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Reading Elena Poniatowska's *Leonora* in an Undergraduate Seminar

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*Reading* I live to the rhythm of my country and I cannot remain on the sidelines. I want to be there. I want to be part of it. I want to be a witness. I want to walk arm in arm with it. I want to hear it more and more, to cradle it, to carry it like a medal on my chest. *Elena Poniatowska*¹

**Abstract:** Description of an Honors literature seminar focused on a selection of texts by prominent Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska, including critical strategies involved in preparation, work required by students, and Poniatowska’s creative strategies in depicting rebellious women and other socially marginalized figures. A special focus on the biographical novel *Leonora* (2011) illustrates the pedagogical possibilities of this novel, and students' analytical responses to the reading.

**Key Terms:** Elena Poniatowska, Honors seminars, Mexican literature, Mexican art, Leonora Carrington, contextual mapping, novelistic montage

The spring of 2013 was my last semester as an active professor in the classroom, so in addition to teaching a favorite introductory course, I chose to bid farewell to Swarthmore College by teaching a seminar I had developed in 2008, “Elena Poniatowska: la hija de México.”² I was born in Mexico and retain Mexican citizenship. For over fifty years, “Mexico's daughter” has always spoken to me about “the rhythm of our country.” I am grateful for Elena Poniatowska and her work, and I read her critically. I have translated two of her non-fiction books and studied most of the others. I wanted to pay homage to the writer and witness of history, and at the same time, share her literary gift with a group of strong students.

In this essay I would like to talk about why reading critically and collectively this particular author in an undergraduate seminar can provide a deeply enriching experience, and why the novel *Leonora* (2011) offers great opportunities for fruitful discussions in the classroom. I will conclude with the ideas of two students who wrote papers about it, and the general reactions of seminar members. I have found no full critical treatments in academic journals of this most recent novel written by Poniatowska, but some reviews are extremely helpful.³ While the French translation was published in September of 2012, an English one is not yet available.⁴

**THE SEMINAR**

Many years ago, as I first contemplated the challenge of offering a seminar on a topic in Latin American literature to undergraduates, I thought the task was almost impossible. It seemed to me that most of our advanced students majoring or minoring in Spanish still needed foundational courses, more than a focused exploration of a single theme or author. I was also aware of the considerable time undergraduates must devote both to Spanish-language training and the development of writing and analytical skills, before they are ready to do advanced work in literature. In spite of those concerns, the experience of teaching seminars changed my perspective. The Spanish Program at Swarthmore College has enjoyed wonderful results from the seminars it teaches every spring semester, rotating among the program’s faculty.

A seminar, the most advanced course at the college, receives two credits, while other courses generally receive one. This means that seminar work is the equivalent of half of a student’s load for the semester. Participation is limited to a maximum of twelve students, almost always juniors and seniors. Professors admit students to seminars on the basis of previous preparation, but in the Modern Languages and Literatures Department admission is not limited to majors and minors. Seminar topics have included Mario Vargas Llosa, Federico García Lorca, and Jorge Luis Borges. Over the years, I have taught three seminars: “Visiones narrativas de Carlos Fuentes,” “Poesía y política: los mundos de Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz y Ernesto Cardenal,” and the one on Elena Poniatowska.⁵
Students are delighted by the opportunity to get to know an author in depth, and to see how substantial literary criticism enriches the adventure of reading and analyzing essays and narrative within a coherent corpus. The sociopolitical context of texts offers another important source of intellectual curiosity and excitement during the term. In fact, Latin American Studies minors and special majors are frequently drawn to these seminars, contributing to their interdisciplinary dimension.

In all seminars, participants become a learning team. In my particular pedagogical practice, they write papers individually, but prepare research and oral presentations in pairs. In class, they often subdivide in smaller groups for special collaborations, for example, providing an answer to a question about the text under consideration and then testing it against other groups’ results. Members rely on each other and come to know their peers’ strengths, such as familiarity with Mexican culture or history, knowledge of a particular literary perspective, a knack for remembering narrative detail, or the ability to articulate an incisive critical point. This was clearly visible in class discussions, and—I was glad to see—in some final essays of my last seminar, where several members quoted other students’ previous papers. Even when not all students operate at the same level of linguistic or analytical proficiency, they are all able to make significant contributions to each other’s understanding, and certainly to mine.

Seminars are part of the flagship Honors Program at Swarthmore College, introduced in 1922. They were designed to provide an experience of independent learning to students eager and able to participate in an intense colloquium on a given field, and develop such mastery of that field that a scholar from a different college or university could examine the student, in writing and orally, at the end of his or her eighth semester. As the program has evolved, seminars have been opened to students who do not participate in Honors examinations. Our seminar had ten students, and only one was in Honors.

Each student wrote two essays and a more extensive term paper. Students expressed preferences about the book they wished to work on, and I respected their wishes as best as I could, assigning two of Poniatowska’s books to each of them. They had plenty of freedom to choose a critical angle on the texts they would write about. The subject matter of the term paper, however, asked them to identify a critical perspective that could be applied to two or more of the works read in the seminar. We devoted three initial weeks to reading short stories and foundational critical work before seminar members had to present papers to the class. In that period, we also studied the Mexican Revolution and its aftermath, and worked on some aspects of Latin American feminism. As the semester progressed, students received introductory notes for all texts and a few questions to guide their reading. Sometimes I also sent them specialized vocabulary lists in advance, knowing much of the vernacular contained in certain narratives or essays would not be included in dictionaries.

From the fourth week on, two students presented their individual papers on a given text at each session; naturally the rest of the class had also read the book. For each book by Poniatowska, there were at least two papers and sometimes three of them. The theses in those papers structured a good part of class discussion. One day before the seminar met, everyone received the papers electronically, read them critically, and prepared written questions and comments for their authors, and occasionally for the rest of the class. Questions were usually posted in Moodle, the course management system. At each session throughout the semester, at least two pairs of students gave Power Point presentations on critical articles from academic journals, followed by in-class discussion. Students identified those articles on their own, through the Modern Language Association’s (MLA) database, or other electronic search engines, but I also uploaded some articles on Moodle. While the articles could be written in Spanish or English, all presentations and seminar work were conducted in Spanish. In addition to Poniatowska’s texts, a collection of nearly sixty critical books was in reserve at McCabe Library throughout the term, expanding students’ sources of articles. Librarian Pam Harris was always at hand to aid anyone who needed help.

We read texts in this order: De noche vienes (1979), Tlapaleria (2003), Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela (1978), La noche de Tlatelolco (1971), Hasta no verte, Jesús mio (1969), Tinísima (1992), Paseo de la Reforma (1996), Las siete cabritas (2000), and finally Leonora. In 2008, we had included La piel del cielo (2001) and El tren pasa primero (2007), but I exchanged them for the last two for my final seminar, although it was a difficult choice.

In addition, students made illustrated oral presentations, individually prepared, on a selected text of their choice written by Poniatowska on visual representations of Mexico in the photography of Mariana Yampolsky, Graciela Iturbide, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Kent Klich, or
Héctor García. After the end of the semester, the Division of Education of the Philadelphia Museum of Art created a mini-exhibit with photographs by Tina Modotti, Mariana Yampolsky, and Graciela Iturbide, and posters from “Taller de Gráfica Popular”11 for my ten students and me to examine in a closed session. Afterwards, our lunch at the Museum was a delightful way to end our spring semester venture.

Great writers invent worlds, and the breadth and quality of criticism on Poniatowska shows how big and textured her world is.

WHY ELENA PONIATOWSKA

At 81 years of age, having lived in Mexico since 1942, Elena Poniatowska is not only one of the most important Mexican and Latin American journalists and writers—she is also a living witness of her country’s history. She has spent six decades located at the center of an artistic and intellectual world of enormous variety and complexity, and she has chosen to describe it and celebrate it in her journalistic and literary work. She has received the most important awards in her country and abroad for her vast literary production. The work of many excellent critics in the United States, England, and Spain since the 1980s, especially feminists, has joined work done in Mexico, producing a wealth of high-quality textual analysis and commentary that covers a wide range of critical approaches. Great writers invent worlds, and the breadth and quality of criticism on Poniatowska shows how big and textured her world is.

To teach the work of Elena Poniatowska is to place some extraordinary facts and values before the minds of young people:

- The power of a direct language imbued with the rich oral qualities of popular culture that is also impassioned and often poetic. The creative mimetism of Poniatowska’s ear as she recreates her subjects’ voices.
- The ability to write in a variety of registers and ignore the limitations of genres.
- The moral and political dimensions of the author’s attention to the urban poor, workers, servants, peasants, children, and especially the women in these groups. The limitations, ambivalences, and contradictions of this undertaking.
- The invitation of these texts to problematize canonical feminism. The resistance of the texts to being easily explained and tamed.
- The author’s special attention to the arts of photography and painting. Her identification with some foreign women artists who have made their home in Mexico and for whom art has been a saving grace.
- The indispensable presence of a historicized Mexico City in the author’s narrative, and particularly in her book-length journalistic essays in which ordinary people speak after disastrous events, such as the Mexican army assault on demonstrating students (1968) and the earthquake that devastated a central part of the city (1985).
- The role of U.S. academia in the reception, consumption, and critical evaluation of Poniatowska’s literary corpus.

WHY LEONORA

Leonora (2011), Poniatowska’s most recent novel, was published by Seix Barral, the publisher that awarded her the “Premio Biblioteca Breve 2011.” It is based on the life of Anglo-Mexican artist Leonora Carrington (1917-2011), one of the most original representatives of surrealism in painting and sculpture who was also a distinguished writer. The novel is based on information gathered through more than fifty years of friendship between the two women, special interviews with the artist and many of her friends and relatives, and impressive research, as the bibliography included at the end of the book reveals. Leonora Carrington died a few months after the release of Leonora in Mexico (which she never read, according to its author). The many obituaries and elegies published after her death underscore the high esteem in which the Mexican and international artistic community held her work; they also address the fascinating aspects of Carrington’s life as a woman who defied parental authority, artistic co-optation, and subjection to normative systems, suffering the consequences of such rebelliousness with amazing fortitude. Even before her death, Mexico had claimed her as a Mexican artist and cultural icon, in spite of the very private life she led.

THE BIOGRAPHY, THE PLOT

Leonora was born in Lancashire to a very wealthy industrialist and his Irish wife. The child rebelled against her family’s authority and the obligations her social class imposed on her. She identified with the freedom of
animals and declared that she was a mare. She began
painting when she was very young, giving evidence of
an unusual talent. She was enrolled in one, then another
fine Catholic boarding school, but was expelled from each
due to her disobedience and inability to follow the social
expectations of the nuns for a female child. Her distressed
parents sent her to a third school located in Florence for
upper class English girls, where she continued to defy the
established order. There, Leonora could study the great
Italian painters and sculptors of the late Medieval Ages
and Renaissance, traveling to Padua, Venice, and Rome.
After two more schools in Paris, where she visited the
Louvre frequently with her mother, her father yielded to
her desire to study painting in London. There, she met
Max Ernst (1891-1976), already a famous painter whose
surrealist work impressed her deeply. She went to France
with him and became his lover, despite the fact that he
was married and 26 years her senior. In 1938, she and
Ernst went to live in the countryside, buying a house
with money sent by Leonora’s mother, Maurie. After two
years, Ernst was detained first by French authorities and
later by the Gestapo; subsequently, Leonora fell apart and
lost her mind.

Leonora’s parents, naturally, tried to save their daugh-
ter. They maneuvered to get her out of occupied France
and into Santander, Spain, where they had her placed in
a psychiatric hospital that treated her with a potent drug
called Cardiazol. The medication, injected several times
against Leonora’s will, produced convulsions and left her
body dejected and unable to control itself. One day, when
she was better, she was allowed to travel to Madrid with
a nurse, where she ran into Renato Leduc (1897-1986), the
Mexican journalist, poet, and diplomat whom she had
met in Paris as a friend of Pablo Picasso. Leduc asked her
to go to Lisbon and look for him in the Mexican embassy.
Coincidentally, her father Harold Carrington’s representa-
tives wanted her in Estoril, Lisbon, so that she could send
her to South Africa to another hospital. Watched constantly
by them, she was taken to the Portuguese capital, where
she managed to escape to the Mexican embassy and receive
diplomatic protection. Renato and Leonora were soon
married, in part to facilitate her immigration to the U.S. At
the same time, Ernst and many other famous artists were
receiving help from the millionaire and patron of the arts
Peggy Guggenheim, who had become Ernst’s new lover.
They all waited several weeks in Lisbon before traveling by
ship to New York, but after two years Leonora and Renato
moved to Mexico City. There, the marriage disintegrated.
Leonora, dejected at first, found a new home in the group
of European exiled painters, photographers, and writers.
Especially important for her was the friendship of the great
Spanish-Mexican surrealist painter, Remedios Varo. In the
midst of this new group, Leonora met her second husband,
Imre Emerco Weisz (1912-2007), known as Chiki.

Weisz, a Hungarian Jew who grew up in a hospice
because of his mother’s widowhood and poverty, photo-
graphed the Spanish Civil War along with Robert Capa and
Gerda Taro, and developed most of their photographs. Like Ernst, Weisz had been imprisoned by the Nazis and
managed to escape. Leonora and Chiki had two sons,
Gabriel and Pablo. For Leonora, becoming a mother
became the greatest source of happiness. She devoted
herself to her sons and her art. She painted with dogged
determination, and achieved international recognition
after her exhibition in New York in 1947. Leonora died
on May 26, 2011.

These are all biographical facts. For them to become a
coherent novelistic montage, an alchemic transformation
is necessary, involving the situation of scenes in time and
space, the creation of dialogue, the imagination of each
character, encounter, displacement, change of setting,
setback, or accomplishment.

THE NOVEL

In spite of the length of the book—almost 500 pages
divided into 56 chapters—it can be read with ease. It begins
with the protagonist’s early childhood and ends with the
friendship between the elderly artist and a young fictional
character, Pepita. A street smart and trendy student, she
is in awe of the painter and becomes a close companion,
affirming her worth and recognizing that the end
of her life is near.

There are lyrical passages throughout the novel,
especially in relation to the time Carrington and Ernst
enjoyed in Saint Martin d’Ardèche, where they painted,
walked, swam in the river, produced and drank wine
copiously, and loved each other and their neighbors. The
vertiginous ordeals Leonora endures read as a novel of
adventure, while her connection with great painters and
writers of her time produces an astonishing spotlight on
20th century artistic avant-garde talent—in Paris and New
York: André Breton, Antonin Artaud, Paul Eluard, Pablo
Picasso, Herbert Read, Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí,
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Joan Miró, and later in Mexico: Luis Buñuel, Remedios Varo, Kati Horna, Octavio Paz, César Moro, Wolfgang Paalen, Alice Rahon, Günther Gerzso, and many more. Chapter 15, titled “La resaca” or “The Hangover,” deals with the consequences of Leonora’s intoxication after drinking a bottle of wine because Ernst had temporarily disappeared from her side (127). The nightmarish and grotesque scenes prefigure Leonora’s madness and resemble a movie by Luis Buñuel or Antonin Artaud.

Leonora is similar to Tinísima and Querido Diego, where the tension between a lived event and the imagination of how it unfolded is part of the reading experience and can lead to interesting considerations. The author’s ability to render credible a character of powerful talents and passions, willing to go to any length to remain faithful to what she saw as true, is part of the strength of Leonora. The protagonist can certainly be seen as a feminist heroine when one considers her capacity for self-affirmation before her domineering father, a wealthy and authoritarian man who tried to keep his daughter under rigid control. On the other hand, it is true that, like Modotti in Tinísima, Leonora willingly depends on some men to take important steps in her life.

**LEONORA IN LEONORA**

Part of the fictionalization of Leonora consists of exaggerating certain traits that amount to a psychological study of the woman painter. Early in the book, the narrator stresses Leonora’s love of dogs and horses, which she shares with her father. He in turn believes his daughter resembles him in personality more than his three male children and is proud of her strong character. But when she rebels against him, he destroys her dearest toy, the rocking horse “Tartaro,” something she never forgets. The stage is set for Leonora’s deep identification with the world of animals, especially in their freedom and strength. She chooses to conflate femininity with animality, and finds a creative force in that nexus. Her power as an artist, woman, and human being will always reside there. Animals, real and imagined, will populate her work and her life. The narrator starts Chapter 19, just before war breaks out, with these words: “A Leonora nada le atañe, Max y ella no son hombre y mujer, sino pájaro y yegua.” (154) Far from falling into the trap of a masculine division of reason and feeling along gender lines, the fictional Leonora assumes the implications of rejecting an enlightenment version of Reason in favor of an understanding of a world where there is no separation between humans and Nature. Thus, reason and imagination become one and the same, something visible in Leonora Carrington’s vast artistic output.

The narrative voice also focuses on the Irish origin of Leonora’s mother, Maurie, and her nanny, Mary Kavanaugh, who entertained the children with tales of magical creatures and otherworldly lore. Catholic traditions are part of that heritage, with a more complex spiritual background than that of the Anglican faith. In her early job of explaining the world to Leonora, “Nanny” is analogous to the nameless Indian nanny in Balún Canán (Nine Guardians, 1957), by Rosario Castellanos—perhaps the Mexican writer whose work Poniatowska has discussed most eloquently and admiringly. Both surrogate mothers, the Irish and the Tzeltal (Maya), inhabit the mythical world where a child’s imagination thrives, and both are at the same time needed and devalued by the ruling class. Both women are also eventually rejected by the children they once lovingly raised.

The focalization of the narrative on Irishness in the mother and caretaker accomplishes two objectives: one is to establish a maternal lineage that becomes more important than the paternal one; and secondly, to create a cultural backdrop that is not only different from Englishness, but a contestation of its hegemonic assumptions. Critic Beatriz Mariscal, in an article on Leonora subtitled “The Phantoms of Liberty,” stresses the liberating role of Nanny’s tales: “Los cuentos tradicionales de su nana, irlandesa como su madre, y sus sueños, la ayudaron a escapar de una realidad que la sofocaba.” As with Leonora’s femininity/animality, the double maternal Irish roots foreground the unconscious as the source of survival, redemption, and ultimately art. Here is a dialogue between Nanny and Leonora, the young child:

–Parece que atrae a los sidhes.
–Sí, quisiera que jugaran conmigo toda la vida.
–Si lees, Prim, nunca vas a estar sola.
Te acompañarán los sidhes. (12)¹⁹

Later, Leonora’s maternal grandmother tells her that she is more of a Celt, claiming her for both the maternal and Gaelic side of the family, with its rich imaginative world. In a beautiful testimony written for El País, “Leonora Carrington o la rebeldía,” Poniatowska spoke about her dear friend who had just died:
Con su sentido del humor, destrozó cualquier imposición, hasta la de ser surrealista. Más que surrealista, su mundo interior fue celta y su obra está muy cercana al mundo de su infancia, un mundo que nada tiene que ver con la lógica, un mundo inesperado de poesía que es el de los sidhes, los little people que para nosotros, los mexicanos, son los chaneques que nos acompañan, jalan la comisura de nuestros labios para que sonriamos y nos desatan las agujetas de los zapatos.

This assertion is made about the real Leonora Carrington, but seems to stem from the novel and its spirit. Two pages before the novel ends, dolphins speak to the great artist as they cavort in the aquarium, in and out of the water: “Qué audaz has sido, Leonora, qué grandes tus batallas.” (494)

Leonora became a mother of two sons, and she gave her father’s name to the first one. (349) The experience of motherhood becomes fully connected to her painting. “Pinta con fervor, porque dentro de un momento tendrá que atender a su hijo. Tomarlo en brazos es un instinto natural, pintar también lo es.” (357) We find an echo to this strong assertion of the narrative in a quotation of Carrington’s words by Mexican critic Elena Urrutia:

Leonora describe su maternidad como “algo estremecedor”; “Fue una gran conmoción. No tenía ni idea de lo que era el instinto maternal. No tenía ni idea de que iba a poseerme un instinto maternal tremendamente fuerte, no había tenido ningún indicio de ello antes de que nacieran mis hijos, pero fue algo que emergió de las profundidades …”

The novel hints at the connection between madness and creative genius in Leonora, a recurring theme both in science and art history. Having suffered a mental breakdown of painful consequences in 1940, Leonora could have thought that psychosis was too destructive to produce art. Nevertheless, she was deeply connected to the surrealist credo, by which insanity is a necessary component of the artistic life. The word “locura”, madness, appears nineteen times in the novel’s manuscript, sometimes especially associated with surrealist women. (91) Leonora seemed to suffer and tolerate madness, and sometimes she welcomed it and cultivated it. Her own son tells her: “… tu angustia es tu aliada, es la que te hace pintar …” (427) After a conversation between Leonora and Ernst, as she was about to leave New York for Mexico, the narrator explains:

Santander la transformó, la acompaña y la despierta cada madrugada, está presente siempre, al alcance de su mano, sobre la almohada ... Él [Ernst] no puede retenerla porque ella conoce la locura, no la idealizada por André Breton ni la que predicen los genios, sino la que puede palpar todos los días . . . (281-282)

Santander is the city where she was committed to a fearsome psychiatric hospital, representative of fascist Spain. As Irene Matthews pointed out in a 1995 essay on Poniatowska’s photographic texts, “... she produces meaning both from a particular, exclusive, framework, and from the cumulative, metonymical effect of 'simple' contiguity.”

The central figure of the surrealist movement, André Breton (1896-1966), is among the many friends Leonora met through Max Ernst in the novel. In real life, he was trained as a psychiatrist, and spoke often about the special art available to psychiatric patients. In Nadja (1928), his most famous book, the protagonist is an attractive woman who turns out to be mentally ill and living in a sanitarium. Leonora met Salvador Dalí (1904-1989) in Breton's house, and he said of her that she was “la más importante artista mujer.” (91) The well known encounter between Dalí and the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), in 1929 produced an important discussion of Dalí’s “paranoid critical method” in the creation of art.

Surrealism contained a serious level of theorization of the connections between art and madness, in addition to the mostly playful proclamations. One of the Mexican elegies written in 2011 on Carrington quotes Breton’s assessment of Leonora:
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André Breton, mítico fundador del movimiento artístico con el que tanto se ha caracterizado la obra de Carrington—el Surrealismo—, se expresaba de ella en cuanto que “contempló el mundo real con los ojos de la locura y a la locura del mundo con un cerebro lucido.” (my emphasis)28

This important statement rings true in relation to the fictionalized Leonora. The displacement and suffering of mental illness gave her a paradoxical hold on life and a way of seeing the absurdity and destruction of World War II and fascism, which she opposed with all her might even in her most irrational moments. Leonora, fictional and real, came to terms with her own mental fragility and turned it into her strength. When the painter was in her nineties, she told her interviewer, Mexican poet Homero Aridjis: “Sí, soy ambidiestra, como los locos. Pero ahora estoy más loca que cuando estuve en la casa de locos.”29

The narrator in the novel makes clear the child can draw with both hands, and her teachers, the nuns, believe she must have a mental disease. (31)30

Readers of Elena Poniatowska are used to narratives in which some foreign women are saved by their art, an art that is deeply connected with their voluntary embracing of Mexico. Tinísima is the most important piece, but the transformation of Angelina Beloff in Querido Diego also hints at the future biographical facts of her success as a painter and as a Mexican national by choice. Mariana Yampolsky (1925-2002), author of the elegant photographs contained in several books produced in collaboration with Poniatowska, was born in Chicago to Jewish parents, but found her home in Mexico and photographed its people, roads, towns, and fields. Parts of the texts remark on the alliance these women have made with their adopted country, just like Poniatowska, the child born in France to parents of Polish and Mexican origin, will grow to identify with a certain Mexico and love it through her writing.

The relationship of the fictional Leonora to Mexico is more complex. She despised the noise and falsehood of the folkloric Mexico represented by Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo’s parties (296), the Mexico her husband Renato Leduc inhabited and enjoyed. Moreover, she rejected muralism as a state-sponsored art. On the other hand, Leonora made a commitment to remain in Mexico and became fascinated by many aspects of its history and geography. The Mexican government commissioned her to paint a mural on the Maya vision of creation, based on the Popol Vuh, for the Museum of Anthropology. Her travel to Chiapas was an encounter with a mysterious world that appeared to her as Maya and Celtic at once. (437)

According to the Brazilian art critic and psychoanalyst Jussara Teixeira, in her commentary on Leonora:

Eleonora [sic] descubre y bebe a México en todos sus sentidos, en su poesía. Si la relación entre México y el surrealismo se da por laberintos del sueño, pintar un muro, un mural maya … en el museo de antropología titulado “El mundo mágico de los mayas,” se ofrece como una clarividencia.31

And Octavio Avendaño Trujillo, in his article “Ya no existen surrealistas” (There are no More Surrealists), quotes an answer Leonora gave him during an interview: “Mi corazón está con mis hijos y aquí, en México.”32

In sum, the novel invites the reader’s attention to Leonora’s complex character as a woman in touch with the natural world, especially the world of animals, with whom she identifies. She rejects paternal authority to the point of being in complicity with her mother and nanny, and through those deep connections she receives the mythical stories from Ireland, along with Catholicism, as a pre-modern cultural background. While Leonora’s catastrophic nervous breakdown lasts only a few months, the novel emphasizes at a slant the creativity of the artist and its rootedness in her troubled inner world. Leonora’s relationship with Mexico, unlike that of other foreign artists about whose lives and work Poniatowska has written, and unlike that of Poniatowska herself, is not univocally a loving one, especially in the early years in her new home country. All this gives us a complex, even conflictive character to work with in classroom discussions, allowing us to deepen our vision of the work of Poniatowska at large.

In many ways Leonora tells a truth about the great Anglo-Mexican painter Leonora Carrington that cannot fit inside a mere biography.

LEONORA AND STUDENTS

In this section I present some concluding thoughts from the two papers written on Leonora, and I summarize
the way the seminar at large saw the novel, including in relation to previously read texts.

Danielle Seltzer, a senior and special major in Latin American Studies, wrote an essay entitled “En busca de algo familiar: el sentido de pertenencia en Leonora” (Searching for the Familiar: Sense of Belonging in Leonora,” April 30th, 2013). Danielle asserts that Leonora looked for a sense of belonging in the many people she met outside the family, and that even when Max Ernst was in some way responsible for Leonora’s breakdown, he also introduced her to surrealism, a realm which resolves the contradictions between the world of dreams and outside reality, according to the “Surrealist Manifesto.” This, Danielle implies, is a stepping-stone toward healing and perhaps even finding a new sense of belonging. She then elaborates on the way living in Mexico, meeting a true friend and colleague in Remedios Varo, and the stability that allows her to paint and raise a family give Leonora some respite; yet no source of vitality equals her art.

Since there were no critical articles published in academic journals on Leonora, Danielle relied on book reviews and the work of critics whose work covers a wide span of Poniatowska’s writing. For example, she quoted Beth Jörgensen’s discussion of the protagonist of La flor de lis (1988), and how “identification with the father has traditionally provided the growing child with the means of entry into the outside world of work, public life, and public recognition.”

Suggesting that because of her disconnection with the father figure Leonora must search for the maternal in her life, she concludes: “Al fin, Leonora llegó a ser la mujer que quería ser, es decir, logró buscarse un lugar. Sin embargo, es importante establecer que su búsqueda queda abierta, incompleta y sin conclusión concreta: no la termina creándose. “ (6) I believe Danielle is pointing to the high price paid by Leonora for her Faustian bargain as she cut all ties with her English upper-class network and roots: father, brothers, and family friends, and indeed, with her country. Happiness and true freedom don’t seem to be within Leonora’s reach.

Even more skeptical was Yamilet Medina, a junior and Spanish major, in her paper “En busca de libertad: el viaje de Leonora” (“In Search of Freedom: Leonora’s Journey,” April 30th, 2013). Yamilet asks:

¿Existe algún otro personaje, aparte de Jesusa, que demuestre una independencia casi total? Es interesante preguntarse por qué la búsqueda de las protagonistas por su libertad nunca termina en un final agradable.

Yamilet seems to be asking a rhetorical question. As the title of her paper suggests, she gives weight to the wandering nature of Poniatowska’s women protagonists, as if their quest for freedom were inscribed in their intercontinental displacements in some cases, or in a constant change of centers of gravity within Mexico, as in the case of Jesusa Palancares. She then quotes Juan Bruce-Novoa’s study of four feminine protagonists in the novels of Poniatowska: Lilus Kikus in the short novel of the same title, Mariana in La flor de lis, Jesusa in Hasta no verte, Jesús mio, and Tina Modotti in Tinísima. The critic, cited by Yamilet, concludes, referring to all four women:

A pesar del ambiente represivo, esta mujer logra el momentáneo placer de sentirse viva en y con el mundo —placer erótico en esencia y por eso peligroso—aunque luego esos agentes sociales le cobran duro su violación del tabú. (77)

Yamilet’s insight and her application of his perspective to Leonora would have pleased the esteemed late critic, who died a year before the publication of the novel. She concludes her paper with questions and considerations:

¿Qué se puede inferir de la futura posición de la mujer si cada vez que intenta desafiar su posición marginal termina sola o infeliz? ¿Vale la pena en ese caso luchar o darse por vencida por vencedora y aceptar la “felicidad” que asignan las normas sociales a las mujeres obedientes y abnegadas? Cualquiera que sean las respuestas a estas preguntas, una cosa sí sabemos: las mujeres sobre las que escribe Elena Poniatowska demuestran ser valientes y decididas. A pesar de sus defectos individuales, su tenacidad y perseverancia ante toda oposición, sea considerada ingenuidad o valentía, sirven como ejemplos de
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características que podrían ayudar a guiar la causa de las mujeres marginalizadas por una sociedad patriarcal. (7, 8)35

Since Leonora was the last novel read in the course, students had considerable resources for comparative analysis. Tayler Tucker, who as a Spanish major developed one of her seminar papers on Tinísima into a 25-page essay as the basis for her comprehensive examination, noticed that in Leonora the woman’s body is less focalized than Tina’s. Thinking of the French feminists’ injunction to “write the body” and from the body, Tayler sees Leonora as a character more constrained by her social origin and less in touch with her body’s freedom than Tina, suggesting that perhaps class accounts for that difference.36

A mapping out of Poniatowska’s fictional women characters problematized our discussion, taking it from what Leonora does not do to what it does, as in Yamilyt’s concluding paragraph. “Cada amor es distinto,”(493) “Each love is different,” says Leonora in answering Pepita’s assumption on the love of Max as the greatest in her life. “Each book is different” could be Poniatowska’s answer to a hypothetical question about the text she loves best.

Several critics of Poniatowska’s works, particularly Beth Jörgensen in her study of Tinísima, have pointed to Poniatowska’s own presence in the lives she has fictionalized.37 Seminar student Nancy Haro, a senior and Spanish major, wrote about this in relation to Las siete cabritas (2000) in her paper, “La biografía poniatowskiana en Las siete cabritas” (Poniatowskan Biography in The Seven Sisters, April 16, 2013).38

La presencia de Poniatowska en las biografías de Cabritas también pueden ser parte de lo que Janet Beizer llama “bio-autography” definida como “the writing of a self through the representation of another.”39 Según el argumento de Beizer, una biografía feminista, donde se emplea la idea de la ‘bio-autografía,’ intenta buscar a una mujer antepasada que sirva como modelo femenina en un mundo donde las personas antepasadas a las que elogiamos siempre han sido masculinas. Es una búsqueda materna que algunas veces representa lo que la autora quisiera que hubiera sido su madre, según Beizer. De esta manera, Cabritas no sólo es una reflexión de la vida de Poniatowska; también está ligada a su deseo de destacar mujeres poco convencionales que a pesar de sus dificultades e imperfecciones ofrecen un modelo de resistencia y (auto) empoderamiento femenino. (6)40

Nancy helps us in different ways in this paragraph, establishing one of the most important angles in which one can see Poniatowska as a feminist author, as she claims that imperfect women who seek their own empowerment can be legitimately held up as models. In addition, Nancy underscores the similarity between the author and her biographical subjects, which can be extrapolated to biographical novels such as Leonora. She quoted Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez’s review of Las siete cabritas: “Poniatowska’s seven subjects are scandalous, provocative women whose greatest sin was to go against the grain, willful women who accomplished artistically despite their society,”41 an assertion that we may take as a very sharp formulation of one more trait that Poniatowska and the painter have in common.

This is relevant as I bring this article to an end, because a final seminar discussion, initiated and led by students, centered on the way the author is invested in each one of the books we read and whether she identifies more with one or another of her protagonists.

Before our first class discussion on Leonora, I gave a Power Point presentation on Carrington’s paintings to situate her as the real first-rate artist the novel addresses. Students enjoyed the art and were intrigued by it, but immediately contrasted the photographic work of Tina Modotti with the art of Leonora Carrington as belonging to two different worlds. Modotti’s connection with the social struggles of the Mexican and Bolshevik revolutions and the global workers’ movement gave her visual art a different dimension. Even when they understood to what extent Leonora Carrington’s pictures had opposed conventional art and affirmed the power of women artists, they missed Poniatowska’s emphasis on novelistic subjects whose lives include a political practice or ways of thinking directed at ending injustice—not only in terms of gender, but also in terms of economic and social inequality.
Later, after a long discussion of Leonora, students observed that the protagonist was not committed in her daily life or artistic practice to end social difference, even when she was concerned about political disasters in the world and spoke forcefully against anti-semitism. In contrast with Tina Modotti, who sacrificed even her art for revolutionary change and lost everything in the process, they believed Leonora had at least partially held on to her privilege, defending her privacy and security. In Paseo de la Reforma, Amaya’s dedication to the fight for equality in Mexico and Ashby’s admiration of her values did not ring authentic to their ears. Neither Amaya nor Leonora can completely abandon the trappings of their own aristocratic class, and this may also be connected to Leonora’s initial reticence to embrace Mexico. In her paper on Leonora, though, Danielle had written that she had not simply rejected privilege, but had disdained it as something fixed and boring (3).

When asked who represented Poniatowska best, Tinísima or Leonora, some students felt that the writer identifies with the desire of Modotti to change the world, and at the same time belongs to a family more like Carrington’s. I here recall Danielle again, as she quotes Beth Jörgensen: “the details of Elena Poniatowska’s privileged, European-oriented upbringing do not predict her stature as a major chronicler of recent Mexican history and culture” (Jörgensen 1994, xiv). Someone pointed to Poniatowska’s critical perspective, at times satirical, on Mexico’s upper class, as in Tlapalería and even Paseo.

Reading and discussing Elena Poniatowska’s Leonora in the spring of 2013, with ten excellent students who had become friends, even at the end of a heavy semester for all of us, felt like a wonderful treat. The book is, after all, “otra obra maestra” in Poniatowska’s constellation. The final question I posed: “Which three texts do you value most?” the answer from the seminar group, after much intelligent discussion, was very clear: Hasta no verte, Jesús mio, La noche de Tlatelolco, and Tinísima. I had no quarrel with that.

N.B. This article is dedicated to my Spring 2013 seminar students Katie Goldman, Nancy Haro, John Henry Ignatiev, Yared Medina, Zachary Nacev, Amir Parikh, Yared Portillo, Danielle Seltzer, Tayler Tucker, and Mariam Vonderheide.

ENDNOTES
2 Elena Poniatowska: Mexico’s Daughter.
3 See especially reviews by Beatriz Mariscal (Note 14), Salvador Oropesa (Note 30), and Catherine Wall, “Elena Poniatowska, Leonora.” World Literature Today 85.5 (Sept./Oct. 2011): 64-65.
6 A description of the Honors Program appears here: <http://www.swarthmore.edu/academics/honors-program.xml>.
7 In May of 2013, Professor Janet N. Gold, from New Hampshire University, acted as external examiner for Zachary Nacev ’13, who received High Honors.
8 We gave ourselves two weeks to cover lengthy novels like Tinísima and Leonora: the first week was spent on general discussion of the text and critical articles, and presenters submitted their papers before discussion during the second week.
9 Many of these books are in English, originating in the United States and England. Those written by one author address the work of Poniatowska among others, while edited collections include a chapter devoted to her. The titles cover many fields: contemporary women authors of Latin America, Mexican women writers, the Mexican chronicle and political essay, feminist criticism, and testimonial literature. Authors include Ignacio Corona, Jean Franco, Kristin Ibsen, Amy B. Jones and Catherine Davies, Amy Kaminsky, Lucille Kerr, Sara Poot Herrera, Claudia Schaefer, Cynthia Steele, Kathy Taylor, and María Elena de Valdés.
10 The switch was not an easy choice, but I wanted to focus more on Poniatowska’s women’s biography, fictional or not, and felt I needed to do justice to the spell cast by Leonora.
11 The “Taller,” an artists’ collective (of mostly engravers), was founded in 1937 to foster the ideals of the Mexican Revolution through art. Mariana Yampolsky was one of its members.
12 Weisz was instrumental in saving a suitcase of valuable negatives from those days, which was found in Mexico in 2007, and is considered an invaluable source of visual documentation, both artistically and historically. See the

13 Two reviews of *Leonora* published in leading Mexican periodicals forcefully devalue its power as a novel. Christopher Dominguez Michael’s “Leonora por Elena Poniatowska” and Roberto Pliego’s “Una yegua desbocada” miss important aspects of the fictional craft. That the first one should also sneer at Poniatowska’s political trajectory belies the ideological bend of the critique. The title of Pliego’s review echoes the famous essay written by Poniatowska on the work of Carlos Fuentes, “Un tropel de caballos desbocados,” at the same time as it refers to Carrington’s identification with her mare, Winkie. *Letras Libres* 148 (abril de 2011) Web and *Nexos* s/n (1 de agosto de 2011) Web. April 2013.

14 “Elena Poniatowska logra mantener ese difícil equilibrio entre su capacidad de novelar y los límites que le impone la particular biografía de su protagonista” (EP manages to achieve the difficult balance between her capacity to write a novel and the limitations imposed by the particular biography of her protagonist). Beatriz Mariscal, “Leonora Carrington según Elena Poniatowska: los fantasmas de la libertad.” (*Revista de la Universidad de México* 106 (2012): 65-68). Web.


16 “Nothing fazes Leonora. She and Max are not man and woman, but bird and mare.” These and all other quotations from the novel are my translations.


18 Her dreams and the traditional storytelling of her nanny, an Irish woman like her mother, helped her escape a suffocating reality. Mariscal, Ibid. Web.

19 It seems that you attract *sidhs*.
   —Yes, I wish they would play with me all my life.
   —If you read, Prim, you will never be alone. *Sidhs* will always keep you company.

20 “With her sense of humor, she abolished the imposition of any set of rules, even those of being a surrealist. More than surrealist, her interior world was Celtic, and very closely associated with her childhood, a world that has nothing to do with logic. It is an unexpected world of poetry, the world of *sidhs*, the little people who for us, Mexicans, are the same as our *chaneques*, who are always with us, pull our our lips to make us smile, and untie our shoe laces.” Elena Poniatowska, “Leonora Carrington o la rebeldía” (*LC* or Rebellion). *El País* (May 28, 2011). Web. April 2013.

21 “How audacious you have been, Leonora, how great are your battles!”

22 “She paints feverishly, because in a moment she must pay attention to her son. To take him in her arms is a natural instinct, just like painting.”


24 Your anguish is your ally; it is anguish that leads you to paint.

25 Santander transformed her, walks with her, wakes her up each day at dawn, is always present, within reach of her hand, on her pillow … He [Ernst] can’t keep her, because she knows madness, not the one idealized by André Breton, nor the one geniuses celebrate, but the one she can touch every day …

The original manuscript reads: “La locura la transformó,” or “Madness transformed her.”


27 The most important woman artist.

28 AB, mythical founder of Surrealism, the artistic movement that has characterized so completely Carrington’s work, expressed that she had “looked at the world with the eyes of madness, and saw the madness of the world with a lucid mind.” Juan Carlos Jiménez Abarca, “Soñada fantasía.” *Letras de cambio. Suplemento de Culturas de Cambio de Michoacán*. Nueva época. S/n (junio de 2011). He credits Angélica Abelleyra, “La rebeldía como sello” (*Suplemento Laberinto de Milenio* (28 de mayo de 2011).


30 Reviewer Salvador Oropesa, having noticed the biographic emphasis of the novel, stresses the author’s narrative strategies, as in this paragraph: “Otra novedad está en el intento por parte de Poniatowska, mediante focalizaciones en diferentes personajes, de explicar el surrealismo desde dentro mediante asociaciones de
imágenes ilógicas, la inclusión de sueños y la antropomorización de animales a lo Lewis Carroll en una tradición muy anglosajona.” *Chasqui* 41.1 (May 2012): 223-224.


34 "In the end, Leonora became the woman she meant to be, that is to say, she found a place for herself. It is important, however, to establish that her search remains open-ended, incomplete and without a concrete conclusion: it does not end in self-creation."

35 "What can one conclude about the future position of women if each time she defies her marginal position she ends up alone or unhappy? Is it worth struggling or should one give up and accept the “happiness” social norms assign to obedient or selfless women? Whatever the answers to these questions are, we know one thing: the women Elena Poniatowska writes about demonstrate valor and decisiveness. In spite of their individual shortcomings, their tenacity and perseverance before opposition (may those be construed as naïveté or brazeness), serve as examples of traits that could help the cause of women marginalized by a patriarchal society.”

36 Class discussion and personal communication.


38 “Las siete cabritas” is the name of the constellation Pleiades, commonly known as “Seven Sisters.” “Siete cabritas” means literally seven goats, and Nora Erro-Peralta reminds us of the popular expression “más loca que una cabra” (crazier than a she-goat) in relation to the very unusual women contained in Poniatowska’s biographical text. See “Recreando vidas, ¿biografía o ficción?: Las siete cabritas de Elena Poniatowska. In *La palabra contra el silencio*. Op. cit.


40 "Poniatowska’s presence in the biographies contained in *Cabritas* may also be part of what Janet Beizer calls ‘bio-autography’ defined as ‘the writing of a self through the representation of another.’ According to Beizer’s argument, a feminist biography in which the concept of ‘auto-biography’ is applied attempts to look for a woman ancestor that may serve as a feminine model in a world where all praised ancestors tend to be male. It is a maternal search that sometimes represents what the author would have liked her own mother to be, according to Beizer. In this way, *Cabritas* is not only a reflection of the life of Poniatowska: it is also linked to her desire to foreground non-conventional women who, in spite of their difficulties and imperfections, offer a model of feminine resistance and self-empowerment.”


42 One more masterpiece, Salvador Oropesa, op. cit.

WORKS CITED


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