

LA MADRE MATIANA: *Prophetess and Nation in Mexican Satire*

On July 1, 1917, a publication calling itself *La Madre Matiana* hit the newsstands in Mexico City. The newspaper promised a bold take on politics and society, and its masthead revealed a mission both madcap and grandiose: “A prophetic, truth-telling newspaper; it will block the sun with a finger, bark at the moon, and serenade the morning star.”¹ This earnest but rather comical statement of endeavor appeared in each issue, and Mexicans of the time would have seen in addition an irreverent parody in the publication’s name. The periodical’s founder, Angel Prieto, had appropriated a clairvoyant character from popular lore to serve as his paper’s alter ego. He chose well—the prophecies of madre Matiana had provoked Mexicans for over half a century and gained renewed prominence during the Mexican Revolution. In the years leading up to the newspaper’s emergence, various publications had revisited the Matiana legacy. For example, a 1914 broadside repurposed an apocalyptic José Guadalupe Posada lithograph from the 1890s to illustrate its commentary on the prophecies’ significance (see Figure 1).² Titled “The End of the World is Near: The Prophecies are Fulfilled,” it muses that the revolutionary unrest of the time was perhaps the prelude to the bloody dénouement predicted by the prophetess. Alternatively, the newspaper *Ecos* sought to dampen the Matiana-mania sparked by the 1914 U.S. occupation of Veracruz. Lamenting that the seer was “achieving indubitable

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1. *La Madre Matiana* (September 9, 1917).

2. “Se aproxima el fin del mundo: las profecías se cumplen,” May 1914, Jean Charlot Collection, University of Hawaii at Manoa Library. Posada died in 1913, making this broadside an early posthumous publication. However, as was common in the popular press, images were frequently used multiple times to illustrate distinct events. For example, this lithograph appeared in an 1894 broadside concerning an earthquake in Mexico City. See Ron Tyler, ed., *Posada’s Mexico* (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress and the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1979), p. 180. A cursory Web search turns up other instances of the lithograph’s use. Apparently, it headed a printing of “El Corrido del Fin del Mundo” circa 1895–1900; see http://www.artoftheprint.com/artistpages/posada_jose_guadalupe_corrido_elfindelmundo.htm. Accessed July 28, 2011. It also graced a different earthquake broadside in 1912; see <http://www.flickr.com/photos/oesda/5214548257/in/set-72157625357117465/>. Accessed July 28, 2011. The latter image resides at the Musco José Guadalupe Posada in Aguascalientes.

FIGURE 1
Broadside. La Madre Matiana



Source: *La Madre Matiana* (1914). Courtesy of the Jean Charlot Collection at the University of Hawaii.

celebrity among the popular masses,” *Ecos* pronounced the prophecies superstitious nonsense and declared that pamphleteers were taking advantage of the credulous, particularly women.³ In a different vein, exiled journalists in 1916 seized on madre Matiana as a means to ridicule the new revolutionary president, Venustiano Carranza.⁴ How did this female visionary figure become the center of controversy and irreverent commentary?⁵ Perhaps more importantly, why should present-day scholars interest themselves in her trajectory?

3. “Unas profecías falsas,” *Ecos* (May 30, 1914). This article claims that Matiana and the prophecies were “alcanzando celebridad indudable entre las muchedumbres populares.” The translation is mine.

4. See *La Revista Mexicana* (April 16, 1916).

5. This essay is part of a larger research project on constructions of female piety and the Matiana legacy. The project spans the period from the mid-1800s to mid-1900s and is currently under contract at the University of New Mexico Press with the working title *Searching for Madre Matiana: Prophecy and Female Piety in Modern Mexico*.

Madre Matiana matters because she embodied conflicting but intertwined understandings of popular Catholicism, Mexican cultural identity, and feminine devotion that remained unresolved throughout the revolutionary process. Thus, scrutinizing Prieto's near-forgotten satirical newspaper yields important insights concerning the history of gender and nationhood in Mexico. First, *La Madre Matiana* enriches our understanding of the nuanced history of gendered representation in public discourse. Second, the newspaper's impersonation of a legendary prophetess and its stereotyping of female fanaticism opened a satirical space in which the fashioning of a secular national identity could take shape. Finally, *La Madre Matiana* transformed a popular figure and social type that symbolized irrationality and backwardness into an indelibly memorable Mexican heroine. In doing so the publication revealed an attempt to absorb—and contain—the strong associations attached to devout femininity and popular religiosity within revolutionary nationalism.

The relative weakness of national identities in Mexico during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries set the stage for *La Madre* (as the editorial staff nicknamed their publication). Generations of erstwhile nation-builders had struggled to achieve social consensus and a broad national sense of community. Over this long period, festering uncertainties fueled satirical expression in all its modalities. However mocking, satire usually flourishes amidst serious but less-than-revolutionary campaigns to effect social change and the obvious contradictions among social norms, professed ideals, government policies, and popular practices. According to Rubén Quintero, the genre has functioned since at least classical times as a predominantly reformist form of expression.⁶ In essence, it resides among the tools readily deployed in efforts to “improve” society and thus often serves groups seeking to define themselves.⁷ It is hardly surprising that we find satire embedded in the insecure nationalisms of Latin America. In the case analyzed here, *La Madre* offers us a unique entrée into the problematic history of nation-making in Mexico.⁸

6. For the general characteristics of satire, see Rubén Quintero, “Introduction: Understanding Satire,” in Rubén Quintero, ed., *A Companion to Satire* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 1–12.

7. See Amy Wiese Forbes, *The Satiric Decade* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010). For colonial Latin America, Julie Greer Johnson argues that Creole satirists' scathing portrayal of a multiracial society and ineffective imperial administration laid the groundwork for processes of American self-definition. See her *Satire in Colonial Spanish America: Turning the New World Upside Down* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

8. On the broader complexities of nationalism, popular culture, and national identity in Mexico relevant to the period under consideration here, see Henry C. Schmidt, *The Roots of Lo Mexicano: Self and Society in Mexican Thought, 1900–1934* (College Station: Texas A & M Press, 1979); Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, *Deep, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Ricardo Pérez Montfort, *Estampas de nacionalismo popular mexicano: diez ensayos sobre cultura popular y nacionalismo* (Mexico: CIESAS, 2003); and William H. Beezley, *Mexican National Identity* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008).

Among the nagging dilemmas faced by nation-builders was how to incorporate groups and social types deemed adverse to the success of the modern nation. Thus “the Indian” and “the bandit” came to be of obsessive concern to Latin American state-builders, and their recurrent representation reveals a paradox.⁹ At times they appear as irredeemable obstacles to advancement and unity, but in other instances they symbolize the primitive origins of the imagined national spirit. An archetypal female figure also troubled nation-builders, but has received less scholarly attention: the intensely and publicly pious Catholic woman. This social type served as both conundrum and muse for liberal nationalists. On one level, gender norms, Catholic political identity, and miraculous thinking made her incompatible with modern rationalism. On another level, she sometimes encapsulated the nature of Mexican popular culture and brought to it an elemental legitimacy. The nationalist imaginary, therefore, had to assimilate devout femininity in some fashion.

According to the popular literature of the day, madre Matiana was a late-colonial mystic of humble birth who foresaw years of conflict and destruction for Mexico before the nation even existed. Moreover, she predicted a definitive confrontation in some future year ending in the number eight, which would lead to the triumph of a revived Christian order.¹⁰ The reason for Mexico’s suffering was its embrace of modern ideologies and its corresponding abandonment of pious customs. Matiana, the texts recounted, had glimpsed Satan and his minions drafting and disseminating constitutions enshrining the ideas that would lead Mexico to the brink of catastrophe. Anticlericalism, secularizing reforms, and irreverent attitudes would bring about divine retribution. Thus, the seer allegedly foresaw invasions and festering civil strife—but she also saw that pious women through coordinated feats of expiation would eventually save the day. The collective action of a select group of nuns would regain celestial favor. Persecuted religious orders would be miraculously restored, and Catholic monarchy would reemerge in Mexico.

9. For the representation of the Indian, see Rebecca Earle, *Return of the Native: Indians and Myth-Making in Spanish America, 1810–1930* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press: 2007). See also Edward Wright-Ríos, “Indian Saints and Nation-States: Ignacio Manuel Altamirano’s Landscapes and Legends,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 20:1 (Winter 2004), pp. 47–68. On bandits, see Juan Pablo Dabove, *Nightmares of the Lettered City: Banditry and Literature in Latin America, 1816–1929* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007).

10. This synopsis is based on the pamphlet “Las profecías de Matiana,” 1861, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, and “Profecías de Matiana,” Biblioteca Nacional (BN), Fondo Lafragua, RLA 348 LAF. The latter text is found in a bound collection of popular almanacs. The first pages were removed, so it is missing the title page with the date and the publication information is incomplete. The cataloguing information lists 1858. For a Revolutionary-era version, see *Profecías completas de la madre Matiana* (Mexico: Imprenta Gutenberg, 1914) in the Biblioteca Nacional de México (BN).

These prophecies appeared for the first time in pamphlets published in 1847.¹¹ Thus initial publication took place amidst the traumatic experience of U.S. military invasion and mounting debates concerning Mexico's ineffective defense. It was not until the late 1850s, however, that the prophetess achieved notoriety. Advertisements announced the sale of Matiana pamphlets in Mexico City in 1857, and a flurry of publications followed.¹² The prophetess, therefore, gained prominence as the tensions between liberal reformers and Catholic conservatives stoked by defeat finally boiled over in all-out civil war in 1858. The dates of extant Matiana texts (1858, 1861, and 1867) suggest that she secured an audience amidst a decade dominated by internecine bloodshed and yet another foreign incursion (the French-backed empire of Maximilian of Habsburg).¹³ During this period, factions from across the political spectrum clamored for unity, but constantly vilified each other.¹⁴ Matiana and her visions apparently resonated amidst the polarization, although it is impossible to calculate pamphlet circulation, sketch her readership, or gauge oral transmission. What is clear is that these texts embedded a popular female figure of miraculous foresight and piercing social critique in the national consciousness.

The prophetess and her visions are almost certainly apocryphal. Regardless, they activated a historical memory of baroque piety and engaged abiding assumptions about the female aptitude for mysticism. The extant descriptions of the visions echo the themes and biographies of female visionaries of the colonial era: extreme penitential practice, innate spirituality, inquisitorial persecution, exemplary abnegation, and unwavering faith in the face of masculine skepticism.¹⁵ They also depict a lost past of Christian harmony and juxtapose this idealized vision with contemporary discord. Therefore, Matiana sprang from conservative nostalgia, fear of change, and frustration with Mexico's persistent instability. In the decades that followed, however, she served various purposes, depending on

11. "Profecías de Matiana sobre los sucesos que han de acontecer en esta capital," Mexico City: Valdés y Redondas, 1847. Held at the University of Texas, Arlington Library.

12. *Diario de Avisos* [Mexico], July 10 and 15, August 6, and September 3, 1857. Each pamphlet cost one *real* at the Librería Abadiano. A more attractively illustrated version could be purchased a decade later at the Blanquel bookstore: *Calendario de las profecías de la madre Matiana* (Mexico: Imprenta de A. Boix, under the direction of M. Zornoza, 1867) in the Sutro Library at the San Francisco branch of the California State Library.

13. "Profecías de Matiana," 1858; "Las profecías de Matiana," 1861; and *Calendario de las profecías de la madre Matiana*, 1867.

14. Antonia Pi-Suñer Llorens, "Introducción," in *Historiografía Mexicana* 4, Antonia Pi-Suñer Llorens, ed. (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1997).

15. See Jennifer Lee Eich, *The Other Mexican Muse* (New Orleans: University Press of the South, 2004); Nora E. Jaffary, *False Mystics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Asunción Lavrin, *Brides of Christ* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008); Asunción Lavrin and Rosalva Loreto López, *Diálogos espirituales* (Puebla: Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades de la Benemérita, Universidad Autónoma de Puebla and Universidad de las Américas Puebla, 2006); Asunción Lavrin and Rosalva Loreto López, *Monjas y beatas* (Mexico City: Universidad de las Américas Puebla, Archivo General de la Nación, 2002); and Antonio Rubial García, *La santidad controvertida* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999).

the interests of her re-interpreters. In a sense, generations of Mexicans fashioned their own Matianas.

For some, the prophetess served merely as a lowbrow diversion, but for others she provoked concern.¹⁶ The most telling engagements of the Matiana legacy are those in which the seer serves as a touchstone for variant views on religion's place in Mexican society. Secular liberals scoffed at the very notion of prophecy, ridiculing Matiana's visions as a cynical attempt to incite the ignorant populace. In some instances though, they also deployed the prophetess in making fun of their journalistic rivals. For example, in 1870 a newspaper called *El Boquiflojo* mocked the editorial prognostications of *El Monitor Republicano* as Matiana-like absurdities.¹⁷ Criticisms in this vein carried slights based on gender. Male writers questioned opponents' masculinity and rationality by equating them with the prophetess. The novelist Manuel Payno put Matiana to work as well. In *Los bandidos de Río Frío* (1889), he famously parodied mid nineteenth-century Mexican society. The tale is set in motion by an indigenous *curandera* (healer) named Matiana who makes her living pedaling superstitious quackery.¹⁸ Thus Payno introduces Mexico's "backward" customs and social types by referencing the pamphlet prophetess. Nonetheless, the prophecies kept circulating. One skeptic complained that market stalls at Mexico City's Plaza del Volador offered Matiana pamphlets for a pittance and even slipped free copies surreptitiously into purchased books.¹⁹

In part, conservative Catholics kept the prophecies alive. In 1883, Dionisio A. Jesús María wrote to the Church hierarchy, hoping to republish the prophe-

16. In the former camp, Guillermo Prieto, a well-known liberal writer, confessed a weakness for the popular *calendarios* (almanacs) of the era and recalled encountering madre Matiana in their pages. See "San Lunes de Fidel," *Siglo XIX* (December 16, 1878). For Prieto, these texts endured as a guilty pleasure, reminding him of juvenile fantasy and the budding joys of reading. For more on the *calendario* tradition, see Beezley, *Mexican National Identity*, pp. 25–31. See also Isabel Quiñonez, *Mexicanos en su tinta* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1994).

17. See "Profecías, descubrimientos y opiniones opuestas," *El Boquiflojo* (March 17, 1870). In this article, the publication maligned the prophetess as a product of a bygone obsession with divination and mocked the new era's seers in their "suit coats and slacks." The irony, which would have been immediately apparent to Mexican readers at the time, was that *El Monitor* was perhaps the most renowned voice of secular liberalism. In a similar vein, Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera criticized a Catholic newspaper: see "El Ministerio de Hacienda y las profecías de la madre Matiana," in *Escritos inéditos de sabor satírico*, Mary Eileen Carter and Boyd G. Carter, eds. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1972).

18. See Manuel Payno, *Los bandidos de Río Frío*, 2nd ed. (Mexico City: Porrúa, 2000), pp. 20–24. Matiana is not a common name, and thus I take Payno's use of it to be a reference to the Matiana prophecies. In the novel, this Matiana is called on to resolve an exceptionally late pregnancy. She tells her patroness that the Virgin of Guadalupe requires a sacrificial victim, and she kidnaps an illegitimate, upper-class child. Ultimately, she abandons the infant in a garbage dump, and his subsequent fate propels the narrative. Ironically, the patient goes into labor due to the shock caused by the notion of child sacrifice. Payno is mocking belief in miraculous cures; here, such a cure "succeeds" but not because of the alleged magic.

19. "Unas profecías falsas," *Ecos* (May 30, 1914). The author did not provide an actual date, but he made this comment while criticizing the pre-Revolutionary history of the prophecies.

cies.²⁰ Mexicans disparaged the visions, he claimed, because they misunderstood their purpose. The impious were incorrigible, but God was trying to warn the devout of impending punishment. In 1889, the conservative intellectual Luis Duarte published an entire book on the Matiana prophecies, steeped in the era's international Catholic militancy.²¹ He provides an extensive re-interpretation of Matiana's visions in light of Mexican events, stressing women's unique loyalty to the church. An archdiocesan censor gave his approval and Catholic newspapers enthusiastically recommended the book.²² Liberal periodicals, in turn, attacked it on the grounds that support for miraculous nonsense revealed an absence of journalistic integrity.²³ Undeterred, Mexico City's preeminent Catholic daily was still selling Duarte's book at its offices in 1898.²⁴

The themes linked to madre Matiana—militant Catholic revivalism, popular “superstition,” and gendered notions of fanaticism and fidelity—carried on into the twentieth century, but the Mexican Revolution inspired a wider set of associations linked to the prophecies. The official organ of the Methodist Church in Mexico approached the topic pragmatically, suggesting that poverty and hunger caused by war, as well as the looming winter of 1915, were bolstering widespread belief in the prophecies.²⁵ In at least one instance, the seer served as a symbol of female insanity: residents of Monterrey nicknamed a deranged homeless woman after the prophetess.²⁶ In addition, a large number of rural Catholics in Oaxaca embraced a young indigenous girl's supernatural capabilities in 1928, finding convergences between her alleged visions, the occurrence of earthquakes, intensifying church-state violence, and the prophecies of madre

20. Dionisio A. Jesús María to J. Reyes Velasco, Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de México (AHAM), December 14, 1883, Caja 222, exp. 31. It is not clear if he ever published this manuscript.

21. Luis G. Duarte, *Profecías de Matiana acerca del triunfo de la iglesia* (Mexico: Imprenta del Circulo Católico, 1889). Letters between Duarte's collaborator, Antonio Martínez del Cañizo, and the Archdiocese of Mexico's *provisor* discuss making sure the revisions to the manuscript will please the ecclesiastical censors; see Antonio Martínez del Cañizo to Provisor, Archivo Histórico de la Arquidiócesis de México (AHAM) (September 24, 1889), caja 208, exp. 64, 1889. See also Antonio Martínez del Cañizo to Provisor, AHAM (October 4, 1889), caja 208, exp. 64, 1889. The censor Vito Cruz's report was ultimately included in the book and also remains in the archdiocesan archive; see Vito Cruz, AHAM (November 8, 1889), caja 208, exp. 64. Duarte may have known Dionisio de Jesús María, but I have found no record of their acquaintance.

22. “Las profecías de Matiana vindicadas,” *El Tiempo* (November 23, 1889); “Coincidencia,” *El Tiempo* (June 20, 1890); and “Las profecías de Matiana,” *El Amigo de la Verdad* (August 29, 1891). The latter publication quipped that liberal invective served only as additional proof of the prophecies' merits.

23. For example, see “La prensa,” *El Siglo XIX* (September 3, 1890) and “Predicciones de la madre Matiana,” *La Patria* (September 6, 1891).

24. *El Tiempo* (April 26, 1898). Short notices advertising its sale appeared in many subsequent issues.

25. “Notas editoriales,” *El Abogado Cristiano* (November 26, 1914). In addition, On July 14, 1917, exactly two weeks after *La Madre Matiana's* initial publication, a different Mexico City newspaper commented on the prophecies. It dealt with them at arm's length, addressing the visions within an essay on popular myths, but nonetheless promised to republish the “sensational prophecies of madre Matiana”; see *Confeti* (July 14, 1917). I have not been able to find a copy of this version of the prophecies.

26. *El Porvenir* (July 7, 1927).

Matiana.²⁷ Articles written decades later claimed that Mexicans of previous generations had invoked the prophetess amid natural disasters, comets, and rumored unrest.²⁸ One journalist in 1947 dubbed the era before electricity “the times of madre Matiana.”²⁹ For some then, the visionary figure eventually came to symbolize pre-modern life and traditions. At some point in the twentieth century, the pamphlet seer would even become one of the many feminine nicknames for death in Mexican slang.³⁰

In commandeering the seer’s name and persona, Angel Prieto and his staff exploited the reverence, derision, and unease surrounding this fantastical character. The timing of the publication’s emergence was surely deliberate: launching the newspaper with 1918 (a year ending in eight) only months away gave the newspaper’s prophetic persona a mischievous timeliness. The popular acceptance of *La Madre Matiana*, especially its satirical aspects, was helped along by the fact that Mexicans suffered previously unknown levels of hardship between 1915 and 1918. Economic turmoil, extreme food shortages, and epidemics battered the populace. In fact, Mexicans called 1917 the “year of hunger.”³¹ Finally, the promulgation of a new, more anticlerical constitution only five months before *La Madre*’s inaugural issue bolstered its relevance further.³² The Matiana texts published during the revolutionary period, not surprisingly, also included additional prophecies related to contemporary political events.

“LO QUE TIENE Y NO TIENE MADRE”

At first glance, the newspaper appears to offer a straightforward send-up of “superstition” and the Catholic Church. A mannish, piously attired Matiana

27. Edward Wright-Ríos, *Revolutions in Mexican Catholicism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009), chapter 7.

28. For example, three essays from Guadalajara’s *El Informador* mention madre Matiana in this manner: Enrique Francisco Camarena, “Hace Cincuenta Años” (April 4, 1965); “Los 50 años de vida periodística de E Informador” (October 5, 1967); and Zenaido Michel Pimenta, “Infundados temores al terminar el Siglo de ‘Las Luces,’” January 9, 1977.

29. Carlos González Peña, “Empezamos a pagar,” *El Universal* (July 24, 1947).

30. See Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, *Death and the Idea of Mexico* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Zone Books, 2005), p. 26. Lomnitz-Adler makes no mention of the madre Matiana legacy, but his source (see footnotes 8 and 9) does; see Juan M. Lope Blanch, *Vocabulario mexicano relativo a la muerte* (Mexico City: Dirección General de Publicaciones, 1963), p. 24 and footnote 26. Lomnitz-Adler asserts that the name Matiana is a derivation of *matar* (to kill). Lope Blanch, however, doubts this linguistic connection. He emphasizes madre Matiana’s role as a legendary figure and claims that she had become a symbol of antiquity, witchcraft, and sorcery. He does not discuss when these associations emerged. In the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century texts that I have analyzed she is not depicted as a personification of death, although in some sources, like *La Madre*, she is sometimes portrayed as having returned from the dead.

31. Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, vol. 2 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), pp. 411–415.

32. For an overview of anticlericalism at this time see Ben Fallaw, “Varieties of Mexican Revolutionary Anticlericalism: Radicalism, Iconoclasm, and Otherwise, 1914–1935,” *The Americas* 65:4 (2009), pp. 481–509.

appears on the masthead, skewering priests with an outsized phallic sword. Sections parody the *santoral* (calendar of the saint's feasts and holy days) and the writing style of devotional texts. The issue of September 9, 1917, however, reveals a more complex approach to popular religiosity and pious femininity. There, a front-page article titled "*Lo que tiene y no tiene madre*" (What Has and Does Not Have a Mother) pivots on a vernacular phrase. La Madre indulges in "her" favorite trick: tapping the rich Mexican usage of *madre* and its permutations. There are few words in popular Mexican usage with similar coarse complexity and offensive potential. A book on Mexicanisms published in Madrid during the 1890s stressed Mexicans' hypersensitivity to the term.³³ Never, it argued, should one inquire after "*tu/su madre*" (your mother) in Mexico: ask instead for "*su mamá*" (your mom). Simply saying "madre" risked a potent insult.

The key to *madre* and its many derivations since at least the eighteenth century is the insinuation of extremes, usually bad and sometimes good.³⁴ According to one slang dictionary, *madre* is among the foremost "major Mexicanisms," on a par with the equally generative *chingar*.³⁵ Alone, *madre* often means worthless or useless, like "*me importa madre*" (roughly, I don't give a damn).³⁶ In related usage, "*¡La madre!*" conveys abrupt rejection of excuses or opposing arguments.³⁷ To be *hasta la madre* is to be absolutely fed up.³⁸ During the revolutionary era the term also described exceptional brutality: *dar en la madre* meant to mortally wound or strike decisively.³⁹ Hence, Mexicans also use *madrazo* (a harsh blow) and *madreador* (a person who imparts beatings), and *partir la madre* (annihilate or destroy).⁴⁰ As with many colloquial terms, the negative

33. José Sánchez Somoano, *Modismos, locuciones y términos mexicanos* (Madrid: Manuel Minuesa de los Ríos, 1892), p. 91.

34. See Real Academia Española, *Diccionario de autoridades*, facsimile edition, vol. 2 (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1963), pp. 449–450. This early eighteenth-century Spanish dictionary defines *salir de madre* as "to exceed in superabundance in some action, be it good or bad."

35. See Linton H. Robinson, *Mexican Slang* (Campo, Calif: Bueno Books, 1992), pp. 38–43. *Chingar* means to rape or violate, but often is loosely translated as "fuck." Hence to be the *chingón* is to be the perpetrator of the act of violation or domination and to be the *chingado/a* is to be the subjugated victim. Octavio Paz famously explores the centrality of this dynamic centrality in the Mexican national psyche in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), pp. 74–88.

36. Robinson, *Mexican Slang*, pp. 38–43; José Martínez Pérez, *Dichos, dicharachos y refranes mexicanos* (Mexico City: Editores Mexicanos Unidos, 1977), p. 229.

37. Martínez Pérez, *Dichos*, p. 154. A related expression fulfilling much the same function is *¡Ni madre!*; see Real Academia Española, *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, vol. 2 (Madrid: Editorial Espasa Calpe, 2001), pp. 1413–1414. This dictionary, published in Spain, treats Mexican colloquial usage.

38. Real Academia Española, *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, vol. 2, pp. 1413–1414.

39. Arturo Langle Ramírez, *Vocabulario, apodos, seudónimos, sobrenombres y hemerografía de la Revolución*, (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 1966), p. 52. See also Real Academia Española, *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, vol. 2, pp. 1413–1414.

40. Robinson, *Mexican Slang*, pp. 38–40. "*Romper la madre*" is a common equivalent phrase. Often these are deployed as threats, as in "*Te voy a partir la madre*" (roughly equivalent to "I'm going to break your face").

connotations are inverted in some contexts. Thus *a toda madre* (figuratively, at full force or speed) denotes excellence.⁴¹

A partner of *madre* in Mexican argot is *desmadre*. Here, too, the issue is the signification of excess or the marking of outer limits. A combination of the prefix *des-*, connoting negation or inversion, and *madre*, it usually implies chaos, confusion, and anarchic behavior.⁴² But it can also bear more violent connotations. According to a dictionary of revolutionary expressions, *desmadrar* originally referred to the act of separating calves from cows, but came to mean to wound gravely. Likewise, a *desmadrado* is the victim of brutal assault.⁴³ The reflexive form, *desmadrarse*, means to gravely wound one's self.⁴⁴ Carried a bit further, it can also mean to break or ruin. Thus, *desmadre* can refer to disorderly happenings, extreme violence, and outrageous behavior. The phrase *esto va de desmadre total* indicates an event that has gotten completely out of hand.⁴⁵ And the common phrase *armar desmadre* means to cause trouble or foment disorder and a *desmadrozo/a* is a troublemaker. This was the role that *La Madre Matiana* archly embraced.

Making the most of *madre*, *desmadre*, and related expressions served as standard *La Madre* practice. In fact, featured columns were titled "*Madradas*" and "*Desmadres*." These names were not chosen simply to generate laughs. To label "what has or does not have a mother," for example, amounts to marking the limits of social acceptance. Their weapon, in this case, is the vulgar expression of extreme contempt, "*No tiene madre*," set up in a series of set pieces. To be branded as such represents an offensive means of imputing a complete lack of scruples or shame.⁴⁶ It also denotes the most abject and debased existence possible.⁴⁷ In this context, *La Madre* mentions something considered good and quips, "*Eso sí tiene madre*"; juxtaposed to this good deed or event appears a

41. See Martínez Pérez, *Dichos*, p. 30. Although not common everywhere, "*no tiene madre*" is also used a superlative. In both cases we could say they serve as the equivalent of English phrases like "off the charts" or "out-of-sight." See also Robinson, *Mexican Slang*, p. 39.

42. For the prefix *des-* see Real Academia Española, *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, vol. 1, p. 755. For *desmadre*, see vol. 1, p. 790.

43. Langle Ramírez, *Vocabulario*, p. 37.

44. Martínez Pérez, *Dichos*, p. 94.

45. Colin Smith, *Collins Spanish Dictionary*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 248.

46. A more polite way of calling someone shameless is *sinvergüenza*. It denotes a lesser degree of shamelessness. See Real Academia Española, *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, vol. 2, p. 2072.

47. See Francisco Javier Santamaría and Joaquín García Icazbalceta, *Diccionario de mejicanismos* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1959), p. 676 and Martínez Pérez, *Dichos*, p. 208. Regarding this phrase, the latter quips, "En pocas palabras: es un hijo de la chingada." In doing so he equates *no tiene madre* with being *chingado/a*, that is, the product of violent sexual domination. An example of the lack of *madre* to signify someone or something that is beyond the pale of social norms appears in Juan Rulfo's short story "Luvina." In this text, rustic peasants deadpan their deep suspicion of the Mexican government: "También nosotros lo conocemos [el gobierno] . . . De lo que no sabemos nada es de la madre del gobierno" (We know the government too . . . but we know nothing about the government's mother). See "Luvina," in Juan Rulfo, *Obras* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987).

related one that is deemed galling, with the declaration, “*Eso no tiene madre.*” Of course, part of the joke is self-referential: who better to make these determinations than *La Madre* herself? The writers deploy the expression to mock individuals and institutions, but the seriousness beneath their jests is palpable. For example, *La Madre* praises the state’s expulsion of foreign priests, underscoring their reputation as sexual predators and exploiters of the masses; then, “she” condemns Church efforts to block this ruling, after prelates had refused to abide by it, claiming rights enshrined in the 1917 constitution. In subsequent pairings, *La Madre* targeted hypocritical judges and shady provincial politicians.

The newspaper editor and staff were playing a part, so to say. In fact the newspaper’s commentary entailed simultaneous performances: playing the legendary seer, affecting the castigating diatribes and illogical certainty often associated with devout women, communicating in the witticisms of common Mexicans, and staging *desmadre*. *La Madre*’s Matiana is a demented, impertinent, yet uncannily insightful battle-ax who knows no fear.⁴⁸ As a seer she also has mysterious powers of discernment. She uses those talents to expose fraud and corruption—but she also talks nonsense. As it created a parody, *La Madre* was producing a satirical nation-building rhetoric. Appropriating a legendary popular visionary and then deploying her to expose *lo que no tiene madre* represents a demarcation of values. In the process, *La Madre* implied that Matiana was quintessentially Mexican and that Mexicans remained deeply superstitious. Of course, this setup provides ready material for satire, and thus *La Madre* relished the contradictions.⁴⁹ Portraying their namesake as a clownish zealot (a reactionary Cantinflas of sorts) provided them license to scoff in all directions.⁵⁰ The Matiana character, as drawn in *La Madre*, was meant to embody the miracle-obsessed quirks, the charming ridiculousness, and the caustic wit of *el pueblo* (the people). All the while, *La Madre* is both making fun of the national “self” and taking part in its construction. True to the satirical genre, the newspaper assumed a public, moralizing stance, speaking for the populace as it targeted folly and corruption. Although the journalists aimed to conjure *desmadre*, they also sought to advance social goals and win hearts and minds. However, their derision was open-ended and offered no solutions—*La Madre* was called to reveal, not resolve.⁵¹ Crucially, in 1917, she took on a recognizably Mexican female voice. Over time, though, Angel Prieto and his staff

48. Here I use the colloquial term for a formidable or domineering woman, because it carries sexist connotations similar to the Mexican uses of the name madre Matiana. See *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), <http://www.oed.com/>. Accessed July 28, 2011.

49. Quintero, “Introduction.”

50. I refer to Mario Moreno’s comedic alter ego Cantinflas, a barrio buffoon whose absurd send-up of twentieth-century Mexican modernization captivated film audiences throughout Latin America. See Jeffery Pilcher, *Cantinflas and the Chaos of Mexican Modernity* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2001).

51. Quintero, “Introduction.”

would switch to crass, masculine-voiced sarcasm as revolutionary nationalism evolved in the early 1920s.

POSITIONING AND PLAYING THE PROPHETESS

There are a number of studies that examine Mexican women and gender in the Porfirian and Revolutionary periods. They address the reframing of patriarchy, female agency in institutions, feminism, women in the workplace, and the gender dynamics of marriage and daily life.⁵² Works analyzing literature and art also help to contextualize the Matiana phenomenon.⁵³ For the most part, though, scholars do not fully mine satire and examine its historical impact. At times, we sample it to gauge political resistance and rivalry. For example, historians have looked at humorous prose, verse, and caricature as evidence of principled opposition to authoritarianism before the Mexican Revolution.⁵⁴ However, *La Madre's* ridicule goes well beyond the politics of humiliation and defiance. "She," and a number of her forbearers, probed the shifting boundaries of Mexican identity. The core of their wit resides in emblematic characters that both violate and mark the bounds of propriety. Often, simple jester-like transgressions inspire laughter. At other times the object of ridicule resides on the "other side" of social acceptance, and satirists make him or her—their popular, rule-bending alter ego—the defender of shared values. In the present case, *La Madre* implies that the fanatical mystic is more sensible—and more Mexican—

52. See Carmen Ramos Escandón, ed., *Presencia y transparencia* (Mexico: Colegio de México, 2006); Elsa Muñiz, *Cuerpo, representación y poder* (Mexico: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana and Miguel Angel Porrúa, 2002); Apen Ruiz Martínez, "Nación y género en el México revolucionario: la India Bonita y Manuel Gamio," *Signos Históricos* 5 (2001), pp. 55–86; and Esperanza Tuñón Pablos, *Mujeres que se organizan* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1991). For a representation of the field in Mexico, see María Teresa Fernández-Aceves, "Imagined Communities: Women's History and the History of Gender in Mexico," *Journal of Women's History* 19:1 (2007) pp. 200–205. For a broader portrait of the issues and theoretical approaches see William E. French and Katherine Elaine Bliss, "Introduction," in *Gender, Sexuality, and Power in Latin America Since Independence* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007). Recent English-language works on the Revolutionary era include Jocelyn Olcott, *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005); Jocelyn Olcott, Mary K. Vaughan, and Gabriela Cano, eds., *Sex in Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Stephanie J. Smith, *Gender and the Mexican Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); and Stephanie Mitchell and Patience Schell, eds., *The Women's Revolution in Mexico, 1910–1953* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).

53. The pathbreaking text in this regard is Jean Franco, *Plotting Women* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). For an examination of gender and nationalism in literary depictions of race, class, and romance, see Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). For the depiction of women in film, see Julia Tuñón, *Mujeres de luz y sombra en el cine mexicano* (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 1998). In the arena of painting, Frida Kahlo has inspired what is almost a separate branch of gender studies. For an overview of important Frida books, see Salomón Grimberg, "Review: Thinking of Death," *Women's Art Journal* 14:2 (Autumn 1993–Winter 1994), pp. 44–50. For useful essays addressing the various polemics, see Elizabeth Barber, "Art Critics on Frida Kahlo," *Art Education* 45:2 (March 1992), pp. 42–48; Oriana Baddeley, "Her Dress Hangs Here," *Oxford Art Journal* 14:1 (1991), pp. 10–17. See also Sharyn R. Udall, "Frida Kahlo's Mexican Body," *Women's Art Journal* 24:2 (Autumn 2003–Winter 2004), pp. 10–14.

54. Daniel Cabrera, the director of *El Hijo del Ahuizote*, represents an example of the heroic journalistic figure. See Margarita Espinosa Blas, "El Hijo Del Ahuizote: un periódico americanista," in *La prensa decimonónica en México*, Adriana Pineda Soto and Celia del Palacio Montiel, eds. (Morelia: Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, Universidad de Guadalajara, and CONACYT, 2003).

than the targets of their satire. On another level, Matiana and the “backward” populace she represents function both as the butt of jokes and the protagonists of *La Madre*’s reformist nationalism.

Madre Matiana, then, served as a multivalent metaphorical figure. Due to the nature of the historical evidence (popular ephemera, minor newspapers, and literature at many levels) any analysis of her role in Mexican culture must be an interpretative, interdisciplinary endeavor. Engagements of critics and the larger society with fanaticism, piety, and femininity set the stage for *La Madre*’s appropriation of the Matiana persona in the late 1910s. In many ways the seer represented a real challenge for these journalists. Sensitive to the culture around them, *La Madre*’s writers could not leave the ideas, practices, and “irrationality” embodied in the Matiana figure out of their more sophisticated representations of the nation. To manage this tension, they effected a clever reversal: they portrayed the (in)famous visionary as an offbeat national avenger.

In the context of the times this was a novel strategy. Crafting an elite masculine honor had been a central function in constructing Mexico’s public sphere over the preceding decades. Only men deemed *de honra* (of recognized formal education, liberal principles, status, and manly valor) could speak for *el pueblo*.⁵⁵ *La Madre*’s gambit represents a premeditated contravention: it deploys a raging female religious voice—the antithesis of modern masculine decorum—in staking its claim to public opinion. Simultaneously, it focuses on *desmadre* to expose the untoward in Mexican society. Although the actual voices of women were absent, the newspaper created such a voice by intertwining *lo femenino*, *lo fanático*, and *lo mexicano*.

A pair of theoretical approaches bolsters this interpretation. Scholars have long focused on the processes that shape nationalism.⁵⁶ Nira Yuval-Davis’s examination of representations of women in nationalist identity narratives is instructive.⁵⁷

55. Pablo Piccato, *The Tyranny of Opinion* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010). For more on the conceptualization of public opinion and efforts by factions to define and control it, see Gerald L. McGowan, *Prensa y poder, 1854–1857* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1978). For the religious dimensions, see Brian F. Connaughton, “Conjuring the Body Politic from the *Corpus Mysticum*: The Post-Independent Pursuit of Public Opinion in Mexico, 1821–1854,” *The Americas* 55:3 (1999), pp. 459–479 and Brian F. Connaughton, “A Most Delicate Balance: Representative Government, Public Opinion, and Priests in Mexico, 1821–1834,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 17:1 (2001), pp. 41–69. For the Catholic press in the mid-nineteenth century, see Erika Pani, “Una ventana sobre la sociedad decimonónica,” *Secuencia*, nueva época, 36 (1996), pp. 67–88.

56. For example, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. ed. (London and New York: Verso, 2006); Craig J. Calhoun, *Nationalism, Concepts in Social Thought* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2005); Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991). For a summary of approaches to identity formation, see Karen A. Cerulo, “Identity Construction,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 23 (1997), pp. 385–409.

57. See Nira Yuval-Davis, “The Bearers of the Collective,” *Feminist Review* 4 (1980), pp. 15–27 and *Gender & Nation* (London and Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1997).

Female figures are crucial in depictions of a nation and its creation, where they commonly appear as “bearers of the collective.” In this sense, “women serve as reproducers, not only of the labor force and/or of the future subjects of the state, but also as the reproducers, biologically and ideologically, of the national collective and its boundaries.”⁵⁸ Much of the discursive power materializes in the treatment of recognized social identities—cultural narratives that delineate similarities and distinctions between the self, groups, and others, and these narratives often have their roots in myth, history, and descriptions of custom. As with the ideas surrounding the nation itself, identity narratives do not require airtight definition so much as frequent expression. In this manner, they gain the aura of broad acceptance, although they require continual re-adaptation.⁵⁹ Once lodged in the collective imagination, however, they can channel emotions, convey understandings of history, bolster visions of the future, and shape notions of social organization. In essence, enduring identity narratives represent pillars beneath the framework of meaning. They are also crucial to arguments for change; hence, they often appear in discourses that examine what are felt to be national problems.⁶⁰ Competing social projects, not surprisingly, often employ distinct identity narratives. Again, gender positioning in these narratives shapes their logic. As bearers of the collective, female figures often carry a “burden of representation”: they embody the people, morality, customs, and land. Thus, figures like madre Matiana hold their place in relation to other, frequently masculine, representations. Often they function as “symbolic border guards”—the us versus them, the legitimate versus the illegitimate.⁶¹

Another approach looks at the appropriation of madre Matiana as an act of impersonation, perpetrated in journalistic performance. In this sense, *La Madre*'s satire is akin to what Jill Lane found in her study of Cuban blackface theater.⁶² It might be said that Angel Prieto and his staff indulged in discursive cross-dressing. The parallel resides in Cuban engagements of black culture and Mexican approaches to Catholic religiosity. For Cuban nationalists, blackness remained an intractable problem. Their Mexican counterparts also grappled with race, but a more stubborn obstacle proved to be popular religious culture. Mexican scholarship describes twentieth-century *indigenismo* as a strategy of homogenization.⁶³ Secular nationalists and the revolutionary state sought to

58. Yuval-Davis, “The Bearers of the Collective,” p. 15.

59. Calhoun, *Nationalism*, pp. 1–7.

60. Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation*.

61. Ibid. This kind of representation of women in nationalist discourse appears in Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, pp. 35–40.

62. Jill Lane, *Blackface Cuba, 1840–1895* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

63. Alan Knight, “Racism, Revolution, and Indigenismo in Mexico, 1910–1940,” in *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870–1940*, Richard Graham, ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. 71–114. See also Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *México profundo* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).

absorb indigenous customs and history into an imagined mixed-race national culture. But the case of Catholicism was different—scholars consistently emphasize the intent among reformers to banish religion from the public sphere in Mexico altogether.⁶⁴ Clearly, strong devout identities, particularly among women, aggravated Mexico’s secular nation-builders. However, the functions of satire in racial and cultural assimilation have yet to receive significant attention in Mexican historical scholarship.

Blackface theater in nineteenth-century Cuba featured stock satirical characters, allowing non-black social actors to stereotype popular culture and control its representation while constructing purportedly “national” modes of expression.⁶⁵ Plays ridiculed supposedly typical figures, but even as they did so they represented them as inimitably Cuban. Lane’s analysis centers on these acts of impersonation, which she claims reveal the making (and faking) of a new Cuban identity. She argues that performances of stereotyped blackness created a setting wherein Cubans could invent, share, and practice the behaviors associated with mestizo nationalism. Staging opportunities for an actor (or a journalist) to play the maligned religious “other” in Mexico reveals a similar effort to contain Catholic piety and practice, and to construct simultaneously the “legitimate” behaviors, beliefs, and customs of the nation. Stereotyping and the mocking of female fanaticism through satirical impersonation also amounted to an attempt to appropriate the assumptions of authenticity attached to devout femininity, while at the same time exerting control over “the popular” and its representation.

“RIDENDO CORRIGO MORES”

Angel Prieto’s madre Matiana did not descend from the ether as *La Madre* joked. In fact, a look at the newspaper’s predecessors is essential for placing it in the proper context. Mexico’s satirical tradition goes back to colonial-era broadsides and flourished during the nineteenth century.⁶⁶ Particularly after 1850, newspapers dedicated solely to satire were common.⁶⁷ They belong to a

64. See Adrian Bantjes, “Mexican Revolutionary Anticlericalism: Concepts and Typologies,” *The Americas* 65:4 (2009), pp. 467–80. See also Alan Knight, “The Mentality and Modus Operandi of Revolutionary Anticlericalism,” in *Faith and Impiety in Revolutionary Mexico*, Matthew Butler, ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 21–56.

65. Although male, the Cuban blackface character most reminiscent of madre Matiana is the *negrito catedrático* (little black professor). A fictional invention, he mocks black attempts to master high culture and emulate the educated. The character constantly assumes a preposterous air of grandeur while making a mess of erudite Spanish. In something of the same way in which the fanatical Matiana is a stereotyped female fool, the catedrático is the black buffoon. In fact, such was the popularity of this figure that a newspaper called *Los Negros Catedráticos* specialized in political satire in the voice of this comic figure. See Lane, *Blackface Cuba*, pp. 71–86 and 96.

66. María del Carmen Ruiz Castañeda et al., *El periodismo en México* (Mexico City: Editorial Tradición, 1974).

67. For an entertaining baptism in these publications, see Rafael Barajas, *El país de “El Abuzote”* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005); *El país de “El Llorón de Icamole”* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica,

legacy of Mexican reformism grounded in notions that top-down cultural transformation represents a crucial step toward prosperous nationhood. It is for this reason that a sustained dedication to biting social commentary emerged from liberal and revolutionary journalism. This *raison d'être* is artfully characterized on the masthead of *La Linterna* (The Lantern, 1877).⁶⁸ It features a smirking jester shining a bright light on a dark globe. In doing so, he illuminates the paper's Latin motto scrawled on the Earth's horizon: "*Ridendo Corrigo Mores*" (Laughing, I correct customs or mores). It is a rather presumptuous claim, but its origins lie in a broader satirical tradition. Variations of this slogan appeared in French newspapers and other Latin American publications. Carrying further its enlightenment-through-mockery mission, the weekly labeled itself *joco-serio* (combining *jocoso* and *serio*, simultaneously playful or funny and serious).⁶⁹ On a more practical level, a sales strategy was also in play. Serious essays on public issues were common but often pedantic. Satire offered an escape, but it entailed a balancing act. At times the serio smothers the jocoso, engendering only clumsy ridicule of popular custom.

Precursor publications also appropriated the female voice. Early in the nineteenth century a standard ruse among anticlerical writers was to attack a rival's political stance by depicting with wild exaggeration its adoption among devout women. For example, an 1823 pamphlet joked that church injunctions against Freemasonry had inspired packs of crazed women to attack random triangular objects because they vaguely evoked Masonic imagery.⁷⁰ The jest depends on the assumption that women could not comprehend political debates and that their opinions were thus laughable by definition. The most effective appropriation of the female voice, however, came from conservative satirists. They turned the wholesome Catholic woman or girl into a personification of Mexican practicality and drew sharp contrasts between feminine commonsense traditionalism and liberal radicalism.⁷¹ Their conservative female characters speak in plain lan-

2007); and *La historia de un país en caricatura* (Mexico: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Dirección General de Publicaciones, 2000).

68. See Barajas, *El país de "El Llorón de Icamole,"* p. 45.

69. Interestingly, a French satirical newspaper, *La Caricature*, employed the motto "castigat ridendo mores" (one chastises character/habits by laughing at them) in the 1830s. For this publication the point was to discipline political leaders through ridicule; it was conceived of as a tool to broaden political participation during monarchical rule. See Forbes, *The Satiric Decade*, p. xiii. The same Latin motto was also in use in the Brazilian satirical press, and Brazilians also employed a subtitle similar to Mexico's *joco-serio* (*serio-moleque*). See Marco Aurélio Ferreira da Silva, "'Corrige os costumes rindo,' Humor, vergonha e decoro na sociabilidade mundana de Fortaleza (1850–1890)" (Ph.D. diss., Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, 2004). Da Silva (p. 101) stresses the complex meaning of the phrase—it connotes punishment and correction via censure, but it also suggests moralizing through humor about habits seen as deviant or subversive to the social order. He argues that in its Brazilian usage it also targeted customs deemed irrational or ridiculous from an elite perspective.

70. "Pregunta de las beatas al señor provisor," Centro de Estudios de Historia de México, CONDUMEX (Puebla: Oficina Liberal, a cargo de Cabrera, 1823).

71. Erika Pani, "'Ciudadana y muy ciudadana?'" *Gender and History* 18:1 (April 2006), pp. 5–19.

guage and possess an innate understanding of hierarchy, order, and decency. With considerable success, they mocked liberals as foreign-inspired dupes.⁷²

In a related phenomenon, satirical publications often presented their protagonists (and thus themselves) as characters drawn from popular culture. Sometimes they appear as logo-like figures, as with *La Linterna's* jester. At other times, a specific persona anchors the editorial voice. In this sense, articles and caricatures feature the emblematic figure as the hero (or victim) of his or her own misadventures. Often, the satirists chose figures with unsavory traits associated with lower social orders; in other words, they drew on the picaresque tradition.⁷³ In some cases, we see fantastical imps instead of humans.⁷⁴ The key was to depict these characters as violators of propriety and to exploit the comedic potential of their crass behaviors among their social betters (see Figure 2). In doing so satirists laid claim to and nudged public opinion.⁷⁵ On another level, Angel Prieto and the *La Madre* staff embraced another dimension of the picaresque tradition: the lampooning of piety.⁷⁶

A number of journalistic forbearers probably inspired *La Madre*. In the 1870s a newspaper called *Juan Diego* also played the part of the people's seer.⁷⁷ Other publications chose sinister namesakes: for example, *Mefistófeles* exploited notions of the devil's unsettlingly prescience and *La Madre Celestina* assumed the character of the infamous procuress of Golden-Age literature.⁷⁸ However,

72. In some ways the recourse of Mexican conservatives to ethically pure female figures echoes notions of womanhood and morality that animated the strategic feminization of abolitionism in Brazil. See Roger Kittleston, "Women and Notions of Womanhood in Brazilian Abolitionism," in *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World*, Pamela Scully and Diana Paton, eds. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 99–120.

73. For Mexico, the classic picaresque character is Pedro Sarmiento, more commonly known by his nickname "el Periquillo Sarmiento." See Fernández de Lizardi, *El periquillo sarmiento* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1997) and Luis Leal, "Aspects of the Mexican Novel from Lizardi to Elizondo," *Arizona Quarterly* 24:1 (Spring 1968), pp. 53–64. For the nation-building import of the novel, see Antonio Benítez-Rojo, "José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi and the Emergence of the Spanish American Novel as National Project," *Modern Language Quarterly* 57:2 (1996), pp. 325–339.

74. Examples include *El Ahuizote* and *El Hijo del Ahuizote*. On the former see Barajas, *El país de "El Ahuizote"*. Because the latter focused on criticism of the Díaz government and involved legendary artists like José Guadalupe Posada, its articles and cartoons have been widely reproduced. See Ricardo Flores Magón, *Regeneración, 1900–1918* (Mexico: Hadise, 1972) and Manuel González Ramírez, *La caricatura política* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1974). See also Espinosa Blas, "El Hijo del Ahuizote."

75. Aside from journalistic representations, a good example of these types of characters can be found in nineteenth-century puppet theater. The staff of *La Madre* was probably familiar with El Negro and Vale Coyote; see Beezley, *Mexican National Identity*. The news clown Brozo (journalist Víctor Trujillo) carried on this tradition in the 1990s and early 2000s; see <http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brozo>. Accessed July 21, 2011. Brozo is a vulgar, lecherous, social critic. His character is a deliberately inappropriate street humorist, enjoying sexual puns and barroom jests as he comments on events and politics. His television show, *El Mañanero*, also parodied the *santoral*. A cursory search at www.youtube.com for "el mañanero brozo" turns up a host of video clips.

76. R. M. Price, "On Religious Parody in the Buzcón," *Modern Language Notes* 82:2 (March 1971), pp. 273–279. The novels often cited in this regard are Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599) and Francisco de Quevedo's *Historia de la vida del Buzcón, llamado Don Pablos, ejemplo de vagamundos y espejo de tacaños* (1626).

77. Barajas, *El país de "El Ahuizote"*, pp. 86–91. In this case, it is also a tongue-in-cheek reference to the nationalist overtones of the Virgin of Guadalupe apparition narrative.

78. See Barajas, *El país de "El Ahuizote"*, p. 78 and Barajas, *El país de "El Llorón de Icamole"*, p. 32.

FIGURE 2
Eavesdropping for the Nation



Source: *La Casera* (September 21, 1879). Courtesy of the Yale University Library.

La Casera, a more lighthearted endeavor, offered a particularly useful illustration of a male journalist's impersonation of female figures. The editors chose a widely recognized social type, the elderly female manager of a *casa de vecindad* (tenement), often featured in the era's *costumbrista* (customs and manners) literature.⁷⁹ A combination of the downwardly mobile busybody and nagging rent collector, this character was ubiquitous in Mexican urban life. On the masthead, she is a bug-eyed snoop straining to hear through a wall. Opposite her, caricatured politicians recoil in shock as she tolls a bell: *La Casera* has discovered their misdeeds and sounds the alarm. Thus, as befitted attention to this figure, the newspaper promised to expose the untoward happenings in the *vecindad* or, by extension, the nation. In some cartoons she batters public figures with a broom—a class- and gender-appropriate weapon. The writers also laid claim to the archetypal *casera's* tricks: gossip, subterfuge, and impertinence. In other words, they deployed stereotypes of womanly guile.⁸⁰

Another precedent for Angel Prieto's madre Matiana, appeared in *El Padre Cobos*, a newspaper renowned for its derisive opposition to the Díaz regime. In this case, the publication's namesake and another broom-wielding matron, doña Caralampia Mondongo, defend society together. Cobos appears as a good-hearted, progressive pastor reminiscent of Miguel Hidalgo who tends to his "flock" (the nation). He is Mexico's moral compass, the protector of dem-

79. Hilarión Frías y Soto, *Los mexicanos pintados por sí mismos*, facsimile edition (Mexico: Porrúa, 1974), p. 227. See also María Esther Pérez Salas, *Costumbrismo y litografía* (Mexico: UNAM, 2005).

80. *La Casera* (June 1, 1879), in *El país de "El Llorón de Icamole,"* pp. 169–173.

ocratic ideals. At times, he tries paternally to coax better behavior from public figures. His low-key ministrations, though, set the stage for his indignant sermons when provoked. At these times we see him rallying the populace to defend the nation.⁸¹ His female counterpart, however, is more relevant to Matiana's legacy. With her cumbersome name, the combination of a feminized version of an obscure male saint's name and a street-food favorite (tripe soup), doña Caralampia Mondongo represents a truly popular female figure. Her first name alludes to outmoded naming traditions; that is, selecting odd names from the santoral.⁸² Her surname is a dish of Afro-Latin origin that evolved over time into a denigrating epithet describing both lower-class adornments and those who wear them.⁸³ Cast as a liberal version of the honest *mexicana*, she appears as the image of popular domesticity and maternal umbrage. She is a sturdy housewife reluctantly drawn out of her home by troubling public happenings and, once perturbed, is an energetic punisher. As with other female satirical figures, her political task is an extension of her domestic duties: she cleans up the public sphere. A key thread linking these figures is the stereotyping of female intuition or discernment: doña Caralampia senses trickery instinctively and *La Casera* pries and spies. *La Madre Matiana*, naturally, divines and divulges.⁸⁴

REVELATIONS OF *LA MADRE MATIANA*

When *La Madre* uncorked its own brand of derision in 1917, it touched off a celebration among opponents of then-president Venustiano Carranza. One of the voices of the Mexican exile community, the Texas-based *La Revista Mexicana*, praised it as a bold send-up of the revolutionary government: "Just the name of this newspaper represents a threat to the bearded president."⁸⁵ In fact, thanks to *La Revista's* extensive coverage of *La Madre* we have an idea of what the first issues contained.⁸⁶

81. For more on the Padre Cobos character, see Barajas, *El País de "El Ahuizote,"* pp. 94–103. In the context of liberal hero worship, his invocation of Miguel Hidalgo (and José María Morelos) made Cobos a potent nationalist symbol.

82. Few know of this saint, but he is the patron of Comitán, Chiapas. See Carlos Navarrete, *Documentos para la historia del culto a San Caralampio, Comitán, Chiapas* (Chiapas: Gobierno del Estado de Chiapas, Consejo Estatal de Fomento a la Investigación y Difusión de la Cultura, Instituto Chiapaneco de Cultura, 1990).

83. See Santamaría and García Icazbalceta, *Diccionario*, p. 735. Although it is interesting to consider, I do not perceive any allusions to Afro-Mexican origins beyond her surname in the texts or cartoons featuring doña Caralampia. She is perhaps best seen as a reference to the mixed-race urban working class that she represents. In addition, words mocking lower-class taste, style, or intelligence often have racist origins. For this term see Santamaría and García Icazbalceta, *Diccionario*, p. 750.

84. It is important to note that these female figures are not thinkers. As Jean Franco notes for other representations of women, they do not possess the civilizing, evaluative gaze reserved for men. Franco, *Plotting Women*, pp. 79–102. Instead they depend on innate understandings, tricks, or revelations for their powers of discernment.

85. *La Revista Mexicana* (July 8, 1917).

86. I have been able to locate only one issue of the first era (1917): *La Madre Matiana* of September 9 of that year. It appears to have been published from at least July to September. The newspaper re-emerged in the mid-1920s, and 15 issues from 1923 reside in the collection of the library at the University of Sonora.

Founded by Nemesio García Naranjo in 1915, *La Revista* focused on interpreting Mexican news and reporting on the lives of Mexicans in the United States. It also presented itself as a standard-bearer of anti-Carranza opinion. Like many factional newspapers, it set up shop near the border, and until 1920 it served as a key critic of the emergent revolutionary state.⁸⁷ From 1916 forward, *La Revista* invoked madre Matiana's prophecies in a manner that illuminates why the pamphlet prophetess became the namesake of a newspaper. In a long article titled "La situación mexicana," published on April 16, 1916, the *Revista* staff set out to characterize the various revolutionary factions. None of the leaders received favorable treatment, but Carranza drew the brunt of their ire.⁸⁸ The newspaper sardonically postulated that his lengthy stay in Veracruz in 1916 was due to his superstitious fears concerning Matiana's predictions. *La Revista* then proceeded to provide a haphazard biography of the seer and pointed out that many of Matiana's predictions had already come true, such as her alleged claim that Mexico would suffer during a time of three presidents named Francisco (between 1911 and 1914: Francisco León de la Barra, Francisco Madero, and Francisco Vázquez Gómez). The newspaper avoided the more outlandish aspects of the narrative, such as the impending celestial restoration of the Catholic monarchy. It keyed in, however, on a still unfulfilled prediction, purportedly quoting directly from the prophecies: "Mexico will also have a president with a great beard, and he will be dragged through the streets of Mexico. Afterward, peace will be re-established."⁸⁹ Neither the three Franciscos nor the bearded president appear in nineteenth-century versions of the Matiana narrative. They represent Revolutionary-era additions to the visionary's legacy. At *La Revista*, this "prophecy" inspired an outpouring of commentary. Several editorials invoked visions of the populace dragging Carranza through the streets, and over time the vision came to serve as an all-purpose expression of contempt for the regime. The newspaper taunted Carranza with quips stating that Matiana was closing in on him, and they issued joke warnings that perhaps he should shave in order to escape his fate.⁹⁰ *La Revista* also beseeched the prophetess: "madre Matiana . . . the time is approaching for the fulfillment of your prophecy."⁹¹ In sum, this exile newspaper cast madre Matiana as the popular voice of anti-revolutionary anger.⁹² They even pub-

87. Nicolás Kanellos and Helvetia Martell, *Hispanic Periodicals in the United States, Origins to 1960* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2000).

88. *La Revista Mexicana* (April 16, 1916).

89. "La situación mexicana," *La Revista Mexicana* (April 16, 1916).

90. For the former, see *La Revista Mexicana* (November 19, 1916). For the jests about shaving, see *La Revista Mexicana* (July 8, 1917) and "La situación de Venus" (March 16, 1919).

91. "Tópicos del día," *La Revista Mexicana* (October 29, 1916). See also "Una disputa de enterradores," *La Revista Mexicana* (October 28, 1917).

92. "Elecciones," *La Revista Mexicana* (August 13, 1916). Here they claimed that most of the population hoped for an outcome like that foreseen by Matiana.

lished “open letters” to both Carranza and Matiana. The former demanded that the “so-called president” abandon the presidency or face the prophethess.⁹³ The latter begged Matiana to make her prophecies come true post-haste and rid Mexico of Carranza.⁹⁴ *La Revista* also republished another newspaper’s “interview” with Matiana, wherein a ghastly crone rages about the nation’s wretched state.⁹⁵

Additional evidence underscores Matiana’s high profile at this time. Several publications invoked her in the 1920s, some extensively. *El Informador* in Guadalajara cited Matiana as the epitome of stubborn superstitious absurdity.⁹⁶ Monterrey’s *El Porvenir* mentioned the prophecies’ strangeness and discomfiting accuracy in an article about natural disasters, fires, and active volcanoes. Throughout the republic, *El Porvenir* claimed, people lived in fear of impending calamity.⁹⁷ In May 1920, this periodical even published an open request for a copy of the prophecies.⁹⁸ As evident in the case of *La Revista*, it was not just the predictions that interested journalists: it was the expressive potential of a popular female character marked as deranged but prophetic that proved irresistible. In fact, the San Antonio weekly evinced only a shallow interest in the original prophetic narrative. In the end the provenance hardly mattered—Matiana made good copy.

Apart from some sloppy appropriations, the full text of Matiana’s prophecies was reproduced in at least one new pamphlet in 1914. Titled *Profecías completas de la madre Matiana*, the text claimed to be a faithful copy drawn from two nineteenth-century almanacs, the *Calendario del Nigromántico* (1858) and Blanquel’s *Calendario de la madre Matiana* (1867).⁹⁹ It argued that Matiana’s miraculous visions had remained rooted in Mexican memory since the mid-nineteenth century. For the most part, the 1914 publication is a close copy of the earlier texts. In addition, passages identified as add-ons appear in a separate section, and a lengthy appendix updates the Matiana prophecies for twentieth-century readers, offering in addition a defense of their divine merit. This portion of the text makes no mention of a bearded president. However, the pamphlet opens the door to all manner of additions, cautioning in its own pages that the *calendario* versions should not be considered the full extent of Matiana’s prophecies. Much was probably omitted, the text surmises, due to the secretiveness of eighteenth-century convent culture and inquisitorial investigations.

93. “Carta sin sobre al díque presidente Venustiano Carranza,” *La Revista Mexicana* (July 21, 1918).

94. “Carta sin sobre a la madre Matiana,” *La Revista Mexicana* (January 5, 1919).

95. “Una interview con la madre Matiana,” *La Revista Mexicana* (December 12, 1917).

96. J. Sauza González, “En casa ajena. Mentiras piadosas,” *El Informador* (March 3, 1920).

97. “Prosas dominicales,” *El Porvenir* (March 23, 1920).

98. “Las profecías de madre Matiana,” *El Porvenir* (May 26, 1920).

99. *Profecías completas de la madre Matiana*, 1914.

The anonymous author calls on authorities to carry out an archival investigation to recover the prophecies in their entirety.

In 1917, then, *La Madre Matiana* seized on enduring concerns attached to Matiana's prophecies and the new fears kindled by the revolution. It is nearly impossible to determine the paper's circulation at the time, but it reached at least the northern state of Sonora and the port city of Veracruz, in addition to Mexico City.¹⁰⁰ *El Demócrata* of Veracruz noted in 1924 that *La Madre* was the best-selling paper among the poor at the time.¹⁰¹ Most likely, *La Madre* found her way around Mexico on the rail lines. The newspaper's inaugural issue included a manifesto in verse form.¹⁰² Naturally, it played up the traits attributed to the prophetess and popular devotionism. Matiana, the newspaper claimed, had miraculously returned to the city to keep an eye on the government and make sure it served the people. Couplets list her unique skills and proclaimed her ready to confront whoever needed humbling—politicians, petty strongmen, abusive landlords, and others. *La Madre* also promised to turn Matiana on her alleged original creators: the clergy.¹⁰³ With this statement the editorial staff revealed themselves to be firmly within the rationalist camp, openly criticizing the seer as a clerical invention designed to manipulate popular ignorance. Nepotism, corruption, and incompetence, however, were their Matiana's primary targets. She would champion progress and law and expose judicial chicanery and malfeasance. In a liberal patriotic flourish, *La Madre* pledged to defend the legacy of nineteenth-century reformers. She would be loud and energetic in protecting the public interest (see Figure 3). Matiana had come back from the dead, the newspaper crowed, and if she had not been frightened by the gloom of the sepulcher, the threat of prison could hardly deter her.

This new Matiana, then, represents a liminal figure echoing the *pícaros/as* of Mexican literature and various satirical precursors, but she was grounded in an irreverent take on baroque female piety. Her legend as a visionary with comic dimensions provided Prieto and his staff with a wide range of options, and they made the most of them. On one level she is “the pamphlet prophetess,” a figure of humble origins with a remarkable ability to predict the nation's future, pinpoint society's failings, and dictate the means to set Mexico aright. The news-

100. *La Madre Matiana* (September 9, 1917) mentioned agents in Orizaba, Veracruz, Córdoba, and Nogales. In addition, extant issues from 1923 are housed at the University of Sonora's library, suggesting that *La Madre* reached that northern state.

101. “Nuevo jefe militar en potrero del llano,” *El Demócrata* (August 29, 1924).

102. Reprinted in *La Revista Mexicana* (July 8, 1917).

103. *La Revista Mexicana*, (July 8, 1917). In this case they employed the Spanish saying: “*Para que la cuña apriete, tiene que ser del mismo palo*” (for the wedge to fit tightly, it must be made of the same wood). The implication of this turn-the-tables phrase is clear. Matiana was the clergy's creature in the newspaper's estimation, but now she would attack her onetime masters.

FIGURE 3
Masthead, La Madre Matiana, 1917



Source: *La Madre Matiana* (1917). Courtesy of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin America Collection at the University of Texas.

paper coyly presented her visions as both patently silly and uncannily accurate. In this way *La Madre* teased the reader, implying that deep down Mexicans feared that Matiana had indeed glimpsed a calamitous future. However, just as important as a seer persona, these journalists often rendered Matiana as an archetypal Mexican figure, *la beata* or *beatona*, a popular female social type much vilified by liberal writers. Often “la beata” appeared as a spinster who cultivated an ultra-pious image, aggressively backed the clergy, and spewed superstitious hokum and condemnations.¹⁰⁴ In this manner, she represents both a sanctimonious idiot savant and a gender-specific representation of popular Catholicism, taken to its extreme. This Matiana is the village *fanática*. Another characterization in play is the spinster busybody, the *metiche* in Mexican parlance.¹⁰⁵ In concert these traits gave *La Madre* license to craft deliberately convoluted muckraking in popular slang.

104. In its original meaning a *beata* is a female member of a lay order. However, in common usage it refers to women who make a show of their Catholic piety and their allegiance to the Catholic Church. The term often connotes a sanctimonious prude and a clerical sycophant. Nonetheless, it can also mean simply “churchy.” When used with the augmentative suffix *-ona* to make *beatona* it is always pejorative. By extension *beateria* refers to the useless pious actions or expressions of conservative actors. See Real Academia Española, *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, vol. 1, p. 304. See also Smith, *Collins Spanish Dictionary*, p. 93. For an example of its sarcastic and misogynist usage in liberal texts, see “Milagros de la Reforma: la beata,” *miscelánea* 376, no. 5 (Guadalajara, Biblioteca Pública de Jalisco, 1858) This pamphlet pretends to be a zoological tract analyzing the *beata* as one of the nation’s “animals.” They appear as the Church’s harpies and are defined as a super-abundant class of elderly spinsters who shun all useful work and dedicate themselves to church attendance and slavishly attending to priests. The author asserts that sexual frustration is the true motor of *beata* life; that is, that their passionate commitment to religion is simply veiled lust for clergymen.

105. For “*metiche*” see Santamaría and García Icazbalceta, *Diccionario*, p. 720. As evident in the examples provided in this reference work, it is frequently used to describe women and gossip.

A final facet of *La Madre's* satirical project is Matiana's representation as popular punisher—a *madre* on the rampage. In the hands of Prieto and his staff, she is the stout, common Mexican woman who exposes charlatans and deviants. Although not particularly original, this persona was of obvious utility. *La Matiana vengadora* dominates the masthead of the early issues and reveals much about how the newspaper's writers saw themselves. In her first phase at the paper (1917) she is a brawny *marimacha* (man-woman) attacking clergymen.¹⁰⁶ In addition to making priests suffer (one was impaled on her saber, with which she also accomplished the apparent penetration of another), she pursued with a fury anthropomorphized bats (political vampires?) and other miscreants. We also see the snake of deception slithering through the frame. In the newspaper's second era (1923) she appears much tamer. This Matiana is in many ways a throwback to the colonial-era servant of the early pamphlets. She is an ungainly old maid dressed in a beata's habit, performing her cleaning chores (see Figure 4). Unlike the Matiana of 1917, she carries the gender-appropriate broom, like doña Caralampia Mondongo; no longer is she the sword-wielding attacker. Instead, she keeps her head down and sweeps away a string of *políticos* from in front of the chamber of deputies. She is less aggressive and less masculine, but nonetheless Matiana, and by extension *La Madre*, are together cleaning up Mexico at the symbolic threshold of the republic.

In this manner, the multifaceted character established the rhetorical range of the newspaper. The spirit of *La Madre* was particularly biting during its inaugural era. The paper's freewheeling style in 1917 is probably a reflection of the simmering tensions between the city's rapidly growing working class, their employers, and the Carranza administration.¹⁰⁷ The new government had forcefully repressed a general strike in 1916, and the relationship between urban workers and the state was antagonistic. Prieto and his staff attacked a range of public figures and groups from a vague pro-working-class perspective, but they avoided an overbearing emphasis on Carranza or the criticism of the new constitution found elsewhere.¹⁰⁸ If we heed *La Revista's* analysis, *La Madre's* mere existence stood as critique enough. Occasionally, though, the newspaper targeted the president directly; for example, Carranza appeared in a cartoon as the doomed libertine don Juan Tenorio, arrogantly ignoring the

106. For a definition of "*marimacha*" see Smith, *Collins Spanish Dictionary*, p. 465, where it is translated as a mannish or butch woman. According to the Real Academia Española, *Diccionario*, vol. 2, p. 454, it refers to a woman who due to excessive weight or masculine actions appears to be male. This fits the image on the 1917 masthead of *La Madre*.

107. See John Lear, *Workers, Neighbors, and Citizens* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), pp. 341–50.

108. For a discussion of Carrancista politics, administration, and the political climate in Mexico between 1916 and 1920, see Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, vol. 2, pp. 435–493.

FIGURE 4
Masthead, La Madre Matiana, 1923



Source: *La Madre Matiana* (1923). Courtesy of the University of Sonora Library.

complaints of the populace and threatening them with violence.¹⁰⁹ The newspaper also mocked the global pretensions of the United States and sneered at its melting-pot society.¹¹⁰

In addition, regional politics attracted *La Madre's* indignation. The most effective satire emerged from texts crafted to mimic the calendarios wherein the original prophecies had appeared and the newspaper's efforts to make the most of the exaggerated language and turn-back-the-clock nature of the prophecies. Here a rich intertextual playfulness takes shape as *La Madre* lampoons popular devotional writing in general. The newspaper produced a spoof of the santoral (calendar of the Catholic feasts), featuring absurdly named saints who served as the patrons of maligned individuals and groups, or simply allowed the journalists to issue barbs. For example, we see an announcement for the feast of "San Porfirio Díaz, tyrant of Mexico, emulated by locals and foreigners." We also read of the pending "exaltation of the Holy Cross, a cross long borne by the population." Another section titled "*Máximas y sentencias*" (Maxims and sentences) played on notions of the beata as a sanctimonious scold. Here *La Madre* issued aphorisms laced with puns or phrases, twisting customary sayings into quick jabs at social shortcomings such as laziness and lawlessness.¹¹¹

By *La Madre's* second era, as seen in issues from 1923, Angel Prieto and his staff had altered the newspaper's tone. In many ways, the changes to the newspaper's masthead fit the evolving political climate. It is possible that at some point Car-

109. *La Revista Mexicana* (July 22, 1917).

110. *La Madre Matiana* (September 9, 1917).

111. *Ibid.*

ranza shuttered the original publication, or that the newspaper for a time may have become insolvent. By 1923, relations between urban workers and the state had begun to solidify into the more stable, paternalistic structures that characterized the later 1920s.¹¹² In the second coming of *La Madre* the editorial staff focused on more measured muckraking. The writers were more openly conservative, although they maintained their posture as defenders of the Revolution. The paper still contained the parodied santoral and sections titled with variations of madre, and these largely functioned in the same fashion. But the calendario spoof lost prominence. An advice column appears with what seems like invented correspondence, wherein writers mock Americanized slang and youth culture. President Obregón appears caricatured with some frequency, but the representations are relatively tame.¹¹³ In sum, the second era of *La Madre* is cautious, giving the impression that Prieto and his associates were trying to avoid irritating the Obregón administration. Perhaps they were treading lightly amid tensions surrounding the looming presidential transition. Indeed, disgruntled revolutionary generals led by Adolfo de la Huerta rose up in December 1923 after Obregón's selection of Plutarco Elías Calles as his successor. *La Madre* at this time maintained a broad pro-industrialization stance and muted its previous anti-clericalism. In addition, the newspaper clearly found the rapid modernization of urban culture disconcerting. Customs were changing in the city and nation around *La Madre* without much regard for "her" satirical guidance.

Much of the political commentary focused on provincial corruption, suggesting a veiled critique of the state. *La Madre* insinuated that the government allowed abuses outside of the capital. In this it was relatively safe: Most Mexicans remained cynical about politics. They assumed that regional bosses manipulated voting and pocketed resources, and their suppositions were most often accurate. President Carranza tried to control provincial politics but frequently failed.¹¹⁴ Obregón's deal-making brought more federal influence in local affairs, but the change hardly meant a new era of transparency.¹¹⁵ In the articles criticizing events outside the capital, *La Madre* catches politicians in compromising situations. Thus, sections appear with titles like "*La república encuerada*" (Naked Republic), "*Tampico en calzones*" (Tampico in Underwear), and "*Puebla en camisión*" (Puebla in a Nightshirt).

112. Lear, *Workers, Neighbors, and Citizens*, pp. 341–58.

113. Often he appears with a hook sticking out of the stump of his famously missing arm. For example, in *La Madre Matiana* of June 28, 1923, he appears as a night watchman with Article 27 of the new constitution dangling from his hook. In short, he only half-heartedly guards the portion of the constitution dealing with land ownership, national sovereignty, and the prohibitions against church property ownership.

114. On Carranza's efforts from 1916 to 1920 and prevailing attitudes towards governance and corruption, see Knight, *Mexican Revolution*, vol. 2, pp. 478–490.

115. *Ibid.*, pp. 493–494. See also Jaime Tamayo, *El obregonismo y los movimientos sociales* (Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 2008).

The social commentary is also notably conservative. For example, *La Madre* published a misogynistic critique of the First Congress of the Pan-American League of Feminists.¹¹⁶ They mocked it as a “modern women’s pageant” of a handful of ugly women whining about marriage, child-rearing, and inequality.¹¹⁷ For these journalists, the gathering revealed a misappropriation of revolutionary ideals and preposterous gender rebellion. They labeled the attendees *rojas* (reds), and insinuated that unnamed seditious forces lay behind the conference. In no way, the newspaper argued, could “*feministas*” speak for Mexican women. The nation’s “real” women, they argued, were innately devout, focused on their children, and self-effacing. *La Madre* also resorted to the hackneyed ignorant-female trope. In this case, a reporter parodied his maid’s enthusiasm for the conference and ridiculed her attempts to use concepts she could not pronounce.¹¹⁸

La Madre also took on the role of policing masculinity, with articles mocking the mannerisms and leisure activities of wealthy youths.¹¹⁹ On June 28, 1923, the paper also published a poem characterizing “*el fifí*,” an urban dandy of implied homosexuality, as a social calamity.¹²⁰ These texts offer glimpses into the construction and deployment of the homophobic working-class masculinity taking shape during the early twentieth century. Here *La Madre* takes part in the “subverting of the bourgeois male subject,” which entailed a nationalist-inspired juxtaposition of the male laborer-citizen and men of the city’s upper class. The latter appear as effeminate social parasites.¹²¹ Further evidence of *La Madre*’s conservatism appears in the “Desmadres” column wherein the paper labels *agraristas* as bandits dragging the nation towards barbarism. The newspaper warns Obregón that *agrarismo* will ultimately cause him considerable headache.¹²²

La Madre may have become more politically cautious by 1923 but the newspaper distinguished itself in other ways. In essence, the newspaper opted for a dif-

116. “Concurso de hembras modernistas,” *La Madre Matiana* (May 24, 1923); “Desmadres,” *La Madre Matiana* (May 31, 1923).

117. In attendance was an organized group of Yucatecan women led by the radical feminist Elvia Carrillo. These women shocked many Mexicans with their calls for sexual freedom, sex education, and contraception; see Ana Lau J., “Las luchas por transformar el estatus civil de las mexicanas” in *Integrados y marginados en el México posrevolucionario*, Nicolás Cárdenas García and Enrique Cuerra Manzo, comp. (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Xochimilco, 2009), pp. 297–348. Lau analyzes the impact of this congress on pp. 325–332.

118. Cabeza Pelada, “¡Viva el amor libre y la nivelación de los ‘secos!’” *La Madre Matiana* (May 31, 1923).

119. “Lo que vio, oyó, olfateó, y gustó ‘Cabeza Pelada’ en el último combate de flores,” *La Madre Matiana* (May 24, 1923).

120. Rómulo Díaz, S. J., “Calamidades sociales,” *La Madre Matiana* (June 28, 1923).

121. See Robert Buffington, “Homophobia and the Mexican Working Class, 1900–1910” in *The Famous 41*, Robert McKee Irwin, Edward J. McCaughan, and Michelle Rocío Nasser, eds. (New York: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 193–226.

122. “Desmadres: agraristas y rancheros,” *La Madre Matiana* (June 28, 1923).

ferent take on desmadre, and it gained a special kind of notoriety as a result.¹²³ According to Carlos Monsiváis, *La Madre* in the 1920s served as an early exemplar of a particular form of Mexican identity performance: the collective celebration of crass, suggestive commentary. He argues that the newspaper delighted in using popular *albures* (vulgar puns) as headlines and helped to cement the notion that vulgarity and a fondness for lewd humor are quintessentially Mexican.¹²⁴ Frequently, headlines alluded to sex organs, sodomy, and ejaculation. For example: “¡¡*Con esa lengua que tienen hacen sabio a mi pelón!*!” (With the tongue [blather] they have, they make my baldy [penis] seem a genius!)¹²⁵ Of course, making *lengua* the subject and *mi pelón* the direct object is a clear insinuation of fellatio.¹²⁶ Aside from such attention-getting impropriety, much of the newspaper’s rhetoric is steeped in allusions to crops and livestock, thus making a deliberate nod to rural culture—the roots of most Mexicans at the time. This represents a new strategy for the newspaper. Instead of sticking with the stereotypical female fanatic, the writers increasingly assumed a masculine working-class voice steeped in ribald scorn and bravado. Monsiváis suggests that *La Madre*’s eventual demise may have come when censors began policing vulgarity in the press.

The editorial shift in *La Madre* between 1917 and 1923 may have been inevitable. In its earlier issues the newspaper closely parodied the Matiana narrative tradition and the *calendario*. Thus, much of the satirical humor emerged from playing the prophetess and twisting devotional literature’s conventions. It was quite astute, given the up-tick in Matiana’s fame from 1914 to 1918, and it probably attracted readers. In later issues the newspaper kept some of this approach, but it focused much less on the seer’s characterization. Angel Prieto and his staff were moving beyond the character that originally gave them their unique journalistic persona. They had established their own identity as *La*

123. See Jorge Mejía Prieto, *Albures y refranes de México* (Mexico City: Panorama Editorial, 1985). According to this author, *La Madre* excelled at the *albur* and represents a historical model of this expressive genre.

124. Carlos Monsiváis, *Amor perdido* (Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1977), p. 342. Monsiváis here looks at the vulgar commentary of 1960s-era publications. He criticizes them as boorish and predictable, but emphasizes the prominent place of this crass kind of Mexican identity in the formation of public consciousness. He traces the journalistic tradition to *La Madre*. Monsiváis describes a kind of general reveling in the notion that Mexicans are particularly ingenious when it comes to scatological humor and synonyms for sexual intercourse.

125. *La Madre Matiana* (June 7, 1923); the translation is mine. Monsiváis (*Amor perdido*, p. 342) provides additional examples from *La Madre*: “*No me aprieten los limones porque te llenas de jugo*” (Don’t squeeze my lemons or you will be covered in juice) and “*No me cierren las petacas que faltan dos talegas*” (literally, don’t close the suitcases on me because two sacks still are not in; figuratively, don’t close those big buttocks on me because my balls are still coming). For a discussion of the Nahuatl-derived “petaca,” see Santamaría and García Icazbalceta, *Diccionario*, pp. 837–838.

126. The word “*lengua*” (tongue) and its derivations have rich and varied connotations. See Santamaría and García Icazbalceta, *Diccionario*, pp. 659–660; Real Academia Española, *Diccionario*, vol. 2, pp. 1362–1363; and Smith, *Collins Spanish Dictionary*, p. 436. Here, *La Madre* is working from a large number of expressions, such as *lengua larga*, *mala lengua*, and *lenguón*, all of which refer to someone producing foolish, verbose, or malicious speech, or gossiping impertinently.

Madre and no longer depended on parody of the pamphlet prophetess. Instead, they shifted from the beata's rants to the common man's sarcasm and vulgar commentary. Most likely, the Matiana character lost its allure as the imagined prophetic fulfillments faded. The anti-Carranza associations linked to Matiana were no longer relevant and the sense of revolutionary-era gloom had dissipated as well.

The change made sense for other reasons too. The newspaper's target audience appears to have been the growing population of rural-origin, male urban laborers. This group was also a target of official efforts to build nationalism; hence, it was probably good for business and politics to speak in their voice. Not surprisingly, *La Madre* reproduced the prejudices and social conservatism of this part of the population and the emergent state. In essence, it appears that Prieto and his staff were trying to ride the wave of evolving Mexican nationalism. During a period of uncertainty and widespread suffering, they chose as an alter ego a female visionary who evoked mystical tradition, miraculous thinking, and popular irrationality—a persona fitted to preside over the real-life *desmadre*. Then, amidst the consolidation of the new state's power and economic recovery, they found a foul-mouthed masculine voice to fit the hyper-male revolutionary nationalism taking shape in the 1920s.

CONCLUSION: *LA MADRE Y LA NACIÓN*

In most examinations of nationalism, scholars focus on the efforts of political elites to fashion cultural hegemony. Typically, the printed word and rhetorical endeavors to define the nation serve as evidence for historians, who are sensitive to the language, ideas, norms, and practices discursively linked to the nation, as well as those marked for marginalization. In short, scholars follow intellectuals of the past in their search for the essence of the nation.¹²⁷ As Craig Calhoun points out, the “success” of various quests for national foundations is not nearly as important as the practice of talking and writing about the search and the discoveries along the way. Myth and invented tradition gain traction through reiteration and progressive adaptations, and over time the revisiting and almost ritualized description of “discovered” origins proves central to the ways in which peoples frame their worldview in nationalist terms. The creators of *La Madre* and their predecessors took part in this process, but they did so from a tentative stance. In other words, since satire usually criticizes without offering solutions it is well suited to the indecisive nature of the nation-building process that is common in post-colonial settings.

127. Calhoun, *Nationalism*, pp. 1–7.

For scholars like Calhoun, a tipping point is when nationalist identities gain clear precedence over other categorical identities (for example, religion and class). These issues are particularly important in Latin America because nation-builders largely failed to reach this watershed until the 1930s—not, however, for lack of trying. But identities rooted in pre-Columbian and colonial history proved difficult to surmount. In Mexico, this challenge is evident in the endeavors launched by liberal and revolutionary nationalists. As in other societies, these movements spoke of freeing the populace from the “oppression” and “obscurantism” of older corporate ties, identities, and indigenous languages and customs. Most of all, Mexico’s secular nationalists bemoaned religious “fanaticism” and the affinities between the populace (particularly women) and the clergy. Throughout, a Catholic counter-nationalism remained a potent challenge.

In many ways, it was the inability of any group to assert a clear cultural hegemony for the century following Mexican independence that created auspicious conditions for publications like *La Madre*. Nationalist insecurities inspired long-lasting conflicts over the values of the nation, and they also sparked experimentation in the discursive arena. The appropriated prophetess and other characters in the satirical press give us glimpses into the process. Particularly in the context of the joco-serio tradition, we find Mexicans deploying social types at the margins of liberal and revolutionary discourse. The characters themselves are borderline figures, and the mirth they inspire masks agendas for setting class boundaries and marking social frontiers. In the late 1910s, madre Matiana represented the liminal figure par excellence: she spanned reality and legend, the fanatical and the insightful, the mysteriously sacred and the derisively profane. Moreover, she bridged conceptions of colony and nation, and of past (both criticized and idealized) and future (both illusory and creatively imagined). As such, she represented an excellent vehicle for satirical explorations of the national.

Much scholarship on nationalism centers on how states work to manufacture feelings of belonging and fuse these sentiments to the prevailing social order. Processes of national identity formation, though, are often too chaotic for such easy manipulation and control. William Beezley draws our attention to unscripted popular diversions in Mexico. He argues that a mix of calendarios, children’s games, local festivals, and popular theater in the nineteenth century gradually shaped a flexible national consciousness. He asserts that this hodgepodge of entertainments proved more successful than the efforts of the elite to create a homogenous Eurocentric Mexican identity. This largely market-driven process celebrated the nation’s cultural and social diversity instead.¹²⁸ In Beez-

128. Beezley, *Mexican National Identity*.

ley's wide range of sources, however, a heterodox liberalism is in evidence. In general, he found evidence of the extension of moderate republican notions of citizenship and of a gradual, porous secularization, while revealing that most Mexicans continued to cherish Catholic practices and beliefs. This suggests that a cross section of the Mexican populace bought into, literally and figuratively, an elastic nationalism. People were omnivorous in their consumption of national narratives and eager to participate in many emerging practices.

Popular theater and other pastimes also underscore an additional and crucial fact: sharing jokes and making fun of society's acknowledged shortcomings represent experiences that strengthen collective identification. They are akin to the dynamics of nineteenth-century social dance.¹²⁹ The experience of moving together to specific rhythms, the development of a communal vocabulary of steps, and the internalization of melodies and lyrics can produce a powerful sense of belonging. It follows that the shared pleasure of political humor and a familiarity with a set of satirical characters can also create bonds of affinity. Derision, like dance and misery, loves company.

The role of gender representation and satirical impersonation in nationalist discourse, as outlined by Nira Yuval-Davis and Jill Lane, gives these observations added weight. Although not stated explicitly in their works, efforts to spur change through ridicule frequently depend on the manipulation of gendered social types. They play on the established metaphors, stories, and characters anchored in the discourse of nationalist contestation. The *La Madre* case highlights the use of stereotyped notions of femininity and fanaticism, but precursor publications had also used female figures. The humor and political critique hinged on the symbolic delineation and transgression of norms and boundaries, as embodied in the actions and rhetoric of the female characters. In the most straightforward representations, we find allegorical feminine personifications of the nation, constitutions, and the "people." Typically "she" passively suffers due to a public figure's misdeeds.¹³⁰ More complex representations of the nation appeared in conservative satire wherein devout women's idealized propriety and the incarnation of innate *mexicanidad* served as a foil for radical liberalism's embrace of foreign ideas. Doña Caralampia Mondongo shares some of these characteristics, but like the figure who was *La Casera's* namesake she is the people's champion, drawn from the gallery of recognized popular types. Crucially, both of them are borderline figures in terms of class, and the satirical

129. John Charles Chasteen, *National Rhythms, African Roots: The Deep History of Latin American Popular Dance*, 1st ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004).

130. For example, the *El Abuzote* cartoon of February 5, 1884, wherein the Constitution of 1857 is depicted as a bold Athena-like figure, shows "how she was"; by 1874, there appears a ravaged wench, wrecked "after what they have done to her." See Barajas, *El país de "El Abuzote,"* image 55, pp. 150 and 284.

effect of the act of political humiliation stems from receiving a tongue-lashing, or a beating, from a broom-wielding matron. *La Madre*, as we have seen, deployed a multifaceted figure: she was all at once the deranged prophetess, the fanatical beatería, and the visionary nemesis of corruption.

The reformist strategy in madre Matiana's satirical impersonation depended on Mexicans seeing themselves in the prophetess while understanding that she epitomized "backwardness." In a sense, like the satirical figures of Cuban blackface theater, she is an anticolonial representation. Her illogical beliefs and her actions, rooted in the ways of the past, are the target of ridicule. By making a hash of Catholic traditionalism, mysticism, and contemporary politics, she marks *beatería* (sanctimoniously saintly behavior and fanatical thinking) as outmoded in the modern nation. In this sense Matiana is a negative representation: she stands for what Mexicans should leave behind. Nonetheless, the audience is supposed to identify with her. She may be wrongheaded, but at a deep level she also represents raw popular indignation. Despite her blind superstition, she "sees" for the people, and a quarrelsome impertinence leads her to speak for them too.

The contradictions in *La Madre's* satirical project were cloaked in what appeared to be contempt, but they are inescapable. Mexico's secular nationalism placed pious women outside the bounds of citizenship. Matiana and her beatería recur in ways akin to the repeated appearances of brigands and banditry in Latin American discourse: she represents the antithesis of modern nationhood, yet she also symbolizes the primordial. *La Madre's* jests play on feminized religious identities and how they fit, or fail to fit, in the national imaginary. These identities represent obstacles to unity, colonial traditions, and irrational mindsets—they are the weights on the wheels of progress. In fact much of *La Madre's* humor, particularly in 1917, emerges from the dramatized *desmadre* resulting from the positioning of female fanaticism in relation to Mexico's liberal nationalist norms. In the process, however, the newspaper put forward the notion that prophetic longing, miraculous thinking, and santoral-centered customs are quintessentially Mexican. While *La Madre* belittled these aspects of popular culture, it did so in a manner that acknowledged their prevalence and authenticity. Faced with this realization, these journalists attempted to quarantine Mexico's "backwardness" within madre Matiana's satirical persona.

REPRISE

After *La Madre* folded, the prophetess reappeared occasionally in Mexican journalism, but mostly as a simple descriptor linked to predictive statements, or ref-

erences to past ignorance.¹³¹ However, in the mid-twentieth century the symbolic power associated with the Matiana persona resurfaced dramatically in Agustín Yáñez's novel *Las tierras flacas* (1962).¹³² In a work largely devoid of humor, the author writes with angst-ridden secularism, presenting a nationalist's lament about Mexico's brusque modernization. For this author, madre Matiana symbolizes the essence of traditional Mexican culture. In his earlier and much-praised book *Al filo del agua* (1947), Yáñez suggests that Catholicism's repressive hold on women represented the core of Mexico's explosive tensions in 1910.¹³³ In *Las tierras flacas* the popular customs of the pre-revolutionary past remain anchored in an all-encompassing fanaticism embodied by a community leader named "madre Matiana." She is a curandera and faith healer who can deftly judge men's character. Moreover, she serves as the cantankerous heart and moral steward of a remote valley called Tierra Santa (the Holy Land), an allegorical representation of the Mexican nation. This Matiana, symbolically far older than all the other characters in Yáñez's microcosmic Mexico, serves as the ever-vigilant liaison between a desperate community and Divine Providence. At the twentieth-century nationalist's watershed moment, the eve of the Mexican Revolution, she guards the boundaries between the nation's past, present, and future. But the odds are against her and the people who depend on her. A lecherous despot and his bastard offspring exploit them mercilessly. In addition, the parched land and cruel climate curse their labors. For Yáñez, the Matiana figure represents pre-modern peasant Mexico's only recourse amid grinding hardship: irrational, miraculous hope. This is somewhat ironic since Matiana had traditionally been an urban figure, but, like Angel Prieto, Yáñez took liberties. He appropriated the pamphlet prophetess and turned her into the female manifestation of Mexico's imagined deeply rural spirit.

Yáñez's Matiana tries to protect her people, but her antiquated devotional wisdom must give way to masculine-mediated air travel, electricity, irrigation, and enlightened governance if Tierra Santa/Mexico hopes to escape a grim fate. Matiana ultimately helps revolutionaries gain a foothold in her Holy Land in hopes of securing a more just order. In short, in Yáñez's fictional Mexico the male representatives of modernity win over the female avatar of tradition. Here, this alliance lacks the symbolism-laden romantic coupling of other nationalist novels.¹³⁴ The

131. For example, see F. Tejedor, "Los espantos y la credulidad," *Sucesos para todos* (December 14, 1937); L. F. Bustamante, "El hombre de la túnica morada," *Jueves de Excelsior* (April 18, 1946); Lucio Mendieta Núñez, "Lo que no hará el Consejo Nacional de Economía," *El Universal* (July 24, 1946); and "Futurismo presidencial," *La Crítica* (February 1, 1955).

132. Agustín Yáñez, *Las tierras flacas*, 1st ed. (Mexico: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, 1962).

133. Agustín Yáñez, *Al filo del agua*, 2nd ed. (Nanterre, France: Signatarios Acuerdo Archivos ALLCA XX Université Paris X, 1996).

134. See Sommer, *Foundational Fictions*.

aged heroine fatefully backs the forces of change because of her community's desperation, but she gives little credibility to their promises of quasi-miraculous progress. Tragically, the revolutionaries secure dominance over Tierra Santa in an explosion of violence that peaks in the last vicious act of the old order: madre Matiana's brutal blinding. The people's seer, the female anchor and conscience of the community, is left with her sightless eyes dangling from their sockets, and no one can take her place. Furthermore, the new order fails to address popular ignorance and superstition with the proper sensitivity. Soon electricity illuminates Tierra Santa but the old ways linger. For Yáñez, victorious revolutionaries flaunted the trappings of modernity but failed to implant emancipating ideas and practices. They "liberated" traditional society only to abandon it. Modern Mexico has disposed of madre Matiana and the ideologies she represents—the symbol of the nation's female conscience and soul—without finding a suitable replacement. The populace, as a result, remains trapped by its deep irrational longings. Thus, as late as the 1960s, the pamphlet prophetess still stirred apprehensions for Yáñez, who in spite of his close ties to the post-Revolutionary state and its policies, perceived a crippling disconnect between the modern nation and Mexico's "backward" people. The vaunted revolutionary process, despite promises and predictions, had failed. It had not bridged the new rationalist order and popular culture. Contemplating what he perceived as a disjointed Mexican modernity, Yáñez resorts to long-standing assumptions linking the endurance of miraculous thinking and backward practices to an essentialized devout femininity. In other words, peering into the abyss of nationalist disenchantment, he encounters madre Matiana.

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