

## CHAPTER ONE



### *Re-Birth of a Nation: On Mexican Movies, Museums, and María Félix*

Nation-building rhetoric of post-revolutionary Mexico is a symphony of patriotism, “our” indigenous heritage, and the sanctity of Mexican womanhood. Representations of the emergent state inform both elite and popular culture, from the novel to the ballad, but nationalism’s voice resonates most powerfully in the vernacular of mass culture. Nation, race, and gender do not simply lie secluded in celluloid patriotism; in Mexican productions of the 1940s these discourses are absolutely central to film and its promotional apparatus. The so-called Golden Age of Mexican Nationalist cinema, emanating from a Golden Age of Mexican post-war regeneration, is renowned for its representations of legions of stylized Indians, their social conditions artfully explicated by teary-eyed *señoritas*, themselves variously inscribed as cultural mediators or idealized as Indian maidens. Deploying the conventions of melodrama, filmmakers like Emilio Fernández aestheticized the indigenous and fetishized the feminine in an attempt to gather all Mexicans under the banner of a unified national subject (Figs. 1.1 and 1.2).

The tensions between these “potential citizens” and the potent elite formed one of the uncontested premises of Mexican Golden Age cinema.<sup>1</sup> In Mexican political melodramas, the monumental staging of the promise of civilization and the threat of barbarism was rarely as directly represented as it was in the manifestos of destiny portrayed in Hollywood’s contemporaneous films. Where all stripes of Hollywood’s “cowboys and Indians” alternately civilized



FIGURE 1.1. The unified national subject: *María Candelaria's* "colorful natives." Courtesy Cineteca Nacional.



FIGURE 1.2. Fernández's fetishized feminine: *María Candelaria's* face on another's nude form. Courtesy Cineteca Nacional.

and sacked each other and the land they lived upon, potential and powerful citizens alike often engaged in direct hand-to-hand combat without benefit of intervention—divine, feminine, or otherwise. The Mexican movie manifesto decreed a difference. Many 1940s films could have been launched as was the 1943 *Doña Bárbara*: a boatman powering civilization up-river into barbarous territory cannot even begin the journey without rhetorically asking his passenger, a lawyer named Santos Luzardo, “With whom do we travel? With God!”<sup>2</sup> But it was not only God and legal saints like Luzardo who mediated cinematic civilization and savagery. In a land where powerful *políticos* faced off barbarous masses, Mexican *caudillos* and Indians duked it out with the divine benediction of the feminine. From *la virgen María* to María Félix, female arbitration determined the process, if not always the outcome, of the filmic representation of Mexico’s national project (Fig. 1.3).

In the 1990s high-stakes nation-building in Mexico reopened the debate on the meaning of civilization. Changes in the constitution, which had been virtually untouched since its drafting in 1917, began to legally enfranchise (but not necessarily empower) groups ranging from indigenous people to clerics. Concurrently, a centuries-old “potential citizenry” claimed the voice of its birthright. Challenging commemorations of “The Discovery of 1492,” for instance, representatives from Mexico’s many Indian communities addressed the quincentenary from an indigenous perspective. Celebrations of “Civilization” were recast as celebrations of civilizations’ “500 Years of Resistance” to colonization. On the religious front, decades of enforced clerical silence on national politics, stemming from nineteenth-century edicts ensuring the separation of Church and State, ended with the political incorporation of the clergy. More and more, “civilization,” as a polemic, has become disputed territory.

In addition to the interpretive struggles waged within national borders, extraterritorial space and the domain of foreign policy have also become sites for articulating the significance of civilization. In the early 1990s such debates informed and were informed by arguments for and against the Free Trade Agreement, which pitted proponents of the technological “civilization” of Mexico against trade protectionists who argued that so-called technological primitivism makes both ecological and economic sense. When Mexican citizens wage these kinds of battles transnationally, both from within Mexico and throughout the Diaspora, campaigns to civilize potential citizens become as complex as Vasconcelos’s 1920s strategies were straightforward.

In response to these different interests’ bids for the power to elucidate national priorities, the Mexican government contextualized the nation’s glorious past and promising present in myriad new scenarios. A blitz of officially sponsored Mexican art exhibitions in the United States showcased the most strident of these representations. The enormously popular “Mexico: Splendors



FIGURE 1.3. Consecrated from on high: *La virgen María* (Félix) in *Río Escondido*. Courtesy Cineteca Nacional.

of Thirty Centuries,” and its satellite exhibitions, exported a carefully framed national portrait intentionally designed to engender U.S. favor for the Free Trade pact.<sup>3</sup> Within Mexico the ruling elite’s drives to save-and-civilize the natives took on a slightly different characteristic: art exhibitions were constructed to appeal to middle-class Mexicans who were wavering between possibilities for new civilization (Free Trade and big business) and old barbarism (protected production and small collectives).

While traditional displays like “Splendors” do bounce back to Mexico in the form of catalogues pyramided in department store windows,<sup>4</sup> other exhibitions of the national patrimony are part of the national product marketed within the nation. Removed from standard U.S. exhibiting practice, a new genre of what we might call national “art spectacles” is bringing the empowered elite and a “citizenry” evermore reaching its potential into direct contact. Paralleling the 1940s model of filmic feminine intervention between marginalized groups and the State (no better dramatized than by María Félix’s rural schoolteacher in *Río Escondido*), is an astonishing new phenomenon (no better exemplified than by María Félix herself): flesh-and-blood “apparitions” of 1940s film stars and commentators who attempt to connect the contemporary Nation-State with a wide cross-section of its national subjects. These live performances use the authoritative space of the museum to unite film festivals, appearances of media stars, bandwagoning politicians, and social critics with fine art collections. Museum catalogues further promote the liaison; film scholars and art critics sanctify the union in public talks; journalists sensationalize the rest.

The reanimated rhetoric on salvation-through-civilization sparked by these multidisciplinary forums bears uncanny resemblance to Golden Age cinema’s proselytizing of fifty years ago. The apotheosis of today’s “endangered” indigenous peoples is now the stuff of museum exhibits much as it once informed the theses of Emilio Fernández’s films.<sup>5</sup> Yet collections gathered anywhere from the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City to the Cultural Center in Tijuana seem to privilege the survival of “authentic” indigenous artifacts over the survival of “authentic” Indians. Museums’ differentiation between Mexico’s indigenous heritage (regarded as a valuable component of the national patrimony) and actual life in Mexico for indigenous people (seen as “inevitably bound for extinction”) echoes old save-the-natives discourses that function on assimilation models.

Nowhere has this pattern been more forcefully borne out than in the exhibition-as-spectacle hybrid, exemplified most strikingly by film diva María Félix and cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis. Crowning a busy program at the Tijuana Cultural Center in the summer of 1990, Félix came to town—as she had done months before in other parts of the Republic, and as she would do months later on international television—to inaugurate French-Russian artist

Antoine Tzapoff's idealized portraiture of "fast-disappearing" northern indigenous peoples. Her mediation of the event—effected by her presence, a retrospective of her most nationalistic films, Monsiváis's homage to her career, her article in the exhibition catalogue, and a flood of interviews in Tijuana newspapers—illustrates how the 1940s rhetoric of Mexico's post-revolutionary nationalism and that of the country's more recent expressions of nationalism are inextricably bound together by old discourses on the nature of nation and civilization. However differently inscribed in new cultural practices, Mexico's official nation-building strategies continue to be dependent upon cultural arbiters, whose interventions between dominant and subordinated groups paradoxically serve to enthrone power structures while at the same time enshrining the powerless. It is one such arbiter, the Janus-faced Félix, Fernández's fetishized Mother of Indigenous Mexico, and alternately the State's fetishizer of the Indians, with whom this chapter now embarks.

#### PROTAGONISTS OF THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE


When María Félix first transfixed film audiences, she was twenty-nine years old, had two mediocre melodramas to her credit, and was starring in *Doña Bárbara*.<sup>6</sup> In the role that would transform her career, Félix was established as both a respected actress and an overdetermined icon. Félix—and her director, the fan magazines, and the critics—fashioned actress and icon almost literally from the same cloth. Doña María adopted Doña Bárbara's riding breeches, took on the fictional character's interest in witchcraft, and made herself over in the image of *La devoradora*, the devourer of men (Fig. 1.4). For her part, Doña Bárbara, soul of the untamed Venezuelan soil, became something of a naturalized Mexican citizen. As María Félix's Mexican face superimposed itself upon the waters of the Orinoco, that landscape—"farther away than the Cunaviche, farther than Meta, farther still than the Cinaruco, farther than forever"<sup>7</sup>—relocated just somewhat farther beyond the Prado Cinema in Mexico City. Venezuela's problems became Veracruz's solutions.

By 1943 Mexico was capturing the Spanish-speaking film market and nationalizing everything in the process. Mexico's Dolores del Río was no longer Hollywood's exotic Brazilian/"half-breed"/Gypsy/Polynesian; repatriated after twenty-seven films made "in the Mecca of movies," her roles in *Flor silvestre* (1943) and *María Candelaria* (1943)—the first a panegyric of the Revolution, the latter a romanticization of indigenous culture—assured her a place in the pantheon of national film heroes (Fig. 1.5). Others who had left Mexico in the 1920s returned. Filmmaker Emilio "Indio" Fernández, again, allegedly encouraged by his Los Angeles encounter with exiled president Adolfo de la Huerta—"Build our own cinema, Emilio . . . Mexican cinema"—went back to his homeland with



FIGURE 1.4. Félix as Doña Bárbara, “the devourer of men.” Courtesy Cineteca Nacional.

ORCHIDS IN THE MOONLIGHT



**Rialto**  
PRESENTS

FLYING DOWN  
TO RIO

THE AERIAL MUSICAL PICTURE  
WITH  
DOLORES DEL RÍO  
FRED ASTAIRE  
GINGER ROGERS  
RAOUL ROULIÉ

DIRECTED BY  
THORNTON FREELAND

CHORUSES AND ENSEMBLES BY  
DAVE GOULSON


ORCHESTRAL DIRECTION  
MAX STEINER

LOUIS BROCOFF  
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER

MERIAN C. COOPER  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

LYRICS BY  
GUS KAHN  
& EDWARD ELISBERG

MUSIC BY  
VINCENT  
YOUMAN



**T.B. HARMIS**  
COMPANY  
50 BROADWAY, NEW YORK

Other Songs Featured in This Picture

"MUSIC MAKES ME"  
"CARIOCA"  
"ORCHIDS IN THE MOONLIGHT"  
"FLYING DOWN TO RIO"

FIGURE 1.5. Dolores del Río, 1933: Hollywood's exotic Brazilian. Score from *Flying Down to Rio*.



the realization “that it was possible to create a Mexican cinema, with our own actors and our own stories, without having to photograph *gringos* or *gringas* or to tell stories that had nothing to do with our people.”<sup>8</sup>

During the presidencies of Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940–1946) and Miguel Alemán (1946–1952), films premiered in the capital at the astonishing rate of one per week. This boom represented a threefold increase over the number of movies produced in the 1930s. In contrast with the '30s productions, films of the '40s relied more heavily upon a star system illuminated by actresses and actors whose symbolic significance remained relatively stable. In addition to Félix’s “woman without a soul” and Dolores del Río’s “exotic *ejido* flower,” Sara García played the eternal Mexican mother; Pedro Armendáriz, the stalwart leader of men; Jorge Negrete, romantic *hacendado*; Pedro Infante, working-class hero; Gloria Marín, classic sweetheart; Marga López, taxi-dancing prostitute; Cantinflas, tongue-tripping interloper; Andrea Palma, mysterious cabaret goddess. As the protagonists in these films varied only slightly, so were the plots equally predictable. Yet reworked themes and archetypal characters did nothing to prevent eager crowds from patronizing the cinema. In the wake of a revitalized allegiance to things Mexican—fostered in part by previous President Lázaro Cárdenas’s (1934–1940) nationalization of the oil companies, programs in land redistribution, and experiments with “socialistic” education,<sup>9</sup> and in part by the national pride inspired by relative Mexican technological affluence during the presidencies of Ávila Camacho and Alemán—film audiences flocked to features on the Revolution, urbanization, pastoral life, national history, and Indian communities.

To a remarkable extent the entire apparatus of movie production and distribution was saturated with the rhetoric and the representations of nationalism. Supporting the cinema’s ideological didacticism, the illustrated press teamed up with advertisers and film stars to promote goods that would enhance the image of Mexico as a nation among nations. *Negro y Blanco y Labores*, a popular movie-and-sewing magazine designed for women, employed María Félix’s image to introduce a cosmetic line that assured the triumph of the actress and rewarded the “efforts of her able Mexican directors.” The star of *El monje blanco* (The White Monk; 1945), her face composed behind her “Filma Cake compac,” triumphed in her role as a most “natural and human”—but especially Mexican—protagonist (Figs. 1.6 and 1.7). The makeup, a “Creation of Hollywood,” was heralded as yet another triumph “that also serves the stars of our National Cinema as well as the Mexican woman.” Smoothed uniformly over the complexions of humanized movie actresses and glorified Mexican women, “Missuky Social Makeup” staged itself as the great equalizer. Félix was not the only national patrimony. Beautified by Missuky, stars and spectators alike were prepared to triumph in their roles as protagonists of the national narrative.<sup>10</sup>

**EL TRIUNFO DEL CINE NACIONAL**




MARIA FELIX se revela como actriz única en "El Monje Blanco"



Una nueva fórmula exclusiva de Maquillaje "CAKE". - no reseca el cutis - es para uso diario.

Ese encanto extraordinario de María Félix, su actuación natural y humana, representa el esfuerzo desarrollado por los hábiles directores mexicanos.

Su triunfo agrupó todos los elementos modernos de la técnica más adelantada.

El Maquillaje Social **MISSUKY**, Creación de Hollywood, triunfa también sirviendo ya, como en Hollywood, a las estrellas del Cine Nacional y a la mujer mexicana.



Lapiz Labial, Colorete y Polvo en armonía de colores modernos.

# Missuky

HOLLYWOOD CREATION

REG. NÚ 18742 - 18750 - 18630 - 18603      PROP. NÚ - FF 20



**PROGRAMAS DE RADIO PARA UD.:** "Estrellas del Mañana" en XEW de las 19:15 a las 19:45. Todos los lunes. - "La Hora del Cine Nacional" en XEQ Cadena Azul, los martes de las 21 a las 21:30.



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FIGURE 1.6. María Félix nationalizes Hollywood. *Negro y Blanco*, December 1945.

**Conga**

*El perfume que sugiere ritmos y cadencias tropicales*

TAMAÑO LUJO, \$15.00  
TAMAÑO REGULAR, \$10.00  
TAMAÑO PRUEBA, \$3.00.  
BRILLANTINA "CONGA"  
Líquida, \$1.75.

**...Y AHORA**

**EL NUEVO  
POLVO  
DE BELLEZA  
CONGA**

en su elegante presentación  
"ENVASE COBRE"

Cia. Industrial y Distribuidora, S. A.  
Isabel la Católica 33, Desp. 402. México, D. F.

Colores Ocre, Rachel, Rachel No. 2,  
Blanco y Natural. Caja ... \$4.00

Regn. Nos. 10017 y 17828 D. S. P. Prop. No. 3788

MOPY CORTÉS  
La guapa vedette en  
7 DIAS DE LICENCIA  
de la RKO Radio Pictures.

FIGURE 1.7. Mapy Cortés exoticizes Mexico. *México al Día*, March 1943.

## CELLULOID PATRIOTISM

In addition to creating consumers and endowing women with a sense of national purpose, Golden Age Cinema and its promotional appurtenances initiated a nostalgic remembrance of the past. Modernity, however desired, was to be pursued with a backward look. Post-revolutionary nation-formation meant taking in the Revolution, its aftermath, and the future as all of a piece. Emilio Fernández's *Río Escondido* encapsulated these time-frames as it moved María Félix through Mexico City's modern presidential palace to an outlaw's municipal palace in the desert. Impediments to national progress, thematized in the film, lay in the unsolved problems of "primitive" Mexico: lawlessness, illiteracy, disease, "spiritual poverty" and its material equivalent. In Fernández's resurrection of 1920s nationalism, self-empowered and self-serving political henchmen who would carve up the nation into personal fiefdoms were as uncivilized as the savage politicians whose greed had forced the Revolution. As Vasconcelos had proclaimed with his literacy campaigns in the 1920s, as President Lázaro Cárdenas had seconded with his education programs in the 1930s, and as Emilio Fernández affirmed with his sententious 1940s films, the flame of the sacred lamp of learning, aloft in a rural schoolteacher's hand, was the only fire with which the fire of the barbarous, incendiary torch of war could be fought. By 1947, with public faith in old civilizing strategies beginning to fade, Félix's mediating light was the beacon that Fernández used to illuminate the triumphs of the past as well as the path to progress.

As *Río Escondido's* opening statement is superimposed over Leopoldo Méndez's engravings, spectators are presented with textual and iconographic reminders of Mexico's "bloody past" as well as the nation's march "toward a superior and more glorious future." The first of ten images foregrounds the ignited torch that Félix, on the express orders of her President, will extinguish. Subsequent engravings preview the story of *Río Escondido*. The print that most closely evokes the spirit of the film (which was originally entitled *The Rural School Teacher*) features the *maestra* with her young charges, gazing at a portrait of nineteenth-century President Benito Juárez, "who," as Félix will later intone to the village children, "was an Indian, just like you" (cover photograph). In Fernández's hands Méndez's depictions of the need for indigenous peoples' education become reminders of Diego Rivera's earlier monumental representations of the nation's struggle toward universal literacy. To further underscore this connection, Gabriel Figueroa's camera dramatically sweeps Rivera's national palace murals while the anthropomorphized voice of the Bell of Dolores (the symbol of Independence) majestically moves spectator and protagonist into the opening sequences of the film.<sup>11</sup>

We immediately begin to learn, as one engraving foreshadowed, just “how immense is the will” of the “little teacher.” Amid Rivera’s representations of the “triumphant and terrible” history of Mexican civilization, Rosaura (Félix) pauses with us on the palace staircase to contemplate those who went before her: armies of teachers who formed the backbone of the Mexican educational system and the mainstay of its supporting rhetoric. About to contend with the results of some of the same oppressions illustrated in the stairwell, Rosaura, who suffers from an incurable disease, seems to take sustenance from these reminders of her predecessors as she hurries to receive instructions about her special teaching appointment in the desert village of Río Escondido.

Rosaura’s reflections prompt me to pause here and consider the triumphant and terrible history of those schoolteachers, who had proven to be both indispensable and problematic to administrations wanting to recuperate traditional models of a national family. Years of sending strong women off to reconstruct the post-revolutionary nation had taken their toll. The effort to “put to rights a world turned upside down by the Revolution,” as Jean Franco has explained, called for a kind of institutionalized patriarchy, where “the broken family, the cult of violence, and the independent ‘masculinized’ woman [had] to be transformed into a new holy family in which women accede[d] voluntarily to their own subordination not to a biological father but to a paternal state.”<sup>12</sup> As agents of social change, the teachers were ultimately antithetical to the long-term goals of this project; consequently their primary service to nation-building had to be carefully controlled. What is interesting is how this control was exercised through representation. With Fernández these historical teachers’ inherent contradictions are resolved within the fictional person of Rosaura, whose days in the province are numbered. It is precisely the little teacher’s terminal illness that allows her to board a north-bound train to fulfill her destiny. Rosaura can act outside the familial paradigm since her impending death assures her separation from and subordination to the paternal state she serves. As the martyred *maestra*, she will not disrupt the restoration of the post-revolutionary family. Her revolutionary actions will not be regarded as those of a “real” woman, wife, or mother, and her maternal ministrations will not be seen as revolutionary, but as a part of the great new melodrama, the Revolution.

Fernández mandates Rosaura’s concession to the patriarchal nation from the first. Upon ascending those stairs in the national palace, she hurries to the office of none other than the Head of State, President Miguel Alemán. There Manuel Dondé (mistaken by some critics as Alemán himself<sup>13</sup>) outlines the nation’s nationalist agenda to a feminized Félix. Gone are the breeches of the “devourer of men,” replaced by the more ubiquitous black *rebozo* and concomitant feminine tears of sympathy for the country, the Indians, and the “good Mexicans” she must serve (Fig. 1.8). Fernández’s choice of Félix—so



FIGURE 1.8. Female arbitration of the nationalist project: Félix about to receive her presidential mandate in *Río Escondido*. Courtesy Cineteca Nacional.

long identified as a “savage man-hater”—works especially well to underscore the transformation of the independent woman to dutiful charge of the state. When Félix trudges off on her journey to the Sonoran outpost, accompanied by a celestial choir, undulating Mexican flag, and images of Diego Rivera’s murals, her apotheosis begins. In the course of the film she takes on the virginal role in the new holy family. “Adopting” three village children whose mother has been felled by smallpox, she restores Benito Juárez and a map of the Republic to their rightful places in the reconsecrated schoolhouse; she reempowers a weakened Church to support the Indians; she conquers evil incarnate in the body of a would-be rapist while she herself remains pure; and ultimately she dies of a heart condition, but not before hearing the President of Mexico’s grateful benediction. In the final footage the celestial chorus renews audiences’ spirits as the little teacher’s hagiography is etched across her headstone.

Representation of native people in *Río Escondido* is no less orchestrated. From a filmmaker who is proud of his Kickapoo blood, but who insists on “the civilizing influence” of elite culture,<sup>14</sup> we are presented with “idealiza-

tions” of “some poor little Indians” who must be saved from barbarism, ignorance, despotic *caciques*, and wayward religious leadership.<sup>15</sup> *Río Escondido* delivers in celluloid what its director promised in interviews: a vision of “the indigenous person as the purest, most authentic, most beautiful [being], possessed with superior traits.”<sup>16</sup> In Fernández’s patriotic-pamphlet style the villagers’ significance is coded as a kind of visual ideogram, a “non-arbitrary sign,”<sup>17</sup> whose meaning, “truth,” and “authenticity” are traced not to any reality of the Seri, Yaqui, Pima, or Papago groups of the Sonoran desert, but back to indigenist discourses launched by Mexico City philosophers in the 1910s and 1920s.

One congruence between Indian “truth” and reality did exist. Neither Fernández’s fictionalizations nor the real people he represented were legally incorporated into the Mexican national fabric. In film and in fact, as far as the government was concerned, indigenous people were discursive categories and not legal entities. For example, as Rodolfo Stavenhagen points out, the writers of the 1917 Constitution acted “as if, with formal juridical structure, they could erase a social reality that made them uncomfortable.”<sup>18</sup> The Constitutionals superseded legislation—“Indian people do not even appear in any part of the Constitution”—with the rhetoric and practice of a “politics of assimilation.”<sup>19</sup> Throughout the first half of the twentieth century this policy was enforced by literacy programs legislated only for Spanish-speaking rural populations. Indians were assimilated, at least on paper, into a mass of undifferentiated *campesinos*, or “country people.” By disregarding sociolinguistic differences between Indians and mestizos through the practice of all-inclusive laws, those who would assimilate native peoples into the national culture succeeded, instead, in assuring their political disenfranchisement.

As “Indian” became increasingly synonymous with “unincorporated national,” devoid of any other legal status, the intent of the government’s liberal paternalism became commensurately clear. Through representation or rhetoric, Indian peoples’ cultural, linguistic, and political sovereignty—and to a certain extent, that of the rural schoolteachers sent to “Mexicanize the Mexicans”—was erased. Symbolic erasure was closely followed by what Stavenhagen calls the “political negation of the indigenous person,” and the subsequent loss of “a legally recognized territorial base.” While indigenous groups did own part of their ancestral lands, Stavenhagen argues that their unlegislated possession was responsible for some of the most egregious abuses of indigenous territories.

Although Fernández never suggests that Río Escondido’s indigenous populations have a legal right to their land, he does rage against territorial abuse as an example of moral injustice. While the evil municipal president controls the amount of water available to the village Indians, at issue is his unequal distribution of the resource, not his unjust possession of water rights.

That this *cacique* oversteps the boundaries of his “legal” ownership is only demonstrated when Rosaura fails to civilize him, to humanize him into respecting the Indians and permitting their moral development through education. In *Río Escondido* it is only the abuse of power—not its usurpation and accumulation—against which the little schoolteacher has been sent to fight. However much Fernández praised Cárdenas-style “socialism,” *Río Escondido*’s politics are more in accord with the liberal paternalism of the 1920s. It is a morally indignant Fernández, not a politically astute filmmaker, whose righteous rhetoric determines the actions—and their significance—of the women, Indians, and evil *caciques* who wage the national holy crusade.

### MUSEUM CURIOSITIES

The museum is the ceremonial throne of patrimony, the place where [the national treasure] is kept and celebrated, where the semiotic order—used by hegemonic groups to organize the museum—is reproduced. To enter a museum is not merely to enter a building and look at objects, but rather to enter into a ritualized system of social interaction.<sup>20</sup>

In September 1990, forty-two years after *Río Escondido* debuted in Mexico City, the film and its star made the trek to northern Mexico to bring “culture” to what many capital-dwellers have generally regarded as a cultural wasteland: that Yaqui/Yanqui/Mexican/U.S. border outpost called Tijuana.<sup>21</sup> Crowds wrapped around the monolithic globe-shaped museum in the Cultural Center to await the arrival of María Félix, whose official duty was to inaugurate the opening of Antoine Tzapoff’s exhibit of indigenous portraiture. Félix, winner of that year’s Presidential Prize for her service to the nation, was greeted with all the fanfare befitting the Indian princesses she portrays in several of Tzapoff’s works. Aging film fans dressed to the nines, rivaled only by youthful transvestites in full Félix drag, ignored the ninety-degree heat to pay proper respect to the star. A Chicano cultural historian reminisced about his aunts’ love affairs with Félix films. A Tijuana priest murmured (ir)reverently that if he couldn’t have an audience with the goddess, he hoped at least to touch the hem of her garment. Interrupting the excited flow of devotees and art patrons filing into the museum, underemployed Indians and mestizos hawked Adams’s Chiclets. Once inside, visitors were greeted by an enormous *Portrait of María Félix, Riding Amazon-Style upon a Rhinoceros*. Cameras, held aloft by the crowd, recorded what they could. Carlos Monsiváis, the nation’s preeminent chronicler, added to the inaugural speeches. *La Doña* smiled and waved graciously. Tzapoff bowed his head in an attitude of prayer.



Patrons fawned over Félix as they shuffled through the exhibit in her wake. Shortly after the ribbon-cutting ceremony, strains of ex-husband Agustín Lara's "María Bonita" urged an elite minority toward the reception area and away from the paintings. The public stood gawking outside the cordoned-off area, craning to get a glance of that arched eyebrow. Between breathy dialogues about the actress's film career, one could hear serious students of art commenting on the "remarkable authenticity and overarching reality" of the portraits. Indeed, the Amazon Queen looked a lot like Félix in the final shot of *Enamorada* (Fernández's 1946 nationalization of *The Taming of the Shrew*), and the indigenous male figures bore an unmistakable resemblance to their creator, would-be Indian Antoine Tzapoff. In the unlikely event that spectators misinterpreted the meaning of such visual organizing myths, Fernando Gamboa's catalogue description clarified. In Tzapoff's work, "Man is converted into a hero, woman into an allegory, parallel to this magnificent and nostalgic world in extinction. Never, perhaps, has the preoccupation of ethnographic and ethnological exactitude resulted in more faithful representation in painting."<sup>22</sup>

This exaltation of Seri, Yaqui, Kickapoo, Pima, Tarahumara, and other northern indigenous people into male heroes or female allegories—in the images of Santa María and San Antoine—served to obliterate the cultural and economic context of these peoples and organize their symbolic extinction. Tzapoff's foregrounding of nostalgia matched museum curators' directives to funnel visitors quickly into the inner spaces of the ethnographic preserve and away from the waiting vendors hunched outside the great domed museum. In the uninterrupted amble of patrons passing before representations of "purity" and "authenticity" something was lost, underscored by the comment of a European tourist who wondered out loud why the Indians couldn't be encouraged to save themselves through judicious family planning, education and health programs, and, I suppose, morally uplifting events like the one we were attending.

The initial part of the question had merit: *why?* Why, indeed, are these groups disappearing? Local Tijuana newspapers, which might have engaged in thoughtful speculation, were merely awash with what Monsiváis, on the occasion of another Félix fête, called the "language of cinemaphilic fanaticism combined with official bread-and-circus cant."<sup>23</sup> Félix, icon of the dutiful daughter of the State, was deployed in these articles and in the accompanying catalogue of the exhibit to mediate the significance of the art work, the meaning of her film retrospective, and the fact of the fast-disappearing northern Indian groups. Distinctly absent from such pieces as the diva's contribution, "The Commerce of the Scalp," were questions about the reasons twentieth-century indigenous people might be disappearing. Save-the-natives rhetoric had the same feel as a Vasconcelos asking a Rivera to paint "Indians, more

Indians" on the walls of government buildings. In Tzapoff's hyperrealistic portraiture, as in Vasconcelos's desires for the same, what was required to be preserved was the nostalgic representation of Indian people. As Fernando Gamboa's essay ecstatically explains, "The painting of Tzapoff turns its back on the influence of postmodern art. It launches its effects of shadows within its frames [of] extreme realism, and proposes idealizations." Tzapoff's undeniably striking creations of "a world bound for extinction" do inspire great concern. But that concern is for what has gone unproposed in his paintings. His nostalgic idealizations promote a premature narrative closure and inhibit other proposals and the telling of different stories. In turning his back on the influences of postmodern possibility, Tzapoff turns away from the very heroes he would save. "Authentic" and "pure," his mythic Mexicans find safe ground only in the museum, the "ceremonial throne of the national patrimony."

On behalf of the exhibit's curators, writer Salvador Elizondo (son of *Río Escondido's* producer of the same name) supports Tzapoff's reductive narrative with his resigned acceptance of "the inevitability" of Seri Indian extinction. Elizondo simultaneously asks that we "keep in mind . . . that the Seri tribe is presently reduced to less than 500 individuals" and subsequently that we appreciate "the value of a scientific testimony of enormous importance."<sup>24</sup> Elizondo's praise of Tzapoff's representations of "archetypes rather than individuals" contributes to the trend of "collecting natives" as so much scientific data, or so many museum pieces—a disturbing practice that ultimately suppresses the meaning of testimonies to the disappearance of indigenous people.

It is instructive to contrast the discourse of recognized native sons, lavishly catalogued with other artifacts of the museum, with that of the author(ity)less newspapers positioned outside the influential sphere of the Cultural Center. On the day the Tzapoff exhibit opened, an article without a byline appeared on the back page of *La Jornada*, in the space often reserved for Cristina Pacheco's politically provocative short stories.<sup>25</sup> The Mexico City daily, unlike the Tijuana press, which featured Félix's figure in "Amazon" garb, ran a photograph of an aging Seri woman who would have had no place in Tzapoff's "allegories of womanhood." The accompanying article, without making any claims for the kind of "extreme realism" that Tzapoff achieves, nevertheless begins to outline some of the very real forces threatening Seri sovereignty.

According to the boldface headline, the Seris "Reject Investors' Proposals." From the outset, readers are assured that this indigenous group will hang onto its ancestral lands, and that neither the Mexico City investor (Televisa's deceptively named Víctor Hugo O'Farrell) nor the United States's Gulf y Pacific Seafood Company will seize control of the fishing area that the Seris, perhaps prophesying the worst, have called "The Sacrifice." Thus, whether or not the dangers posed to the Seris by Oklahoma or Mexico City investors are

borne out is not immediately at issue. What is of vital testimonial importance in view of the “inevitable” indigenous extinction is the documentation and publication of some of the ways that Indian lands—constitutionally unprotected, as Stavenhagen reminds us—are at risk. By writing the unwritten, *La Jornada* does not necessarily shore up the Seris’s listing fishing industry, but it does interrupt the resigned fatalism provoked by nostalgic nationalism and discourages reductive “saving-of-the-natives” as artifact collection.

We can chart María Félix’s carefully constructed rhetoric somewhere between elite and popular discourses of the new indigenism. Carlos Monsiváis observes that Mexican film divas often occupy that place “between the sword and the shawl” maintained “again and again between *la* beautiful *señorita* and the Long-Suffering Mexican Woman.”<sup>26</sup> The space between a rock and a hard place, Octavio Paz had proclaimed by the end of the 1940s, is the place of nothingness, the domain of *la Chingada*.<sup>27</sup> As feminist scholarship has countered, that place is the site of Malintzin, of cultural mediation, and of zealously controlled discourse on gender and race.<sup>28</sup> Before Doña Bárbara, Félix is Doña Nobody; her “meaning” is manifested only as she takes on the significance of the characters she portrays. This transformative process legitimates Félix’s persona and establishes her as a cultural mediator whose discourse will be controlled by the kind of roles she is permitted to play. When the actress, representing herself, comes to Tijuana to bear witness, her testimony is bounded and authenticated by audience identification of an extensive history of María as “*la* beautiful *señorita* and the Long-Suffering Mexican Woman.” But can a woman tell her own story? Is Félix—film icon and art patron, self-fashioned and other-constructed—a reliable witness?<sup>29</sup>

In recent decades, in full view of the powerful testimonies that women are sharing—“masculinized,” politicized women, the likes of whom fight in revolutions throughout Latin America—the control of women’s stories is of increasing interest to those who would control nations. In the 1990s control of Félix’s representation, as well as what that representation in turn represents, becomes an extension of the control exercised over Rosaura/María as the national evangelist first made her way into “uncivilized” Indian territory. In Tijuana the sinister implications of control are masked by the deftness of a postmodern turn of events: it is Carlos Monsiváis, in inimitable style, who steps in to tell María’s tale, to frame her narrative, and to introduce *Río Escondido* to an audience just back from the Indian exhibit. The seriousness of the catalogue yields to the often tongue-in-cheek playfulness of Monsiváis’s analysis, but the sometimes inseparable panegyric and parody combine to reinscribe Félix with the same aura of emblematic power and testimonial credibility endowed by movie presidents and real rulers alike.

How can I complain when chronicler and crowd are having such a swell time? But Monsiváis, master of ceremonies, is also the indisputable master of

the narrative. The power of the image is the only story Félix controls. She takes her cues from his lines, cocks her head just so, leans attentively into his praise, “surrounded by a wealth of adjectives in the manner of necklaces or votive lamps: beautiful, primordial, splendid devourer, cruel, dominant, lucid, exceptional.”<sup>30</sup> Monsiváis talks and the audience pays heed, paying homage to *la Doña* in bursts of applause as he pauses, breathless with adulation. He speaks in the same hushed tones he remembers a young fan using on another occasion, “with the emphasis of someone who employs prayer to the saints: praising, adoring, admiring.” His narrative and his presentation testify to an ultimate truth in his written words: *In the religion of the cinema, to be a “goddess of the screen” is a literal burden. Each gaze cast upon María Félix scatters incense and myrrh, each comment is a prayer, each exclamation a laic rosary. Her essence does not lie in her presentation of self but rather in the apparition of her being, the renewing miracle of someone who has not given in to the demands of time. . . . Before the microphone our presenter regards his apparition and continues reverently, “She is, why avoid the word, a myth. And in her case, for once the term is justified in all senses of the word.”*

Monsiváis, as expert in “mythography” as he claims Tzapoff to be, both mystifies and demystifies mythic creations. He can render genuine homage and reveal falsity at the same time; he is the first to point out how myth-making works. Yet however nimbly he positions himself (he has a way with words), whether constructing or deconstructing the myth, Monsiváis *has his way* with words. He honors, he adores, he analyzes: María is Mexico, María is the Virgin Incarnate, María is the Goddess of Desire.

At the end of the hour-long review of her film career, María arches her body in satisfied exhaustion, and speaks: “So much life recounted in such a short time. To tell the truth, I’m in pieces.” Grateful and proud, the exquisite remnants of a woman allow an embrace. Renewed, she rises to salute her now-frenzied audience. At her side Antoine Tzapoff gazes mutely into the distance like one of the sanctified Indians in his portraits. Monsiváis joins them. María’s triple incarnation of the State, the Church, and Mexican Womanhood reflects in the trinity embodied on the stage. Monsiváis as (official) storyteller, Tzapoff as (officially recognized) deifier of Indians, and Félix as (officially promoted) icon form a new kind of holy family. The audience—drenched by the kind of religious fervor such a manifestation brings about, sated by expressions of patriotism inspired by the national nature of the event, and moved by the erotic tension released in the Goddess’s waving hand—can do nothing more than burst into spontaneous applause. And the ovation, as the chronicler himself put it, *was thunderous*.

Monsiváis’s almost parodic staging of the making of María Félix can claim a place in the tradition of rhetorical fictions of twentieth-century Mexico, and within discursive practices beyond the border. In light of what *Van-*

*ity Fair* has called the “Mexico Mania” engendered by “Splendors of Thirty Centuries,” novelist Edmund White interviewed the “Diva Mexicana” with the intent of explicating her exotic Mexicanness. White’s article is remarkable not only in its treatment of María Félix as a kind of endangered species in the eyes of New York museum patrons, but also for the encouragement he obviously gives Félix to tell a particular story of her role in Mexico’s national formation. First he remarks upon the actress’s transformation from alabaster Creole to Queen of the Indians:

When she was young, she told me, she was as pale as that white bird Stanislaw Lepri painted to represent her. Now, almost as a tribute to Tzapoff’s fascination with Indians, she has turned herself into a dark-skinned shaman, all high cheekbones and chiseled features, her dark-reddish hair swept back from the carved arrowhead her face has become.<sup>31</sup>

White next gets his “shaman” to describe the most curious element of her mythic construction. He gives us Félix as National Heroine, speaking about her receipt of the Presidential Prize for her Lifetime of Service to the Nation:

I kept thinking of my film *Río Escondido*, in which I play a schoolteacher who visits the president to ask him for a favor for her students. My character crossed the great plaza, the Zócalo, just as I did; climbed the stairs of the presidential palace, just like me. But the president she met was fictional, whereas mine was real. And my character had come to ask for something, whereas I was invited to receive.<sup>32</sup>

With these unremarked inclusions of the *Doña*’s proud statements, White succeeds in displaying what he called “the artifact Félix has made of herself.” Yet I wonder once more if Félix’s much-rehearsed testimony is the authentic curio that White would like to showcase. While the writer may have no more ulterior motive for grooming the Félix myth than the desire to tell a compelling story, his interview, like Monsiváis’s compelling narrative, images Félix within a rhetoric of nostalgia—whether nationalistic or not—whose discursive power can negate whole populations, to say nothing of a woman who might attempt to testify on their behalf.

#### “PAÍS MUERTO/SOCIEDAD VIVA”

Sociopolitical conditions in Mexico have changed since the Tijuana, New York, and Los Angeles extravaganzas, but remarkably continuous threads persist in new permutations of old nationalist discourse. After late November 1991, when a repatriated Félix televised her triumphal return from Parisian to Mexican society, Mexican news media became adorned with the face of the

septuagenarian actress and patron of the arts. In the first half of December that year, *la Doña* graced the covers of no fewer than six magazines, from weeklies offering pro-government “political commentary” to self-defined “antiestablishment” periodicals that depend upon the nearly nude to sell copy. However styled, Félix continued to be national news, and, as ever since her appearance as Doña Bárbara, her image was deployed to invigorate national pride. For a country, as critic Claudia Schaefer points out, that exported its artistic “Splendors of Thirty Centuries” in efforts to “define and legitimate its national identity,” the “Splendor” of Félix in her home court made for a dazzling display of the new sovereign nationalism. “Whether we like it or not,” explained my Mexico City cab driver en route to an interview with chronicler Monsiváis, “with *la Doña*, Mexico marches forward.” He underscored his point with a nod of his head toward a freshly painted sign on the bricks of a warehouse, the only splendor in a working-class neighborhood. The script could be appreciated for blocks, white letters on a green and red field: “México Marcha Adelante.” Satisfied with the textual documentation, the driver continued, “You see. And last week she started fixing up our historic downtown area.”

Saving the *centro histórico* from development or dilapidation is indeed yet another of the actress’s concerns. Forever aligned with centers of power, continually confused with history, María Félix, Monsiváis insisted that afternoon, *incarnates* the nation. Even, or perhaps especially, in the face of the crisis that he calls “dead nation/living society,” Félix, “like the *Virgin de Guadalupe*, doesn’t just represent Mexico; she is Mexico.” Manifesting herself thirteen days short of that other virgin’s feast, Félix miraculously appeared to millions of viewers during a marathon interview with Televisa’s Verónica Castro. The actress’s save-the-nation pieties were reminiscent of those she deployed with Tzapoff in their Tijuana restoration project. In both venues the seamlessness of Félix-as-México interceded “naturally” between people and State, binding and conflating *pueblo* with *gobierno*, masking, as Schaefer says in a parallel context, “the miseries behind the splendors.”

Visual texts link the Tijuana splendors with Televisa’s splendid display of the *doña*. The continuum here is transparent. What we were asked to save at the Cultural Center were images—images of Seri, Yaqui, Kickapoo, and Pima people, nationalized as citizens under the unifying portrait of Our Lady of the Rhinoceros. This same “allegory of woman” organizes our visual experience of Félix’s Televisa interview (preserved on video and “available at Mexican supermarkets everywhere”), only this time the amazon does battle with those who would allow the *centro histórico* to teeter on the brink of extinction. In addition to the visual referent of Tzapoff’s fantasy of Félix as native queen, and beyond the incarnation of the goddess herself (the cameras stage her seated in an ornately gilded chair before her immense Rhino por-

trait), the common denominator of the Tijuana and Televisa extravaganzas is the demand for the preservation of images of Mexico without much regard for what these symbols represent. Whatever Félix's intentions, whether she is an agent of nostalgic nationalism or merely, as Monsiváis asserted in our conversation, a "consequence" of nationalism run amok, the "[dead] Mexican nation marches forward" only on the strength of warehouse-mounted slogans, through national television evangelism, and by the efforts of museums to preserve the patrimony. However complicit we may be with these representations, surely we can begin to look to sources other than those populated by María Félix's various images for a "living Mexican society" that always and already "marches forward."

Since the quincennial year the place of the *sociedad viva* is everywhere. Restoration of the nation's historic center has meant more than refurbishing old buildings. Hegemonic groups' organization of old orders in museums and beyond have yielded to the presence of new structures, evidenced in forms as diverse as constitutional amendments or indigenous articulations of the meaning of the millennium. The diffusion of these multivalent discourses has depended not only upon their showcasing through mass media and public spectacle, but upon the polyphonic response all of these events have engendered. With 1992's thoughtful conversations about nation and community in mind, I returned to Tijuana/San Diego to talk with some of the people who had attended the Tzapoff exhibit, and there I discovered visitors' new takes on what they had witnessed two years before.

"I still wear my marvelously cheap copies of Félix couture," one of my transvestite friends told me, "but since her failure to address national economic restoration in favor of local cosmetic gentrification, I've modified my look. Now I ground her light skirts with serious leather boots. You know, to kick up a little controversy, make my own statement." Working-class friends from the housing development where I had spent my Tijuana research summer expressed similar concerns. "I never thought of her as one of those *Chilangas* [here used derisively to describe someone from Mexico City] who didn't give a damn about anything outside the capital," a former neighbor said, "but now I'm not so sure. Fixing up the national *centro histórico* is great, but isn't Tijuana part of the nation? We could use a little fixing too." As spectators, museum patrons, and citizens begin to engage in direct dialogue with each other, obfuscating cultural mediations like María Félix's can be seen for what they are: exercises in monological nation-building.

Interventions in master narratives, as Néstor García Canclini's *Culturas híbridas* reminds us, can reorganize power relations. The idea that monological nationalism (or even a monologue about nationalism's stars) can be displaced has also been dramatized by Elena Poniatowska's interruptive *Todo México*.<sup>33</sup> Very much present as witness and listener, Poniatowska inserts herself into her

interviews and literally interrupts the often nationalistic testimonies of “all Mexico.” In the spirit of García Canclini’s “strategies for entering and leaving modernity,” I offer a snippet of Poniatowska’s dialogue with María Félix, not to suggest a “solution” to the “problems” of nostalgic nationalism, but to indicate another discursive strategy that disrupts monologic mythmaking:

FÉLIX: Look, Elenita . . . I’m thrilled with what I’m about to do: go out on the street, stroll through my city—each day it looks prettier. . . . Each day the progress of my nation is more notable. Each day things are better! And all because we’ve had such great leaders.

PONIATOWSKA: Ah, come on! I wouldn’t believe a word of what you’re saying even if God Himself told me. Isn’t that demagoguery?<sup>34</sup>

*Demagoguery!* The final, illuminating impertinence stuns. With these words, any residue of my own complacent fascination with the mythic María—arising from years of cinematic pleasure at Mexican movie revival houses, from Monsiváis’s witty monologues, and from the thrill of seeing *la Doña* in the flesh—is now completely disturbed. Escaping rhetorical traps, Poniatowska’s dialogic interventions encourage an active spectator response so very different from the unconsidered adulation elicited by Tzapoff’s or Televisa’s exhibitions. In talking back to the Divine Miss Mexico, Poniatowska interrupts, for a precious moment, any unconscious flows of patriots filing into Cultural Centers of Nationalism. If nations, the world’s *centros históricos*, are truly to be saved, if women’s voices are not to be used against their own efforts, might not a little unsettling dialogue be a good place to begin the interruption of homogeneous, nostalgic nationalism?