacha her inability to express herself, she states: “Hay cosas que no se pueden decir” [*there are things that cannot be said*] (7). While describing her experiences of looking at her *primo marido*’s wounds, she explains that she was “sin palabras” [*without words*] (9). The inability to speak and a consistent, pervasive silence also follows Pablo’s violence: Laura “se quedó sin habla” [*remained without speaking*] in response to his aggression (14), and after Laura and Nacha recall Pablo’s violent behavior, “se produjo un largo silencio en la cocina” [*there was a large silence in the kitchen*]. The repeated contrast between violence and silence underlines the complementary nature of these phenomena in history: silencing is an act of violence, and the voices of those from communities that have been marginalized as a result of systemic violence are so often silenced. By speaking together, Nacha and Laura actively break the silence of history regarding women’s agency and insert new voices which promise solidarity, mutual understanding, and ultimate liberation. Together, they negotiate these violent landscapes and validate each other’s perspectives.

### **Laura and the Fear of Authorship**

Because Laura plays the role of an author in her own narration of history, it is relevant to consider the distinct obstacles that female authors face; in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979<sup>2</sup>) discuss the isolating and anxiety-producing role of being a female author in a field dominated by men. While past literary critics such as Harold Bloom discuss “the anxiety of influence,” Gilbert and Gubar (1979) argue that the woman writer confronts “the fear of authorship.” That is, women writers have only male predecessors and fear the hostile reactions of male readers who reject the feminine voice or feel threatened by this new

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<sup>2</sup> Although written almost forty years ago, this text elucidates Garro’s work. If we consider the date of publication for “La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas”—just ten years after Gilbert and Gubar’s work was published—we can see how Garro’s writing draws on the feminist theory that was emerging at this time.

authority. The anxiety that emerges from this reality is akin to a disease: if women fight this sickness and speak, their society rejects them. If they silence themselves, they risk going mad. This anxiety is evident in Laura; in both worlds, she expresses an eagerness to escape.

While living with her machista husband Pablo, Laura longs to slip back into the past and abandon her home. “¿A qué horas vendrá a buscarme?” [*What time will he come to look for me?*], she asks continuously, referring to her *primo marido* (Garro 1964:12). However, when Laura inserts herself into her Indigenous past, she also becomes paralyzed with fear. Laura cannot tolerate her anxiety in this space and she flees repeatedly, citing her fear as the motivating force. She explains to Nacha that despite her *primo marido*'s request that she wait for him to return: “yo me escapé otra vez, Nachita, porque sola tuve miedo” [*I escaped again, Nachita, only because I was afraid*] (19). At a later instance, Laura states: “me salí de allí a toda carrera perseguida por el miedo” [*I left that place as quickly as I could, pursued by my own fear*] (27). Though Laura demonstrates the necessity for women to insert themselves into history and to play an active role in deconstructing gendered discourses, her anxiety in adopting this authorial position is evident. Like the anxious woman writer, Laura feels the pressure of writing a story using a voice which has no predecessor, and she dwells on the border of madness, obsessively reading and at times unable to resolve the tensions that divide her.

As Gilbert and Gubar (1979) emphasize, women authors often express their authorial anxieties through their characters' struggles with memory:

the reason for their deep sense of alienation and inescapable feeling of anomie—is that they have forgotten something. Deprived of the power that even their pens don't seem to confer, these women resemble Doris Lessing's heroines, who have to fight their internalization of patriarchal structures for even a faint trace memory of what they might have become...Charlotte Brontë's Lucy Snowe conveniently 'forgets' her own history and even, so it seems, the Christian name of one of the central characters in her story, while Brontë's orphaned Jane Eyre seems to have lost (or symbolically 'forgotten') her family heritage. (1937)

The symbolic “forgetfulness” of female characters refers to a distinct challenge women face when exploring their collective history: the lack of histories expressed through the female perspective. Though located in the present, their “internalization of patriarchal structures” prevents them from recalling “what they might have become.” Laura, as she actively engages and embodies her history, remembers her ancestral past and previous identity; however, when her machista husband Pablo enforces his control over her, she confuses and forgets these memories of her origins. In fact, in response to Laura’s interest in the past, Pablo requires his wife to be checked medically, thus emphasizing the way in which patriarchal perceptions and institutions attempt to control or medicalize women. Moreover, Laura’s conversation with the doctor, in which she seemingly confuses her own past with the stories of Bernal Díaz del Castillo and the Spanish Conquest, highlights the difficulties women face when both remembering and forgetting their pasts. Nonetheless, Laura transcends the narrative trope of the forgetful woman and demonstrates a determination to remember. While she admits to Nacha, “todo se olvida” [*one forgets everything*], she adds an important distinction: “pero se olvida sólo por un tiempo” [*but one only forgets for a little while*] (Garro 1964:6).

### **The Role of Memory**

Significantly, the narration of Laura’s story exists as a retelling of Laura’s and Nacha’s memories. As Laura recalls her experiences and emotions, Nacha affirms their occurrence with references to her own memory. Repeatedly, the narrator states: “Nacha recordó” [*Nacha remembered*] (Garro 1964:16, 19). Likewise, Laura continuously asks Nacha “¿Te acuerdas?” [*Do you remember?*] (10) and affirms Nacha’s memory of events by stating “Tú lo sabes, Nacha” [*You know that, Nacha*] (15). The creation and sharing of memory between these two women signifies the importance of female connection in realizing and constructing women’s

history. Though Laura expresses anxiety in the violent and disappearing world of Indigenous Mexico and forgetfulness and fear in the patriarchal environment at home with Pablo, she feels comfort in the company of Nacha, whose emotional support and reaffirmation of memory validates Laura's story and encourages her to recall the past in a safe, sympathetic environment.

Laura reclaims her memories in instances that resemble epiphanies due to their rapid re-emergence into her consciousness. Upon seeing her *primo marido* on the bridge, she states: “en ese instante, también recordé la magnitud de mi tración” [*in that instant, I also remembered the magnitude of my betrayal*] (Garro 1965:5). On one occasion, it is Nacha's presence that inexplicably and immediately reminds Laura as to where she should go to meet with her *primo marido*. Laura is waiting in her room, when Nacha's brief check-in inspires Laura: “me vino un pensamiento a la cabeza” [*a thought came to my mind*] (16). After their conversation, Laura leaves home in search of a café to which she had never been but feels mysteriously drawn. Later, while situated in her Indigenous past, she suddenly remembers that she was in front of her childhood home. The continual, rapid, and almost mystical eruption of memories in Laura's mind signifies the difficulty and painfulness of her journey in reclaiming a feminine perspective on historical events. To use a more modern parallel, this emergence of memory reflects the way that trauma can suddenly resurface in an individual when faced with a “trigger.” In this case, Nacha, Laura's *primo marido*, and Laura's physical location act as triggers, forcing her to recall painful memories, feelings, or insights. As the opening scene of the story illustrates with the imagery of boiling water, Laura must confront the past events and emotions which emerge continually in the present.

Pablo, the machista husband of Laura, embodies the role of patriarchal authority in contemporary Mexico. Unlike Laura, who actively engages her past and reclaims her memories,

Pablo is an absurd and violent man with nearly no ability to remember. Laura describes his forgetfulness with frustration, stating: “Ya sabes que se le olvida todo” (Garro 1964:12) [*You already know that he forgets everything*], to which Nacha replies: “Este marido nuevo no tiene memoria y no sabe más que las cosas de cada día” [*This new husband does not have a memory and he does not know more than everyday things*]. Though there are times when Pablo reminds Laura of someone she once knew “a quien yo no recordaba” [*whom she did not remember*], she explains that Pablo immediately returns to his usual self: “absurdo, sin memoria” [*absurd, without memory*] (15). Moreover, Laura states that Pablo “solo repetía los gestos de todos los hombres de la ciudad de México” [*only repeated the gestures of all the men in Mexico City*]. Ultimately, Pablo’s inability to remember renders him ridiculous. Without proper recall of the past, Pablo can only mindlessly mirror the actions and expressions of the other men around him. Rather than create his own identity, Pablo simply projects an image of what he believes represents masculinity: he is unconcerned with the past, he is violent, controlling, angry, and he speaks endlessly about politics and his work connections.

Pablo’s inability to remember “más que las cosas de cada día” [*more than everyday things*] in contrast to Laura’s passionate pursuit of history underlines the significance of Laura’s actions (Garro 1964:12). That is, throughout history, men have dominated historical discourse, deciding which details to include, exaggerate, glorify, and minimize—as demonstrated in Bernal Díaz de Castillo’s history, or in the many other glorifications of Conquest by the Spanish conquistadors. Though these specific examples centralize the perspectives of *Spanish* men and thus exclude the voices of *Indigenous* men, history has repeatedly favored masculinist interpretation. Consequently, men do not possess women’s urgent need to interpret these accepted stories in search of their silenced and invisible roles and voices. Laura, however, due to

her interactions with her ridiculous husband, “[ha] aprendido a no respetar los ojos del hombre” [*has learned not to respect the eyes of men*], and she witnesses the story of the Spanish Conquest as an actively inquisitive agent (9). In defiance of her husband’s demands, she continuously escapes her home with an urgent desire to recall her past. Laura’s disobedient behavior also directly opposes cultural expectations of women’s passivity: she insists on leaving her house and playing an active role in her life and history. Despite the patriarchal society in which she exists, she has learned “no tenerle respeto al hombre” [*not to have respect for men*] and to prioritize her own perspective (8). Moreover, Laura’s transgressive actions demonstrate her conviction to fight “contra la perspectiva patriarcal” [*against the patriarchal perspective*] the only way it can be done: “través de la voz de la mujer” [*through the voice of the woman*] (Tyutina 2008:1).

### **Blame, Betrayal, and Defeat: Complicating Gendered Discourses**

Because Laura emphasizes the absurd nature of Pablo, she disrupts the patriarchal expectation of respect and submission to one’s husband. As a result, he is violent toward her, yet she refuses to accept his physical abuse as an indication of his strength or his victory over her. After one violent outburst, Laura reflects to Nacha: “Yo no tengo la culpa de que aceptara la derrota” [*It’s not my fault that he accepted defeat*] (Garro 1964:14). In this powerful rejection of blame, Laura implies that Pablo’s internalization of gender norms which assert his superiority over women represents his defeat. Rather than accept the blame, Laura “places the blame on him for selling himself to the enemy by imitating their violent behavior and forgetting his ancestors and his culture” (Garcés 2007:120). In this instance, Garcés suggests that Pablo has internalized the aggressive conduct of the Spanish conquistadors, adopting their patriarchal standards of masculinity by displaying violent anger, using force, and rejecting “feminine” behavior. Pablo’s assimilation to these damaging cultural norms strikes Laura as her husband’s true defeat, and she

refuses to take the blame for his actions. By emphasizing his absurdity and representing his resort to violence as defeat, Garro transgresses gender expectations.

Dominant discourses render the Indigenous woman culpable for the fall of Technotitlán and disproportionately burden women with the position of “defeated” as a scapegoat mechanism; yet Garro uses Pablo to illustrate the “defeat” of the modern Mexican man. That is, his uncritical repetition of violence and his inability to recall an alternative mode of behavior is a weakness—one that has played a key role in the construction of an incomplete, incoherent history which subordinates and silences the voices of women. Laura’s accusation that Pablo only repeats the gestures of all the men in Mexico City even suggests a slight parallel to La Malinche. As Margo Glantz (2001) writes, La Malinche’s position required her to translate constantly between three languages: Spanish, Mayan, and Nahuatl. Consequently, there is a stark absence of La Malinche’s own voice; she becomes “un habla que aparentemente sólo repite lo que otros dicen” [*a speaker that only repeats what others say*] (108). This comparison to La Malinche aligns Pablo more closely with the power that La Malinche possessed as a translator. As La Malinche translated information that assisted the Spanish, so does Pablo essentially “translate” patriarchal conduct from what he observes in society into his own behavior. By uncritically adopting these discourses and behaviors, Pablo continues to suppress others and thus mimics the conquistadors’ violence. Her realignment of the victors, the defeated, and the traitors in Mexican history and society is a powerful example of Garro’s dedication to challenging Mexico’s gendered discourses and is most evident in the repeated image of Laura’s *primo marido* as vulnerable, bleeding, and fleeing.

By portraying the physical wounds of Laura’s *primo marido* so vividly, Garro intentionally underlines the vulnerability of this male figure. Rather than engage the gendered



trope of man's seeming invincibility, Garro allows for this masculine character to reveal and wear visible signs of defeat. Moreover, Laura's *primo marido*'s implication in defeat connects him to Pablo, whom Laura accuses of accepting defeat by practicing violent behavior. These parallels repeat throughout the story, blending timelines and identities to fuse the mystic past and present. Garro's strategic use of magical realism invites the reader to question the connections between Pablo and Laura's *primo marido*, and between Laura's memory and the cultural contexts which both connect and separate the different worlds in the story.

### **Blurring Male Characters**

The uncanny connection between Pablo and Laura's *primo marido* reveals itself to Laura subconsciously. Confiding to Nacha, Laura states: "Yo me enamoré de Pablo en un carretera, durante un minuto en el cual me recordé a alguien conocido, a quien yo no recordaba. Después, a veces, recuperaba aquel instante en el que parecía que iba a convertirse en ese otro al cual se parecía" [*I fell in love with Pablo on a highway, during a minute in which he reminded me of someone familiar, whom I did not remember. After, at times, I recuperated that instant in which he seemed he was going to convert into this other whom he seemed like*] (Garro 1964:15).

Interestingly, Laura explains that she fell in love with Pablo on the road, the space in which she reunites with her *primo marido*. Further, she recognizes her love for Pablo in an instant, just as she feels immediate shame when she sees her Indigenous husband on the bridge. The instantaneous feelings that these figures evoke in Laura highlight their symbolic power; both of these figures trigger unconscious memories. While Pablo's presence reminds her of her Indigenous husband and her love for him, Laura's *primo marido* reminds her of the trauma of the Spanish Conquest—particularly evoking the collective sensation of guilt and shame that society has encouraged Indigenous women to internalize.

Garro also blends the identities of Pablo and Laura's *primo marido* by paralleling their positions as Laura's partner. More specifically, Laura's unique situation positions her as a "cheater" in both worlds: her shifting selves and timelines force her to be unfaithful to both Pablo and her *primo marido*. Laura's position as one forced to betray not only reflects the position of La Malinche but constructs another connection between Pablo and her *primo marido*: both of these men are "betrayed" by Laura. While Pablo responds to this position with violence and futile attempts to control Laura's destiny, her *primo marido* calmly accepts this reality: "Traidora te conocí y así te quise" [*as a traitor I met you, and like that I loved you*] (Garro 1964:25). He forgives her "betrayal," acknowledging that she had "buena voluntad" [*good intentions*] and that "lo bueno crece junto con lo malo" [*the good grows together with the bad*]. Her *primo marido*'s acceptance of Laura's position demonstrates their strong mutual understanding; unlike the contemporary *machista* man, who has adopted a sense of ownership toward women, Laura's *primo marido* has compassion for her position and loves her unconditionally.

Laura's dialogue with Nacha develops the parallels between her two husbands further. She states: "A los dos les gusta el agua y las casas frescas. Los dos miran al cielo por las tardes y tienen el pelo negro y los dientes blancos" [*They both like water and chilly houses. They both look at the sky during the afternoons and have black hair and white teeth*] (Garro 1964:12). However, these vague similarities between Laura's *primo marido* and Pablo do not evoke the same emotional response in her, largely due to the way that Pablo treats Laura. She tells Nacha: "Pero, Pablo habla a saltitos, se enfurece por nada y pregunta a cada instante: '¿En qué piensas?' Mi primo marido no hace ni dice nada de eso" [*But, Pablo talks in short bursts, he gets furious over nothing, and he asks every instant: What are you thinking about? My cousin husband does*

*not do or say any of that*] (12). Laura contrasts this negative depiction of Pablo's *machismo* with a flattering representation of her Indigenous spouse: "mi primo marido, nunca, pero nunca, se enoja con la mujer" [*my cousin husband never, never, got angry at women*] (15).

While a dichotomy exists between Laura's Indigenous past and her contemporary reality, these worlds are highly interdependent. By blending aspects of the past with that of the present moment—evidenced in part by the parallels between Pablo and her *primo marido* and those between Laura and La Malinche—Garro "[links] the mythic past and present of contemporary culture" (Nanfito 2003:131). In fact, even the intentional naming of Laura's Indigenous husband *primo marido* invites a dual interpretation: while the name directly translates to "cousin husband," the word *primo* comes from the Latin word *primus*, meaning first. As such, by only referring to Laura's Indigenous husband as *primo marido*, Garro suggests that this man was Laura's original spouse, thus making Pablo Laura's "segundo marido" [*second husband*]. If Laura symbolically represents the contemporary Mexican woman, Garro's suggestive naming implies that Mexico's original connection remains with the Indigenous populations. Garro, like many Mexican writers seeking to locate and define Mexican identity during this time, uses Laura's *primo marido* to stress Mexico's first and primary relationship with the Indigenous populations.

By constructing parallels and intentional disconnections between Pablo and Laura's *primo marido*, Garro explores a postmodern expression of identity, examining the multicultural, shifting, and simultaneous realities that can exist within a singular identity—a task which is largely possible due to her strategic employment of magical realism. Garro's intentional blurring of characters creates ambiguities in the temporal landscape of the story, which challenge the binary opposition between the Indigenous and contemporary Mexico that Latin American

literature often perpetuates (Nanfito 2003:129). As a result, Garro renders Mexico's historic past and mythic past as urgent matters of concern; cultural symbols originating from the time of Conquest continue to blur realities and permeate into contemporary society.

### **Blending Timelines**

Garro's choice to create ambiguities between characters and timelines is consistent with her intent to reveal the interconnectedness of discourses, identities, and time. In the narration of the story, Garro thus disrupts the typical linear function of time for the "concept of a unified, circular time" in which all moments seem to exist simultaneously (Nanfito 2003:136). For instance, Laura's *primo marido* repeats several times a prophecy regarding the union of two parallel timelines. While he and Laura walk together to Laura's destroyed childhood home, he states: "ya falta poco para que se acabe el tiempo y seamos uno solo...por eso te andaba buscando" [*soon time will end and we will be one...for that reason I was looking for you*] (Garro 1964:9). Laura adds in her explanation to Nacha: "cuando se gaste el tiempo, los dos hemos convertidos en uno solo" [*when time runs out, the two of us have converted into one*]. Using a rock, Laura's *primo marido* draws two separate lines that eventually converge into one, thus illustrating his promise to her. The prospect of this fusion is powerful. That is, Laura simultaneously represents the contemporary Mexican vision of history influenced by European conquistadors (as suggested through her displayed interest in Bernal Díaz's work) and that of an Indigenous Mexican woman. When Laura joins with the Indigenous man, their union demonstrates the valorization of multiple voices in the collective history of Mexico: those of both men and women; from both Indigenous and Spanish perspectives; and from past and contemporary perspectives. Because these voices integrate to inform a more inclusive understanding of Mexico's history, Nacha's escape from the Aldama household to pursue her

own destiny suggests that she will consolidate these new understandings into present and future discourses.

Thus, Garro's intentional blending of timelines and identities in the story serves Laura's symbolic role as a bridge between worlds and histories. At the end of the short story, Laura chooses to remain with her Indigenous husband. Though she may potentially die in the Spanish Conquest, Laura fulfills her fate of uniting with her *primo marido* and merging their timelines. As Nanfity (2003) observes: "with this fusion, Garro suggests fundamental changes in the biblical myth of Adam and Eve and their purported fall from grace caused by Eve's betrayal, proposing and promoting the notion of a confluence of the two sexes" (136). Because La Malinche is known as "the Mexican Eve," the end of "La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" effectively rewrites the myth of Eve and La Malinche (Cypess 1990:117). That is, Laura and her Indigenous husband's union and mutual disappearance into the past—combined with the consistent demonstration of his vulnerability—demonstrate that neither sex is entirely at fault for the fall of Technotitlán.

Rather than passively accept blame for Indigenous defeat as a La Malinche figure, Laura's states throughout the story, "la culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" [*it's the Tlaxcaltecas' fault*]. By shifting the blame to a group of Indigenous who intentionally allied with the Spanish, Garro's short story does not just defend and include the feminine voice but seeks to convey a broader historical truth. For instance, while the Spanish often violated Indigenous women and rendered them powerless, the Tlaxcaltecas were rewarded for their betrayal and willingly assimilated into Spanish aggression and political goals (Matthew 2014:20). Moreover, and with even greater insight into the situation of the Indigenous during the Spanish Conquest, Laura's *primo marido* states: "hay muchas traiciones" [*there are many betrayals*] (Garro 1964:25). Garro's assertion

that La Malinche, and more broadly, Indigenous women are not singularly at fault for Spain's victory is vital to her reimagination of the La Malinche figure. By complicating the notion of "traitor," Laura reconstructs the dominant configuration of La Malinche. Garro suggests that as a result of patriarchal discourse and control of history, Indigenous women have thus wrongly internalized guilt for Spain's successful colonization of Mexico; Garro seeks to highlight the injustice of this interpretation and to encourage others to remember, and re-remember, the many other historical factors that led to this defeat.

### **Re-remembering the Past**

*Memory, prehistoric memory, has no time.* Toni Morrison (1987)

As already mentioned, Laura must reinsert herself into the past through time-travel in order to engage her Indigenous history. In the beginning of the story, Laura shares with Nacha and reflects on the words of her ancestors:

'Alguna vez, te encontrarás frente a tus acciones convertidas en piedras irrevocables como esa' me dijeron de niña al enseñarme la imagen de un dios, que ahora no recuerdo cual era. Todo se olvida, ¿verdad Nachita?, pero se olvida sólo por un tiempo. En aquel entonces, también las palabras me parecieron de piedra, solo que de una piedra fluida y cristalina. La piedra se solidificaba al terminar cada palabra, para quedar escrita para siempre en el tiempo.' (Garro 1964:6)

*[‘One time, you will find yourself in front of your actions converted into irreversible stones like that’ they told me as a young girl while showing me the image of a God, that now I do not remember which one it was. One forgets everything, right Nachita? But one only forgets for a time. Back then, words also seemed to me like they were made of stone, only a stone that was fluid and crystalline. The stone solidified at the end of every word, to stay written in time forever]*

According to Biron (2012), Laura's description displays "an inherited, indigenous understanding of words" from her Indigenous past which suggests that "saying or writing something...fixes it forever" (144). While during the pre-Columbian times—when one assumes this was said to

Laura—words appeared to her as “fluida y cristalina” [*fluid and crystalline*], she observes that the passage of time solidifies them into hard, irreversible stone. Laura’s understanding of the power of words connects to her anxiety of authorship; as a young girl, her ancestors taught her that words and actions cannot be reversed, and she thus grasps the incredible importance of expressing truth. While being shown the image of a God, her Indigenous ancestors express the eternal power that words possess. Like a God, words are immortal and their influence can transcend time and space. Yet words can also be forgotten, as Laura forgets the identity of this God from her childhood memory. Though Laura’s ancestors reveal the permanent nature of words to Laura as if warning her of their power, Laura now understands that the power lies more with those who remember and interpret these truths. That is, from the perspective of different moments, history and its corresponding discourses can be rearranged, altered, and interpreted differently; by re-examining these seemingly permanent stones, Laura reverts them to their original fluid and crystalline construction and challenges her ancestors’ fear that the past can be rendered irreversible.

In the short story, Laura’s actions both indicate a prophetic fulfillment of her ancestors’ words and challenge their relevance to her contemporary existence. Laura does continually remember and consider the significance of her actions, which in effect, disrupts and rearranges the “irreversible stones of history.” However, in contemporary Mexico, Laura’s husband violently reprimands her for escaping home and exploring her past—fulfilling her ancestor’s promise that she would one day face consequences for her actions. As a symbol of La Malinche, Laura’s simultaneous adherence to and challenge of her ancestors’ prophecy demonstrates Laura’s role in defying ancestral and historical scripts and actively seeking a more liberating future. Thus, Garro disputes the idea that Laura is a passive victim to her circumstance and uses

her heroine to disrupt the discourse that insists that La Malinche passively allowed for Spanish Conquest, as Antonio Ruíz's *El sueño de La Malinche* might suggest. The unique historical account she provides and her recharacterization of the La Malinche myth show progress toward a more just, socially conscious, and permeable history. "La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" contributes to a positive redefinition of the La Malinche figure beyond her representation of collective guilt and challenges Latin America's historical memory.

### **The Bridge Scene: Past and Present Meet**

Laura's own memory plays a critical role in challenging the historical memory of both the Indigenous during the Spanish Conquest and modern-day Mexican women. Laura's first encounter with her *primo marido* occurs after her car breaks down in the middle of a long, white bridge. In this moment, she explains: "El tiempo había dado la vuelta completa, como cuando ves una tarjeta postal y luego la vuelves para ver lo que hay escrito atrás" [*Time had completely turned around, like when you see a postcard and then you turn it to see what is written on the back*] (Garro 1964:5). By comparing her experience of time to a postcard turned around, Garro illustrates the connection between history, experiences, and discourse. Previously, Laura had been experiencing time in a linear fashion. As Garro implies, her life in modern Mexico represents the image side of a postcard; a singular reality captured by a singular perspective. In addition, postcards assume separation between the experience (the image or the sender) and the receiver. As the receiver of this postcard, Laura inherits a reality she did not create. Yet by turning this postcard around—as time turns around in this pivotal scene—Laura explores the hidden meanings behind the reality she inherits. By engaging time in this way, Laura is able to see the fragility of all our explanations of the past. As Jacques Derrida (1987) argues in *The Post Card*, "there are nothing but post cards...our entire library, our entire encyclopedia, our words,



our pictures, our figures, our secrets” (53). Thus, Laura’s reference to a postcard reveals her to be the inheritor of a reality based on discourses reproduced and perpetuated through a variety of means, generations, and external influences. Likewise, her choice to interrogate the past situates her as an individual challenging the construction of accepted historical, social, and linguistic truths. As her timeline converges with her *primo marido*’s, she is able to engage both the *written text* that explains her current reality *and* the unwritten text—the past that has not yet been recognized.

Just as La Malinche was once victim to her circumstance as a slave, Laura cannot escape this meeting. Laura states: “tuve miedo y quise huir. Pero el tiempo se cerró alrededor de mi, se volvió único y pederero y no pude moverme del asiento automovil” [*I was afraid and I wanted to flee. But time closed all around me, it became one and dying and I could not move from the seat of the car*] (Garro 1964:5-6). As her Indigenous husband approaches and their timelines converge, Laura must confront her feelings of fear, guilt, and betrayal. This moment of vulnerability for Laura serves as another parallel to La Malinche; just as the converging cultures of the Spanish and Indigenous trapped La Malinche in her position as a bridge between cultures and languages, Laura becomes physically stuck in the middle of a bridge—unable to flee, yet simultaneously escaping into another world.

Laura’s *primo marido* appears in a mystical environment where “el sol se vuelve blanco” [*the sun turns white*]: “traía ojos brillantes. Desde lejos me llegaron sus chispas negras y vi ondear sus caballos negros en medio de la luz blanquísimo del encuentro” [*his eyes were brilliant. From far away their black sparks reached me and I saw his dark hair waving in the blinding light of our meeting*] (Garro 1964:6). As her *primo marido* gets closer, however, Laura sees that “tenía una cortada en la mano izquierda, los cabellos llenos de polvo, y por la herida del

hombro la escurría una sangre tan roja, que parecía negra” [*he had a cut on his left hand, his hair was full of dust, and from the wound on his shoulder dripped a blood so red that it seemed black*]. The closer Laura gets to this man, the more intimately she can see his suffering. Thus, while Laura appears at first to be the sole victim, trapped on the bridge and unable to move, the pain that becomes increasingly apparent in the wounds of her *primo marido* illustrates his parallel vulnerability. Further, the transition from the mystical imagery of vibrant, all-consuming light to the realistic and painful descriptions of dust, dirt, and blood highlights Laura’s role as she travels into her Indigenous life: to demystify history and to re-remember her surroundings.

Garro’s use of color—particularly the stark contrast of white and black—in this key scene demonstrates the interdependent dichotomy between the worlds of Laura and her *primo marido*: Laura is travelling back from 20th century Mexico while her *primo marido* is suffering from the defeat of the Spanish Conquest. She describes to Nacha: “yo me quedé en la mitad del puente blanco, que atraviesa el lago seco con fondo de lajas blancas. La luz era muy blanca” [*I stayed in the middle of the white bridge, that went over the dry lake with white stones on the bottom. The light was very white*] (Garro 1964:5). This intense white imagery, which repeats throughout the story, often accompanies a mention of darkness, blood, or stains. In this instance, for example, she describes her *primo marido* as having dark eyes, “caballos negros” [*black hair*], “piel ardida por el sol” [*skin burned by the sun*], and “una sangre tan roja, que parecía negra” [*a blood so red that it seemed black*] (6). Garro’s use of color proposes and dismantles binaries; she presents opposites—white and black—yet continually emphasizes their likenesses.

The imagery of white and black is strategic and could reflect a key aspect of Mexico’s history: *mestizaje*—mixing between the white Spaniards and the darker-skinned Indigenous communities. Other theorists suggest that it “symbolize[s] the united destiny of Laura and her

other, Aztec husband, as in the yin-yang symbol” (Nanfito 2003:131). Nanfito’s interpretation reveals the interdependence of Laura and her *primo marido*’s different worlds and emphasizes the necessity of each in forming a cohesive convergence of opposites. However, the violent clash of Garro’s color imagery in this scene and throughout the story also suggests a different interpretation: the Spanish conquest of Native lands has left a nearly unhealable wound—a permanent stain—on Mexican history that continuously emerges and wounds contemporary society. Because dark imagery continually reappears, “staining” white scenes, I suggest that Garro uses this color contrast to highlight the pervasive influence of past national trauma on contemporary culture and society in Mexico. Like Antonio Ruíz’s painting, *El sueño de La Malinche*, Garro illustrates the continued relevance of Indigenous past to Mexico’s contemporary landscape. However, Garro’s color imagery presents a more violent insistence of historical trauma; these realities do not sleep peacefully as Malinche does in Ruíz’s piece, but they continually assert themselves into the present moment—demanding to be seen and acknowledged.

### **Laura and her *primo marido*: Engendering Guilt**

Due to her experiences as an Indigenous woman, Laura clearly feels the guilt of these traumatic memories within Mexican history. For that reason, Laura instinctively desires to wash away the dark blood that emerges from her Indigenous husband’s wounds. During her first interaction with her *primo marido* on the bridge, she states: “yo tenía vergüenza. La sangre seguía corriendo por el pecho. Saque un pañuelito de mi bolso y sin una palabra, empecé a limpiársela” [*I was ashamed. The blood kept running down his chest. I took out a little tissue from my bag and without a word, I began to clean it off of him*] (Garro 1964:7). The existence of

this blood immediately reminds Laura of her guilt, causing her to feel shame. As a result, she tries to clean away this nearly black blood from her *primo marido*.

Later in the story, Laura again recalls her “vergüenza” [*shame*] during another encounter with her Indigenous cousin; she states that: “del hombro le seguía brotando sangre. Me llene de vergüenza, bajé los ojos, abrí mi bolso y saqué un pañuelito para limpiarle el pecho. Luego lo volví a guardar” [*blood kept flowing from his shoulder. I became full of shame, I lowered my eyes, opened my bag and took out a tissue to clean his chest. Then I saved it*] (Garro 1964:24-5).

Adhering to the La Malinche myth, Laura has internalized the guilt for his pain and defeat, and she continuously seeks to absorb it with ineffective tissues. As Garro makes evident through its repeated use, this small white tissue is unable to erase the persistent evidence of dark, running blood. Thus, Laura unconsciously acts out her cultural role as the carrier of guilt and actively seeks to eliminate signs of weakness from her cousin, despite the futility of this effort.

Significantly, it is Laura who keeps the stained handkerchief in her purse, thus indicating that the presence of guilt in Laura’s life is as natural as a typical feminine accessory. By bearing these blood stains in both the Indigenous and contemporary worlds, Laura again disrupts the binary between these realities.

Laura may try to wipe away the blood of her *primo marido*, but it follows her and reappears throughout the story. When Laura first arrives back in the house to speak with Nacha after being missing for several weeks, “todavía llevaba el traje blanco quemado y sucio de tierra y sangre” [*she still wore the white, burned suit that was filthy with dirt and blood*] (Garro 1964:3). Here, Garro draws a parallel between Laura and her Indigenous husband; while he seems to bleed perpetually, Laura’s bloodstains never disappear. As a result of their Indigenous identities and/or roots, Laura and her *primo marido* cannot simply forget the significance of their

complicated history; blood and bloodstains remain on him and on Laura's clothes—through contact or words alike—and it is clear that the past affects their present moment. Further, despite the fact that her white dress bears blood, Laura insists on wearing it with just “un sweater blanco encima” [*a white sweater on top*] (16). In other words, while Laura attempts to remove the blood from her Indian husband's skin, she intentionally refuses to remove her dirtied, bloodied clothing. Paralleling the image of these stains with bad memories, Josefina asks: “¿Por qué no te cambiaste? ¿Te gusta recordar lo malo?” [*Why don't you change? Do you like to remember the bad?*] (11). Though Laura remains quiet, her actions speak louder than words: Laura continues to wear this stained dress, demonstrating the manner in which many modern-day Mexican women continue to bear the burden of guilt for their country's collective memory.

In *La Malinche, sus padres y sus hijos* Margo Glantz (2001) cites Octavio Paz's description of La Malinche and her lasting effect on Mexico: “su mancha es constitucional y reside...en su sexo” [*her stain is constitutional and resides in her sex*] (278). Paz argues that Malinche's betrayal has created a permanent stain—one which is and continues to be inseparable from her sex. In “La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas,” the blood stains on Laura's white dress symbolize the external representation of her internalized guilt for the fall of Technotitlán; Laura wears this blood as her own, despite it belonging to someone else—just as historical discourses force La Malinche to accept responsibility for the defeat of her people, despite the myriad of factors that contributed to Spain's victory. Like La Malinche, Laura receives punishment and blame. For example, when Pablo sees evidence of this blood, he immediately “golpeó la cómoda con el puño cerrado” [*hit the drawers with a closed fist*], and later “le dio una santa bofetada” [*gave her a slap across the face*] without allowing Laura to explain herself (Garro 1964:14). Pablo, as a figure of male dominance and machismo, simply assumes that Laura is guilty,

punishes her, and takes away her power to speak. His subsequent decision to lock Laura in the house under constant vigilance represents how men have attempted to control women and the feminine voice, consequently denying them personal agency and the freedom to tell their own story.

Nonetheless, Laura perseveres and gives a voice to La Malinche. In her traveling, she personally demonstrates and witnesses depictions of gender that directly contradict the notion that women are exclusively to blame. In other words, as Laura's Indigenous husband expresses to Laura during a violent episode of the Conquest: "hay muchas traiciones" [*there are many betrayals*] (Garro 1964:25). Furthermore, and perhaps more significantly, Laura sees that—contrary to dominant gender conceptions—the men were also at fault. During her first narrated encounter with her first husband, she notes that he wore "el peso de la derrota sobre los hombros desnudos" [*the weight of defeat over his naked shoulders*] (6) and "andaba mal herido, en busca mía" [*walked badly hurt, in search of me*] (7). Her *primo marido* is wounded, and he needs her. Later, he grabs Laura's hand, "como agarraba a su escudo" [*like he grabbed his shield*] and her subsequent realization that he had lost his shield highlights his vulnerability; he was virtually defenseless against the invading forces (8). As a result of their defeat by the Spanish, Laura sees firsthand that Indigenous men lost their sense of independence and strength; they were defeated by force and rendered vulnerable to the will of the Spanish and its allies—just as the women were.

By depicting Laura's *primo marido* as eternally bleeding, Garro challenges Paz's claim that women are inherently inferior because of their "rajada"<sup>3</sup> [*slash*], or their "herida que jamás

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the word "rajada" in Spanish can also be translated as "coward"—a term with which Laura often identifies herself. As such, perhaps Garro suggests that women's weakness is not biological but either a natural fear-response to threat, or a quality socialized into women by a patriarchal society.

cicatrizas” [*wound that never scars*] (Glantz 2001:281). Though Paz here refers to a female’s physical biology as a fatal sign of her weakness, Garro quite literally assigns this weakness to a male figure; he is the one with the eternally bleeding wound, and it is women who must continually tend to it according to gendered discourses which render women carriers of collective guilt. However, as Garcés (2007) argues, Laura “actively resists and redefines dominant cultural patterns regarding men and women” (117). By traveling back in time, Laura observes that Indigenous men and women were equally defeated, thus presenting an image of men that counters the cultural expectation of masculine control and dominance. By incorporating Paz’s language—which rendered women essentially inferior—and translating it onto a male figure, Garro challenges and rewrites the social script that codes men as symbols of strength and women as inherently weak, passive, wounded, and subjugated.

The insertion of a voice for La Malinche, and for Indigenous women in general, is another critical tool for rewriting gender into Latin American discourse. As Adrienne Rich (1972:18) writes in “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”:

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society.

By travelling to her Indigenous reality, Laura demonstrates this search for identity, meaning, and escape from her male-dominated and violent home in contemporary Mexico. Though the act of “re-visioning” to which Rich refers centralizes the power of writing, Laura is able to embody her past (“an old text”) with the “fresh eyes” of a young woman in a visceral, physical manner. In doing this, Laura prioritizes her own perspective and intuitions: she chooses what to see and what not to see, and she chooses what to remember and share with Nacha. Garro emphasizes the

valorization of Laura's viewpoint from the beginning of the story, as one of Laura's very first statements becomes the story's title. Rejecting the limiting nature of oppressive perspectives in favor of her own, Laura states: "he aprendido no respetar los ojos del hombre" [*I have learned not to respect the eyes of men*] (Garro 1964:9) and later declares that Pablo (a symbol for the contemporary Mexican *machista*) has dead eyes (12).

Laura also highlights the failure of masculine voices and language to comprehend and relate to women. While listening to Pablo speak, she notes a sense of alienation from his words: "Cuando estábamos cenando me fijé en que Pablo no hablaba con palabras sino letras. Y me puse a contarlas mientras le miraba la boca gruesa" [*When we were eating dinner, I noticed that Pablo spoke not with words but with letters. I began to count them while I watched his fat mouth*] (Garro 1964:11-12). The decomposition of Pablo's words into isolated letters, incapable of constructing truth or meaning, highlights the disconnect between "masculine (chauvinistic) language" and Laura's "role of the Other" (Nanfito 2003:135). Later, Laura states in reference to Pablo that "sus gestos son feroces y su conducta es tan incoherente como sus palabras" [*his actions are as ferocious and his behavior is as incoherent as his words*] (Garro 1964:14). Dismissing the masculinist voice and vision as irrelevant, incoherent, inhumane, and even dead, Laura establishes herself as the one with the power and legitimacy to breathe new life into history with a distinctly feminine standpoint. As she accepts this role and breaks the trope of feminine silence, Nacha's encouragement and consistent affirmation of Laura's emotions and memories construct a strong counter-voice to the *machista* and violent language of Pablo.

### **Final Scene: The Completion of a Cycle**

In the final scene of the story, the narrative returns to a description of its original setting: Nacha and Laura sitting alone in the kitchen at night. As the howling coyotes fill the silence



between them, the two eagerly consume salt off the back of their hands—an act that emphasizes their agency and solidarity. Together, they await for the arrival of Laura’s *primo marido*, and when Nacha hears him approach, she opens the window for Laura’s escape. Soon after, she “limpió la sangre de la ventana y espantó a los coyotes, que entraron en su siglo que acababa de gastarse en ese instante” [*cleaned the blood from the window and scared off the coyotes, which entered the century that just ended in that instant*] (Garro 1964:28). As such, Nacha cleans the kitchen for the last time, completing both her literal and symbolic role in the Aldama household. Nonetheless, Nacha’s symbolic role as a bridge permitting Laura’s explorations takes priority; after Laura leaves, Nacha states that she no longer feels at home and leaves immediately, declaring: “voy a buscarme otro destino” [*I am going to find another destiny*] (29).

By returning to the kitchen, Garro not only recentralizes a feminine space but emphasizes the nonlinear nature of time in the story. Significantly, this scene marks the ending of a cycle. That is, the ultimate reunion of Laura and her *primo marido* represents the fulfillment of his prophecy: that they would become one and unite their worlds—worlds which he once depicted as separate lines. With the union of Laura and her *primo marido*’s timelines, Nacha is at last able to clean the continually emerging blood that Laura was unable to prevent or remove. Nacha’s unique power to erase these marks reveals her critical role; as a modern-day Indigenous woman, her agency in interrogating historic (and continued) violence against Indigenous women is vital in the process of re-evaluating Mexican historical discourses and realities. The final erasure of this blood by Nacha suggests the potential healing that a more equitable valorization of perspectives could inspire in the future.

Because this possibility emerges from the coming together of Laura and Nacha, Garro underlines the critical position of women reexamining the past, examining masculinist histories,

and challenging patriarchal gender constructions. Further, Garro suggests that Laura's escape also liberates Nacha, as she vows to leave the Aldama household to find a more fulfilling future. Because Nacha also serves as a La Malinche symbol in the text, her promise to determine her own fate is significant; while Laura's union with her Indigenous world leads her back to the time of the Spanish Conquest, Nacha can freely navigate her future, reminding others and encouraging silenced voices to express their truth. The liberatory nature of this final scene reveals the necessity for women to examine national memory and address its traumas, gaps, and inaccuracies; Garro suggests that by including the voices of the silenced and centralizing the experiences of the marginalized, all of society can find redemption. While these redemptions manifest differently—Laura unites with her former love yet must face the Spanish Conquest, while Nacha's future suggests more open-ended possibilities—both individuals choose their fate. Laura inserts herself permanently into the past, while Nacha embraces a more liberating future.

### **Conclusion**

Garro's "La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" is a striking examination of female Mexican identity and the role of women in constructing historical discourses. By incorporating the mythic, the fantastic, and blended identities through her use of magical realism, Garro interrogates two worlds: contemporary Mexico and Laura's Indigenous community during the Spanish Conquest. Accordingly, Garro's work exposes and considers the perpetual influence of the historical past and the mythic past on the present moment. In addition, by paralleling Laura's guilt and feelings of betrayal with the La Malinche myth, Garro's work restructures this cultural symbol.

Laura, unlike La Malinche, is able to play an active role in her narrative and provides a detailed account of her experiences, thoughts, and beliefs to Nacha. As such, "La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" humanizes La Malinche and reveals the difficult position she occupied as a young

woman sold as a slave to Cortés and his army. The humanization of La Malinche is vital; as the only Indigenous woman recorded as a major player in the Spanish Conquest, historians, philosophers, artists, and theorists have mythologized, deified, and demonized her in a variety of ways. As Margo Glantz (2001) writes, “cuando las mujeres descuellan se tiende a deshistorizarlas y a convertirlas en mitos” [*when women stand out, they tend to be dehistoricized and converted into myths*] (103). By paralleling qualities of La Malinche with modern-day Mexican women, Garro radically revises the historical tendency to mythify this controversial figure and falsely reduce her to a passive victim of circumstance or an active traitor of her culture.

Like Antonio Ruíz’s painting *El sueño de La Malinche*, La Malinche invites a variety of interpretations. Her influence as a cultural symbol continues to shape contemporary discourses of Mexican national identity and the role of women in Mexico’s history. Though Ruíz’s Malinche slumbers beneath a modern Mexican *pueblo*, Garro’s Malinche figures are wide awake—actively critiquing their present circumstances, confronting violence, narrating stories, and re-examining the past. Garro thus paints a different portrait of La Malinche: one in which she opens her eyes and throws off the blanket. In Garro’s story, Malinche examines her *own* history and rejects the portrayals imposed on her from those seeking a female scapegoat for the victory of the Spanish.

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