

## ARTICLES – HISPANIC STUDIES

# *Como agua para chocolate* and 'Íntimas suculencias': Laura Esquivel's *nueva literatura* and the creation of a canon of women writing about food, knowledge and pleasure

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Since it was published thirty years ago, Laura Esquivel's first novel *Como agua para chocolate* has been the subject of intense critical debate. On the one hand, *Como agua* is associated with the 'boom femenino' of Spanish American women's writing in the 1980s. On the other, it is dismissed as 'light literature'. Esquivel's subsequent work has received scant attention. This article calls for a reassessment of *Como agua* in light of Esquivel's own overlooked theoretical interventions published in an essay entitled 'Íntimas suculencias. Tratado filosófico de cocina'. 'Íntimas' calls for, and outlines the characteristics of, a *nueva literatura* which would foster new ways of understanding the relationships between food, knowledge and pleasure. This article uncovers the extent to which *Como agua* met the standards of *nueva literatura* set out by Esquivel. In 'Íntimas', Esquivel also traces a tradition of Hispanic women who have written about food, knowledge and pleasure. The women in this canon include Inés Arredondo, Dorelia Barahona, Rosario Castellanos, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and María Luisa Mendoza. This article revisits the work of these forerunners as well as developing a new understanding of *Como agua* and highlighting Esquivel's contribution to consolidating a canon of Hispanic women writers.

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Thirty years after the publication of Laura Esquivel's polemical bestselling novel *Como agua para chocolate* (1989), she and other Spanish American women authors still struggle to be heard and to be taken seriously.<sup>1</sup> There is a particular reluctance to pay due attention to

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<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, *Como agua* was seen as a major breakthrough for women authors in Mexico, and on the other, as epitomising declining standards and the prevalence of market forces which had led to the emergence of 'light literature'. I am not the first to notice this contradiction in the reception of Esquivel's work. Nuala Finnegan and Jane E. Lavery write with reference to Esquivel and Ángeles Mastretta: 'Despite the commercial and critical success of their work, it is their best-seller status that has led to their dismissal as "easy literature" by many high-brow critics and by the general reader alike' (2). Claire Taylor refers to 'the often heated debate about her works and status as a writer' ('Laura Esquivel and the Boom Femenino' 199). An analysis of reviews of *Como agua* in the Mexican press has also shown how it is more often associated with enjoyment rather than with literary quality (Bowskill 80). On the debate surrounding *literatura light* see: Finnegan *Ambivalence* 148–50.

non-fiction interventions by women authors. This article, therefore, draws attention to the overlooked work of Spanish American women authors and argues for the significance of a speech Esquivel gave at one of the most important events in the Spanish American literary calendar, the Feria del Libro held in Guadalajara, Mexico in 1990. This speech aimed to define a *nueva literatura* in relation to a tradition of women authors. It became the title piece of the volume *Íntimas suculencias: Tratado filosófico de cocina* a published collection of essays, speeches, short stories and recipes. Yet it has been overlooked. 'Íntimas' has never been the subject of an article-length study and the predominantly non-fiction writings in the collection are rarely mentioned in studies of Esquivel's fiction.

This article seeks to show that our understanding of both *Como agua* and the essay 'Íntimas suculencias' is enhanced if they are read as companion texts in an overarching project to conceptualise and put into practice a *nueva literatura*. The key features of this new literature are the breaking down of barriers that separate food and domestic knowledge, and written knowledge and food and sexual pleasure. The removal of these barriers, Esquivel suggested, would lead to a revalorisation of the kitchen space, a celebration of female sexuality and an end to gendered binary thinking. This article is structured around these features. It analyses the representation of food and knowledge, the representation of the kitchen space as a non-gendered space, the relationship between food and sexual pleasure and the representation of female sexuality. Cutting across all of this is an analysis of the ways in which gendered binary thinking is or is not challenged.

In 'Íntimas', Esquivel also uncovered a canon of Hispanic women writing about food, knowledge and pleasure. I take Esquivel's – admittedly brief – statements about the representation of food, knowledge and pleasure as a starting point to revisit these texts and to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the canon she proposed and her relationship to it. The tradition Esquivel articulated included Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's 'Respuesta a la muy ilustre Sor Filotea de la Cruz' (1691), María Luisa Mendoza's 'Fruta madura de ida' (1976), Rosario Castellanos' 'Lección de cocina' (1971), Dorelia Barahona's *De qué manera te olvido* (1990) and Inés Arredondo's 'Estío' (1965).<sup>2</sup> As will be seen, Esquivel positioned these texts as flawed but necessary precursors to the creation of a *nueva literatura*.

Sor Juana's 'Respuesta' is a letter by the seventeenth-century nun defending women's education, in which she highlights what she was able to learn from time spent preparing food in the kitchen. Mexican journalist, novelist and politician Mara Luisa Mendoza, commonly known as La China Mendoza, writes in 'Fruta madura de ida' about a woman who receives a basket of fruit from her lover, who becomes her husband only later to abandon her. Rosario Castellanos' 'Lección' tells the story of a newly married woman as she attempts to cook her first meal for her husband. *De qué manera*, by Dorelia Barahona, who was born in Madrid but lived in Costa Rica where the novel is set, tells the story of the friendship between three girls from teenagers to adulthood. Inés Arredondo's 'Estío' centres on the relationship between a mother who narrates the story, her son and his friend, focusing on a day at the seaside. Finally, Laura Esquivel's own novel, set against the backdrop of the Mexican Revolution and narrated by the protagonist Tita's great-niece tells the story of Tita's relationships with Pedro and John as well as with the other women in her family: Mamá Elena and her sisters Rosaura and Gertrudis. Not all of these texts feature food as prominently as *Como agua*. Yet they were all

<sup>2</sup> The tradition Esquivel outlines is mostly, but not exclusively, one of Mexican authors. The exception is Dorelia Barahona. *De qué manera te olvido*, the novel to which Esquivel referred, was first published in Mexico and Barahona spent some time in Mexico while writing the novel, which is dated 'Abril, 1979, Costa Rica. Abril, 1989, México' (Barahona 94). 'Fruta Madura de ida' was first published in 1976 and is included in the collection *Ojos de papel volando*. 'Lección de cocina' was first published in *Álbum de Familia* in 1971. For the editions referenced here, see the Works Cited at the end of this article.

identified by Esquivel as illustrative of important trends in the ways in which food, knowledge and pleasure have been represented in the Hispanic world and how these representations reflected the changing status of women. While Esquivel selected these texts, they and *Como agua* of course belong to an even broader tradition, identified by Tamer Heller and Patricia Moran, of women writing about food, knowledge, pleasure and the kitchen space as a way of expressing 'deeply conflicted feelings about appetite and desire, authority and assertion' (Heller and Moran 3). Nevertheless, the texts identified by Esquivel are studied here because it was in relation to these that she sought to locate her own writing and trace the development of a 'new literature'.

We can understand Esquivel's desire to locate herself in relation to her female predecessors with reference to the ideas of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who have noted the problems women authors face when confronted by a male-dominated canon. The male authors made famous during the so-called 'Boom' which introduced Latin American literature onto the world stage circa 1958-1970 seem to conform more to Harold Bloom's ideas about the 'anxiety of influence' in the way that they did all they could to distance themselves from their predecessors. In 'Íntimas', however, Esquivel, a member of the later 'boom femenino', took a different path. Her anxiety, based on Gilbert and Gubar's conceptualisation, was one of authorship, 'a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a "precursor" the act of writing will isolate or destroy her' (49). Faced with this anxiety, the female author must undertake a 'revisionary process' which is a 'battle [...] not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of *her*' (Gilbert and Gubar 49). Given the polarised reception of *Como agua* in the previous year, the idea that Esquivel used her speech at the Guadalajara Feria del Libro to try to correct some of the readings of her work is particularly compelling. The starting point for this revisionary process, Gilbert and Gubar suggest, is to identify 'a *female* precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible' (49). In so doing, the woman author legitimises 'her own rebellious endeavours' (Gilbert and Gubar 50). Nevertheless, as can be seen in the way Esquivel distanced herself from the women she cited, the woman author's relationship with her female precursors remains ambivalent: 'even the maker of a text, when she is a woman, may feel imprisoned within texts' (Gilbert and Gubar 52). By analysing the claims Esquivel made about each of her antecedents in more detail, then, this article identifies Esquivel's ambivalent relationship to them as well as shedding light on several texts that have been largely forgotten.

Esquivel's 'Íntimas' is particularly significant as the product of the moment that a canon of Mexican women's writing was emerging. As Nicola Stead notes, 'Gilbert and Gubar's study emerged at a particular moment in time when women in the Second Wave of feminism were struggling for social equality and recognition' (20). Similarly, when Margaret Atwood and Carol Shields took up the challenge of identifying a history of Canadian women's writing it 'coincided with the rise of the women's movement in Canada and internationally' (Stead 28). Claire Taylor has noted that it took some time for Latin American feminist criticism to follow the trend, which had earlier emerged in Anglo-American feminist criticism, of uncovering a lost tradition of women's writing. Taylor writes: 'until the late 1980s, when *La Scherezada criolla* and other early forays into Latin American feminist criticism were published, there was little sustained focus of feminist criticism on specific writers, with an attempt to sketch an alternative female canon' (93). One of the important contributions of these texts was, as Pérez Sastre and Giraldo G noted in their review of *La Scherezada criolla*, to show "'toda una 'genealogía' de esa escritura hecha, desde los inicios del siglo XX en Latinoamérica, por las mujeres, ese 'continente negro' desconocido e ignorado la mayoría de las veces'" (quoted in Taylor 94). In Mexico specifically, the 1980s saw the publication of foundational texts

such as Martha Robles' *La sombra fugitiva. Escritoras en la cultura nacional* and Fabienne Bradu's *Señas particulares: Escritora. Ensayos sobre escritoras mexicanas del siglo XX*. These publications took the first steps towards tracing a genealogy of Mexican women writers. In this context, Esquivel's statements in 'Íntimas' take on added significance as a contribution to the early stages of this endeavour to write a history of women's writing.

Despite the vast amount of academic criticism dedicated to *Como agua para chocolate*, no-one has yet connected *Como agua* and 'Íntimas'. The fact that Esquivel's non-fiction writings have been overlooked is in keeping with Claire Taylor's statement about 'the levels of suspicion that still remain when women's cultural production comes under scrutiny', particularly when it involves a woman talking or writing about other women (94). In returning to the feminist politics of *Como agua*, the article also goes against the grain of recent criticism about the novel, which, as Victoria Martínez has noted, has moved away from feminist readings in favour of connecting 'the message of the text with neo-liberal policies' (28). Equally unexpected is that critics, with few exceptions, have had little to say about the connection between Esquivel's work and that of Sor Juana and Castellanos. The exceptions are Diane Long Hoeveler, Cristina Ortiz and Herminia Alemañy-Valdez, who foreground similarities between *Como agua*, 'Lección' and/or the 'Respuesta', while Janice Jaffe and Tony Spanos position Esquivel's text in terms of a breakaway from one or both of Sor Juana and Castellanos. These discussions are dominated by a focus on the representation of the kitchen space. By focusing on each of the specific aspects Esquivel identified, this article reveals that there are both points of convergence *and* divergence between Esquivel and her predecessors. The relationship between *Como agua* and the texts by the other women authors Esquivel cited has, until now, been completely overlooked.

Leaving aside Esquivel's text, connections between Sor Juana and Rosario Castellanos, including but not limited to 'Lección de cocina' and the 'Respuesta', have been made by Julia Cuervo-Hewitt, who points out that in 'Lección de cocina' Castellanos referenced Sor Juana in a way that 'no es gratuito ya que Sor Juana dejó profundas huellas en la obra de Rosario Castellanos' (135). Nevertheless, Cuervo-Hewitt does not address the representation of food and its relationship to knowledge, pleasure and the kitchen space in the two texts. Since feminist critics championed Castellanos' work in the 1970s and 1980s, successfully arguing for her inclusion in the Mexican literary canon, she has attracted growing interest – but only a few articles focus in any detail on 'Lección de cocina': Helena López writes about contradictory emotions in the text while Zoe Brigley Thompson and Sophie Gunne consider the representation of sexual domination.<sup>3</sup> This article revisits 'Lección' alongside *Como agua* as well as the 'Respuesta', 'Fruta madura', 'Estío' and *De qué manera*, focusing on the representation of food, knowledge, the kitchen and pleasure.

Compared to the body of criticism about *Como agua*, little has been written about Arredondo, Barahona and Mendoza. 'Estío' is briefly discussed in Beatriz Espejo's prologue to the Fondo de Cultura Económica collection of Arredondo's short stories in which she emphasises the transgressive thrust of the author's choice of incest as a subject. Armando Segura Morales also focuses on the representation of incest in the novel as well as on the way in which nature and climate in the text reflect the character's emotional state. He makes no reference to food in the text. Barahona perhaps came to Esquivel's attention after *De qué manera* won the Premio Juan Rulfo for a first novel awarded by the Mexican Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes in 1989. The novel was subsequently published by the Mexican publishing house Ediciones Era. Barahona's work has been anthologised and she is sometimes mentioned in lists of Costa Rican authors, but only one article on *De qué manera* has been published.

<sup>3</sup> On the way in which Castellanos was championed by feminist critics, see Catherine Grant xvii.

In that piece, Arnaldo Mora Rodríguez considers the way in which the novel relates to the historic-political context in Costa Rica and Central America in the 1970s and 1980s. There is similarly little criticism about María Luisa Mendoza and nothing on 'Fruta de ida madura'. Mendoza was included in Rosario Castellanos' collection of essays *Mujer que sabe latín*, but despite Seymour Menton describing her as 'bien conocida como periodista, locutora de televisión, novelista y diputada', astoundingly criticism of her work is largely limited to book reviews (368).<sup>4</sup> As Magdalena Maiz and Luis H. Peña remark, 'the lack of monographic studies attempting to comprehend [Castellanos'] work in a general and thorough manner points out that there is still much criticism to be written about her work' (324). This article is a first step towards a better understanding of the work of Mendoza and the other women who formed part of Esquivel's canon of women writing on food, knowledge and pleasure.

### Food and Knowledge

This section analyses the extent to which *Como agua* can be interpreted as living up to Esquivel's aspirations for a *nueva literatura* and scrutinises Esquivel's understanding of her predecessors in order to see how portrayals of food, knowledge and the kitchen have evolved in Spanish American women's writing. In Esquivel's *nueva literatura*, food and knowledge would be reconciled and the kitchen would become a valued space for both men and women.

In 'Íntimas', Esquivel points to the experience of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz as evidence that the food–knowledge dichotomy was false because the nun had found knowledge in the kitchen when she was deprived of her books (73). She also argues that Rosario Castellanos' 'Lección de cocina' illustrates the frustration experienced by educated women when there is a lack of opportunities for them in the public sphere. Finally, she interprets Dorelia Barahona's *De qué manera te olvido* as evidence of how women had internalised society's devaluation of the private sphere (Esquivel, *Íntimas*, 75–6). While we may take issue with Esquivel's narrow definition of 'knowledge' as being associated with the written word, we should nevertheless remember the long association between writing and authority in Latin America. As Edmundo Paz-Soldán and Debra A. Castillo observe with reference to Angel Rama's classic *The Lettered City*, '[t]he nineteenth-century scholar possessed control over the social and political order because he also controlled, among other powers, the authority of scriptographic technology in a mostly illiterate society. He, thus, had few competitors – certainly no female ones – in his ambitious effort to organize the new republics according to the power of the word' (3). Shirin Shenassa, drawing on the work of Walter Mignolo, similarly and emphatically states: 'One cannot deny the impact of writing on oral cultures in the conquest and subsequent colonization of Latin America, and the relationship between the technology of alphabetic writing and administration, control, and power' (253). Moreover, Shenassa comments that 'print separates knowledge from experience' (255). It was no longer necessary to experience something to know it; knowledge 'acquired by reading now had the status of firsthand experience [...] provided that the transmission of the information in question adhered to the new typography-induced discursive practices' (Shenassa 256). This written knowledge excluded large segments of the population, including the majority of women, and was in contrast to 'earlier information types such as "wisdom" or "craftsmanship"' (Shenassa 256). It is this entrenched tradition of separating two spheres of knowledge that Esquivel seeks to overcome in her *nueva literatura*.

In *Como agua*, Esquivel tries to bridge the food–knowledge divide and create a *nueva literatura* by showing how knowledge about food can be turned into written form. Thus, Tita's culinary creations gain longevity as a written text in the form of a recipe book. As Jaffe

<sup>4</sup> See also: Charles M. Tatum, 'María Luisa Mendoza, atrevida novelista mexicana'.

observes, by the simple fact of bringing the kitchen and writing together, the novel unites 'two supposedly incompatible companions for women today' (202). Tita begins writing her recipes down on the same night she witnesses Gertrudis run away and so writing is presented as Tita's parallel attempt to find her own freedom and means of self-expression. Furthermore, it is through Tita's recipe book that her great-niece learns to cook and so food is reconnected to prestigious, book-based learning and the academic tradition – as opposed to the devalued oral and domestic traditions from which Tita learned to cook.

Tita's cookery skills, which Ibsen notes are deliberately represented as learned rather than biologically determined, are placed on an equal footing with John's scientific knowledge (142). Kari S. Salkjelsvik goes so far as to suggest that the effectiveness of Tita's home remedies and her creativity in cooking may lead us to see her knowledge as superior to John's (176–7). Thus, the novel brings into question gendered assumptions which value the supposedly 'masculine' form of scientific knowledge.<sup>5</sup> The commensurability of the two forms of knowledge is underscored by the similarities between Tita's recipes and the methods for John's experiments. The description of the latter reads: 'En una libra de agua se disuelve una de nitro y se le agrega un poco de azafrán para darle color, y en esta solución se baña el cartón' (Esquivel *Como agua* 101). Similarly, Tita's recipe for *chorizo norteño* instructs: 'En cuanto suelta el hervor, se retira del fuego y se le pone a la olla una tapadera encima, para que los chiles se ablanden' (79). By suggesting that each task requires the same level of skill and knowledge, the novel can be seen to invite a revalorisation of Tita's domestic abilities. However, its portrayal of her does not bring into question the traditional gendered association between women and domestic knowledge and so the novel only partly challenges the gendered binary as was Esquivel's stated aim in 'Íntimas'.

The false separation between food and knowledge, as Esquivel noted, had already been overcome by her predecessor, Sor Juana, who in her 'Respuesta' saw food and knowledge as complimentary forms of sustenance. Sor Juana's will to discover forbidden knowledge invites comparison with Eve, who was unable to resist the lure of the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. This similarity could have undermined her defence of women's education in the eyes of the Church. Indeed, as Nina M. Scott observes, 'the issue of permissible inquiry versus excessive and thus sinful striving for knowledge' is dealt with in Sor Juana's 'Primero Sueño', so she was well aware of the restrictions imposed by the Church doctrine on her quest for knowledge (513). Nevertheless, such is Sor Juana's thirst for knowledge, including forbidden, secular knowledge, as evidenced in the 'Respuesta' that she describes it as 'el mejor *alimento* y vida del alma' (emphasis added). In describing knowledge in terms of nourishment, she creates a direct parallel between food for the body and the knowledge that feeds the soul (988). Here again, however, the insistence that knowledge, rather than the Holy Spirit/God, nourishes the soul puts her at risk of being considered heretical.

Sor Juana also disrupted the association between knowledge and the written text by describing how she found opportunities for learning in the kitchen. Indeed, it is possible to read Sor Juana's claim to be able to find an education even in the kitchen as a thinly disguised boast about the creativity and flexibility of her intellect. Or, perhaps even more daringly, it may be seen as a rejection of religious texts in favour of secular knowledge that could be acquired by observing the world around her. The value she places on the lessons learned in the kitchen is underscored firstly by the description of her lessons from the kitchen, which

<sup>5</sup> It can also be argued that the novel undermines the supposed superiority of Western forms of knowledge through the characters of Nacha and Luz del Amanecer. Spina, for example, notes that John 'privileges his grandmother's knowledge over that of the West and finally becomes an open follower of his grandmother' (215). Such an interpretation has, however, been brought into question by Victoria Martínez, who suggests that the novel ultimately confirms racial stereotypes around the idea of the 'noble savage' (35).

calls to mind the procedure of a scientific experiment as she relates how she has identified the different outcomes of her actions: 'Veo que un huevo se une y fríe en la manteca o aceite y, por contrario, se despedaza en el almíbar, ver que para que el azúcar se conserve fluida basta echarle una muy minima parte de agua en que haya estado membrillo u otra fruta agria' (de la Cruz 1986). Significantly, here practical, hands-on experience is seen as the essential precondition of written knowledge. Sor Juana also brings gendered assumptions that connect women to knowledge about cooking into question when she writes, with a hint of irony, 'qué podemos saber las mujeres sino filosofías de cocina?' and mockingly reassures her imagined interlocutor/reader that learning is not incompatible with performing domestic duties as she cites Lupercio Leonardo's assertion that 'bien se puede filosofar y aderezar la cena' (1986). In 'Íntimas', Esquivel suggested that in *Como agua* she was continuing the work begun by Sor Juana in pointing out that the division between food and knowledge was false. This claim is borne out by closer analysis.

In contrast to Sor Juana and Tita, the woman portrayed in Castellanos' 'Lección de cocina' is unable to reconcile food and domestic skills with her pursuit of written forms of knowledge. In the strictest sense, 'Lección' may not be considered an example of *nueva literatura*, yet we should also note that the woman's situation is presented as being far from ideal. The story may not represent a perfect world, but it does not endorse the imperfect one it portrays. Moreover, all three texts defend the commensurability of knowledge about cooking and other, traditionally 'masculine', forms of written and academic knowledge. Trying to adapt to her new circumstances as stay-at-home wife, the narrator of 'Lección' unsuccessfully attempts to relate her cooking to a more familiar academic context, thus establishing a parallel between the two types of knowledge. She requests a preface and a dictionary of technical terms 'para hacer accesible al profano el difícil arte culinario' and starts the conclusion of the story of her failed attempt to cook a first meal for her husband with 'Recapitulemos' – as if she were concluding an academic essay (Castellanos, 'Lección', 838 and 845). She also describes both the knowledge she had previously gained and that she will need to acquire in the kitchen as 'destrezas', placing them on an equal footing while still separating, as Alemañy-Valdez notes, 'el saber como actividad práctica y el saber como actividad intelectual' (Castellanos, 'Lección', 837 and Alemañy-Valdez 7). Furthermore, the fact that the 'educated' narrator struggles to understand the specialist vocabulary in the recipe book suggests that the language of the latter is as obscure to the uninitiated as an academic essay and that expert knowledge is required to interpret each text. The assumption that knowledge about cooking is innate and, in fact, not even knowledge as much as instinct is also undermined in Castellanos' text, as the narrator states that the recipe book '[m]e supone una intuición que, según mi sexo, debo poseer pero que no poseo, un sentido sin el que nací que me permitiera advertir el momento preciso en que la carne está a punto' ('Lección de cocina' 841, emphasis added). In this way, Castellanos, more than either Sor Juana or Esquivel, undoes the association between women and domestic knowledge while also affirming the latter as a branch of knowledge. Nevertheless, Esquivel saw Castellanos' story as reaffirming the division between food and knowledge, as the protagonist is forced to choose between either the domestic or the academic world. For Esquivel, therefore, 'Lección' reflected the struggles women experienced in the mid- to late twentieth century as they tried to negotiate lives where they had increased educational opportunities but were still faced with expectations of fulfilling their traditional roles as wives and mothers. The narrator-protagonist does not exhibit the desired understanding of food and knowledge Esquivel wishes to see in her *nueva literatura*. Yet, closer examination reveals some interesting points of convergence between *Como agua* and 'Lección' and their attitudes to domestic knowledge. Equally, the association between women and domestic knowledge in *Como agua* and 'Respuesta' indicates that they too may fall short of the standards of the *nueva literatura*

if it is required to *represent* rather than (implicitly) endorse the ideal relationship between food and knowledge.

### The Revalorisation of the Kitchen as a Non-Gendered Space

In a context today where Mexican women can put their lives at risk just by entering public spaces and where they are also not safe from domestic abuse at home, the need to challenge the gendered division of space is particularly pressing. As Lucía Guerra Cunningham notes in her analysis of gender and space in representations of the house/home in Spanish American women's writing:

Puesto que desde una perspectiva geográfica y antropológica, el espacio se produce bajo factores socio-culturales insertos en un sistema genérico, el paradigma que divide la ciudad entre 'lo público' y 'lo privado' debe comprenderse como parte de un fundamento ideológico que refuerza las diferencias atribuidas a 'lo femenino' y 'lo masculino'. (819)

The *nueva literatura* that Esquivel described, and towards which she suggested generations of women authors had been striving, is one way in which women authors have tried to transform the public imaginary and undermine the existing binary division in society which continues to demarcate and devalue 'feminine space' and put women's lives in danger when they step outside its boundaries.

In 'Íntimas', Esquivel suggests that a *nueva literatura* was required because 'el pensamiento, la razón, el estudio, el saber' had been categorised as masculine and separated from 'el placer gastronómico y el sexual' which had been labelled as feminine (71–2). One of the main aims of the *nueva literatura* was to end this gendered binary thinking. Previously, literature 'ha estado inclinado a uno u otro lado según el desarrollo de la sociedad' ('Íntimas' 72). But a *nueva literatura* would present a balanced view which would enable women and men to 'regresar a la casa que abandonamos, pero ahora conscientemente, a otro nivel' (Esquivel, 'Íntimas suculencias', 83).

No critics have connected, as this article does, Esquivel's representation of the kitchen in *Como agua* with her desire to create a *nueva literatura* – one of the central characteristics of which was an end to conceptualising the kitchen as a gendered space.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, critics have debated extensively the question of whether *Como agua* is a feminist text in which the kitchen, as Jaffe suggests, is a 'space of creative power rather than merely confinement' (201) or whether, as in Maite Zubiaurre's view, this 'kitchen tale' keeps 'women within the

<sup>6</sup> The broader question as to whether or not *Como agua* reinforces traditional gender roles and binaries independently of its representation of the kitchen space has also received considerable critical consideration. As is the case for so many aspects of the novel, however, there is little consensus. On the one hand, Deborah Shaw and Brigitte Rollet suggest that the novel and film share a very conservative representation of gender (85). Claire Taylor similarly claims that, aside from some 'ambivalent re-playings and possible reorientations of gender stereotypings', the female characters are 'unable to define themselves outside of its [gender] binary' (*Bodies and Text* 142). On the other hand, Kristine Ibsen argues that 'each of the female characters has an individual identity that does not necessarily fit into the rigid dichotomies imposed by patriarchal thought' (143). She continues: 'Real women, the novel shows us, may have "masculine" attributes such as strength and courage, just as real men may show "feminine" nurturing sides' (Ibsen 143). Alberto Julián Pérez concurs, noting that the male and female characters combine traits that may traditionally be thought of as masculine and feminine (49). Joanne Saltz presents a compelling argument that the novel disrupts gender roles and binaries, positing that the female characters defy all of the categories (virgin, mother, whore) that would be traditionally assigned to them. Finally, Cristina Ortiz has suggested that the incorporation of different kinds of text, including those not usually thought of as literary, brings into question 'el marco operativo binario establecido por la ideología patriarcal' (122–3).

magic-domestic realm and at the margins of any real public influence' (n.p.). An alternative reading, which locates the text between these two extremes, is proposed by Taylor, who concludes that the text remains ambiguous because of an unresolved tension between Esquivel's revalorisations of women's domestic role and the kitchen space and traditional associations that cannot be completely discarded (*Bodies and Text* 137). The reservations of Taylor and others are based on the suggestion that by keeping Tita in the kitchen Esquivel reinforces the traditional association between women and the domestic sphere. Salkjelsvik, for example, writes:

Uno de los problemas inherentes en estas interpretaciones es que mantienen vigente una división binaria del espacio – tanto físico como simbólico – derivada de una noción antropológica que diferencia entre los aspectos masculinos y femeninos de la cultura. Como consecuencia, las estructuras de poder que esta crítica ve supuestamente subvertidas en la novela resultan paradójicamente reforzadas: el hecho de definir un espacio femenino que aparece en oposición a otro masculino o de poder equivale en última instancia a permanecer dentro de la metafísica patriarcal. Mantener que un espacio es productivo para la mujer, o que rescata un discurso exclusivo de la mujer, no supone ningún tipo de redefinición de la estructura opresiva en sí, sino que meramente confirma la oposición entre marginador y marginado. (171–2)

She nevertheless concedes: 'El único elemento innovador dentro de esta dinámica sería que la mujer adquiere mayor poder' (171–2).<sup>7</sup> By reading *Como agua* alongside 'Íntimas', however, we can see how Esquivel tried to address this association, on the one hand by showing the need for men to also have a connection to the kitchen and, on the other hand, showing the need for women to have the choice to have a life outside the kitchen.

Although Tita finds strength in the kitchen, the kitchen is not, as Martínez suggests, a 'woman's space' (29). Rather, it is 'un lugar de comunión' between the sexes (Esquivel, 'Íntimas', 83). This space is beneficial not only to Tita and Gertrudis but also, as Jaffe (209), Susan Lucas Dobrian (61) and Vincent Spina (215) have noted, to Pedro, John and Sergeant Treviño. Indeed, it is these men's openness to this space that signifies them as the most sympathetic male characters in the novel. By making the kitchen the contested space in the power struggles between Mamá Elena, Tita and Rosaura, the novel also challenges traditional understandings of the kitchen as a place of women's subjugation. Initially, Mamá Elena exercises complete control over her daughters, the kitchen and food production, but as Tita develops her skills, the kitchen becomes her domain and she escapes from her mother's control: 'Tita era entre todas las mujeres de la casa la más capacitada para ocupar el puesto vacante de la cocina, y ahí escapaban de su [Mamá Elena] riguroso control los sabores, los olores, las texturas y lo que éstas pudieron provocar' (Esquivel, *Como agua*, 45). Freed from her mother's 'formulas tan rígidas', Tita adopts the kitchen as her own creative space and the location of her illicit encounters with Pedro (Esquivel, *Como agua*, 171). Thus, through the character of Tita, Esquivel tries to recover the kitchen as a space where self-expression and fulfilment are possible in order to produce her 'nueva literatura que hable, sin resentimiento ni vergüenza, del hogar, del amor, de la cocina, de la vida' (Esquivel, 'Íntimas suculencias', 84). Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that the kitchen only becomes a place of empowerment for Tita out of necessity.

The connection between *Como agua* and 'Íntimas' in terms of the way both advocate a reimagining of the kitchen space can be seen in the way that these texts trace the development in

<sup>7</sup> Similar opinions are expressed by Harmony Wu 181 and Maite Zubiaurre n.p.

attitudes over time. Before identifying what Esquivel sees as the ideal, non-gendered kitchen space in which men and women can freely enter and leave, 'Íntimas' follows the shifting attitudes towards this space across generations. A similar development is observed in *Como agua*. For Mamá Elena's generation, the kitchen was a space of confinement where one carried out one's domestic duties and obligations, which included managing the servants.<sup>8</sup> Her daughter, Tita, is able to exercise a certain amount of control from within the kitchen and gains some pleasure from her work there but is not free to leave. Gertrudis escapes the confines of the family home but for her the kitchen 'becomes a space of spiritual renewal [...] to which she must return from time to time' but because she cannot cook she has to rely on Tita to do so (Spina 215). Gertrudis is keenly aware of her own lack of knowledge about cooking and how her sense of identity could be lost all too easily if Tita were to die: 'Gertrudis lanzó una plegaria en silencio y con los ojos, pidiendo que Tita viviera muchos años más cocinando las recetas de la familia. Ni ella ni Rosaura tenían los conocimientos para hacerlo, por lo tanto el día en que Tita muriera moriría junto con ella el pasado de su familia' (Esquivel, *Como agua*, 155). For Tita and Gertrudis' generation, it is not possible to have both a life outside and inside the kitchen. Tita's great-niece, on the other hand, is completely free to choose to spend time in the kitchen or not. In keeping with Esquivel's comments in 'Íntimas' and her conceptualisation of a *nueva literatura*, hers is presented as the ideal situation and part of Tita's legacy.

Tita has won for herself and future generations the right to choose to spend time in the kitchen and enjoy its pleasures or pursue other interests. An alternative interpretation is put forward by Martínez, who asserts that Tita has made 'no special progress' because she returns to the kitchen in the final chapter to prepare food for the wedding (35). However, whereas for much of the novel the kitchen is the only place in which Tita can express herself and her feelings and where she has some control, by the end it is her decision to go back to that space. The way in which she takes a stand against the family tradition of not allowing the youngest daughter to marry frees future generations from a similar fate. Esperanza is liberated from her mother, Rosaura, who had threatened to continue the family tradition against which Tita had struggled.<sup>9</sup> Having opened up a choice for her niece, Tita not only teaches Esperanza how to cook but also provides 'otro tipo de conocimientos de los que su madre le daba' (Esquivel, *Como agua*, 202).<sup>10</sup> This progression from one generation to the next, from being obliged to make do with the kitchen as a refuge to choosing to enjoy its benefits, is significant – just as the groundwork laid by the women authors Esquivel cited in 'Íntimas' was important in paving the way for future generations of women authors. Tita's type of passive resistance, which we may understand with reference to Josefina Ludmer's concept of *tretas del débil*, is represented here as an important step taken by a generation of women whose courage opened up the opportunities now enjoyed by Tita's great-niece and the protagonist of another short story in *Íntimas suculencias*, 'Mole negro de Oaxaca'. Both of these women can enjoy spending time in the kitchen *and* have independent lives outside the home. These women, unlike Tita, Gertrudis and, as will be seen, the women in *De qué manera te olvidó*, can 'have it all' because gendered binary thinking that separated food, knowledge and pleasure and saw women's place as being in the devalued private sphere of the home has been

<sup>8</sup> Joanne Saltz notes that although Mamá Elena 'has transgressed that system in her affair with José and the resulting birth of Gertrudis, later, as matriarch she enforces that system' (34). Furthermore, Saltz cites Jean Franco's reminder that 'in the privatized and inward-looking Hispanic house [...] the virtual confinement of married women to the home had not only been required by the Church but was also intended to ensure the purity of blood that Spanish society had imposed after the wars against the Moors' (Jean Franco cited in Saltz 32).

<sup>9</sup> Jaffe also notes that 'as a result of Tita's rebellion, as an adult the niece enters the kitchen only when she chooses' (208).

<sup>10</sup> Jaffe also makes the point that Tita has a role in educating Esperanza (207).

overcome. Moreover, they *need* to 'have it all' because to ignore the kitchen space completely is detrimental as it is to lose part of one's identity, as Gertrudis is at risk of doing, or it is likely to result in the kind of unhealthy relationship that Rosaura has with food.

Writing about the protagonist of 'Lección' in 'Íntimas', Esquivel observed that, for the generation she represents, being made to spend time in the devalued kitchen space was a source of frustration: 'El hecho de que las actividades dentro de la casa no fueron productivas, hizo que fueran devaluadas por las mismas mujeres' (75). 'Lección' opens with a description of the kitchen as an unwelcoming, alien space, almost hostile in its cleanliness: 'Es una lástima tener que mancillarla con el uso' (Castellanos, 'Lección', 837). The kitchen reminds her of a sanatorium, although she admits that at least 'carece del exceso deslumbrado' (837). The reference to a sanatorium is particularly interesting: 'sanatorio' is used particularly to refer to a hospital where tuberculosis is treated and so suggests that being married is akin to this illness in the way it debilitates and keeps women indoors.<sup>11</sup> 'Sanatorio' may also refer to a psychiatric hospital, indicating in the context of the story that marriage, and especially being confined to the kitchen, has a negative effect on a woman's mental health. This implication is certainly borne out by the narrator-protagonist's experience, as she does not want to tell her husband the truth about what happened to the now burned meat for fear of arousing concern: 'mi marido va a mirarme con suspicacia, va a sentirse incómodo en mi compañía y va a vivir en la continua expectativa de que se me declare la locura' (847). Initially, the narrator resigns herself to the place she has been assigned as a result of her new role as a wife: 'Mi lugar está aquí' (837). In the end, however, she refuses to follow the established recipe for being a 'good wife'. Rather than being the site of her final submission, therefore, her experience of being in the kitchen provides her with the stimulus to realise the limits of the sacrifices she is willing to make:

Pero yo contaba con que el sacrificio, el renunciamiento completo a lo que soy, no se me demandaría más que en la Ocasión Sublime, en la Hora de las Grandes Resoluciones, en el Momento de la Decisión Definitiva. No con lo que me he topado hoy que es algo muy insignificante, muy ridículo. Y sin embargo. (847)

It is the place that 'la oblige y le ayuda a la autoreflexión necesaria para la preparación y el afianzamiento de la interioridad de su ser' (Alemañy-Valdez 4). Thus, in the words of Brigley Thompson and Gunne, "'Cooking Lesson' ends when the narrator becomes aware of her passive status as a Guadalupe, and begins to actively fantasize instead about becoming a sexually transgressive woman: a version of Tonantzin (the Aztec goddess that was Guadalupe's forebear), or a kind of La Malinche who revels in her own desires' (282). As Esquivel stated, the kitchen is a source of frustration for the narrator-protagonist of 'Lección' and it is a heavily gendered space. But what she overlooked is that it is also the space where resistance begins, where the narrator is able to think, reflect, express her suppressed feelings and realise the limits of her own self-abnegation.

It is only because of this time spent in the kitchen that the narrator is able to articulate her dissatisfaction and formulate her rebellion. By the end of the story, the narrator-protagonist takes control: 'Yo seré, de hoy en adelante, lo que elija en este momento [...] Yo impondré, desde el principio, y con un poco de impertinencia las reglas del juego' (Castellanos, 'Lección', 846). She decides not to follow the old 'receta' for being a wife, whereby she seems to conform to get what she wants, because this does not represent an authentic self (846). She rejects this

<sup>11</sup> The reference to a 'sanatorio' as hospital for treating tuberculosis is perhaps particularly resonant because, as is well documented, Castellanos suffered from tuberculosis while working in Chiapas.

path because 'me repugna *actuar así*' (846, emphasis added). She likens her role as a wife to being an actress in a film; it is a performance that she has to put on, and of which cooking is a part, so that the couple will conform to the stereotypical image of 'la pareja de amantes perfectos y entonces, en la mitad de un abrazo, nos desvaneceremos y aparecerá en la pantalla la palabra "fin"' (843). Failure to adapt to her new role, however inauthentic, and even if it means putting on a lifelong performance, will mean the end of her marriage; but complying will lead to the end of her sense of individual identity. The story thus connects food and the kitchen with self-knowledge and, in an unexpected way, with women's self-realisation and liberation. Seen in this light, although 'Lección' does not represent the kitchen space in the way Esquivel hoped a *nueva literatura* would do, it is a more interesting antecedent to *Como agua* than Esquivel realised.

Esquivel suggested that Barahona's *De qué manera* illustrates how women have internalised society's devaluation of the private, domestic sphere in favour of the public. We have seen how a closer analysis of the representation of domestic knowledge as learned and the way that the kitchen becomes a site of self-realisation in 'Lección' complicate this view. Equally, a more nuanced characterisation of Barahona's text might also be required. The kitchen is less important in *De qué manera* as the girls spend a lot of time in cafes and bars signifying their growing independence as they move away from home. Nevertheless, the kitchen space is not devalued. For María, having her own 'gran cocina de leña' forms part of her ideal future life (Barahona 15). Her dream is realised when she moves to the mountains with her second husband and prepares chicken with potatoes and tortillas for her parents when they visit each Sunday. For María, therefore, the kitchen is highly valued and is an integral part of her vision of an independent life. Although she is happy, as Esquivel asserted, María has internalised society's devaluation of her domestic role. From a young age, she dreamt of a house in the mountains 'donde sembrar melocotones y construir una casa con una gran cocina de leña' (Barahona 15). María pursues her dream even though she knows that for her friends this situation would be pitiful: 'Aquí estoy tranquila, dos niñas, un marido que de seguro a ti te parecerá horrible y aburrido, una casa limpiísima, dos pequineses, cuatro peceras y bastantes kilos de más' (10). Claudia, on the other hand, whom Leda accuses of being a self-styled 'escritora incomprendida', prioritises her writing and her career in journalism, never marries and at the end of the novel, although she has lived abroad and achieved a lot in her professional life, she is left longing for her lover, Valentín, a revolutionary who has not returned from a mission (9). From Esquivel's point of view, *De qué manera* can be seen as a step forward from 'Lección' because María does not outrightly reject the private sphere in the same way Castellanos' character does and she has a choice to spend time in the kitchen or not, but she is self-conscious about her decision – aware of how it is viewed by a society that devalues the kitchen space. Barahona's text acknowledges the satisfaction María derives from her role, as well as acknowledging its limitations from Claudia's perspective. Likewise, the novel notes Claudia's professional achievements, while recognising the personal sacrifice they have entailed. Thus, while both choices are validated to some extent, *De qué manera* indicates that it is not ideal that women are expected to choose and no solution is presented to this impasse. From this viewpoint, *De qué manera's* position may be closer to that of *Como agua* than Esquivel's characterisation implies. Both texts share the view that women should be free to have a career without sacrificing the benefits associated with a domestic life but only Esquivel's text, in keeping with the criteria for a *nueva literatura*, attempts to present the kitchen space as non-gendered.

For Esquivel, Castellanos and Barahona, problems arise when women have no choice but to spend time in the kitchen. Even when there is no choice, for Esquivel, as well as for Sor Juana and Arredondo, the kitchen can still be an important site of refuge. Although most

of 'Estío' is set outside, the kitchen is a place to which the narrator retreats when trying to hide from her incestuous feelings.<sup>12</sup> For Sor Juana the kitchen was at least a place where she could acquire secular knowledge, quietly resisting those who told her to give up her studies. As Nina M. Scott writes: 'The convent was as close as she could come to a room of her own in which to nurture her intellectual life' (513). Sor Juana also questioned the gendered division of space as being detrimental to both men and women. Thus, she claims that Aristotle missed out because he was denied the opportunity to learn from being in the kitchen: 'Si Aristóteles hubiera guisado, mucho más hubiera escrito' (de la Cruz 986). In this way, the 'Respuesta', like *Como agua*, participates in 'la tarea de cuestionar la división estructural en esferas que sirven a la ideología patriarcal para catalogar en un registro u otro de acciones y pensamientos' (Ortiz 121). In this sense, Esquivel's assertion that the kitchen had been devalued in earlier literature could be nuanced.

Although Esquivel did not comment on the (albeit minor) references to the kitchen in 'Fruta madura', it is also not sufficient to say that the kitchen is devalued in this story. The unnamed protagonist is expected to support her husband's political career by staying at home. She comes to resent the way in which she is side-lined despite being instrumental in his success. She was the overlooked 'cocinera multiplicadora de panes el día de la elección' and she compares herself to the railway sleepers which we travel over but ignore (Mendoza 99). As her role is not chosen and is not recognised, she is resentful of her domestic duties, which are listed without enthusiasm: 'la medida del pan casero, las servilletas almidonadas, la comida recetada por bisabuelas de rancho y tiempo' (Mendoza 100). The protagonist bemoans the lack of significance her husband attaches to her domestic role, but it is important to note that she recognises the vital role she has played in her husband's success and so she does not devalue the domestic realm even if it remains a space that is encoded as exclusively female. While Esquivel's predecessors went some way to addressing the challenge of valuing the kitchen space, for them it remained a woman's domain. They may not have endorsed the status quo, but they did not show an alternative. In this context, the way 'Íntimas' and *Como agua* argue for the representation of the kitchen as a site of renewal for *both* men and women as part of a *nueva literatura* marks a significant shift.

### Food, Sexual Pleasure and the Celebration of Female Sexuality

Esquivel's call for a *nueva literatura* celebrating sexually liberated women was linked to and reflected the emergence of a group of increasingly independent, educated middle-class women. Within her *nueva literatura*, as well as a uniting of food and (written) knowledge and revaluing the kitchen as a non-gendered space, Esquivel imagined that there would no longer be a negative association between food and sexual pleasure and that there would be a celebration of female sexuality. Debra Castillo explains that as the number of women authors and readers in Mexico grew, so too did the interest in positive representations of female sexuality in literature:

Whereas earlier Mexican best-sellers (including the century's first major best-seller, *Santa*) tended to be not only male-authored but also implicitly aimed at a male audience, modern Mexican best-sellers are more likely to be woman-authored and aimed at an audience of women, especially those leisured middle-class women who are now assumed to make up the bulk of book buyers in the country. Sales figures indicate not only that these women read prodigiously but that they overwhelmingly read works by other middle-class women in which women have positive protagonic

<sup>12</sup> On the significance of the outside setting, see Armando Segura Morales.

roles. Even more interestingly, works like Sefchovich's and those of her colleagues who make it to Mexican best-sellerdom tend to highlight images of women who freely express their sexuality and who are not castigated for their adventurous love lives. National allegory, it seems, is giving way in these best-sellers to meditations on sexual politics, at least in what sells to the eager Mexican audience. (33)

As Esquivel suggested in 'Íntimas', the representations of women in literature were connected to women's changing role in society.

In 'Íntimas', Esquivel identifies Mendoza's 'Fruta madura de ida' as illustrating the potential for a positive connection between food and sexual pleasure. She uses a quote from 'Fruta madura' to describe the fruit in the Garden of Eden, even though Mendoza's story does not reference the Genesis myth and so the quotation is taken out of context. Building on this quotation from 'Fruta madura', 'Íntimas' identifies Eve picking the forbidden fruit as the foundational moment – as a result of which 'quedaron unidos la comida, el saber y el placer dentro de una creación literaria' ('Íntimas', 71). As we know, in the Genesis account (Chapter 3) eating the forbidden fruit is associated with pleasure (the food on the tree looks appetising) and the knowledge of sexuality and sexual difference, because upon eating the fruit the couple, who had been naked, feel the need to cover their bodies. According to Esquivel, 'Fruta madura' reverses the traditional association, which stretches back to the Genesis story, between food, sexual pleasure and sin. In Mendoza's story, the fruit is connected to sexual pleasure and the protagonist's developing self-knowledge and awareness, but the element of sin is omitted. By citing Mendoza's text in relation to the Genesis narrative, Esquivel subtly highlights how Mendoza and, by extension, her *nueva literatura* seeks to rewrite this foundational text in a way that reclaims women's right to pleasure and to a voice with which to tell their own story.

Esquivel was correct to say that 'Fruta madura' connects food and sexual pleasure without sin, but this represents only a partial reading of the story. Narrated by a woman looking back on her younger self, referred to in the third person as 'la niña', 'Fruta madura' is built around a comparison between her and a basket of fruit that she receives from her admirer-husband.<sup>13</sup> Initially, both are appetising and it is from this early part of the story that Esquivel took her quotation for 'Íntimas'. The description of the fruit has clear sexual overtones: 'se diría que tanta redondez eran matrices cortadas, pulpas sexuales, afiladas riquezas para lamerse, comerse mejor' (Esquivel, 'Íntimas', 71 and Mendoza 98). The fruit is linked to the sexually 'ripe' female body: 'la broma pesada de los capulines acharolados de laca, ojos de india, los duraznos velludos, nalgonas las peras, lomos de cocodrilo de las piñas' (Mendoza 98). While these descriptions are associated with the young woman and her admirer, looking at the basket the narrator realises that she is still like the fruit; they will both mature and lose their appeal. As she says at the end of the story: 'Como la fruta madura: nos caemos del árbol' (Mendoza 100). It is for this reason that the woman suggests to her servant that they should eat the fruit and die, so that neither will have to suffer the fate of aging. The servant agrees to this pact because she says men no longer pay attention to her anyway. In this context, female sexuality is not celebrated but is presented as overly dependent on male desire. The eating of the fruit will not bring pleasure, only relief from the knowledge that they are no longer desirable to men and the pressures of trying to be sexually appetising. Thus, while the opening descriptions of the basket of fruit do, as Esquivel suggested, link food and sexual

<sup>13</sup> The narrative plays with time, so that it seems that the woman receives the basket of fruit both as a young woman from her admirer and as an older woman from the same admirer, who went on to become her unfaithful husband.

pleasure, the story overall complicates this connection. Equally, however, as in 'Lección', thinking about the fruit leads the protagonist to greater awareness of her situation. As a result, 'Fruta madura' draws attention not only to the problematic connection between food, women's sexual pleasure and male desire, but also to the objectification of women (who are treated like pieces of fruit) and highlights the way in which women are discarded by society as they get older. In this sense, perhaps the most significant contribution of Mendoza's text is the way the narrator who has been cast aside is nevertheless able to voice her own subjectivity and to assume agency.

Arredondo's 'Estío', like the Genesis narrative, associates food and sexual pleasure with sin and so, for Esquivel, was an example of how food and sexual pleasure have been wrongly separated ('Íntimas' 77–8). The sin committed is that of incest as the protagonist-narrator lusts after her son, Román, while her son's friend lusts after her, forming a triangle of unrequited love. From the outset, food and passion are connected as the protagonist, her son and her son's friend eat together at home and later while standing in the river. After bathing in the river, the narrator describes bringing food from the house and falling asleep under the mango tree. Subsequently, as her desire becomes harder to control, she sends her son and his friend out alone and tries to satisfy her incestuous feelings by voraciously eating mangoes. As Beatriz Espejo writes: 'su sensualidad aflora más tarde cuando, acalorada, se sienta en la escalinata que da a la huerta para comer con voracidad tres mangos maduros dejando correr el jugo por su garganta' (30). The discomfort she feels when La Toña catches her eating reflects her guilt about her feelings: 'Me quedé con el mango entre las manos, torpe, inmóvil, y el juego sobre la piel empezó a secarse rápidamente y a ser incómodo, a ser una porquería' (Arredondo 16). Nevertheless, she derives some temporary satisfaction from the food as she allows the last drops of liquid to run down her neck, leading to a feeling of release: 'Y sin saber por qué comencé a reírme alto, francamente' (16). Finally, she enters a phase of wilful denial, which is reflected in her complete withdrawal and the declaration: 'Creo que casi no respiraba [...] tampoco tenía necesidad alguna' (Arredondo 22, emphasis added). This lack of any need presumably includes food, so that it is only by denying all of her appetites to the point of feeling suffocated that can she resist temptation. Compared to *Como agua*, 'Lección' and even Sor Juana's 'Respuesta', food plays a minor role in 'Estío'. Yet the scene in which the protagonist eats the mango is unforgettable. This scene, contrary to Esquivel's vision for a *nueva literatura*, links food and illicit sexual pleasure in a semiotic system in which desire for the former is used to signal the narrator's true sexual feelings. One appetite can be temporarily satiated through the other, but in the end only asceticism can save her from sin and this is a high price to pay.

In drawing on a semiotic system linking food and female sexual desire, 'Estío', 'Lección' and *Como agua* follow a long tradition in Hispanic literature including, for example, Leopoldo Alas' *La Regenta*.<sup>14</sup> According to Lévi-Strauss, a sign is used to express the one by the means of the other and categories relating to food can 'be used as conceptual tools with which to elaborate abstract ideas' (1). With reference to female sexuality as represented in myth, Lévi-Strauss notes that the sexual code often 'becomes latent and is concealed beneath the alimentary code' (369). Furthermore, Freud argues that repression is often accompanied by displacement, whereby what is repressed finds a channel for expression which is less obvious and, therefore, less threatening to the status quo (Chapters 2 and 4).

In the context of this tradition, Castellanos' text is unusual because the narrator-protagonist expresses her *lack* of sexual feelings towards her husband through food even though, from the point of view of patriarchal society, her feelings would be less sinful within the context of

<sup>14</sup> On the link between food and female sexuality in *La Regenta*, see Alison Sinclair's 'The Consuming Passion'.

marriage than the feelings of incest experienced by the narrator of 'Estío'. As Alemañy-Valdez tells us, in 'Lección' 'todas las alusiones a la carne remiten a lo sexual' (6). The protagonist reports that the appearance of the meat 'me inhibe el hambre' (Castellanos, 'Lección', 838). The meat, which is 'rígido por el frío' and 'rojo, como si estuviera a punto de echarse sangre', may not look appetising but the real reason she is repulsed is because it reminds her of the appearance of her and her husband's sunburned bodies and how he made her lie on her back to have sex, which she did not enjoy because of her sunburn (838). Brigley Thompson and Gunne suggest that the narrator's 'sexual life is symptomatic of the oppressive nature of her marriage and her domination by her husband' (281). In 'Íntimas', Esquivel was concerned that food and female sexual pleasure were too often linked to sin. Food has been used to conceal sinful sexual desire as in 'Estío', but in 'Lección' it is used to veil the narrator's equally socially unacceptable feelings of repulsion towards her husband. Nothing in 'Lección' suggests that food, like sex, does not have the potential to be pleasurable and without sin, but Castellanos' story is a useful corollary as it points out that the removal of sin alone is not enough to prevent either food or sex from provoking disgust.

Despite setting out her hopes for a *nueva literatura* in which food and sexual pleasure were not associated with sin, in Esquivel's *Como agua* food and sexual pleasure are connected with sin and Tita's desire for her sister's husband is concealed beneath an alimentary code. Thus, following Pedro's marriage to Rosaura, food becomes a 'código nuevo de comunicación' between Tita and Pedro when other forms of communication are prohibited (Esquivel, *Como agua*, 50). Pedro, for example, expresses his delight at Tita's cooking in front of his wife: 'cerrando los ojos con verdadera lujuria: – ¡Este es un placer de los dioses!' (49). In the long term, however, Tita, like the mother in 'Estío', cannot sublimate her desires through food, and she suffers a breakdown as a result of which she too stops eating as well as speaking. As Ibsen has noted, 'the connection between food and expression is underscored in the novel as Tita refuses to eat *and to speak* following her emotional breakdown' (137). Thus, although 'Estío' and *Como agua* connect food, sexual pleasure and sin, they imply that denying these appetites is destructive for women.

Not only would Esquivel's *nueva literatura* remove the link between food, sexual pleasure and sin, it would also reconcile food and sexual pleasure without relying on traditional gender roles. Reading *Como agua* in the light of 'Íntimas', therefore, leads us to reflect on the scene in which Tita communicates with Pedro through her cooking so that the act of eating becomes tantamount to a sexual experience in which Tita takes the active role instead of the traditional passive role:

Tal parecía que en un extraño fenómeno de alquimia su ser se había disuelto en la salsa de rosas, en el cuerpo de las codornices, en el vino y en cada uno de los olores de la comida. De esta manera *penetraba* en el cuerpo de Pedro, *voluptuosa, aromática, calurosa, completamente sensual*. Parecía que habían descubierto un código nuevo de comunicación en el que Tita era la emisora, Pedro el receptor y Gertrudis la afortunada en quien se sintetizaba esta singular relación sexual, a través de la comida. Pedro no opuso resistencia, la dejó entrar hasta el último rincón de su ser sin poder quitarse la vista el uno del otro. (Esquivel, *Como agua*, 49–50, emphasis added)

Victoria Martínez suggests that Pedro's passivity in this encounter, to which we are told 'no opuso resistencia' as Tita 'penetraba en [su] cuerpo', is evidence of his weakness and his 'failings as a man' (Esquivel, *Como agua*, 50 and Martínez 30). In 'Íntimas', however, Esquivel argued that binary thinking which opposed knowledge and pleasure, active and passive was

mapped onto a division of the masculine and feminine and needed to be challenged (72 and 82). In light of this statement, Pedro's passivity should not be judged as a failing. Indeed, one way to overcome this false dichotomy imposed by binary thinking, Esquivel suggested, was through the preparation and consumption of food because the energy invested in the food by the woman preparing it 'convierte al *acto* de comer en un *acto* de amor' ('Íntimas', 82, emphasis added). She continued:

se invierte, revierte y amalgama el rol sexual de la pareja. El hombre se convierte en el ser pasivo y la mujer en el activo. La energía de la mujer, mezclada en los olores, los sabores, las texturas, penetra en el cuerpo del hombre, *calurosa, voluptuosa, haciendo uno el placer gastronómico y el sexual.* (83, emphasis added)

Esquivel's repeated association of women with food preparation and the significance of cooking as a means to express their love is not unproblematic, as it continues to rely on patriarchal associations of women with the domestic sphere. However, the similarities between the vocabulary used by Esquivel in both texts is striking, suggesting that her intention at least was to overturn traditional gender roles and to portray an ideal state where gender is overcome: 'Aquí no hay guerra de sexos. Están superados' ('Íntimas', 83). On closer inspection, then, the scene in which Pedro eats the food Tita has prepared should not be viewed as portraying a simple reversal of roles whereby Tita becomes active and Pedro passive but, as Esquivel's formulation implies, 'se invierte, revierte y amalgama el rol sexual de la pareja' (83). Tita and the food she has prepared penetrate Pedro's body but, like the food, she is also consumed by him. For his part, Pedro surrenders himself to Tita and the pleasures arising from the food she has prepared, but he also actively devours it and, by extension, her. In this scene at least, *Como agua* presents a less conservative, more complex view of gender relations which goes beyond a simple binary distinction – albeit one that still apparently relies on women fulfilling their role as cooks.

In Tita's case, food and sexual pleasure are connected in terms of the repression of her feelings. It is in the portrayal of Gertrudis, however, that *Como agua* models the ideal of *nueva literatura*, showing the fulfilment that can be achieved when food and sexual pleasure are connected in a way that is liberating. In one of the most memorable scenes in the novel, Gertrudis eats the quails in rose petal sauce Tita has prepared and is so overcome with passion that she runs away with Juan. We are told that Tita prepares the same meal each year on the anniversary of her sister's departure, 'como ofrenda a la libertad que su hermana había alcanzado' (Esquivel, *Como agua*, 56). Esquivel thus links the enjoyment of food and sexual pleasure to personal freedom. Tina Escaja points out that, in the end, Gertrudis' status is 'legitimized triply: by her marriage to her first love; by legitimizing her own identity as a mulatta through having a biracial child within wed-lock; and by social recognition and financial power' (21). Gertrudis is confident in her own sexuality, which she conceives as being free of sin, even if others may judge otherwise, she has a positive attitude to food and the kitchen, and marries a man who is equally at home in the kitchen and respects her career. Barring the fact that she cannot cook, Gertrudis' life and happiness is what is on offer for the women of the *nueva literatura*.

In *Como agua* food is also the link between generations of women, as Tita's recipes, which she received from Nacha, bring Gertrudis home and are passed on to her great-niece via Esperanza. This valuing of food as something that brings friends and family together and which evokes memories was overlooked by Esquivel in her consideration of a *nueva literatura* but represents an interesting point of convergence between *Como agua* and *De qué manera*,

in which food and drink are also associated with family ties. When Claudia leaves home, food is high on the list of the items she will take with her: 'el diccionario anarquista que le regaló el abuelo aragonés, sus semillas de zanahoria para la huerta, agujas, ganchillos y toda clase de manualidades' (Barahona 34). The cost of independence from one's family is also expressed in terms of food as Leda buys her own cake for her twentieth birthday and is sad that it is the first birthday cake that was not made for her by her mother: 'Delante del pastel ríe, sin poder ocultar cierta tristeza [...] Y, aunque disfrutara de sus nuevas posibilidades económicas, sentía que ese síntoma marcaba un gran cambio' (55). Indeed, in *De qué manera* independence often leads to loneliness, signified by meals alone with only memories for comfort. As Claudia prepares her fish in Canada, she misses home, friends and family. It is this experience of eating alone that leads her to write to María after so many years. In contrast, when she returns home she is happy to spend time with her family and food is at the heart of this gathering: 'Surtido con vino, horchata, picadillo de papaya verde y maduro con queso. Domingo de café y flan de coco entre los helechos. Después, una cremita de cacao mientras se acurrucan los niños y los gatos en las mecedoras para oír las historias de la que llega' (76). Although the relationship between food and family did not feature as part of her *nueva literatura*, both *Como agua* and *De qué manera* invite us to reflect on the link between food and the joy of family.

In 'Íntimas', Esquivel did not comment on the relationship between food and pleasure in Sor Juana's 'Respuesta' or Barahona's *De qué manera*. Closer examination, however, reveals that there is a link between food and pleasure in these texts. In the 'Respuesta', Sor Juana writes with excitement about 'los secretos naturales que he descubierto' and the pleasure she derives from having the freedom to learn. In *De qué manera*, as well as being associated with family ties, food is connected to the pleasures of friendship which in turn are linked to the development of a sexuality that is independent of men. At the beginning of the novel, when Claudia, Leda and María are teenagers, they form the 'Cuerpo Activo de Mujeres Amantes'. The title of their group is a declaration of their intent to claim their own sexuality. When the group of girls meets, they share their experiences with boys and tell one another what they have learned about sex. The sharing of food and drink is an integral part of this gathering as they sit in Leda's room drinking beer, making pizzas and dancing as part of their 'ritos libertarios' (Barahona 16). On one occasion, after Leda has told her friends that she was raped and Claudia has confessed that her mother regularly overdoses on pills, the girls toast using a special liqueur. The opportunity to speak about what has been repressed, culminating in a toast, affirms the bond between the girls as well as the connection between open communication, mental wellbeing and a healthy enjoyment of food that is also evident in 'Estío' and 'Lección'. Later, when the girls have grown up and are growing apart, Leda has learned to enjoy fine wine and food but the distance between the girls is signified by the fact that Claudia and María are no longer interested in the wine, food or what she says (Barahona 56). Again, food is part of a semiotic code that expresses what cannot be said openly. Finally, the girls' reconciliation is signified by another toast when Leda vows to start afresh after her lover has left her. Friendship, confirmed by the sharing of food, provides an antidote to this failed relationship. These bonds, expressed through food, are not sexual but the ties of friendship are more important in the girls' lives as they provide solace after failed sexual relationships. Esquivel's focus in 'Íntimas' and *Como agua* was on the link between food and sexual pleasure in men and women. This focus on heterosexual sexual relationships as being at the centre of her *nueva literatura* led her to overlook the way in which the other woman-authored texts she cited remind us of the joys of freedom, the pleasure of learning and the importance of female friendship in the context of sexual development and healing.

## Conclusions

Esquivel used her speech at a public event that is at the heart of the Mexican cultural calendar to cite the work of five Hispanic women authors. In so doing, she drew attention to their work and invited new audiences to engage with it while grounding herself and her novel, which had been the subject of so much controversy, within a broader canon of women's writing about food, knowledge and pleasure. This article took up the invitation implicit in that speech to go back and try to better understand not only Esquivel's work but also that of her literary foremothers. Looking at how her predecessors had represented the relationship between food, knowledge and pleasure, Esquivel suggested that we need a *nueva literatura* which would break down the boundaries between these categories, revalorise the kitchen and female sexuality and undermine gendered binary thinking. By reading Esquivel's own novel in light of these comments, it has been possible to discern how she tried to implement this agenda in her work. In this respect, perhaps her greatest innovation was to try to reimagine the kitchen as a non-gendered space which was needed by men as much as women. Nevertheless, even she was not completely successful in fulfilling all the criteria of the *nueva literatura* – particularly in the way that she continued to associate women with domestic knowledge, even as she put it on an equal footing with written knowledge. Furthermore, closer examination of the texts she cited implying they were examples of the 'old' literature has revealed that some of her characterisations need to be nuanced and revised. Often Sor Juana, Castellanos, Mendoza, Arredondo and Barahona did more than she recognised to challenge the devaluation of the kitchen space, the regulation of female sexuality and to imagine new relationships between food, knowledge and pleasure. They did so typically not by portraying an ideal situation, but by refusing to endorse the status quo as it was represented in their texts. Esquivel's misreadings may be symptomatic of the way in which Gilbert and Gubar have posited that even as women authors need to create a literary tradition in which to locate themselves, their relationship to them remains ambivalent.

While *Como agua* and the 'Respuesta' value the knowledge acquired in the kitchen, they do not completely undo the gendered binaries that associate women and the domestic as 'Lección' does. Esquivel was correct that *De qué manera* shows how women internalised the devaluation of the private sphere but closer examination revealed that this situation is regretted in the novel. The kitchen provides refuge for Sor Juana and the mother in 'Estío', but for Castellanos' protagonist and, to a greater extent, Tita the kitchen becomes a site of resistance and empowerment – even if in 'Lección' this resistance ultimately leads to a rejection of that space. Equally, for Tita embracing the kitchen means apparently conforming to a traditional gendered division of space, thus highlighting the double bind that even when women claim the kitchen space, the way it has been devalued undermines their position. There is, however, hope for change as represented by Tita's ancestors. In connecting food and sexual pleasure as a form of liberation, for Gertrudis *Como agua* comes closest to achieving the link Esquivel desired in her *nueva literatura*. However, *Como agua*, like 'Estío' also draws attention to the high price women pay for repressing their feelings. The link between food, sexual pleasure and a female sexuality free from sin is present in 'Fruta madura' and 'Lección', but these texts highlight the way in which women's sexuality too often depends on men and that the freedom from sin alone is not sufficient to guarantee sexual pleasure. *De qué manera*, meanwhile, reminds us of the longstanding association between food, family and friendship that is also present in *Como agua* but which Esquivel overlooked.

I should like to conclude this article by reflecting as to whether it may be unreasonable to draw so many conclusions from Esquivel's speech which was later published as 'Íntimas'. The fact that Esquivel deemed it, and the other pieces in *Íntimas*, worthy of being edited,

gathered and published speaks to the importance she (and her publisher) attached to them. Too often, newspaper and magazine articles, interview transcripts, epilogues and prologues and other such "ephemera" produced by authors are overlooked. Yet, to take one recent example, the work of Liliana Weinberg on prologues written by Borges showcases the value of looking at the full range of an author's publications. Ignoring Esquivel's speech while poring over the letters and unpublished draft texts of male authors smacks of a double standard. Treating Esquivel's speech as a theoretical intervention also invites us to question our assumptions about what constitutes theory, what theory *should* be like and who writes it. As Taylor argues, drawing on the work of Eliana Ortega, 'the task of the feminist critic is one of continual awareness of and openness to diversity and difference' ('Latin American Feminist Criticism Revisited' 98). Chicana feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga and Ana Castillo have already shown through their texts, which challenge boundaries between theory and fiction, that there is a need to question traditional Western forms of theory and their suitability to express different experiences.<sup>15</sup> As Sonia Saldívar-Hull has noted, 'Chicanas ask different questions which in turn ask for a reconstruction of the very premises of "theory"' (220). Dismissing Esquivel's speech as too insubstantial or insignificant to merit attention is simply to reinforce existing hierarchies and replicate the way in which some critics tried to dismiss her work as 'literatura light' to be read for pleasure but not taken seriously. We should reserve the right to interrogate her ideas for a *nueva literatura* and interpretations of her chosen texts. Yet, we must also understand her strategy of naming a tradition of Hispanic women authors in her speech within a broader context of feminist literary criticism which has sought to recover and reevaluate women's contribution to literature and to interrogate how women are represented in it in ways that both reflect and influence women's lived experience.

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