Malinche was a whore, but since everything this woman did was on a grand scale, so too was her whoring. She, a Mexican, made herself the honored concubine to Cortés, the Spanish conqueror of Mexico. (Shedd 1971)

There are those who call me *La Chingada*, who say I was a whore. They lie. A whore sells her body, but I gave mine, and gave my heart and gave my mind until the bitter last. There are those who call me traitoress. Liars. I betrayed no one. I was betrayed. Monstrously betrayed, cruelly betrayed. But from the very hour of my birth I seemed marked for a strange destiny. (Lewis Brandt 1979)

Doña Marina occupies a prominent, if dubious, place in collective imagination, as the quotations provided above indicate. Both Margaret Shedd’s statement, taken from the preface of her 1971 novel, and Jane Lewis Brandt’s statement, excerpted from the first sentences of her 1979 novel, respond to a long-standing popular conception of Marina as Mexico’s national emblem of defiled wom-
anhood, a traitor, and a whore. According to Shedd, Marina is no longer a mere whore; she is a highly successful self-propelled whore, responding in the most astute way possible to circumstances she cannot change. According to Brandt, she is not a whore at all but a misunderstood participant in romantic love, again a victim of circumstance. These epigraphs are also representative of a fundamental and international shift in the twentieth century, whereby artists, poets, performers, playwrights, and novelists have actively and diversely appropriated and reinterpreted this historical figure. The multifarious and complex mythology surrounding Marina probably derives, at least in part, from a paucity of surviving historical facts. Beginning in the first decades following the Spanish conquest of Mexico, the compelling circumstances of her life were embellished. This study will demonstrate that even the earliest pictorial representations of Marina, such as those found in the sixteenth-century Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain (Sahagún 1950-1982) and Lienzo de Tlaxcala (Chavero 1979), betray the biases of their creators, who construct Marina according to their cultural needs and political aims.

Nearly five hundred years ago, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Marina was born to a cacique, or chief, in the Nahuatl-speaking area of Coatzacoalcos, located at the northern end of the isthmus of Tehuantepec in the modern Mexican state of Veracruz. Though she began her life in surroundings appropriate to her noble lineage, her circumstances changed dramatically after her father died. Her mother, upon remarrying, gave her child away to the people of Xicalango, a coastal Chontal Maya area approximately 200 kilometers to the east. Subsequently, she was passed along as a slave to coastal Maya-speaking people farther west along the Tabasco coast. In 1519, these people gave her and twenty other women to the Spanish commander Hernando Cortés as part of an appeasement gift after they unsuccessfully attacked the invading Spanish forces (Cortés 1986: 376). Cortés had all of the women baptized, at which time she received her Christian name, Marina. In apportioning the women, Cortés took Marina’s lineage into account and gave her to the most highly ranked Spaniard in his party, Alonso Hernández de Puertocarrero. After about a month, Cortés realized the bilingual
Marina’s great value as a translator and potential diplomat. Jerónimo de Aguilar, a Spaniard who had been shipwrecked and enslaved by the Yucatec Maya several years earlier, had been translating between the Maya and Spanish languages after his rescue by Cortés. Marina provided the crucial link between Maya and Náhuatl, the central Mexican language spoken at Tenochtitlan, the capital city of Motecuhzoma’s vast empire. Cortés took Marina back, and from that moment on she became instrumental in the conquest.

Early historical and visual accounts of the conquest generally include Marina, although they grant her varying degrees of importance. For example, as Karttunen (1994:20) points out, in Cortés’ own accounts he refers to her by name only once, in a letter to the Spanish king Charles V, and then without the respectful title “Doña.” Doris Heyden (Durán 1994:499, n. 4) criticizes the History of the Indies of New Spain by the sixteenth-century missionary writer Fray Diego Durán, claiming that Marina “is not given her proper role by Durán, while other historians, such as Bernal Díaz del Castillo, emphasize her key position in the subjection of the Aztecs.” Among the early colonial painted manuscripts, Marina appears occasionally in works like the Codex Azcatitlan (Barlow and Graulich 1995) but makes her most frequent appearances in “The Conquest of Mexico,” Book 12 of the Franciscan missionary Bernardino de Sahagún’s Florentine Codex, and in the Lienzo de Tlaxcala. The extant versions of these last two documents, originally executed in post-conquest Mexico during the latter half of the sixteenth century, contain some of the earliest pictorial representations of Doña Marina.

Book 12 of the Florentine Codex recounts the story of the conquest. Indigenous assistants, trained and directed by the Spanish friar Bernardo de Sahagún, attempted to record aspects of pre-Hispanic life in the Florentine Codex by interviewing Mexica nobles who had survived the conquest (Sahagún 1950-1982, I:12). The compilers recorded the data gathered in pictorial images and Nahuatl text, while Sahagún provided a partial Spanish translation.4

The original Lienzo de Tlaxcala consisted of eighty-eight scenes depicted in a grid-like format in thirteen horizontal rows on linen
(Glass 1975:214). The Indian city of Tlaxcala commissioned the record in 1552 as part of a campaign for favors from the Spanish crown. The Tlaxcalans sought to appeal to the Spanish authorities by reminding them of the important role they had played as allies in the conquest of Mexico. Though the original and earliest copies of the Lienzo disappeared by the nineteenth-century, many versions were made. The Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin holds what may be the oldest surviving copy, painted during the sixteenth century on maguey paper (Stone 1984:7). Only four scenes, however, remain on this fragment. The more complete version used here is a 1979 black and white reprint of a color copy made by the Mexican historian Alfredo Chavero and originally published in Mexico in 1892 (Chavero 1979).

Both manuscripts in their various forms, reveal a mixture of native and European influences. They are based on native paintings whose pictures and signs, representing names, dates, places, and events, popularly referred to as glyphs, functioned as both visual history and mnemonic devices used to stimulate oral recitation. The oral version would have included additional details and elaborations. The presence of glyphs, discrete figural forms, and flatness in representation contribute to an overall pre-Hispanic appearance in the Florentine Codex and the Lienzo. At times, European tendencies are expressed in the emphasis on naturalism, volume, and the grouping of forms.

This collaboration of influences can be extended to include the circumstances of production. Sahagún, a Spaniard, deployed the memory of elderly native informants and the artistic abilities of younger missionary-trained assistants who recorded the information. The indigenous artists of the Lienzo took the Spanish and Tlaxcalan alliance as their subject and produced their work with a Spanish audience in mind. Although both works resulted from shared European and indigenous experiences, they have different emphases and biases. In short, the Florentine Codex represents what has been called the version of the vanquished, while the Lienzo de Tlaxcala accentuates a Tlaxcalan-aided Spanish victory.
In many respects, the artists of both works create similar versions of Marina. In all of the images, she wears traditional indigenous dress, which consists of a long skirt with a large tunic, or huipilli, worn over the top. The huipilli has a modest v-necked opening with a rectangular patch beneath it. This costume ranges from simply decorated to more elaborately patterned. Spatial devices throughout link Marina to Cortés and the Spaniards. In most instances she appears between persons or groups in the act of translating. Her hands gesture as she interprets, pointing to one or the other participant in the conversation. However, despite initial similarities, the Florentine Codex and the Lienzo do represent Marina in distinctly separate ways. Disparities exist in the number of times Marina is recorded in each, in her appearance, in the context in which she occurs, and in her positioning. These disparities suggest different interpretations of her identity.

While Book 12 of the Florentine Codex includes her in several crucially important scenes, she appears only seven times out of one hundred sixty-one images. She appears in the frontispiece which depicts the “Landing of the Spaniards.” She also appears in six other scenes: “Moctezuma’s messengers present gifts to Cortés,” “Marina interprets for Cortés,” “Marina interprets for the Spaniards when Moctezuma meets Cortés,” “Marina addresses Mexican noblemen,” “People of Teocalhueyacan comfort the Spaniards,” and “People of Teocalhueyacan welcome the Spaniards” (Sahagún 1950-1982, Book 12, plates 1, 12, 22, 44, 51, 94, 101).

In the frontispiece, the Spaniards unload their ships on the shore after landing (fig. 1). The depiction includes many of the foreign domestic animals that the Spaniards had brought with them. In the lower right hand corner three horses appear. A dog, pigs, and a cow cluster in the lower left. On the right, beneath the arc which “heralds the dawn of the Christian era,” Marina stands (Maturo 1994:2). According to art historian Carol Maturo (1994:2), Marina speaks Nahuatl to the indigenous man on her right. She translates the Nahuatl into Yucatec. Aguilar, on her left, translates Marina’s Yucatec into Spanish. Cortés, or perhaps a scribe or secretary, seated below, records information gathered from the exchange. As is typical of most
Florentine Codex images, Marina performs her most important function, translating.

While the artists of the *Florentine Codex* featured Marina only seven times, she appears quite frequently in the *Lienzo*. Of the *Lienzo*'s forty-eight scenes on the conquest, Marina is found with Cortés in sixteen and as an independent figure in four others. The image titled “Quitlaqualmacaque” ("They gave him food"), represents a typical scene from the *Lienzo* (fig. 2). Cortés sits in a Spanish chair with Marina translating beside him. Identifiable by their distinctive knotted cotton headdresses, the Tlaxcalans stand on the left.
The Tlaxcalan leader, whose status is denoted by the long feathers in his headdress, sits on another Spanish chair, though the artist positions him below Cortés. On his right hand he counts off the gifts or tribute that he offers to the conquistador.

The two manuscripts vary slightly in the details of Marina’s appearance. In the Florentine Codex she always appears with her hair wound up, in a traditional central Mexican style, with two small knots on top of her head. In contrast, the Lienzo depicts her with long loose hair parted down the middle (cf. figs. 1 and 2). Marina is barefooted in all Florentine Codex images, while in the Lienzo versions she wears European-style shoes. The Florentine Codex images sometimes show Marina with the native sign for speech, a curved volute,
emanating from her mouth. Chavero’s copy of the Lienzo never utilizes speech scrolls.

Neither version of Marina depicts individual likeness. In the Florentine Codex the simple rendering of body and features varies from image to image, reflecting the different artists’ individual styles and taste. For example, in “Marina interprets for Cortés” (fig. 3), Marina appears rather massive with very large hands and feet. By comparison, in the depiction of the people of Teocalhueyacan welcoming the Spaniards after their retreat from Tenochtitlan following the Noche Triste (fig. 4), Marina is much smaller and wears more richly decorated clothing. The entire scene is rendered more naturalistically, in greater detail, with a more European sense of volume, and it makes use of the pre-Hispanic volute for speech. The simple rendering and the varied artistic interpretations, coupled with the fact that the artists most likely never saw Marina, preclude a portrayal of individual likeness.

In Chavero’s copy of the Lienzo, all images are rendered by one hand and consequently attain a consistency unparalleled in the Florentine Codex. This consistency may be artificial. It is unclear whether the original Lienzo was painted by one or several artists. Like
the Florentine Codex images, however, no attempt at portrait-like resemblance is made. This becomes apparent in the scene titled “Quitlauhtique” (“They presented him with gifts”) (fig. 5). The scene represents five Tlaxcalan lords offering gifts to Cortés, among which are their five daughters, accompanied by their mothers and ladies in waiting. All of the women in this tightly clustered group have features nearly identical to those of Marina, who stands and translates near Cortés’ seat. Even in the University of Texas fragment, where the clothing is differentiated, the individual features remain undistinguished (Stone 1984:6, fig. 1). The generic female representation seems to connote simply a version of youthful beauty.
This non-specific approach to physical identity, traditional in the pre-Hispanic period, remains consistent throughout both the Florentine Codex and the Lienzo de Tlaxcala. Individuals and groups are instead identified primarily by their clothing, attributes, size, and positioning. For example, in “Quitlauhtique” (fig. 5) Marina appears in the same traditional indigenous dress as the other women, but she is distinguished by her larger size, her proximity to Cortés, and the hand gestures which show her in the act of translating. Jeanette Favrot Peterson (1994:191) reads such positioning as a testimony to Marina’s high rank, explaining that: “According to prehispanic canons of representation, location, and scale dictated hierarchy in rank. . . . In her dress, posture, and pivotal location Malinche is thus constructed as a woman of high rank.”
Both the Florentine Codex and the Lienzo de Tlaxcala portray Marina in a manner consistent with her noble birth. Though a slave and a concubine, representations of Marina in the early manuscripts align more with sixteenth-century descriptions of noblewomen than with subsequent and overwhelmingly prevalent understandings of her as la puta or la chingada (derogatory terms which translate loosely as “a whore” and “one who is sexually violated”).

Book 10 of the Florentine Codex, titled “The People,” records information about different types of indigenous people and groups, including several descriptions and accompanying illustrations of noblewomen and “evil” women. Among various attributes, the noblewoman, “is one who merits obedience; [she is] honorable, of high standing—to be heeded. A modest woman, a true woman, accomplished in the ways of women, she is also vigorous, famed, esteemed, fierce, stern” (Sahagún, Book 10:45). Many of the descriptions sound similar, defining the noblewoman as “a protector, meritorious of obedience, revered, worthy of being obeyed; a taker of responsibilities, a bearer of burdens—famed, venerable, renowned” (Sahagún, Book 10:46). Though images of Marina do not entirely agree with these characterizations—Marina did, after all, have decidedly unique circumstances—they seem to describe her in these favorable terms. She often appears, in the Florentine Codex and in the Lienzo, protecting Spanish interests loyally and managing her great responsibilities and burdens gracefully. Moreover, her frequent presence testifies to her importance.

The two manuscripts avoid portraying her as a bad noblewoman, “enraged, unjust, disturbed, troubled,” and “given to vice, drinking, drunkenness” (Sahagún, Book 10:45-6). Nor do they portray her as a harlot, “a young woman [or] an evil old woman, besotted, drunk—very drunk, much besotted; dejected, perverse . . . a free yielder of herself, a whore from the brothel, a deflowered one . . . . She appears like a flower, looks gaudy, arrays herself gaudily; she views herself in a mirror” (Sahagún, Book 10:55). The illustration of the harlot in the Florentine Codex presents a woman with unkempt hair and gaudily colored clothing, holding flowers and standing in an ungraceful posture (fig. 6). By contrast, even with her long hair untied in the
Lienzo, Marina is far more dignified than the Florentine Codex descriptions and illustrations of "evil" women.

Marina's context in these two manuscripts also varies. In the Florentine Codex, Book 12, she generally translates in non-violent situations. For example, the artists include her in the scene of the people of Teocalhueyacan welcoming the Spaniards (fig. 4), but not in any of the scenes of conflict that led up to that moment. Nor does she appear in any of the many battle scenes that follow. In the Lienzo, however, she engages in many different types of activity. Some scenes emphasize her role in battle, while others highlight her role in Christian conversion. Marina's participation in battle scenes implies an element of danger and camaraderie unmatched in the Florentine Codex images. She appears in some battle scenes at the rear of the troops and, in the portrayal of the battle at Tepotzotlan, she holds a shield and a sword (fig. 7). Such images suggest that she played an integral role in the many conflicts that occurred during the conquest.
Presumably, she helped to unify Cortés’ forces on the battlefield by translating, even as she defended herself alongside the men. In these images, there is no question as to her alliances. She participates actively in the battle scenes rather than functioning strictly as a diplomat.

Additionally, Marina’s role in Christian conversion is played out in the Lienzo, but not in the Florentine Codex. In their attempt to appeal to Cortés, the Tlaxcalans emphasized this aspect of the conquest. For example, “Ycmonavatecque tlaxcalla” (“When they embraced in Tlaxcala”) (fig. 8) depicts Cortés grasping the arm of a Tlaxcalan noble beneath a large, centrally located cross. On one sidestand Tlaxcalans, whose fancy dress, ear plugs, and feather headdresses signify their high status. On the other side, Marina
appears, tucked behind a flag and positioned between the figure of Cortés and an unidentified Spanish figure. Marina seems to appear here for translation purposes, although her gesturing hands cannot be seen. Cortés wears civilian clothing rather than armor, emphasizing the civil atmosphere. The Tlaxcalans appear to accept, or at least tolerate, Christianity along with the alliance. In another scene titled “Ycmoquayateq que tlatoque” (“When the lords were baptized”) (fig. 9), a Christian image, this time a portrait of the virgin and child, again dominates the central area. The scene depicts four indigenous nobles being baptized while Cortés looks on and Marina presumably translates the Christian concepts.
Figure 9. "Yemoquayateq que tlatoque" ("When the lords were baptized"), *El Lienzo de Tlaxcala* (Chavero 1979, Pl. 8)

Though other sources corroborate Marina’s command of Christian concepts (see Cypess 1991:25), Carol Maturo (1994:97), suggests that these scenes, like others in the *Lienzo*, are largely fictitious. Meant to demonstrate the alliances between Tlaxcalans and Spaniards, "When they embraced in Tlaxcala" (fig. 8) summarizes two events. The first was the initial meeting between Cortés and Tlaxcalan leaders, probably at Tizatlan. As Maturo (1991: 97) explains, "The cross symbolizes the second event. As a consequence of the alliance, Cortés had a cross erected in one of the temples after it had been cleansed of all images of the gods." Both "When they embraced in Tlaxcala" and "When the lords were baptized" (figs. 8 and 9) obscure the fact that Christianity was not accepted without conflict and many Tlaxcalan lords and principal nobles resisted conversion.
Like many histories, the Lienzo clearly reveals the underlying motives and biases of its creators.

On occasion, images from the Lienzo articulate Marina's identity as distinct from that of the powerful figure of Cortés. Though she generally appears immediately adjacent to Cortés, several exceptions exist. For example, the battle scene at Tepotzotlan, described earlier, emphasizes Marina's role as a valuable member of the troops rather than as the personal translator and concubine of Cortés (fig. 7). In another scene titled "Aychqualco" (fig. 10), Marina appears very much like the other warriors as she sleeps with her knapsack and shield close at hand.
In one rather exceptional instance, Marina stands out as an individual and as a significant leader. In the image of “Chololla” (fig. 11), she appears on the far right of the battlefield. She does not appear among a mass of warriors here, but is figured in full-length. Peterson (1994:193) describes the events at Cholula as a turning point early in the Spanish campaign which “highlights Malinche’s [Marina’s] independence and assertiveness. Although she was one of several individuals who learned of the putative Cholulan plot to ambush the Spaniards, she is singled out as the only individual who could convince Cortés of the treachery.” The position of her hands seems to indicate that she is translating, although the parties involved are unclear. In Maturo’s (1994:107) opinion, she seems to stand alone, "motivating the Spaniards, represented by the man on horseback and by the armored knight on the steps of Quetzalcoatl’s temple, to
military action." The position of her hands may also serve as a device used to make her easily identifiable in the absence of Cortés.

A similar portrayal of Marina operating autonomously, though less clearly articulated, exists in the Florentine Codex (fig. 12). In this scene Marina appears on a rooftop terrace with a Spaniard, addressing Mexican noblemen who are represented by the single figure below. After the capture of the Aztec ruler Motecuhzoma, the Aztecs began withholding food and supplies from the Spaniards. The speech scrolls indicate that she is in dialogue with the noble below, telling him to resume delivery. The Spaniard beside her holds out his
hand in a beseeching gesture, emphasizing the desperateness of the circumstances. Though not a battle scene with immediately threatening circumstances, this episode shows Marina operating with some autonomy. Peterson (1994:194) points out that in the Florentine Codex the Nahuatl texts tend to assign responsibility and direct action to Marina, while the Spanish translations present her as more of a passive player, the translator of Cortés’ words. For example, the Spanish text accompanying this image states that: “Then Captain don Hernando Cortés gave orders through Marina, who was his interpreter... She began to call loudly to the Mexica tecutles [lords] and piles [nobles] to come to give the Spaniards the necessary food” (Lockhart 1993:125). In “Marina addresses Mexican noblemen” (fig. 12) she appears to fall more in line with native conceptions. She actively converses with the Mexican below, while no speech scrolls emanate from the mouth of the Spaniard behind her.

**Conclusions**

Overall, the Florentine Codex portrays Marina in a manner slightly different from that of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala. Her importance as a translator and her presence at key events in the conquest is recorded, however, not with the same breadth as that found in the Lienzo. Perhaps the survivors of the conquest who recorded these images did not wish to represent the presence of a woman among their conquerors or did not accept that women, particularly of noble descent, might be present on the battlefield. The Tlaxcalans, on the other hand, may have felt that frequent portrayal of Marina could enhance their cause in some way. As one of the most important members of Cortés’ expedition, she symbolized the value of indigenous allies.

Although these early manuscripts say much about Marina’s role as a translator and diplomat in the conquest, many aspects of her life were apparently not recorded. While numerous writers and artists documented Cortés’ life and exploits, Marina’s life history tended to fade away in the areas not touched by the Spanish leader. Both the
similarities are what strike us most. Both focus on Marina's role in the conquest as translator and assistant to Cortés, and neither portrays her nationalism and sexuality in derogatory terms. In fact, her sexual relations with Cortés, a focal point in the collective myth that has risen up around her, are never explicitly revealed in the images of the Florentine Codex and the Lienzo de Tlaxcala.

Roland Barthes writes that:

In fact, nothing can be safe from myth, myth can develop its second-order schema from any meaning and, as we saw, start from the very lack of meaning. But all languages do not resist equally well.

Articulated language, which is most often robbed by myth, offers little resistance. (1993: 131)

The depictions of Marina in the early manuscripts derive from a native oral tradition that used images as mnemonic devices to spur oral recitations of history. This, combined with the relative scarcity of other written documentation on Marina's life, suggests, in light of Barthes, that the figure of Marina is particularly ripe as subject matter for myth-making. In each generation, artists, writers, and the public at large have transformed Marina into a scapegoat for social ills or a bearer of their fantasies, ideals, and standards. At the end of his recent book Doña Marina, La Malinche, biographer Ricardo Herren (1992:164) suggests that Marina will finally be left in peace. To the contrary, I conclude that she will continue to function as a most malleable glyph, a constantly expanding sign with multivalent meanings that will change according to the needs, whims, and desires of future generations.
Notes

1. Parts of this paper have been presented at the Indiana University Art History Symposium, Bloomington, IN (1998), Southeast College Art Conference, Miami, FL (1998), and College Art Association Conference, Los Angeles, CA (1999).

2. Doña Marina is also called Malina, Mariana, Malintzin, Malinche, Malinalli, and Malinalli Tenepal. I am following the Náhuatl scholar Frances Karttunen, who suggests that the above are corruptions of the name Marina. Marina was the name Cortés assigned to this woman at baptism and is the only name whose origins we definitively know (See Karttunen 1994:5-6).

3. The basic outline of Marina’s life, provided here, derives from accounts by the conquistador Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1956) and Cortés’ biographer, Francisco López de Gómara (Simpson 1964).


5. See Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson (1986:51) for the commission. This was brought to my attention by Karttunen (1997:292).

6. All translations of the Lienzo’s illustration titles are from Maturo 1994.

7. Compare Marina’s footwear with the Tlaxcalan sandals in Figure 2. Marina’s European-style shoes are most clearly articulated in Figure 11 and are clearly marked in the University of Texas fragment.

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