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The Sons of La Malinche

Octavio Paz

Without a doubt, the most famous essay ever written about "mexicanidad" is Octavio Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, which first appeared in the influential journal *Cuadernos Americanos* in 1950. Paz (1914–1998) was by then already a major figure in Mexican poetry, and the book marked his brilliant debut as an essayist. The essay is a dizzying intellectual exercise, seeking to explain the Mexican's "hermetic" personality through an allusive, though at times opaque, combination of Jungian psychology, poetic imagery, and historical analysis. Paz held that Mexico was intent on denying its true heritage, that its evolution was retarded by repeated cycles of conquest, violation, and revolution, and that centuries of history were embedded in the Mexican character.

Paz's literary career began in the early 1930s. He fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War and later undertook a diplomatic career, which included posts in France, India, Japan, and Switzerland. He quit this career in 1968 in protest against the government killings of student protestors at the Plaza de Tlatelolco (see part VII of this volume). While he remained very critical of the Mexican political system, he became increasingly conservative in his later years, which often placed him at odds with other Latin American intellectuals. In 1990 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

All of our anxious tensions express themselves in a phrase we use when anger, joy, or enthusiasm cause us to exalt our condition as Mexicans: "¡Viva México, hijos de la chingada!" This phrase is a true battle cry, charged with a peculiar electricity; it is a challenge and an affirmation, a shot fired against an imaginary enemy, and an explosion in the air. Once again, with a certain pathetic and plastic fatality, we are presented with the image of a skyrocket that climbs into the sky, bursts in a shower of sparks and then falls in darkness. Or with the image of that howl that ends all our songs and possesses the same ambiguous resonance: an angry joy, a destructive affirmation ripping open the breast and consuming itself.

When we shout this cry on the fifteenth of September, the anniversary of

our independence, we affirm ourselves in front of, against and in spite of the "others." Who are the "others"? They are the *hijos de la chingada*: strangers, bad Mexicans, our enemies, our rivals. In any case, the "others," that is, all those who are not as we are. And these "others" are not defined except as the sons of a mother as vague and indeterminate as themselves.

Who is the *Chingada*? Above all, she is the Mother. Not a Mother of flesh and blood but a mythical figure. The *Chingada* is one of the Mexican representations of Maternity, like *La Llorona* or the "long-suffering Mexican mother" we celebrate on the tenth of May. The *Chingada* is the mother who has suffered—metaphorically or actually—the corrosive and defaming action implicit in the verb that gives her her name. . . .

In Mexico the word [*chingar*] has innumerable meanings. It is a magical word: a change of tone, a change of inflection, is enough to change its meaning. It has as many shadings as it has intonations, as many meanings as it has emotions. One may be a *chingón*, a *gran chingón* (in business, in politics, in crime or with women), or a *chingaquito* (silent, deceptive, fashioning plots in the shadows, advancing cautiously and then striking with a club), or a *chingoncito*. But in this plurality of meanings the ultimate meaning always contains the idea of aggression, whether it is the simple act of molesting, pricking or censoring, or the violent act of wounding or killing. The verb denotes violence, an emergence from oneself to penetrate another by force. It also means to injure, to lacerate, to violate—bodies, souls, objects—and to destroy. When something breaks, we say: "*Se chingó*." When someone behaves rashly, in defiance of the rules, we say: "*Hizo una chingadera*."

The idea of breaking, of ripping open, appears in a great many of these expressions. The word has sexual connotations but it is not a synonym for the sexual act: one may *chingar* a woman without actually possessing her. And when it does allude to the sexual act, violation or deception gives it a particular shading. The man who commits it never does so with the consent of the *chingada*. *Chingar*, then, is to do violence to another. The verb is masculine, active, cruel: it stings, wounds, gashes, stains. And it provokes a bitter, resentful satisfaction.

The person who suffers this action is passive, inert and open, in contrast to the active, aggressive and closed person who inflicts it. The *chingón* is the *macho*, the male; he rips open the *chingada*, the female, who is pure passivity, defenseless against the exterior world. The relationship between them is violent, and it is determined by the cynical power of the first and the impotence of the second. The idea of violence rules darkly over all the meanings of the word, and the dialectic of the "closed" and the "open" thus fulfills itself with an almost ferocious precision.

The magic power of the word is intensified by the fact that it is prohibited. No one uses it casually in public. Only an excess of anger or a delirious enthusiasm justifies its use. It is a word that can only be heard among men or during the big fiestas. When we shout it out, we break a veil of silence, modesty or hypocrisy. We reveal ourselves as we really are. The forbidden words boil up in us, just as our emotions boil up. When they finally burst out, they do so harshly, brutally, in the form of a shout, a challenge, an offense. They are projectiles or knives. They cause wounds. . . .

If we take into account all of its various meanings, the word defines a great part of our life and qualifies our relationships with our friends and compatriots. To the Mexican there are only two possibilities in life: either he inflicts the actions implied by *chingar* on others, or else he suffers them himself at the hands of others. This conception of social life as combat fatally divides society into the strong and the weak. The strong—the hard, unscrupulous *chingones*—surround themselves with eager followers. This servility toward the strong, especially among the *políticos* (that is, the professionals of public business), is one of the more deplorable consequences of the situation. Another, no less degrading, is the devotion to personalities rather than to principles. Our politicians frequently mix public business with private. It does not matter. Their wealth or their influence in government allows them to maintain a flock of supporters whom the people call, most appositely, *lambiscones* (from the word *lamer*: “to lick”).

The verb *chingar*—malign and agile and playful, like a caged animal—creates many expressions that turn our world into a jungle: there are tigers in business, eagles in the schools and the army, lions among our friends. A bribe is called a “bite.” The bureaucrats gnaw their “bones” (public employment). And in a world of *chingones*, of difficult relationships, ruled by violence and suspicion—a world in which no one opens out or surrenders himself—ideas and accomplishments count for little. The only thing of value is manliness, personal strength, a capacity for imposing oneself on others.

The word also has another, more restricted meaning. When we say, “*Vete a la chingada*,”² we send a person to a distant place. Distant, vague and indeterminate. To the country of broken and worn-out things. A gray country, immense and empty, that is not located anywhere. . . . The *chingada*, because of constant usage, contradictory meanings and the friction of angry or enthusiastic lips, wastes away, loses its contents and disappears. It is a hollow word. It says nothing. It is Nothingness itself.

After this digression, it is possible to answer the question, “What is the *Chingada*?” The *Chingada* is the Mother forcibly opened, violated or deceived. The *hijo de la Chingada* is the offspring of violation, abduction or deceit. If we

compare this expression with the Spanish *hijo de puta* (son of a whore), the difference is immediately obvious. To the Spaniard, dishonor consists in being the son of a woman who voluntarily surrenders herself: a prostitute. To the Mexican it consists in being the fruit of a violation.

Manuel Cabrera points out that the Spanish attitude reflects a moral and historical conception of original sin, while that of the Mexican, deeper and more genuine, transcends both ethics and anecdotes. In effect, every woman—even when she gives herself willingly—is torn open by the man, is the *Chingada*. In a certain sense all of us, by the simple fact of being born of woman, are *hijos de la Chingada*, sons of Eve. But the singularity of the Mexican resides, I believe, in his violent, sarcastic humiliation of the Mother and his no less violent affirmation of the Father. A woman friend of mine (women are more aware of the strangeness of this situation) has made me see that this admiration for the Father—who is the symbol of the closed, the aggressive—expresses itself very clearly in a saying we use when we want to demonstrate our superiority: “I am your father.” . . .

The *macho* represents the masculine pole of life. The phrase “I am your father” has no paternal flavor and it is not said in order to protect or to guide another, but rather to impose one’s superiority, that is, to humiliate. Its real meaning is no different from that of the verb *chingar* and its derivatives. The *macho* is the *gran chingón*. One word sums up the aggressiveness, insensitivity, invulnerability and other attributes of the *macho*: power. It is force without the discipline of any notion of order: arbitrary power, the will without reins and without a set course. . . .

The essential attribute of the *macho*—power—almost always reveals itself as a capacity for wounding, humiliating, annihilating. Nothing is more natural, therefore, than his indifference toward the offspring he engenders. He is not the founder of a people; he is not a patriarch who exercises *patria potestas*; he is not a king or a judge or the chieftain of a clan. He is power isolated in its own potency, without relationship or compromise with the outside world. He is pure in communication, a solitude that devours itself and everything it touches. He does not pertain to our world; he is not from our city; he does not live in our neighborhood. He comes from far away: he is always far away. He is the Stranger. It is impossible not to notice the resemblance between the figure of the *macho* and that of the Spanish conquistador. This is the model—more mythical than real—that determines the images the Mexican people form of men in power: caciques, feudal lords, hacienda owners, politicians, generals, captains of industry. They are all *machos*, *chingones*.

The *macho* has no heroic or divine counterpart. Hidalgo, the “father of the fatherland” as it is customary to call him in the ritual gibberish of the Repub-

lic, is a defenseless old man, more an incarnation of the people's helplessness against force than an image of the wrath and power of an awe-inspiring father. Among the numerous patron saints of the Mexicans there is none who resembles the great masculine divinities. Finally, there is no especial veneration for God the Father in the Trinity. He is a dim figure at best. On the other hand, there is profound devotion to Christ as the Son of God, as the youthful God, above all as the victimized Redeemer. The village churches have a great many images of Jesus—on the cross, or covered with thorns and wounds—in which the insolent realism of the Spaniards is mingled with the tragic symbolism of the Indians. On the one hand, the wounds are flowers, pledges of resurrection; on the other, they are a reiteration that life is the sorrowful mask of death. . . .

The Mexican venerates a bleeding and humiliated Christ, a Christ who has been beaten by the soldiers and condemned by the judges, because he sees in him a transfigured image of his own identity. . . . And this brings to mind Cuauhtémoc, the young Aztec emperor who was dethroned, tortured, and murdered by Cortés.

Cuauhtémoc means "Falling Eagle." The Mexican chieftain rose to power at the beginning of the siege of México-Tenochtitlán, when the Aztecs had been abandoned by their gods, their vassals and their allies. Even his relationship with a woman fits the archetype of the young hero, at one and the same time the lover and the son of [a] goddess. . . . He is a warrior but he is also a child. The exception is that the heroic cycle does not end with his death: the fallen hero awaits resurrection. It is not surprising that for the majority of Mexicans Cuauhtémoc should be the "young grandfather," the origin of Mexico: the hero's tomb is the cradle of the people. This is the dialectic of myth, and Cuauhtémoc is more a myth than a historical figure. Another element enters here, an analogy that makes this history a true poem in search of fulfillment: the location of Cuauhtémoc's tomb is not known. To discover it would mean nothing less than to return to our origins, to reunite ourselves with our ancestry, to break out of our solitude. It would be a resurrection.

If we ask about the third figure of the triad, the Mother, we hear a double answer. It is no secret to anyone that Mexican Catholicism is centered about the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In the first place, she is an Indian Virgin; in the second place, the scene of her appearance to the Indian Juan Diego was a hill that formerly contained a sanctuary dedicated to Tonantzin, "Our Mother," the Aztec goddess of fertility. We know that the Conquest coincided with the apogee of the cult of two masculine divinities: Quetzalcóatl, the self-sacrificing god, and Huitzilopochtli, the young warrior-god. The defeat of these gods—which is what the Conquest meant to the Indian world, be-

cause it was the end of a cosmic cycle and the inauguration of a new divine kingdom—caused the faithful to return to the ancient feminine deities. This phenomenon of a return to the maternal womb, so well known to the psychologist, is without doubt one of the determining causes of the swift popularity of the cult of the Virgin. The Indian goddesses were goddesses of fecundity, linked to the cosmic rhythms, the vegetative processes and agrarian rites. The Catholic Virgin is also the Mother (some Indian pilgrims still call her Guadalupe-Tonantzin), but her principal attribute is not to watch over the fertility of the earth but to provide refuge for the unfortunate. The situation has changed: the worshipers do not try to make sure of their harvests but to find a mother's lap. The Virgin is the consolation of the poor, the shield of the weak, the help of the oppressed. In sum, she is the Mother of orphans. All men are born disinherited and their true condition is orphanhood, but this is particularly true among the Indians and the poor in Mexico. The cult of the Virgin reflects not only the general condition of man but also a concrete historical situation, in both the spiritual and material realms. In addition, the Virgin—the universal Mother—is also the intermediary, the messenger, between disinherited man and the unknown, inscrutable power: the Strange.

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

If the *Chingada* is a representation of the violated Mother, it is appropriate to associate her with the Conquest, which was also a violation, not only in the historical sense but also in the very flesh of Indian women. The symbol of this violation is doña Malinche, the mistress of Cortés. It is true that she gave herself voluntarily to the conquistador, but he forgot her as soon as her usefulness was over. Doña Marina³ becomes a figure representing the Indian women who were fascinated, violated, or seduced by the Spaniards. And as a small boy will not forgive his mother if she abandons him to search for his father, the Mexican people have not forgiven La Malinche for her betrayal. She embodies the open, the *chingado*, to our closed, stoic, impassive Indians. Cuauhtémoc and Doña Marina are thus two antagonistic and complementary figures. There is nothing surprising about our cult of the young emperor—

"the only hero at the summit of art," an image of the sacrificed son — and there is also nothing surprising about the curse that weighs against La Malinche. This explains the success of the contemptuous adjective *malinchista* recently put into circulation by the newspapers to denounce all those who have been corrupted by foreign influences. The *malinchistas* are those who want Mexico to open itself to the outside world: the true sons of La Malinche, who is the *Chingada* in person. Once again we see the opposition of the closed and the open.

When we shout "*¡Viva México, hijos de la chingada!*" we express our desire to live closed off from the outside world and, above all, from the past. In this shout we condemn our origins and deny our hybridism. The strange permanence of Cortés and La Malinche in the Mexican's imagination and sensibilities reveals that they are something more than historical figures: they are symbols of a secret conflict that we have still not resolved. When he repudiates La Malinche — the Mexican Eve, as she was represented by José Clemente Orozco in his mural in the National Preparatory School — the Mexican breaks his ties with the past, renounces his origins, and lives in isolation and solitude.

The Mexican condemns all his traditions at once, the whole set of gestures, attitudes and tendencies in which it is now difficult to distinguish the Spanish from the Indian. For that reason the Hispanic thesis, which would have us descend from Cortés to the exclusion of La Malinche, is the patrimony of a few extremists who are not even pure whites. The same can be said of indigenist propaganda, which is also supported by fanatical criollos and mestizos, while the Indians have never paid it the slightest attention. The Mexican does not want to be either an Indian or a Spaniard. Nor does he want to be descended from them. He denies them. And he does not affirm himself as a mixture, but rather as an abstraction: he is a man. He becomes the son of Nothingness. His beginnings are in his own self.

This attitude is revealed not only in our daily life but also in the course of our history, which at certain moments has been the embodiment of a will to eradicate all that has gone before. It is astonishing that a country with such a vivid past — a country so profoundly traditional, so close to its roots, so rich in ancient legends even if poor in modern history — should conceive of itself only as a negation of its origins.

Our shout strips us naked and discloses the wound that we alternately flaunt and conceal, but it does not show us the causes of this separation from, and negation of, the Mother, not even when we recognize that such a rupture has occurred. In lieu of a closer examination of the problem, we will suggest that the liberal Reform movement of the middle of the last century seems to be the moment when the Mexican decided to break with his traditions, which

is a form of breaking with oneself. If our Independence movement cut the ties that bound us to Spain, the Reform movement denied that the Mexican nation as a historical project should perpetuate the colonial tradition. Juárez and his generation founded a state whose ideals are distinct from those that animated New Spain or the pre-Cortesian cultures. The Mexican state proclaimed an abstract and universal conception of man: the Republic is not composed of criollos, Indians, and mestizos (as the Laws of the Indies, with a great love for distinctions and a great respect for the heterogeneous nature of the colonial world, had specified) but simply of men alone. All alone.

The Reform movement is the great rupture with the Mother. This separation was a necessary and inevitable act, because every life that is truly autonomous begins as a break with its family and its past. But the separation still hurts. We still suffer from that wound. That is why the feeling of orphanhood is the constant background of our political endeavors and our personal conflicts. Mexico is all alone, like each one of her sons.

Notes

1. *La Llorona* is the "Weeping Woman," who wanders through the streets late at night, weeping and crying out. *Trans.*
2. Somewhat stronger than "Go to Hell." *Trans.*
3. The name given to La Malinche by the Spaniards. *Trans.*