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Weight, Writing, and Privilege: Carmen Boullosa, Elena Poniatowska, and Rosario Castellanos

If location is the key to a good real estate deal, then likewise, context makes all the difference in a literature class. Placing authors' historical times into the larger framework of centuries of Mexican and U.S. history gives learners a way to absorb the literary pieces as a logical if perhaps curious reaction to events, and not just as an assigned reading that students may or may not "identify with" using contemporary standards. The following teaching plan aims to harness students' preexisting notions about migration, weight, and age, while exploring short texts by the Mexican-born authors Carmen Boullosa, Elena Poniatowska, and Rosario Castellanos. Each of the topics applies to all the writers, although for reasons of space I explore only one theme per writer. In honor of meeting students where they are, I usually begin a course with at least one contemporary text and then work backward chronologically. Thus, the outline below starts with a text by Boullosa and ends with a text by Castellanos.

Early in the semester I like to play a chronology game that involves dividing the class into two teams and asking a rotating member from each team to stand at the board and, choosing from a list that I have placed on the board, write down what the team believes is the year in which an event I describe aloud took place; I reinforce the knowledge of chronology introduced by the game by giving a written quiz at the end of class and allowing students to work collaboratively on it in groups of their choosing. For other quizzes that range beyond the list of years, I supply the last two digits of a year and ask the students only to fill in the century. These activities prove surprisingly challenging for many of them because they aren't accustomed to thinking about such broad historical context.

In an activity I pair with the chronology game, I write "spontaneously" on the classroom board a simple timeline that I develop from right to left. Starting on the far right for a class on Mexican literature, I set up the following dates: 2010, the year of the Mexican bicentennial, which took place during President Felipe Calderón's bloody retaliations against narcotraffickers; 1910, the start of the Mexican Revolution; 1810, the beginning of the independence movement;

1767, when the king of Spain ordered all Jesuits to leave New Spain; 1691, when the nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz wrote her autobiographical feminist epistle *Respuesta a Sor Filotea*; 1521, when Hernán Cortés achieved the downfall of Tenochtitlán, which would become Mexico City; and 1492, when Christopher Columbus arrived wide-eyed in the Caribbean. After this basic setup, the instructor can then play the activity forward, adding additional dates of interest in chronological order.

Beginning with the topic of migration, which informs the class's analysis of Boullosa's work, the following dates of interest prepare students to compare Mexican history and the history of the United States. On the same time line, I can add the inauguration of Mexico City's first university in 1553. It took another eighty-three years for the northern colonies to open their first university, Harvard, in 1636, and thus no English-language equivalent to Sor Juana, a genius academic, exists in the history of the United States. The Declaration of Independence appeared in 1776, nearly a decade after the Spanish king expelled the Jesuits from the New World. This quick trip forward in time corrects the erroneous idea that Mexico is somehow less sophisticated than the United States by reason of a permanent lag in development. To the contrary, at the end of the eighteenth century much of the United States *was* Mexico, as illustrated by the map in Carlos Loprete's civilization and culture textbook (72). After students contemplate that map, the instructor may point out that the year 1848 marks the loss of a great deal of Mexico's land, thanks to an invasion by the United States and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War, called the U.S. Intervention in Mexican history textbooks.

The United States also played a role in both the 1910 revolution in Mexico and in the cartel violence of the twenty-first century: rebels and later, cartel members, retreated strategically to Texas, which at both times was more stable than northern Mexico. In 1915 Mariano Azuela published the novel *Los de abajo* (*The Underdogs*) in serial form in a newspaper in El Paso, Texas, and during President Calderón's *sexenio* ("term of office"; 2006–12) the government's campaign of armed retaliation against cartels drew support from the United States. Within this larger context, students can consider the productive periods of three Mexican writers, and their short texts suggested here.

Boullosa's essay "El sueño mexicano" (The Mexican Dream) remembers that in the 1830s and 1840s many African American slaves—thousands, according to Boullosa—fled the United States and what was then the Republic of Texas to Mexico, which refused to return the

escaped people. Mexico had outlawed slavery and found itself in conflict with both the United States and Texas. As Boullosa points out, in 1850 the "Sueño Mexicano"—a capitalized phrase in the last paragraph of the essay—came to include not only black slaves but also hundreds of Seminoles who left a Texan reservation. Class discussion can compare the dynamics of the "Sueño Mexicano" for escaped slaves and for Seminoles and the American dream for later migrants to the United States.

Boullosa's essay "Más acá de la nación" (Beyond the Nation) complicates the matter of race in Mexico by examining an image commonly found on an official Mexican textbook of the 1960s, which depicts a darker-skinned woman clothed in a Greek toga who allegorically represents Mexico.[1] Boullosa engages this image in her critique of the superficiality of this official celebration, evinced by the paucity of information available about the model for the image. Oral accounts name the model as Victoria Dornelas and indicate that she may have died of the effects of alcoholism, possibly after having lived in Paris. Supposedly, the painter Jorge González Camarena fell madly in love with Dornelas but never left his wife, "a not-at-all-Indian Frenchwoman" (Boullosa, "Más" 63). Boullosa adds that the painter and his wife are *güeros*, which in Mexican Spanish means people who are light-skinned or moneyed. The dual definition of *güero* recognizes the imbricated nature of racism and classism in Mexico.[2]

Boullosa's "Más acá de la nación" also reviews a variety of culturally specific terms for housekeepers, who occupy an overlooked and often denigrated sector of Mexican society. The wave of internal migration in Mexico during the second part of the twentieth century that brought women from the countryside to the national capital did not encourage employers to respect their cheap and easily replaced labor, and this practice continues. Students can examine how the speaker, Boullosa, stands at the crossroads of racial and class privilege. On the one hand, she is relatively light-skinned and, by her own admission, employs household help in Mexico City. On the other hand, in New York City, where she has a second home, she is seen as "Mexican" and "of color" (70). For class discussion, instructors can encourage students to imagine themselves in a social environment in which they are subjected to other people's positive and negative prejudices; students can contemplate themselves as actorsin a complex network of license and bias, in other words. Are they near the top of the hierarchy in one social system and the bottom of another? What point is Boullosa making about migrant housekeepers' and her own Mexicanness?

With Poniatowska, her standing, often lauded as Mexico's grand dame of letters, can be discussed as well as her stories featuring household servants. Now in her eighth decade, she can be analyzed through recent media on her participation in the ceremony in which Poniatowska was awarded Spain's eminent Miguel de Cervantes Prize in 2013. A prominent image uses a soft focus which obscures the writer's facial wrinkles and age spots and in the process pixilates her gray and white hair to the point of blurriness, giving the impression of a halo (Poniatowska, "Elena"). Does this media process play in her favor? Poniatowska commented to me in an interview in July 2018 that she cannot find the time to color her hair: "Sí, yo nunca me pintaría. Me da una flojera infinita porque sabes que si te pintas tienes que ir cada mes o cada veinte días. Es horrible. Es espantoso" ("Yes, I would never dye my hair. The idea bores me to death because you know that if you dye it you have to go every month or every twenty days. It's horrible. It's terrifying"; Interview).[3] Poniatowska added that she cannot set aside time for cosmetic services with a dermatologist either. Thus hiding her age is not important to this prolific writer. Students can discuss how age is treated under the prejudices of contemporary youth culture, and how age might constrain students' perceptions of Poniatowska.

In a move to represent indigenous Mexican culture, during the ceremony for the Cervantes Prize, Poniatowska chose to wear an elaborate red and yellow huipil. Students can analyze their reactions to this attire and how Poniatowska represented Mexico. They can then read news reports on the event. One journalist praises Poniatowska, claiming that she has not changed since her cub reporter years: "A sus 82 años Elena Poniatowska sigue siendo la misma joven autora que entrevistaba celebridades, la misma mujer madura que enfrentó la historia inmediata de su pueblo a través de sus crónicas y reportajes, la misma mujer entregada a la pasión por vivir que es escribir" (With her 82 years Elena Poniatowska continues to be the same young author who interviewed celebrities, the same mature woman who confronted the immediate history of her people through chronicles and reporting, and the same woman dedicated to the passion for life that is writing; Valdés Medellín 81). What do students think about the idea of remaining "the same" through the decades?

"Las lavanderas" ("The Washerwomen") and "Esperanza número equivocado" ("Esperanza Wrong Number") provide topics for further discussion on age and ageism.[4] In "Las lavanderas," the narrative voice—ageless and disembodied—inserts itself explicitly only once, at the end of the fourth sentence, with the comment "siento como un gran ruido de manantial" ("I

hear loud noise like running spring water"; 486). This first-person reference to the sound of distant traffic connects the narrator to the modern urban environment, leaving the washerwomen just outside it as they scrub clothes in the river and without the aid of a washing machine. The narrator's ability to make contact with modernity reappears at the conclusion of the tale, which features a canny and ironic comparison. A recently returned washerwoman, Lupe, blames her absence on her father's death, which was caused by a church bell that knocked him from the bell tower. In revenge, the community members put the bell in a jail. The other women characters accept this logic, and therefore, in terms of intellectual sophistication, it seems that the oldest, Doña Otila, does not differ much from the youngest, Conchita. The characters appear doomed to remain excluded from a modern society that would never bother to imprison an inanimate object for murder.

In "Esperanza número equivocado," the protagonist feels bitterly excluded from the narrative of marriage. Esperanza, the ironically named older, pessimistic, and unmarried household employee (whose name means "hope"), has a fortune-telling habit at the beginning of the story: she checks the wedding announcements in the newspaper and predicts the brides' futures, with outcomes slanted toward the "obsessive and malignant" (Poniatowska, "Esperanza" 488). In her youth, she enjoyed using the landline telephone to make social connections beyond the house. She kept mistaken callers on the phone—hence the story title—and sometimes dialed numbers randomly, hoping to strike up conversation with a stranger. Now that she is older, she both insists that no other household employee answer the phone and rejects surprise connections; for the concluding plot twist, she swears at an accidental caller: "y por favor, se me va a ir usted mucho a la chingada" ("and you'll do me the favor of going straight to fucking hell"; 488). Esperanza never married and appears sidelined by her age and circumstance; like the washerwomen, she is unable to see her predicament as clearly as the narrative voice appears to view it.

The best academic article I have found on the subject of household help has to do with the sustained yet always unequal relationship between Rosario Castellanos and her mother's former cook and nurse, María Escandón (Steele). A more recent biographical article, by Erin Gallo, mentions Cynthia Steele's piece and expands on it by tracing efforts by Castellanos to recast herself as an independent woman during gigs as a visiting professor at various universities in the United States during the 1960s. Gallo also mentions Castellanos's taste for valium (303–

04). I recommend Castellanos's poem "Válium 10" for classroom use, even in a course that focuses on novels and short stories. Here and in other pieces, Castellanos circles the issue of food and the implied theme of body weight.[5] While instructors will want to distinguish Castellanos's literary voices from her own voice, the subject of fat appears in both her fiction and her personal letters.

Self-critical missives from Castellanos to her friend and eventual spouse Ricardo Guerra years before their marriage address the topic of weight. In a letter from Madrid dated 1951, Castellanos tells Guerra that she is "disparejamente gorda" (unevenly fat; *Cartas* 121). Another letter, written in Wisconsin in September 1966, hints at her thinness as a triumph; she informs Guerra: "Estoy bajando un poco de peso, lo que era necesario porque entre chicharrón y chicharrón, y botanita y botanita (ay), ya no era posible" (I'm losing a little bit of weight, which was necessary because from chip to chip and snack to snack (ay), it wasn't possible anymore; 184). In another letter to him, from October, she reports, "Ya puedo usar mucha ropa que en México no me venía. Si sigo así voy a llegar muy esbelta" (Now I can wear a lot of the clothes that didn't fit me in Mexico. If I keep up like this, I'll arrive quite slender; 202). By November, she declares that she has kicked her Mexican junk food habit: "Pero fíjate que a mí el antojito ya no se me antoja. Prefiero la esbeltez" (But now, guess what, junk food doesn't appeal to me anymore; 228). In "Válium 10," weight figures in terms of the duties of meal planning, which are accomplished in concert with a private cook. The poem winks at high art in its use of Latin in the description of meal planning as an "ars magna combinatoria" (art of great combinations) and manages irony, captured in the adjective "quotidian" in the line "el menú posible y cotidiano" (the possible and quotidian menu). That is, while the Latin phrasing aims for high culture, the notion of daily habits winkingly takes the tone down a notch.

The poem's struggle with grinding domestic routine prepares students to read the short story "Lección de cocina" ("Cooking Lesson"). This story adopts the point of view of a female narrator who has watched the housekeeper prepare food and who now, as a newlywed, must attempt the task herself. The meat she takes from the package, which is described as frozen and then as bloody, serves as a metaphor for her young marriage, and as the protagonist gradually burns the steak meant for two, she sees that it is inedible. Students may judge the marital ideas as reflecting outdated patriarchy, but the sustained frustration with food might be recognizable to them. Castellanos broaches the contradictions of a capitalist society anxious for indulgence and

discipline. The contradictory goals of cookbooks can vary from visual appeal to budget, to quick prep or more complex. The possibility of enjoyment fades, however, as the narrator turns from fretting that the steak may be too large for one meal to thinking that the shrinking and eventually overcooked serving best suits the garbage.

On the surface, the protagonist of "Lección de cocina" maintains an ambivalent attitude toward the need to nurture her own goals and the need to perform a self-denying housewife role. Students can discuss the endless pressures of economical cooking and cleaning, and pressures related to more indulgent self-care. The battle between economy and indulgence may explain why consumer societies promote restricted diets. In his amusingly titled *Eat Fat*, Richard Klein summarizes the diet historian Hillel Schwartz's answer to this contradiction: capitalism approves of diets because at first people spend more as a result of the special needs of a given diet, and later on, during the postdiet phase, they continue spending because of their altered and even increased appetites, which cause most dieters to regain lost weight and then some (Klein 144; Schwartz 246–47). In the 1980s, Schwartz incorrectly predicted that fat would become beautiful again, an aesthetic view that Klein, a decade later, also would like to see return (Klein 210–11). But in the 1960s Castellanos, despite her extensive work with feminist leanings, was never able to accept her body.[6]

In conclusion, I offer a fourth topic that connects age, fat, and migration: the cool. Peter Stearns's excellent history of cool in the United States views this emotionally subdued mode of being as a consumption-friendly style: the cool are more passionate about objects than about people. It is surely no coincidence that after *American Cool*, Stearns wrote a history of fat. Of course, students know cool when they see it, without Stearns's help. The concept of cool—*padre* or *chido* in late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century Mexican slang—can be suggested to students in terms of the other topics. Instructors can ask: Is fat cool? Is older age cool? Is migrant status cool? Do the lines of cool cut across these categories, so that perhaps a fat young man could be cool, but not a slender elderly woman? As these topics complicate one another and place analysis in context, students who previously did not think of the instructor as cool may well reconsider.

Notes

1. Those textbooks belong to a series of *libros de texto gratuitos* ("free textbooks"), first published in 1960, that continues today. See "Conaliteg" for images of the textbooks. The cover in question appears twice, once with the caption "Generación 1962" and once as "Generación 2014."

2. If Dornelas managed to paint her own canvases, that effort is now forgotten. Boullosa does provide a list of successful Mexican women artists and women artists residing in Mexico whom students can research, including Frida Kahlo, María Izquierdo, Nahui Olin, and Tina Modotti.

3. Translations in this essay are mine.

4. These two stories, which appear in Chang-Rodríguez and Filer's *Voces de Hispanoamérica* ("Voices of Latin America"), are actually older than the textbook acknowledges. Although they were reprinted in Poniatowska's early short story collection *De noche vienes*, from 1979, Jörgensen notes that they first appeared under the section title "Herbolario" ("Herbalist") in the 1967 edition of *Los cuentos de Lilus Kikus*.

5. Instructors can note that valium was first approved for use in 1960 and frequently prescribed to women by medical doctors for "women's problems." It would be helpful for students to read a short biographic essay (in *Latin American Women Writers*, 1989; or *Spanish American Woman Writers*, 1990) about Castellanos. Before her son's birth in 1961, she suffered from depression after several miscarriages. Her husband was regularly unfaithful during their thirteen-year marriage, and she divorced him in 1971.

6. For additional details on the attitudes of Castellanos's female characters toward fat, see Hind.

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