

Spanish American Women Writers: Simmering Identity Over a Low Fire

Ksenija Bilbija
University of Wisconsin-Madison

“... for example, food is to be eaten; but it also serves to signify (conditions, circumstances, tastes); food is therefore a signifying system, and must one day be described as such.”

—Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*

“One man’s cookbook is another woman’s soft porn.”

—Margaret Atwood

“Introducing *The CanLit Foodbook*”

When Virginia Woolf argues in *A Room of One’s Own* for an appropriate and pertinent place for a woman, she never mentions the kitchen as a possible space in which her intellectual liberation from the patriarchal system could be enacted.¹ At first glance, this area had always been assigned to a wife, servant, daughter, slave, mother, grandmother, sister or an aunt. For feminists, the kitchen has come to symbolize the world that traditionally marginalized and limited a woman. It represents a space associated with repetitive work, lacking any “real” creativity, and having no possibility for the fulfillment of women’s existential needs, individualization or self-expression. This alienating kitchen is beautifully and convincingly used as a starting point in Rosario Castellanos’ story “Lección de cocina” ‘Cooking Lesson.’ A nameless narrator, easily identified as a middle-class woman who has just returned from her honeymoon, ponders her sexual and culinary

initiations. She is faced with the apparently easy task of frying a steak, but the red meat that has been taken out of the freezer resembles her own flesh that has just gone through the first sexual experience. The setting of a modern, spotless white kitchen is juxtaposed with a bloody steak and the recent bleeding of her own body on the wedding bed. Along with gender differences the protagonist questions the logic of an authority which is not her own, but imposed by those who have the actual power—her husband and the patriarchal order that he stands for:

Es también el aspecto, rígido por el frío; es el color que se manifiesta ahora que he desbaratado el paquete. Rojo, como si estuviera a punto de echarse a sangrar.

Del mismo color teníamos la espalda, mi marido y yo, después de las orgiásticas asoleadas en las playas de Acapulco. El podía darse el lujo de “portarse como quien es” y tenderse boca abajo para que no le rozara la piel dolorida. Pero yo, abnegada mujercita mexicana que nació como la paloma para el nido, sonreía a semejanza de Cuauhtémoc en el suplicio cuando dijo “mi lecho no es de rosas y se volvió a callar.” Boca arriba soportaba no sólo mi propio peso sino el de él, encima del mío. (Castellanos 162-63)

It’s also the appearance of it, frozen stiff; it’s the color that shows now that I’ve ripped open the package. Red, as if it were just about to start bleeding.

Our backs were that same color, my husband’s and mine, after our orgiastic sunbathing on the beaches of Acapulco. He could afford the luxury of “behaving like the man he is” and stretch out face down to avoid rubbing his painful skin . . . But I, self-sacrificing little Mexican wife, born like a dove to the nest, smiled like Cuauhtémoc under torture on the rack when he said, “My bed is not made of roses,” and fell silent. Face up, I bore not only my own weight but also his on top of me. (Castellanos 208)

Her own flesh consumed by her husband and the frozen piece of meat labeled “for frying” have both been assigned strict and similar destinies: burning. She remembers the old and man-pleasing recipe for happiness that calls for “la femeneidad que solicita indulgencia para sus errores” ‘femininity that begs indulgence for her errors’ destined for “la derrota [que] me garantiza el triunfo por la sinuosa vía que recorrieron mis antepasadas, las humildes, las que no abrían los labios sino para asentir . . .” (171) ‘my defeat [which] guarantees my triumph by the winding path that my grandmothers took, the humble ones, the ones who didn’t open their mouths except to say yes . . .’ (215). Nevertheless, the protagonist does not follow that recipe and the lesson that the title of the story suggests is not the phallogocentric one. Instead of completing the prearranged identification process and fulfilling the laws of patriarchy, she establishes her own difference and opens the possibility of reconstructing a more authentic self. This interior process of self-discovery parallels the act of cooking and transforming the frozen piece of meat. The new identity that the protagonist has achieved has the metaphoric value of the gold that medieval alchemists hoped to extract from base metals.

The parallel between the kitchen and the alchemist’s laboratory is an obvious one. However, while the latter space is traditionally associated with male endeavors to transform inorganic matter into life, either in the form of the philosopher’s stone or gold, the former has been tied to women and the processing of raw into cooked. Furthermore, the alchemist’s desire to create and nurture life without female participation—the production of the *homunculus*—indicates a strong inclination towards completely appropriating the female biological role of mothering. And yet, the ultimate goal of both is the metaphoric overcoming of death: while the alchemists attempted to find the path to the soul’s eternity, the cooks supplied the necessary nourishment to the body.

One of the most influential Latin American novels of the twentieth century, Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) juxtaposes the woman’s kitchen and the laboratory of an alchemist as two central spaces in the mythical realm of the house, and by extension, of the nation. There are two types of modernity that

overlap in García Márquez's vertical view of the five centuries of Latin American existence: while Ursula Iguarán, the stereotypical nurturer of the Buendía family, focuses her power on controlling food preparation and active production—industrialization—of little candy animals, puddings, meringues and bread, her husband José Arcadio Buendía, enchanted by the prospect of technological advancement—films, telephone, gramophone and photographs—spends days theorizing about the world, and constructing weapons in the space from which the destruction of Macondo would come. For it is precisely in the male alchemist's lab that the recipe of the family's identity is deciphered and the Buendías erased from existence without being given "the second opportunity on earth." This Manichean and deterministic view of gender roles is further emphasized by some of García Márquez's statements, such as the one given in an interview to Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza: "Creo que las mujeres sostienen el mundo en vilo, para que no se desbarate mientras los hombres tratan de empujar la historia." (79) 'I think women keep the world going and keep everything from falling apart while men try to push history forward' (76).

A different, quite parodic and critical gender perspective has been presented in several recently published (cook)books by Latin American women writers. Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate: Novela de entregas mensuales con recetas, amores y remedios caseros* (1989) (*Like Water for Chocolate: A Novel in Monthly Installments with Recipes, Romances and Home Remedies*) and Silvia Plager's *Como papas para varenikes: Novela contraentregas mensuales, en tarjeta o efectivo. Romances apasionados, recetas judías con poder afrodisíaco y chimentos* (*Like Potatoes for Varenike: A Novel in Monthly Installments, Cash or Charge. Passionate Romances, Jewish Recipes With Aphrodisiac Power and Gossips*) (1994) have tried to revise stereotypical power relations and interpretations of male and female identity symbols.² After all, alchemy and cooking probably did not always have rooms of their own, but may have shared the same transformative space.

In these novels the mythical, homogenized wholeness of Latin American identity posited by García Márquez, along with the exploration of its origins vis-a-vis Europe, becomes

fragmented. The power of medieval alchemy, introduced by a vagabond tribe of gypsies who paradoxically bring the spirit of Western modernity, is parodically replaced by different ethnic cuisines: Aztec in the case of the Mexican writer and Jewish in the Argentine example. Both gastrotexts can be labeled as postmodern in the sense that they mimic mass-mediated explorations of gender identities.³ Their surprisingly similar subtitles replicate the format of a monthly magazine whose readers are housewives, or to use a more expressive, literal translation from the Spanish term *amas de casa*, mistresses of the home. *Like Water for Chocolate* is composed of twelve parts clearly identified by months and their corresponding dishes, with the list of ingredients heading the "Preparation" section. *Like Potatoes for Varenike* has a less embedded structure: the actual recipe (ingredients and preparation) is completely separated from the melodramatic text, but the technique and the "little" secrets of how to actually make a successful and potent dish are in the individual chapters that follow the love life of the main protagonist Cathy Goldsmith.⁴ The main body of the text ends with an apocryphal "Kama Sutra for Gluttons," a pseudo-scientific exploration of different sexual maneuvers with appropriate food recipes. By amalgamating the novelistic genre with cookbook recipes, Esquivel and Plager actualize a postmodern blurring of distinctions between high and low cultural values. Both writers insist on the cover that their respective books are actually novels, but they also subvert this code of reference by adding a lengthy subtitle that recalls and imitates the particular realms of popular culture that are associated with women. Although both of the books under consideration here are authored by women, I am not making the claim that recipe-writing is an archetypically female activity. As a matter of fact, by making a connection with alchemy, I would like to suggest that both activities have a common androgynous origin in the past.

Esquivel's book was originally published in Mexico in 1989, became a national bestseller in 1990, continued its success with a movie version that garnered many international film awards, and in 1992 swept across the English speaking world—primarily the North American market—as a New York Times bestseller for several weeks. Plager's book came

out in Argentina in April of 1994 and the public is still digesting it. Critics too. The editors' blurb on the jacket suggests that in *Like potatoes for varenike* the writer "nos muestra sus dotes culinarias y humorísticas, a través de una divertida parodia de la exitosa *Como agua para chocolate*" 'shows us her culinary and humorous talents through an entertaining parody of the successful *Like Water for Chocolate*.' This statement is very significant for several reasons: first of all it represents the female writer *primarily* as a talented cook; second, it invokes the model, recognizes its success and appeals to the rights of cultural reproduction; and third, it claims that the book that the reader has in hand is actually a parody of that model.

Invoking the culinary expertise of the fiction writer, specially if the writer is a woman, fits all too well into the current, end of the century, wave of neo-conservatism. It also feeds into the postmodern confusion between reality and its simulation. Fiction is required to have the qualities of reality and reality is defined as what we see on television or read about in the newspaper; that "reality," however, is physically and psychologically fragmented and can only offer an illusion of wholeness. The avant garde insistence on the power of the imagination is giving way to research, "objectivity" and "expertise." Personal confession and "true stories" are valued higher than "imagined" ones and experience—in this case the culinary one—becomes the basis of identity and the source of discursive production. No wonder that the genre of the nineties is testimonial writing!⁵

Esquivel's book has received the same treatment. Most of the review articles published about *Like Water for Chocolate* start with a description of Esquivel's own kitchen and the confirmation of her "real" talent for cooking. An interview in *New Age Journal* is particularly explicit about this and the reader can actually hear the interviewer Mark Seal chew—between the lines—the enchiladas with mole sauce that Laura Esquivel made for the occasion.⁶ "Laura Esquivel is in her element, the kitchen" he writes and soon after adds that "[she] has put the men joining her on this sunny noon into some sort of crazy spell." And as if actual culinary expertise really was a *sine qua non* of her good writing, and the publisher

the editors of the English version of the book even warn the readers that “The recipes in this book are based on traditional Mexican recipes and have not been tested by the publisher.”⁷ Surprisingly enough for our era of truthful acknowledgement, copyright law and royalties, the question of the original producer/creator of the recipes used in the novel has not been raised yet.⁸

This leads right into the second problem, the invocation of the model and call for cultural reproduction. Actually, maybe Minh-ha’s concept of “recirculation” would be better suited, because it seems that the structure of *Like Potatoes for Varenike* is remarkably similar—not only in terms of the title and the subtitle—to its acknowledged and lucrative model. On the other hand, isn’t the whole idea of the cookbook recipe based on sharing? And, if Esquivel’s book made such a great impact on the reading audience, why not use this same recipe for success? In addition, to make the argument even more problematic, who is the “original” creator of those recipes anyway? In Esquivel’s case, indigenous elements such as corn, turkey and chiles are prepared with Spanish (Arabic!) raisins, almonds, pomegranate seeds and cinnamon. Dishes such as “Quail in Rose Petal Sauce,” “Champondongo and Turkey Mole with Almonds and Sesame Seeds” reflect Mexico’s mestizo identity. In Plager’s example, the cultural menu reflects mostly Eastern European Jewish cuisine with its matzos, beets, eggplant and potatoes, and therefore dishes like varenike, borscht and latkes. Not much in common with Argentine national cuisine—besides the love of pasta—which in the minds of Argentinians belongs to them as much as to Italians. Mexican cuisine, then, reflects the process of merging and blending between the indigenous and the conquering Spanish forces, while the Jewish cuisine in Argentina shows the opposite tendency, that of preserving its “difference” and not giving in to absorption and coercion by the dominant Hispano-Italian culture. This tendency could be identified as gastronomic nationalism.

As the story in *Like Potatoes for Varenike* unfolds it becomes clear that the main focus is literally a stolen recipe. Told in the third person, but with the touch of intimacy so typical of cookbooks, the narrator introduces Cathy Rosenfeld, a voluptuous widow who has a successful catering business

and the title of “the queen of *latkes*.” The competing enterprise that is just being established needs some of her recipes and the co-owner, the youngest daughter of the Rastropovich family, is set to use all her feminine wiles in order to take Cathy’s glory away. At one point she actually feigns dizziness and requests to be taken not to the restroom but to Cathy’s kitchen where she slips a piece of paper (recipe!?) down her dress. Later on, this same “intruder” will sabotage a reception catered by Cathy Rosenfeld by mixing a few poorly-made and spoiled pieces of “Ma’Amoul” into the rest of the food. This produces a scandal of international proportions and Cathy is stripped of her identity as “the queen of *latkes*.” At the end, with the help of another cook, Saul Steinberg, with whom Cathy experiences a passion comparable only to cooking, the Rosenfeld business is cleared of all wrongdoing and the real villains are revealed. The culmination of the stealing and the actual public dethroning of “the queen of *latkes*” coincide with Cathy’s love affair with Saul, who is married. In a sense, the recipe piracy is parallel with the robbery of the husband, which also vaguely echoes the plot of *Like Water for Chocolate*, where Pedro “is stolen” from the love of his life, Tita—the main protagonist and the cook—and forced to marry her older sister Rosaura.

I entered this long discussion about “who stole what from whom” after pointing to the fact that all the recipes are presented as if they belong to someone. The person that possesses them is in neither case the writer of the books I discuss. Cathy Rosenfeld says about the Rastropovich thief:

pero que esa ladrona no se ilusionara, que ya vería que siempre está la pizca, el toque, la inspiración, la pincelada, la improvisación, el detalle, el gusto y que la diferencia hacía al artista y al impostor.

but the thief should not have any illusions because she will soon realize that there is a hint, a touch, the inspiration, the glaze, the improvisation, the detail, the taste, and the difference marks the artist and the impostor. (92)

But the actual difference between an “artist” and an “impostor” cannot be established so easily. How is it possible to claim ownership of an original recipe? Does printing fix its form and make it “belong” to someone? Even if this were the case, many cookbooks include suggestions such as “add spices or salt according to taste.” Would that make every actualization and execution of the recipe an “original” product? Isn’t this endless recreation the essence of the recipe form? Are they considered symbols of a nation, common property of all the members that identify themselves with the particular community, and who were, in addition, culturally shaped by its mores? That would mean that as long as a Jew is writing about Jewish food it is within the acceptable limits of narrative propriety. Interestingly, the appendix is constructed around the “expert’s” voice whose research investigates “ethnic minorities.” In Esquivel’s case, a grandniece is rereading her ancestor’s cookbook and reconstructing her experience. The original moment of recipe construction/creation is hidden in the past and the importance lies now in its recreation and regrouping of the cultural determinants, in the preservation of the ethnic self and resistance to the pressures associated with the larger overpowering majority: Jews in Argentina and the indigenous population in contemporary Mexico. The recipe is heard, shown and transmitted from one kitchen to another, from mother to daughter, and sources, names and identities are all contained in that demanding tone that tells how many onions and tomatoes will be necessary for a tasty champondongo.⁹ The personal “I” of “my recipe” formula is seldom used in either one of the books. The pleasure is in the repetition and the fact is that the repetition is never the same because the kitchen and the recipe-teller are always different. This is similar to the storytelling process Trinh T. Minh-ha describes in her book *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*:

The story is me, neither me nor mine. It does not really belong to me, and while I feel greatly responsible for it, I also enjoy the irresponsibility of the pleasure obtained through the process of transferring. Pleasure in the copy, pleasure in the reproduction. No repetition can ever be

identical, but my story carries with it their stories, their history, and our story repeats itself endlessly despite our persistence in denying it. (122)

It is the pleasure of chewing the words, salivating them and spitting them out, of digesting them, of feeding them to another endlessly until one can reach deep into memory and say: "I swallowed it with my mother's milk."

The gastrotexes that I am discussing deal with gendered identities in a truly postmodern fashion: by situating the female protagonist in the kitchen and by literally allowing her to produce only a "kitchen table talk" spiced with melodrama instead of grandiose philosophical contraptions, their authors "install and destabilize convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionally and, of course, to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past" (Hutcheon, *A Poetics*, 23). In that sense the feminist discourse becomes paradoxical: instead of insisting on the liberational dimension of feminism which wants to get woman out of the kitchen, the postmodernist return to the discourses of power leads Esquivel and Plager to reclaim the kitchen as a not necessarily gender exclusive space of "one's own." Both writers rely heavily on traditional cultural practices and subvert the patriarchal values associated with masculinity and femininity.

Nevertheless, the question that still remains to be answered is the one of parodic intention of Plager's novel in regard to Esquivel's text, as suggested by the editors on the book jacket. I find Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody as an "imitation with critical difference" (*A Theory*, 36) very appropriate, but I am somewhat puzzled when looking at Plager's novel through such a prism. The title of *Like Potatoes for Varenike* already syntactically repeats Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*. The same goes for the recipe structure of the book. Furthermore, Esquivel's book is itself already a parody of clichés that surround female domestic lives. The critique of patriarchy is present as a parody of the magic realist novels a-la-*One Hundred Years of Solitude* in regard to representations of the traditional Latin American family.

More than parodying Esquivel's novel, Plager shares the same codes of representation, uses a dialogic "double directed discourse" and claims the newly acknowledged feminist tradition.¹⁰ She situates her protagonists in a different context—Jewish Argentina—and makes the relationship between feeding/eating and sexuality even more pronounced: the novel ends with an anonymous manuscript that ridicules the Oriental stereotype of successful lovemaking. The well known recipes in *Kama Sutra* are revised into "Kama Sutra for Gluttons" where participants need not be skinny and nimble.

In that sense it is not an exaggeration to say that *Like Water for Chocolate* legitimizes the discourse of the kitchen and of cookbook recipes, while Plager, by continuing her own exploration of a different ethnicity, *confirms* this literary tradition. Cooking and feeding become the source of "true" power, and food penetrates the bodies of "others," determining their emotional responses and well-being. Although this may sound like witchcraft, like offering a delicious but poisonous apple to innocent Snow White, we should not forget that this is a patriarchal recipe, and consequently it gives only a partial version of the story. The apple is also a fruit of immortality and transformation associated with the Goddess.

This ambiguity and tension has been explored by psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, who suggests that the mother's breast is the focus not only of oral libidinal impulses, but also of destructive ones. The symbol of the breast—representing the mother—is divided into "good" and "bad," which is the basis for a "paranoid-schizoid position." This ambivalence can later be recognized in the individual's development of symbolic structures and consequently, his/her responses to culture.

Feeding is posited as an inherently female activity. The mother's breast becomes a privileged and preferred object of both love and food. The act of sucking, which will later turn into a kiss—that is, the stylized replica of sucking—establishes a bond between the infant and the (m)other. It creates primary human identity. The child is separated from the uterine world in which there is no split between the desire—hunger—and its fulfillment—eating. The non-verbal, emotional, instinctual language developed during the (truncated) union with the mother is what French psychoanalyst and critic

Julia Kristeva defines as *le semiotique*.¹¹ This is the unconscious part of language, the one “sucked with the mother’s milk,” the part that gets repressed upon the successful passage through the Oedipal complex and entry into the verbal, paradoxically called the mother tongue. For the mother, feeding (and writing!) turn into giving oneself in order to preserve the other. As milk gives way to words, recipes for life and food are created. Not rigid formulas—although this is not impossible, as Esquivel indicates with the character of Mamá Elena—but showcases flexible, reader oriented texts that allow one to “flavor according to one’s taste.”¹²

Esquivel and Plager construct texts that do not fit into the traditional discourse of maternity. *Like Water for Chocolate* is constructed around the mother, who by invoking social rules, requires her youngest daughter Tita to reject any prospects of independent life, and take care of her until death. After Tita’s premature birth on the kitchen table, “entre los olores de una sopa de fideos que se estaba cocinando, los del tomillo, el laurel, el cilantro, el de la leche hervida, el de los ajos y, por supuesto, el de la cebolla,” (Esquivel 13) ‘amid the smells of simmering noodle soup, thyme, bayleaves, and cilantro, steamed milk, garlic, and, of course, onion,’ (Esquivel 6) Mamá Elena does not satisfy the baby’s need for food, and Tita has to turn to Nacha, the cook, with whom she establishes the successful object relation (objektbeziehung). The proto object—the breast—determines the relationship that the individual will have with other objects in the course of life, is the foundation upon which the construction of individual subjectivity takes place. In this carnivalesque farce, the mother becomes a fairytale-like stepmother, while Tita, who will never feed her own child, becomes the nurturer for all in need. She appropriates the space of the kitchen, transforming it into the center of her power which alters the dominant patriarchal family structure. Hence, her emotions and well being determine the course of other’s lives and she literally shares herself with the outside world: when she makes the cake for her sister’s wedding to Pedro—with whom she was planning to get married—her tears of desperation mix with sugar, flour, eggs and lime peel. This later provokes melancholy, sadness and finally uncontrollable vomiting among the guests:

Una inmensa nostalgia se adueñaba de todos los presentes en cuanto le daban el primer bocado al pastel. Inclusive Pedro, siempre tan propio, hacía un esfuerzo tremendo por contener las lágrimas. Y Mamá Elena, que ni cuando su esposo murió había derramado una infeliz lágrima, lloraba silenciosamente. Y eso no fue todo, el llanto fue el primer síntoma de una intoxicación rara que tenía algo que ver con una gran melancolía y frustración que hizo presa de todos los invitados y los hizo terminar en el patio, los corrales y los baños añorando cada uno el amor de su vida. Ni uno solo escapó del hechizo y sólo algunos afortunados llegaron a tiempo a los baños; los que no, participaron de la vomitona colectiva que se organizó en pleno patio. (Esquivel, 44)

The moment they took their first bite of the cake, everyone was flooded with a great wave of longing. Even Pedro, usually so proper, was having trouble holding back his tears. Mama Elena, who hadn't shed a single tear over her husband's death, was sobbing silently. But the weeping was just the first symptom of a strange intoxication—an acute attack of pain and frustration—that seized the guests and scattered them across the patio and the grounds and in the bathrooms, all of them wailing over lost love. Everyone there, every last person, fell under this spell, and not very many of them made it to the bathrooms in time—those who didn't joined the collective vomiting that was going on all over the patio. (Esquivel, 39)

The somatic reaction provoked by Tita's bodily fluids actually shows how the daughter undermines the mother's authority and prohibition. Something similar happens with "Quail in Rose Petal Sauce": Tita decides to use the rose that Pedro gave her as a sign of his eternal love, and prepares a meal that will awake Gertrudis' uncontrollable sexual appetite. By introducing the discourse of sexuality without necessarily relating it to marriage and by nurturing without procreating, Esquivel opens for discussion the ever present topics of feminine self-sacrifice and subordination that have traditionally been promoted by patriarchal literature.

Although Plager's examples are less spectacular in terms of parodic magic-realist exaggeration, she nonetheless clearly establishes a psycho-somatic relationship involving food and emotional power. Her text evolves around a successful mother-daughter connection, and it relates the sexual attraction that ripens between a mature couple, a business-owner Cathy Rosenfeld and her chef, Saul Steinberg. For example, during the preparation of "Latkes with eggplant" the air in the kitchen was so saturated with their erotic energy, temptations and occasional touches, that after eating them, the guests at the bat-mitzvah behaved as if they had swallowed the essence of love potion:

Que la mamá de Jessica se estuviera besando en la boca con su con cuñado y que la dulce niña del *bat-mitzvá* anduviera escondiéndose debajo de las mesas con uno de sus primos y que el abuelo revoloteara entre las damas metiéndoles cubitos de hielo o flores en el escote y el toqueteo reinara, era previsible. También era previsible que durante el baile de la *tijera* los hombres hicieran ronda alrededor de las mujeres y que estas fueran para atrás cuando ellos iban para adelante. Encontrar un baño desocupado resultaba imposible y los rincones lucían el adorno de parejas incrustadas en su ángulo. En los guardarropas los abrigos cobraban vida y, cada tanto, un brazo o una pierna asomaba por entre los percheros. Amigos y parientes fraternizaban olvidando alianzas matrimoniales, antiguos rencores y promesas de amor eterno. Allí reinaba la fugacidad del deseo y la eternidad navegaba por los aparatos digestivos con su consiguiente destino.

That Jessica's mother would be kissing her brother-in-law's brother on the mouth and that the sweet *Bat-Mitzvah* would be hiding under the tables with one of her cousins, and that the grandfather would flutter amongst the ladies, dropping ice cubes or flowers down their dresses, and that fondling would reign supreme was foreseeable. It was also foreseeable that during the *scissor* dance, the men would form a circle around the women and that the women would take a step backward when the men stepped forward.

Finding an empty bathroom was impossible and every corner of the room displayed couples incrustated in its angular embrace. In the closets, coats sprang to life and every so often an arm or a leg peeked out between the hangers. Friends and relatives were mingling, forgetting marriage vows, old disputes and promises of undying love. The fleetingness of lust was everywhere and eternity navigated through digestive tracts with its unavoidable destiny. (Plager 21)

By breaking the boundaries between body and soul and by showing that they are actually one, both Esquivel and Plager successfully undermine the duality so embedded in Western culture. They—latter day apprentices of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz—go against Plato and his all too well known argument that the soul can best reflect if there are no distractions from the body. They dismantle that same duality that puts masculinity on one side and femininity on the other. *Like Water for Chocolate* and *Like Potatoes for Varenike* unlock the kitchen door and present us its most common inhabitants—women. Then, they leave this door wide open and invite man to share. In Esquivel's version sergeant Treviño is the one who helps Gertrudis decipher the recipe for cream fritters and in Plager's book Saul and Kathy work together from the beginning in meal preparation. By going against the rigid patriarchal binary thinking they, in Derridean fashion, reveal that there is no "transcendental signified." There is no original recipe either, nor original cook. It is all about transcending ego boundaries through dialogic, polyphonic texts, emphasizing the importance of nurturing, both for man and women, going against sexual oppression and connecting those "honey-tongued" people who are not only making their cake, but are ready to eat it too. Let that cake be "Almíbar sencillo" ("Simple Syrup"), like Marta de Arevalo suggests in her poetry book *El arte de guisar amores* (*The Art of Love Cooking*):

Para todos.

Con la cabeza fría
y el corazón confiado

entrar en la gran olla del mundo
 y revolver con optimismo
 hasta encontrar
 un espíritu (con su físico, claro)
 generoso
 cordial
 y dulce-
 mente compatible
 con nuestra necesidad
 de dos,
 para compartir
 la mesa de la dicha.
 (Arevalo, 100)

For everyone.
 With a cool head
 and a trusting heart
 enter the great kettle of the world
 and stir with enthusiasm
 until you find
 a spirit (along with its body, of course)
 generous
 cordial
 and sweet-
 ly compatible
 with our need
 to be a couple
 that shares
 the table of happiness.¹³

October, 1994

Notes

1. Virginia Woolf does make a very interesting reference to food and recipes and their importance as a literary topic: "It is a curious fact that novelists have a way of making us believe that luncheon parties are invariably memorable for something very witty that was said, or for something very wise that was done. But they seldom spare a word for what was eaten" (10).

<https://newprairiepress.org/stcl/vol20/iss1/8>

DOI: 10.4148/2334-4415.1384

2. All the translations of Plager's novel are my own.
3. The term "gastrotexte" has been coined by Michel Rybalka. (Bevan 3).
4. The definition of the recipe as an embedded discourse has been explored by Susan J. Leonardi (340).
5. The critical attention given to Guatemalan Rigoberta Menchú is just one of many examples of the identity constructed on a particular experience. An excellent theoretical article that discusses the recent abundant use of the "confessional mode" of writing and the emergence of the feminist "I" is Susan David Bernstein, "Confessing Feminist Theory: What's 'I' Got to Do with It?," *Hypatia*, 7, No. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 120-47.
6. Mark Seal, "Laura Esquivel's Healing Journey," *New Age Journal*, June 1994, pp. 72-76.
7. The publisher does have the copyright to the English version but not the "responsibility" for the content!
8. My suspicion that Latin America was not an isolated case was recently confirmed when Judith Rossner's new novel *Olivia or the Weight of the Past* was reviewed in New York Times Book Review by a restaurant critic (!) who begins her evaluation of the book by stating that "Judith Rossner is an accomplished novelist, but I would guess that she is not much of a cook" (Reichl, 15).
9. Anne Goldman problematizes the recipe-sharing activity in her excellent article, insisting on its social context and asks a very pertinent question: "When does recipe sharing, that is, become recipe borrowing, with only a coerced 'consent' from the domestic help" (Goldman, 172). Although I very much agree with Goldman's point, the texts that I am discussing emphasize different problems associated with recipe production and the act of cooking.
10. Ana María Shua, one of the most well known Argentine writers, also published in 1993 a similar (cook)book entitled *Risas y emociones de la cocina judía*. Although Shua is not explicitly claiming that her work is a novel, it could also be identified as such. Earlier, in 1979 in Mexico, Margo Glantz published *Las mil y una calorías. Novela dietética*, a book that Luisa Valenzuela defined as her most biographic piece of writing (Valenzuela, 92).
11. In her introduction to *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Julia Kristeva defines *le semiotique* as "the actual organization, or disposition, within the body, of instinctual drives as they affect language and its practice, in dialectal conflict with *le symbolique*" (18).

12. The problem of Mamá Elena's identity enters into the realm of the identification with the aggressor.

13. The translation of Arevalo's poem is my own. I would, however, like to thank Susana Chávez Silverman for a valuable e-mail discussion during the process of writing this essay.

Works Cited

Arevalo de, Marta. *El arte de guisar amores*. Montevideo: Ediciones de la Plaza, 1993.

Bernstein, Susan David. "Confessing Feminist Theory: What's 'I' Got to Do with It?." *Hypatia*, 7, No. 2 (Spring 1992): 120-147.

Bevan, David, ed. *Literary Gastronomy*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988.

Castellanos, Rosario. "Cooking Lesson." *A Rosario Castellanos Reader*. Trans. Maureen Ahern. Austin: U Of Texas P, 1988. 207-215 Trans. of "Lección de cocina" *Album de familia*. Mexico: Joaquín Mortiz, 1977. 161-71

Esquivel, Laura. *Like Water for Chocolate: A Novel in Monthly Installments with Recipes, Romances and Home Remedies*. Trans. Carol Christensen and Thomas Christensen. New York: Doubleday, 1992. Trans. of *Como agua para chocolate: Novela de entregas mensuales con recetas, amores y remedios caseros*. México: Planeta, 1989.

García Márquez, Gabriel. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Trans. Gregory Rabassa. New York: Harper & Row Publisher, 1970.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. New York and London: Routledge, 1985.

_____. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York and London: Routledge, 1988.

Klein, Melanie. *Envy and Gratitude: A Study of Unconscious Sources*. London: Tavistock Publications, 1957.

Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1980.

Leonardi, Susan. "Recipes for Reading: Summer Pasta, Lobster à la Riseholme, and Key Lime Pie." *PMLA*, 104, No. 3 (1989): 340-47.

Mendoza, Plinio Apuleyo. *The Fragrance of Guava*. Trans. Ann Wright. London: Verso Editions, 1983. Trans. of *El olor de la guayaba*. Colombia, Bogotá: La oveja negra, 1982.

- Minh-ha, Trinh T. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1989.
- Plager, Silvia. *Como papas para varenikes: Novela contraentregas mensuales, en tarjeta o efectivo. Romances apasionados, recetas judías con poder afrodisíaco y chimentos*. Buenos Aires: Beas Ediciones, 1994.
- Reichl, Ruth. "Neglected Daughters." *New York Times Book Review*. August 21, 1994: 15.
- Seal, Mark. "Laura Esquivel's Healing Journey." *New Age Journal*. May/June 1994: 72-76.
- Shua, Ana María. *Risas y emociones de la cocina judía*. Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Shalom, 1993.
- Valenzuela, Luisa. "Mis brujas favoritas." *Theory and Practice of Feminist Literary Criticism*. Ed. Gabriela Mora and Karen S. Van Hoft. Ypsilanti, Michigan: Editorial Bilingüe, Bilingual Press: 1982.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929.