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## Review/ Reseña

Liza Bakewell, *Madre: Perilous Journeys with a Spanish Noun*.  
Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011.

## Deconstructing the Language of Motherhood

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Latin America's complicated reverence for the iconography of motherhood hit the global headlines recently when the Bolivian mining city of Oruro unveiled a 150-foot tall statue of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus during the 2013 Lenten carnival celebrations.<sup>1</sup> The Virgin of Socavon, as she is locally known, became the world's largest Marian statue;

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<sup>1</sup> "Oruro dedicates huge statue of the Virgin Mary", *Miami Herald*, February 9, 2013; "World's Largest Marian Statue Unveiled in Bolivia", *Catholic News Network*, February 4, 2013. <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/worlds-largest-marian-statue-unveiled-in-bolivia/>; "A large statue of the Virgin Mary stands on Santa Barbara hill overlooking the mining city of Oruro, Bolivia, as it is unveiled", *The Guardian*, Feb. 1, 2013. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2013/feb/01/picture-desk-live-the-best-news-pictures-of-the-day1>

significantly taller than the Virgin of Panecillo in Quito or the Virgin of San Cristobal in Santiago, and towering over even the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro. While it was her enormous size that captured global attention, the Virgin of Socavon is also interesting for the way in which she places the act of mothering center-stage. Depicted not in the solitary, mournful pose of most Marian statues, but as actively caring for the child she immaculately conceived, her maternal stance explicitly projects the ideal of being both a mother and a virgin—an ideal which of course is a biological impossibility—on the largest possible stage.

This conflict between sexuality and motherhood at the heart of ideals of femininity has been one of the central analytical themes in the field of Latin American Gender Studies. In one of the iconic early studies of Latin American femininity, anthropologist Evelyn Stevens famously coined the term *marianismo* to describe the way in which Latin American women were venerated for manifesting attributes of sexual purity, piety and moral strength, as well as submission to men, and underlined how the Virgin Mary served as an ideal of feminine behavior: maternal, but sexually pure.<sup>2</sup> Just as the Virgin Mary loomed so physically large in the region, literally watching over many of the region's most important cities, so she dominated cultural ideals, shaping the parameters within which "appropriate" female behavior was imagined.

While Stevens' work has been criticized for its middle-class focus and its tendency to implicitly blame women for acquiescence in the process of their subordination, the work pushed mothering to the center of the scholarly agenda for those interested in Latin American gender.<sup>3</sup> Even studies that have challenged some of the specifics of Stevens' arguments have reinforced the centrality of ideas about motherhood for understanding the social and political positioning of Latin American women. Historian Silvia Arrom, for example, challenged the idea that the Mexican cult of

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<sup>2</sup> Evelyn P. Stephens, "Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America," in Ann Pescatello (ed.) *Female and Male in Latin America* (Pittsburgh University Press, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> The most forceful critique of the concept of *marianismo* can be found in Marysa Navarro, "Against Marianismo," in *Gender's Place: Feminist Anthropologies of Latin America*, eds. Rosario Montoya, Lessie Jo Frazier, and Janise Hurtig (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002).

motherhood was rooted in the power of the colonial church, demonstrating instead the way in which the emphasis on women as mothers was a nineteenth century phenomenon, rooted in the secular reforms of the liberal state, and used as a way to remove women from the public sphere.<sup>4</sup> Arrom's insights fuelled a veritable wave of historical research into the phenomenon of republican motherhood.<sup>5</sup> Political scientists have also used the concept of *marianismo* as a jumping-off point to examine women's involvement in Latin American politics. In her classic work on "supermadres," Elsa Chaney demonstrated how women entered the political arena as an extension of their domestic role and used the language of the home to articulate their ideas and to legitimate their presence.<sup>6</sup> Interest in the role played by the Mothers of the Plaza del Mayo in the collapse of the Argentine military dictatorship later sparked a new body of work on the political and social meaning of mothering by historians, anthropologists and political scientists.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this tremendous level of attention to mothering as a social and political act and to the imagery and representation of mothers, the specific language through which motherhood is discussed and projected has been the subject of very little attention. This is the void into which Liza Bakewell's *Madre* steps. In a strikingly original and insightful work, Bakewell, a linguistic anthropologist, deconstructs the usage of the word

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<sup>4</sup> Silvia Marina Arrom, *The Women of Mexico City, 1790-1857* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> See especially Sarah Chambers *From Subjects to Citizens: Honor, Gender, and Politics in Arequipa, Peru, 1780-1854* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); Rebecca Earle, "Rape and the Anxious Republic," in *Hidden Histories of Gender and the State in Latin America*, eds. Elizabeth Dore and Maxine Molyneux (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 127-146.

<sup>6</sup> Elsa Chaney, *Supermadre: Women and Politics in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> Some of the most important examples include Lorraine Bayard de Volo, *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity and Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Marguerite Guzmán Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza del Mayo* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1994); Jo Fisher, *Mothers of the Disappeared* (Boston: South End Press, 1989); Mala Htun, *Sex and the State: Abortion, Divorce and the Family under Latin American Dictatorships and Democracies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and Jadwiga Pieper Mooney, *The Politics of Motherhood: Maternity and Women's Rights in Twentieth Century Chile*. For a new work that synthesizes the role of motherhood in Latin American history see Erin E. O'Connor, *Mothers Making Latin America* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014 [forthcoming]).

“*madre*” in Mexico; a country where the word “*padre*” means “super-cool,” but “*madre*” is not considered fit for polite society.

The book begins with Bakewell reflecting on a piece of graffiti she saw on her first visit to Mexico City as a graduate student in 1987, and which she could not translate. The graffiti read: *a toda madre o un desmadre*. The phrase made little sense to her, so she asked friends and acquaintances what it meant. They all told her that a woman shouldn't be asking questions like that. Although she eventually got her translation (“fabulous or a fuck-up”) this didn't satisfy her, and the search for the deeper meaning of the phrase—why it meant what it did, and why it was so forbidden for a woman to ask about it—came to consume her. Over the course of the next two and a half decades her interest in the graffiti morphed into many other questions: why did “*madre*” mean “worthless” and “*padre*” mean “marvelous”? Why is the word “*madre*” considered so rude? Why does it mean “whore as much as virgin” (14); and why is it better to talk about one's “*mamá*” than one's “*madre*”? The quest for the meaning of one simple phrase “became a multidisciplinary exploration of a two-syllable word that involved hundreds of friends and acquaintances, not to mention linguists, lexicographers, grammarians, philologists, philosophers, cognitive scientists, archeologists, primatologists, historians, fellow anthropologists, and even biologists” (21). The book details and examines an astounding range of “*madre*” terms: “*de poca madre*” (literally “of little mother”, actual meaning: “great”); “*me vale madre*” (literally “it's worth a mother”, actual translation: “worthless”); “*desmadre*”, “*en toda madre*”, “*madriza*”, “*madrizo*” and on and on and on. Bakewell kept a physical list of *madre* terms as part of her research and by the time she presented it to a hotel desk clerk who had volunteered to help with her project it literally went on for pages.

The central question at the heart of the book asks: how could mothers on the one hand be so venerated, and on the other so maligned? In the land of the cult of the Virgin Mary, in which the Virgin of Guadalupe is the most important nationalist icon, how was it possible for *madre* to essentially be a curse word? Why were mothers, the source of safety and

nurture in childhood, viewed as so dangerous that uttering their name could provoke a fight?

Bakewell's investigation proved challenging. The problem was that "*madre* lives in a man's world; *cultured* women do not use these expressions" (22). Men could say the word; women could not. Not only were *madre* words men-only, they were explicitly macho terms—words men used to signify their virility and über-manliness. Indeed, women who used such language were labeled with the most damning and disparaging of insults: they were considered a "feminist" (as well as a slut and a lesbian.) To gain insight, Bakewell had to plead, cajole and negotiate; in one instance striking a bargain with an ex-pat Mexican journalist in the U.S. that she would share with him her age and salary—topics that fascinated him, but were taboo in New England—if he shared with her the secrets of "*esas madres*."

Her efforts paid off, and her findings are at once riveting, hilarious and deeply, deeply revealing. With the help of Alberto, the friendly hotel clerk, Bakewell organized the "*madres*" on her list into four categories: the Ugly and Useless; the Fierce, Fiery and Scary; the Whores; and the Sensational and Awesome. The first were consisted of the swearwords; things you would throw out in frustration when something bad was happening (an "*ay madre*" akin to "damn" if you dropped something on your toe), or to show your contempt for something or someone (like "I didn't believe his story at all," "*ni madre*," "not even a little"). The second were those that were used as verbal symbols of aggression, ranging from *sacar de madre a una persona* (to stick your tongue out at someone); to *le voy a romper la madre*, "let's go kick that guy's ass"; to giving it to someone in *la toda madre*—killing them. Or the verb *madrearse* which means to beat someone up. In the whore-mother category went those most famous of Mexican cursewords—*chingada madre*, and all its variations. The good mother category, or the Sensational and Awesome as Bakewell phrased it, was perhaps the most interesting. The Virgin Mother was in there, of course, and also "My mother, pure and heavenly, if not your mother. And, definitely the Mother *Superiora* of the convent down the street, in the next town." But there were also expressions about problems created by a lack of mothering. "If you have bad manners or no conscience

or you are just some kind of creep, then *qué poca madre tienes* (what little [good] mother there is in you). You should have more mother to be a better person, you lowlife, you idiot” (79). If your life was a *desmadre* (a disaster, or a fuckup) it was because your mother—your housecleaner, nurturer and cook—was no longer living with you and taking care of you.

Religion is part of Bakewell’s answer to the complexity and ambivalence of *esas madres*, and, channeling Stevens, she sees the Virgin Mary as a central figure in the drama of the word *madre*. For Bakewell, the biological impossibility of real women being both virgins and mothers is at the heart of a Mexican mother’s contradictory social positioning. She argues that Eve and the Virgin are the two mothers that determine the dichotomous Mexican representation of mothering. The Virgin Mary is the aspirational but impossible to emulate “good” mother, while Eve is the “bad mother”; the temptress whose actions mean that all Catholic children must be baptized to wash off her sin. The dilemma of *madre* in Mexico is encapsulated in the fact that “The Church believes the bride, once married, is Eve, not the Virgin” (176).

Of course, the Virgin Mary is just as important in other Catholic countries throughout Latin America, as well as in Italy, yet it is only in Mexico that the word for mother has such a complex meaning. In these other Marianist countries, Eve is the one who is cursed, not mothers. Bakewell sees Mexican nationalism as critical to explaining this riddle. The emergence of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a nationalist icon has meant that Virgin veneration is taken to an extreme in Mexico. Bakewell’s informants speak at length about the Mexican obsession with the Virgin of Guadalupe, and one of her friends sarcastically notes that “God and Jesus hardly count for anything in Mexico” in comparison with the way the Virgin is worshipped (171). Bakewell examines how the imagery of the Virgin of Guadalupe was used by the Liberal state to consolidate the secular cult of motherhood during the nineteenth century. She also examines how what she calls “the myth of La Malinche” emerged in tandem with these processes. As the nineteenth century progressed, representations of Cortes’s translator, Malinche (Malintzin), transformed from the heroine of colonial iconography in which she was lauded for her role in aiding the

Spanish in bringing “civilization” and Christianity to the natives, to the traitorous of imagery of the nationalist period as postcolonial elites sought to distance themselves from the Spanish and make a claim to an indigenous past by identifying with the Aztecs and denouncing Malinche for collaborating with the Spanish. “La Malinche, La Nación and La Virgen de Guadeloupe” thus became part of a triumvirate on which Mexican *madrehood* rested, as “the masculinity of the paternalistic State came to depend upon the virginity of the Nation” (186). Women’s behavior and morality was thus central to the standing of the nation, and even today those who are too independent, who do not submit to male authority in the “proper” way are labeled “*malinchistas*”—the implication being that like the original Malinche they are traitors; not proper Mexican women.

Sex and power are thus central to understanding *madre*. Bakewell argues that “chingar,” to fuck, is intimately entwined with the word *madre*, especially in its past participle form, *chingada*, where it means fucked woman, or whore. “*Chinga tu madre*,” fuck your mother, or fuck you, is the most powerful Mexican insult, and the verb *chingar* is not always necessary—the phrase *tu madre* alone would supply the meaning.

It is so taboo to use one of the Ugly and Useless, Fierce, Fiery and Scary or Whore Mothers to insult someone, precisely because in doing so the person’s mother is being insulted. *Whose* mother is being discussed is at the heart of *madre*’s power. Precisely because of the power of the imagery of motherhood, insulting someone’s mother—that almost universal staple of playground teasing—has an unmatched strength in Mexico. As one of Bakewell’s student informants put it: “...The worst way to offend a Mexican is to say something insulting about *his* mother. His *madre*” (68). Whereas in the U.S. the most severe insult is “fuck you;” in Mexico, to have the same level of impact, the insulter cannot be direct, and must instead go through their target’s mother: “fuck your mother.” In the English term *motherfucker*, by contrast, the mother invoked is not the target’s own mother. Bakewell argues that to have a mother—*tener madre*—is to have honor, to care about others, to know shame. Mothering and honor are synonymous. This is why the word is so malleable, so easily shifting its meaning from something very good to something very, very bad. “Fuck

your mother” carries such weight, because in an honor-based society an individual’s status draws from that of their family, so “if your mother is fucked, and you are her child, there goes your reputation inside the blood of her shame seeping from under the door of her house and running down the street for everyone to see” (89). The stigma of dishonor removes a person’s social power. Bakewell links this issue of honor convincingly to the ideas of sexual morality that underpin marital status. Mothers who are married are elevated by their role and considered to epitomize respectability and class, while those who are unmarried lost status precisely because their children marked them as fucked—they were women who had “opened up” when they should not have and had to pay the consequences. Motherhood raises a woman’s class status only within certain boundaries—if there is the right number of children (“too many” is lower-class), and definitely only if there is “a husband to name-drop” (51).

Bakewell’s most intriguing (if not always convincing) line of analysis explores the relationship between *madre* and power in the home. One of her female Mexican students floated the idea that the complexity surrounding *madre* was not so much about mothers, but about “men and the disdain men have for their mothers” (83). The student posited that patriarchy in the home—the power and control women exercise over the running of their home and the lives of their children—made men feel emasculated. This was the dark side of the cult of the Mexican mother: mothers who used the imagery and language of the self-sacrificing, self-abnegating mother to manipulate and control their children. Bakewell links women’s status and control in the home to the way in which the invention of the cult of the mother by the Mexican state in the nineteenth century created an ideology of separate spheres. Yet there are gaps in this hypothesis, as Bakewell herself notes. First of all, not *all* Mexican women seek to rule the home with an iron fist: many—like mothers elsewhere—spoil and indulge their children, while others draw their primary identity from work they do outside the home. Moreover, to equate the positing of women within the home to patriarchy is to take state propaganda at face value and confuse discourse with reality. Just because women have historically been confined to the home, does not necessarily mean they

exercise dominion there; and suggestions of matriarchal power are undermined by studies that have highlighted domestic violence and physical abuse.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, Bakewell ponders, “if a matriarchy inside the house is responsible for a plethora of *madre* insults, then why hasn’t the patriarchy outside the house engendered *padre* insults?” (85). The reality of *padre* was quite the contrary. In contrast to the challenges Bakewell had understanding *madre*, her notes on *padre* were summed up in one line: “Simple and unambiguous, in charge of excellence and sex” (73). Her housekeeper posited that the imbalance reflects the disciplinary role mothers play within the home, and Bakewell tied this suggestion into anthropological research that shows up and down the class ladder Mexican mothers were in charge of the primary duties associated with child-rearing—feeding, clothing, disciplining, socializing—while the fathers were “available for playing and having fun” (87). Little wonder, then, that “*padre*” came to mean cool.

Not only is *padre* used to invoke coolness and excellence, it is also used primarily by women. Women use the term far more than men, seeking to signal their respectability, status and class. *Padre* is “above ground, well-behaved, upper class... in contrast to *madre*, who isn’t” (72). Bakewell argues that men use *madre* insults more than women and women use *qué padre* more than men, because in each instance there is power to be gained: “One by disassociation and provocation, the other by association” (87-88). Men tore women’s most socially revered role down in order to reassert their own status, while women sought connections to the social prestige of men.

One of Bakewell’s most important observations is that mother issues are primarily a male concern. Mexican women do not have the same tangled up relationship with their mothers that men do, and certainly to insult a woman’s mother does not have the same inflammatory impact as to insult a man’s. Bakewell argues that this translates into a gendered experience of Mexican identity. She suggests that Octavio Paz’s famous

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<sup>8</sup> See Andrew Morrison and Maria Loreto Biehl, *Too Close to Home: Domestic Violence in the Americas* (Washington D.C.: Inter-American Development Bank, 1999).

essay “*los hijos de La Malinche*,” which presents the Mexican as the tortured and humiliated child of a violated mother, is specifically about sons and only represents the male perspective. Daughters do not have the same agonized relationship with their mothers, and thus have a more straightforward understanding of what it is to be Mexican. This focus on how the lived experience of national identity is gendered is intriguing and adds a new layer to discussions that have mainly centered on gendered representations of the nation.

*Madre* also extends its lens to other issues specific to the Mexican use of Spanish that sheds light on gender inequities. There is a chapter on flirting and street harassment, which examines the words men use to proposition women and which explores how Bakewell’s female students experience male come-ons. A chapter entitled “Lost in *los*” looks at “the masculine default”: how in Spanish plurals for human groupings are always rendered masculine if there is even one man present, so rather than the gender-neutral “parents” of English-usage, mothers and fathers together are reduced into “*padres*”—the mothers go missing. Bakewell critiques how the feminine is always pushed out in these formulations: “*Las* ninety-nine *amigas* plus *el* one *amigo* resulted in one hundred *los amigos*” (111). One retired nurse laments how after twenty years of being part of a profession labeled *las enfermeras*, the hiring of one male nurse at her hospital led all the nurses to be relabeled *los enfermeros*. Bakewell also interrogates the different imageries male and female pronouns invoked in her informants, with the masculine *el* conjuring images of the “strong, active, brave, wise and clever” and the feminine *ella* summoning only the “weak, passive and foolish” for (119). She looks at how even words which describe acts and states of being which only apply to women’s lives—such as pregnancy and childbirth—are gendered male if they are active and important, and links this to the same codes of honor, legitimacy and descent that make *madre* such a powerful insult. She also reflects on the physicality of the pronunciations of the *mmm* and *pppp* sounds that make up “mama” and “papa” and explores how these terms stem from the biology of vocalization and how this impacts their symbolic meaning.

One of the many strengths of Bakewell's book is that it gives a non-specialist a clear sense of what a linguistic anthropologist does; what the study of language actually means. The reader leaves the book with a greater understanding of the nuances of the performance of language, the way stories are told, the fluidity with which speakers and listeners manipulate their communication through variables such as gender, class, race, region, and age. They also gain an understanding of the complexity of translation and the importance of attention to context.

Bakewell's insights are as fascinating and rigorous as they are casually presented, and while the book reads like a travelogue, it is actually a deeply insightful piece of social analysis. Anecdotes reveal the deep connection between gender and mothering in Mexico with a subtlety and gentleness that this reader found very moving. Bakewell notes that of 300 cab-rides she took during her first visit to Mexico City, 290 of the drivers asked her whether she had children, and when she said no, offered their condolences that she and her husband could not have children. At the time she was an unmarried graduate student with no desire to embark on motherhood. A man she is in love with refuses to sleep with her because he respected her and wanted to protect her from becoming one of "those *madres*." The reader is also treated to a tour of Mexican politics over the course of two decades; the culture and customs of polite society; as well as Bakewell's own academic career and her love affair with Mexico and its people. We move through weddings, art exhibitions, intellectual gatherings, and gain a window into the rituals of Mexico's cultural elite. Some of the most famous names in Mexican intellectual circles make a cameo appearance: Carlos Fuentes, for example, laughingly adds more *madres* to her list over "tea and tacos." The book offers a window into how political corruption and growing drug-related problems affected intellectual elites, and will thus be of enormous interest to the political scientists and historians of tomorrow. Moreover, Bakewell provides important insight into how this political and narco-instability was gendered. She analyzes astutely the ways in which the indignities of foreign penetration are represented in sexualized terms as the rape of the nation. She also presents

a fascinating discussion of a drug kingpin who took pride in having fathered 100 children.

*Madre* is directed at a general audience and would work wonderfully in a variety of classroom settings. I definitely intend to assign it in my Introduction to Latin American Studies course. But the book is also an important research tool for scholars. *Madre* demonstrates the importance of language for understanding political and social realities, and will likely prompt new research questions among the historians, anthropologists and political scientists who seek to engage with the meaning of mothering. As Bakewell notes “We don’t even notice what language is up to most of the time. But words as much as speakers are doing the doing” (23). While some may feel uncomfortable with this linguistic determinism, scholars of Latin American motherhood would do well to take up Bakewell’s baton and think critically about how words themselves contribute to the reality in which Latin American mothers operate and engage.