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Feeding the Other, Feeding the Self: Pat Mora and Ana Castillo's Feminist Narratives of Food

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the representation of domestic foodwork in selected texts by Ana Castillo and Pat Mora through the lens of feminist food studies, suggesting that Castillo and Mora offer feminist, nuanced representations of domestic foodwork that acknowledge both its oppressive legacy and its healing potential for women. Mora and Castillo challenge the way domestic foodwork has been naturalized and devalued in dominant patriarchal discourses that have contributed to women's oppression. In spite of this fraught legacy, they reclaim foodwork as a tool for women's healing and emancipation. In their texts, foodwork appears as a practice of care and self-care that can allow women to nurture each other and themselves in the face of a patriarchal, sexist society that exhausts and depletes them.

KEYWORDS: Chicana literature, feminism, food studies, gender, cooking, self-love, care

Introduction

According to Sherrie Inness, "The complex web of interrelationships among women, food, and cooking must be untangled by anyone wishing to understand American culture, whether in the 1700s or today" (Kitchen Culture 3). This connection between femininity, women, and cooking, and more broadly between food and gender, has indeed been at the center of a dynamic field of research within American Studies, focused on studying food from a feminist perspective and through the lens of gender studies. While the study of food and gender was at first mostly focused on the experiences of white middle-class women, the field of feminist food studies was cemented around the idea that an intersectional approach to food and gender was necessary, and that the study of women and food needed to encompass diverse perspectives from differently positioned women instead of extrapolating the experiences of white women as universal. As Cairns and Johnston put it, "Women come to food from different social locations that emerge at the intersection of race, class, sexuality, and food history, in addition to personal interests and experiences… Women do not relate to food in one universal way," hence the need to explore "a multiplicity of food femininities" (13-14), a

multiplicity of perspectives on women and food. This paper focuses on the link between food, gender, and femininity in the works of contemporary writers Ana Castillo and Pat Mora, who bring their perspectives as Chicana feminists from working-class backgrounds to the table of feminist food studies. Their literary texts offer valuable reflections and insights on the issue of food and gender, thus creating a strong connection between feminism and food as they represent the link between food and women's oppression, but also reinvent new discourses about food that contradict patriarchal norms.

Mora and Castillo identify as feminists and as Chicanas, a term that connotes their ethnic background as Mexican-American writers– as well as their commitment to social justice. Such a designation traces its roots back to the Chicano movement for racial and economic justice that took place during the 1960s (Muñoz). The movement was characterized by a rather conservative outlook on women's place in society, with many Chicano activists seeming to think that Chicana women were to contribute to the cause by staying at home and nurturing the next generations. This patriarchal vision of women's roles was criticized by Chicana writers and feminists, as Benay Blend explains:

> During the 1960s and 1970s, Chicana feminists began to question the portrait of the so-called Ideal Chicana drawn by Chicano cultural nationalists. This stereotype reflected an ideology that equated Chicano cultural survival with the glorified traditional gender roles for Chicanas. As a result, emerging Chicana feminists challenged this narrow concept of family, with its traditional role of women as producers and reproducers of the race. While Chicana feminists challenged domesticity as a space that demeans women, others when confronted with women's traditional art, found that their sympathies were torn. (41)

Blend points out Chicana feminist writers' ambivalent relationship to domestic practices such as cooking, which constitutes both an emblem of the patriarchal oppression they denounced and the feminine creative tradition they valued and paid homage to. Even as Chicana feminists criticized the patriarchal ideology that suggests that women's role should be to nurture and care for the family within the domestic space, they did not completely reject domesticity. Mora and Castillo exemplify this dimension of Chicana literature: both self-declared feminists denounce patriarchal norms and ideologies that seek to confine

women to the home, but also suggest the possibility for women to reclaim this space and the activities associated with it, especially cooking.

This paper will explore Mora and Castillo's feminist, subversive representations of food and more precisely the work of feeding others. Such work has often been and continues to be assigned to women, and instrumentalized in discourses about dominant femininity that contribute to women's oppression. Mora and Castillo denounce and resist patriarchal discourses about foodwork, while showing how the work of feeding others can be reclaimed as a tool for women's healing and emancipation, through nurturing, supportive communities of women and the practice of self-love. This analysis will focus on tracking how the act of feeding others appears in a selection of Mora and Castillo's texts, including Mora's culinary memoir House of Houses (1997), her essay "Layers of Pleasure" (1997), the poem "Lydia" from her collection called Encantado (2018), and Castillo's novels So Far from God (1993), Peel My Love Like an Onion (1999) and Give It to Me (2014), as well as her collection of essays Massacre of the Dreamers (1994). While seemingly eclectic, these texts share a particular interest in daily life, especially that of Mexican-American women, and in domestic life and activities, including cooking and eating.

Focusing on Mora and Castillo's feminist representation of the act of feeding others, this paper will build on existing scholarship within the field of Chicana studies about feminism within Chicana texts, on the one hand, and about food in Chicana literature, on the other hand. Francisco A. Lomelí, Teresa Márquez, and María Herrera-Sobek describe Chicana literature as a feminist intervention within a patriarchal, male-dominated literary and cultural milieu. Pat Mora and Ana Castillo clearly demonstrate the "feminist ethos" (290) that characterizes Chicana literary production. Mora's texts have been said to promote a "gynocentric world view" (Gutiérrez Spencer 30) and to validate "female identity" (Kurzen 359), and have been analyzed through the lens of ecofeminism, as they challenge the devaluation of both women and the non-human world (Martín-Junquera; Murphy). Critics have also underlined the feminist nature of Ana Castillo's work, which defies taboos around the female body, feminine sexuality and especially lesbian sexuality (Candelaria 146; Maier;

Mills), and has been described as a "call to arms, to (…) fight against the injustices of the patriarchy" (Grof 16). In keeping with the existing scholarship that has demonstrated that Mora and Castillo's writings contribute to feminist literature and feminism in various ways, this paper will highlight the feminist ethics displayed in their texts and more precisely in the way they write about foodwork and feeding work. Meredith E. Abarca and Nieves Pascual Soler have demonstrated that the motif of food, far from being anecdotal, often constitutes an important site of meaning and symbolism within Chicana/o literature, as many Chicana/o writers deliberately use food symbolism, comment on the contemporary realities of food production and consumption, and address questions of ethics and politics through their focus on food. As the work done on food in Chicana literature by Maria Claudia André, Ellen M. Gil-Gomez, Julia Erhardt, Amanda Ellis, and others suggests, reading Chicana literature through food provides a fruitful avenue for research, that this paper will explore by focusing on the theme of feeding others in works by Mora and Castillo.

While critics have suggested the importance of the theme of food in Castillo's work (Herrera; Salazar; Steere), the role that food plays in Mora's works has not been given as much scholarly attention, despite the fact that food occupies a central place in her texts. Mora and Castillo both address the ecological and social stakes of food production, as well as women's complicated relationship to food within a patriarchal society; they use food to enhance characterization in their prose and to enrich their poetry with food metaphors; and they evoke food-centered memories from their lives in their autobiographical texts, using food as a structuring device. One of the many similarities between Mora and Castillo's respective work resides in the way they write about the act of feeding others, which participates in the broader feminist ethics of their texts. They subvert the gendered meanings associated with the act of feeding others in dominant discourses, and they reclaim that work (which has so often been imposed on women and associated with strict norms of femininity) as a tool for women's healing and emancipation: something that women can use to nurture each other and themselves, practicing sorority and self-love as resources to cope with a patriarchal, sexist society. This paper will first focus on how Mora and Castillo resist the naturalization and devaluation of the work of feeding others, before turning to the way

they portray women feeding each other and themselves as a means to subvert gendered norms that always present women as nurturers, especially of the family, and never as receiving nurturance themselves, as they are expected to sacrifice themselves and focus on the needs of (male) others.

Beyond the Cooking Mystique: Resisting the Naturalization and Devaluation of Feeding Work

Inness uses the term "kitchen culture" to describe the way discourses about food and foodwork often contain messages about gender roles, explaining that "Kitchen culture is a critical way that women are instructed about how to behave like 'correctly' gendered beings. If we are to understand women's gender roles in the United States, we need to study food. (…) kitchen culture passes down lessons about gender roles at the same time it conveys lessons about how to prepare yeast rolls" (*Kitchen Culture* 4). Discourses about food and foodwork are often associated with messages about gender norms and about femininity in particular. Mora and Castillo's texts intervene in that "kitchen culture" by disrupting some of the messages associated with the act of feeding others in dominant discourses about food. Firstly, they challenge the essentialization of women's cooking and women's food work in the home, as well as its devaluation.

Through what has been called a "cooking mystique", "a kitchen-based version of the feminine mystique" (Neuhauss 159), the act of feeding others has been presented as women's natural responsibility: as an attribute of ideal femininity, which is seen as involving a caring, nurturing disposition. As Inness puts it, "the wisdom seems to be that all women … should 'naturally' be the ones responsible for cooking" (*Dinner Roles* 8). Women's foodwork becomes an essential aspect of the performance of hegemonic femininity, as Marjorie Devault points out, "It is not just that women do more of the work of feeding, but also that feeding work has become one of the primary ways that women 'do' gender" (118-9). Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil remark that "responsibility for domestic 'feeding work' is deeply embedded within the core of the whole concept of femininity, through the socialization of

women into the acceptance of such obligations as natural and through the sanctioning of women who fail or refuse to fulfill these obligations" (86). This essentialization of the work of feeding others has been linked to a form of devaluation, through a process evoked by Deborah Barndt, who explains that "deeply entrenched gender ideologies construct certain women's tasks as 'natural,' thus devaluing the skills they require as well as the domestic practices through which women have acquired them" (272). This is the case of women's foodwork, which has been constructed as more of an attribute of women's nature, and less of a learned skill, demanding effort and time. Discourses that associate foodwork with women's natures tend to downplay the effort and skill involved in women's home cooking as a form of work, since they give the impression that cooking is an effortless, natural expression of women's personality, something that should come easily for any woman. Therefore, for DeVault, it is essential to de-essentialize home cooking, and to make visible the labor and the skills it entails, "The underlying principles of housework must be made visible. The work must be seen as separable from the one who does it, instead of in the traditional way as an expression of love and personality" (142). This is exactly what Mora and Castillo achieve in their texts, as they de-essentialize cooking by emphasizing feeding others as a skill, not as a natural manifestation of women's nurturing personalities. They challenge essentializing discourses about home cooking, but also discourses that devalue home cooking, not by essentializing it, but by rendering it as trivial, basic and insignificant (Inness 2, Swinbank 162). To resist this perception, Mora and Castillo associate home cooking with the realm of the sacred, suggesting that home cooking and the work of feeding the family is of great value and significance.

First of all, Mora and Castillo contradict the naturalization of feeding work: its representation as a manifestation of women's supposed nature. Instead of being exclusively associated with women, the gesture of feeding others is depicted as a universally accessible practice in their texts. As Theresa Delgadillo suggests, Chicana writers avoid a tendency to "biologize compassion and nurturance" (905). This is true of Mora and Castillo, in whose texts nurturance is not depicted as the exclusive province of women as it so often is in patriarchal discourses. In their texts, men, as well as women, express their love and care for others by

offering food, and adopting a nurturing position. According to Kate Cairns and Josée Johnston, "foodwork needs to be valued more generally as part of a restructured, counterhegemonic masculinity" (169). Mora and Castillo achieve the integration of foodwork and masculinity that Cairns and Johnston call for, by portraying nurturing men. Castillo's texts feature several men who are adept cooks and who take care of the women in their lives by making them nourishing, delicious meals, such as Manolo in *Peel My Love Like an Onion* (1999), who starts to learn how to cook for the narrator Carmen after she tells him about her mediocre cooking skills, "Then he said, That's fine, *I* should learn. (…) And that night he made his first tortilla española. He made it from the memory of all the potato omelettes he'd eaten in Spain. Too much garlic. But garlic is good for you. The man you love cooking for you is good for you" (132). As exemplified by this quotation, Castillo's text is highlighting the learning process that has allowed the man described to feed and nurture another as an act of love, departing from the representation of cooking as care being a feminine prerogative.

Toni Tipton-Martin insists on the importance of recognizing that cooking skills are not natural but acquired and therefore accessible to anyone who is willing to try, "These skills, often mischaracterized as a mythicized natural-born talent or culinary 'mystique,' are acquired by observation and practice and intelligence" (16). The mischaracterization of cooking Tipton-Martin evokes here is a gendered one, as cooking has been depicted as a natural talent in the case of women specifically, in discourses that justify an unfair distribution of labor whereby women are expected to do the majority of foodwork at home because they are seen as naturally suited to the work of feeding others and most specifically the family. But Tipton-Martin suggests that this powerful "culinary mystique" can be challenged when we make visible the processes involved in learning how to cook, such as observation and repetition, and when we insist on cooking as an acquired skill. This is precisely what Mora and Castillo do in their texts, especially by describing men who practice cooking for others, who learn how to feed others through experience, even though their cooking skills were not much to begin with. In "Layers of Pleasure" (1997), Mora explains how, when her aunt's health declined, her uncle, who had never cooked, started feeding her, "Humans adapt, and though Uncle Lalo's previous kitchen experience was limited to dish-washing, he began to

perfect the art of making hot cereal. 'I think I've got the idea now, honey. I can serve your aunt a good, hot breakfast with no lumps'" (151). The references to the notion of "experience" and "art" in this quotation point out the skills involved in the work of feeding others, which is not presented as something only women can and should do simply because of their supposed natural abilities and affinities, but as an art, a practice, that can be learned and perfected by anyone.

Mora and Castillo present home cooking not only as a skill, but as a highly valuable, even sacred skill. Women's skills, the skills that are involved in the work that has predominantly been accomplished by women, such as cooking, have often been devalued within patriarchal discourses (Kerr and Charles 47). The skills involved in the work of cooking for others, feeding others, and expressing love and care through such gestures, have been denied, and cooking has been presented as a mindless, devalued activity, in discourses that reinforce women's subordination by suggesting that women's work and skills are inferior to other types of work. Mora and Castillo's texts directly resist this patriarchal devaluing of women's skills and women's work, describing the practice of feeding others as real, skilled, and valuable work—almost sacred work, done by people who have become experts at caring for others through food. This is done through the depiction of the character of Sofi, a single mother raising her four daughters on a ranch in Castillo's novel *So Far from God* (1993). When her daughter Esperanza, who works as a reporter, is about to leave for the Middle East, Sofi uses cooking to show her love and concern for her daughter, "Sofi prepared Esperanza's favorite foods that weekend, like posole and sopa and lots of chili, because feeding is the beginning and end of what a mother knows to do for her children, even when she doesn't know what to say" (48-49). Sofi uses food as a language, a way of communicating her affection and care for her daughter. The text emphasizes this communicative, expressive, and affective function of food, but also the skill involved in knowing how to use this language, how to make one's care and love clearly felt through the foods one prepares for a loved one. The use of the verb "to know", in relation to foodwork, underlines the idea that such work is not mindless but entails a form of knowledge and mastery, which subverts the devaluation of cooking and women's work. In her culinary memoir, *House of Houses* (1997), Mora also uses the verb "to

know" to pay homage to the culinary skills and the knowledge possessed by women who know how to express care and love through food, "I look at my father's four sisters, the Mora women who've outlived their two brothers, the women whose hands like their mother's know kitchen secrets, the glue of food, how to hold families together with tortillas and coffee" (78). Like Castillo, Mora uses the verb "to know" to describe the skill and competency involved in caring for a family through "the glue of food," through acts of feeding others that become the foundation that solidifies the family. In Mora's text, the verb "to know" is however not applied to a person but to a person's hands, suggesting that culinary knowledge is embodied, stored in the body and not on pieces of paper. This motif of the hands reoccurs throughout Mora's memoir, as an emblem of the embodied knowledge possessed by cooks who use their hands to feed and to soothe, to care. The image of knowing hands embodies, as Vicky Swinbank explains, the process of acquiring culinary knowledge through bodily experiences, "The embodied learning involved in learning to cook has been described as a 'habit of hands', whereby the routines and regular practice of food preparation becomes an embodied memory" (86-7). This embodied memory and knowledge involved in cooking is also described by Lisa Heldke through the image of hands:

> The knowing involved in making a cake is 'contained' not simply 'in my head' but in my hands, my wrist, my eyes and nose as well. The phrase 'bodily knowledge' is not a metaphor. It is an acknowledgement of the fact that I *know* things literally with my body, that I, 'as' my hands, know when the bread dough is sufficiently kneaded, and I, 'as' my nose know when the pie is done. (218)

Mora's suggestion that her relatives' culinary knowledge is stored in their hands resonates with this idea of an embodied knowledge and memory. As Heldke explains, recognizing the embodied knowledge involved in activities like cooking, as Mora invites us to do, disrupts the traditional dichotomy between body and mind, that has been linked to a devaluation of the body, of the material realm and by extension of women who have been associated with the corporeal. Subverting this dominant hierarchy, Mora's text emphasizes the valuable embodied knowledge possessed by those who know how to feed and nourish others, both physically and emotionally, thanks to their culinary (but also caring) skills. The many passages in which Mora zooms in on the hands of her relatives clearly convey her awed admiration for

their expertise and their almost miraculous ability to care for and to nurture both individuals and families. Indeed, Mora describes the cooks in her family, who are experienced at nourishing others, as sacred figures, who perform sacred work–an association that can also be found in Castillo's texts.

Both Mora and Castillo subvert the devaluation of food work not only by revaluing the skills involved in home cooking, but also by associating women who feed others and the realm of the sacred. By linking feeding others to the realm of the sacred and the religious, Mora and Castillo subvert the association of home cooking with something trivial, ordinary, routine, and insignificant. They also subvert Cartesian dualistic thought, in which the spirit is seen as completely detached from and superior to the body, the immaterial privileged over the material. This form of thinking has been instrumental in devaluing activities linked to the body and materiality–including cooking and other activities associated with femininity. Associating cooking, an activity anchored in the material world, with the spiritual and the sacred realm evoked by religion, as Mora and Castillo do, challenges this dichotomy between the spiritual and the material, and revalues women's home cooking as a form of sacred practice and knowledge, to be valued and respected. Far from ordinary, the act of cooking for others in the home is portrayed, in Mora and Castillo's texts, as a sacramental activity, as holy and significant as an official religious ritual. In *House of Houses* (1997), Mora describes her aunt Lobo's acts of care through food in terms reminiscent of religious ritual, as in the following conversation, "'I used to make special lemon cookies for you. Do you remember? I make them so they won't be too greasy because you are little, *reina*, *muy chiquita*. (…)' Thin cookies, lemon hosts, placed on my tongue by my single aunt" (241). Lobo takes care of her niece through cooking: she takes care of Mora's nutritional needs (by altering the recipe so that the cookies would not be too greasy), as well as her need to be loved and cherished. Her offering is given significance by the reference to the hosts, which evokes the Catholic ritual of the Eucharist: Lobo is implicitly compared to a priestess, and her gestures of caring through food are presented as a sacred ritual. This passage subverts traditional Catholic religious practices, which dictate that the ritual of Eucharist can only be performed by a male priest (Counihan 15), by replacing the usual priest with a woman and sacralizing the gesture of

feeding others. This passage exemplifies the tendency, shared by many contemporary Chicana writers, to subvert Catholicism and to reclaim elements from religious ritual and imagery for their own purposes (Androne 2). In this case, Mora uses the symbolism of the Eucharist to portray the nourishing ritual she shared with her aunt and more generally the gesture of feeding the other as a sacred ritual, and to elevate the cook to the status of a sacred figure. This association between a woman feeding others, and the realm of the sacred and the religious, can also be found in Castillo's novel *So Far from God* (1993), as exemplified by the character of doña Felicia, a traditional healer, who adopted her nephew, "In doña Felicia's home, at that time she lived in Tome near the church and was, in fact, the keeper of the keys and the caretaker of the santos there, there was always something good and satisfying on the stove when he got home from softball practice, his denims were patched but clean, his shirts ironed; in short, he was well cared for by the old woman" (98-99). Doña Felicia's work as keeper of the keys at the church and caretaker of the santos is presented in the same sentence as the work she does to care for her nephew, especially by feeding him. Syntactically, nothing distinguishes these two kinds of work, putting them on equal footing and suggesting that the work Doña Felicia does cooking for her nephew and generally caring for him is as important and sacred as the work she does tending to the santos and the church. As in Mora's text, the work of feeding others is associated with the spiritual, and the traditional hierarchy between the sacred and the mundane, the soul and the body, is disrupted. Castillo makes visible the often invisibilized work of care accomplished within the home by enumerating the results of doña Felicia's labors, and evokes a link between this work and the sacred. According to Tey Diana Rebolledo, "Through (…) the intricate descriptions and valorization of women's work, Chicana writers undo the invisibility of domestic work and the invisibility of women's contributions. Through a description of the knowledge necessary for that work, the writers gain authority, seize agency, and are able to represent their own subjectivity" (150). Mora and Castillo's descriptions of the work of feeding others fit in perfectly with Rebolledo's assessment, as they underline the knowledge and skills involved in feeding others and present this act as sacred, life-nourishing work.

Food, Sorority and Self-Care: Nourishing Women

Besides the essentialization and devaluation of women's food work, Mora and Castillo challenge another aspect of dominant discourses about women and food: the idea that women should cook and care for others first, specifically for men and children, and that women are satisfied simply through nourishing others, without the need for any reciprocity. As Carole Counihan explains, dominant patriarchal discourses about cooking convey the message that women should nourish (especially men), but there is no expectation that they should be cared for in return, "Food provisioning often reproduces female subordination by requiring women to serve, satisfy, and defer to husbands and boyfriends who do not feel a similar need to serve their women" (13). Mora and Castillo challenge this perception of food work as something women do for men, by emphasizing nurturing relationships between women who cook for each other. Here, Counihan also emphasizes an asymmetry in the way women are expected to provide care, but there is not the same expectation that they will receive care (through foodwork and otherwise). Women are expected to feed the family, but no one is expected to feed them, literally and metaphorically. This lack of acknowledgement of women's needs, and this tendency to portray women only as providers, and not as recipients of care, is another aspect of patriarchal culture that Mora and Castillo challenge, by describing women who are fed and cared for by others— who are served, instead of always serving others.

Dominant, patriarchal representations of feeding work not only suggest that feeding others is something women, and only women, do, but also that it is something they do mostly for men and/or children within the context of a heteronormative family. Cooking's primary purpose is seen as an expression of women's love for their partners and families. This conception was cemented during the 19th century, as Katharina Vester explains in her analysis of cooking literature, "Cookbooks claimed women's unpaid domestic labor to be the most evolved expression of their love for their husbands and children, and a woman's most valuable service to their extended family, community, and nation" (131). Within such discourses, the main purpose of women's feeding work is to satisfy the appetites of men and

children, and femininity is associated with caring for the family. As Cairns and Johnston put it, "Throughout much of modern Euroamerican history, the ideal woman was one who cooked delicious, nourishing meals for her family" (6). Such norms suggest that women's foodwork should be in the service of men and the family, and that "women cook to please men" (Charles and Kerr 40). Those normative representations of cooking take place in a broader patriarchal context in which women are expected to put their relationships with men before their relationships with each other and their own needs, to "put the man first" as Mary Pat Brady writes (160). Castillo reflects on this injunction in the preface to her novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986), "My older sisters never maintained close relationships with women after marriage. When a woman entered the treshold of intimacy with a man, she left the companions of her sex without looking back. Her needs had to be sustained by him. If not, she was to keep her emptiness to herself" (35). Here, Castillo exposes the cultural, heteronormative norms that encourage women to devote themselves exclusively to their relationships with men, to cater to their tastes and opinions and to silence their own appetites and needs if they find themselves unfulfilled by those relationships. Castillo and Mora's texts disrupt such expectations that women's lives (and their cooking) should be centered around their relationships with men. In their texts, women's relationships with each other are central, as they are in Chicana culture more generally, according to Maxine Baca Zinn, "Chicano families are mother centered, and (…) Chicanas have developed alignments with other women which nurture a collective sense of their own worth" (26). This is reflected in Chicana literature, as Estill explains, "Chicana writers have created a world filled with women and the bonds among them" (47). Mora and Castillo prove no exception to this rule, as they devote a great portion of their texts to exploring caring, nourishing relationships and friendships between women, that are often expressed and solidified through gestures of caring that take the form of feeding the other. Food is a vehicle for the expression of love and care that, in Mora and Castillo's texts, is not limited to heterosexual relationships but used as a tool for women to strengthen their bonds and to nourish each other. Women do not cook to please men, as is the assumption in patriarchal discourse, but also to please and care for each other. For instance, in *House of Houses* (1997), Mora's mother recounts how her own

mother, Mamande, would care for her stepdaughter Lobo, who worked long hours, through food: "Mamande would always have some kind of dessert for Lobo, pudding or pie,' Mother says, 'so that there would be something waiting for her when she got home from work, always in the dark…'" (66). While dominant representations of the act of feeding others usually emphasize the image of a woman cooking for her husband, having food ready for him when he comes home from work, such dominant representations are subverted as Mamande cooks to please, not a man, but her stepdaughter. Lobo and Mamande's friendship proves to be a crucial source of support, instead of being seen as a poor substitute for a relationship with a man– and the fact that the food is left for Lobo by Mamande, not served to her, exemplifies how that relationship is based on equality, reciprocity, and a respect for each woman's independence, far from the asymmetry of care often associated with traditional expectations of heteronormative relationships. Similarly, in Castillo's *Peel My Love Like an Onion* (1999), Carmen's relationship with her friend Chichi, who is a sex worker, is more stable and nourishing to her than her relationships with her lovers. It is Chichi who cares for Carmen after she has had a miscarriage, by bringing her food:

> I got home from the hospital, my womb empty and scraped like a carefully carved-out melon (…) . (…) I'd lain in bed the whole week. Sometimes if Chichi went out for dinner with some trick she'd bring back Chinese leftovers or pizza. She'd leave a beer or half bottle of cheap wine for me too. Chichi meant well but you can't expect a whole grain diet from someone who makes her living on the street. (61)

In this passage, the motif of food is linked to two different forms of care. Firstly, it is linked to the medical care Carmen received while in hospital: the text uses a food metaphor, the image of the carved-out melon, to express Carmen's feelings and sensations after the "dilation and curettage" procedure she has undergone after her miscarriage. This image evokes both the material reality of the procedure, which removes tissue from the uterus, and Carmen's feelings of emptiness, hollowness, and grief. Instead of abundance, food imagery here denotes lack, grief, but also a feeling of dehumanization and objectification as Carmen talks of herself as if she were a piece of food. The medical care Carmen has received was successful in so far as the procedure went well, but it leaves her feeling empty and objectified: it seems that only her body, her shell (like the skin of a melon) has been cared

for, not her psyche. In the passage, food also expresses a form of care that does just the opposite: caring for the psyche, if not necessarily for the body. This is the care Carmen receives from her friend Chichi in the form of food offerings, which are not the most nutritious but stand as symbols of her affection for Carmen, who recognizes the sincerity of Chichi's commitment to support her recovery by feeding her. Even if Chichi does not provide foods that will care for Carmen's body, her gifts clearly convey her affection and as such, they care for Carmen's spirit. While Carmen, who appears quite preoccupied with nutrition, notes the fact that the food Chichi leaves is not very healthy, she still recognizes it as tokens of Chichi's affection, for which she appears very grateful throughout the novel as Chichi keeps offering support in various ways. The nourishing, supportive friendship between the two women, which could appear as anecdotal since the novel centers on Carmen's tumultuous love life with men, proves to be a central focal point of the text as well as a crucial source of comfort, reassurance and meaning in Carmen's life. The image of the cheap leftovers, the only food Chichi was able to bring to Carmen, embodies a central aspect of the novel: these two women's commitment to support and nourish each other in spite of the limitations they might face, improvising and making do in order to continue to care for each other in the face of poverty and marginalization.

Through such images of women feeding others, Mora and Castillo's texts present the bonds between women as nourishing and sustaining, resisting the patriarchal assumption that women's relationships with men should be at the center of their lives. Their representations of women feeding other women are subversive of the dominant norm that suggests women's feeding work should be primarily intended to satisfy their male partners and to bolster the family unit. But they are also subversive because they represent women receiving nurturance and care, which subverts patriarchal norms that suggest that women should be nourishers, without asking for care and nourishment for themselves in return. As Susan Bordo suggests, dominant representations of the work of feeding others suggest that women are "most gratified by feeding and nourishing others rather than themselves" (118). Discourses about women and feeding imply that women supply care, instead of receiving it, as Devault explains: "the gendered relations of feeding and eating seem to convey the

message that giving service is part of being a woman, and receiving it fundamentally part of being a man" (234). Gendered discourses about foodwork promote the association between femininity and putting others' needs before one's own: "women's deference to others [is] an essential element of the gendered nature of feeding work" (Copelton 147). In *Massacre of the Dreamers* (1994), Castillo herself mentions this norm according to which women should be satisfied by nurturing others even if they are not themselves nurtured, "while girls are taught that they must be givers of affection and caretaking, they are not always given the message that they are deserving of receiving nurturing. (…) we must find ways in which we ourselves get nurturance" (204). Part of the feminist dimension of Castillo and Mora's texts resides precisely in this message, that women are deserving of receiving nurturing and care. Through their depictions of women being cared for, but also caring for themselves through food, Castillo and Mora resist the cultural norm that associates femininity with self-sacrifice and that denies women, who are expected to continually care for others, care of the self.

In Castillo and Mora's texts, cooking becomes a tool for women's self-healing, a tool that helps women nurture their bodies and affirm to themselves that they deserve care and love. In her preface to her poetry collection *My Father Was a Toltec* (1995), Castillo wrote that she wanted her poems to be a celebration of self-love and an invitation for women to care for and celebrate themselves (xix). One of the ways Castillo's texts celebrate women's self-love, is by depicting women who practice self-care through food. In *So Far from God* (1993), an essential part of Caridad's healing after the brutal attack she has experienced is the care she learns to provide to herself, including through the teas and foodstuffs she ingests:

> (…) life became a rhythm of scented baths, tea remedies, rubdowns, and general good feeling for Caridad. Her body, already externally repaired from the mutilation it had undergone, now was slowly restored internally by the psychic attentiveness she received from her teacher and which she learned to give to herself. (…) Her 'moon' became regular by taking rue at least three days before she estimated that it was due. Te de anis she drank for anxiety and she also prescribed it on a regular basis for her sister Fe. Romero, the woman's herb, she also took a cup of each day. She kept to a diet of mostly fruits and vegetables; once a week she and doña Felicia shared a small piece of medium-rare hormone-free steak for added protein. (63-4)

From a site of woundedness and violence, Caridad's body becomes a site of healing and care, through the nurturing gestures she makes towards herself. Caridad's eating habits become part and parcel of her recovery because they nurture and heal her body, but also her psyche, as they symbolize her love and care for herself. Just like her mother Sofi, who used food to convey her love for her daughter Esperanza by preparing her favorite foods, Caridad uses food as a non-verbal language, to signify to herself that she is loved and worthy of care and attention. This message contrasts with the lack of compassion shown to her by her community, who blamed her for her own attack because she was known to enjoy going out and meeting men. Caridad's practice of self-nourishment constitutes a form of resistance against the implicit message she has been given, that she is not deserving of care because she is a woman who enjoys her sexuality freely. Castillo's description of self-care and self-love resonates with feminist scholarship, especially Black feminist scholarship, that "rescues self-love from pathology and instead imagines it as politically, erotically, and creatively generative" (Green and Bey 108). In Castillo's text, the practice of caring for the self and loving oneself is similarly presented as generative and as a political gesture of self-valuation against the sexism Caridad has experienced, especially through her community's reaction to the attack. The gesture of feeding herself with care becomes a reparative practice, in the face of society's attempts at devaluing her personhood. It is also a gesture that resists the norms of femininity that discourage women from caring for themselves even in circumstances when their bodies are damaged and in profound need of healing. As Gayle Sulik has shown in her study of women with cancer, even when women's bodies are ill, wounded, and in urgent need of care, the pressure for women to tend to others first remains strong, and can lead women to neglect themselves, "The strong cultural connection between femininity and nurturance works in conjunction with norms of female sacrifice to construct an ethic of caring that impedes women's care work for the self" (869). For the character of Caridad, so badly mutilated and hurt, letting go of those expectations and putting her own healing first is crucial to her recovery. Caridad gradually learns to think of care, not as something that is only done for others (as many women are encouraged to view care) but as a practice that is also done for the self: she is used to nurturing others (she used to work as a nurse and has

now become a traditional healer), but the text suggests that her healing depends on her learning to nurture herself. Mora also portrays a woman who learns to nurture herself, in the poem "Lydia" (2018):

> I buy a potato,
>
> to practice cooking
>
> for one.
>
> ………………………
>
> I set my place
>
> while the potato softens,
>
> then sit, study his chair.
>
> I fold my sadness
>
> in clean creases, over
>
> and over, compressing
>
> until it's the size of a pit
>
> I store inside.
>
> The bell calls me to dinner.
>
> I mash sour
>
> cream, butter, salt, pepper
>
> into the clouds I feed myself. (*Encantado* 21)

In this poetic description of cooking for one, the gesture of folding the potatoes with the cream and butter to create the dish parallels the imagined gesture by which the speaker

folds her sadness into smaller and smaller units: the material transformation that underlies cooking is accompanied by an emotional transformation for the speaker, who seems to progressively let go of her sadness and heal as she nourishes her body. Enumerating the ingredients that go into the making of those mashed potatoes, the poem becomes a quasi-recipe, a recipe for healing (the self), that could inspire readers to replicate the speaker's gestures and to feed themselves "clouds" of mashed potatoes.

As exemplified by this poem, with its loose recipe, Mora and Castillo not only depict characters who are learning to care for themselves and nourish themselves; they also encourage and help their readers to engage in this practice of self-care, by providing recipes, or quasi-recipes. Mora gives her readers a loose recipe for mashed potatoes, framed by poetic reflections on the healing and curing potential of cooking for and nurturing oneself. Castillo also provides a recipe for self-care centered around food in her collection of essays *Massacre of the Dreamers* (1994). At the end of a chapter concerned with healing and traditional forms of medicine, she includes a recipe for a curative bath prepared with lemons, limes and garlics, stating that "Baños are a remedy for both physical and emotional ills" and that "The following 'recipe' may be used to cleanse the self of negative energies in the environment, to rid one of an unsettling feeling, or regularly, for chronic anxiety" (160). This recipe encourages readers to take care of themselves through food, as an ingredient in a ritual meant to heal both physical and emotional wounds. By including such instructions, and by portraying female characters who learn to feed and care for themselves, Mora and Castillo's texts enact a caring and curing mission: they encourage women readers to nourish themselves and reclaim their right to be nurtured by resisting patriarchal norms that associate femininity with self-sacrifice and caring for others. Food can become, they suggest, a positive, healing force in the lives of women. In that respect, their literary production aligns with the field of feminist food studies which is precisely devoted to exploring women's multifaceted relationships to food, underlining the link between food and women's oppression while also going beyond it to recognize the ways in which food can come to play a positive role in women's lives, especially when they reclaim the culinary sphere to resist and subvert the patriarchal norm (Avakian and Haber; Parker et al.). Mora and Castillo's texts

resonate with feminist food studies as they recognize the connection between food and gendered oppression, but also the possibility that food can play a positive role in women's lives by nurturing bonds between women and by being a tool for self-care.

Conclusion

According to María Claudia André, many Chicana and Latina writers reclaim the space of the kitchen, which has often been the focal point of women's oppression, to turn it into an atelier or a laboratory, where gendered conventions and norms are transfigured, leading to utopian concoctions for women's emancipation and pleasure. She explains, "Like a homeland without borders, the safe environment of a feminist kitchen provides a space where gender is no longer a given image defined by the masculine, but a means of exploration of a whole spectrum of sensual, sexual, and textual possibilities" (17). André's insights on the role that food and the kitchen play in Chicana literature apply to Mora and Castillo, whose texts also constitute metaphorical feminist kitchens, from which gender is subverted: anchored within the domestic space, their texts do not repudiate the culinary realm entirely, but transform its meanings and its gendered associations. In the utopian, feminist kitchen of their texts, the act of feeding others becomes liberated from the patriarchal norms that have often been associated with it and transforms into a tool for nurturing women through relationships or through acts of self-love that affirm women's right to have their appetites met and their hungers satisfied.

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