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Reviving Colonial Echoes: *Malinche* and the Politics of a Modern Musical

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On 15th September 2022, Nacho Cano, composer of the popular pop band Mecano, premiered his musical *Malinche* in Madrid. The production retells the story of Malinche, an indigenous woman who played a crucial role during the Spanish conquest of Mexico as an interpreter and advisor to colonizer Hernán Cortés. Cano's portrayal of this complex historical figure has raised important questions about cultural appropriation, historical accuracy, and the ethical responsibilities of artists engaging with culturally sensitive material.

Originally named Malinalli and later baptized as Marina by the Spanish, Malinche was instrumental to the Spanish during their conquest of the Aztec Empire due to her knowledge and ability to speak Nahuatl and Maya languages. While often stigmatized and labeled a traitor, the term “malinchista” reflects a perception of preferring foreign influences over one's own culture (Infobae, 2022b). However, Malinche's unique role as the sole mediator between conquerors and the conquered afforded her considerable power, enabling her to influence dialogue and possibly settle personal scores with the Aztec empire. She embraced her position, embodying the Renaissance motto “*iuvat vivere*” (to live is beautiful), which reflects her pragmatic approach to survival in a complex situation (Fontes, 2023).

As the producer, writer, composer, and musical director of *Malinche*, Cano takes creative liberties with the historical narrative, prioritizing entertainment over historical fidelity. The musical is described on its official website as “a celebration of the encounter between two peoples and their cultures” (Infobae, 2022a), emphasizing the dramatic aspects of this meeting and focusing on the romantic relationship between Hernán Cortés and Malinche, symbolizing the metaphorical union between Mexico and Spain. However, the portrayal of indigenous peoples by non-indigenous actors and their interactions with Spanish colonizers in *Malinche* has sparked controversy, particularly regarding authenticity and sensitivity. Critics argue that the production perpetuates colonial dynamics by interpreting Mexican history through the colonizer's lens, reinforcing stereotypes and neglecting the voices of those who lived through this history. Scholars, historians, and cultural commentators in both Spain and Mexico have criticized the musical for misrepresenting Mexican history and the trauma of colonization.

The musical is presented in a 1000-seat auditorium, supported by public funds from Madrid's regional government, and performances are offered in English twice a week. This multilingual approach hints at ambitions beyond Spanish borders, aiming to attract a wider tourist audience and increase the production's appeal in global markets. While the use of different languages can broaden the production's reach, it raises questions about how language choice impacts audience interpretation and cultural nuances. The multilingual aspect yields varied results. While the inclusion of multiple languages holds potential, the adaptation of cultural idioms and historical references sometimes falls short, losing depth and meaning. Some actors face challenges performing in English, reflecting broader issues of language proficiency in Spain. Incorporating Nahuatl, the indigenous language spoken by Malinche, alongside Spanish could have enhanced authenticity, offering a more respectful portrayal of her role and the cultural dynamics of the time. A thoughtful English translation could further complement this multilingual presentation. Embracing a multilingual format

could also promote cross-cultural dialogue and understanding, facilitating meaningful discussions about history, identity, and cultural heritage.

The reception of *Malinche* may vary significantly between Spanish and international audiences. Spanish viewers may approach the musical with a deeper understanding of their colonial history, while international audiences may lack this context. This difference underscores the importance of careful translation and contextualization to ensure that non-Spanish audiences grasp the historical significance and cultural nuances presented. The dynamics of cultural appropriation, where dominant cultures exploit and commodify aspects of others, are particularly evident in *Malinche*. Through its portrayal of Malinche, the musical glosses over historical complexities, inadvertently reinforcing colonial narratives and conveying conservative messages of cultural superiority. The emphasis on the grandeur of Spanish conquistadors through elaborate dance numbers and stirring compositions romanticizes the encounter between Malinche and Cortés, potentially justifying the violence and subjugation of indigenous peoples. This focus on spectacle can lead audiences, particularly those less familiar with history, to overlook the devastating impact of colonization on indigenous communities. The production misses an opportunity to amplify authentic voices and challenge dominant historical narratives.

Despite the historical distortions in *Malinche*, Nacho Cano emphasizes his extensive research in Mexico in his Netflix documentary *La Creación de Malinche* (Making Malinche) (Cano, 2021). However, the documentary largely reads as a propaganda piece shaped by Cano's perspective. He aims to correct historical misrepresentations of Malinche and perceptions of the Spanish and the Aztecs, yet the 'danger of this kind of romanticized nostalgia seems to go over his head' (Budowski, 2021). Cano surrounds himself with historians, musicians, artists, and actors to endorse his version of the story, and while the documentary features a critical testimony from a Mexican passerby condemning Spanish colonization, the remaining testimonies align with Cano's views, rendering it a self-indulgent advertisement.

During the press conference for the musical's premiere, Cano highlighted support from prominent Mexican figures and institutions, including historian Beatriz Gutiérrez Müller, wife of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, and the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), which oversaw the historical aspects of the production. Cano stated, "I couldn't have made this work without Mexico's support", noting Gutiérrez Müller's approval of his portrayal of the conquest (Infobae, 2022a). However, this approval contrasts with the broader historical discourse in Mexico, where President López Obrador has publicly demanded an apology from Spain for the crimes committed during the Conquest, emphasizing that the rights violated during that period should be recognized by contemporary standards (Infobae, 2021a). Despite the musical's romanticization of events, Gutiérrez Müller reportedly received it well (Infobae, 2022a), which suggests that notions of white supremacy are upheld to some extent within Mexican society. Cano argued that it makes no sense to apologize for the Conquest of Mexico: "Perhaps it is we who should apologize to those who come in 500 years for how we left the planet, but for us (the Spanish) to apologize for what others did 500 years ago makes no sense" (Infobae, 2021b).

Malinche's website highlights a collection of positive reviews since the show's opening in 2022. Spanish newspaper *El País* highlights the precise and powerful dancing of Jesús Carmona as a standout aspect. *AcePrensa* describes the show's anthem, "México mágico", as a powerful message celebrating the fusion of two cultures and embracing the past. *Libertad Digital* praises the "impressive staging", featuring a large set and 60 performers, including

actors and dancers. An attendee calls the show “moving, grand, and emotional”, stating that *Malinche* “leaves no one indifferent”. Another user commends the “angelic voices of the Malinches”, the choreography, acrobatics, set design, and humor, emphasizing that it’s well worth seeing (Malinche The Musical, 2024).

Conversely, Spanish critics have offered varying opinions on *Malinche*, some noting that Cano presents a simplified version of history, avoiding deeper exploration of the subject (Vidales, 2022). For ABC, musically, Cano’s signature style is evident, particularly in the choral numbers, but “the inclusion of popular songs from Mecano during the curtain call raises questions about the musical’s originality” (Bravo, 2022). Critics viewing the musical from a more critical standpoint accuse it of perpetuating racism, capitalism, and Catholicism. They argue that *Malinche* glorifies colonialism and presents a romanticized version of the conquest, with characters like Moctezuma portrayed in a superficial and almost cartoonish manner. The musical conveys only a few verses of harmony and cultural richness resulting from the encounter between Spain and Mexico, but critics contend that the musical endorses outdated, racist notions, such as the idea that indigenous peoples of the Americas were saved by European colonization. The portrayal of Hernán Cortés and Malinche’s relationship as the birth of a new, civilized race is viewed as a blatant oversimplification of history. The spectacle is seen as catering to a conservative audience longing for the days of the Spanish Empire, delivering a kitschy and shallow interpretation of a complex and painful history. Critic Peio H. Riaño observes that *Malinche* is designed for “pijos” — a term used in the script to refer to spiritual snob types who pay a ticket price starting at 55 euros and tacos for 15, as fake as the Mexico that unfolds on stage (2022).

Right-wing critics were also disappointed by the musical, as it did not fulfill their expectations of being a true ode to Spanish history. They sought a defense against ideological revisionism and the “Black Legend” of Spanish colonialism (Fernández Retamar, 2019), but were met with what they considered a lackluster narrative. These critics were frustrated by the portrayal of Cortés as a foolish, self-centered character driven by greed and lust rather than a noble figure on a mission to expand his nation's empire. Additionally, they disapproved of the superficial humor and the depiction of clerical figures like Fray Olmedo, performed by drag artist Nacha la Macha, whose character was reduced to a caricature. Nonetheless, they praised the portrayal of Queen Isabel the Catholic’s mandate to baptize the natives as serving both humanitarian and spiritual purposes (Serrano, 2022a). Interestingly, within the space of a week, the same media outlet published an updated review praising Cano's revisions to the script in response to the initial critique, noting how he addressed concerns by removing anticlerical references and the alleged portrayal of the priest's homosexuality (Serrano, 2022b). These changes highlight to the production’s intent to maintain the approval of conservative sectors.

Mexican sources have noted differing perspectives on the musical depending on whether it is viewed from a Spanish or Latin American standpoint. Critics in Mexico have pointed out that the musical was created by a right-wing Spaniard, suggesting a biased portrayal of the story. Mexican magazine *Expansión* criticized the “minimal, almost token” presence of Latin American and African-descended talent, while Cano claims the cast reflects significant cultural fusion (2022). The lyrics do not shy away from addressing the Spanish invasion of the Aztecs, the dominant civilization in Mesoamerica. Meanwhile, newspaper *Milenio* collected critical comments from internet users, highlighting issues such as the sexualization of a 15-year-old girl and outrage over Malinche being portrayed by a white actress, despite the poster depicting an indigenous woman (2022). Other online commentators have echoed

these concerns, accusing the musical of romanticizing the relationship between Malinche and Cortés while ignoring the genocide that occurred. They also criticized the predominantly white Spanish cast, highlighting the eurocentrism and white-washing inherent in the production.

In Spain, many viewers have also condemned both the production and Cano for the musical's portrayal of the conquest. TikTok user América Valdes described her experience as "the most disgusting three hours of entertainment in my life", criticizing the musical for downplaying the violence against the Aztecs and presenting the conquest as nearly bloodless (2022). Valdes also pointed out that the musical depicts Malinche as a free woman and Hernán Cortés as a charming, desirable man, which many found problematic. *Afroféminas* took the critique further, labeling the show as "postmodern Falangism" that caters to Spanish conservatism. The publication argues that one cannot glorify exploitation, crime, and ethnic cleansing, accusing Nacho Cano of not only promoting forgetfulness but also spreading lies, mockery, cultural appropriation, and shame for the dispossessed peoples (2022). The musical's website even sells supposedly Aztec products, including plush toys and shot glasses featuring Aztec deities. If anyone seeks a definition of cultural appropriation, *Afroféminas* suggests, this is it (2022). The show's website also offers the chance to celebrate birthdays and hen parties at the venue's Mexican-themed bars and restaurants.

Throughout the script of *Malinche*, the themes of evangelization are clearly recognized. Spanish colonizer Hernán Cortés tells Aztec Emperor Moctezuma: "Enough with the sacrifices; it is not good to take someone's heart out on a stone!", to which Moctezuma later replies: "I'm starting to like that Jesus" (Cano, 2022). After experiencing death and reincarnation as a kitsch star, Moctezuma refers to the Catholic God, stating: "he is the magic" (ibid). Initially depicted as a savage leader, Moctezuma discovers love and kindness only through the arrival of the Spanish. He repents for sins committed in the name of his god, dies, and seems resurrected as an angel in heaven to live with a child. This narrative implies that cultural assimilation was a positive outcome of colonization, overshadowing the loss of cultural autonomy and the imposition of European norms.

In another scene, a priest exclaims after Hernán Cortés and Malinche's first sexual encounter that "a new race will be born out of your union, a race that's great, free, and magical!". Malinche's lyrics convey conservative messages of cultural superiority, reinforcing narratives that align with certain views of colonization and the construction of a Mexican mixed identity: "In this new land, where old meets new, we forge a path where dreams come true. Blend our customs, merge our ways, in unity we find our future's blaze" (Cano, 2022). The spectacle accompanying these lyrics depicts a harmonious blending of Spanish and indigenous cultures, promoting a narrative that downplays the violent reality of colonization. By exoticizing indigenous culture with tropes like drums, chants, and vibrant colors, the musical reinforces stereotypes portraying indigenous peoples as primitive or mystical. Lines such as "Dance to the rhythm of ancient drums, where mystic chants echo and hum. Colors of the tropics, vibrant and bold, stories of conquest, glory retold" (ibid) perpetuate a narrative of cultural otherness, reinforcing colonial attitudes while romanticizing the conquest as a noble and unifying event.

The production has also faced political controversy regarding nepotism and use of public funding. The website's publicity states, "Malinche is freedom. Gift freedom, gift Malinche". This aligns with the political campaign slogan of Madrid's Regional Government President

Isabel Díaz Ayuso: Madrid is Freedom (therefore, vote freedom) (Europa Press, 2021). Cano's friendship with Díaz Ayuso seemingly granted him direct access to a subsidy of 39,371 euros to help produce the show, which he requested three days after receiving compliments during the Dos de Mayo celebration, where he was awarded a medal by Díaz Ayuso. The regional Ministry of Economy, Employment, and Competitiveness provided this funding as part of measures to assist companies during the coronavirus pandemic. Reports suggest the money went to the company owning his mansion in Ibiza, where President Díaz Ayuso reportedly spent her vacation.

Cano's close relationship with Díaz Ayuso has continued to spark controversy, as Ayuso served as the patron for the 400th performance of *Malinche* in Madrid, where Cano led the audience in singing a song in her honor. In June 2024, Díaz Ayuso accompanied Cano at the premiere of his new dinner show musical *Ibiza Hippie Heaven* (Rodríguez, 2024). Cano has compared Díaz Ayuso to Queen Isabel the Catholic (the sponsor of Hernán Cortés, with whom Cano indirectly identifies), calling her “the miracle of Madrid” and praising her handling of COVID-19 restrictions that favored the hospitality and entertainment sectors. His ties with Madrid's administrations have led to both altruistic gestures, such as composing for Madrid's Olympic bid, and lucrative contracts. In 2021, the Madrid City Council announced a 19,000-square-meter land concession for *Malinche*, which sparked public outcry and resulted in a relocation to Ifema, where the venue for *Malinche* was ultimately constructed (Corroto, 2024). Cano's public admiration for Ayuso persisted, as he referred to her as “the savior of this country” on television in 2022 (Honorato, 2024).

Malinche became embroiled in further controversy following Cano's arrest on July 9, 2024, for allegedly hiring undocumented immigrants under exploitative conditions. One dancer, Lesly, reported to Madrid police about the poor working conditions for dancers brought from Mexico in December. She revealed that they entered Spain as tourists, not on student visas as initially claimed, and were instructed to lie about their purpose of visit at customs. The dancers reportedly earned as little as 300 euros per month while working up to 12-hour days, six days a week. Despite Cano's defense of the program as a legitimate training opportunity, police investigations suggest the young Mexican dancers were misled, overworked, and left in a precarious legal situation. Cano insists that the participants were on scholarships and performing as part of their training, not employment (Romero Medinilla, 2024).

This incident has sparked a political backlash. Cano condemned police actions as “criminal” following his arrest for alleged irregularities in staff hiring, resulting in the withdrawal of sponsorships from companies like Renfe, Spain's state-owned railway, which had offered discounts to customers (Bolinches, 2024). His statements received support from Díaz Ayuso and far-right leader Santiago Abascal, who accused the government of using “totalitarian” methods to target Cano for his political views.

In July 2024, Nacho Cano announced the musical would bid farewell until September 2024, when its third season was set to begin, with performances scheduled through December. He also planned to launch the musical in Mexico in March of the following year. However, these plans are now uncertain due to Cano's recent arrest. Despite having completed two seasons and attracting 600 performances and 500,000 spectators, earlier reports indicated approximately 350,000 spectators. The future of the third season, planned for September, now hangs in the balance due to the legal issues surrounding Cano.

Since the start of its run, *Malinche* has ignited widespread debate about historical accuracy and representation. The show exemplifies how power and financial dynamics can influence the telling of another culture's story. The effects of Spanish colonization continue to burden indigenous populations in Mexico today. The colonizers introduced diseases and massacred indigenous civilizations, causing the death of about 90% of the pre-Columbian population. This demographic collapse fueled the transatlantic slave trade. While mixed marriages were permitted to promote evangelization, Spaniards typically married Indigenous women from elite backgrounds, while fathering illegitimate children with enslaved women and servants, often through coercion or rape. Spanish Emperor Carlos V prohibited mestizos, and illegitimate children from holding public office or receiving land grants, reinforcing a caste system based on “purity of blood” (Afroféminas, 2023).

Despite receiving the endorsement of the Mexican Anthropological Institute and the Mexican president's wife, Nacho Cano did not consult the over 11 million indigenous people who still live in Mexico, enduring conditions inherited from the conquest. Today, being indigenous in Mexico often means facing poverty, discrimination, and daily racism. The public response to *Malinche* underscores the importance of informed representation and respectful engagement in conveying universal messages while honoring cultural specificity. This entails including cultural experts and community representatives and maintaining authenticity to avoid stereotypes and oversimplification. Artists bear an ethical responsibility to challenge colonial legacies, uplift ignored voices, and promote understanding across cultural boundaries. *Malinche* does not speak to any of the above.

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