

## **Textes et contextes**

ISSN : 1961-991X

: Université Bourgogne Europe

15-2 | 2020

Les femmes américaines entre féminisation du politique et politisation de l'intime – Le détective en famille

# 'This Unlocked House': The Intrusion of Politics in Contemporary Chicana Autobiography

15 December 2020.

**Méliné Kasparian**

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PREO

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## 1. Introduction

- 1 Autobiography has been used by Chicana<sup>1</sup> writers, who belong to a historically marginalized population, as a conduit for resistance and a political weapon, as Juan Velasco has aptly noted, "the political intervention and the impact of Chicana/o autobiography's revisionist

concept is measured by its attempt to name the topography of horror and trauma that is located in Chicana/o experience" (2004: 321). For Chicana writers Pat Mora and Cherríe Moraga, gesturing towards this "topography of horror and trauma" is accomplished through texts that center on the intimate, sensorial experience of the body, as a way to evoke the condition and history of the Mexican-American subject in general, and of Chicana women in particular. I will focus on two works that have been the subjects of few studies: *House of Houses* by Pat Mora, and *Native Country of the Heart*, by Cherríe Moraga. These two works can be described as family memoirs. Memoirs are a subset of autobiographical writing, but tend to focus on a more limited period of time than autobiographies typically do, and to be concerned less with events and more with intimate, personal experiences—in the case of family memoirs, the experience of a whole family. The two family memoirs at hand foreground their narrators' efforts to recover and preserve their relatives' histories, and, in so doing, diverge from the archetypal framework of autobiography, defined by Smith and Watson as focusing on an individual, autonomous, usually masculine subject (2001: 3). Cherríe Moraga's memoir is centered on her mother's history and end of life, which is marked by illness. While she already explored her relationship with her mother and to her mother's intimate life in *Loving in the War Years*, a memoir in which she evoked "the maternal as racial and sensual home" as Paul Allatson suggests (2002: 286), in *Native Country of the Heart*, Moraga has to come to terms with the loss of the mother who represented the feeling of home. While *Loving in the War Years* focused on Moraga's ambivalent relationship to her mother through her childhood and early adulthood, *Native Country of the Heart* evokes a later period of her life, when her mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and progressively declined. Pat Mora's memoir documents her life in a family home filled with living relatives as well as ghosts, who exchange stories around the kitchen table over the course of a year. *House of Houses* contains many of the themes that characterize Mora's poetry collections, such as memory, cultural preservation, the environment, and family—and some of its protagonists, such as Mora's husband, daughter, and aunts, also appear in previous poems.

- 2 What makes *Native Country of the Heart* and *House of Houses* stand out from their respective authors' normal production is genre. Both

works correspond to Philippe Lejeune's definition of autobiography as a text that offers a pact to the readers to read it autobiographically, a pact that is present when the name of the author on the book cover is identical to the narrator or the protagonist's name in the text (1989: 12). In the Latin American context, autobiographical writing also includes the form of the *testimonio*, a narrative told in the first person by an individual who experienced oppression, aimed at denouncing forms of violence and domination (Esparza 2013: 13). Both *House of Houses* and *Native Country of the Heart* are influenced by this tradition, like most Chicana autobiographical writings. Marion Rohrleitner explains that Chicana writers:

draw on conventions of the testimonial mode and defy mutually exclusive binaries by blurring generic boundaries and creating a form of life writing that is partly memoir, partly *testimonio*, and partly autobiography. ... these hybrid memoirs-cum-testimonios are ideally suited to express the contradictory border-crossing experiences of Mexican immigrants to the United States (Rohrleitner 2017: 40).

- 3 The best descriptor for what Mora and Moraga accomplish in their autobiographies, however, can be found in Anzaldúa's notion of *autohistoria*, as a term to characterize

women-of-color interventions into and transformations of traditional western autobiographical forms. Deeply infused with the search for personal and cultural meaning ... *autohistoria* focuses on the personal life story but, as the autohistorian tells her own life story, she simultaneously tells the life stories of others (Anzaldúa 2009: 319).

- 4 This intermingling of the personal and the collective, the private and the public, is precisely what happens in Mora's and Moraga's work. In Mora's *House of Houses*, the home where this exploration of both intimacy and history happens is so finely tuned to the rhythms and idiosyncrasies of its inhabitants that it is compared to a body, a living organism. Mora writes "through generations, sun, wind, rain, hands, voices, and dreams create and alter this place pregnant with possibilities in a landscape as familiar to me as my body. What does the house, the body, know?" (2008: 4). Just as Mora collapses the frontiers between the house and the body, something Moraga does as well,

neither constitute a refuge that would be safe from the intrusion of the political sphere. Domesticity, as well as the sphere of intimacy and the body, is constantly disrupted by the political context and the specific history of violence for the Mexican-American subject. I will analyse the political dimension of Mora's and Moraga's writing about the body, and I will try to show that, in both their works, sensorial and corporeal experiences are not a private matter but form the basis for a political reading of American society and history. Mora and Moraga both mobilize the senses and corporeal experience in order to evoke the situation of the Mexican-American subject, but they draw attention to different aspects. Mora insists on the experience of racism and discrimination in encounters with the Anglo-American other. Within the domestic sphere, memories of that discrimination invade the characters' consciousness while they are having sensorial experiences that to all intents and purposes should be enjoyable, but trigger memories of the public spaces where these Mexican-Americans have experienced the racism that is endemic to American society. The goal of turning the domestic space into a refuge, of sealing the house against the intrusion of dominant American society proves out of reach for those who belong to marginalized groups, for whom the private sphere does not provide a respite from the oppression experienced in the public sphere. As for Moraga, she explores a specific bodily experience, that of hungering and eating, in order to depict the interaction between intimacy and politics. By displaying what is usually hidden—her own yearnings and appetites, as well as the insides of a racist Anglo-America and the inner workings of a heterosexual Chicana community—she articulates a poetics which fuses materiality with abstraction in order to explore political issues of social justice.

## **2. Disrupted Domesticity in Pat Mora's *House of Houses*: From the Senses to the Political**

- 5 Norma E. Cantú has underscored the importance of the senses for the domesticity of immigrants and diasporic communities, who seek

to recreate a sensorial link to the culture of their country of the origin:

I contend that it is essential for diasporic and immigrant communities who are displaced and who must survive in an alien *sitio*<sup>2</sup> where an alien *lengua*<sup>3</sup> dominates to preserve a cultural practice that reshapes, or constructs, the alien *sitio y lengua* into a safe space, a space resplendent with the foods, music, and celebrations of home, of the *sitio y lengua* of origin. Thus, spices like cumin and music like *norteño*<sup>4</sup> and celebrations like *quinceañeras*<sup>5</sup> become the *sitio y lengua* of survival and resistance. ... I have explored the *quinceañeras* and *matachines*<sup>6</sup> celebrations and their role in the community as social glue and as resistance to white hegemonic cultural practices, and I am convinced that these diasporic communities do indeed survive because of their allegiance to cultural practices. These subjects carry home with them, like turtles (2014: 139).

- 6 Sensorial practices allow migrants to create safe spaces, distinct from the values and norms of their host society. Mora exposes this desire to resist cultural influence from within the domestic space. The narrator's grandfather, in *House of Houses*, would insist that only Spanish be spoken inside the house, "all speak Spanish in these rooms that he considers Mexican territory. 'When you come into this house, sons, you are entering Mexico.'<sup>7</sup>" (Mora 2008: 57). The sounds of Spanish are a way to turn the house into an environment that is reminiscent of Mexico, a country that this family was forced to leave. At first glance, this quote exemplifies the idea that what turns the physical structure of the house into a home, a place of familiarity and reassurance, is mostly immaterial—in this instance, the sound of Spanish. Yet, this passage also compares the home to territory, a geopolitical entity which conjures up geography and borders, thus drawing the reader's attention back to physical space. This passage highlights the dream of a house as a protected, safeguarded entity, like a country with closed borders. It is about barricading oneself against the intrusion of mainstream American culture that risks diluting this family's Mexican identity. However, Mora's text constantly emphasizes the illusory nature of that dream, the impossibility of creating a totally protected domestic sphere that would be impervious to the upheavals of American society and politics. When writing about *House of Houses*, critics have tended to focus on positive connotations of the home. The

home, in *House of Houses*, is described by Crystal M. Kurzen as “a place of gathering to reminisce warmly about the past” (2011: 353), by Marie Christian as “a house of comfort and belonging” (2005: 146), and by María Jesus Castro Dopacia as a space imbued with “protection and human warmth that confer it a maternal atmosphere” (2007: 70). Imelda Martín-Junquera contrasts Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” a story about a woman trapped within an unhappy domestic sphere, and *House of Houses*: “Where doubt, fear, and alienation dominate the first narrative, harmony, love, and caring populate the second” (2014: 27). I would argue that the opposition between these two texts, and these two domestic modes, is not so clear, and that it is worthwhile to investigate the moments of alienation and psychic stress that take place in the domestic setting in *House of Houses*.

- 7 Rebolledo and Rivero have noted, about Mora’s poetry, that “in the world in that she lives the poetic speaker is not quite at home; there is always a pea under the mattress; a cactus thorn in the flesh” (1993: 32). That sense of discomfort, of unease even within the domestic world of home, can also be found in Mora’s autobiography—and is a microcosmic incarnation of the problematic relationship to the question of homeland and belonging that Chicano/as experience because of a history marked by conquest and displacement. Mora evokes this centrality of in-betweenness, hybridity in Chicana history and identity when she identifies the borderlands as her home:

the border for me, la frontera, is a definite place, the U.S/Mexico border, that space separated by El Río Grande, those two tangled countries, the U.S and Mexico rubbing against each one another, the friction of languages, histories, values, economic disparity, attraction and revulsion. That constant tension is the geographical emotional place from which I come (Oliver-Rotger 1999: 5).

- 8 *House of Houses* is also marked by a constant tension, between the dream of turning the house into a protected space of intimacy, and the invasion of this domestic sphere by politics, through the memories the narrator’s relatives recount. So, while Cantú underlines the way immigrants use the senses and sensorial practices such as cooking, music, or dancing to find comfort in an alien world, Mora shows

how sometimes, such pleasant sensory aspects are not enough to forget the different kinds of violence they encounter.

## 2.1. Sensory Experiences inside the Home as Linked to Politics and History

- 9 The best illustration of this juxtaposition of the safe space of family with the political space of the United States is a conversation taking place in the kitchen, in which the narrator's aunt, Aunt Lobo, tells her about her family's exile and their arrival at the border between Mexico and the United States. Mora writes:

'Una vez', Lobo the irrepressible storyteller begins, her words sweet and smooth as *flan* on her tongue still transporting me to the past, to the stories she told us over and over, wrote in spiral K-Mart notebooks near the end of her embodied life. On this cold winter morning, her voice and the voice of the fire in the small kitchen *chimenea* braid, warm me like the navy-blue shawl she once gave me (Mora 2008: 20).

- 10 This passage establishes a protected and comfortable domestic setting. The warmth of the fire is amplified by the warmth of the shawl given to the narrator by Lobo, the sounds from the fireplace harmonize with Lobo's voice: this creates the impression of a harmonious fusion, and a reassuring intimacy. The comparison between Lobo's words, and a *flan*'s creamy sweetness reinforces that impression of comfort. These details present the domestic sphere as a place that envelops the subject and satisfies the senses, just like the shawl, an emblem of protection and loving warmth. This setting, carefully crafted by the narration, is shattered when Lobo evokes the violent, dehumanizing experiences the migrants are subjected to at the border:

'The U.S. officials find humor in our condition,' Lobo says, starts to sweep the kitchen, but continues her story. 'We probably are quite a sight in our rickety carriage and mud-covered clothes. In those days, no passports or documents are needed. ... For a time, when the poor cross from Juárez, the immigration officials make them bathe in gasoline before la pobre gente humilde are allowed to enter this country' says Lobo (Mora 2008: 33-34).



- 11 The idyllic setting which frames the narration creates a contrast which highlights the violent and dehumanizing experience of the migrants. Lobo's story, which reflects the history of the United States' migration policy and the lived experience of the migrants from Mexico, takes on such importance and urgency that domestic activities are interrupted. Lobo takes hold of her broom to go back to the quotidian domestic rhythm, but it seems like this going back to normal is made impossible by the vividness of those memories of the border, which seem to haunt her. The usual temporality of the house is disrupted by the urgency of remembering and relating these often neglected fragments of American history. The fire evoked at the beginning of Lobo's tale contrasts with the gasoline baths the Mexican migrants were subjected to. This detail touches upon an episode of American history which remains relatively obscure: the toxic campaign of disinfection at the border, starting at the beginning of the twentieth century. The rising eugenics movement, fears of invasion sparked by World War I, and racist stereotyping of Mexicans as unclean, led to dehumanizing practices meant to ensure no "unfit" persons would enter the US. Tom Lea, the mayor of El Paso, first developed a campaign to inspect every house in a predominantly Mexican neighborhood, and force anyone with lice to take vinegar and kerosene baths. Those practices were also put in place within the El Paso jail, and a disinfection plant was built at the border in 1916. Every immigrant considered "second class" had to strip naked and be inspected for lice. Were any lice found, the immigrants had to take vinegar and kerosene baths. Their clothes were fumigated with toxic pesticides. In 1917, Carmelita Torres led protests against these dehumanizing practices. However, these "Bath riots" resulted in little, if any, durable change. In the 1920s, the toxic gas Zyklon B was used to fumigate clothing at the border, and starting in 1942, the migrant farmworkers that came to the United States as part of the labor agreement called the Bracero program were sprayed with the toxic pesticide DDT. It was only in the 1960s that these practices were recognized as toxic and discontinued. This episode, as David Dorado Romo notes, remains marginal within American historiography:

Most historians have forgotten about this obscure incident that took place on the border in 1917. I first heard of the U.S. government's policy that provoked these riots while I was still in high school. One

evening, during a family dinner, my great-aunt Adela Dorado shared her memories with us about her experiences as a young woman during the Mexican Revolution. She recalled that American authorities regularly forced her and all other working-class Mexicans to take a bath and be sprayed with pesticides at the Santa Fe Bridge whenever they needed to cross into the United States. My great-aunt, who worked as a maid in El Paso during the revolution, told us she felt humiliated for being treated as a 'dirty Mexican.' (Romo 2005: 223)

- 12 Romo's interest in the buried political history of El Paso starts with an anecdote told at the kitchen table. Similarly, the conversations shared by the narrator in *House of Houses* with her relatives in the family kitchen lead to a mine of information about the experience of working-class Mexicans in the border region, which is not necessarily reflected in the history textbooks.
- 13 This movement, from pleasant sensorial stimuli inside the domestic sphere, to an evocation of Mexican-Americans' experiences of violence, exclusion and discrimination in the American public sphere, is repeated throughout *House of Houses*, in a striking pattern. While Cantú has identified the way migrants manage to turn the domestic sphere into a reassuring safe space through the use of the senses, it is not the case for the characters in Mora's memoir, for whom this experience of home as a sensorial, safe refuge remains partly elusive. Sensorial experiences happening within the domestic sphere can trigger memories of traumatizing encounters with the racism of American society. In Mora's text, senses seem to open up a passageway between private and public spheres, and the sensory and the political are constantly juxtaposed. Lisa Law puts forward the idea that senses interact with space and with power dynamics within the political sphere, through her notion of geography of the senses: "the senses are often assumed to be an intrinsic property of the body—a natural and unmediated aspect of human *being*. ... I argue that the senses are far from innocent, they are a situated practice that can shed light on the way bodies experience different spaces of culture" (2001: 266). This idea that the senses are not innocent can help us gain insight into the text's use of them as a way to address political issues about race in the United States. Lisa Law shows that paying attention to the sensory experiences of some subjects may afford the researcher a closer look into dynamics of power and inequality: "Geo-

graphies of the senses articulate the cultural politics of difference and inequality, making new spatial connections between home/away and between dominant/subordinate and power/resistance” (2001: 280). Law’s framework encourages us to pay closer attention to how different subjects are able to have certain sensory experiences while others may not. Mora’s text, when viewed through this lens, suggests that those subjects with privilege also have the privilege to be able to enjoy a sensory connection to their environment, to the physical space of their house and garden, without any fear or awareness of exclusion and rejection from the space of mainstream America—unlike the characters in *House of Houses*, whose relationship to their physical surroundings seems continually contaminated by the discrimination and political violence they have experienced.

- 14 The Filipina domestic workers studied by Lisa Law in Hong Kong actively create their own sensory landscapes (for instance through the consumption of Filipino food at Sunday gatherings) to find a sense of home and familiarity. Cooking Filipino food allow these immigrant women to transport themselves out of Hong Kong and into the Philippines. “ ‘Home cooking’ thus becomes an active creation: a dislocation of place” (Law 2001: 276) that transforms the foreign spaces of Hong Kong into spaces of familiarity. The passages from *House of Houses* quoted earlier, with their heightened emphasis on the senses, are also passages which foreground that process of navigating between different places and times. Mora’s text contains many moments in which instead of creating a sense of home and belonging, sensory stimuli either cannot prevent the subject from reliving memories of exclusion, or actually trigger these memories. These sensory landscapes are associated with a sense of unfamiliarity, displacement, and with the evocation of a space of public, political violence, where Chicanos/as were made to feel unwelcome.

## 2.2. The Interior as the Garden

- 15 Besides the kitchen, the garden also represents a domestic space where we see that drifting towards public spaces that have constituted arenas of political violence for the members of the family in *House of Houses* (in the case of Lobo’s story, the space of the border).

- 16 As a microcosm, the garden is typically an image of domesticated nature, of control over chaos, of mastery, but not even the walls surrounding the garden in *House of Houses* can keep out the painful memories of the political violence done to Chicanos, instances of which will be explored below. Many passages of *House of Houses* that take place in the garden conjure up the history of Texas which was marked for decades by anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican feeling, and by de facto segregation against Mexican-Americans, who faced discrimination in regards to employment, education and housing as well as having to bear “the social stigma of being ‘Mexican’” (Foley 1998: 54). Indeed, *House of Houses* evokes the daily experiences of racism, discrimination and exclusion lived by Mexican-Americans in Texas during the first-half of the twentieth century—as demonstrated by three examples. The first one concerns the exclusion of Mexican-American congregants from the white Catholic community of El Paso. It is in the garden of the family home that the narrator suddenly thinks of the church that was built in 1916 so that Mexican-Americans would no longer attend the same church as Anglo-Americans: “the pink spring scent takes me back to Lobo and the processions of girls in white dresses at Holy Family Church, the church she once told me was built before I was born to get the Mexicans out of Saint Patrick’s Cathedral” (Mora 2008: 123). Churches were included in the segregated organization of space in El Paso, as Monica Perales has explained:

Social separation extended to community institutions, enforced by daily practice, residential patterns, and law. For instance, Mexicans worshipped in churches separate from their Anglo neighbors. Anglo Protestants established their own congregations. ... Parish boundaries followed residential (and racial) boundaries, with churches like Sacred Heart, Santa Rosalía, and Holy Family ministering to the Mexican communities on the south side, Smelertown, and Sunset Heights, respectively, and Saint Patrick Cathedral serving the Euro-American neighborhoods to the north of downtown. El Paso’s schools were similarly formed to reinforce racial divides (Perales 2010: 47-48).

- 17 The spring-like smell of the garden, which had been presented throughout the narration as a sanctuary, is what transports the narrator towards that story of exclusion. This passage clearly under-

mines the expectation that domestic spaces can be completely protected from the political violence experienced by the members of this family, and by Mexican-Americans more generally. The racism which structures public spaces in American society finds its way inside the refuge they try to create in the private sphere. Even the most apparently pleasant spaces are not safe from the intrusion of those painful memories.

- 18 Apart from smell, another sense linked to the space of the garden in *House of House* is taste. That the garden is a space of conviviality is illustrated by a conversation between the narrator, her mother, and her daughter Cecilia: “Cecilia brings a bowl of apricots to the table under the tree, and Mother comes to sit with us, memories seasoning the family conversation” (Mora 2008: 165). This conversation is associated with a pleasant gustatory experience, as the memories and stories which pepper the conversation give it more flavor. During this conversation, the narrator’s mother explains that as a teenager she would participate in debate competitions away from her hometown: “once, we stop for a meal at Lubbock. The sign on the restaurant says NO DOGS OR MEXICANS. I know no one can tell I’m Mexican, but I feel bad” (Mora 2008: 177). Once again, the framing of the narration (characterized by conviviality and the satisfaction of the senses) clashes with the violence evoked within the story told by the narrator’s mother. In stark contrast with the warm conviviality which emanates from this home where family members spend a lot of time together at the kitchen table, the public space of the restaurant evoked in this story is a space of racist exclusion and violence, which seems to contaminate the domestic space of the garden. This second example reflects the segregation that Mexican-Americans had to endure in Texas during the first half of the twentieth century, as so-called Juan Crow laws –similar to Jim Crow laws used against African-Americans– prevented them from frequenting whites only restaurants, swimming pools, theaters or parks. The pain experienced by Mora’s mother is all the more hidden and private as she can pass as white. She could have access to those spaces of whiteness, but this access would come at the price of rejecting her family and her origins. This passage also alludes to the intersection between food and racialized identity, and to the racial dynamics of eating which have been widely explored by food studies scholars. Kwate (2019) has

shown that the history of restaurants in the United States has been marked by racism as restaurants capitalized on racist stereotypes and images, while scholars such as Tompkins (2012) have explored how racist constructs have mobilized the language of food. One can also think of the use of food-based slurs such as “beaners”, “hot tamales” or “berry pickers” against Mexican-Americans. It is interesting to note that Mora’s memoir is characterized by a strong contrast between the uses of food within the family as a way to include and care for others, and to strengthen family ties, and the way food is used by the dominant group to marginalize and denigrate Mexican-Americans. Mora’s exploration of the senses underscores the layering of racism within the fabric of daily life and suggests that America’s racism has consequences even on such an insignificant and ordinary act such as eating.

- 19 The discrimination Mora’s mother experienced is explicit, since it is proclaimed on signs, but her father evokes an experience of a more subtle form of racism in the restaurants where he would take the doctors working for his optical company. This is evoked in a passage which starts with Mora and her father visiting a market:
- 20 We stop at the snapdragons remembering the scrawny versions we watered in our backyard in Texas. My father had bought the piece of land that became our home instead of taking Mother on a honeymoon, a decision that made her frown. How often each of their four children stand holding a hose through the years trying to tempt roses or larkspur or snapdragons to survive in that hard dirt below the glaring sun. My father remembers only successes. Perhaps, he’s too busy working, grinding lenses day and night at his optical company, to consider just how difficult life is in this border town. Little flourishes with ease, whether a plant or a business, particularly a business owned by a Mexican or Mexican American.

‘When I’d take our doctors out for lunch,’ my father says to me late in his life, momentarily admitting the prejudice he’d encountered, ‘the waiters would always make a big fuss over the Anglo doctors, then hand them the bill. They don’t think a guy who looks like me can pay, even when the waiters are Mexicans.’

‘Why?’

‘Honey! I have a map of Mexico on my face.’ (Mora 2008: 116)

- 21 Through involuntary memory, the snapdragons, a sensorial element, transport the characters far from the market, previously described as offering an abundance of produce and colors, of pleasant sensorial stimulations, and towards a far less idyllic reality. The parched flowers can be read as a metaphor for the condition of this immigrant family who also have to make their way in an hostile environment, where they are stigmatized because of the color of their skin: the image of the map of Mexico suggests that Mora's father's features brand him as "othered", that his body becomes a text which those with white privilege interpret as synonymous with foreignness. Like roots under the earth, experiences of ordinary racism such as the ones lived by Mora's father in the restaurants he used to frequent can lie dormant under the surface of the racialized subject's consciousness only to reappear, prompted by seemingly pleasant sensorial stimuli. The fact that Mora's father mentions the Mexican waiters' having interiorized racist stereotypes about their own community sheds light upon the nature of the restaurant as a space where various forms of racism are manifested in *House of Houses*: from blatant, openly advertised discrimination in the case of the signs described by Mora's mother, to a more subtle form of racism in the case of Mora's father, who is never presented with the check, and including interiorized racism as manifested in the Mexican waiters' behaviour.

### 2.3. The Interior as the Mind

- 22 Experiences of racism intrude not only upon the domestic private sphere, but also upon the characters' interiority, leaving deep scars in their psyche. The narrator finds hints of this interiorized racism in her mother's diary, where she learns that the latter was tempted to take advantage of her pale complexion in order to pass as white:

How early does this little bilingual girl in the 1920s and '30s—how early do children in the '90s—want to push away their names or skin or accent or family or weight or home or language with one hand while they long to clutch tight to the familiar with the other? Torn by conflicting loyalties, insecure in a world different from her private world. (Mora 2008: 181).

23 From the eminently private material that is the diary, the narrator draws political conclusions about the permanence of interiorized racism which creates cracks and fragilities in the racialized subject's psyche, and prevents them from fully belonging in any world. Because of this intimate division, the racialized subject remains divided between a yearning to take shelter within the domestic and familial sphere, and the temptation to reject that sphere in order to gain more acceptance within the American public sphere. The interiorized racism that affects the family in *House of Houses* manifests itself through the denial of the characters' indigenous roots. This distancing from an indigenous ancestry is widespread among Mexican-Americans, both because of the interiorization of the racial hierarchy enforced by Spanish colonizers in Mexico, and because denying one's indigenous ancestry allowed one to accentuate one's Spanishness as a means of trying to attain the rewards of white privilege. As Neil Foley explains, the pervasive discrimination Mexican-Americans faced in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century led the so-called Mexican-American generation to try to present themselves as white and to distance themselves from Black people with whom they were identified, in an attempt to achieve equal status with Anglo-Americans: "Growing numbers of middle-class Mexican Americans thus made Faustian bargains that offered them inclusion within whiteness provided that they subsumed their ethnic identities under their newly acquired White racial identity and its core value of White supremacy" (1988: 63). Mora reflects on the costs and the loss involved in this bargain when, having just mentioned Catholic songs, she writes:

Where are the other holy songs in the family, the non-Christian songs—chants for rain, corn-growing songs, heartbreaking songs, hatebreaking songs, healing songs, love songs? What are the names of Indian women and men, part of this family, who sang the songs? Why have only the Spanish names been passed from mouth to mouth? When does the legacy end of cherishing only white skin and *ojos azules*, *azules*, *azules*<sup>8</sup>? In this desert garden, when does the *agua santa*<sup>9</sup> heal us, when do we heal our spirits, the soul of the house? (Mora 2008: 156)



24 Domestic space in this passage is presented as a place where a racist, oppressive legacy is perpetuated, having colonized the minds of the inhabitants of this house. The family's indigenous roots and past have been erased, and the soul of this home needs to be healed from the traumas created by the political history of the American continent. As I have attempted to show, Mora's autobiographical exploration of that partly realist, partly recreated family home does not constitute a naive, escapist retreat into a fantasy world of cosiness and comfort. Instead of shying away from the less pleasant realities of her relatives' and ancestors' lives and histories, it addresses the skeletons in the closets. As we have seen, the senses are not only associated with creature comforts, but very often trigger painful recollections of, and meditations on the politics and history of the United States-Mexico relationship. Restaurants seem like a particularly painful place of racist othering: in contrast to food being used as a source of commonality, community, it can also be a tool of exclusion. We will explore this further by focusing on taste in the work of Cherríe Moraga, whose work shows that Mora is not alone in her exploration of Chicana identity through the senses.

### **3. Taste, the Eating Body, and Cherríe Moraga's Activist Writing**

25 I will now focus on one sense, taste, in the writings of Cherríe Moraga, another Chicana writer with a penchant for memoir. I propose that taste and food-related imagery are central to her exploration of the intersection between the political and the intimate. The role of food in her writing has not been explored very much. I contend that an analysis of her work through a framework inspired by literary food studies would lead to a better understanding of her confessional style, and of the interplay between her poetics and her activism. I shall first focus on the use of food metaphors as a way to highlight the consequences of a racist society on each subject's (dominant and marginalized) interiority. I will then analyze the way this is superimposed with food-related metaphors that speak to the heterosexism of the traditional Chicana community, especially as it manifests itself within family life. Lastly, paying attention to food in Moraga's text re-

veals the importance of materiality, sexuality and desire in her conception of activism and writing.

### 3.1. Food Imagery and the Interiority of Marginalized and Dominant subjects

- 26 Eating is an intimate act. Firstly, in the act of eating, we are intimate with food, as we bring this substance into contact with our bodies, our lips, our mouths. Secondly, eating involves individualized pleasures, tastes, and anxieties. However, eating is also an act that often happens in public and involves other people, alterity, and cultural norms. Moraga draws upon this ambivalence and associates food with a problematic relationship between the individual, and broad structures of feelings, political ideology, especially racist ideology. In Moraga's work, the internalization of this ideology is evoked through the image of swallowing, which serves as a metaphor for the interiorization of the racist gaze. The act of swallowing, of eating, involves a process of incorporation of exterior elements into one's inner body, and as such, is an analog for the movement from outer to inner, from history and politics to family and intimacy that internalized racism entails, as presented in Moraga's text, She writes:

What *la familia*<sup>10</sup> Moraga shares historically with multiple generations of Mexicans and Mexican Americans is the denial of our Native origins. As *mestizos*<sup>11</sup>, we swallowed the bitter Kool-Aid of colonization—first through the Spanish and then the *gringo*<sup>12</sup>—that distanced us from the recognition of a living Indigenous presence in our histories, our families, and ourselves. At times, I felt my mother's prejudice in this regard, a bias directed even at herself, which always translated into a hyperawareness of skin shade (Moraga 2019: 179).

- 27 The expression "drinking the Kool-Aid" is a reference to the mass suicide that happened on November 18, 1978, in Jonestown, Guyana, where members of a commune died by suicide after drinking a grape-flavored, poisoned drink. This expression connotes blind obedience, suggesting that those members of marginalized groups who believe in the American dream and ignore the racial hierarchy which structures American society are doomed to failure. Through this expression, the racial hierarchy that has been enforced by the Spanish col-

onizers and later on by Anglo-Americans is presented as poisonous and lethal. Believing in the dominant group's values (especially those values related to race) when one is part of a marginalized group is equated with psychological suicide as it leads to a denial of one's roots. As in Mora's text, exploring one's consciousness (and the traumas and scars that living in a racist society has left there) is linked to family, to an intimate exploration of the mother's psyche. The process of internalizing racism is underscored by the ternary rhythm in the segment "our histories, our families, ourselves" (Moraga 2019: 179) which moves the reader towards ever more intimate circles: a sense of collective history, the private world of family, and the even more private/intimate realm of interiority. Significantly, the mention of skin reinforces the sense of a problematic interaction between outer and inner, as this protective envelope also becomes the battleground where a racist ideology imprints itself unto the subject, who views their body through that exterior filter. Swallowing "the bitter Kool-Aid of colonization" (Moraga 2019: 179) means having one's interiority deconstructed and undermined by racist ideology. Moraga's literary depiction of the interaction between racist ideology and the consciousness of the marginalized subject is characterized by the association between food-related imagery, and the motif of skin. This association is used by Moraga in order to underscore the marginalized subject's crumbling, fragile interiority in a racist society which does not allow anyone's interiority to be wholly private, intimate, untouched by society's structures. This idea is epitomized by a character who starts to think about race and color and suddenly finds that her sense of reality vacillates: "Soon her body began to change with this new way of seeing. She felt her skin, like a casing, a beige bag into which the guts of her life were poured" (Moraga 2000: 30). Alvina Quintana writes that this story represents the character's "initiation into an American reality founded on color consciousness and social injustice" (1996: 120). But what should also be noted is the fact that the idea that a racist ideology wreaks havoc on the subject's mind is explored through food imagery, through an image of abjection. Exposed "guts" constitute "matter out of place" to borrow from Mary Douglas (1966: 36), an element that is precisely supposed to remain private, inner, hidden. This stripping down of the subject's interiority, as epitomized by the image of a sausage, perfectly encapsulates the way Moraga's confessional brand of writing exposes the abject interi-

ority of the subject who lives in a racist society, while also airing the dirty laundry of the Chicana community by evoking internalized racism. This pervasive ideology is presented as a bitter, corroding force that threatens to annihilate (liquefaction is evoked as the guts are “poured”) every subject’s interiority. For the marginalized, Mexican-American subject, this leads to a forced amnesia, a forgetting of one’s history, which crates a distance with oneself. She writes:

I am a displaced mixed-blood Chicana, whose native relations on my mother’s side may land me somewhere in the deserts of Sonora and perhaps, quite distantly, in the once paradisaic lands of the Tongval. There is something to be found in those sites where memory calls us, in spite of the institutional amnesia, force-fed to us for centuries. We return as refugees to that forgotten landscape which we somehow recognize as home. (Moraga 2019: 181)

- 28 Food imagery is used by Moraga to suggest that the racist poison Mexican-Americans have been forced to swallow creates an emptiness at the heart of their existence, because of the temptation to deny one’s roots. Instead of being linked to sustenance and nourishment, here food is associated to the enhanced vulnerability created within the Mexican-American psyche by a racist society and politics. The “act of forgetting” (Moraga 2019: 281) makes it impossible for the subject’s interiority to be a locus of harmony, and renders the subject a stranger to themselves. However, the idea that “land has memory” (Moraga 2019: 281) presents land as the antidote to the “bitter Kool-Aid of colonization,” (Moraga 2019: 179) to the poison of self-hatred and amnesia Mexican-Americans have been forced to swallow, which has lodged itself in their intimacy. Land, as a site of memory, has value in that it counteracts the fraught intimacy of the Mexican-American subject who is tempted to deny their roots and dilute their culture.

### **3.2. Food Metaphors and the Heterosexism of the Traditional Chicana Community**

- 29 Such strong pull towards a land imagined as the land of the ancestors anchors Moraga within Chicano cultural nationalism, a movement

which used the desert lands of the South West as a rallying point for Chicanos by identifying this region with Aztlán, the mythic homeland of the Aztecs. This mythical homeland was mobilized to create a sense of unity and common belonging among Chicano/as from diverse class backgrounds, around the struggle to obtain more visibility and more rights (especially land rights) within mainstream American society. Emma Pérez explains that "Aztlán exists as an invisible nation, within the engulfing 'imagined community' of dominant US discourse" (1999: 19). Despite her closeness to the Chicano movement, Moraga does not shy away from pointing out what she perceives as its oppressive aspects, namely, its heterosexism. Although the above discussion has emphasized the role of food-related metaphors in Moraga's depiction of Anglo-America's cultural imperialism and racism, in the following I will analyse her use of food tropes as a way to denounce the heterosexist aspects of Chicana culture, especially as they play out within the private world of family. Moraga highlights the gendered division of labour within Chicano households when she recounts the way she and her sister would wait on their older brother and his friends:

As I stopped to satisfy their yearning throats, 'jock itch' was all that came to my mind. Their cocks became animated in my head, for that was all that seemed to arbitrarily set us apart from each other and put me in the position of the servant and they, the served. I wanted to machine-gun them all down, but swallowed that fantasy as I swallowed making the boy's bed every day, cleaning his room each week, shining his shoes and ironing his shirts before dates with girls, some of whom I had crushes on (Moraga 2000: 84, emphasis in original).

- 30 As in passages devoted to Anglo-America's cultural imperialism and racism, the act of swallowing is used to symbolize a harmful, disempowering ideology being forced onto the subject, who finds themselves in a dominated position. The narrator has to satisfy these men's appetites and desires, represented by the image of "yearning throats," (Moraga 2000: 84) while her own same-sex desire is denied and her voice is suppressed. Meals are likened to a stage for the performance of gender, where the heterosexist oppression of Chicana women by Chicano men is most visible within Moraga's text. Com-

mentality therefore, is not necessarily conducive to a true sense of egalitarian community. Moraga writes:

Some men oppress the very women they love. But unlike the racist, they allow the object of their contempt to share the table with them. The hatred they feel for women does not translate into separatism. It is more insidiously intracultural, like class antagonism. But different, because it lives and breathes in the flesh and blood of our families, even in the name of love (Moraga 2000: 100).

- 31 The table, which represents the intimate space of Chicana family, is presented as the place where harmful political and ideological conceptions of gender roles are translated into insidious oppression and violence, hidden in the domain of the intimate, in the name of love. By referring to flesh and blood, to elements of the body, Moraga's text underscores the intimate, private nature of that violence against women within the Chicana community. As Lourdes Torrez notes, Moraga "explores how women are denied a right to their bodies through the repression of their sexuality, the lifelong threat of sexual violence, and the denial of reproductive rights" (1996: 134). The illusion of sharing a safe space, the space of family and Chicana community, is debunked by Moraga's evocation of the homophobia within Chicana culture, in a poem entitled "Passage:"

*on the edge of the war near the bonfire  
we taste knowledge*

There is a very old wound in me  
between my legs  
where I have bled, not to birth  
pueblos or revolutionary  
concepts or simple  
sucking children

but the memory  
of some ancient  
betrayal.

So that when you touch me  
and I long to freeze, not feel

what hungry longing I used to know  
nor taste in you a want  
I fear will burn  
my fingers to their roots  
it's out of my control.  
Your mouth opens, I long for dryness.  
The desert untouched.  
Sands swept without sweat.  
*Aztlán.*

Pero, es un sueño<sup>13</sup>. This safety  
of the desert.

My country was not like that (Moraga 2000: 38, italics in original).

- 32 The comparison of the vagina with an old wound linked to the notion of betrayal superimposes the intimate and the political by suggesting that, for the speaker, giving in to her lesbian desire would mean betraying her culture. This fear of cultural betrayal through women's sexuality is reminiscent of the figure of La Malinche, Hernán Cortés's indigenous translator and lover, who was vilified for betraying her people. Moraga notes that, in Mexican-American culture, "the concept of betraying one's race through sex and sexual politics is as common as corn" (Moraga 2000: 95). This idea that fulfilling one's sexual appetite as a woman turns one into a traitor to her community is at the heart of the poem, in which images of hunger and thirst embody the speaker's lesbian desire, which she is tempted to deny in order to belong in the land of Chicano nationalism. The solace promised by the mythical desert homeland of Aztlán, however, is illusory for the lesbian subject who falls outside the bonds of this imagined community because of her sexuality.

### 3.3. Food Imagery and Militant Writing

- 33 In addition to her criticism of the Chicano nationalist movement, intimate images of the vagina and mouth allow Moraga to voice her own politics and views of activism. In Moraga's text, hunger seems to be the preferred metaphor for her lesbian desire which is presented as the root of her politics. This focus on sexuality is something she has been reproached for by Third-World feminists, as she notes:

... to be concerned about the sexuality of women of color was an insult to women in the Third World literally starving to death. But the only hunger I have ever known was the hunger for sex and the hunger for freedom and somehow, in my mind and heart, they were related and certainly not mutually exclusive. If I could not use the source of my hunger as the source of my activism, how then was I to be politically effective? (Moraga 2000:124).

- 34 Moraga proposes a hunger-based activism, meaning an activism which addresses the material needs and sexual as well as metaphorical desires of women. This activism would be a response to women's hunger, encapsulated, in Moraga's writings, by the figure of the hungry woman, a conflation of the Aztec creation myth of a hungry woman crying constantly for food, and of the Mexican legend of La Llorona, who drowned her children after having been abandoned by her lover. Moraga suggests that the Aztec figure of the woman with mouths all around her body should be understood in relation to La Llorona:

Who else other than La Llorona could this be? It is always La Llorona's cries we mistake for the wind, but maybe she's not crying for her children. Maybe she's crying for food, sustenance. Maybe *que tiene hambre la mujer*<sup>14</sup>. And at last, upon encountering this myth—this pre-capitalist, pre-colonial age, pre-catholic mito—my jornada began to make sense. This is the original Llorona y *tiena mucha hambre*<sup>15</sup>. I realized that she has been the subject of my work all along, from my earliest writings, my earliest feminism. She is the story that has never been told truly, the story of that hungry Mexican women who is called puta/bruja/jota/loca<sup>16</sup> because she refuses to forget that her half-life is not a natural-born fact. I am looking for the insatiable woman (Moraga 2000: 147).

- 35 Moraga presents the hungry woman's yearning insides as the source of her feminist politics and writings. The act of broadcasting that hunger, that intimate sensation, of putting those insides on display, constitutes the starting point of an activism which addresses issues of materiality and the body. It therefore may be that food-related images are central to Moraga's work because they point to the intersection of literal and metaphorical, materiality and spirituality that she calls for as a strategy of activism: "To date, no liberation movement



has been willing to take on the task. To walk a freedom road that is both material and metaphysical. Sexual and spiritual. Third World Feminism is about feeding people in all their hungers" (Moraga 2000: 123). The ideal activism and the ideal writing would be addressed to the body: "... the most visionary and dangerous of faculty inspire thoughts that directly affect the bodies sitting in front of them. The bodies think. They stand up" (Moraga 2000: 186). The abundance of food imagery in Moraga's work goes hand in hand with a conception of writing as a sensorial device, the impact of which on the body of the reader allows for political resonances in their interiority.

## 4. Conclusion

36 Both Mora's and Moraga's work delineate the interplay between intimacy and politics through writing about the senses. In Mora's memoir, the irruption of the political in the intimate, private realm of the family home is highlighted through recollections of political violence that are triggered by apparently benign, innocent sensorial stimuli. Taste, especially, appears to mediate between intimacy and politics. Mora's memoir highlights the endemic racism of American society by contrasting the hospitality of the family home with the violent instances of exclusion faced by her Mexican-American relatives. Domesticity is not protected from the political violence of American society, and the marginalized subject seems to be betrayed by their own body as physical sensations (linked to sound, taste, smell) trigger memories of the violence inflicted upon them by the politics and history of the United States. As for Moraga, she uses food imagery in order to denounce the heterosexist oppression of Chicana women within the private world of family, in the name of love, and to articulate her own feminist politics and poetics. Food metaphors point to the fragile, porous, and ideologically constructed nature of both the body and the interiority of the American subject. This fragility is, I suggest, approached as an opportunity to intimately affect the body and mind of the reader through a type of writing which incorporates sensoriality and materiality, in order to be more politically effective.

37 Both Mora and Moraga have written texts that invite their readers to notice the darker, serious aspects that can be associated with textual food, highlighting questions of ethics, oppression, and cruelty, in-

stead of letting these aspects be overshadowed by the moments in the text when food is connected to hospitality, cosy intimacy, and nostalgic memories. Mora reminds us of the racist legacy of restaurants and food businesses in the United States, and shows how for racialized subjects in the United States, moments of commensality can be contaminated by the long-lasting consequences of this racist history. Moraga, for her part, denounces both the racism of mainstream America and the heterosexism of the traditional Chicano family, which upholds gendered norms that prevent Chicanas, and even more Chicana lesbians, from being subjects, consumers in their own right, and have them instead tend to the needs and desires of others, providing nourishment and care while having to deny her own cravings. Like Mora, she suggests that not all bodies are able to enjoy the pleasant, sensory experiences that others take for granted, and that not all bodies are able to find a safe space of comfort, untainted by the reality of multiple oppressions. The senses and materiality are a very important dimension of both Mora's, and Moraga's work; but instead of merely leading to an escapist, nostalgic kind of writing, they point to political issues around the question of how different bodies get to exist in the world, and how some bodies are marginalized and denied the comfort of a retreat, of a safe space. In both Mora's, and Moraga's work, the focus on the senses in general, and on taste in particular, participates in a feminist project that explores the political stakes of everyday, bodily experiences. Mora and Moraga therefore fit in with Jessica Hayes-Conroy's idea that food may be a particularly interesting lens to study the relationship between the personal and the political:

Feminist scholars have long stressed the political importance of understanding how the micro-world of daily, lived experience and embodied practice is articulated in and through our larger macro-political world ... Can a focus on food help us bring this project ever further in the body? (Hayes-Conroy 2014: 28).

- 38 Having read Mora and Moraga's work, one is tempted to answer that question in the affirmative. By writing about the senses and about taste, Mora and Moraga do indeed take the feminist project of linking the personal and the political deeper into the body, by focusing on internal sensations and relating them to political structures that de-

termine which bodies have which experiences—which bodies get to enjoy safe and pleasant sensory landscapes, while others either work to provide these experiences for others (in the case of Chicana women stuck doing housework in Moraga's texts) or have their enjoyment of such landscapes disrupted by memories of racism (in Mora's work). In both Mora's and Moraga's work then, a focus on the sensations of the body functions as a way to denounce oppression and inequality, and to emphasize the idea that sensory experiences are not neutral, but rife with politics and ideology.

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1 Chicanos are descendants of both the indigenous peoples of Mexico and the Spanish conquerors, and became citizens of the United States after the annexation of part of the territory of Mexico was ratified by the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848. Initially, they were second-class citizens whose rights, especially over land, were constantly violated by Anglo-

Americans (beginning with the annexation of Texas, for example). While at first this population remained very proud of their Mexican origins, they began to assimilate into American culture after World War Two. In a push against assimilation, the Chicano movement of the 1960s emphasized cultural pride, advocated for a more inclusive education and mobilized against inequality and discrimination. Providing a space for liberated speech, literature, in general, and autobiography in particular, played a fundamental role in the movement.

2 Site.

3 Language.

4 A genre of music from Northern Mexico.

5 The *quinceañera* is a celebration, observed in Latin America as well as in the United States, to mark a girl's fifteenth birthday.

6 *Matachines* are dance troupes who perform ritual dances that were inherited from 17th century Spain. Those dances were adopted by various peoples in the Americas after the Conquest. In this passage, Cantú alludes to the sense of dispossession and alienation that being plunged into an unfamiliar linguistic environment can create for immigrants. She chooses to leave those terms in Spanish instead of using an English translation, perhaps in order to recreate the experience of being confronted with an alien language for her English-speaking readers.

7 '*Cuando pisan en esta casa, hijos, pisan Mexico*'.

8 Eyes blue, blue, blue.

9 Holy water.

10 The family.

11 Mixed-blood people.

12 The American.

13 Dream.

14 Maybe the woman is hungry.

15 and she is very hungry.

16 whore/witch/dyke/crazy

### **English**

In the autobiographical writings of two contemporary Chicana writers, Pat Mora and Cherríe Moraga, entities that are usually seen as belonging to the intimate realm –such as the home and the body– are constantly being portrayed as disrupted by, or disrupting, the realm of politics. Mora's work brings to the foreground, through an attention to the senses, the vulnerability of Mexican-American subjects to political violence even within the domestic sphere and within themselves, while Moraga's writings capture the vulnerability of the body to politics as an opportunity to mobilize the reader politically.

### **Français**

Dans les écrits autobiographiques de Pat Mora et Cherríe Moraga, deux écrivaines contemporaines Chicanas, les deux entités souvent vues comme appartenant à l'intime que sont le corps et la maison sont constamment en relation avec la sphère politique –qu'elles en subissent les atteintes, ou qu'elles cherchent à l'influencer. Mora met en valeur la vulnérabilité du sujet Mexicain-Américain à la violence politique qui peut l'atteindre même dans les recoins de son intériorité et dans la sphère domestique, tandis que Moraga s'empare de cette vulnérabilité du corps à la politique comme d'une opportunité pour mobiliser le lecteur.

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### **Mots-clés**

littérature Chicana, autobiographie des femmes, histoire des États-Unis, corps, nourriture

### **Keywords**

Chicana literature, women's autobiographies, history of the United States, body, food

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