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Teaching Mexico's Remarkable Writer

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Those of us who work in the field of interdisciplinary studies, we often work from a variety of approaches and thematic collaborations. Diálogo’s goal, furthermore, is to include a wide range of issues in the humanities and social sciences. The current issue is an examination of pedagogical approaches to teaching about Mexico, through the works of the extraordinary and prolific writer, Elena Poniatowska. Journalist as well as novelist, Poniatowska has often used her work to bring issues of social justice to the forefront.

“Pedagogy” can conjure multiple responses in the academy. In some cases, journals shy away from discussions of “how we teach,” preferring more theoretical approaches to critical research. And yet, during Ph.D. preparation in most of our disciplines, our studies are oriented by both theory and practice. Most academics, in fact, spend considerable time teaching classes, and mostly to undergraduate students. The current theme opens a discussion on how we involve our students in the process of learning about Mexico, and in more universal terms, the responses of people and societies to political repression, disasters and other difficult realities of the contemporary era. Discussions on “how to teach” great writers and canonical texts are occurring in other publishing venues. We chose to center our study on how to teach the innovative narratives of Mexico’s contemporary writer, Elena Poniatowska.

The contributors who responded to our call represent a wide variety of disciplines and teaching experiences at both U.S. and international universities—from Mexican scholars and artists to those who study Mexican literature. In each case, the contributors have a longstanding connection to Poniatowska’s insightful subject matter and are dedicated to the reception, and understanding, of her texts by students.

Guiding and assembling this first issue of 2014 has been especially enjoyable for me. I have admired Elena Poniatowska and marveled at her texts through the years, beginning in 1990 when I selected her first published text, Lilus Kikus, to translate and as the subject of my master’s thesis (M.A., New York University). I first met her when I was a new assistant professor, and have frequently heard her talks and been present for homenajes dedicated to her at numerous conferences. Since each writer in this issue has been touched by Poniatowska, and her outstanding writing, we were especially thrilled to hear of her selection for the prestigious Premio Cervantes 2014 award—the highest honor in Spanish-language letters—often called the “Nobel prize” of Spanish and Latin American literature. She will receive the award in a ceremony held in April in Spain.

Poniatowska’s books are numerous: The first was published in 1954, followed by five in the 1960s, four the next decade, six the following, eleven in the 1990s, 22 in the first decade of the new century, and five between 2010-13 (please peruse the Chronology). It would be impossible for this issue to include articles enough to cover all of her texts. Even so, the collection presented here delves into works that invite examination from a variety of perspectives, including current critical studies in disability and human subjects, textual and structural hybridity, techniques of new media, the art of biography, artistic prowess, geographic and historical settings. From in-depth research to teaching and learning applications, to shorter reflections on the impact of particular texts, and two evocative interviews, we hereby present a guide to Mexico’s great contemporary writer, the latest recipient of the highest accolade for distinguished writing.

Those of us who teach her works are acutely aware of how her books have affected us through the years: We have discovered in her writing unique turns of phrase, deeper meanings between the lines, and scintillating images. Perhaps one of the most powerful narrative frames of her texts is the way Poniatowska brings the words and presence of so many extraordinary historical characters into our understanding. Major occurrences of Mexican contemporary history have been documented in her books—the 1968 massacre of students, and the earthquake of 1985—as well as the stories of remarkable figures, including protestors and political prisoners, great artists, and other figures who have made a strong impact on Mexico. Elena Poniatowska is a unique and distinguished voice among Mexican writers of the 20th-21st century.
It was an honor to partner on this theme with my esteemed colleague at Davidson College in North Carolina, Dr. Magdalena Maiz-Peña, who brought five of the contributors to this project. She herself provided an in-depth article on little studied Mexican artist Nahui Olin, based on an essay in Poniatowska’s engaging collection of essays, Las siete cabritas. Since the articles in this issue divide evenly between English and Spanish, we decided to create our Introductions to the issue in both languages.

The articulate and smart approaches of the contributors to this issue provide enlightening perspectives for readers and teachers alike. Discussions include one of Poniatowska’s best known texts, Querido Diego (Dear Diego), as well as a little known biography of disability rights activist Gaby Brimmer. Several essays discuss her landmark historical texts: the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City; the innovative composition/compilation on the 1968 student massacre in Mexico City; and her 1969 novel on the soldadera (soldier woman) of the Mexican Revolution. Many of Poniatowska’s subjects are women, and often artists. So it is no surprise that her most recent novel, on Leonora Carrington, is highlighted in the critical discussion of a senior seminar. Other articles pursue group study of artists Angelina Beloff, Tina Modotti, Mariana Yampolsky, and Elena Garro, as well as the various artists depicted in Las siete cabritas, and the recent Leonora.

One article describes how a special website, and digital archives, were created by students, while other articles discuss the process of study through Power Point preparations. An introspective interview conducted by graduate students in Canada was the concluding achievement of a visual arts class taught in Spanish, using Poniatowska’s texts. The Reflections section of shorter essays brings enlightening perspectives on autobiography, testimony, women’s roles, artistic figures, and class privilege, as well as the intricacies of translating Poniatowska’s novel on the soldadera (Hasta no verte, Jesús mío).

Poniatowska has a special affinity for Oaxaca: her protagonists Jesusa in Hasta no verte, Jesús mío, and railroad worker Demetrio Vallejo in El tren pasa primero are Oaxacan, and Poniatowska created a beautiful essay to accompany the publication of photographs from a special exhibit by Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide, Las mujeres de Juchitán (1994).

We are grateful to Iturbide for granting us permission to include a selection of her photographs from that exhibit and others. Juchitán is located in southern Oaxaca, along the istmus, where Zapotec-speaking people follow traditions that date back hundreds of years. At times called an ancient matriarchal society, the women preside over their social community. Poniatowska describes the Juchitecas as follows:

It is something to watch the women arrive, like moving towers, their heart-window open, their children hanging at their hips or breasts, their skirts flowing in the breeze. In Juchitán, Oaxaca, iguanas view the world atop the high headdresses of the women.

The Juchiteca owns the market. She is the power, the negotiator, seller, bargainer, generous, and shrewd. Only women sell. The men leave at daybreak for their labor: they are fishers, iguana hunters, and farm workers. When they return, they deliver their harvest to the women, who carry products to the market atop their headdress, in colorful pots. The market array is always colorful, happy and plentiful. Juchitán is a mythic space where man finds his origin and women their deepest essence (my translations from the Spanish). Iturbide’s photographs compliment the legacy of Poniatowska’s writing.

We open the Book Review section with a meticulous review essay on a new, edited collection in Spanish, co-edited by Magdalena Maiz-Peña, and Nora Erro-Peralta of Florida Atlantic University. This essay is an excellent overview itself of Poniatowska’s legacy. Two short book reviews follow, with insights on books about noted Puerto Rican artist Rafael Ferrer, and on Cuban music. In the Creative section, it is a pleasure to include work by delightful Puerto Rican writer Blanca Anderson, and Mexican-American writer Marcela Zárate.

As Elena Poniatowska is feted this year for her prestigious Cervantes award, it behooves us to make note that to date, only ten of her books, and several forewords to books, have been translated to English. Many more are needed. We hope this special issue inspires further study and translations, as well as new approaches to teaching her unique books.

Saludos cordiales desde Chicago.