

You Will Find Yourself Disoriented': Food and the Disruption of Gendered, Political, and Literary Norms in Pat Mora's *House of Houses*

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The normative aspects of food, especially regarding women and gender, are pervasive, as Katharina Vester (2015, p.137) has noted. Recipe books and domestic manuals have functioned as a way to regulate women's lives, and food advertizing has been a powerful tool for reinforcing gendered norms. However, food writing can also disrupt those expectations, as is the case in Pat Mora's collective autobiography entitled *House of Houses* (1995), a magical-realist account of the lives of five generations in a Mexican-American family. Focusing mostly on *House of Houses*, I will attempt to show that Pat Mora writes about food in a way that disrupts patriarchal norms, the norms of white middle-class feminism, norms concerning who deserves to have their stories told, and lastly, literary norms of genre. Mora's text exemplifies the idea that contrary to popular perceptions, food, in contemporary Chicana literature, is not just about reassuring grandmothers, but a much more complex and multifaceted theme.

Food, disruption and gender: women's appetites, patriarchal myths and feminist norms

In *House of Houses*, the disruption created by the use of food imagery concerns, first and foremost, the patriarchal norms that regulate women's bodies by emphasizing thinness as the ideal and condemning women's literal and metaphorical appetites. Mora's resistance to these cultural forces is what will concern us first. Helena Michie has identified a tradition of feminist writing which reclaims women's bodies and appetite (Michie, 1987, p.130). I will attempt to show that Mora's text can be firmly placed within that category.

House of Houses is shot through with depictions of women freely enjoying food, which disrupts the gendered norm that encourages women to provide pleasure, instead of being on the receiving end of it. Mora depicts a family of women who encourage each other in their enjoyment of food and other sensual pleasures: "The women in my blood suck warm apricots and hum songs of old loves that never say good-bye" (Mora, 2008, p.162). The text continually highlights the idea that the ability to enjoy food is a skill which the narrator's relatives have passed on to her. For instance, the narrator's grandmother used to peel grapes for her: "She removes the thin skin, places / the luminous coolness on my tongue. / I know not to bite or chew. I wait / for the thick melt, / our private green honey" (Mora, 1991, p.12). A sense of communion between the two women is achieved through the sharing of gustatory pleasure. Significantly, this pleasure is presented as an

educated one: the narrator 'knows' that she shouldn't bite or chew, because she has learned that from her grandmother. This evocation of appetite participates in the text's depiction of a woman-centered sensuality, dissociated from masculine pleasure. Mora writes: "Mornings when I rub cream into my legs after a bath, I think of the women in my family in the rooms of my heart, each rubbing cream between her hands, then up her legs, enjoying the quiet and the feel of stroking, soothing, our own flesh" (Mora, 2008a, p.181).

This disruption of patriarchal norms is also achieved through revisiting myths and narratives that have been used historically to promote the suppression of women's appetites and desires. One such narrative centers on the Virgin Mary, who, as the antidote to Eve, embodies the expectation that women should deny themselves the fulfillment of their appetites. In the Chicano cultural context, the Virgin Mary translates as 'La Virgen de Guadalupe,' a symbol of female sacrifice, devotion, and submissiveness, as feminist writer Sandra Cisneros explained:

Virgencita de Guadalupe. For a long time I wouldn't let you in my house. I couldn't see you without seeing my ma each time my father came home drunk and yelling, blaming everything that went wrong in his life on her. I couldn't look at your folded hands without seeing my abuela mumbling. 'My son, my son, my son...' Couldn't look at you without blaming you for all the pain my mother and her mother and all our mothers' mothers have put up with in the name of God (Cisneros, 1991, p.127).

Mora turns that narrative of submissiveness on its head in a passage in which the Virgen appears at the family breakfast table: "Quickly, Nuestra Señora reaches for the *pan dulce*, sinks her teeth into the sweet bread, says as soon as she's swallowed, '¡Ay, qué delicioso! Forgive me,' she laughs licking the last bits of topping from her fingertips, 'I just couldn't wait. *Pan dulce* is one of my weaknesses" (Mora, 1991, p.231). This Virgen is not weak or self-denying, but authoritative, mischievous, and greedy. The Virgen's liberated laughter and speech after she satisfies her sweet tooth evokes Hélène Cixous' feminist conceptualization of laughter as women's 'greatest strength' (Cixous and Kuhn, 1981, p.55)

In the same way, Mora's text disrupts the myth of the Garden of Eden, which has been interpreted by feminist critics as a cautionary tale about the danger of letting women satisfy their appetites. I propose that Mora's disruption of that myth places her within a group of 'women writers and critics [who] have revised the Genesis

story of Eve that had for so long been a fable about women's need to avoid forbidden fruit, transforming it instead into a story about another type of genesis – the reclamation of the female body and female appetites' (Heller and Moran, 2003, p. 31). Such revision is at stake, I would argue, in a passage in which the narrator and her grandmother, Mamande, watch a pair of mourning doves: 'Legends say the female painted her face white and her beak bright red to attract a mate, the red actually the scarlet juice of tunas, the prickly pear's ripe fruits. Biting into an apricot, Mamande looks east to the mountain as she chews the sun-warmed chavacán' (Mora, 2008a, p.147). In the Garden of Eden narrative, Eve's appetite and oral pleasure precipitates the Fall, making her into a corrupting temptress who entices Adam to err. The image of Mamande biting into an apricot, as well as the fact that the female bird uses a fruit (the prickly pear) to seduce and attract the male bird, are reminiscent of the myth. Where Mora's text differs from that myth, however, is that Mamande's enjoyment of the fruit does not lead to her being banished from the garden. On the contrary, her gustatory pleasure seems to anchor her even more firmly within the natural environment, as she derives enjoyment from the fruit and the landscape simultaneously. In *House of Houses*, women's sensuality ties them to the land, as illustrated by the narrator's meditations about her women relatives:

The sensuality of gardeners and cooks. Women who button their blouses to the neck, avert their eyes at bare curves and cleavage across a room or on canvas; such women in their kitchens and gardens release their senses to play. With firm hands, they knead bread dough and smell the drunk steam from cranberries simmering in port, with a tasting spoon sip the crimson concoction. They spread their fingers deep into warm beds they mulch on their knees outside, sprinkle wildflower seeds and their headstrong surprises into the garden, bend into the honeysuckle's gold buzz and place the clear drop of nectar on their proper tongues, watch snails lazily revealing their skin. Such sensuality is sanctioned, even sacred when performed in the service of others, self-sacrifice a noble path for women, certainly in both Mexican and Church culture. But don't the physical pleasures themselves – tasting the wild orange wind, peering into the hibiscus' open mouth, hearing the tongued trees, smelling the heat of rising dough, stroking the plums' red curves – the private body pleasures also lure women to those kitchen and gardens? (Mora, 2008a, p.159)

This passage partakes of the disruption of the Garden of Eden myth by presenting the garden as a haven for sensual women and as a space of female agency. The apparent tension between puritanism and sensuality that pervades the passage serves to suggest that these women are able to carve out a space of freedom and sensual satisfaction for

themselves, while appearing to conform to traditional, patriarchal norms, since that satisfaction is effected through domestic activities like cooking and gardening. The Garden of Eden, a place that stifles women's appetites, is replaced by this garden in the desert, which constitutes a utopian space where women's desires can be expressed and satisfied.

This revision of myths and narratives is characteristic of contemporary Chicana literature in general, as Mermann-Jozwiak has pointed out: 'Such appropriation and resignification, as well as parody, code-switching, and generic hybridity resulted in highly innovative texts' (Mermann-Jozwiak, 2005, p.3). Mora's writing is made distinctive by the fact that this disruption is effected, in her texts, through the use of food imagery, as I have tried to show.

Although the above discussion has emphasized Mora's disruption of gendered patriarchal norms, in the following I will argue that her food writing also disrupts norms upheld by a certain strand of feminism regarding what women's relationship to the domestic and culinary sphere should be. White, middle-class, second-wave feminism has tended to suggest that the only fulfillment women should seek is outside the home, within the capitalist sphere of paid employment. While this strand of feminism portrays the domestic sphere as purely oppressive, Mora's text constantly underscores the positive role the kitchen plays in the lives of the women she depicts, without being naive about the oppressive potential of the culinary realm. The domestic sphere can be a space for women to share their own stories, as Traci Marie Kelly has observed:

For many women, sitting around a table or standing around a kitchen counter becomes the space where their stories are told. For generations, oral storytelling has brewed while dinners have simmered. [...] There is a power that we get from telling our stories through our recipes. Some women have appreciated the 'canvas' of the kitchen, using that space to create nourishing meals, memories, and art. These works are rich sources for autobiographical assertion because they present the lives of women through their own voices, rendered from a room that has been, truly, a room of their own (Kelly, 2001, p.252).

Mora's writing conforms to that vision by demonstrating the idea that even if the kitchen has been the locus of women's confinement within the private sphere, cooking can nevertheless constitute a pathway to self-expression for working-class, marginalized women. This possibility, for women, of reclaiming the culinary sphere as a space of freedom, not oppression, has been explored by the field of feminist food studies: 'The preparation and presentation of food, like quilting and gardening, is yet another traditional domain of women which has recently been reexamined and acknowledged as a source and site of creativity and another medium by which women can talk about their lives' (Goeller, 2007, p.19).

Similarly, Mora associates cooking with creative self-expression and writing. In an essay devoted to a Mexican dish called 'capirotada,' she remarks that there are myriad ways of preparing it: 'choices, options, like shaping a garden or an essay' (Mora, 1997, p.154).

In addition, Mora presents the kitchen and the culinary as a space of intellectual pursuit when she explains how a friend helped her learn about the history of the dish called 'capirotada': 'dictionaries in hand, we pursue braided roots, culinary and linguistic' (Mora, 1997, p.151). Gastronomy is associated with a community of women in pursuit of learning, as evidenced in a passage from *House of Houses*, in which the narrator and her aunt Lobo enter the kitchen where their relatives are gathered:

Lobo and I enter the kitchen, see the group busy with cloves and conversation. We decide to sit at the blue kitchen table while we look at a book on nativity scenes from Mexico, read that it was Saint Francis of Assisi in 1223 who's credited with beginning the custom in Greccio using a live ox and donkey for his first scene in a grotto (Mora, 2008a, p. 277).

What's more, cooking itself is presented as an intellectual operation in Mora's writing. Reminiscing about a meal she had with her aunt and uncle, Mora writes:

Somehow, the feel of the time with them – he's sitting at the table remembering and she's moving from refrigerator to stove, pouring iced-tea, stirring a pot, adding to his memories, basting slices of pumpkin – and I'm pre-adult again, pre-responsibility, in that private family world with two older people who care about me and have known me since I was born, watching a woman who understand kitchens, whose hands dice, slice, sauté, pare, stir, blending ingredients and serving them on scrubbed dishes, a woman who, when she finally sits at the table, tastes and ponders what she cooked, adjusting mentally, a pinch more pepper next time, a little less garlic, seasoning what she serves us as her husband seasons the stories he tells himself (Mora, 2008a, p. 229).

Significantly, the accumulation of verbs foregrounds both the technical skills and the intellectual and reflective aspects involved in the cooking process. This suggests that domestic tasks lead to a form of knowing that integrates the material and the abstract, disrupting the patriarchal dichotomy between mind and body, rationality and materiality.

In Mora's writing, the kitchen is thus a space of knowledge and self-expression; it is also a space of conversation and support. In 'Layers of Pleasure', Mora describes the meals she used to share with her women friends:

Once my three were in school all day, some friends and I began cooking for one another once a month.

We prepared fresh pea soup or chicken *sopa*, lingering over them as we sat around a table, sharing ourselves and our family traditions. We gave one another advice on everything from dividing irises to foster blooming to our fears about our ability to nurture our family life (Mora, 1997, p.149).

Mora thus writes about the culinary realm as a space where women can be nurtured literally, intellectually and emotionally, a place of sociability, and a refuge. In so doing, she disrupts second-wave feminism's narrative of domesticity as a space of pure drudgery and toil for women.

Food and the disruption of memory and history

In *House of Houses*, the culinary is used to disrupt norms around who deserves to have their history told. The domestic sphere holds women's memories and histories. In the kitchen, the narrator's aunt bombards her with names of relatives whose histories she then proceeds to recount: 'I don't even try to unravel the web, the names this family chronicler remembers, preserves in notebooks so we will know where we come from' (Mora, 2008, p. 22). The term 'preserves' reminds the reader of the preserves prepared during the summer by the women in the story, encapsulating this association between the culinary and domestic on the one hand, and women's histories and memories on the other hand. One needs to explore the culinary and domestic sphere in order to access those memories, as the narrator suggests after she is told a specific story about her aunt: 'Why didn't I see or hear the story until I began to explore this house? The private life of the family women, the chamber of their hearts which they enter when alone' (Mora, 2008a, p.147). Having conversations centered around the domestic and culinary sphere allows the narrator to learn about the material lives and experiences of her family members, these marginalized, working-class Mexican-American women whose stories and histories are not necessarily present in the official historical record. One such conversation leads her grandmother Elena to describe the kitchen of the ranch she used to live on:

She remembers pushing the swinging crib as she chopped and skinned tomatoes, chiles, onion, *cilantro*, sees the shepherd's bed above the small hearth, the rafter on which she hangs herbs to dry, the wood boxes for flour and vegetables. Such a different life *en el rancho* than in this house. [...] She feels the heat again from the black pot in which she'd make her own soap outdoors in Mexico having leached the lye from wood ashes with rainwater, slowly stirring the rendered animal fat with lye water until it thickens like oatmeal, pouring it into wood molds, scoring the soap while it's warm, storing it to age, her face steamed for years by huge pots and ovens, the face caressed by babies. She begins to hum and soon the group joins her (Mora, 2008a, p.275).

Mora's writing thus emphasizes the value of the culinary realm and the narratives it holds for anyone who is interested in recuperating women's stories and histories, which had for so long been excluded from the historical archive because they happened, more often than not, within the domestic sphere.

The narrator asks her relatives for recipes, but receives more than she bargained for, as exemplified in the following passage about her great-grandmother: 'She goes to her room, brings out the book in which she writes her thoughts, her recipes and gardening lists' (Mora, 2008a, p.140). This notebook of recipes also serves as a diary: exploring the culinary realm therefore allows the narrator to learn not only about these women's material conditions of living but also about their subjectivity. The exploration of these women's notebooks disrupts the erasure of working-class Chicana women from history. This historiographic project of recovering ordinary Chicana women's subjectivity is shared by many contemporary Chicana writers, according to Francisco Lomelí, Teresa Márquez and María Herrera-Sobek: 'They proposed to re-create or establish significant portions of a Chicana epic, that is, a story that had remained silent, untold, forgotten, ignored, minimized, repressed' (Lomelí, Márquez and Herrera-Sobek, 2000, p.290). But once again, Mora's particularity resides in her achieving this historiographic disruption through food, through the exploration of the culinary and domestic realm.

Literary disruptions

The theme of food, in Mora's writing, is at the source of multiple disruptions, including the disruption of literary and generic norms. *House of Houses* does not fit neatly into any single literary genre as it includes fragments of different types of text, such as recipes, poems, songs, folk tales, and remedies. And while the canonical model of autobiography is centered around a unitary and independent subject, usually a white man (Smith and Watson, 2001, p.3), *House of Houses* is a collective autobiography, in which the stories the narrator cajoles out of her relatives are as important to the narration as her own memories. This collective dimension, whereby the text adopts a rhizomatous structure with multiple narrators, is encapsulated by the recurring image of the voice: 'At my desk, I listen, hear the rhythm of my heart, of the clock, the broom, the kitchen stirrings, the prayers, clck, clck of rosary beads, savor the inner voices' (Mora, 2008a, p.18). The narrator savors the voices of her relatives as well as the sounds of the kitchen. These voices become 'inner,' as if she had incorporated them into her consciousness, and the boundary between the main narrator and her family members is disrupted, blurred. The best illustration of that confusion between the 'I' and the other can be found in a passage about the narrator's aunt Chole, in which free indirect speech disrupts a narrative that started in the third person:

Chole works for a dentist in Juárez, but he touches her and she runs crying to a pharmacist who's a relative. She can't even take the streetcar home because of motion sickness, says to herself: *my family doesn't understand the sacrifices I'm making. All they do is criticize me. No wonder I cry so much*, wiping away the tears as *she* walks home in the dark, frightened, often frightened and alone (Mora, 2008a, p.131, emphasis mine).

This passage exemplifies the way the narrator swallows the voices of her relatives. Mora articulates this constant crossing of the boundary between self and other in one of her essays:

You will find yourself disoriented at times by the use of the word 'we.' I know the feeling. I purposely let the meaning shift and slide as it does in my life. Who are the we's of me? My family, writers, Chicanas, Southwesterners, mothers, women of color, daughters, Latinas, college graduates, Hispanas, wives, Mexicans, U.S. citizens, readers, advocates, Mexican Americans, women, educators, learners? (Mora, 2008b, p.7)

This fusion between the self and an external element is precisely what the act of eating creates, which may be one of the reasons why Mora's writing is so centered on the alimentary and culinary realm. There seems to be a connection between the unclassifiable nature of *House of Houses*, and food's ability to transgress boundaries and categories. Elspeth Probyn exposes this elusive nature of food when she states that 'food seems to possess inherent tropic qualities. Simply put, food moves about all the time. It constantly shifts registers: from the sacred to the everyday, from metaphor to materiality, it is the most common and elusive matter' (Probyn, 1999, 217).

Conclusion

In conclusion, in Mora's writing, food is inextricably linked to multiple disruptions and transgressions which have political, cultural and literary consequences. I have attempted to show that she writes about food in a way that transgresses Western gendered norms, by celebrating a community of women who share their love of food and their sensuality and rewriting patriarchal myths about women's appetite. If her writing is resolutely feminist, it is situated within the specific tradition of intersectional feminism, and interrogates the norms of white middle-class second-wave feminism by highlighting the value of the culinary and domestic sphere for marginalized women. Secondly, I have tried to show that her food writing questions the norms surrounding who gets to have their story and history told, since its exploration of the culinary sphere becomes a way to recuperate Chicana women's histories. Lastly, food metaphors are used in the text in

order to designate the specificity of her writing where the autobiographical subject swallows and incorporates a multiplicity of others, disrupting generic boundaries in the process. This confirms the usefulness, for literary food studies, of thinking of food as a meta-language, 'food as form' (Shahani, 2018, p.4).

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