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The Supermadre and the Governmentality of Heteronormativity in Post-Water Wars Bolivia

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In the city of Cochabamba, Bolivia in April of 2000, thousands of people – rural and urban, impoverished and middle class, young and old – took to the streets in order to reclaim their community’s public water system from the foreign corporation, Bechtel. Of the striking images to have emerged from those dynamic events of over a decade ago – events that would usher in an unparalleled period of resistance to economic globalization and neoliberalism in Bolivia – a photograph of an indigenous Bolivian woman, standing solitarily in a deserted street and launching a projectile from a slingshot towards a wall of heavily armed riot police, has become particularly iconic. This woman’s act of political resistance - and the actions of many other women who participated in political protests in 1999 and 2000 – seemingly defied the traditional Bolivian gender roles. The figure of the *supermadre*¹ was invoked by the image of the Bolivian activist. She would do battle on the streets with the foreign forces of neoliberal privatization and simultaneously fulfill her role as mother and caretaker by fighting to protect her family’s access to resources.

Postdevelopment theorist and anthropologist Arturo Escobar argues that Latin America - and in particular the countries of Ecuador, Venezuela, and Bolivia - is the site where the world’s only significant state level counter-hegemonic processes are taking place.² It would seem logical that it is in this “original space of the emergence of modern/colonial capitalism,” as defined by the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, that resistance “against this pattern of power and the production of alternatives to it,” would occur.³ Latin American states were the first to be forced to undergo the most extreme kind of structural adjustment measures and to widely adopt World Bank/IMF inspired neoliberal economic agendas. In the region’s strong turn toward the left during the last decade, these same states have shown a resistance to modern/colonial capitalism and have sought to correct the social inequalities that have emerged from American neoliberalism’s hegemonic domination of the region. In the opportunity for the remaking of Latin American nations, many see the exciting potentiality for the creation of “a post-capitalist economy based on non-capitalist forms of social and economic life,” and even for a “post-liberal order that transcends liberal classifications of identity.”⁴ While one can envision the freeing of “all people rendered inferior, deviant or invisible”⁵ in a potentially remade Bolivian social order, the centrality of the *supermadre* political subjectivity – which

¹ In her seminal 1979 book *Supermadre: Women in Politics in Latin America*, Elsa Chaney reported on Peruvian and Chilean women who were extending their traditional roles as wives and mothers into the political arena where they focused on “feminine” issues such as family, morality, and food prices.

² “Latin America at a Crossroads.”

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ Lind, “Intimate Governmentalities, the Latin American Left, and the Decolonial Turn,” 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

simultaneously challenges and reinforces gender norms while dictating appropriate sexuality - is illustrative of the severe need that exists for a feminist analysis in Bolivian society. The current absence of a gender critique works to reinscribe the colonial/neoliberal governmentality that Bolivian activists have been working for decades to shake off.

The Cochabamba water wars began as local protests and gained widespread international media attention for overthrowing a newly privatized and British/American-backed consortium water company. Bolivian women's roles in these protests were seen to reflect their "interests in practical gender needs and a concern with household survival mechanisms."⁶ Bolivian women occupied a key position in the Cochabamba water wars, not only taking to the streets in protests, but also acting to form bonds of solidarity between rural and urban women - making cross-class alliances that allowed rural people to "occupy the urban area as 'Bolivians'" and allowing "*mestizo* Bolivians to claim indigenous heritage."⁷

This analysis of women's role in the Water Wars helped to construct a powerful political identity for Bolivian women, but has also been criticized for "focusing on short-term economic understandings of change rather than on women's empowerment and the negotiation of changing femininities."⁸ The creation of the hybrid political subjectivity of the Bolivian *supermadre* assisted in legitimizing women's concerns by drawing attention to their maternal identity and proved extremely successful in helping women to gain access to both public and political arenas. Their non-traditional political behavior was granted space and protected by the simultaneous projection of a "traditional, domestic, and politically 'safe' femininity."⁹ While the Cochabamba activists were in this way able to successfully keep attention focused on the conflict at hand by "generating a set of gender representations that were easily understood in a range of arenas and at both local and transnational scales," the *supermadre* representation gave validation to a dominant heteronormative model of the neoliberal nuclear family - complete with its disciplining gender binary and sexuality - which continued to shape "the way in which understandings of gender [were] consolidated through activist...networks."¹⁰

The inscribing of the *supermadre* feminine political subjectivity in Bolivian activist politics also carried with it a relationally defined and mutually constitutive heroic indigenous masculinity which would become consolidated in the image of socialist president Evo Morales. Morales was the leader of Bolivia's indigenous coca grower union, the *cocaleros*. The crucial role the *cocaleros*

⁶ Laurie, "Gender Water Networks," 179.

⁷ Ibid., 185.

⁸ Ibid., 179.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 185.

played in the Cochabamba Water Wars victory helped to eventually launch him into the presidency.¹¹ Despite the popularity of his heroic “fused masculine image of the *poncho* and *corbata*,” representing his consolidation of the male rural Indian identity with that of the male *mestizo* professional, Morales’s heroic masculinity has been criticized “for its gender blindness.”¹² Maria Galindo, founder of *Mujeres Creando* – a radical feminist organization that has been confronting the patriarchy of Bolivian society since the 1980’s – initially had hoped that an indigenous led Morales administration would incorporate a queer/feminist perspective that would lead the country away from the heteronormativity of the (neo)liberal state. Galindo explains: “In the beginning there was a lot of hope, a lot of social expectation...It has developed not in positive ways but in negative ways...The Evo Morales now is not the Evo Morales of the beginning.”¹³

The *supermadre* subjectivity presents the Bolivian woman as an active political participant and resistance fighter - a person who has transcended traditional stereotypes which define motherhood as a woman’s only acceptable role in society – while simultaneously reaffirming her maternal role. Galindo describes a strikingly similar construction of “woman” that presents itself via the Morales administration’s policies, which she categorizes as “very contradictory and very well disguised.”¹⁴ On the one hand, the Bolivian government has adopted a “liberal policy of equality” which places a certain quota of women into political parties with a requirement that a certain percentage be elected as deputies and senators. This constructed appearance of political equality for woman can be juxtaposed against the “bono Juana Asurdo” law (named after a heroine of the revolution against Spain in the 19th century). This law grants a cash payment from the government of 1800 bolivianos to every woman that has a baby. Galindo describes this combination of legislation as “a portrait of the thinking of this government.” The state is more than willing to offer women inclusion into state-based neoliberal institutions (the Morales administration has also allowed women to enter the Bolivian military), but it is clear that in the Bolivian government’s active promotion of binary heteronormative gender roles and family structures, “women means babies.”¹⁵

Sexuality is also being used to “police the boundaries of masculine political subjectivities” within Morales’s party, as highlighted by the dismissal of his first water minister under the guise of immoral sexual conduct in the wake of

¹¹ Goodman, “Cochabamba, the Water Wars and Climate Change.”

¹² Laurie, “Gender Water Networks,” 184.

¹³ Galindo, “Bolivian Radical Feminist Maria Galindo on Evo Morales, Sex-Ed, and Rebellion in the Universe of Women.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

ideological infighting over the minister's lack of expertise. Sexuality likewise took center stage in Morales's geopolitical ideological struggle with Peru's President, Alan Garcia, as a series of back and forth exchanges over their respective positions on Venezuela eventually resulted in outrage from a Bolivian Senator who felt that Garcia had disrespected Morales by insinuating that he was a 'maricon.'¹⁶ More recently, Morales stated during a speech that eating chickens injected with feminizing hormones causes European men to deviate from their masculinity. In issuing an apology for his remarks, Morales affirmed that Bolivia was a country in which homosexuals were protected by constitutional rights, insinuating "a system of formal equality [in which]...the norm introduces...all the shading of individual differences," imposing homogeneity and individualizing at the same time.¹⁷ It seems that in Bolivia sexuality is stilled deployed as a technology of normalization and social control and has, as Gerard Dumenhill and Domenique Levy warned, preyed "on the liberatory energies [that, in this case, the Bolivian social] movements have generated...and [on] the radical openness to alternative futures that appear to be a common desire across progressive movements."¹⁸

Considering the 2008 Bolivian Constitution's claim to have "left behind the colonial, republican, and neo-liberal State,"¹⁹ one must question the enduring presence of distinctly capitalist and neoliberal normalizing discourses of sexuality and gender present in Morales's Bolivia. The leftist government in Bolivia invokes a disciplining heteronormativity and further reinforces heterosexuality as a social institution, despite its historical function in shaping the very "modern/colonial economies and social life" that Bolivian social movements, and the State itself, would like to see re-imagined.²⁰ Janet Jakobsen asserts that the "politics of sexuality and the politics that drive issues like economics or war are fundamentally connected."²¹ Often though, categories of family, gender, and sexuality are under-theorized and seen as side issues in comparison to race and ethnicity when discussing alternative, post-capitalist or post-liberal futures.²²

As long as Bolivia, and other South American states that have sought to reject neoliberal and colonial ideals, continues to remain in "the business [of] bring[ing] about gendered forms of being,"²³ prescribing national sexuality and inscribing heteronormativity into social institutions, while offering mere tolerance

¹⁶ Laurie, "Gender Water Networks," 17.

¹⁷ Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 183.

¹⁸ McRuer, "Crippling Queer Politics, or the Dangers of Neoliberalism," 62.

¹⁹ Escobar, "Latin America at a Crossroads," 27.

²⁰ Lind, "Intimate Governmentalities, the Latin American Left, and the Decolonial Turn," 6.

²¹ Jakobsen, "Sex, Secularism, and the 'War on Terrorism': The Role of Sexuality in Multi-Issue Organizing," 17.

²² Lind, "Intimate Governmentalities, the Latin American Left, and the Decolonial Turn," 5.

²³ Kendall Thomas, "Afterword: Are Transgender Rights Inhuman Rights?," 321.

and equal rights to those who do not fit into these norms, their social transformations, while having “a series of novel elements,” will “remain within the confines of established Eurocentric and modernizing Left perspectives.”²⁴ Arturo Escobar argues that, in fact, Bolivia’s “state-centric, dialectical, and teleological view of social transformation...re-actualizes developmentalist imaginaries,” and calls for “an altogether different interpretation that attempts to break away from the framework of modernization and the State shared by liberal and Left positions.”²⁵ To break away from this framework would undoubtedly require breaking away from the biopolitical production of binary gender relations and heterosexual family that the Bolivian state has actively embraced.

Feminist theorist Maria Lugones likewise sees the heteronormativity promoted by both the *supermadre* femininity and the heroic indigenous masculinity as reaffirming a colonial/neoliberal ideology. She advocates the need for a feminist framework in Bolivian social movements that serves “as a lens that enables us to see what is hidden from our understandings of both race and gender and the relation of each to normative heterosexuality.”²⁶ Such a framework becomes increasingly vital as “new left governments [converge] more with right-wing ideologies than with the various social movements that supported them, including the feminist and LGBTI movements,”²⁷ as they remain “mired in the production of modern citizens.”²⁸

Lugones emphasizes that “categorical, dichotomous, hierarchical, logic [is] central to modern, colonial, capitalist thinking about race, gender, and sexuality.” She encourages a “nascent questioning of the very category of ‘gender,’”²⁹ stating that “[t]he long process of subjectification of the colonial toward adoption/internalization of the men/women dichotomy as a normative construction of the social- a mark of civilization, citizenship, and membership in civil society-was and is constantly renewed.”³⁰ Lugones illustrates that continual translation of terms into the vocabulary of gender gives value to this distinction and exercises the “coloniality of language through colonial translation,”³¹ giving the example of a conversation had with an indigenous Bolivian woman, Filomena Miranda:

I asked her about the relation between the Aymara *qamaña* and *utjaña*, both often translated as “living.” Her complex answer

²⁴ Escobar, “Latin America at a Crossroads,” 30.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁶ Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” 742.

²⁷ Lind, “Intimate Governmentalities, the Latin American Left, and the Decolonial Turn,” 6.

²⁸ Escobar, “Latin America at a Crossroads,” 41.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁰ Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” 748.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 750.

related *utjaña* to *uta*, dwelling in community in the communal land. She told me that one cannot have *qamaña* without *utjañ*. In her understanding, those who do not have *utjaña* are *waccha* and many become *misti*. Though she lives much of the time in La Paz, away from her communal lands, she maintains *utjaña*, which is now calling her to share in governing. Next year she will govern with her sister. Filomena's sister will replace her father, and thus she will be *chacha* twice, since her community is *chacha* as well as her father. Filomena herself will be *chacha* and *warmi*, as she will govern in her mother's stead in a *chacha* community. My contention is that to translate *chacha* and *warmi* as man and woman does violence to the communal relation expressed through *utjaña*.³²

Rethinking the Western colonial imposition of gender dichotomy and its resultant nuclear family (still evident in the *supermadre* subjectivity and in Morales's constitution) would constitute a significant move towards the reclamation of a country from the control of foreign neoliberal interests. In this way, a process could be set in motion to deconstruct modernizing western discourse's reliance on "liberal notions of individual autonomy and rights," recognizing that "particular constructions of...identities...embed exclusion and repression while constructing notions of ...[proper] 'Bolivianess.'"³³ This proper "Bolivianess" comes to be embodied by the *supermadre* feminine subjectivity and its constitutive masculine subjectivity that emerged from the Cochabamba Water Wars.

Felix Guattari analyzes identity as "a concept which is in a way profoundly reactionary, even when handled by progressive movements." Guattari sees the channeling of minority subjectivities into "identities" as implying "a type of production of subjectivity that adjusts itself very well to the matters of capitalist society."³⁴ In striving to move into a post-capitalist imaginary, focus on tolerance and equal rights based around the politics of identity must be replaced with an active development of radical strategies. Maria Galindo emphatically states: "We don't want equality between men and women, this is not our view. We want a *despatriarcalization* of society...We are not asking for a law, we are not asking to be in the parliament, we are not asking to get money from the government...What do we want from the state? We don't want anything from the state."³⁵

³² Ibid.

³³ Escobar, "Latin America at a Crossroads," 43.

³⁴ "Queer Dominican Moves: In the Interstices of Colonial Legacies and Global Impulses," 170.

³⁵ Galindo, "Bolivian Radical Feminist Maria Galindo on Evo Morales, Sex-Ed, and Rebellion in the Universe of Women."

Rather than continuing to reproduce the same heteronormative definitions of gender, sexuality, and family that are present in western capitalist societies, Bolivian feminist activists such as Galindo wish to move in directions more reflective of the original spirit of the Cochabamba Water Wars. Optimistic Bolivians at that time imagined the creation of a post neoliberal/capitalist/colonial society, as was expressed in the (mostly unacted on) 2008 Bolivian Constitution. Such a society must redefine its social and gender relations, not continue to inscribe binaries and norms which serve as the tropes that hold up the neoliberal nuclear family.

In 2007, when the Constituent Assembly of Ecuador began meeting to redraft the constitution, there was a large push from mainstream LGBT activists for integration into the new constitution based on liberal notions of affirmative action. However, they were strongly opposed by a group of primarily trans and lesbian activists who demanded that the family itself be redefined in the new constitution. The language of the *transfeminista* political sector ultimately was included in the constitution. It stated that “the family” was no longer defined based on kinship or sanguine relations, but rather on an “alternative logic.” In this way, all non-normative families could access state benefits from the governments economic redistribution plan.³⁶

The Ecuadorian activists went beyond seeking integration of a new identity category. The “ultimate goal [was] not only the democratization of existing...relations but a more liberatory and liberationist pluralization of the possibilities of gender”³⁷ and sexuality, as well as the creation and maintenance of worlds and publics which “necessarily include more people than can be identified.”³⁸ In order for Bolivian activists to restore the optimism and energy that existed during the time of the Water Wars and in the early years of the Morales administration, they must continue to demand a similar “pluralization of the possibilities of gender”³⁹ and sexuality, fighting to unseat the disciplining heteronormative sexuality and its social relations, embodied in the image of the *supermadre*, which are currently being reproduced at multiple levels of Bolivian society and government.

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³⁶ Lind, “Intimate Governmentalities, the Latin American Left, and the Decolonial Turn,” 8.

³⁷ Kendall Thomas, “Afterword: Are Transgender Rights Inhuman Rights?,” 320.

³⁸ Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public,” 558.

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