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Gorgeous Pedagogy

Elena Poniatowska's 1994 collection of essays mainly focusing on the situation of marginalized women in Mexico, Luz y luna, las lunitas, immediately impresses the reader with its sheer gorgeousness. Lavishly accompanied with photographs by Graciela Iturbide as well as with other photographs drawn from various archival sources, this volume at first glance seems less a serious meditation than a beautiful object: a coffee table volume to glance through idly when one is temporarily abandoned in someone else's home by the host. Upon delving into the book more carefully and reading (or re-reading--many of these pieces were previously printed elsewhere) the essays in this book, I felt more and more uncomfortable with my own delight in the volume, more concerned about the implications of both the visual and narrative packaging. I even had to give myself a serious shake before defiling my copy with underlinings and marginal jottings. In this paper I would like to explore my delight and my discomfort and suggest that it has both a methodological cause and a pedagogical effect. In other words, I want to ask: What does Poniatowska teach us in this book? and What implications do the essays in Luz y luna, las lunitas have for our own pedagogical practice?

The problem is how to read this volume, how to analyze the conjunctions among the marginalized women, Poniatowska's (and Iturbide's) appropriation of their lives and works, and the reader's delight in the gorgeous object that results from this collaboration of native informant, writer, photographer, and reader. And yet, at least in my case, the very sensual joy I found in a superficial glance through the volume abandoned me with a certain shiver of alienated concern upon reading the articles more closely. Emblematic markers that describe this discomfort are easy enough to identify. To take one example, Poniatowska's semi-fictional creation, Jesusa Palancares, serves as the guiding spirit behind this volume. She is given the first word in the book--in the form of an epigraph to "El último guajolote", is the central subject of a two-part essay, and serves as well as a touchstone in the last essays. And yet "Jesusa

Palancares" is no more and no less real than Sancho Panza; a fact that Poniatowska and her readers both remember and forget in this sequence of articles, with the telling exception of a single, curious note at the beginning of the second part of the long essay on "Vida y muerte de Jesusa." Poniatowska writes: "Jesusa Palancares murió en su casa, Sur 94, Manzana 8, Lote 12, Tercera Sección B, Nuevo Paseo de San Agustín. . . . En realidad, a Jesusa la llamaba yo Jose, Josefina Bórquez, pero cuando pensaba en ella pensaba Jesusa" (56). There is in this passage a curious conflation of the fictional character's life and death with the life and death of the real woman, Josefina Bórquez, whose smiling face decorates the pages of this essay. All the conversations, all the quotes, all the appeals to a working class authority throughout the volume take place in the name of Jesusa, that is, in the name of the character thought up by Poniatowska; Jose is erased even from the life and death that is the subject of this essay and she is remembered in passing only at the moment of her death. The clear indication is that the artifact (text or photograph) takes precedence over the lives and deaths of real people.

I do not want to argue the ethics of this assumption, but merely point out its implicit contradiction with the more explicit message of the volume; in page after page, essay after essay, the writer offers her audience a long and loving work of rescue, reminding us that the street vendors, the indigenous women, the abused servants, the tireless embroiderers of saintly robes exist, and in their quiddity enforce a salutary reflection in the more privileged reader about the blindness of a system in which these humble contributions are ignored. This recognition accords perfectly with Poniatowska's well-known image as a writer who, despite her provenance from elite circles in Mexican society, demonstrates her solidarity with the common people of her country with a more than ordinary social commitment, making her a spokeswoman (frequently the spokesperson) for the marginalized elements in her society. As Jean Franco writes, her "chronicles and testimonials 'give voice' to the subordinate classes and set the everyday language of survival against official history" (70). At the same time, the choice of this particular concrete and counter-hegemonic Mexican reality, so familiar to us from works like La noche de Tlatelolco, Nada, Nadie, and Hasta no verte, Jesús mío, both brings that marginalized reality into elite social consciousness and displaces it. In choosing Jesusa, Poniatowska slights Jose; in choosing

the colorfulness of the street vendors, she ignores their poverty; in choosing the strong, laughing women of Juchitán, she neglects the malnutrition, the crippling diseases that scourge their community. To put it harshly: Poniatowska's trademark mix of journalism, fiction, and essayist writing replaces the historical subject with an aestheticized fictional character.

To some degree these multiple displacements reflect Poniatowska's own nature as an originally displaced person who chooses Mexico out of a soul-deep need, and thus recreates herself as a Mexican citizen--a fiction effect made real. This need for Mexican-ness inevitably structures the form taken by her desirous approach to those representatives of marginal sectors of the society who, in their misery, seem more consistent with a "real" Mexico than the globe-hopping members of her own social class. Then too, Elena Poniatowska can be said to have inherited displacement from her birth: from her father, a French-born scion of Polish nobility; and from her mother, a French-born child of the Mexican landed aristocracy. Her parents had to recreate themselves as French out of their own exiled displacements from their respective motherlands. When the family is displaced again by World War II to the land her mother knew of only to despise, nine-year old Elena is educated in a series of private British- and French-run schools in Mexico, and in a U.S. convent. Thus, when as a young woman Poniatowska consciously chooses a Mexican identity, she turns her back on her parents' analogous but opposite choice of a Eurocentric identity. In this questioning of her Mexicanity, it is Josefina Bórquez who serves as the mediator, and Jesusa Palancares who acts as Poniatowska's alter ego, other mother, and touchstone for the writer's love for her adopted mother country. Jesusa is--in Poniatowska's words? Bórquez's words?--the moon goddess who organizes life around herself: "Soy la mujer luna, soy la mujer intérprete, soy la mujer estrella . . ." (75). Fittingly, this definition, modestly displaced onto Jesusa's arrogant voice, perfectly encapsulates Poniatowska's own role.

Luz y luna, las lunitas offers itself to us as a palimpsest of discourses, all condensed under the narrative substratum of the author's impulse to identify with a created displacement of "real" Mexico, here identified as the beautiful object, the fictional concretization of her neediness. I agree with Irene Matthews that this work partakes of a complex and sui generis combination of "anthropological, social,

archeological and personal" impulses (228), and I would add to this list that it also involves the reconciliation of journalistic and lyrical modes. In this respect, Poniatowska's work fits neatly into the growingly well-recognized sub-genre of the "criolla gender essay" that Mary Louise Pratt succinctly defines with reference to Victoria Ocampo. The preferred form of the male essay, says Ocampo, is the monologue; conversely, Pratt suggests, the criolla gender essay structures itself implicitly or explicitly as a dialogue or conversation with its readers (13, 17). In Luz y luna, las lunitas, Poniatowska's feminist practice is negotiated in the explicitly recorded dialogues between her and Jesusa, in the unspoken conversation between her text and Iturbide's photographs, in the recounting of the interactions between Iturbide and the women of Juchitán, in the implicit conversation between Poniatowska and her reader. These conversations are the essential grounding for her writing, and they form the basis for her social commitment as well. In her respectful inscriptions of the inseparable differences that separate her experience from, say, that of Jesusa or the women of Juchitán, Poniatowska incodes her respect for the deep Mexico she discovers in these women and seeks an alliance with them that will further both her social feminist project and her personal voyage of self discovery. In this inscription, as in the photographs, Poniatowska and Iturbide present images that are at the same time trite (essentialist notions of femaleness and Mexicanness) and pose a challenge to the status quo; here again Matthews is illuminatingly succinct in her analysis (234-5).

Highly problematic in these ambiguous dialogues is the status of the marginalized woman/indigenous subject. When the superstar writer/recognized photographer comes into a poor community and takes such lushly lovely photographs as Iturbide's, or writes such elegant, lyrical prose for packaging in a luxury item of a final product like Luz y luna, las lunitas, it behooves us to at meditate upon the conjunction of the superstar writer and the indigenous culture as it is recycled into the international primitivist nostalgia market as that culture's sole point of access to the attention of the powerful.¹ "El último guajolote" begins this way:

¡Mercaráaaaaaan chichicuilotitos vivos! ¡Mercaráaaaaaan chichicuilotitos cocidos!

Vivos o cocidos los llevaba doña Emeteria en una canasta tapada con un trapo. Los vivos colgaban de su brazo para que no escaparan, cuicuirí, cuicuirí, y a los cocidos había que resguardarlas del polvo, de las miradas y de las tentoneadas. (9)

The call of the street vendor trips off the tongue with an exotic musicality, and doña Emeteria, a transitory character in this tale of an earlier time, dissolves in the lyrical cry of her own birds. She is less a human being than a structure of need and nostalgia, an auditory memory that serves to ground Poniatowska's Mexican identity in childhood experience (remember, by contrast, that the youthful Poniatowska's schooling was entirely Europeanist). As Matthews notes, this essay and its accompanying photographs "romanticize an earlier Mexico when living seemed simpler, more honest, more communal, more fun. . . . [T]he tone of nostalgia in her writings hauls the most attractive elements of those earlier periods out of the simply specular and onto a platform of contemporary desires" (238).

"Juchitán de las mujeres" is equally nostalgic in tone, for while it evokes a more contemporary frame than the first essay in the volume, the reality of the Oaxacan village is equally distanced in time and space from the world of the Mexican or international academic elite:

En Juchitán, Oaxaca, los hombres no encuentran dónde meterse si no es en las mujeres, los niños cuelgan de sus pechos, y las iguanas miran el mundo desde lo alto de su cabeza. En Juchitán . . . los árboles tienen corazón, los hombres el pito dulce o salado según apetezca y las mujeres están muy orgullosas de serlo, porque llevan la redención entre las piernas y le entregan a cada cual su propia muerte. (77).

We readers, like Elena Poniatowska and Graciela Iturbide, interject ourselves into this Edenic landscape as charmed and slightly superior foreigners. We are ready to be entertained by these wise, and excessive, and not-quite-human female beings ("hay que verlas llegar como torres que caminan" [82]), and Poniatowska hints that there is a lesson for her own model of repressed upper class femininity in their strength and in their assumption of equality with their men. Yet, despite her enthusiasm, it is difficult to see how the lessons of the Juchitán women apply to the very different social circumstances of

metropolitan women, reducing the indigenous women, in the final analysis, to the gorgeous pictures in this book, dissolving them into the first world camera-eye, writer's-eye, feminist consumer paradise.

Marginal Mexico, feminine Mexico, comes to exist in this book as time-tourist's checklist of things to see and touch in which Poniatowska and her reader are the sole active agents. The loving accumulation of visual detail in these two essays reminds me strongly of Rachel Bowlby's observation, made in reference to Nabokov's *Lolita* but, I think, equally applicable to the consumer/lover ethics described here. Bowlby writes: "the poetic speed of consumption also mutates into its opposite, a state of tranquil suspension, underwater slow motion . . . , a silently timeless still life." In "El último guajolote" and in "Juchitán de las mujeres" also, the vivid memories of travel and purchase slow on the written page into the timeless still life of the list. Bowlby describes this atmosphere as "the literal fulfillment of the fantasy that the appeals to consumption constantly promote; that this is just for you, you are the only shopper in the world, and far from you having to do anything to obtain them, the goods will simply float effortlessly into your hands" (66). In these essays, the consumer disguises herself as a lyrical ethnographer, collecting the quaint delights of a romanticized otherness; in Matthews' words, "piling on mythic details until they assume the consistency of fact" (238). Disturbingly, this richness of the native culture remains appealing only insofar as it presents itself in the form of a lyrical dream made solid and monumental by the writer's and the photographer's art. The richness and the complexity of the Juchitán women must remain at a safe distance, albeit a distance lyrically bridged by a feminist desire, otherwise the complexities of reality would too nearly disturb the fragile, nostalgia-ridden constructions of a fictional fact.

In order to explore this problematic more closely, I would like to look specifically at two of the essays in the book that in some ways display contrasting aesthetics: "Juchitán de las mujeres" and "Se necesita muchacha," the two articles that face each other across the center of the volume, sandwiching Graciela Iturbide's photographs between them.

One way to get at the structures of desire projected in "Juchitán de las mujeres" would be to contrast Poniatowska's feminized Zapotecan Oaxaca with Néstor García Canclini's no less fictional, but differently imagined masculine Zapotec culture. García Canclini writes:

. . . on a field trip eight years ago to a weaving pueblo in Teotilán del Valle, I entered a shop in which a fifty-year-old man and his father were watching television and conversing in Zapotec. When I asked about the wall hangings with images from the work of Picasso, Klee, and Miró, the artisan told me that he began to weave the new designs in 1968 on the suggestion of a group of tourists who worked for the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He then took out an album of clippings from newspaper reviews and analyses, in English, of his exhibitions in California. (38)

For both García Canclini and for Poniatowska the Oaxacan indigenous population defines a reality that is both strikingly other. For the feminist theorist, Juchitán's self-reliant, strong women model a utopian possibility of liberation; for the culture studies-oriented anthropologist, the exotic world of the English-Zapotec-Spanish speaking weaver is a post colonial icon. Interestingly enough, these two models, which project themselves onto an identical geographical space, are entirely mutually exclusive. Thus, we readers at the metropolitan center become witnesses to one of the finest tricks of the Latin American educated elite. Latin America, the periphery of the Anglo-European axis, appeals to its own periphery, the Zapotec-speaking indigenous people of Oaxaca, as the model for an enlightened social practice. Mexico's indigenous culture--implicitly and explicitly described as a holdover from the past--becomes the foundational protocol for a feminist (Poniatowska), postmodern (García Canclini) practice projected into a utopian future. His and hers and our fascination with the changing face of the "authentic" native inevitably projects us into the *mise en abîme* of our own displaced and culturally-encoded desires. As Armstrong warns us in an apposite statement, "even the 'subject' of the critical term 'subject position' tends to dissolve too readily back into a popular and sentimental version of the bourgeois self" (33). Poniatowska's description of Juchitán, in some sense, serves as a displaced intellectual or psycho-mythic autobiography. Furthermore, the women of Juchitán are few enough, poor enough, isolated enough to provide a model, but no real threat, thus increasing their novelty and their intrinsic charm.

In Poniatowska's Juchitán, men shrink to the size of their penis, or hang from women's breasts-- "los hombres no encuentran dónde meterse si no es en las mujeres, los niños cuelgan de sus pechos . . ."

(77)--while the women grow to massive size: "mujeres a las que no les duele nada, macizas, entronas, . . . mujeres buenas porque son excesivas" (78) and an equally assured sense of their power: "ellas no [lloran], nada de abnegadas madrecitas mexicanas anegadas en el llanto" (84). Even the language they speak excludes the male half of their population: "El zapoteco es más dulce, mas dócil que la castilla. Es un idioma mujer" (92). Never mind the contradictions between the positing of a strong, hard Zapotec woman and her docile, sweet man and the assertion that the Zapotec language, because it is sweet and docile, is feminine. Poniatowska is less interested in ethnography than in a feminine myth, a reverse Eden where Eve strides proudly and Adam contentedly remains in her shadow or pines for her love (see, e.g., 83). As Franco reminds us in her brief commentary on this essay, "this celebration of excess is an antidote to the sober and often pedestrian accounts of women's movements that prevail in academic literature. Poniatowska's view is not that of the participant observer of a single event but a lyrical essay on the possibilities of non patriarchal sexuality and politics" (73). The rhythms of this lyrical prose are likewise excessive, and in their summoning of the Juchitec utopia, Poniatowska brings energy to her feminist project. She wants to leave Eurocentric patriarchal myths behind, and reactivate alternative mythological practices that earlier thinkers disdained as primitive or peripheral. Put another way, Poniatowska's women of Juchitán metaphorically stand in for a particularly Mexican-inflected version of a feminist utopia as cultural other or, more precisely, to borrow a Lacanian term, as the "Other" with a capital "O" that exists before separation. This precise lyrical formulation allows Poniatowska to reimagine her indigenous subject in a way foreclosed by previous Eurocentric appropriations of her as the white man's other, the degraded sexual object, mythically cast in the role of the silently submissive slave eternally producing traitorous mestizo children. Likewise, the laughing women of Juchitán, in full possession of their "sabiduría indígena" (79) provide an alternative to the suffering, self-sacrificing weepiness of the bourgeois Mexican woman.

This impression is confirmed in Iturbide's photographs, which frequently choose a low camera angle, thus rendering the women more imposing, while not mitigating their charming otherness. Disturbingly, the conjunction of Poniatowska and Iturbide teaches us that the women are both larger

than life and reassuringly contained. Making them mythic also makes them manageable. I am reminded of Elizabeth Burgos's similarly condescending physical description of Rigoberta Menchú, which also mythologizes to the woman's moon-like qualities and turns her into a fancy-dress doll:

Llevaba su vestido tradicional: un huipil multicolor con bordados gruesos y diversos. . . . Una falda . . . multicolor, de tela espesa, visiblemente tejida a mano, le caía hasta los tobillos. Una franja ancha de colores muy vivos le ceñía la cintura. . . . Lo que me sorprendió a primera vista fue su sonrisa franca y casi infantil. Su cara redonda tenía forma de luna llena. Su mirada franca era la de un niño (12).

Menchú, like the women of Juchitán, is set apart. Her moon face makes her wise, her child-like smile makes her unthreatening, her un-western clothing makes her safely exotic. There is a perilous complacency at work here, something akin to the appropriation of peripheral third world women for a pseudo feminist sublime that Gayatri Spivak warns about in her many discussions of the increasingly popular versions of subaltern studies in the western academy. Poniatowska's lovingly elitist appropriation of Juchitán sublimes their very different cultural practices to a celebration of otherness defined in western aesthetic terms. In fact, much of my unease with this book has to do with the degree to which Poniatowska's political aim, so familiar to us from other of her chronicles, tends to be subsumed almost entirely into an aesthetic appreciation. In the exhaustion of elite Mexican feminist models, she turns to Juchitán for renewal and therapy. I think that John Beverley is exactly right in reminding us that testimonios like Rigoberta Menchú's (and, I would add, photo-essays like Poniatowska's), whatever their original intention and audience, "are made for people like us in that they allow us to participate as academics and yuppies, without leaving our studies and our classrooms" (88). Here, precisely formulated, is the crux of what Poniatowska teaches us in her gorgeous essay on Juchitec women.

What happens when we take this vexed pedagogical exercise into our own classrooms and attempt to teach it to our students, who often know little about Mexico and nothing about its indigenous peoples? What happens, in Gerald Graff's words, when the teacher finds him/herself, as Lionel Trilling did, "in

the position of having to inform his students about those complacent pieties that modern literature was supposed to disabuse them of"? Trilling describes this odd sensation as deriving from his request that students look into the Abyss, and finding them complacently doing exactly as he asks--the Abyss turns out to be merely abyssal ignorance on the students' part (Professing 232), what Graff earlier calls "the explication of texts in a vacuum" (Professing 231). Both Trilling and Graff describe a student body for whom the traditional liberal arts education in general, and literary studies in particular, has become increasingly marginal and unappealing, and who find profoundly irrelevant the attempts by literary critics of both the right and the left to grapple with cultural issues.² Unsurprisingly, in this context, "the literature teacher stands before the class not as a member of an identifiable collective engaged in modes of thought that most students might see themselves as internalizing, but as the representative of alien requirements which tend to be seen as obstacles to be circumvented with as little damage to the students' career ambitions as possible" (Graff, "Future" 257). In the baldest possible terms Graff is telling us that we teachers want students to think critically, to write coherently, and to make these practices a central part of their general approach to all cultural forms, including those implicitly underlying the (to us) alien fields of Engineering or Business Management. The students mostly want to get a graduation requirement out of the way.

Even in Mexico this gorgeous product raises pedagogical concerns. In "El lenguaje oculto." María Luisa Puga's contribution to Itinerario de palabras, the Mexico City novelist and intellectual defines the themes of a series of thirty-four lectures she proposes to give in a tour of the north of the country. She will focus on "the appropriation of language," in her definition, how language acquires a voice of its own when literature begins to appropriate the history of the nation; "how we are taught to read," in which she delineates a general practice of miseducation, since language and culture are presented in schools as alien objects of detached study rather than as integral components in the ongoing construction of the self; "what we read," disconcertingly, she finds that what "we read" in school are classics from Spain like El mío Cid complemented by a diet of American best-sellers at home; "how language colonizes," the examination of how people are taught to speak "correctly"; "identity through

language," that is, the manner in which a personal self-concept is created in stories told us and stories we tell about ourselves (12). In short, Puga proposes to explore the values and social interests presumably served by the classical curriculum of study and to propose a more appropriate vehicle for exploring the range of Latin American responses to a diverse and self-questioning Latin American reality.

This listing of issues will undoubtedly sound familiar. I know I have come across discussions of a similar set of concerns again and again as I read in the literature related to pedagogy and curricular reform in the United States. It is also clear from her discussion of Mexico, and of the operation of the Ministry of Public Education, that Puga sees clearly that any "national" curriculum, defined from the center of the country, will inevitably do violence to the diverse cultures of its citizens. At the same time, she sees no real alternative; the United States, she comments at one point, is powerful precisely because it has been able to impose successfully upon its citizens a single national image. Her comment about the United States is, of course, highly debatable. I am less interested in debating it, however, than in noting the tension between a rejection of that perceived cultural imperialism (so like Mexico's, though more successfully imposed) and her wistful acknowledgment of an empowering structure that works to the benefit of the national project. In this context, her own well-intentioned project of exploring the implications of such appropriative and colonizing practices with reference to the highly elite practice of fiction writing and reading reveals itself as hopelessly naive and absurdly reductive.

How do the Juchitec women, whose knowledge is indigenous and whose language is Zapotec fit into this model for national curricular practice? The obvious answer is that they do not participate in it at all. In this respect, Poniowska's project on Juchitán shows its most perniciously attractive aspect. Her essay's nostalgic tone reconfirms, in Matthews words, "what really matters is what is already lost" (228). Among the things already lost is the beautiful feminocentrism of the Juchitec women. Not only is Poniowska's model of Zapotec social interaction based on an entirely heterosexist model, in the interstices of her lyrical paean to the Juchitec women, we can see that their lives are circumscribed and determined by the same masculinist models as the wider metropolitan society she decries. If the women are strong, the men, in a good mainstream Mexican stereotypical manner, are incredibly brave and

fearless warriors (94). The outward display of feminine strength, then, responds as much to projection and wish fulfillment on Poniatowska's part, and in response to a secondary reading of Juchitec culture as mediated by Iturbide's photographs and by various ethnographic reports, as to any objective Oaxacan reality. Thus, Juchitec women, for all their openness about sexuality, are absolutely enjoined to retain their virginity until marriage or to risk embarrassment or actual ostracism from Juchitec society (88, 90). Likewise, infidelity to the husband is an unforgivable crime (92); even those widows who choose an adventurous lifestyle involving sexual encounters with more than one man customarily inform their dearly departed husband of that fact: "Una viuda se mantiene casta hasta cierto día. Entonces va al panteón y le habla al muerto: 'Hasta hoy te fui fiel. Ahora ya no'" (91).

What remains behind after the loss of a feminocentric basis to society is the beautiful object of nostalgia, and not of pedagogical practice. Matthews concludes: "Elena Poniatowska looks for the evidences of vitality in a culture she feels is losing its urgency, its sense of pride, and its sense of self. . . . [H]er essays often scrutinize the usual public scenarios --political, masculinist--in a moment of crisis, of being undone. And she replaces those scenes with other public images, popularized and feminized, often marginal or bizarre" (238). Because her scenes are bizarre and magical, they confirm the existential crisis and insert the essay into the personal realm, making it unavailable or irrelevant to the larger national project.

The case is somewhat different when we turn to the second of the two essays I wish to briefly discuss here: "Se necesita muchacha." Originally published as the Mexican foreword to the 1983 release of Peruvian Ana Gutiérrez's collection of interviews and testimonios from Peruvian maids, the long essay is reedited here and accompanied by archival photographs of Mexican women and children. Thus, while Poniatowska is always careful to make her analysis a comparative one, so as to bring the Mexican reader of Se necesita muchacha into a more sympathetic response to the Peruvian context of the book, an inattentive reader of Luz y luna, las lunitas would be justified in concluding that the photographs match the citations from the text, and that most of the quotes, despite occasional non-Mexican idioms, come from Mexican maids rather than Peruvian ones. The first erasure in this illustrated text, then, is

precisely that specificity of Peruvian reality that is the very heart of Gutiérrez's volume. Displaced from that book into the context of a discussion of Mexican marginality, the essay also changes in focus.

The description of the forgotten, invisible women who work as servants in middle class Mexican homes gives title to the whole of this volume: "Son las criaditas, las gatas domingueras. Ellas . . . esperan con su carita de luna, luz y luna, las lunitas" (122). On first glance, the two essays in Luz y luna, las lunitas that confront each other across the bridge of Iturbide's photographs serve as dialogical counterpoints: though they share the moon face of the admirable marginals, the strong Juchitec women have little in common except for indigenous origin with the powerless servants; the peripheral indigenous culture moves into the city and is likewise erased as shamefully ignorant, not modern enough for a middle-class household and a middle-class mistress. Unlike the proud women of Juchitán who stand tall, speak their minds, and conserve their native traditions, the women who work as maids in Mexican and Peruvian households strive diligently to disappear from sight and consciousness. Even the archival photographs chosen to accompany this text offer a contrast to Iturbide's gorgeous images of empowered womanhood. "Se necesita muchacha" hosts gritty and crowded pictures; in the most notable of them (the two-page spreads on pages 120-121 and 136-7) the women in the foreground have their heads low, and cluttered slums fill in the background. In the first of these pictures, the women are photographed from above, struggling up the hill towards us with their children in their arms, leaving behind the makeshift shanties in which they live. As they struggle and labor, heads lowered, so too does their voice. In the testimonios lavishly cited in the text, language chokes on itself, says Poniatowska, and like the women, the word tries to shrink into invisibility:

. . . el idioma todavía se hace más chiquito, "estito nomás", los diminutivos abarcan no sólo los adjetivos, los sustantivos sino también los pronombres. La gente no halla cómo pasar inadvertida, borrarse, que la acepten por la ausencia absoluta de sus pretensiones. Nada piden. . . . De poder se harían invisibles hasta aniquilarse totalmente. (147)

This insistence upon their self-erasure, their muteness, is both a condition of their work and an effect. The mistress wants to see a shining, clean house, impeccably served meals. She does not want to be

reminded that her toilet was scrubbed by those invisible brown hands. She does not want to remember that her intimate family secrets, her loves and her betrayals, are inevitably witnessed by another woman. The maid, then, is trained to silence.

At the same time, Poniatowska reminds us, these women from the countryside where floors are made of packed dirt and water for cooking and cleaning needs to be carried long distances are overwhelmed by the modern marvels they are expected to manipulate with flawless expertise. Fear silences them as much as they are enjoined to silence by their work: "La casa, sus puertas que no saben abrir ni cerrar, sus ventanas corredizas, los enormes espacios de vidrio por los cuales a veces atraviesa, estrellándose, la luz eléctrica, los enchufes que dan toques, los excusados, los collares de la señora, las corbatas del señor . . . todo las desconcierta y las aterroriza" (114). A little later in the essay, Poniatowska names this poisonous combination of felt inadequacy and forced silencing a "parálisis del alma" that maids suffer as an incurable disease.

Nothing could be a stronger contrast with the portrayal of the Juchitec women, who conduct their loves and hates loudly in the open street, and whose domestic spaces also seem to have a public dimension. "La juchiteca no tiene vergüenza," says Poniatowska, and she cites an example:

--Ayúdenme --les rogó Andrés-- que yo las ayudaré.

Entonces una de ellas interpeló: "Shinú, Andres, ¿dijiste, ayúdame o acuéstate conmigo?

Porque si es lo segundo, pido mano". (77)

Where the Juchitec women enforce recognition of their presence and their sexuality, the maids desire only to hide the former so as to protect the latter from the all-too-common unwanted assaults on a body in which they live as a strangely alienated mechanism.

Likewise, the women of Juchitán conserve their native language, Zapotec, as the preferred idiom and they stride erect and proud in their colorfully un-western native dress. In Poniatowska's version of their lives and beliefs, Zapotec culture seems to them so clearly superior to that of the Spanish speakers that accommodation to the dominant society does not enter their minds. In contrast again, the maids are forced to make an incomplete transition into a degraded modernity. With their native traditions and

cultures downvalued or displaced, and no real access to the aesthetic delights of metropolitan civilization, they are caught between cultures with no place to find strength. And yet, in the right circumstances, an oblique critique takes place. For Poniatowska, one of the most ironic exchanges occurs when a moon-faced maid rejects the markers of an indigenous past that is hers by right of blood and admired by the white mistress, in favor of "una modernidad de pacotilla, de infame acetato, de industrialización de plástico, vinílica y melamina." When the enlightened mistress wishes to take her ignorant maid to the pyramids to meditate on Mexico's indigenous greatness, the maid declines. When the mistress offers to sponsor an artistic voyage of discovery into the indigenous past, the maid replies: "¡Allá esos majes que se dejaron! Y luego, esos tepalcates tan feos que les dicen dioses. A usted porque le gustan esas cochinadas, yo tengo malos ratos, pero no tan malos gustos" (172). For Poniatowska the exchange with the temporarily uppity servant is slightly comic. It reflects well on her as an understanding mistress, and illustrates her point about the loss of cultural capital among the displaced campesinas. She does not need to ask where the reader's taste lies; clearly, we too are expected to share Poniatowska's love of ancient indigenous artifacts and to feel saddened by the servant's inability to appreciate these beautiful objects.

And yet, the maid is not far wrong in her unspoken suspicion of the mistress's motives. Although she is locked in a mostly silent, and always unequal, dialogue with her mistress, there is nothing wrong with her perceptions about the respective values of maids and clay pots. The maid's rejection of Poniatowska's taste in native artifacts goes to the heart of this unequal relation. Both women know very well that maids and handicrafts are the two products of the indigenous people that make their ways into middle-class homes; in some cases interchangeably, but usually to the detriment of the human beings. On the literal level, Poniatowska describes the poignant story of a first-rate artist in weaving, a Oaxacan woman who wins an important prize for her work, then uses the connections her award provides to secure a position as a maid, and henceforth produces no more handicrafts (123). On the metaphorical level, Poniatowska's own prose sometimes partakes of a romantic dehumanization that places pots and people into a symbolic relation of equivalence: "Porque de esa masa prieta, chaparra y anónima salen

los criados. . . . Los grandes latifundistas cavan en esta arcilla lodosa que no puede ser sino doméstica. Con la mano la aplanan, le dan forma y la ponen a secar al sol. Cuando se resquebraja la tiran. ¿Qué otro destino tienen los cántaros rotos?" (114). Handicrafts and housecleaning are both "hand work", as opposed to the privileged "mind work" that serves as the intellectual mistress's justification for employing the maid, and which displaces questions of class and gender exploitation onto a social frame of differential skills. The maid's rage is easy to intuit; more surprising is Poniatowska's class-based complacency, that in other instances she so ably deconstructs.

Poniatowska describes the maids as universally paralyzed and silent. Her categorization of the mistresses is somewhat more complex (118), but comes down to two overriding types: "las patronas adoptan dos tipos de conducta: uno el de la patrona-niña que brincotea, sonrío, solicita aquiescencia, se reafirma a sí misma ante los ojos de la comparsa (yo pertenezco a este adorable grupín), y el otro, el de la patrona-madre que llama a la sivienta 'hija,' la protege, la dirige en todo, se sienta en su cabeza . . ." (157). I deeply admire the unflinching honesty of Poniatowska's pitiless self-characterization in this passage; however, as her maid would tell her--although not in the same words--she leaves the social and pedagogical implications of her insight largely unexplored. Despite her efforts to put herself in the place of maids, to speak with them and for them, her pedagogical frame of reference wavers between the patrona-niña, who with her lyrical asides and aesthetic appreciations asks us to love her, and the patrona-madre, who sternly instructs us--here more than in any other essay of the book--on the human consequences of our own arrogant blindness.

Always, she is displaced from the beautiful object of her pedagogical enterprise: by birth, by education, by philosophical inclination, by assumptions about her implicit audience. Curiously, her cultural authorities on the lived reality of maids tend to be other middle-class authors' representations of them. She cites fictions by Sara Sefchovich (161), Rosario Castellanos (162), and Edmundo Valadés (164), and in a fine example of displaced self-citation refers frequently to the authority of her own fictional character, Jesusa Palancares (119, 140, 160, 170). These quotes from fictional texts bear the weight of the analysis, for while Poniatowska quotes generously from Peruvian and Mexican maids in

the context of her discussion, it is this ventriloquized maid rendered through the master's or mistress's voice that clinches the argument or defines the theoretical issue. While this kind of use for fictional texts well accords with a certain Latin American model of pedagogy in which literature has a crucially formative role, by the use of fictions in this essay the testimonios are inevitably displaced back into the middle-class context and are defined in terms of an alien cultural and aesthetic frame. The voice of Poniatowska's maid, who resists re-education about cultural values, is silenced once more.

This cultural frame is not only class biased, but also, and against the grain of her overt intentions, Eurocentric. Thus for example Poniatowska introduces her argument about indigenous exploitation with an appeal to authority: "Un escritor francés, A. de Tsertevens, escribió Le Mexique, pays à trois étages y colocó a los indígenas en el sotano' (119). Later she writes: "en México se es campesino porque no se puede ser otra cosa. . . Nada tienen que ver los campesinos mexicanos con los paysans avarés de que habla Claudel" (135, 138). Or still elsewhere she says, "Muchas 'mucamas', 'doncellas' o 'gatas' por una suerte de mimesis adoptan el modo de la patrona. . . . Los franceses las llaman 'femmes de chambre' porque su perímetro es el de la recámara aunque, a diferencia de las 'cocottes', sea sólo para limpiarla" (151). What I find interesting in these three quotes--and they are typical of much of Poniatowska's writing here--is that in each case she feels the need to explain or qualify the experience or to define the nature of marginalized Mexicans, and she finds it appropriate and illuminating to do so with reference to a French intellectual or cultural frame. At such moments, Poniatowska's first, displaced cultural identity as a Frenchwoman appears in the interstices of her chosen Mexicanity. This ambivalent dedication inserts the critique of dominant modes of thought into a well-defined structure of Eurocentric cultural and aesthetic domination.

Reading "Juchitán de las mujeres" and "Se necesita muchacha" across the bridge of Iturbide's photographs of Oaxaca and archival photographs of impoverished Mexico City women compels us into a consideration of the aesthetic pleasures and intellectual discomforts produced in the conjunctions and interstices of this gorgeous object, Luz y luna, las lunitas. What does it mean to tell the reader that in Poniatowska's text and photographs the marginalized women of Mexico are making their presence

known? Where do they speak in Poniatowska's text and how? In Rey Chow's words, "What kind of an argument is it to say that the subaltern's 'voice' can be found in the ambivalence of the imperialist's speech? It is an argument which ultimately makes it unnecessary to come to terms with the subaltern since she has already 'spoken', as it were, in the system's gaps" (132). Does this model, to continue Chow's line of argument, avoid "the genuine problem of the native's status as object by providing something that is more manageable and comforting--namely, a phantom history in which natives appear as our equals and our images, in our shapes and our forms?" (133). I would like to be able to answer Chow's disturbing questions with the assertion that in Poniatowska's chronicles, in her novels, in Luz y luna, las lunitas the accurately rendered voice and the photographic image of the marginalized woman in the gaps of the gorgeous narrative in some way dialogue with the metropolitan criolla gender model implicitly proposed in Poniatowska's text, that these women who have not historically participated in the national conversation about Mexicanity will have found a position from which to articulate their social and cultural reality, as our equals and in their own form. I uneasily suspect, however, that the lovingly created image in this text remains interstitial, and that any academic reading of these second-hand and mediated social formations can only be provisional, if not entirely solipsistic. In the slice of time captured by Luz y luna, las lunitas, in the gorgeous model of pedagogy it proposes, Poniatowska elaborates a Mexican feminist analysis and lyric appreciation of marginality, the women of Juchitán forever speak Zapotec, and maids are eternally silent.

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Notes

¹In saying this, I am thinking of a specific circumstantial conjunction. I began writing this essay at the same time as CNN produced an extended report on the dire situation of Juchitán, which is currently (early October 1995) afflicted by a particularly virulent form of dengue fever, exacerbated by poverty and a general ignorance among the population about how the disease spreads.

²Recent statistics confirm Trilling and Graff's sense of the attenuation of student interest in liberal arts. Clifford Adelman reviews college transcripts, reflecting curricular requirements as well as detailing courses actually taken by a broad subset of students. Not only do proportionately fewer students enter traditional humanistic fields, but humanities courses are also taking on a more and more marginal representation in the typical student's curriculum. Adelman concludes that "the requirements in professional and occupational fields are such as to leave preciously little time for anything else" (21), and that "over the course of 8 academic years, some 39.1 percent of the people who earned bachelor's degrees in the United States did minimal to no work [in either high school or in college] in a language other than English" (5). Finally, Adelman warns, "the curriculum of students at elite colleges (3% of all bachelor's degrees in the NLS-72) is so different from that followed by the other 97% that it is irrelevant to discussions of the diffusion of cultural information" (vi).