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**Torn between Two Mothers: Indigenous Women as spiritual Mentors  
in two Novels by Mexican Women Writers.**

Elena Sánchez Mora

*Headwaters*, 2005.

As Deborah Kelly Kloepfer observes in *The Unspeakable Mother*, the story of mother-daughter relationships constitutes the hidden subtext of many texts written by women (174). In many novels by contemporary Hispanic women writers, the estrangement between mother and daughter, in particular, seems to be a constant underlying theme. There are several examples of texts in which distancing between mother and daughter renders the role of the mother ineffective, prompting the daughter to search for an alternative maternal figure. As a result, the female characters in these texts experience what Adrienne Rich describes in *Of Woman Born*:

"Many women have been caught--have split themselves--between two mothers: one, usually the biological one, who represents the culture of domesticity, of male-centeredness, of conventional expectations, and another, perhaps a woman artist or teacher, who becomes the countervailing figure". (247-48).

Within Mexican narrative, I have come upon four novels with protagonists who experience this predicament, but in which all the countervailing figures are indigenous women who are servants in the middle class white households inhabited by the young female characters. In the context of Hispanic cultures, as a rule, this would be rather unexpected, since, as female members of traditional cultures, women of indigenous groups would be typically considered representatives of a male-centered "culture of domesticity." Moreover, as servants of middle class white families, they would be relegated to domestic activities, which would place them in a double position of subservience, due to their gender as well as their race. Furthermore, unlike non-indigenous women artists or teachers, they would be assumed to be even less educated than their adopted daughters, which would make them unlikely to rise over conventional expectations. However, as I will show below, the indigenous surrogate mothers in these novels are portrayed as transmitters of an ancient wisdom that stands in the face of conventional Western patriarchal values. Also, it is precisely their role as servants of middle class white families, that places these women in a position to become a bridge between the culture represented by those families and their own Indigenous culture. As

such, they assume the role of mentors to the young female characters in need of an effective maternal figure. Although their mentoring encompasses a number of roles corresponding to the expectations of a mother figure, I am particularly interested in the spiritual aspect of this relationship, because it helps explain the deep impact the mentors have on their surrogate daughters. This focus is also part of a wider project on which I'm working that looks at the spiritual development of female characters in Hispanic narrative by contemporary female writers.

For this piece, I have chosen only two of the group of four aforementioned novels to illustrate the female bonding between characters of different race and age; they are Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* and Brianda Domecq's *The Astonishing Story of the Saint of Cabora*. The main reason for my choice is that they both have been published fairly recently and have been translated to English, which means they are available at major bookstores as well as at University libraries such as our own Clemens Library. Even though I'm deeply aware that in this study I'm not doing justice to the utter originality and complexity of the narrative structure of these two novels, I hope that through this small sample readers will acquire a taste of their richness.

Also, both novels share a common geographical location and historical time frame, as they both take place in a ranch in the northern border states of Mexico around the time of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. This conflict, which was a major upheaval, started as a political struggle against the 30-year dictatorship of President Porfirio Díaz, but turned into a confrontation between different factions that ultimately defined Mexico's process of economic and social development as a nation.

I will first focus on each of these two novels separately, to provide a glimpse of the development as well as the nature of the relationship between each protagonist and her indigenous mentor. I will then look at the common traits as well as the differences between each author's approach as they relate to the issues I have raised above.

The indigenous nanny, a widespread institution experienced by generations of Mexican children, appears in several well known novels by Mexican women writers beginning in the 1950's. Mostly linked to the kitchen, the care of children and the home, just like other indigenous surrogate mothers who do not perform the specific role of nannies, they're also transmitters of ancestral knowledge, a bond between the indigenous

and the white, the young and the old. More than anything, as substitute mothers to an indifferent biological white mother and antithesis of the patriarchal power to which the white mothers are subservient, they contribute to raise the young white girls' class and race consciousness.

Nacha, Tita's nanny in *Like Water for Chocolate*, also becomes her substitute mother; but her maternal functions include a wide and deep range. From Tita's birth, Nacha takes care of her nourishment by giving her teas, since her mother, Mama Elena, is unable to nurse her as a result of the shock due to her husband's sudden death; in this way the realm of the family's ranch kitchen involves the girl's care and it's strongly attached to it. Within this realm Nacha informally adopts Tita as her child and, in addition to her physical nourishment, she becomes her playmate and takes care of a major part of her education. Together with food, Nacha is part of Tita's best childhood memories; besides, she's capable of perceiving changes in her state of mind through small details in her behavior.

But Tita's life is attached to Nacha and to the kitchen even before her birth. Nacha, being a bit hard of hearing, is capable of listening effortlessly to her crying within her mother's womb every time onions are being chopped. Nacha also plays the role of Tita's memory before she can even start to remember; she's cited as source for Tita's story, as narrated by her niece-grandchild: "The way Nacha told it, Tita was literally washed into this world on a great tide of tears that spilled over the edge of the table and flooded across the kitchen floor." (4); and she's also the one who sweeps the tears that signify Tita's future life struggles and stores them away in the form of kitchen salt.

Moreover, in contrast with previous fictional nannies, whose relationship with the child under their care only lasts through childhood, Tita's life continues to be attached to Nacha's when she grows up and needs a confidante and accomplice. When Tita falls in love with Pedro, a love Mama Elena has banned to impose her tradition of having the youngest daughter stay single to care for her mother, Nacha makes certain he gets her messages. Again, in spite of her hardness of hearing, she listens to the conversation between Pedro and his father after they come to ask for her hand, reassuring her that although he has accepted marrying her oldest sister Rosaura, he did it only to be able to stay close to Tita. Later she consoles her during her heart breaking by giving her, of

course, her favorite food; and as the opportunity of an encounter between Tita and Pedro ensues, Nacha disappears to leave them alone.

Nacha also offers Tita a refuge where she can manifest her feelings openly when she's forced by her mother to prepare the wedding of her own sister to Pedro, Tita's lover, "Now we're alone in the kitchen, so go ahead and cry, my child, because I don't want them to see you crying tomorrow" (27); Nacha not only consoles her, but identifies with her pain since she remembers her own frustrated love, and manifests openly her feelings toward her, covering her with kisses. Tita is dying for the banquet to end so that she can run to Nacha's side to tell her everything; but Nacha's pain is so great that she's the one who literally dies before Tita can return to her side.

In all these functions, Nacha is the antithesis of Tita's biological mother, who not only relegated her to the kitchen since her birth, but also represses her love feelings toward Pedro, condemning her to take care of her mother until her death. Although Nacha and Mama Elena share the story of a love that couldn't be, Mama Elena's and Nacha's love stories lead to opposite outcomes. If Nacha turns her own frustrated love into unlimited love for Tita, Mama Elena insists on reproducing her love frustrations in her daughter, because she, like the ineffective biological mothers I mentioned earlier, identifies herself with patriarchal power. Thus, in her role of substitute paternal figure as head of the ranch after her husband's death, Mama Elena represents the authoritarian and repressive values of pre-revolutionary society (Saltz, 32-35).

Up until now, one can say that although with more intensity and duration, the relationship between Tita and Nacha is fairly similar to that of other literary nannies in Mexican novels. And at this point in the novel when Nacha dies, one would expect that complicity to end as it ended when the nannies in other novels disappeared from the lives of the girls under their care. However, contact with Nacha not only survives Tita's passage from childhood to adolescence, but Nacha's own death. Although at first Nacha seems to leave a void that Tita feels just as if her real mother had died; and in spite of the fact that she disappears as live character starting on the third of twelve chapters, she acquires a new presence that persists throughout the rest of the novel. Moreover, her marginalized situation as servant relegated to the kitchen and belonging to a culture of the past, bestows on her a new form of power when she dies and turns into a spirit. In this

position, she can leave the kitchen and be present in other spaces within the family house to be near Tita when she needs her help.

Like other nannies, Nacha initiates Tita in the secrets of indigenous wisdom, a process that had started when Nacha was alive but becomes more urgent in the face of the problems facing Tita upon her death. For example, although already trained by Nacha in the art of cooking, from the moment Tita substitutes Nacha completely as a cook, she fully inherits her culinary wisdom. In this way Nacha can advise her combining love and cooking, like when Pedro gives her roses, and Nacha dictates to her a prehispanic recipe and incarnates within her to help her prepare it. With this, besides helping her out, she initiates the cookbook Tita writes which is the basis of her niece-granddaughter story.

But Nacha not only passes on to Tita her culinary wisdom, but wisdom of many other types. For instance, she transmits to her her knowledge as a midwife to assist her in the birth of her nephew; or her wisdom as a healer when Pedro suffers burns induced by Mama Elena and she tells her of a remedy to heal him.

However, it's not always the direct presence of Nacha's spirit which lends help to Tita. Sometimes it benefits her indirectly, like when Tita suffers an emotional breakdown following the death of her nephew. At that time, Nacha appears to her through a Native American woman who offers her tea; she's the grandmother of John, an American doctor who is sympathetic to her. In the same way, the broth brought by Chenchu, a younger servant, and prepared according to Nacha's recipe, restores Tita to health (Spanos, 33).

Nacha also continues being present in Tita's life through details such as a poem Nacha taught her as a child that comes to her mind when John asks her to marry him, and the poem makes her think of Pedro; or when after a fight with her sister Rosaura she sings to the beans to cook them, applying Nacha's advice regarding the tamales that remained raw when made in the middle of a discussion.

In her presence as a spirit, Nacha again has her counterpart in Mama Elena, who upon dying noisily and torturously, in contrast to Nacha's imperceptible and peaceful death, also turns into a spirit but with the characteristics of a ghost who is damned to return to the world of the living to continue torturing Tita. In the same way as Nacha's spirit appears to Tita to offer her help in moments of crisis, Mamá Elena's ghost makes its

appearance when Tita is at her most vulnerable, to incriminate her. This occurs while Tita ponders John's marriage proposal, as she suspects she's pregnant after a secret encounter with Pedro, and Mama Elena exacerbates her guilty feelings. The second time she appears is when a drunken Pedro sings her a song under the balcony, to lay blame on her for the indecency of her relationship with her sister's husband. Only this time Tita is capable of facing her and at the same time lays blame on her for Mama Elena's own sin of rejecting her true love out of racism and Tita expresses her true feelings toward her mother: "Once and for all, leave me alone; I won't put up with you! I hate you, I've always hated you!" (194). To her surprise, the ghost vanishes, but not without first harming Pedro.

In contrast, Nacha's spirit remains by Tita until she's consumed in the fire of her own passion with Pedro. But before that happens, her influence is bestowed on the next generation, as Tita follows Nacha's legacy, giving her niece the same nourishment she was given by Nacha, because obviously taking after Mama Elena, her sister Rosaura is incapable of nourishing her own daughter; besides, she tries to protect her from Rosaura's attempt to perpetuate her mother's legacy of repression.

With the same subtlety with which she dies and afterwards appears to Tita almost imperceptibly, Nacha makes her last appearance before the consummation of the union of Pedro and Tita, of whom it is said: "They were so filled with pleasure that they didn't notice that in the corner of the room Nacha lit the last candle, raised her finger to her lips as if asking for silence, and faded away" (238).

In comparing the treatment of nannies in earlier novels one could conclude that, on the one hand, Esquivel mythifies Nacha more than any other, since in the relationship between Tita and Nacha there is no trace of the culpability experienced by the girl protagonists in the face of their nanny's social exploitation. My explanation to this would be that Tita doesn't feel guilty of Nacha's exploitation because she shares it due to the servitude to which her mother subjects her.

On the other hand, one could argue that Nacha's presence as a spirit is equivalent to the physical disappearance of the nanny in the earlier texts, since Nacha's spirit can be considered as a mere creation of Tita's imagination. However, even when Tita herself disappears because there's no room for her in the world Mama Elena bequeathed to her,

the legacy of Nacha, originated in the indigenous past, expands beyond Tita's life into the future, in the form of the recipes and the advice the narrator of *Like Water for Chocolate*, Tita's niece-granddaughter, inherits from her.

In *The Astonishing Story of the Saint of Cabora*, the historical character of supernatural healer Teresa Urrea is fictionally reconstructed from before her birth, through the obsessive research of a modern day female historian who identifies deeply with her. Teresa's birth is the result of the rape of Cayetana, a destitute indigenous woman, by Tomás Urrea, owner of several ranches in northern México. Huila, an indigenous healer who serves as housekeeper in the ranch's main house, will become a major part of her transition from illegitimate child to "saint." Huila is present in her life even before her birth. When young Cayetana, after her rape at the hands of the ranch owner, experiences the first signs of pregnancy, scared, she goes to Huila for advice on what she believes to be diabolic possession. The old healer tells her she's going to be a mother, and as she offers her help she voices her premonition: "I've been waiting for you for some time. What a strange voice you carry in your womb!" (18). And it is Huila who hears the first signs of labor; in fact, it can be said that she's actually the one who welcomes Teresa into this world when she whispers welcoming lullabies to the newborn into Cayetana's ear.

Following this first encounter, Huila won't cross Teresa's path until much later. In the meantime, since childhood, Teresa shows supernatural powers through her hypnotic glance and saliva that never dries out. These gifts endow her with power and independence but also isolate her from her family, who fear and distrust her. From very early, Teresa is also defined by her love of nature and the freedom it represents, as well as by her admiration for the landlord, whom she wants to imitate. This wish leads her to pursue activities not considered proper for her sex, such as playing the guitar and singing with the ranch workers, as well as riding horses. She also learns to read and gets her first glimpse of Mexican society by reading old papers to another old woman from her small village.

However, it is not until her adolescent years that she becomes aware of the effect of her powers, through her spiritual development, supervised by Huila. Abandoned by her mother in the hands of a despotic aunt, she makes her appearance at sixteen in Cabora, her father's ranch in the northern border state of Sonora, where he feels compelled to take

her in as his daughter. Upon her arrival to her father's ranch, it is again Huila who welcomes her into her new world and turns her into a *señorita*; then she patiently awaits "the sign." In the meantime, Huila makes her aware that she must not use her powers for vengeful purposes, like when she puts them in practice to defeat a young man through her superior physical strength. After trying unsuccessfully to fit into the idle life of a well-to-do rural young woman, realizing she is no good for domestic tasks, Huila introduces her to the healing secrets of her trade in the ranch surroundings. It is when she accompanies Huila during her visits to the sick throughout the ranch property that she discovers her gift for healing. As Huila's helper, Teresa becomes aware, on the one hand, of her strange soothing powers, and on the other, after saving a woman in labor, she finds out in horror that death starts to take over her; and this, according to Huila, is something even she can't explain.

Trying to escape this feeling of imminent death, she falls off her horse, "Espíritu", a gift from her father, and enters into a cataleptic state for three months, during which only Huila knows she's not really dead. The old healer pleads to her own mentor, Apolinio, to save her. When Teresa finally wakes up, she predicts Huila's death and cures her lame leg, thus spreading her fame as miraculous healer. It's important to note that Huila dies happy because she believes her life has been taken in exchange for Teresa's. Following Huila's death, Teresa enters into a state of trance that is like a second childhood, during which it is said she hears voices that command her to heal. When she comes back to her senses, she starts having visions and applying her healing powers. She then devotes herself completely to healing. It is worthy of notice that even after her death, Huila continues to be present in Teresa's life in the form of the beliefs she has passed on to her. For example, when she comes back from her trance and becomes aware of her healing powers, she thinks she hears her voice telling her "You have strange powers, child, strange powers ... You tried to flee but you can't run from destiny, because destiny is life" (178). Another instance is when she's curing a young man and sees images of Huila telling her how to discern sickness of the body and of the spirit. But Huila does not appear in the text again until the end, in the form of one of her fondest memories, when Teresa is near her death.

In spite of her father's opposition, Teresa manages to obtain a space within the ranch to practice her newfound vocation, and the ill and poor throughout the region start seeking her. When she's chosen by an indigenous group as patroness of their rebellion against the dictatorship of President Díaz, she's persecuted by the dictator's government and exiled with her father, who was opposed to the dictatorship, to the United States. The novel follows her into exile as she continues her healing endeavors and becomes more involved in revolutionary activism; she also has two daughters, starts a hospital with an American doctor in Arizona and dies in her thirties. From then on, a popular cult develops around her and she's considered by many to be a saint. Although Teresa's healing has a varied background which includes popular Christian beliefs and spiritism, the roots are in Huila's Yaqui Indian philosophy and knowledge of natural remedies, such as plants and dust wet with saliva rubbed on the body of the sick person.

Troughout her life, Teresa goes through periods of doubt, fear and solitude before reaching the acceptance of her powers without trying to give them a logical explanation, and eventually even enjoying them. Her fame leads her to surpass her mentor as her healings develop into a sense of widespread social justice and community service, infused with an incipient national ideology (Guerrero, 54). She responds to a vital impulse that goes beyond her acceptance within white society and looks for a cure for alienated indigenous people persecuted by the dictatorship, incorporating the best aspects of her maternal culture, symbolized in Huila, her adoptive mother. This is key to understanding the spiritual component of her healing practice, since she could have devoted herself to becoming a revolutionary, but she wouldn't have had as much popular impact. Although her lack of formal education prevented her from high intellectual pursuits, she left instead a popular legacy that survived in both sides of the border through religious objects, photographs, pamphlets and oral tradition. It is also worthy of note that, like her mentor, Teresa enjoyed the freedom that her powers gave her, since her incorporation into the dominant class could not have saved her from domestic confinement (Shaw, 306).

In comparing the two novels, I will start with some general remarks. Regarding the connection between history and fiction, while Esquivel's characters are mostly fictional, Domecq's are heavily based on documented historical figures; however, Domecq

recreated them at will, since documentation was very scarce. This is particularly true for the character of Huila (Guerrero, 54). Also, while Esquivel's characters don't seem affected by the revolution as directly as Domecq's, this conflict plays an important albeit different role in both.

In terms of space in the text, although Huila has a smaller role than Nacha, both occupy a seemingly marginal place within white society, yet they are key figures in the development of each protagonist.

Another important trait is how the protagonists relate to their mentors regarding race. Tita, who does not have any indigenous blood, assimilates to the indigenous world through the kitchen, Nacha's realm, first as her helper and later replacing her entirely. In contrast, Teresa, having been abandoned by her indigenous mother, must then reject her as ineffective and as representative of submission to whites. With Huila's help, she makes her entrance into the white culture, only to discard many of its values but not without securing her father's support. Later on, Teresa recognizes her mother's victimization by her father and at the end embraces her when she appears to her at her deathbed.

Most importantly, although Nacha and Huila occupy domestic spaces as servants in white households, their spiritual powers allow them to enter spaces and occupations that transcend pure domesticity. Nacha, confined to the kitchen as nanny and cook during her life, accomplishes this by transforming into a spirit after her death; Huila, a housekeeper, ventures outside the ranch's main house through her role as healer. Specifically, they both derive their power from their status as older wise women who deal with physical and spiritual ailments, one of whose manifestations is as mediums between life and death, such as in their role as midwives.

Both Nacha and Huila not only fulfill the role of substitute mother, but they go beyond it as they symbolically give birth to them and continue to advise and comfort them even after their own physical deaths. Although Huila, unlike Nacha, is not present in the life of the girl she's in charge of right after her birth, upon Teresa's arrival to her father's ranch, it is again the old healer who welcomes her into her new world, and later offers her own life in exchange for Teresa's.

In spite of the fact that food does not play as major a role in Domecq's novel as it does in Esquivel's, in both novels physical wellbeing is parallel to spiritual health. It is clear that the spiritual wisdom that Nacha and Huila pass on to Tita and Teresa is ultimately that of liberation in the face of repression; nevertheless, they don't advocate open rebellion but survival through resourcefulness and preservation of inner freedom. Following physical death, Nacha and Huila continue to represent the legacy of their indigenous past, while at the same time acting as links with the present through their contact with the characters that are still alive; in this guise, their mission is to transmit to them the wisdom of the past, so that they can enrich their present; at the same time, they act upon the future, through the contemporary chroniclers who put in writing their life stories.

In transmitting their alternative viewpoint to a younger generation, they also allow them to trespass conventional expectations in place on the basis of gender. Like race and age, gender is part of an encompassing dialectic between terms seen as irreconcilable opposites by patriarchal values, such as Indigenous-white, male-female, young-old, life-death. Countering this perception, Mama Elena, being a female, is sided with a male dominated outlook; in siding with Nacha, Tita rejects such an outlook. In the same vein, Teresa imitates the male model her father provides, but rejects the patriarchal social system which is the basis of the exploitation of the indigenous and the poor, with whom she sides; at the same time, although her father is a white landowner, he rejects the dictatorship, and this establishes a bond between father and daughter.

Ultimately, as mentors, both Nacha and Huila empower their disciples by passing on the best of their ancient traditions across generations and races.

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