

Crossing Borders/Slipping Skins: Some thoughts on "International Love"¹

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The poem I am about to read I wrote for an American graduate student, a Caribbean Studies scholar who came to the Philippines, and to UP, on a research fellowship early last year.

Over dinner at a dimly lit café, on his last night in the country, I told him something about myself I find troubling: I fall for "apparitional strangers"—visitors to my culture who come alive in a manner I never can; guests who win me over by their ready and trusting ways, but who in the end must leave me, dejected. I seem particularly suited to play the role of "interpreter" to these men who, while here, transform themselves into the persons they were always meant to become.

Like Malinche!, my tall and beautiful stranger quipped from across the table. Amazed by the aptness of this figure—and by the speed of its summons from the indifferent air—I barely managed to mumble, yes, of course, Malinche.

This poem is both a defense and re-imagining of the woman referred to by most Mexican men as *La Chingada* ("The Fucked One") and *La Vendida* ("The Sell-Out").² I suppose one may also see it—in view of what, obviously, at a personal level, had occasioned it—as a defense and re-imagining of myself.

¹ I read this essay on 2 March 2002, at the International Center Students Dormitory, University of the Philippines Diliman on the closing day of the IC's International Week. It later came out in my *Myths and Metaphors* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Press, 2002), 79-85.

² For a wonderful feminist analysis of this Mexican myth, see Norma Alarcon, "Chicanas's Feminist Literature: A Re-vision Through Malintzin/Malinche: Putting Flesh Back on the Object," in Cherrie L. Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldua, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table, 1984).

Malinche

For Courtney

Many Mexicans continue to revile the woman called Doña Marina by the Spaniards and La Malinche by the Aztecs, labeling her a traitor and harlot for her role as the alter-ego of Cortez in his conquest of Mexico.

If indeed, as they accuse me, I have let you in,
let the banner and the armor
and the sword of you in,
it is because into your world
you first allowed me soft
and ungrudging entry.
My people do not see,
in the sun-struck clarity of their dreams,
I have merely returned the favor.
Not to the vengeful conquering god
with skin showing pale as bleached maize,
but to the man, whose random tongue
I learned to hear, to trick and follow
as it skipped and slipped past bare-boned words:
movements of an alien music.
Lit up from its roots by hope, it trilled and
lolloped and shyly swiveled,
and I began to see, as if through a curtain
parting, warm crystal in your eyes,
ocean in your mouth in which I craved to swim,
for in its depths I may lie lost and drowned, but free.
How strange, for it is only now I realize
my shame, this wordless love for strangers:
the delicate sandaled feet, their fitful fingers,
the famished look in their open faces

laved by an astonishment
 I cannot hope to share, unless I myself depart,
 set sail for the horizon hemming in my home.
 Every other sound you made told me
 I am lovely, your gaze a potter's calloused hands
 stroking, fluting me to shape. In your clasp
 I seek the opportunity to come alive,
 as flat upon my mother's mat I am mostly dead,
 or at least mournfully suspended, pendant over my soul's
 dim basin. One day soon it shall be written:
 because of me an empire fell, a nation lost its heart,
 its memories of gold. Why should I care, in truth?
 On the offered palm of a stranger
 my joy's flame-red fruit pulsed and beckoned.
 A child, I simply took and ate.

I accept what is obvious: there is politics in this poem. I suppose any and every instance of "cross-national" affection is always already political—if by "political" we mean a relationship characterized by oppressive difference, by naked if not surreptitious power. To many, Malinche and Cortez's legendary affair is a perfect illustration of this.

Nonetheless, you will notice I also attempted, in my retelling, an "alternative reading"—one informed by an obviously contemporary, feminist understanding of the story of the *Conquista*. In writing the poem, I made sure the ending would harken back to the Edenic myth, in particular, to the demonized figure of Eve, Judeo-Christianity's prototypical "Fallen Woman," the Sell-out or "Whore" against whom the image of the Immaculate Virgin continues to be posed.

I know I cannot actually "redeem" Malinche from the hell into which history and its tortured passages have hurled her. But at least, in this fictitious monologue, I try to make the reader see Malinche's infamous role in history as being in fact a narrative imposition—a script that has been foisted on her from the outside. In other words, she is, in my opinion, essentially innocent: a "child."

I am not saying I too am a "victim" of the same kind of foundational myth, even as I admittedly have been a kind of "Malinche" to a number of "Cortezes" who have, now and then, washed up on my soft and

pristine shores. I don't know how apparent it is in the poem, but I guess here I am also trying to demonstrate how love is always a discourse, a speech or a monologue delivered by a lover. It has been my observation, in this respect, that such a monologue typically partakes of the qualities of an elegy, if not a lamentation.

You will notice that Cortez is silent or "absent" in this poem, except insofar as he is articulated and "made present" by Malinche, who figures him into being by her very words. Thus, to speak about love is always to become the lover, and this lover is essentially and irredeemably alone. Roland Barthes has been my guru here, for it was after I read his strange and bewildering book, *A Lover's Discourse*, that I first came to see just how solitary the nature—the nature which is the language—of love truly is.³ If Barthes is to be believed, to enter love's country is to enter the desolate landscapes of the poetics of solitude.

Malinche's solitude isn't only a matter of culture. She is solitary in her love not only because she and her beloved come from very different worlds, a fact which may lead us to surmise that even if they wanted to they could not perfectly communicate—they could not perfectly bond or unite—with each other. No, Malinche is solitary because *all* lovers, all love, is solitary. Just as I was writing the poems that would comprise my third poetry collection, *The Sorrows of Water*, I happened upon this brightly disquieting truth: *We are never more alone than when we love.*

We are alone in our love because the beloved, the Other, is always already our imagination of the Other, and not the Other, *in truth*. The *true Other* is, in fact, so different from ourselves as to be unrecognizable. In any loving discourse, the beloved is therefore always already another version of the Self.

This is simply another way of saying that the beloved is always already a fantasized or interpreted Other, an idealized phantasm of our own selfish design. We have heard it said before: there is no access to reality except through the language in which we speak it. In this case, we might modify this to say that the Other is available to us only through our imagination of him—our imagination which is "soft and ungrudging entry" into him.

I try to demonstrate this in my poem, somewhat. My hope is that while reading it, the reader may soon discover that Malinche's Cortez—

³ Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977).

the Cortez of her rhapsodic utterance—may have little to do with the real Cortez, *in fact*. This doesn't matter, of course, inasmuch as she, being a lover, cannot help imagining her beloved, anyway. That he's a stranger and virtually unknown and unknowable only stokes her imagination's fires all the more.

Because the boundary that divides them is so great—because the chasm of his strangeness into which she eventually pours her dreams yawns *so vast*—she precisely cannot resist him. We know that desire is always *desire for difference*. And yet, upon closer inspection, we discover that this difference is just another rendition of the “same”: the interests it presents are inextricable from the self who seeks its appearance.

And so: I am talking about the impermeability of the Other, of the boundary that divides us from the Other, the border that can perhaps be likened to *skin*—both our skin and his own. Love is nothing if not an illusion of togetherness, of melding, of intimate bonding between the one who loves and the one who is loved. Whichever society we may be from, we understand that the perfect figure, the best metaphor for this form of human fellowship, *is sex*.

Nonetheless, it is precisely in sex that we see the impossibility of love, supposedly a true and perfect communion between Self and Other. It is also in the figure of sex that we can intuit an image of love as a vain crossing of boundaries and skins, a kind of failed “cross-cultural sharing.” (I will now also call it “international love,” since my being invited to this forum is apparently premised on my being able to talk about such a thing...)

What is sex, after all, if not a frictive slipping of skins, a tactile form of mutual encounter and bodily merging, that may as well describe what happens every time we attempt to engage and empathize with societies other than our own, when we attempt to cross borders of nationality, culture and/or race—when we dare to love past the familiar, desiring bravely and *internationally*.

Soon enough, we find an illusion of intimate knowing emerges, but already we know it is improbable—this craving for pure and utter possession. As a cultural studies scholar I find I am continually attempting to engage with foreign cultures—and yes, foreign *persons* and things.

This I know for certain: the object of my curiosity, of my attentive desire, at any one instance can at best only slip past me. An irremediable impermeability—a productivity of borders that admit even as they shut

out—attends the very process of casting the world into language, of thinking with words, as it certainly does the imagining and activity of sex.

In sex all one really gets are a few dear moments of slipping on and past the beloved's outer covering, his warm and delightfully moist gift of skin. No matter how intimate, how consummate and consuming, how burning, how ultimate and possessive one's passion for the other, one is stumped by that sheath of supple and impenetrable tissue, that corporeal shield of largely dead matter that encloses the other and oneself and thus shuts either and both of you out. At the outermost layer of our beings, skin is the end of love.

And yet, we must insist that skin doesn't simply exclude. In an equally real measure, it includes: the heart and its pumping-warm willfulness, the hearing eyes, seeing tongue, the clumsiness of nosy fingers, all that one loves and with which one loves, are vitally and warmly encased in this living and limpid fabric, without which the body would spill out of itself in what can only be imagined as a kind of primordial chaos. Lining the innermost surfaces of our feeling and many-nerved selves, skin is the beginning of love.

That the beloved, both in love and in life, is always slipping past us should not, I feel, be a cause for grief. Indeed, despite the impermeability of our skins' necessary fictions, we are still perfectly capable of loving. Acknowledging love's solitude isn't necessarily denying its existence, nor our incommutable need to experience it.

And this solitude is never more clearly symbolized than by skin: the boundary that defines Self and Other, the border zone forever exiling us from each other's histories and lives. Skin is all we can ever know in this world. It is what we hold close: the surface intimating depths we can only dream about, and never inhabit or possess.

Like Malinche, we must accept that the beloved, the stranger, becomes more precious, *dearer*, the more he is imagined. Exiles and strangers all, we must forsake even our "nation's heart,/ its memories of gold," and continue to imagine beyond borders, beyond skin. The manifest condition of our existence, skin is the border that renders us at once possible and impossible: the point at which the richest possibilities of our being begin and end.

Only by leaving safety behind and committing this "interpretive leap"—a rhythmic crossing and slipping—can we, to our abiding astonishment, find love. ☞