
Saving Private Ramírez: The Patriarchal Voice of Republican Motherhood in Mexico

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I first read about a woman named Agustina Ramírez while doing research on nineteenth-century Mexican political culture in the Colección Porfirio Díaz in Mexico City. Buried among the 470,000 pieces of correspondence that Díaz received as president, two brief letters by Jalisco Governor Ramón Corona caught my eye. In October 1889, Corona asked Díaz to grant a pension to two grandchildren of a woman he called, 'the only heroine that Mexico had during the [French] Intervention'. Dismissing the sacrifices made by thousands of other women who defended Mexico during the Intervention (1862–67), Corona argued that these two children deserved state aid because their grandmother, Agustina Ramírez, had lost twelve sons in defence of the patria.¹ That last part shocked me. Twelve sons? All of them killed in combat against the French? How could that have happened? How come she was not universally recognised as a national hero? Why was she not standing next to Benito Juárez in villages and cities across the country? And then I thought to myself, how much might Steven Spielberg pay for a screenplay like this? While I continued with my original project, I also began to look for more information about Agustina Ramírez, a search that has produced more questions than answers.

In this essay I want to share her story with a wider audience and also to share the journey that I have travelled to try to answer some of the questions that surround her. The fact is that searching for Agustina Ramírez has induced a self-consciousness that makes me somewhat uncomfortable. While I realise that historians always interpret the past and are therefore inescapably present in their own work, in this case my reading of Agustina Ramírez will say as much about me as it does about her. This idea, of course, is a central contribution of feminist methodologies where authorship cannot hide behind false claims of objectivity, neutrality, or 'fact'. For that reason I want to acknowledge that, after compiling a great deal of material from archives in Mazatlán, Culiacán, Mexico City and Washington, DC, I am really no closer to someone we might call the historical Agustina Ramírez. To be honest, I am not certain if there ever was a single woman by that name who lost twelve sons in battles against the French. But neither do I believe that her story is somehow 'untrue'. Instead, I would insist that the questions of 'real' or 'invented', 'myth' or 'history', do not fundamentally matter. For even if Ramírez was not born in the nineteenth century, she exists now, in the stories people tell about her, in the sketches and statues of her image,

and in the popular political spaces created by references to her life and the death of her sons. Thus, my rendition of this story situates me as an original author and not as an impartial chronicler, just as much as the nineteenth-century politicians who first wrote about Ramírez and the twentieth-century writers who rediscovered this story.²

This issue is also important because at the heart of my reading of the Ramírez family saga rests an emphasis on the power of authors to use this story for political ends. I come to this view by asking a set of research questions that are very different from most others. I have asked, what are the origins and transformations of this story, and how has the story appeared in the public domain? In other words, how have politicians, historians, newspaper editors and artists reimagined and restaged the story of Agustina Ramírez for their own purposes? I have examined both the 'invention' of this story and its 'performance', a perspective somewhere between the historian's concern about diachrony and Paul Connerton's emphasis on observing rituals as an expression of communal memories.³ Conversely, most other authors and artists have asked, who was Agustina Ramírez and why should Mexicans honour her? Not surprisingly, different starting points have led to different conclusions.

The story of Agustina Ramírez was first told, embellished and then retold primarily by men, but aimed strategically at Mexican women. Three local Sinaloan historians are the principle sources for information on Ramírez. Eustaquio Buelna first brought her story to light in the 1870s; José Ferrel embellished the story in the 1890s, responding in part to a brief revision of the narrative; and Antonio Nakayama revived the story for a broader audience in the 1960s and 1970s. Dozens of other writers, both men and women, have written about Ramírez, but Buelna, Ferrel and Nakayama have largely defined the story. Their version of the Ramírez story created an allegory about the virtues of 'republican motherhood', an example of the honour-bound duty of mothers to raise loyal sons to the republic. Thus, this narrative offered a simple and clear-cut example of the ways in which men defined the rights and roles of citizenship based on sexual difference. But that assertion is not the crux of my argument. Instead, I argue that the patriarchal voice speaking for Agustina Ramírez actually contributed to the failure of republican motherhood in Mexico. In contrast to the ideal that Linda Kerber has identified for the USA during the early republic, Mexican women did not have 'the major role in developing this formulation'. Rather, Mexican women had little opportunity or incentive to imagine themselves in this story. It did not overcome the separation between the home and the 'all-male political community'; on the contrary, Agustina Ramírez hardened those boundaries.⁴ As long as men told the story, Ramírez could not become a 'fourth mother' of Mexico, joining the female *imaginaire* collective of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Malinche and *La Llorona*.⁵

The reasons for this failure constitute my search for larger meanings within Ramírez's story. I begin, however, with the story itself, as I have come to understand it, setting aside for the moment my own doubts and questions about this tragedy. I then turn to a literary archaeology that identifies the story's possible origins, transformations and key moments. This analysis will highlight the work of Buelna, Ferrel and Nakayama as the likely sources of a dominant patriarchal narrative. I conclude with my own search for historical meanings within the story and the reasons for its limited appeal as an expression of republican motherhood. My explanation focuses on three factors: (1) the contradictions within the story itself; (2) Mexico's fractured political context; and

(3) the subtle yet direct revision of the story by women that challenged the underlying message of selfless sacrifice.

The search for Agustina Ramírez

The story of Agustina Ramírez goes like this. Together with a twin sister, Anna Agustina de Jesús Ramírez Heredia was born on 1 September 1813, in the small village of Mocorito, Sinaloa.⁶ Her parents, Margarito and Maria Román, were Indian peasants, getting by mostly through subsistence farming and day labour. According to some accounts, Ramírez's father had joined the insurrection that led to Mexico's independence from Spain. Foreshadowing accusations of government neglect of veterans and their families, he never received a pension for his service. Little is known about Ramírez's childhood, though authors have reimagined these times as difficult for her family. Rural populations, especially Indians, lived on the margins in nineteenth-century Mexico; the sacrifice of Ramírez's sons was more impressive because she had so little to give. She was a daughter of a veteran and when the time came for her to marry and have her own family, Ramírez would encourage her husband and then her sons to defend Mexico's sovereignty. She married Severiano Rodríguez and eventually the couple would have thirteen sons and no daughters. Significantly, none of the sons was named after the father, though there were two Franciscos, a José and a José María.

National political conflicts penetrated rural Mexico during the nineteenth century, and Sinaloa was no exception. At the beginning of the 1858–61 civil war between liberals and conservatives, Severiano Rodríguez joined the liberal cause and went to battle to defend Mazatlán, then the state capital. He was killed in combat on 3 April 1859. Five years later, when the French began their invasion of Sinaloa, Agustina enlisted her thirteen sons in the military and joined the war effort as a *soldadera*, a camp follower who fed the troops, nursed wounded soldiers and buried the dead. She would have assumed her husband's rank within the *soldadera* corps; she became Private Ramírez.⁷

Fighting between the French invaders and republican defenders was intense in Sinaloa. Her sons no doubt participated in the major campaigns at Culiacán, Concordia, San Pedro, Villa Unión and, finally, the retaking of Mazatlán.⁸ Several stories about her sons emerge from these years. One of her younger sons, eleven-year-old Francisco II, played the cornet for the republican troops at the key battle of San Pedro in 1864. He died in that decisive struggle, which turned back the French assault. In another battle, two of her sons carried the lifeless body of one of their brothers back to her. She held her dead child in her arms, kissed his face and touched his hands. And then she turned to her other sons and said, 'Alright, everyone to his duty. My duty is to bury my son, and yours is to continue defending the patria'. These two sons lost their lives as well.

In another episode one son deserted from his unit. Ramírez caught up with this wayward son and brought him to General Ramón Corona (the man who wrote to Díaz in 1889). She said to the general, 'Sir, here you have this young man; he is a deserter'. She turned to her son and said, 'Look, understand what I am about to tell you in front of the general. If you desert one more time and by doing so betray your country, realize that to your mother you will be dead. Let no one say that you are my son, and never again will I acknowledge you'. Soon after this incident, the boy died in combat. After

the liberals retook Mazatlán in 1866, Ramírez asked military leaders if her youngest son, Eusebio, could remain with her and not continue the fighting in other parts of the country. Although pressed for troops to carry the fight to central Mexico, Sinaloan battalions eventually took Emperor Maximilian prisoner at Querétaro, and Ramírez's request was granted. She had saved her last remaining son, Private Eusebio Rodríguez Ramírez.

In a few short years, Agustina Ramírez had lost her husband and twelve of her sons in defence of the *patria*. The Sinaloa state government learnt of her sacrifices and granted her a pension of thirty pesos per month on 15 October 1868. Unfortunately, the funds were never allocated in the state budget and she did not receive any money. As word spread about her incredible hardship, the federal congress took up her cause in 1873 and determined that they should grant her a pension as well. Initially proposed at thirty pesos per month, the representatives were shamed by Vicente Riva Palacio into raising it to 150 pesos per month. Despite a determined search for Ramírez, the legislators could not find her and this pension went unpaid as well. According to oral testimony and eyewitnesses, Agustina Ramírez survived her final years as a poor beggar woman, living on the streets of Mazatlán. Forgotten and neglected, she died on 14 February 1879 and was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave.

The search for historical evidence

After first learning about Agustina Ramírez, I continued my search for documentary evidence in archives in Sinaloa, her home state, to corroborate her story. When I asked the director of the state archive in Culiacán about Ramírez, he assured me that her story was true and that he had documents to prove it. I could not see the documents but he had them. The archivist for the Mazatlán municipal archive told me that he thought her story was mostly a myth – but it was a good myth, he told me. I took that to mean that I should proceed with caution. I talked with each of them about the statistical odds of one woman having thirteen sons and no daughters – approximately 1:8,192. They each knew of families with as many or more children, one or two even with predominately male or female children, but not really any single family of all boys. We agreed, however, that it was possible but improbable. We also talked about the odds of a poor Indian woman having thirteen children survive infancy and childhood in mid-nineteenth century Mexico. Again, the best conclusion we could reach was that it was possible though unlikely.⁹

There are at least two kinds of original documents that spoke directly about Agustina Ramírez. First, both the state and federal governments discussed Ramírez in legislative debates granting her a pension. The federal legislation actually listed the names of her sons, which added a sense of greater personal loss and could have helped identify this particular family. But in both cases, no one came forward to claim the pension and no one could find an individual who answered by the name of Agustina Ramírez. Still, biographers have often quoted from these legislative acts in an effort to validate her story since so many politicians could not have been mistaken or so easily misled. How the legislatures learnt about Ramírez's story remains unclear. In any case, it was unusual for legislators to pass a law granting an individual a pension since legislation already provided veterans, their widows and surviving children with aid. These laws spoke generally about all veterans on the winning side of the civil wars of the 1850s and

1860s, though many veterans had considerable difficulty collecting pensions. These laws also consistently included an important stipulation that required veterans to prove that they had served in the liberal armies. For that reason, veterans and their families carefully guarded service records, known as *expedientes de servicio*, and produced those records from time to time for local, state and national officials. When the system worked, and in some parts of the country like Oaxaca (Porfirio Díaz's home state) it worked relatively well, veterans and families could expect small pensions, grants for children and, in some cases, exemptions from personal taxes. Díaz received countless requests for help in securing both the documents that would prove military service and aid in getting a pension authorised by local authorities. And women played a key role in these correspondences, aggressively pursuing aid their families desperately needed.¹⁰ Usually, but not always, Díaz offered petitioners a standard response when they asked him for help in obtaining a military pension. He told them that he did not have the power to grant pensions and that they should take up the case with the Ministry of War. Significantly, when Ramón Corona asked for Díaz's help in securing a pension for Ramírez's grandchildren, Díaz advised him to go to the Congress, but this was because existing legislation provided pensions for widows and children, not grandchildren.¹¹

The second type of documentary evidence involves several notarised copies of a birth certificate that indicates when and where Ramírez was born. Notarised copies of a document in Mexico are legal representations of the original. Of course, this process can produce 'legal' copies of a forged birth certificate. The certificate used most often by biographers was found by Governor Eustaquio Buelna, who discovered the document in his home town of Mocorito during a rebellion against his government.¹² In the wake of this political unrest, which at the national level involved Porfirio Díaz's rebellion against Benito Juárez, Buelna asserted a connection with Ramírez in an attempt to rally popular support for his government. I have seen two different copies of a baptismal certificate for Agustina Ramírez – one notarised in 1957, the other in 1985. Though similar, the text is different in each case. (These are probably the documents in the state archive in Culiacán, mentioned above.) Significantly, the Mocorito certificate did not completely satisfy some people who maintained that Ramírez had actually been born in Tequila, Jalisco. Other questions surrounded her birth date (various days but always in the patriotic month of September), the year of her death (1877 or 1879) and different names of her husband (Severiano being the most common, but also Severo and Ramón).¹³ Ultimately, these debates reveal the limitations of historical methodology to deal with the mystery of Agustina Ramírez. Questions about the place or date of her birth deal with empty 'facts' that attempt to cast her story in terms of the tangible. When we ask what we 'know' about her, the first things we grab on to are the historian's preoccupation with fixing a specific time and place. But these questions lead us down a narrow path. To ask when or where Agustina Ramírez was born is hardly different from asking whether or not she lived and died according to the story. And to ask whether or not she lived or died misses altogether the reality of how some people in Sinaloa reimagined Ramírez in order to advance particular notions of their place in Mexican history.

Buelna's interest in Agustina Ramírez went beyond his discovery of a common home town. Buelna studied Sinaloan history and published several books on the subject. In *Breves apuntes para la historia de la Guerra de Intervención en Sinaloa* (1884), Buelna wrote a brief but poignant account of Ramírez's life and sacrifices.¹⁴ The total passage

was less than 250 words, but it became a key reference for later biographers and historians. She does not appear until the end of his book, as a sort of afterthought on the incredible struggle all Mexicans faced during this war. He offered few details about her life, emphasising instead the motivation that inspired such an incredible sacrifice. Patriotism reached even to the lower classes, Buelna argued, and people understood the importance of national dignity and sacrificing for the *patria*. Finally, as almost all biographers would do after him, Buelna equated Ramírez with the mothers of Sparta, who, according to the epic narratives of Western literature, told their sons to come back bearing their shields or lying dead on them. As an admired and respected historian, and by inserting Ramírez's story within a broader history of the French Intervention, Buelna provided her story with some legitimacy and credibility. He probably did not invent the story since the legislative acts granting her a pension pre-date his discovery of a birth certificate (which he reproduces in *Breves apuntes*), but he certainly animated the story with a particular style and context that would reappear in later years.

Sinaloans needed time, however, to learn this story and to incorporate it into their own narratives about the French Intervention. Throughout the 1880s, speeches and newspaper articles commemorating the French Intervention on *Cinco de Mayo* talked mostly about other local heroes, in particular generals such as Antonio Rosales and Ramón Corona. Significantly, a new search for information about Ramírez began when Corona wrote to the Mazatlán town council on 30 April 1889. After a successful military career, Corona had become governor of Jalisco. In tandem with national efforts to create a secular political culture around heroes of the earlier civil wars, Corona asked the Mazatlán *ayuntamiento* for any information on Ramírez. Corona's own understanding of her story was somewhat vague; he described her simply as 'the mother of a good number of heroes who died for the Patria'. He did not mention meeting her, as some biographers would claim to have happened, nor did he talk about meeting any of her sons. Instead, he asked about the whereabouts of any children or descendants that might still be living. And he requested copies of any and all documents the town council might have in their archive about Ramírez or her descendants. His goal, he said, was to bring this information to the attention of the national government.¹⁵

The president of the Mazatlán *ayuntamiento* replied to Corona in a carefully worded letter on 11 May 1889. He politely stated, 'We do not have any information or records with respect to the mentioned Señora'.¹⁶ But he did offer one possible lead. A year earlier, the Mexico City newspaper, *Las Hijas del Anahuac*, had published a letter from a woman who claimed to be Ramírez's daughter-in-law. In that letter Luz Mendoza de Rodríguez claimed she had married Ramírez's only surviving son, Eusebio. Her husband had died and left her destitute with two surviving children. Armed with this information, Ramón Corona wrote to President Díaz in October 1889 (the letters I originally found). Díaz put off Corona's request, claiming he had never heard of these children and, as I have mentioned, by stating that he did not have the power to authorise a pension anyway. Corona was killed the next month and the effort to popularise Ramírez's story lost a powerful ally with access to national leaders.

Corona's inquiry, however, had sparked an interest among local leaders in Mazatlán who decided to start telling their own version of Ramírez's story. In June 1890, the Mazatlán newspaper *El Pacífico* reprinted Luz Mendoza's letter about her mother-in-law; the actual phrase Mendoza used was 'mi madre política'. This letter represented the first time that a woman talked about Ramírez, or at least was credited with talking

about her. Significantly, Mendoza's version characterised the story in a very different light. She talked not so much about the sacrifices of so many sons, but she emphasised instead the neglect and disregard with which the government treated widows and surviving family members of veterans. Ramírez never received a pension for the loss of her husband and sons, and now, Mendoza argued, that money properly belonged to Ramírez's grandchildren. Mendoza did not suggest that Ramírez's service as a *soldadera* entitled her to enjoy the benefits that male veterans sought; her access to state aid came from her dependant status as a widow and a mother who lacked the protection that men provided. In this case, the government should assume the patriarchal role of provider. Still, Mendoza's letter offered a counter-narrative to the heroic version of the Ramírez story: the sacrifices of a selfless mother were ignored by a heartless government.

Accompanying the letter, however, was an editorial that called on federal legislators to live up to their responsibility to care for veterans and their families. *El Pacífico* asked, 'After so much has been said in favour of this heroic woman . . . why doesn't the National Congress do something to get the federal government to pay for the education of these orphans or grant them a pension?' If Mendoza criticised the government, *El Pacífico* invited the government to respond to that criticism with an act of generosity.¹⁷

In 1891, a year after Ramírez's story re-emerged in public, memorials of *Cinco de Mayo* in Mazatlán cast her as a central figure in the struggle against the French. Nearly the entire front page of the Mazatlán newspaper, *El Correo de la Tarde*, was devoted to Ramírez on 4 May 1891. In a passionate eulogy, José Ferrel described Ramírez as 'the incarnation of patriotism'.¹⁸ She rescued the nation, he wrote, 'like a white virgin rising from the black tomb', a surprising analogy for someone who bore thirteen sons. Ferrel argued that Ramírez had not simply sent her sons to the military; she followed them so that she would know where their bodies fell on the battlefield. He described war as a monster with a voracious appetite that only human flesh could satisfy. Ramírez fed her sons to this monster one by one until it could eat no more. In the end she could save just one.

As the second local historian to focus on Ramírez's story, Ferrel's article provided one new and original element to the narrative. For the first time, a drawing of a woman meant to be Ramírez accompanied the text. On the front page, next to the headline 'Agustina Ramírez', a drawing of a dark-skinned woman, with a grim expression and black hair pulled into a bun, stared back at readers. The woman wore dangling glass earrings and a chain necklace with a cross. Her hair and skin colour were consistent with vague references to Ramírez's indigenous origins, but the fact that she wore a cross seems out of place for a republican hero. Of course, the image itself tells us more about the 1890s than the 1860s. By 1891 the open hostility between the church and the state had subsided considerably. Still, the official history of the civil wars emphasised the struggle against Catholic intervention in Mexican politics and society. There was no way and no attempt to strip Juárez of this anti-clerical view. But was the unknown artist of the Ramírez image trying to go beyond the ideological struggle of those difficult years by implying that she might become a symbol of unity for all Mexicans? Or was the artist implying that, as an uneducated Indian, Ramírez lacked a fundamental understanding of liberal ideals, clinging to the naive belief that one could be both liberal and Catholic? It is difficult to know for sure. In any case, after this drawing appeared, the desire to draw Ramírez in a particular pose or with a specific expression

or accoutrements would attract dozens of artists. Rather than a textual reinterpretation, these images became the most accessible way to offer an original view on the meaning of Agustina Ramírez's sacrifice.¹⁹

Over the long term, the textual limits of the narrative were more directly shaped by Ferrel's article. In fact, Ferrel became the most important primary source for later biographers, and few writers would stray beyond the outlines he established. Ferrel set aside the fact that Ramírez had not received a pension. Instead, he emphasised her patriotism, her devotion to the nation and her willingness to sacrifice her sons in defence of the *patria*. Absent was the complaint against the government. In its place Ferrel likened Ramírez to the other heroes of the nation who had made sacrifices of their own. Juárez, of course, took centre stage: 'Liberty was born in Juárez's heart . . . as a virile act of consciousness'. But even as he described Juárez's patriotism in terms of masculinity and bravery, Ferrel actually tried to de-gender Ramírez: 'She forgot that she was a mother in order to not forget that she was a patriot'. Ferrel argued that Ramírez had set aside her individual family out of love for the universal family. Thus, he could conclude that she had achieved a higher purpose than motherhood: 'She was not a mother but a martyr who offered her heart piece by piece'. In light of Luz Mendoza's complaint against the government, we see a strong reassertion that the state should always be looked upon as a benevolent patriarch. By emphasising her duty as a loyal citizen, Ferrel absolved the government of its responsibility to care for widows and orphans. By extension, all widows and wives who pressured the government for a pension should do so with respect and deference. They had not fought in battle and were, after all, dependent citizens.

The exclusion of women from official narratives of war in nineteenth-century Mexico is not surprising. Nancy Huston argues that, from ancient times to the present, men have universally attempted to write women out of war histories.²⁰ Still, there was nothing 'natural' about the silence surrounding women's participation in Mexican nation-state formation. The Díaz regime intentionally decided not to include women in its most public act of commemorating Mexican heroes. In 1892, just as Ramírez's story was reappearing in Sinaloa and as Mexico City planners were considering who should be honoured with statues along *Paseo de la Reforma*, some newspapers lobbied for greater gender balance. In one case, the columnist Enrique Chávarri (writing as 'Juvenal') published an essay in *El Monitor Republicano* advocating statues for María Catalán, la Corregidora de Querétaro, and Agustina Ramírez. Reprinted in Mazatlán's *El Correo de la Tarde* on 11 February 1892, Chávarri argued that, 'Mexican women are as brave as the sons of this country'. 'It would be a just tribute', he wrote, 'an honour we owe to Mexican women, to erect statues to those who have earned the goodwill of the patria; standing next to the heroes, these women have been the inspiration in battle'. Chávarri found Ramírez's story particularly inspiring, describing it as 'a romance, a drama that the bards from the Middle Ages would have sung on lyres of golden strings'.²¹ But, as we know, Mexican women did not find a place in the heroic pantheon of liberal and republican heroes. With the exception of symbolic representations to Lady Liberty – *El Angel de la independencia* – and a naked *Diana la cazadora*, women are not present in the narrative of *Paseo de la Reforma*.

In 1894, Ferrel wrote a new essay on Agustina Ramírez for a collection of biographical sketches entitled *Liberales ilustres Mexicanos*.²² Once again he emphasised that men had played the primary role in defending the nation: 'The patria did not want

mothers but sons'. This time he noted that Ramírez had not received a pension, but he speculated that she had not actually wanted one. It had been her duty to raise sons for defending the nation. Echoes of this theme re-emerged in a 1907 pamphlet that captured the official sense of heroic patriarchy advanced by Díaz and his allies. This pamphlet, 'La Mujer Mexicana en el Santuario del Hogar', explained that the proper role for men was to fight in defence of Mexican sovereignty. Women, 'in the sanctuary of their homes', were expected to raise sons that would take up that fight when their fathers grew too old or died in combat. Instructing all women to emulate Agustina Ramírez, the male author suggested that her only possible regret was that she did not have twelve more sons to sacrifice for the *patria*.²³ With this inability to imagine the emotions or perspectives of women, we see just how far from reality men had taken the Ramírez story. On the eve of the 1910 revolution, there was little space within this story for a more meaningful, honest or believable expression of republican motherhood.²⁴

The most important source of information about Agustina Ramírez in the twentieth century comes from the body of work published by Sinaloan historian Antonio Nakayama. He published dozens of essays and books on Sinaloan history, several of which were devoted entirely to Ramírez. More than anyone else, the Ramírez narrative used by biographers, playwrights and essayists today comes from Nakayama's point of view. He saw history as a drama, where actors moved on and off the stage of public recognition. While he anticipated critics in his writing, posing questions that he imagined might be asked, he provided few if any primary sources for his conclusions. History was more about interpretation for Nakayama, and his role as a historian was to reintroduce little known characters to a broader audience so that the lessons of the past could guide people through political and social struggles in the present.²⁵

With his eye on the political struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, Nakayama updated the Ramírez story in a revolutionary context. He provided detailed episodes of Ramírez's actions as a *soldadera*, her stern refusal to allow a son to leave the army, her silent acceptance of finding the dead bodies of her sons. To convince readers that she had lived and acted according to his story, he noted that he had talked with the writer José Ferrel, by now a respected elder of the community. Ferrel claimed that he had once met an old woman begging in Mazatlán who told him she was Agustina Ramírez's sister, Guadalupe. This woman described Agustina as a rather unattractive, tall, dark-skinned woman, with wrinkled arms. She could have been any one of the poor Indian women living on the streets of Mazatlán. In a similar way, Nakayama argued that those in power in Mexico City consistently and unfairly neglected all Sinaloans, not just Agustina Ramírez. Thus, Nakayama rejected Ramírez's individuality as a woman and a mother, asserting instead that she represented all anonymous fighters, men and women, who sacrificed their lives for better government and who were forgotten once the wars had ended. In fact, he distanced her as much from Mexico as he could: 'She is beyond the nation. She is an ecumenical figure seated at the side of the mothers of the Greeks and of the Maccabees'.²⁶

Interestingly, Nakayama's interpretation of Ramírez paralleled aspects of his own life history. As a young man he was a staunch opponent of socialist education and a fervent Catholic activist. He associated with a group of writers at odds with officials in Culiacán and Mexico City, though he could usually find teaching and writing opportunities. Still, he was fired several times from state government jobs and received little or no money for his work on Sinaloan history. In the early 1960s he endured several years of political

exile in Sonora, California and Arizona, where he worked mostly in organising archival collections. He returned to Culiacán in 1969, and published numerous works on local history, embracing the new genre known in Mexico as *microhistoria*. By this time, a nationwide student movement had swept Mexico, and the ruling party had revealed its authoritarian tendencies by repressing those students. With his emphasis on the power of anonymous individuals to create history, Nakayama found a more receptive audience. In 1979, a year after Nakayama's death, the Sinaloan magazine *Presagio* dedicated an entire edition to the memory of Agustina Ramírez. Nakayama's narrative was featured prominently in this volume. So too were new drawings of Ramírez. The cover had her surrounded by thirteen skulls in a 'Day of the Dead' pose. Nakayama's reprinted text included a straight-faced Ramírez with a rifle and a bandolier of bullets, a guerrilla fighter ready to take up arms. To a certain extent, Ramírez had become a symbol of revolutionary struggle, but she had never been a republican mother.

The search for larger meanings

My search for meanings surrounding the story of Agustina Ramírez focuses less on its invention and more on its reproduction. While its origins provide a context for the story, its legacy helps explain how the story has changed and remained the same over time. In fact, consistency in this case mattered more than variation. For the three historians who defined her, Buelna, Ferrel and Nakayama, Agustina Ramírez was a character who spoke with a patriarchal rather than a maternal voice. She urged her sons to battle, even when they showed reluctance; she never wavered in her resolve to defend the country against foreign invaders, even when she had to sacrifice so much. She did not ask for greater political rights for women or even demand that the government should provide for her in old age. She understood the unequal roles of men and women and proudly embraced her own job to nurture sons, send them to war and then bury them in silence. Agustina Ramírez never spoke for herself; they spoke for her. In this case, republican motherhood failed in Mexico because men defined it in their own terms. More specifically, the contradictions within the story, the fractured political context surrounding the story, and the rejection by women of the patriarchal narrative within this story contributed to the failure of republican motherhood more broadly.

In some ways the story of Agustina Ramírez attempted to overcome racial, class and regional differences. Contradictions within the story, however, limited its broad appeal. Agustina Ramírez emerged at a time when the Sinaloa state government faced overwhelming divisions on multiple fronts. Ruling class elites were deeply divided by economic and political interests; landowners in northern Sinaloa fought a back-and-forth battle with merchants in the south. The state capital itself followed the fortunes of war, moving between powerbrokers in Culiacán and Mazatlán. In addition, Indian peasants throughout the state had lost land and administrative autonomy; they rebelled throughout the mid-nineteenth century in an effort to regain lost economic and political resources. In fact, landowners used liberal reforms to expand their holdings and force Indian peasants to work as day labourers. Alienated from liberal politicians, Indian leaders used the chaos of the French Intervention to initiate their own rebellion against the government. Although local historians insist that Indian rebels did not fight for the invaders, the government faced a two-front war against the French in Mazatlán and Indians in the north. After the French had been defeated, Indian rebellions continued

through the 1870s, loosely organised around the Indian bandit/rebel Manuel Lozada, 'el Tigre de Alica'.²⁷

Stories of Agustina Ramírez spoke to all of these divisions. Her birth in Mocorito (northern Sinaloa) and death in Mazatlán (southern Sinaloa) symbolised the common bonds that could be forged between rival political and economic groups. More importantly, her socio-economic status as a poor Indian woman represented a supreme patriotic example of sacrifice and devotion to the *patria*. She embodied the latent potential of Mexico's rural poor, particularly its Native populations, to defend the nation. Embedded within Ramírez's story were lessons about the dangers of ethnic conflict. Her love for Sinaloa and Mexico signalled a call to end the hostilities against the government. But the Ramírez story tried to do too much with too little. Authors provided few or no specifics about her indigenous identity, and no direct references to the armed conflicts between Indian communities and the government. Her status as a poor peasant woman was used in biblical terms to suggest that her motivations were pure and humble. But she never overcame her poverty and died begging on the streets of Mazatlán. Why should the poor sacrifice so much? Finally, she was uniquely a Sinaloa state hero, celebrated locally in order to draw attention to the state. Although some men tried to tell her story on a national stage, Ramírez has remained a local hero, playing a limited role in the epic narrative of Mexican nation-state formation.

A greater challenge for the authors of Ramírez stories was Mexico's ideological divide throughout the nineteenth century. While men hoped women would become allies in the patriarchal battle between the leaders of the Catholic Church and the Liberal Party, they continued to believe that most women, particularly uneducated peasant women, would be more loyal to their priests. Historian David Brading describes this problem in clearer terms: 'Liberal patriotism was the Mexican version of classical republicanism'.²⁸ The Ramírez story instructed women to raise sons for defending the nation, but it also meant women had to be for the Liberal Party and against the Catholic Church. Republican mothers in Mexico had to be virtuous, civic-minded and anti-clerical. Liberal men tried to find a substitute for the Virgin of Guadalupe, but they largely failed, even after Porfirio Díaz created a more secular political culture around Benito Juárez. Agustina Ramírez lost twelve sons and not just one like Guadalupe, but the narrow definition of loyalty to the nation limited Ramírez's broad appeal to Mexican women.

Finally, the Ramírez story failed to move women towards a male-defined vision of republican motherhood. If they accepted the story at all, they saw Ramírez as a more fully sensitive and real mother. Luz Mendoza turned the meaning of the story on its head, criticising the government for neglecting widows and dependent children. It was difficult, perhaps impossible, for women to find solace in a story that required so much sacrifice and provided so little recognition. Unfortunately, there were few women who had the opportunity to express their views on the story publicly in the nineteenth century; apart from Mendoza, women's voices are difficult to hear. In the 1960s, however, at the time of Ramírez's revival, several sources provided an alternative reading to the story. In fact, the most enduring image of Ramírez expresses this sentiment in perhaps unexpected ways. In 1961, Governor Gabriel Leyva Velázquez dedicated a monument to Ramírez and her sons in Culiacán. The statue shows a determined Ramírez holding the Mexican flag in one hand, and surrounded by her sons lying in various poses at her feet. Her other arm is stretched out straight, her hand signalling 'Basta – enough'. It

protects her last surviving son from both the French invaders and the liberal armies that used up so many young Mexicans. Whether the artist meant to convey this message or not, this statue offers a powerful symbol for all mothers who were tired of losing their children in bloody civil wars.

In addition, two women provided their own interpretations of the story in the 1960s. Like Mendoza, their versions took the story in a different direction. In 1962, Caridad Bravo Adams staged a play about Ramírez at the Casino de la Selva de Cuernavaca. Bravo Adams claimed she had written it much earlier and had first learnt about Ramírez in the late 1920s when she met an old veteran in Mazatlán who assured her that the Ramírez story was true. The play itself imagines a more human Ramírez involved in a loving and playful relationship with her husband, and devastated by the tremendous pain of losing her sons. Ramírez actually undergoes a transformation from militant defender of the *patria*, to wandering ghost, looking for the graves of her lost family. When her husband leaves for war she follows him, carrying an infant in her arms and proclaiming that, 'Instead of mother's milk the small one will drink from my breast the hate I have for the damned invaders'. But by the end of the war and the play, Ramírez announces, 'I am no longer the Agustina I was yesterday . . . My life has ended because "today" [the end of the war] has arrived. When the new day begins I will go through the streets looking for twelve tombs'.²⁹ Whatever Agustina's original motivation, there was no way for Bravo Adams to imagine a woman who would stoically deal with the grief of such loss.

Aurora Correa published a 'novel of conjecture' about Agustina Ramírez in 1966, creating the most fully human version of Ramírez that I have read. She is a woman, a wife and a mother. Here we see Ramírez in a loving, sexual relationship with her husband. The two hold hands, embrace, exchange small gifts and talk about their hopes for the future and their growing family. When her husband is killed she cries and talks of loneliness. When she brings her sons to the liberal generals, she says their names not as if reading a list, but as the person responsible for giving them life. In addition to speaking, thinking and acting like a real woman, Correa's Ramírez is also fully Indian. But she is not a submissive, simple-minded *indio*, who quietly accepts her fate. She is an *indígena*, proud of her origins yet realistic about the way in which her people are treated. Several times in the novel, Ramírez looks at the ants crawling on the ground and imagines, 'The ants of this country have it better than the Indians, who have been turned into soldiers for more than half a century'. Ramírez knew that, after the war, the republicans would pass laws that favoured the wealthy, while the Indians would go back to nothing. In Correa's version Ramírez angrily questions the political boundaries of race, class and gender that determined her fate. By the end of the book, Correa mocks the limits of republicanism itself: 'And Agustina Ramírez, stuck in Mazatlán, begging, waiting in vain for thirteen years for the government to grant her some recognition, because the patria is poorer in money than ever before, though it is richer in republican consciousness'.³⁰

Correa provided more than a new narrative about Ramírez; the title page includes an original drawing markedly different from any other I have seen. Here Ramírez is portrayed as a young, attractive Indian woman. Her face and alert, bright eyes look towards her left while her body seems to be moving forwards. She is a woman of action, not pre-political at all; she is fully aware of the political world that shapes her life as an Indian woman. But she is also mysterious, her hair and head mostly covered

by a shawl. There are no children or men with her, as in the Culiacán statue, for she is originally and in the end an individual. How different as well is this image from the old, wrinkled woman described by Nakayama. Of course, Correa saw Ramírez with a political consciousness of the 1960s, a decade or more after women finally earned the right to vote in Mexico. But Correa was a contemporary of Nakayama, who saw Ramírez through his own relatively conservative and Catholic lens. So why does Nakayama's Ramírez receive more attention? Why does the historian's version, based as much on conjecture as the novelist's, achieve a wider audience? Perhaps because Agustina Ramírez and the limited notion of republican motherhood in Mexico was a story created, embellished and retold by men, primarily for men.

Notes

1. See Colección Porfirio Díaz (hereafter CPD) at Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City, 14–21 10142, Ramón Corona to Porfirio Díaz, 15 October 1889 and 21 October 1889. For more on the role of women during the French Intervention, see Adeline Zendejas, *La mujer en la intervención francesa* (Mexico City: Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística, 1962); Florencia E. Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Clara Guadalupe García, *Las mujeres de Ruiz. La participación femenina durante la Intervención Francesa en Michoacán, en la obra de don Eduardo Ruiz* (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Históricos del Porfiriato, 1998).
2. The issue of authorship is complicated by Ramírez's indigenous origins. For a theoretical and technical discussion of the interaction between Native 'subjects' and non-Native authors, see the special edition of *American Indian Quarterly* 21 (Fall 1997), particularly essays by Alana Kathleen Brown, 'Collaboration and the Complex World of Literary Rights', pp. 595–603, and Lenora Ledwon, 'Native American Life Stories and "Authorship": Legal and Ethical Issues', pp. 579–593.
3. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 103–4. For cases similar to mine see Laura Gotkowitz, 'Commemorating the *Heroínas*: Gender and Civic Ritual in Early-Twentieth Century Bolivia', in Elizabeth Dore and Maxine Molyneux (eds), *Hidden Histories of Gender and the State in Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 215–37; and Donna J. Kessler, *The Making of Sacagawea: A Euro-American Legend* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1996).
4. Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), p. 284.
5. Gloria Anzaldúa identifies three mothers for Chicanas and Mexicans in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), pp. 30–1. For a discussion of the power and contested nature of the *imaginaire* in Mexico, see Serge Gruzinski, *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner (1492–2019)*, tr. Heather MacLean (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001). The literature on these three figures is vast, particularly for the Virgin of Guadalupe. A frequent starting point for a comparison of Guadalupe and Malinche (or *La Chingada*) is Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1950). More recent studies of Guadalupe include: Margarita Zires, 'Los mitos de la Virgen de Guadalupe: Su process de constucción y reinterpretación en el México pasado y contemporáneo', *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 10 (1994), pp. 281–313; and David Brading, *Mexican Phoenix: Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition Across Five Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
6. My compilation of the Ramírez story comes primarily from: Antonio Nakayama, 'Agustina Ramírez', in Erasto Cortés et al., *Héroes de la patria: La independencia. La reforma. La revolución* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1960), pp. 66–7; Antonio Nakayama, *Sinaloa: el drama y sus actores* (Mexico City: INAH, 1975); Antonio Nakayama, *Agustina Ramírez: Presencia y esencia* (Culiacán: Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa, 1980); and the articles in honour of Ramírez on the 100th anniversary of her death, published in *Presagio* 20 (February 1979), in particular. David Rubio Gutierrez, 'Agustina Ramírez, su tiempo y grandeza'. I have also used Caridad Bravo Adams, *Agustina Ramírez [tragedia popular del cuatro estampas]* (Mexico City, 1961); and Aurora Correa, *Agustina Ramírez: Heroína del pueblo* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1966).
7. For more on the crucial role of *soldaderas* in the nineteenth century, see Mallon, *Peasant and Nation*, pp. 76–9; and Alicia Hernández Chávez, 'Origen y ocaso del ejército porfiriano', *Historia Mexicana* 39

- (1989), pp. 257–96. Elizabeth Salas, *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990) discusses the role of women in the Mexican military over a longer period.
8. For background on the French Intervention in Sinaloa, see especially Marta Lilia Bonilla Zazueta, *La Derota de la Intervención Francesa en Sinaloa y su Héroe* (Culiacán: Archivo Histórico General del Estado de Sinaloa, 2000); Eustaquio Buelna, *Apuntes para la historia de Sinaloa, 1821–1882* (Mexico, 1924); Francisco Javier Gaxiola, *Revista histórica del Estado de Sinaloa, 1856–1865* (Mexico, 1894); and Stuart F. Voss, *On the Periphery of Nineteenth-Century Mexico: Sonora and Sinaloa, 1810–1877* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1982).
 9. I have also talked with women from Sinaloa about Agustina Ramírez, though these conversations have been less formal and less systematic. In general, these women have expressed interest in my doubts about the story and they have encouraged me to continue my research. They were reluctant, however, to go on record as ‘non-believers’.
 10. I discuss pensions and the special role of women in carrying out the correspondence with government officials in ‘Zapotec Women, Family Archives, and Communal Literacy’ (unpublished manuscript).
 11. CPD 14–21 10142, Porfirio Díaz to Ramón Corona, 15 October 1889.
 12. Rigoberta Rodríguez Benítez, *Sinaloa During the Restored Republic, 1867–1877* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Arizona, 2001), pp. 253–62.
 13. Sinaloan historian Antonio Nakayama deals with these debates in *Agustina Ramírez*.
 14. Buelna’s book was reprinted in 1964 by the Universidad de Sinaloa and in 1999 by the Ayuntamiento de Mocorito. In addition, the section on Agustina Ramírez was published as ‘Amaba a sus hijos pero más a México,’ *Presagio* 20 (1979). See also Eustaquio Buelna, *Compendio histórico, geográfico y estadístico del Estado de Sinaloa* (Mexico, 1877).
 15. Archivo Municipal de Mazatlán (hereafter AMM), Independiente Presidencia, Caja 58 Mayo de 1889, Ramón Corona to the Presidente del Ayuntamiento de Mazatlán, 30 April 1889.
 16. AMM, Independiente Presidencia, Caja 58 Mayo de 1889, Presidente del Ayuntamiento de Mazatlán to Governor Ramón Corona, 11 May 1889. The draft of the letter includes several crossed-out phrases, indicating the care with which the town council responded to Corona. Clearly, they felt some pressure to provide Corona with information even if they could only refer him to another source.
 17. ‘La Señora Agustina Ramírez’, *El Pacífico*, 1 June 1890. Excerpts of Mendoza’s letter can be found on the Sinaloa government’s official website: <http://www.congresosinaloa.gob.mx/murodehonour2/agustina_ramirez.htm>.
 18. José Ferrel, ‘Agustina Ramírez’, *El Correo de la Tarde*, 4 May 1891.
 19. See below.
 20. Nancy Huston, ‘Tales of War and Tears of Women’, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 5 (1982); Nancy Huston, ‘The Matrix of War: Mothers and Heroes’, in Susan Rubin Suleiman (ed.), *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 119–36.
 21. Juvenal, ‘Agustina Ramírez’, *El Correo de la tarde*, 11 February 1892. For background on the planning of *Paseo de la Reforma*, see Barbara A. Tenenbaum, ‘Streetwise History: The Paseo de la Reforma and the Porfirian State, 1876–1910’, in *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1994), pp. 127–50.
 22. José Ferrel, ‘Agustina Ramírez’, in Enrique M. de los Ríos et al. (eds), *Liberales ilustres mexicanos: De la reforma a la intervencion* (Mexico: Imprenta del Hijo del Ahuizote, 1890) [later reprinted with Ferrel’s 1894 essay by Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1961], pp. 294–6.
 23. ‘La Mujer Mexicana en el Santuario del Hogar’ (Mexico: Imprenta Lacaud, 1907). A copy can be found in CPD 40–11 611.
 24. A group of seven middle-class women from Sinaloa attempted to use Agustina Ramírez’s name to justify their direct participation in formal politics in 1912, but their effort was limited and ultimately failed. They had organised a political club, La Mesa Directiva del Club ‘Agustina Ramírez’, in support of José A. Meza’s candidacy for governor. Meza lost the election of José Rentería. See also Hector R. Oléa, *Breve historia de la Revolución en Sinaloa* (Mexico: Patronato del Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana, 1964).
 25. In addition to the Nakayama texts cited in note 6, above, see especially, *Documentos ineditos e interesantes para la historia de Culiacán* (Culiacán, 1952); *Historia del Obispado de Sonora* (Culiacán: Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa, 1980); *Sinaloa: Un Bosquejo de su historia* (Culiacán: Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa, 1983); *Entre sonorenses y sinaloenses: afinidades y diferencias* (Culiacán: Difocur, 1991); and *Realidad y mentira de Plácido Vega* (Culiacán: Apoyos Educativos, 1993). Much of his work was published or republished after his death in 1978. The best collection of his work is at the Library of Congress Hispanic

- Reading Room. I would like to thank Dr Barbara A. Tenenbaum for her help in making his work available to me.
26. Nakayama, *Agustina Ramírez*, p. 23.
 27. For background on indigenous issues, including rebellions, see Francisco P. Troncoso, *Las guerras con las tribus yaquí y majo. Desde el 22 de diciembre de 1529 hasta el 31 de diciembre de 1902* (2 vols) (Mexico: Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional, 1984 [1903]). For background on Lozada, see Mario Alfonso Aldana Rendón, *La Rebelion Agraria de Manuel Lozada, 1873* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1983). See also Félix Brito Rodríguez, *La política en Sinaloa durante el Porfiriato* (Mexico: Difocur, 1998); Gilberto López Alanís, comp., *El Porfiriato en Sinaloa* (Culiacán: Difocur, 1991); Sergio Ortega Noriega, *Breve historia de Sinaloa* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999).
 28. D. A. Brading, *The First America: The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots and the Liberal State, 1492–1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 667.
 29. Bravo Adams, *Agustina Ramírez*, pp. 17, 53.
 30. Correa, *Agustina Ramírez: heroína del pueblo*, pp. 13, 54.

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