CHAPTER TWO

AFFECTIONS OF THE HEART: FEMALE IMAGERY AND THE NOTION OF NATION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY MEXICO

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Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist.

Benedict Anderson

Women contribute most particularly to the happiness of the State...In her bosom man begins to exist, in her lap he grows, is nourished and acquires his first notions of Good and Evil.

Semanario Económico de México, 1813

“A nation is nothing more than a great family, and in order for it to be stable and strong it means that all of its members must be closely united with ties of interest and affections of the heart.” With these words, written in 1847, Mariano Otero, a young Mexican politician, reminded his countrymen that they must put aside their differences and come together through love of country in order to overcome Mexico’s tumultuous political, social, and economic disarray in the mid-nineteenth century. Otero’s use of the metaphor of family is important because it implies the concept of ‘nation’ as an intricate web of affective relationships promoting a common good. Indeed, the theme of love of country constantly echoed across visual and written texts as the kingdom of New Spain, with its emphasis on la patria, motherland (also fatherland), in service to the sovereignty of the king, became the Republic of Mexico, with its focus on la nación, “nation,” in service to the sovereignty of the people.

This essay examines the gendered imagery that was associated with such affections. As Mexico attempted to define and constitute

1 Otero (1975) [1847] 45. Otero’s essay was originally published anonymously and is generally attributed to him. Dennis E. Berge (1975), an historian, believes that the authors were Mariano Otero and, possibly, Juan Bautista Morales, also a political essayist.
itself as a nation, sovereignty, represented by the imagery of the
king’s body, was replaced by a changing set of female images.
Throughout the nineteenth century, this new corporeal imagery marked
the shifting of the signifying site of sovereignty and represented
an ongoing search to give visual focus to nationalist affections of the
heart.

The Body of the Sovereign

“Vivan Nuestros Amados Soberanos Carlos Quarto [sic] y María Luisa de
Borbón,” “Long Live Our Beloved Sovereigns Carlos the Fourth and
Maria Luisa of Bourbon.” These words, supported by large wooden
props, appeared on the central plaza of Mexico City in December
1796 as part of a three-day celebration to mark both the birthday
of the Queen, María Luisa de Borbón, and the installation of a
statue of King Carlos IV. As one would expect of this opulent and
luxurious capital of New Spain, the city was elaborately decorated
with banners and its numerous public and private buildings were lit
with over 20,000 lights. In summarizing the event, the Gaceta de
México, a monthly publication, went so far as to state: “It offered a
spectacle that sweeps the imagination.”

The culmination of the celebration, however, was the unveiling of
a massive statue of Carlos IV in the city’s central plaza that pre-
sented the king, his right arm extended, riding a great prancing
horse. In inaugurating this sculptural project, Viceroy Branciforte
asserted that the magnificent metropolis of Mexico City had enjoyed
many benefits of royal patronage and now possessed what it had
previously lacked—a great image of the king placed in the center of
the capital that illustrated his virtues.

Closer examination of the circumstances of the statue, however,
exposes an obvious but unexplored fact about the historical context
of this equestrian visage: It was initially dedicated about three years
after the King of France, Louis XIV, had been beheaded and the
French monarchical system—figuratively and literally—had been dis-

2 Gaceta de México (9 December 1796) 231.
3 Documentos varios para la historia de la Ciudad de México a fines de la época colonial