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Wild Negotiations: Dolores Del Río's Filmic Identity in 1940s Cinema

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Hollywood star, María Dolores Asúnsolo López-Negrete, best known as Dolores del Río, was admired for her beauty and cross-over appeal during her career (1930-1960s). Since her first role in *Joanna* (1925), the construction and marketing of del Río as a cinematic star has captured the spectator's social imagination and presents images of Latinas that are beautiful, "exotic," accessible, translatable, and consumable. Body and language play vital roles in constructing the image spectators have grown to expect from del Río. Her filmic identity negotiates the "wilderness of theory or difference" Elaine Showalter discusses in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," and which film theorist Linda Williams examines as the "wild zone" in "A Jury of Their Peers: Marleen Gorris's *A Question of Silence*." Del Río's identity exemplifies how her career was bound by language that constructs Latina culture and sexuality within a patriarchal ideology. I demonstrate how del Río utilizes her roles in the films *María Candelaria: A Love Story of Mexico's Floating Gardens* (1943) and *The Fugitive* (1947) to negotiate the "wilderness of difference" that women actresses struggled through in the early twentieth century.

Showalter explains that "Feminist critics may be startled to find ourselves in this band of theoretical pioneers, since in the American literary tradition the wilderness has been an exclusively masculine domain. Yet between feminist ideology and the liberal ideal of disinterestedness lies the wilderness of theory, which we too must make our home" (180). She explicates that "We may never reach the promised land at all; for when feminist critics see our task as the study of women's writing, we realize that the land promised to us is not the serenely undifferentiated universality of texts but the tumultuous and intriguing *wilderness of difference* itself" (205, italics mine). Concurrently, Williams' analysis of the "wild zone" marks the wilderness as a more segregated environment and,

not so much a subculture as a dual perspective of living and participating in a dominant male culture with boundaries that overlap, but do not entirely contain, the non-dominant, "muted" culture of women. She thus views male and female experience as two overlapping circles with much of the woman's muted circle falling within the two boundaries of the dominant circle but with a small crescent of experience that she dubs, following Edwin Ardener, a "wild zone" or "no-man's land" of woman's culture that is entirely off-limits to men. (432)

It is also in this metaphorical place where an actress runs "the risk to making a leap to a mythic level of female identity conceived outside the limits of all existing language, all 'known' reality" (432). Del Río traverses borders as a Latina actress and negotiates being typecast as the mythical Malintzín figure during her career. Tey Diana Rebolledo and Eliana S. Rivero describe la Malinche as a slave who,

when she was fourteen[...]was given again, among twenty women, to Hernán Cortés when he arrived in Mexico. Because she had the ability to speak both Nahuatl and Maya, and because Cortés had in his retinue a Spaniard, Jerónimo de Aguilar [...]who spoke Spanish and Maya, she was from the beginning placed in a central role as translator. From there she became Cortés's mistress. Her name became synonymous with that of the conqueror and by the twentieth century in Mexico, the word Malinche or Malinchista was identified with a person who betrays his or her country. (191)

Since del Río was offered these roles of the fallen women, her approach in performing these parts exemplifies the importance of situating a character in the "wild zone" as a way to theorize culture in the "wilderness of difference" in feminist studies. Thus, this essay investigates the way del Río maneuvered the typecast roles she was offered and negotiated the "wilderness of difference" of 1940's cinema culture while offering spectators entrance into a dialogue about women's roles in the patriarchal film industry.

Del Río's leading roles in *María Candelaria* and *The Fugitive* are significantly both named María: these roles define the woman as willing to betray her community for her own needs—taking on the cross-over dilemma. In *María Candelaria*, the protagonist is portrayed in the traditional tale of la Malinche, often considered a traitor to her own

race, while the character in *The Fugitive* is a reformulation of this tale and references la Malinche as representing agency, something often ignored in historical accounts of this figure and paralleling del Río's struggle to keep her image from escaping her control. In all aspects, the character of María Candelaria makes the leap to the mythical—to the “wild zone.” Thus, with this film, a conscious effort is required from the spectator to make these connections.

Conversely, del Río's role in *The Fugitive* escapes the mythical, and in this film, the female protagonist allows for the role to maintain some integrity as a text that can instruct those in the “wilderness of difference.” The protagonist, María Dolores, exists within the “wilderness of difference,” a place where the female protagonist can find agency and is “based on a model of women's culture” (Showalter 197), but only in its analysis of the double-voiced discourse model (Showalter 204). The two Marías in these films become symbolic of del Río's career as it was defined by her ethnicity, race and national loyalties, and where she fought and maintained a position within the patriarchal workings of Hollywood. The “wild zone's” use of archetypes positions women as not maintaining social mores, and as deficient and defiled; it also creates a filmic language used to give a scripted voice to women. Williams' “wild zone” describes the quandary for women's roles that fall inside of this zone, and portrays the risks a feminist artist must undertake in pushing the limits of patriarchy. Del Río's films offer ample opportunity to understand how women characters negotiate language, and the “wilderness of difference” provides a space, “the wild zone,” for an interpretation that may lead to a feminist cinematic apparatus that contains myth as story. Thus, if as Showalter explains, “wild is always imaginary; from the male point of view, it may simply be the projection of the unconscious,” (200) then the “wild zone” within the “wilderness of difference” translates myth into a projection of a woman's reality. Myth then is the tool by which del Río spoke to various audiences—female and male, and Mexican and American—while writing the story of two mythic figures (la Malinche and la Virgen de Guadalupe) onto her single body/text.

As del Río's popularity in the United States and Mexico illustrate, she was successful in speaking to two different audiences through a cultural lens—negotiating two muted spaces (feminine and cultural). Even as she tackled trying to please two very different publics, del Río demonstrates an awareness of the concept of betrayal of one country for the other and its role in her career. In fact, as her career reveals, marketing her image was dependant on the construction of her social identity as faithful to the specific country in which she was working—either Mexico or the United States. Thus, although del Río strategically resisted being typecast, in the end playing these roles was necessary to prolong her career. Chon A. Noriega clarifies in *Chicanos and Film* that while in Hollywood, del Río often did not accept roles that insulted her ethnic heritage, turned down cantina girl roles, and “rejected studio press publicity which falsely identified [her] as ‘Spanish,’” while “insisting that [she] be identified as Mexican” (24-25). She worked against adopting the label of “Spanish” as part of her social identity because it would have moved her away from her Mexican audience. Her insistence on being Mexican illustrates the strength the concept of becoming a *vendida* (“sell-out”) has on cross-over actors attempting to maintain a successful career within a business whose foundation depends on the selling of Americanized images.

Thus, the figure of la Malinche in the “wild zone” helped del Río resist and examine the concept of la *vendida* in the “wilderness of difference,” or the ideology that makes up patriarchy and cultural supremacy. La Malinche referenced the first woman to be titled a *vendida*, when she bore the first mestizo child, born of Spanish and Indigenous heritage with the conqueror Cortes. Del Río draws on the power of the popular archetypal figure and crosses the U.S./Mexico border with an image that challenged modernization and the colonization of Mexico's traditions by the United States. Much of del Río's work demonstrates that during a time when the U.S. was facing war (WWI and WWII) and the border between the two countries continued to be a site of conflict, the figure of la Malinche, a traitor to Mexico, was able to cross into the United States and successfully become a part of that nationalistic and cultural imagination. Consequently, del Río assumed the form of a go-between that brought the modernity of the U.S. into Mexico and that reminded the U.S. of the traditions that their industrialized culture was quickly losing. Both publics took hold of those images and that led to her popularity within Hollywood and Mexican cinema.

Whether she played María Candelaria in the film by the same name, or María Dolores in *The Fugitive*, she reminded viewers on both sides of the border that as an image representing Mexican women (la Malinche), she symbolized value and tradition for both societies. In *Inventing Dolores del Río*, Joanne Hershfield writes: “In addition to being ‘exotic’ and ‘aristocratic,’ del Río was feminine. Her positioning as a ‘feminine’ woman who preferred long hair and a stylish, classic wardrobe to the bobbed hair, slim sheaths, and short hems of the flapper set her apart and above the ‘average’ American beauty. Hollywood repeatedly emphasized that she came from a very wealthy ‘ancient’ Mexican family of ‘Spanish blood’ and spoke five languages” (10). Her marketed body symbolized the border consciousness of a cross-over actress by filling the national imagination with images of aristocracy, Spanish blood, traditional dress,

and romanticized notions of women. Thus, negotiating the “wild zone” made her career dependant on the use of her body as text. Del Río’s body was defined by her public(ized) class status, gender and race; and all three were complicated by their changing nature in the Hollywood marketplace, dependent upon the public’s social needs. As Hershfield elucidates, del Río’s body was the text the directors and the studio constructed:

Ultimately, although she often played the cinematic role of a lower-class “bad woman,” del Río’s public persona was that of a high-class ethnic woman of impeccable morals. This personal and private identity was carefully crafted by [Edwin] Carewe, by [Henry] Wilson, by the studios that produced her films, and by del Río herself. Her real-life transgressions (her husband, from whom she was separated, died in Europe in the midst of rumors that she was having an affair with Carewe) seemed to have little effect on this persona. (10)

Because del Río’s body was marked as overtly feminine and racialized through a class-based perspective, she was typecast into roles that worked off her sexuality and “foreignness.” In fact, director Edwin Carewe and publicist Henry Wilson successfully used the image of the exotic beauty to market del Río to the public (Hershfield 9). Carewe and Wilson designed her image through marketing her body, thus her popularity “peaked during the silent period as she became the victim of increasing type-casting in ethnic and exotic roles, particularly during the sound era, because of her Latin accent” (Keller 106). Consequently, as her future career proved, she would continue to be marked by her Spanish accent and aristocratic body. The combination of body, sexuality, language, and race are reminiscent of la Malinche’s story of being a traitor to her people because of her translation skills, beauty and sexuality.

In fact, the Mexican public challenged del Río’s career choices even before she returned to Mexico to continue her cinematic career. Her role in the 1932 film, *Girl of the Río*, depicts del Río as a stereotypical young Mexican girl who is naïve, virtuous and who speaks with a broken accent. Her role in this film made del Río’s transition back into Mexican cinema difficult at best as,

officials considered *Girl of the Río* to be “offensive” and permitted it to be “exhibited only in a censored version.” Mexican officials ultimately prohibited the distribution of the film in Mexico on the basis of the negative portrayal of Leo Carillo’s Don Jose. Del Río apologized to her country for her role in the film. Apparently, she had insisted that the action take place somewhere in the Mediterranean, but was overruled by RKO. (Hershfield 41)

Consequently, del Río had to regain the trust of the Mexican public. Her later career decisions illustrate her careful choices, such as refusing to star in *Viva Villa!*, which would have marked her as unpatriotic to Mexico (Hershfield 53). Del Río’s later career choices would also uncover and demystify her underlying sense of self as an actress trying to appease Mexican and U.S. audiences.

In her discussion of the body through a material feminist lens, Rosemary Hennessy illustrates that, “a feminism that aims to understand the discursive construction of ‘woman’ across multiple modalities of difference—race, class, gender, sexuality—requires a problematic that *can explain* the connection between discursive constructions of difference and the exploitative social arrangements that shape them” (*The Materiality of Discourse* 65-66). In many ways, Del Río made an effort to reject roles that reflected the stereotypical image of the “Mexican woman” in the public sector and those “exploitative social arrangements,” such as those the MGM executives created, that shaped her body, yet this positioned her against a definition of Mexico that is an intricately woven pattern of male-centered nationalism, religion (mainly Catholic) and class systems (the Spanish vs. los Indios). As Hershfield illustrates, “A movie star has no ‘personal identity’ (even though the person who inhabits a star’s body may claim such an identity). In other words, she is a figure composed of a presence and a set of discourses that symbolize an iconic identity” (xii). Thus, the general image viewers in the United States have of Mexico (which includes race, class, nationalism, etc.) is transferred onto the body of del Río. She becomes the signification of Mexico.

Thusly, *The Fugitive* and *María Candelaria* demonstrate that the use of the “wild zone” or the entrance into the “wilderness of difference” depends on the spectator’s and director’s gaze or positionality. Emilio Fernandez directed *María Candelaria* which, falling into the Malinche model, strongly suggests that women are to blame for their own misfortunes. The filming took place near Mexico City in the floating gardens, cementing the locale and the story firmly in the Mexican social imagination. This locale also set up the “wild zone” as the place where *María Candelaria*

is taken into the mythical realm, making del Río's indigenous self evident to her public. Thus, in negotiating her appearance in the "wilderness of difference," and in order for her career to survive, del Río needed to make this move to the indigenous and play this role in order to be accepted by the Mexican public after her part in *Girl of the Río*.

At the beginning of *María Candelaria*, the narrator (El Pintor) states that the story to be told is "timeless," "true," and "told time and again in the Bible." Yet, he also recalls that the "locale is fiction. It is merely a small state one thousand miles north or south of the equator—who knows?" Because the locale and story are not firmly set in the U.S. social imagination, del Río's character begins as more of a stereotype than a national mythological figure. Conversely, in *The Fugitive*, directed by John Ford for RKO studios, del Río's character is also a representation of la Malinche, but this time the image incorporates a sense of agency for the female protagonist. Because the filming took place in Mexico through a U.S. lens, it contains borderland consciousness discourse and takes part in reformulating national U.S. and Mexican archetypal myths.

In comparing del Río's performances in these two films, they provide entrance into "the imported cinematic apparatus." In "Tears and Desires: Women and Melodrama in the 'Old Mexican Cinema,'" Ana M. López writes, "Like Caliban in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, the colonized must learn to use the colonizer's 'words'—the imported cinematic apparatus—and learn the colonizer's language before he or she can even think of articulating his or her own speech: 'You taught me language and my profit on't is I know how to curse'" (257). This concept gives voice to the myth of la Malinche within a patriarchal discourse, within the wilderness of difference. The myth symbolizes oppression on many levels, and this apparatus teaches women how to discuss oppression while immersed in patriarchal discourse. In offering insight into this apparatus, Christine Delphy illustrates, "It is only from the point of view and life experience of women that their condition can be seen as oppression[...]*women's consciousness of being oppressed changes the definition of oppression itself*" (64). Akin to the birdcage metaphor, Showalter explains, "Observation from an exterior point of view could never be the same as comprehension from within" (199). Thus, the similarities as well as stark contrasts between these two films gives insight and definition to the subtleties of a feminist and border consciousness residing within the myth of la Malinche. This myth is complicated because she is not only defined within a Mexican gaze, but also by the way nationalism, gender and religion work in the United States. Because one film was made in Mexico and the other in the U.S., the intricacies of the Malinche figure illustrate some of the reasons del Río was a cross-over success. In addition, the figure of la Malinche allows possible movement from the "wild zone" to the "wilderness of difference" where dialogue can begin to occur.

Navigating the Floating Gardens

María Candelaria begins with an epitaph which reads, "Una tragedia de amor arrancada de un rincón indígena de México... Xochimilco en el año de 1909."¹ Fernandez draws on the romantic tragedy to shift the intended audience to that of the female spectator. The historical and political connotations (of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, when many women gained independence during the war) are subsumed by the romantic tragedy, leaving *María Candelaria* a beautiful, naïve and tragic woman. *María Candelaria* is a patriarchal interpretation of the Malinche myth and fully incorporates the whore/virgin dichotomy. The language of art and images used to construct this film gives credence to Lopez's "imported cinematic apparatus" whereby the individual mimics the colonizer's language. Connecting this back to Hennessey's idea of the body's connection to "exploitative social arrangements," (66) the problems that lie behind "blaming" the director's gender bias or chalking up Fernandez's portrayal of women to simply man versus woman is made complicated by the reality that he himself is regulated by Hollywood. Because many of Mexico's directors were learning the trade from MGM Studios, Fernandez's language surrounding the art and images found in the film are heavily informed by U.S. stereotypes of Mexico.

This influence is apparent as the film's discourse is steadfastly placed inside the "wild zone." Although *María* is dangerously beautiful and faithfully chaste, the community ignores her purity, defining those qualities into those they can comprehend. They equate beauty with loose sexuality. When she and her betrothed Lorenzo Rafael travel to a nearby village to sell their produce and flowers, it is her beauty that endangers Lorenzo's honor. Whenever *María* leaves her home, she walks with her eyes downcast and covers her face with mud (or with her rebozo) to disguise her beauty and not be noticed; yet she continues to be haunted by responses to her body. In "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification," Miriam Hansen explains the danger hidden in the beautiful female face: "Whenever a woman initiates the look, she is invariably marked as vamp, to be condemned and defeated in the course of the narrative" (587). This theory is further developed because *María* never initiates the look, but is condemned nevertheless. This is the case when el Pintor (the painter from the U.S. who uses her as a model for his work) gazes on *María's* beauty for the first

time in the market. She does not see him gazing at her. Her victimization is obvious as the passive recipient of visual violence (stares and glares from men and women and sexual innuendos from men) and later physical violence (stoned to death by the community).

In constructing María's beauty within the Malinche myth, the film relies heavily on stereotypes of the indigenous population of Mexico by opening with a shot of three statues of Aztec gods. This shot then dissolves to a close-up of María's face where she bears a similar expression to the statue she was "born from," and the spectator catches a glimpse of the cultural and historical origins of her beauty. María is considered to be a piece of art by El Pintor whose comments denotatively construct her as a representation of an Aztec statue—a work of Art that he controls and commodifies. His words, "I paint Indians and find in her the rare delicate qualities of her ancestors. She is the essence of true Mexican beauty," also reflects the director, Fernandez's ability to tie María's beauty to the bodies of her Indian ancestors, placing her as a mythical figure in the "wild zone" where men do not have access. In this, Fernandez commodifies del Río's beauty as history in his art/film by relying heavily on the reputation of this actress to distribute his film. Thusly, both men rely on a woman's body for success, and it is this use of the (nude) female body constructed textually (painting or film) that draws on the sentiment that bodies can be viewed as commodities. Elizabeth Grosz examines the connections between sexuality and textuality in "Bodies and Knowledge: Feminism and the Crisis of Reason." She contends that "On the analogy with painting, the text cannot be conceived simply as an intentional effect, but can also be seen from the point of view of its production and the labor that always leaves its marks in its product" (21-22). Both products, the painting, which lead to María Candelaria's stoning and subsequent death, as well as the film, which lead to del Río's marketing hassle with Mexico, left marks that could not be ignored.

In reference to the María Candelaria, specificity in naming María's mother and el Pintor's art as intentional colonizing acts is purposely not done as it would undermine the myth's message and the spectator's constructed gaze. In essence, it would remove the female from the "wild zone." Thus, María's mother and deed remain unnamed and are considered to be traitorous to those inhabiting the village. Because the "effect of not naming is censorship" (Rich 33), the townspeople's refusal to verbally say the mother's name or what María is being blamed for takes away the matriarch's agency. Then the story of la Malinche is transferred onto the daughter—María Candelaria, allowing the daughter to be blamed for the mother's sins. The community in the film repeats that, "Her mother was a bad woman, and she is too," which attempts to construct a dialogue between the community and la Malinche. Fernandez purportedly attempts to diffuse the bomb of patriarchal discourse, but instead he brings a match. When the community surrounds María and her fiancé Lorenzo as they try to defend themselves, the priest intervenes. He announces, "You accuse this creature, and who accuses you? All of you killed her mother, accusing her of bringing shame upon the town. Remember that Our Father punishes, and all [of] you have children." The priest does not give the townspeople the right to accuse or judge, stating that it is "Our Father's" job, but his words show that the daughter will pay for the mother's sins, even if it is a higher power who judges. Embedding the myth even further, he warns the women and reminds the men that they also have children and are therefore perpetuating the myth, thus harming their own children.

Constructing the narrative as myth plays a crucial role in the spectator's experience. In the second half of the film, Lorenzo is arrested for stealing some quinine and a dress for their wedding. When el Pintor discovers this, he bargains with María and promises to pay Lorenzo's bail if they both give him permission to paint her. It is in this scene, when el Pintor paints her that the colonizing aspects of patriarchal ideology are made fully apparent. When el Pintor asks María to pose nude, she runs from his studio leaving him with only a simple outline of her body and the entire image of her face—the same face she covered with mud and her rebozo when going into town so no one from the community would recognize her and ostracize her because of her beauty (like la Malinche). In the turning point of the film, El Pintor uses another woman's nude body to *fill in* the outline of María's body on his canvas. Like Cortés, el Pintor has conquered the indigenous woman to reach his goals.

Later, as he reminisces of this tragic event, El Pintor explains away María's nervousness about the painting with, "The natives are like that. Neither money nor civilization has changed them." The absence of her body on the canvas is one sign of el Pintor's self-delusion, but he continues to ignore the history of the Aztecs who were conquered by the Spanish that the statues embody—even though he clearly knows the story of la Malinche, he ignores it in order to fulfill his artistic desires—thus reinscribing the conquest. Even after the death of María, el Pintor does not enter the "wilderness of difference," where a dialogue could begin, and places María in the "wild zone."

Ultimately, el Pintor comes close to perceiving his art as more than just his actions and begins to understand “the labor that always leaves its mark in its product” (Grosz 22). Preceding his narration of the story to the journalist, he conveys to her that, “there are things that just by touching them, bleed. This is one of them.” *This* refers to the story of how he was able to paint María Candelaria nude, and the subsequent consequence of her death. The language of the colonizer’s regret surfaces as he recognizes that his art colonized and destroyed María—but he implies that by keeping the painting he will protect the community from themselves. Within this guilt, or as he describes it, “horror,” he refuses to sell the painting and even questions a female journalist’s objectives when he asks her why they think they have the right to pry into other’s lives.

The painting of the two disembodied women merging into the one image attempts to suture the myths of la Malinche and la Virgen de Guadalupe that both figures embody. It is necessary in the film, however, that these two figures *are* separated as the merging of the two would provide a “complete” woman, uncontrollable by the male gaze. The painting holds power because this is the only location the two are merged. But this painting, this “horror,” is owned and protected by el Pintor. Instead of merging the two bodies in a public space, Fernandez frames his film with the statues and la Malinche at the beginning and María lying in a coffin, resembling la Virgen de Guadalupe, at the end. With this framing, Fernandez envisions María as a fallen woman, blaming her beauty and the community’s belief in the dominant ideology. The only way María Candelaria can be seen as innocent is through her death.

The opening and closing scenes put the whore/virgin dichotomy in perspective. Fernandez uses a male narrator, making it difficult to make the assumption that the director is redefining the myths in any way, especially because he uses a symbolic, traditional ending—the death of the heroine. Fernandez uses language that has been culturally accepted and injects anesthesia into his spectator’s gaze as they take part in the “imported cinematic apparatus” that gives Fernandez inroads into his film career and the production of films. While the audience is receptive to el Pintor’s storytelling, Fernandez also maintains his authority as director of the film’s discourse.

The strength of archetypal female myths can overpower a director and force them to succumb to the presence of the whore/virgin dichotomy and the religion found in this mix. The idea that del Río’s body is a marked text and has history with her audience and the film industry also makes this textual endeavor a difficult one. Throughout her career, del Río faced a sense of cultural displacement as her identity was put through a postmodern and capitalistic sieve. She is indigenous on film, Spanish in the media, and Mexican by ethnicity. She is lower-class on film and wealthy in her life as a cinematic star. And yet, her three marriages off-screen did not harm her image as a virtuous woman on film in the U.S.. She blurs the boundaries (as a woman and as a text) that those marketing her identity could not control. In many ways, she became the “halfbreed harlot” (Pettit 61) that characterized many of the roles that were available for the Mexican woman in cinema. As Arthur G. Pettit explains in *Images of the Mexican American in Fiction and Film*, “Her primary function was to provide as much sexual titillation as current censorship standards will permit. She is inevitably portrayed as the product of a tainted racial heritage, possessing every negative quality” (61), and in the case of María Candelaria, she is perceived to be tainted because she is the daughter of la Malinche. Therefore, del Río places herself in the role of la Malinche and blurs those lines of nationalistic loyalty, sexuality, and race for her career.

The director’s interpretation of the Malinche myth raises questions of audience, representation, and if the dominant discourse in the film is gendered. The cross-gender verbal battle that exists in the dialogue is vital when examining the absence of agency for the strong-willed women in Fernandez’s film. La Chismosa (the gossiping woman), the foil character in the film, verbally chastises María and symbolizes the discourse in the film. In one scene, two men remark that gossip travels amongst women similar to the way malaria is transmitted by the female mosquito. This theory is validated when the women become the producers of meaning after la Chismosa spreads the rumor that María posed nude for the painting, disgraced the town, and must pay for it. The malaria reference implies that women have a need to destroy communities, reinforcing the idea that “As women, we have been taught to either ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change” (Lorde 99). María is again disconnected from her identity when Don Damián is told by the woman infatuated with Lorenzo: “You, Don Damián, lost out with both the girl and the pig.” As the story unfolds, Fernandez draws on the social pressures the Malinche myth creates for men. The infatuated woman promises Don Damián that, “The truth hurts and you and I are sore. I am a woman and I will have my way. I’ll start by killing the pig so they can’t marry.” Although this woman does not follow through with her threat, her language *persuades* Don Damián to take his gun and kill the pig (which is María and Lorenzo’s only source of income to pay for their wedding). Fernandez utilizes the power of women’s discourse

over men to temporarily disrupt the hierarchy of power relations and strip men of their agency. But, such moments show that men are not liable for what women's words *force them* to do. Furthermore, without a female community, isolation becomes a factor for María in the "wild zone," forcing her to depend only on patriarchal constraints.

To further separate María from her discourse and confine her to the "wild zone," voice-overs permit language to enter the frame all the while disconnected from the speaker. María is frequently disembodied, not only on el Pintor's canvas but also the film's visual structure. Film theorist Amy Lawrence's concept of "synchronization" clarifies how María's voice is separate from her existence: "Synchronization in such circumstances not only contains women within the diegesis of the film, barring them from the realm of enunciation 'outside' the narrative (a position reserved for the male subject), but at its most chilling '[identifies] the female voice with an intractable materiality' and alienates the female subject from the meanings 'produced' by her own voice" (408). María exemplifies this, as she never complains, is naïve, innocent and beautiful. These are traits of a *good woman*, yet she is not accepted in the community because of her mother's sins. Unlike the other women in the film, María's beauty is not tarnished with a voice that asks for too much (nagging, gossiping, singing badly, etc.). She sings beautifully, but her silence is molded to the male gaze and her body is separated from her speaking voice. As she is fragmented, the community focuses the mother's sins (told through gossip) onto the daughter's body. Her words which deny any wrongdoing are ignored, mistranslated, and colonized, while her body is abused, mistreated and murdered.

Lawrence writes, "In these films [1940's], female characters are no longer subjects but bodies that can be made to signify only through the masculine agency of doctors, lawyers, and others. The male characters wrench sounds out of women through techniques such as hypnosis, sodium pentathol, or torture, and then they interpret or make meaning out of the sounds "they" have produced" (408). María experiences this "disembodiment" when during a malarial fever spell she calls out for her dead pig, and has a premonition of her pending death with images of fire, destruction and the death of the animals. Lorenzo Rafael attempts to make meaning of her words and with an urgency to buy María a wedding dress and cure her sickness he interprets her premonitions squarely in the "wild zone." He decides that in her malarial murmurings she wants the wedding. So in spite of herself, María speaks from this "beyond" of the patriarchal script in her fever, and then the film and the male protagonist re-contain that wildness by reinterpreting it through the narratives sanctioned by patriarchy (i.e. marriage), while falling in line with Freud's theory of the "hysterization of women's bodies" (104). Lorenzo interprets her feverish dreams and decides to steal the quinine and the dress from the local market. Even while María lies helpless in a malarial state Fernandez lays blame on the woman for "what she said" on her sick bed. Thus, María is separated from the materiality of her own discourse. This interpretation portrays Lorenzo as a heroic man that will go so far as tearing down a prison wall for his loved one. Through the entirety of the film narrative, Fernandez glorifies the Indio's will, strength, faith and honor. When the community kills María through public stoning, they stop Lorenzo from conquering or (inter)marrying an unworthy woman such as la Malinche's daughter. The moral contradiction is made clear once more. Love and honor are so intertwined that sexuality and voice become a curse for Mexican women. For María Candelaria, sexuality leads to her death through violence, and similar to la Malinche, her sexual destruction is "necessary" for a "community" to survive.² As myth, María is left in the "wild zone."

María Candelaria's body is defined and left disconnected from the reality of her words. In an effort for self-definition, she confronts the statue of la Virgen de Guadalupe in a significant scene towards the end of the film just before the townspeople riot and call out for her death. She confronts the statue of la Virgen in the church: "Why dost THOU not listen to me? Why punish us? because we love each other and are poor? THOU hearest others, but art hard with us." In this scene, the "whore" confronts the virgin drawing on the complex dualism within the individual. Yet, the film falls short when the priest steps in and dismisses the meaning embedded in María's outcry (when she denies that she did what her mother was accused of doing), and does little to merge her body and language. By ignoring María's words, the priest confines her to a patriarchal interpretation of her discourse. The two archetypes are unable to merge, thus pulling María into the mythical, on her knees, begging for forgiveness from the priest and exclaiming, "I don't want to make the Virgin cry. It's from desperation." Because the virgin/whore dichotomy is so ingrained in her mind, she sees that as the daughter of la Malinche, she is not granted access to la Virgen. This scene illustrates María's attempt to make sense of the role assigned to her body, but falls short when she is killed by the villagers who maintain belief in both la Virgen and la Malinche as separate entities.

This *mise-en-scène* reinforces the "wild zone" as uninhabitable by men because Fernandez is unable to blur the figures in his retelling of the two myths. He places María in the role of a woman who does not understand socially sanctioned patriarchal roles, performs a non-Christian deed by questioning a saint, and reinforces the belief that she is her

mother's daughter. Although la Virgen and la Malinche are different myths, in this film they attempt to come together in one body with one outcome—death. These two images frame the film. The end of the film shows an image of the deceased María in a canoe, wearing a blue rebozo, with her head surrounded by flowers—symbolizing la Virgen de Guadalupe. At the end, Fernandez returns to the shot of the Mayan statues from the opening of the film. She is unable to “escape” the statue she was “born from,” and because the Virgin must remain a stable figure, María must reside in her statue as an icon and myth. In the end, María, as a myth (not a physical woman) embodies the virgin/whore dichotomy and is a mirror reflecting the villager's' sins. Her character symbolizes the way a community's discourse places women in the “wild zone.”

Authenticating the Body

Del Río often found her public voice within the discourse of the “wild zone.” La Malinche was often a part of del Río's role options, typifying her struggle with audience reception on both sides of the border. Criticism did not end with her success in the United States. As Hershfield explains, del Río's border crossing led to disapproval when she returned to Mexico:

Numerous scholars and reviewers have criticized the casting of an “international” star like del Río in the role of an Indian who is supposed to represent “the pure Mexican race.” Mexican film historian Aurelio de los Reyes writes that, like its “Indianist” predecessors, María Candelaria “attempts to reevaluate the beauty of the Indians, but such intention is contradicted by the presence of professional actors in the central role; the authentic Indians...were reduced to the roles of the extras.” He brands del Río a “sacred monster of Hollywood” who returns to Mexico only to revitalize her flagging career and argues that the “glamorization” of the Indian, through the casting of del Río, only works to preclude authenticity. (62)

As an actress, del Río struggled against the term authenticity. Her roles in *María Candelaria* and *The Fugitive* speak to the issue of authenticity as they both incorporate la Malinche image. In *The Fugitive*, spectators notice that the Mexican people are portrayed as helpless, naïve, and willing to accept what the myth offers, which is not unlike Fernandez's portrayal of the community who appeared stronger and determined to exile María, but who accepted the myth's reasoning. The women of the community were portrayed as strong-willed and who would defend their ethics and ideologies, unlike the villagers in Ford's film who are reticent in their roles as a “lesser people.” In the scenes where the crowds of townspeople confront María Candelaria, the women actively engage confrontation with phrases such as, “Let's throw her out before the priest comes!” and “Let's run her out, she's like her mother!” Yet, these women are mimicking patriarchal discourse and lessening the effect of other statements such as, “I am a woman and I will have my way.” It is the patriarchal discourse that controls the woman's utterance. As for del Río, Fernandez's film provides her a role in which she could illustrate how her voice was determined by existing patriarchal narratives. In a symbolic manner, she shared the criticism that she received as a crossover actress with the Mexican public through this role. And although not all criticism she received ended at this point, she went on to have a successful career in Mexican cinema.

María, the Fugitive

When del Río returned to the United States, she was older, placing her in roles that were limited to “the ethnic mother.” No longer able to play the seductress or naïve beauty, she was typecast as the mother, as her role as Elvis Presley's mother in *Flaming Star* illustrates. Her first role as a mother, but one that was still sexual in nature was in John Ford's 1947 film, *The Fugitive*. In this film, she plays a fallen woman named María Dolores who bears the illegitimate daughter of the Lieutenant, played by Pedro Armendariz. The Lieutenant is part of the post-revolutionary socialist government set out to capture and execute the Catholic priests who are practicing illegally in Mexico. In this film, the Lieutenant's socialist fanaticism is set against María Dolores's religious Catholic faith.

The Fugitive is “based on Graham Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory*, set in Mexico during the anticlerical reforms of the twenties and thirties” (Pettit 149). In this film, Henry Fonda plays a drunken priest that is haunted by the pride and weakness he feels when he abandons his parish and community. The federal government searches for him during a time when Catholic priests are being removed, executed, and replaced by official government clergy. This film is a reflection of the corruption happening in the Mexican government and questions their ethics by focusing on government officials that are killing priests, bandits, and murderers. The film juxtaposes these images with cantina

girl heroines and bandit heroes. When the “Saxon hero” (Pettit 149), a bandit played by Ward Bond, takes a bullet so the priest can escape with his life and beliefs, this film puts forward the question of morals and ethics to the Mexican national government and its religious systems.

Because *The Fugitive* was filmed in Mexico, and since the film’s basic foundation was viewed as anti-communist and pro-religion (Catholicism in particular), the producers needed and received the permission of the Mexican government as well as the Mexican Motion Picture Association. Del Río’s character was both a cantina girl and a misunderstood “chaste” woman, who devotes herself to helping the priest escape from the socialist government. But this role alone did not prevent del Río from being ostracized later in her career by a post-war United States movie industry that considered minority actors or progressive radicalism as suspect. This in itself illustrates how conscientious del Río had to be when choosing the roles she was going to play. Hershfield explains:

In 1947, the same year Ford’s film was released, the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) convened to investigate the “Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry.” HUAC targeted screenwriters and directors as perpetrators of the anti-American sentiment that conservative critics believed pervaded the movies. Del Río herself was a victim of this witch-hunt. In 1954, U.S. customs denied her a visa to come to Hollywood, to star in *The Broken Lance* on the basis of her association with “known communists.” (81)

Prior to 1954, del Río crossed borders easily. When John Ford asked her to return to the U.S. to play the character of María Dolores in his film, she could not refuse a friend. This favor placed her once again in the role of an ostracized, indigenous woman that strongly referenced la Malinche, but because of the political atmosphere of the time, del Río’s role in this film moved her role into the “wilderness of difference.” This role went beyond the confines of archetypes on the screen by pushing the spectator to come to terms with the issues of socialism (or “communism” as the HUAC defined socialism), sexuality and religion. In “Beyond Sex and Violence,” Ruth Vasey examines religion in the film industry during the 1930s:

Catholic organizations were among the most active in maintaining contact with the industry, and by invoking their large and powerful constituencies they were able to exert considerable influence [....] Negotiations over these issues created a precedent for Catholic involvement in the drafting of the Production Code in 1930 and for the much more public negotiations between the industry and the Catholic establishment surrounding the reorganization of the PCA [Production Code Administration] under Breen in 1934. (103)

The Catholic Church’s involvement in the industry explains why María Dolores’s illegitimate child is switched from being the priest’s son, as it is written in the novel, to that of the Lieutenant’s daughter in the film. This also takes the son the Doña Marina and Cortés union produced, and transforms that son into a daughter who can reside in the “wild zone” with María Dolores/la Malinche and not in Spain with Cortés. In addition, the change in María Dolores’s sexual partners sets the focus on politics and religion and attempts to move away from the character’s use of sexuality as a tool—which is difficult to do. María Dolores also adopts la Malinche’s linguistic power; she uses language for power and negotiates her place within the “wilderness of difference.” But by changing the child’s father in the film, the director, Ford, and the motion picture industry, reworked María’s sexuality to be secondary to the plot of the film. This revision moved the attention away from the Malinche figure’s sexuality, interracial relationship and problematic portrayal of priests, and placed the focus squarely on political and religious issues. Noriega sheds light on the motivation of the directors and why the film streamlined the political and religious nature of the film over focusing on the interracial romance between the priest and María Dolores in the original novel: “Until the Code’s decline in the 1950s (Hollywood formally buried it in 1968), movies maintained the stand that miscegenation should be avoided. When it occurred or seemed about to occur on screen, death or retribution usually followed. To a degree this element of Hollywood movie textbook values reflected widespread American social mores” (93). Ford’s attempt to erase this relationship from the movie concluded with a new relationship between the Lieutenant and María Dolores. It is this relationship that conveyed the idea of “selling out” or being exiled from a community because of sexuality, foregrounding the myth of la Malinche. Thusly, the film uses the “wild zone” purposefully, as a mechanism to supersede the Production Code’s limitations.

In the film, María and the Lieutenant are defined by their lineage. The Lieutenant was born of two *Indio* parents, and was once part of the community of villagers he was working to “free” from the clutches of the Catholic Church. Because of his ethnicity, his values are supposed to align with the indigenous people, but his loyalties fall elsewhere, placing him *outside* of his community. As a Lieutenant in the government military, he considers the church as the oppressor of the poor. In one scene, he considers the punishment of Indigenous men who have been caught for petty crimes. He looks at them with pity and loathing and in an attempt to align himself with the group by “helping” them, he states, “I’m Indian and proud of it. Stand up straight!” His body, although visibly marked as indigenous, is seen as traitorous to the community he “serves.” While Ford constructs this community to be defined by the Lieutenant as “superstitious fools,” the viewer notes that the villagers stay silent throughout the film, with prayer being their only form of communication. In the end, the Lieutenant becomes an image of socialism with which María Dolores ends up being aligned sexually, not ideologically, as is apparent when she continually attempts to protect the priest. Consequently, what the community sees is different from what María understands herself to be. Her father exiles her from their town for giving birth out of wedlock, and when she moves to another community, she is ostracized for having a child with a socialist who is part of the genocide of the indigenous people and priests. In an ironic coincidence, Ford recreates a contemporary myth of la Malinche within a socialist environment and with the use of an indigenous father figure.

At this point in her career and in light of the political nature of the film, del Río cannot escape being typecast. *The Fugitive* places María Dolores within the role of a chaste woman while strongly alluding to her role as that of la Malinche. María balances on the border separating the virgin from the whore, yet del Río is remembered for her image as a “dark lady” (Pettit 149) in film. As a resident of the “wild zone,” del Río was often typecast as a seductress and able to cross national borders, even when the characters she played were chaste and indigenous. Yet in this film, del Río plays a woman, María Dolores, who baptizes her illegitimate child without the anti-clerical father’s knowledge, and then risks her own life to protect the priest (a different form of Father) and help him escape. She not only has a child out of wedlock, she abandons the father and knowingly enters the “wild zone” once more. Within this move, she chooses to abandon the patriarchal domain to make the mythical leap with her daughter. When Pettit refers to this role as “one of the finer portrayals of the sacrificial dark lady in American film” (149), this figure is firmly placed within the virgin/whore dichotomy. In *Latino Images in Film* Charles Ramírez Berg describes the dark lady figure:

The female Latin lover is virginal, inscrutable, aristocratic—and erotically appealing precisely because of these characteristics. Her cool distance is what makes her fascinating to Anglo males. In comparison with the Anglo woman, she is circumspect and aloof where her Anglo sister is direct and forthright, reserved where the Anglo female is boisterous, opaque where the Anglo woman is transparent. The characters Mexican actress Dolores Del Río played in a number of Hollywood films in the 1930s and early 1940s exemplified this stereotype well. (76)

Pettit’s reading of del Río’s character falls into the category of the sacrificial dark lady, where María Candelaria can also be placed, but not only is María Dolores portrayed as a sexual figure, she also embodies political and religious issues that went beyond the constraints of sexuality. It is here that this role created dialogue within the “wilderness of difference.”

The myth of la Malinche inherently combines politics, religion and sexuality but they need to be actively referenced. At the beginning of the film, when the priest walks into an abandoned church, his shadow resembles that of a cross. The viewer then notes that the first person they see is María Dolores holding her child. In this scene, she wears a white dress and rebozo and resembles la Virgen de Guadalupe, but right away, her words contradict that image. The first words spoken by the priest and María Dolores reflect how she is to be considered by the spectators watching the film. When María sees the priest, she asks, “Who are you? Why are you here?” He responds, “I belong here.” And she answers, “No. No. I know all the men in this village.” Her dress combined with her “knowledge” of all the men in the village place her directly in the virgin/whore dichotomy. When María realizes that he is the priest of that village, she tells him that none of the babies in the community have been baptized, and when he tells her to, “Go summon the others. Tell them to bring their babies,” María’s role in the film as an exile comes through in her response. She states, “They will not come for me. The men yes...the women, no.” Much like the priest in *María Candelaria*, he understands her position as one apart from the community and says, “Perhaps they will come for me,” in response to which both the men and women come with their children. And although María’s daughter, also named María Dolores, is baptized first and in front of the community, religious blessing does not change her status as a malinche in the community.

María Dolores is conscious of her oppression and how to use that knowledge to find power within that oppression. For instance, María Dolores subversively uses language in order to survive and protect the priest's life. Unlike María Candelaria, she understands what the men surrounding her wish to hear. She understands the power of the "wild zone" and the small crescent that lies between the "two boundaries of the dominant circle" (Williams 432) which the patriarch cannot understand. When she is confronted by the father of her child, his words do not oppress her as she firmly stands her ground as the mother of the child and as a woman who can survive independent of his help. In the scene where the Lieutenant runs into the church and laughs at the weakness he perceives in the villagers because his men are invading their community (in order to find the priest), his laughter is silenced when he sees María Dolores standing in the same place the priest first saw her. Again she looks virginal, with her rebozo covering her head and her arms holding her child. Realizing who she is, he smiles and asks, "What are you doing here? Why did you leave your village?" She responds, "My father made me leave after you left." This answer places her as a sexual outcast, and simultaneously as someone who has gone against the will of the church with the birth of her illegitimate child. When the Lieutenant responds, "I meant to come back. I had work to do. We're making a better world, María Dolores. For him too." He says this pointing to the child, but María retorts, "It's a girl. Like me." The Lieutenant, looking disappointed, asks, "What's her name?" Knowing her own history as an exile and fugitive from her community and family, she responds, "My name. María Dolores." María resists patriarchy with the naming of the baby girl, and takes it upon herself to bestow the history and traditions she believes in onto her daughter, not those of the father.

The Lieutenant glares at the baptismal water where the community's children were baptized the day before, and realizes that his own child is part of the system he works against. So as he considers María's Catholicism, he cannot fathom how a woman alone can provide for herself and her daughter without going against the church by using her sexuality for money. When he asks, "How do you live? Do you work?" María responds by pushing back the rebozo on her head to reveal a flower, and emphatically states, "I work in the cantina." In one moment, María is transformed from a docile mother to a "working woman"—a cantina girl. This is a strategic choice for María Dolores—a negotiation.

Although del Río, as a successful actress, worked against positioning herself as a cantina girl in films by turning down some of these roles, she was still typecast as such. As a Mexican woman, del Río often found it difficult to maneuver her body outside the "wild zone," often finding herself "trapped within the limits of patriarchy's definition of what it knows: man as subject, woman as other" (Williams 432). But by revising her position as a cantina girl, in roles such as this one, del Río is able to negotiate the wilderness with her voice and power through her sexuality.

The pivotal scene in the movie focuses on María Dolores's sexuality as power within the socialist system. When the priest comes to the cantina while hiding from the soldiers looking for him, she protects him by planning his escape and preparing his food. Before he is allowed to escape, soldiers come to the cantina looking for the priest and become sidetracked when they begin drinking the wine María has illegally stashed in her wall, hidden by a poster (at this time, wine was illegal since it was used in the Catholic religious ceremony). María intentionally gets the men drunk and flirts with the soldiers in order to keep them from entering her backroom/bedroom where she has hidden the priest. When a soldier kisses her, he asks, "What are you hiding in there?" She answers, "A soldier perhaps?" At this point she tells him that she will need to change her dress in order to dance. She takes this opportunity to change her dress and send the priest to safety away from the cantina.

When she returns from the backroom, she wears a white dress that covers her arms and chest, but then begins dancing on the bar in bare legs. When the Lieutenant enters the cantina he is furious at his men and María's behavior. Throwing her off the bar, he screams, "You and your fancy dress and your bare legs! What are you? What are you? Tell me." Her calm reply is, "I don't know, Juan Rafael. What kind of woman am I?" Thus, she positions herself as an independent woman defying his authority as the father of their child and as a lieutenant of a government she does not believe in. She lays blame on him for leaving her as a mother of an illegitimate child and forcing her to go against her religious beliefs because of his loyalty to the government. In this scene, he understands what he has done and asks, "Did I hurt you?" She coldly responds, "No," thus assuming a degree of independence within their relationship.

This is the couple's last encounter, and María uses her strength to help the priest make his escape. Ford gives del Río's character the capacity to use the "wild zone" to begin a dialogue within the "wilderness of difference." This is something that may not have been possible if she had begotten the priest's illegitimate child in the film. When the priest is finally caught and the Lieutenant gets the opportunity to talk to him, he asks, "You baptized her child, didn't you?" Although he knows the answer is yes before he asks, it is his way of understanding her resistance to his authority

and values. He understands that it is the end of their relationship. In the conclusion, when María hands a cross to the priest through the barred cell window, she is handing him her decision to find her own way through a patriarchal society by willingly negotiating the “wilderness of difference.”

Del Río's role in *The Fugitive* gave her the option to reformulate some of the stereotypical roles she previously filled, such as the cantina girl and the dark lady. The “wild zone” helps in understanding how type-casting is used to define actresses as images. Her role in *The Fugitive* is a physical symbol of the “wild zone” and a metaphorical symbol of the “wilderness of difference” as María Dolores maintains a strong presence throughout the film and demonstrates how a woman can hold power through knowledge and use it from that location. Del Río's scenes with Pedro Armendariz as the Lieutenant focus on the relationship a woman has with herself, family, religion, and patriarchy, but they also leave her with a sense of empowerment at the end, when she makes her own decision to stay single and raise her child. The discourse that surrounds the myth of la Malinche in the “wild zone” is strong and independent, but the “wilderness of difference” provides access to knowledge for women working within this space.

Conclusion: Wild Negotiations

María Candelaria and *The Fugitive* provide models wherein the use or lack of female language is volatile when used through a patriarchal lens. “In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism,” B. Ruby Rich describes a sense of exile a woman feels when constructed by patriarchal language:

For a woman's experiencing of culture under patriarchy is dialectical in a way that a man's can never be: our experience is like that of exile, whom Brecht once singled out as the ultimate dialectician for that daily working out of cultural oppositions within a single body. It is crucial to emphasize here the possibility for texts to be transformed at the level of reception and not to fall into a trap of condescension toward our own developed powers as active producers of meaning. (35)

In addition to this, Elaine Showalter leaves her reader with the idea that “We may never reach the promised land at all; for when feminist critics see our task as the study of women's writing, we realize that the land promised to us is not the serenely undifferentiated universality of texts but the tumultuousness and intriguing wilderness of difference itself” (205).

Del Río's career in film can be thought of as a trek through the “wilderness of difference.” She starred or played minor roles in fifty-five movies, thus her career illustrates that women have the ability to speak and make choices. She was in many ways, an active producer of meaning, but her audience resisted as they produced their own meaning when watching her films. Yet, even through her success as a dark lady figure, she was pushed into difficult decisions regarding her career. As Berg writes in his look at various Latino artists, including del Río, he explains, “Frustrated by the narrow range of stereotypical roles she was offered, Dolores Del Río returned to Mexico in the early 1940s (and became a superstar of Mexican cinema)[...]Hollywood continued its stereotyping of Latinos unabated” (265). In many ways, del Río was exceptional in maneuvering and navigating her way through Hollywood and Mexican cinema. Thus, her legacy includes her concise ability to give voice to a Latina's agency in film and negotiate archetypal female myths through the lens of the “wild zone” and the discussion that can then occur in the “wilderness of difference.”

End Notes

¹ My translation: “This is a romantic tragedy ripped from (or taken from) an indigenous corner of Mexico... Xochimilco in the year 1909.”

¹ The words *necessary* and *community* are contained in quotes because their definitions have also been contained within a patriarchal gaze. For instance, in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson writes that “nation was conceived in language, not in blood, and that one could be ‘invited into’ the imagined community” (133). In this section, Anderson is discussing naturalization and this can be related to the mixed heritage of María Candelaria. Referring to her mother's actions that deemed her a traitor, language has defined la Malinche's place as exiled from the community, regardless of her bloodlines to two communities—Spanish and Indigenous.

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