

THE BODY OF HISTORY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY MEXICO *

Stacie G. Widdifield
(Arizona)

I

When I speak of the "body of history" in nineteenth-century Mexico, I mean by this the bodies - of the Indian, the mestizo, the woman - and their place in the construction of a "history" presented as cultural heritage, as chronicle, and as national genealogy. Such a body, or bodies, was particularly important to elite and official nineteenth-century Mexico in the process of creating a national identity and culture, especially after Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821, and even more so after the 1867 execution of the imposed Hapsburg emperor, Maximilian. Certainly this process responds to a web of pressures - including those of partisan politics and class - and, indeed, the liberals as ultimate political victors over the conservatives (who, for example, engineered Maximilian's coming to power), basically write the dominant history from mid-century on. And although the central issues of gender and race cut across boundaries of partisan politics and class, I am looking here primarily at that dominant liberal history that emerges in nineteenth-century histories, literature, essays, art criticism, and images.

To condense a very complex subject, it might be said that the liberal body of history required the symbolic presence of the Indian, the actual presence of the mestizo, and the fragmented and reproductive presence of the female body. These three bodies were, historically, inextricably tied to the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest of Mexico on the one hand, and to the nineteenth-century rise of the liberal state on the other. It might also be said that the actual conquest that irrevocably opened up the confrontation between

* This paper is derived from issues raised in my book, *The Embodiment of the National in Late Nineteenth-Century Painting*, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1996.

indigenous and European in the colonial world, was replaced by a symbolic confrontation after independence, in that treacherous terrain of the post-colonial world. Nineteenth-century liberals claimed the figure of the Indian as part of their authentic heritage - largely culturally rather than by bloodline. The mestizo - neither Indian nor European, but a distinctly *Mexican* being - (whether engendered by interracial marriage or by institutional assimilation), increasingly came to assume a larger claim to political power itself, and not a few of these mestizos were themselves important liberals. The female body, and women, had, not surprisingly, conflicted roles - as generative and destructive, as sites of cultural origin and cultural perversion. But what is interesting is the way these bodies overlap so to speak; that is, they are bound up in a system that requires their presence as much as it does their absence, or erasure.

I would like to look at this broad problem through an interweaving of issues and images centering around: Benito Juárez, Ignacio Ramírez, Ignacio Altamirano, and, Marina/Malinche, María Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez, and Xochitl. The first complex involves three intellectual and political colleagues, all liberals: Benito Juárez, a full-blooded Indian who became the first Indian President of Mexico, Ignacio M. Altamirano, also a full-blooded Indian who became a lawyer, playwright, congressional deputy, and renowned writer; the third, a mestizo, Ignacio Ramírez, who also rose to prominence in the political and intellectual arenas of mid-nineteenth-century Mexico. The second complex involves the conflicted sixteenth-century indigenous woman, Malintzin, later known by her baptismal name of Marina, or by Malinche, the cruel epithet encoding notions of national treason. This also involves one of the few heroines of the national period, María Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez who tipped off Father Miguel Hidalgo to a plot against him in the celebrated uprising known as the "Grito de Dolores" in 1810 - the symbolic inauguration of struggle for Independence from Spain. Finally, it involves a fictional Indian woman, Xochitl, celebrated in text and image for her legendary "discovery" of a national brew, known as pulque.

What these figures share is a place in Mexican history by virtue of their bodies. Their place in this complex narrative is often marked by a reference to such things as skin color, beauty, or to the device of the classical to repicture them as something they are not. Altamirano, for one, was characterized by his own biographer as having a face "not of a grecian mold." His Indian features and skin color marked his history in a physical way. Indeed, as I have discussed elsewhere, his own novels often suggest his profound awareness of the figure of the Indian in the creation of nation and national text.

In her book *Foundational Fictions, The National Romances of Latin America*, Doris Sommer describes the national romances of nineteenth-century Mexico as "commemorations of consolidating events."¹ As she shows, this is certainly a particularly apt phrasing for the works of Ignacio Altamirano, for example. His novels, such as *El Zarco (The Blue-Eyed One)*, a story of 1860-1861 - but not published until 1900 - and *Clemencia*, which appeared in the pages of the journal of culture, *El Renacimiento* in 1869, revolve around a conflation of practices and ideals, both personal and public. They allegorize consolidating events and grand plans for the nation. Brooding dark-skinned figures are pitted against libertine light-skinned ones, city confronts the countryside, liberals confront conservatives, and men confront women. The oppositions to national progress and consolidation are resolved through the plights of hero and heroine. And, in the process of writing juicy love stories, a national history is written, a foundational fiction gives order to the national future.

Altamirano's novels emit the constant refrain of the dark-skinned, humble, and virtuous Indian being spurned by the light-skinned, superficial woman. Sommer reckons that Altamirano's desire for the "white object of his desire" is as much about "the individual passion that would cross racial categories" as it is "Altamirano's patriotic longings for a unified and indigenous republic."² The implication of this conflation for visual art, particularly for the images on which I have focused here, is profound. Altamirano conjures up the same categories of opposites in his novels that the artists do in their paintings. And just as his romances are pretexts for staging strategies for nation building, so are paintings. I would like to focus on two images which seem to offer striking examples of visual foundational fictions: José Escudero y Espronceda's *Portrait of Benito and Margarita Juárez* (1890) and José Obregón's *The Discovery of Pulque* (1869).

What greater romance could there be for the restored liberal republic of 1867 (following the execution of Maximilian) than the marriage of a thirty year-

¹ Doris Sommer, "Something to Celebrate: National Nuptials in Chile and Mexico," in *Foundational Fictions, The National Romances of Latin America*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984, p.205.

² The full text is "This wish-fulfillment of a spiritually superior but physically unattractive Indian lover who finally wins over the white object of his desire is repeated obsessively throughout Altamirano's novels, pointing perhaps to a deeply personal yearning. But the individual fantasy of a passion that would cross racial categories is rather hard to distinguish from Altamirano's patriotic longings for a unified and indigenous republic.", *ibid*, p.228

old, full-blooded Zapotec to an eighteen-year old young woman of European ancestry; of the union of this short, dark-skinned assimilated Indian to the worldly, light-skinned daughter "of polished education and noble and elevated sentiments?"³ What greater foundational fiction than the 1843 marriage of Benito Juárez and Margarita Maza? If Altamirano (or his character) could not get the object of his desire, Benito Juárez did. Nineteenth-century biographies of Juárez, such as Gustavo Baz's *Vida de Benito Juárez* of 1874, commonly create a picture of a meeting of social and racial opposites. They speak often of the "raza indígena" from which Juárez managed to extricate himself. This comment reflects something of the attitude towards race, and class, that had discursively organized Mexico since the conquest. Or, as Baz put it, "To better comprehend this exceptional man, it is necessary to paint [a picture of] the race to which he belonged."⁴ Juárez had to strive to acquire what his wife had acquired 'naturally' as a result of her race and class. And if his biographies are true enough, the marriage was not exactly welcomed by all. A local newspaper registered public opinion about the impending marriage of this "ugly Indian" to the daughter of a successful businessman, by saying "honey was not made for the mouths of burros."⁵

Even more striking in nineteenth-century imagery is the emergence of an apparent reversal of the primordial pair in the originary foundational fiction of Cortés and Marina, and the stock figures of Spanish man and Indian woman with mestizo child as commonly in the first panel of the colonial period Mexican casta paintings, which typically display an adult couple and child within a highly structured grid of numbers, labels, and even characteristics of temperament. This reversal is abundantly clear in the intimate, double portrait of Benito Juárez and Margarita Maza de Juárez, done by the prolific and highly successful nineteenth-century Mexican portrait painter, José Escudero y Espronceda. This portrait stands out because it is an uncommon double portrait of Juárez and wife. It contrasts with the official and unofficial portraits of Juárez as political figure, often formally attired, and bearing marks of his office. This painting, done in 1890, almost twenty years after the deaths of both Benito and Margarita, emphasizes what the single portraits of Juárez do not, namely,

³ Gustavo Baz, *Vida de Benito Juárez*, Editorial José M. Cajica, Mexico City, 1972. p.129. Baz's book was originally published in 1874, two years after the death of Juárez.

⁴ "Más para comprender a este hombre excepcional, preciso es pintar la raza a que perteneció." Gustavo Baz, *Vida de Benito Juárez*, p.34.

⁵ Carlos Velasco Pérez, *Margarita Maza de Juárez, Primera Dama de la Nación*, Oficina Tip. De la Secretaría de Fomento, Mexico City, 1974. pp.13-14.

his Indian-ness, his dark-skin color, the "rostro bronceado," as biographer Baz termed it.⁶ The contrast between the Indian face of Benito and the pale skin and pink cheeks of the European Margarita echo the structure of the *casta* painting. No offspring are present, but their physical proximity suggests conjugal union. The hierarchy of Spanish man and Indian woman has been turned on its head. It implies the wish for the diminution of the colonial hierarchy based on the actual and symbolic whiteness of one's skin and heritage. The painting suggests that the inevitable process of mestizaje has been altered. The reversal of the Spanish man/Indian woman pair suggests that the hierarchy of race is being reversed, if only symbolically.

I would like to read Escudero y Espronceda's double portrait, with its striking contrast in skin color, as an embodiment of a foundational fiction that re-evaluates the process of mestizaje as necessary and positive. It is no longer pictured as a process haphazard and inexorable, outside the law, as it may be in the *casta* paintings, or as it is in the Cortés/Marina union. The picture of Juárez and Maza is one, instead, of the legal, thus institutionalized, process of racial intermarriage. It must be recognized and reckoned with; the couple's mestizo children do not stand outside the law. The double portrait, I think, implies the issue of reproduction and generation in a way that single portraits could not. It effects an embodiment of the very process of reproducing citizens in order to produce the nation.

What may appear on one level as a replication of the picture of gender offers, on the other, the picture of mestizaje, not to be simply and derogatorily defined as mere assimilation. In a well-known history painting of 1869, *The Discovery of Pulque* the foundational fiction of Marina and Cortés is replaced and inverted. It offers an alternative and institutionally inscribed heritage that pictured the Indian, albeit male, on top, not the European man in the figure of Cortés. Reproductions and derivative images of Obregón's *Discovery of Pulque* seem to take great care in retaining this inversion shown through the contrast in skin color between Xochitl and Tecpancaltzin

The physical aspects of the indigenous and mesitzo figure are fully intertwined with the personal or psychological/spiritual aspects of the Indian. This was significant not only for painted Indians. Altamirano described his colleague Ignacio Ramírez at the age of thirty-two in terms thus:

⁶ Gustavo Baz describes the Indian race to which Juárez belongs and its "bronzed face" in *Vida de Benito Juárez*, p.34. On *casta* paintings see Ilona Katzew, *New World Orders, Casta Painting and Colonial Latin America*, America's Society, New York, 1996.

His brown-skinned appearance, pale and of regular features, had the melancholy gravity that is like a trait of the indigenous race (...) Ramírez's parents (...) both queretanos and of the mestiza race, and not pure Indians, as some of his biographers have said. Nevertheless, the truth is that the Indian type dominated in both of them.⁷

This melancholy character is due to the history of the Indian as a race. Nineteenth-century writers in their lamentations over the contemporary Indian often claimed that he was in such a sorry state because his society had been stripped of its culture and enslaved by the conquistadores in the sixteenth-century.

Nineteenth-century writer Gustavo Baz discussed Benito Juárez within the context of his race, stating:

The indigenous race surely possesses brilliant qualities that the abjection of three centuries has in part destroyed (....) Its humility, strange mix of resignation and scorn; its constancy, incomprehensible amalgam of pride and obeisance, make it an exceptional race.⁸

⁷ "Su semblante moreno, pálido y de facciones regulares, tenía la gravedad melancólica que es como característica de la raza indígena...Los padres de Ramírez fueron...ambos queretanos y de raza mestiza, y no indígenas puros como han dicho algunos de sus biógrafos. Sin embargo, la verdad es que predominaba en ellos el tipo indio." (1889). Ignacio M. Altamirano, *Biografía de Ignacio Ramírez*, Mexico, Toluca, 1977. pp. 21; 23.

⁸ "La raza indígena posee ciertamente brillantes cualidades que una abyección de tres siglos ha destruido en parte...Su humildad, mezcla extraña de resignación y de desprecio; su constancia, amalgama incomprensible de orgullo y de obediencia, la hacen una raza excepcional." Gustavo Baz, *Vida de Benito Juárez*, pp.3, 35.

These brown-skinned, melancholy Indians have, it seems, their race's entire history written on their faces and they are survivors of their enslavement. They possess the qualities that make them good citizens, a hybrid of a figure that at once seems to assert its state of difference and submit to that state; after all, to what else would this resignation and obeisance be directed? Indians are most attractive when they fit into structures that can channel their hardworking essences and make them productive, when they are converted into mestizos by culture not by blood. Baz indeed discusses at length the Indian's consistent success in agricultural or military pursuits rather than in intellectual endeavors. These descriptions attempt to incorporate the Indian into the homology of the nation. They are not intended to segregate, rather to recognize difference and accommodate it. These descriptions are recognition of what is distinctly "mexicano."

II

It is one of the mysteries of the destiny of all nations that they owe their ruin and their disgrace to one woman, and to another woman their salvation and glory; the myths of Eve and Mary are reproduced everywhere. We recall with indignation Cortés' concubine, and never will we forget our gratitude to Doña María Josefa Ortiz, the immaculate Malintzin [Marina] of another epoch, who dared to pronounce the proclamation of independence so that the embodiment of patriotism could be realized.⁹

⁹ Es uno de los misterios de la fatalidad que todas las naciones deban su pérdida y su baldón a una mujer, y a otra mujer, su salvación y su gloria; en todas partes se reproduce el mito de Eva y de María; nosotros recordamos con indignación a la barragana de Cortés, y jamás olvidaremos en nuestra gratitud a Doña María Josefa Ortiz, la Malintzin inmaculada de otra época, que se atrevió a pronunciar el fiat de la independencia para que la encarnación del patriotismo lo realizara. Ignacio Ramírez, "Discurso Cívico. Pronunciado el 16 de septiembre de 1861, en la alameda de Mexico, en memoria de la proclamación de la independencia." in Ignacio Ramírez, *El nigromante: selecciones*, ed. by Francisco Monterde, Colecciones Metropolitana, Mexico City. p.19.

Ignacio Ramírez, speaking on 16 September 1861 in honor of Mexican Independence, reminds us that if the political body is male, the symbolic body of the nation is female. But unlike the male body, the female one is split into good and evil. The one accused of illicit sex with the invader Cortés, the other, the virginal heroine who warned Hidalgo of an impending attack and thus, the narrative goes, changed the course of Mexican history. What better choice of words to use than "everywhere is reproduced the myth of Eve and Mary" in an epoch in which the fate of the union rested not only on the productivity, but the reproductivity of its citizens? What more perfect pair for the epoch of the mestizo state than the founding female figures of the Indian Malintzin and the creole María Josefa Ortiz?

The fate of the nineteenth-century Mexican nation was to be configured from the political union of creoles and mestizos, of liberals and conservatives, but also from the sexual union of its male and female citizens, and specifically from a conjugal union. The literature abounds with the figure of the mother and wife; Juárez, himself, was son to Mother Mexico or soon to be husband to fiancé Mexico. The "sons of a common mother engendered even Mexican culture" as Altamirano described the literati from whom he solicited the flourishing of national culture. Fertility - reproductive and cultural - was 'naturally' inscribed in the female figure. But even though Malintzin and Cortés were understood to have initiated the mestizo line, this union was not fixed in the proper sphere. In the nineteenth century, law, of course, should bind political and sexual unions. Ramírez's text speaks implicitly to this issue. He writes of the Eve figure, Malintzin, the concubine, implicitly the figure with a sexual body outside the law, the whore and harbinger of the downfall of the Aztec nation.

Notice that Ramírez does not chastise her for speaking to Cortés, for informing him, for translating, but for the unlawful carnal act she committed. Ortiz, by contrast, whose legacy was her written word to Hidalgo, is freed from such a condemnation; she is lawful and patriotic. And in fact, this act of speaking, ties her more to her male heroic counterparts than even to her evil alter ego of the same sex, Malintzin. Ramírez applauds her thus: "Honor to this Mexican woman in whose noble breast are united masculine virtues with the sweetest virtues, which decorate the sex to which she belonged!"¹⁰ Few women were acclaimed for such acts, male acts, of bravery. Indeed, Ramírez makes

¹⁰ "Honor a esa mexicana en cuyo noble pecho se adunaban las virtudes varoniles con las virtudes más dulces que decoran el sexo a que pertenecía!" Ignacio Ramírez, "Discurso Cívico", p.19.

sure to point out that she sacrificed everything around her in order to perform such a deed, as she was imprisoned for it. She lost those things that made her a woman; she sacrificed "husband, children, beauty, riches, everything, to send, from behind the bars of a prison, the first salutation to the patria."¹¹ She gave up all of the relationships and qualities that constructed her as female to begin with, not the least of which was her place in society as wife and mother. I dwell on this point because it suggests that, not surprisingly, all beneméritos - benefactors of the nation - were men. And Ramírez virtually converts Ortiz into one. Hers was a public act that rent her from the traditional, private, domestic sphere of husband, children, beauty and riches.

Several decades later, not much had changed in the evaluation of Malintzin and Ortiz. In his 1893 tract, *La Mujer Mexicana*, historian José María Vigil also placed Ortiz and Marina, as he referred to her, as the founding female figures of the nation. He speaks of the "two notable figures that appeared in the two most important epochs of our history, the conquest and independence."¹² He went on to construct them from the language of the sexual body and within the framework of the legal place of women. He actually speaks in terms of the difficulty of "defining the moral physiognomy" of Marina; he further extends the legal/body discourse by contrasting the patriotic with the illegitimate. He says of Ortiz: "In her one sees love of the patria without the mixing in of any illegitimate sentiment."¹³ Love of the patria, of the state, implies lawfulness; illegitimate sentiment implies lawlessness.

The other difference between Marina and Ortiz is that while they both reproduced, only one was a mother. Or, if Marina could be called a mother, it was of the type that Octavio Paz wrote about in his oft-quoted essay "Sons of Malinche..."¹⁴ For the nineteenth-century state, motherhood is defined by the legality of the woman's relationship to the man. The female sexual body had to

¹¹ "Para sacrificar marido, hijos, hermosura, riquezas, todo, por dirigir, desde las rejas de una prisión el primer saludo a la patria." Ignacio Ramírez, "Discurso Cívico," p.20.

¹² "Dos figuras notables que aparecen en las dos épocas más importantes de nuestra historia, la conquista y la independencia" in José María Vigil, *La Mujer Mexicana*, Oficina Tip. de la Secretaria de fomento, Mexico City 1893. p.24. The tract was dedicated to the honor of Porfirio Díaz's wife, Carmem Romero Rubio de Díaz. It was clearly issued within the context of the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Romero de Díaz was head of the Mexican Women's Delegation.

¹³ "Difícil es definir la fisonomía moral de esa mujer extraordinaria," in José María Vigil, *La Mujer Mexicana*, p.25. "En ella se ve el amor patrio sin mezcla de ningún sentimiento bastardo..." José María Vigil, *op.cit.*, p.25.

¹⁴ Octavio Paz, "The Sons of Malinche" in *The Labyrinth of Solitude, Life and Thought In Mexico*, trans. by Lysander Kemp. Grove Press, New York, 1961. pp.65-88.

be legally controlled. This was made especially clear with the state's regulation of prostitution in the nineteenth-century. In their work on prostitutes and the porfirian state, Guadalupe Ríos and Marcela Suárez point out that during the empire of Maximilian, the "Oficina de Inspección de Sanidad" was established, which oversaw the control and registration of prostitutes and bordellos.¹⁵ An overarching law governing prostitution was later promulgated in 1898.¹⁶ In the nineteenth-century nation-state, prostitution was a private practice under public control. The notion of public and private is extremely important with regard to women in nineteenth-century Mexico. They were, unlike men, cleft apart by their place in these two antagonistic sites. The socially acceptable and productive role of a woman in nineteenth-century Mexico was as reproducer within the legal construct of marriage, so that her children would not be illegitimate, or symbolically descended from Marina. However, what governed her practices at home was a patriarchal structure that superceded the law. Her rights as citizen were almost non-existent; she had to acquiesce to her husband or father as lawgiver. Or as Vigil put it, "In her the sentiment of duty is superior to that of law."¹⁷ It is particularly striking in this regard to read the public acclamations of Margarita de la Maza Juárez upon her death. She was, after all, wife of the man who helped create the theoretically and newly empowering secular, liberal state. In virtually every eulogy published in the Mexico City papers following her death on January 3, 1871, Maza is described as virtuous mother and obedient wife, even to the point, that as one eulogy pointed out:

Mrs. Juárez, for her benevolence of character, for her magnanimity of soul, for the treasure of domestic virtues of which she was the most perfect model, was called to be worthy of the respect and consideration of

¹⁵ See, José María Vigil, *op.cit.*,

¹⁶ "Ríos and Suárez also point out that prostitution was practiced from the colonial period, and there were certain regulations issued by the colonial administration with regard to prostitution. The significant difference is that prostitution was not viewed within the tightly divided public and private spheres". Ríos Guadalupe and Marcela Suárez, "Criminales, delincuentes o víctimas: la prostituta y el estado en la época porfiriana," in *Fem 16*, 111, May, 1992. pp.4-9.

¹⁷ "En ella el sentimiento del deber es superior á la idea del derecho," José María Vigil, *op.cit.*, p.30.

the most irreconcilable political enemies of her
husband.¹⁸

She was, as another eulogy put it, "a wife without stain, a model mother."¹⁹ She was the virtuous site of conciliation. If Benito and Margarita Juárez were the modern day counterparts to Cortés and Marina, they were legal. Although Margarita would have mestizo children, she was a mother, unblemished; Marina/Malintzin would never be able to cleanse herself or erase her blemish.

¹⁸ "La Sra. Juárez, por la benvolencia de su carácter, por la magnanimidad de su alma, y por el tesoro de las virtudes domésticas de que era lo más perfecto modelo, estaba llamada a merecer el respeto y la consideración de los mas irreconciliables enemigos políticos de su esposo." Anonymous, "La Señora Doña Margarita Maza de Juárez," in *Diario Oficial*, Jan. 3, p. 187. Reprinted in Velasco Pérez, 1974.

¹⁹ "Una esposa sin mancha, y una madre modelo..." Anonymous. "La Sra. Doña Margarita Maza de Juárez," *Two Republics*, Reprinted in Velasco Pérez, 1974. p.87.