

LITERARY HUB

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**On Jazmina
Barrera's *Linea Nigra* and
the Untranslatable
Experiences of
Motherhood**

Malwina Gudowska: “Language, like motherhood, lives on the body.”

By [Malwina Gudowska](#)

June 2, 2022

There are countless apps and websites that will, week by week of a pregnancy, compare the size of a fetus to a fruit or vegetable. But, as Jazmina Barrera notes in her new motherhood memoir, *Linea Nigra*, “None of the apps are written in Mexico, so they don’t take into account the wide variety of fruit we have here, the many different sizes of mangos and avocados.” Because Barrera, based in Mexico City, has a partner from Chile, there is an added lost-in-(fruit)-translation, both in size (Mexican mandarins are the same size as Chilean oranges) and in terminology (“limón” in Mexico is “limón de pica” in Chile).

The act of translation is a central theme in *Linea Nigra*, from the literal—as Barrera translates Rivka Galchen’s *Little Labors* and Megan O’Rourke’s *The Long Goodbye: A Memoir* into Spanish—and figurative, as she notes that the baby’s kicks in utero seem like “a sort of Morse code: our first communication, deliciously ambiguous and one-way.” Barrera’s nods to translation throughout the book, originally published in Spanish, and ones I read in English, translated by Christina MacSweeney, illustrate how using multiple languages to explain and to interpret pregnancy and motherhood offers a point of contact. Mothers are all speakers of a similar vernacular of pre- and post-motherhood, even though the language is often too arduous to articulate, while at the same time, the uniqueness of each motherhood experience robs them of a common language.

There is a poetic *double entendre* in how a translated text references the act of translation in an attempt to convey the untranslatable meaning of both the individuality *and* the ordinariness of pregnancy and motherhood—and how abstract both can be, especially the first time. Both translation and motherhood change the rhythm of a story where languages must coexist and the original text, just like the pre-motherhood being, is

somewhere between them, between selves. Translation is constant choice and endless sacrifice, a search for meaning in chaos and a call for interpretation at the most profound level, as is motherhood.

In the often-cited and, at times, criticized 1995 work of Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, the theory of “domesticating practices” emerged, highlighting what Venuti notes as an erasure of the translator. For Venuti, there are two opposing forces in translation: “domestication” and “foreignization,” or bringing the writer to the reader versus taking the reader to the writer. The former strategy keeps culture-specific items of the original, while the latter focuses on what the target readers would find more relatable.

In a second edition, Venuti clarifies that translation is interpretation—a text is detached from an original language and culture and the translation “recontextualises the source by constructing another.” Even when a translation is in the “foreignizing” camp, it does not escape domestication.

Interpreting motherhood through translation, literal and figurative, is domestication of the foreignization: taking something unfamiliar yet universal, like pregnancy and early motherhood, and making it recognizable to the self, finding the meaning in the chaos and attempting to link the self and the other, a private and public language.

In the part memoir, part biography *A Ghost in the Throat*, Doireann Ní Ghríofa translates the 18th-century Irish caoine (keen), or funeral lament, *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* by Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill into English, amid and in between her own experiences of pregnancy, nursing, homemaking, and childrearing. Ní Ghríofa meditates on how two lives—hers and Ní Chonaill’s, centuries apart—are intertwined by the bonds of womanhood and the “female text,” while she also observes the multiple layers of “domestication”: her movement between English and Irish while translating the keen, and the repetitive moments of motherhood, with its “simplicities” and “drudge-work.”

Language, like motherhood, lives on the body.

“In every translated line of this verse, I feel that I am mimicking the homemaking actions of centuries before, stuffing quilts with duck-feathers, painting walls and kneading dough,” she writes. “In Italian, the word *stanza* means ‘room.’ If there are times when I feel ill-equipped and daunted by the expertise of those who have walked these before me, I reassure myself that I am simply homemaking, and this thought steadies me...” Although the comparison is not explicit, Ní Ghríofa describes the “methodical undertaking,” the attentive reading, and the back-and-forth, line-by-line art of translation in one part of the book, while another is occupied with the same attentiveness to homemaking, room by room and task by task.

Translation is also at the heart of E.J. Koh’s *The Magical Language of Others*, a coming-of-age memoir of a young woman whose mother moves away and is absent, not only physically but emotionally, culturally, and linguistically. It is the daughter who, through translating her mother’s letters from Korean to English, is able to explain the past, piece it together fragment by fragment, and make sense of the distance between her and her mother.

In the introductory *A Note on Translation*, Koh clarifies that when her mother refers to herself as “mommy” in Korean, “her third person is, in part, her mothering,” and although she does not see her translations of her mother’s letters as complete, “the letters transport my mother to wherever I reside, so they may, in her place, become a constant dispensation of love.” From the point of view of the daughter, Koh’s use and undertaking of translation is an act of love, a way to make sense of the inexplicable pain of separation between mother and child.

In *Linea Nigra*, Barrera devotes a long section to the history and art-world connections of Indigenous Nahua model Luz Jiménez. Jiménez eventually became a Nahuatl translator and coincidentally (or perhaps not), had a connection with linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf, of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Also known as linguistic relativity, it is the widely debunked

hypothesis that language influences and shapes our thoughts and therefore, speakers of different languages think differently.

The idea that language influences us in this way *is* present in many motherhood memoirs but not in the traditional Sapir-Whorf sense. Writers use translations to offer meaning, and, in turn, validity to parts of motherhood that are so often overlooked. We are forever attempting to *translate* motherhood because its equal ordinariness and extraordinariness evades us, especially in the early postpartum days when we most crave meaning—or, at the very least, an explanation.

Alumbrar, the expulsion of the placenta in Spanish means, “to give light,” writes Barrera. In the chapter about the placenta in *Like a Mother: A Feminist Journey Through the Science and Culture of Pregnancy*, Angela Garbes describes how for the Hmong people of Southeast Asia, “placenta” means “jacket” or part of a person’s original clothing. The translation is further explained by details of the cultural significance of the “jacket,” a translation technique the German translator Susan Benofsky calls “stealth gloss,” or “weaving” an explanation, often a cultural reference, into a translation text.

“After death, the Hmong believe that a soul returns home, where it must retrieve its placental jacket in order to ascend and be reunited with its ancestors. Without a coat, a soul is doomed to wander for eternity, cold and alone,” writes Garbes.

The practice of including translations and multilingual terminology in motherhood writing goes hand in hand with our societal fascination with untranslatable words, often with reference to extreme emotions—like pregnancy and early motherhood.

“I think of the German expression for the way a pregnant woman carries her child *under her heart*,” writes Louise Erdrich in *The Blue Jay’s Dance*. She never reveals the German phrase, allowing the idea to linger, an untranslatable anchor. In other parts of the memoir, she notes maternal-themed Ojibwe words including “wabimujichagwan,” a word for mirror that literally means “looking at your soul.” The term, she writes, is a “concept that captures some of the mystery of image and substance” of

when mother and child gaze at one another, a nod to Donald Winnicott's theory that a mother's face is, for some time, a mirror to help a baby form a boundary of self.

In the early days of the pandemic, I wrote about a collective need, shared and witnessed on social media, to find meaning in the chaos of the unknown through etymology. As people examined words like *crisis*, *alarm* and *emergency*, and found their Greek or Latin roots to mean something hopeful, they felt comfort (and posted about it).

Even a pragmatic linguist like me, well aware that language and word meaning change all the time, find this optimistic analysis soothing. It is a practice that appears often in motherhood memoirs, a search for the origin story of a term or idea to help find purpose and clarity in one's own narrative.

As for our shared fascination with untranslatable terms, especially those for all-consuming sentiment, as a colleague pointed out recently during a discussion on how one-to-one, word-for-word translatability is much more uncommon than we believe, even in one shared language, the way someone interprets and embodies an expression, a word or an idiom is never exactly the same as another person.

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Parto is Spanish for childbirth, from the verb *partir*, to depart, writes Barrera who never considered childbirth to be a form of departure, one body from another. A few pages later she notes *dar a luz*, in Spanish, means the process of bringing a child into this world giving to light. On the contrary, notes Barrera, in English, birth is not a departure but *giving birth* and references Margaret Atwood's 1977 essay "Giving Birth" where Atwood asks, "But who gives it?... No one ever says *giving death*." Atwood also has issue with *delivering* if the mother is not the one delivered, and the child is not delivered like a letter. "How can you be both the sender and the receiver at once?" she asks.

In *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*, Mona Baker uses the example of the Arabic-to-English translation of "deliver": To deliver a baby in Arabic is "yuwallidu imra'atan" translating to "deliver a woman"

or “assist a woman in childbirth” because Arabic focuses on the person giving birth during childbirth. In English, a woman is not delivered, the focus is on the child being delivered. As Baker notes, this is “a completely different way of portraying an event.”

But “portraying an event” and the event itself are two different things and even in cases where birthing people “deliver” in English, each person’s “delivery,” “birth,” or “the act of giving birth” is different from someone else’s and therefore, different from each own’s interpretation.

Like motherhood, translation is the beginning of a story, a new version of an old self.

Language, like motherhood, lives on the body. In biological motherhood, there are physical marks, and in other circumstances, the scars are psychological. (The Latin title, *Linea Nigra*, refers to the dark line that appears on a pregnant person’s abdomen, a hyperpigmentation due to hormonal changes that is also considered a map for newborns to navigate up the mother’s stomach to reach the nipple.)

As most writing on translation echoes, no matter how “invisible” a translator attempts to be, there is always an embodiment of language from one text to another. (It is not lost on me that there is a disheartening parallel between Venuti’s idea of the erasure of the translator and, amplified by the pandemic, the habitual erasure of mothers in our society—the violence of translation, the violence against mothers.)

The embodiment of translation and motherhood brings up the notion of “the other,” both in the translator but also, in the audience. As Siri Hustvedt writes in her essay *Translating Stories in Mothers, Fathers and Others*: “The other inhabits every word we think or speak. And language itself is translating experience into words for another, even when that other is one’s self.” Post-motherhood and post-translation, the original has been altered as has the audience; it is no longer apparent where one ends and the other begins.

Like *Linea Nigra*, many of my favorite motherhood memoirs are written in fragmented text; often organized in a non-linear structure, sometimes a short anecdote or epigram, other times a longer fragment, the form conveys a sense of scattered writing opportunities and the preciousness of maternal time.

Translation also occurs in fragments: word-level equivalence, grammatical equivalence, textual and pragmatic equivalence. In each case, the collection of fragments creates a continuity and a whole, both lived experiences redefining notions of what is unique yet ordinary. Like motherhood, translation is the beginning of a story, a new version of an old self.

In *Fifty Sounds*, author and literary translator Polly Barton recounts an exchange between her and her mother after Barton asks, while working on a translation, what sound her mother thinks gorillas make in English. It is at that moment Barton's mother realizes what her daughter does for a living, paying excruciatingly precise detail to words, to ideas, to sounds like that of a gorilla.

Barton notes that she too once thought of literary translation as both "enviable and important" but also, "frivolous" and "indulgent." And yet, literary translation is a form of activism, one that she finds herself doing "full of conviction," comparable to motherhood:

I've never been a parent, but I can imagine that this is a similar sort of feeling to the one I might have if someone were to ask me, on seeing me playing some hare-brained game with my child, if this was what I did all day. This sense that, even if it wasn't what I did all day, I would turn and reply without shame, yes, it is, and the reply would come out of a direct understanding that this indulgent attention is the birthplace of all the good stuff.



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Malwina Gudowska is a Polish-Canadian writer and linguist based in London, UK. Her writing has appeared in Financial Times, Vogue, The Globe and Mail and other publications. Her article on raising multilingual children won a National Magazine Award and was included in "The Best Canadian Magazine Articles" anthology. Her PhD research in Applied Linguistics is on language, identity and emotions, focusing on the emotionality of mothers raising multilingual children. She writes about the parallels of motherhood and language over @meaningofmama.

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