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Teaching *Gaby Brimmer*: A Disability Studies Approach

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Abstract: *Gaby Brimmer* (1979), the collaborative “autobiography” of the Mexican disability rights activist, narrates her childhood and young adulthood through the voices of Brimmer herself; her mother, Sari Dlugacz Brimmer; her caregiver, Florencia Morales Sánchez; and Elena Poniatowska. This article presents ideas and resources for teaching *Gaby Brimmer* from a disability studies perspective, in courses on contemporary Spanish-American literature, women writers, genre theory, human rights and activism, or in a disability studies course.

Key Terms: Disability studies, activism, Gaby Brimmer, Elena Poniatowska, Mexican women writers, autobiography

The 1979 publication of *Gaby Brimmer*, the life story of Gabriela Brimmer written by Elena Poniatowska in collaboration with Brimmer, broke new ground in Mexican letters in ways that were perhaps not fully appreciated at the time. This collaborative “autobiography” narrates the formative years of the future disability rights activist through the voices of Brimmer herself; her mother, Sari Dlugacz Brimmer; and her caregiver, Florencia Morales Sánchez. A series of photographs, selections of Brimmer’s poetry, and letters that she wrote to Poniatowska over a period of approximately two years also contribute to the complex verbal and visual portrait contained in the book.

Gabriela Brimmer was born in Mexico City in 1947, and soon after her birth it was discovered that she had cerebral palsy caused by Rh factor incompatibility. As a consequence, she had very reduced motor control over most of her body, her speech was difficult for others to

I told some friends about my experience with Gaby, and later the commitment I’d taken on: the book. [They said] “But what does this have to do with literature? Do you think you can make things any better for her? ... If not, why are you getting involved? Start writing, work on your own things ...”

ELENA PONIATOWSKA

understand, and she experienced spasms and chronic pain throughout her life. She was able to move her left foot at will, which made possible a means of communicating verbally with others through the use of an alphabet board and a typewriter, and also allowed her to manipulate some objects and express affection physically. Intellectually curious and linguistically talented, Brimmer graduated from a mainstream public secondary school and later took classes at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) through her own persistent efforts and with the assistance of Morales Sánchez, and her mother’s constant advocacy and support. She was an enthusiastic supporter of the 1968 student movement and she longed for changes that would bring greater equality to Mexican society.

Gaby Brimmer covers the years from the protagonist’s birth until the age of thirty, a turning point in her life marked by the adoption of a baby girl whom she named Alma Florencia. The publication of the book and the 1987 release of the film *Gaby: A True Story*, directed by Luis Mandoki, changed Brimmer’s life in significant ways, bringing her into a greatly expanded arena of public activities and increased contacts with people outside of her family circle, and prompting her to undertake the disability rights activism for which she became well known and respected in Mexico and internationally.¹ *Gaby Brimmer* is not as well studied, and perhaps not as frequently taught as some of Elena Poniatowska’s other works, although in fact it lends itself particularly well to interdisciplinary approaches to the study of literature and to inclusion in a variety of courses centered on diverse topics. The purpose of this article is to present ideas and resources for teaching *Gaby Brimmer* in courses on contemporary Spanish-American literature, Spanish-American women writers; genre-based courses examining autobiography; *testimonio* or the *Bildungsroman* under a Latin American

studies or a comparative literature rubric; human rights and activism in the Global South or a fully international context; or in a disability studies course. Disability studies theory and criticism provide the overarching framework for my approach. This interdisciplinary field addresses questions of human subjectivity and identity formation, and issues of human rights, difference and diversity that have relevance for all of the suggested course topics, as well as opening our students' minds to modes of corporeal, cognitive and psychosocial experience that are still too often silenced and hidden from view. I believe that the study of *Gaby Brimmer* is particularly important at a time of increased efforts to make education more inclusive of students with disabilities, who are graduating from high school in larger numbers and with higher aspirations for post-secondary education than in the past. Further, it is a story that resonates with college students due to its portrayal of complicated, often conflictive family dynamics and the prominence of the theme of education, while it may also challenge their preconceived notions of what is "normal" or expected in terms of an individual's trajectory toward Western culture's highly valued goals of independence and self-realization. The article does not offer an in-depth analysis of the text, but rather it presents ideas and resources for teaching *Gaby Brimmer* through the lens of disability studies theory. The recommended secondary sources, mostly fairly brief articles or book introductions, are a starting point geared toward an undergraduate population and could easily be supplemented for graduate students by following up with other publications by the scholars cited.

I first taught *Gaby Brimmer* in 2009 in a course on the Spanish-American coming-of-age narrative titled "Identity Signs." The course syllabus was built around a series of twentieth-century novels and novellas that treat their protagonists' process of development from childhood to adolescence and early adulthood, with its related themes of the formation of identity, the individual's search for self-knowledge, and a place in an often hostile society. I proposed to explore with my students how the interplay of factors such as nationality, language, social class, religion, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation make this a dynamic process that is fraught with tensions and contradictions, and one that is not necessarily resolved at the end of the narrative. Serendipitously for me, *Gaby Brimmer: An Autobiography in Three Voices*, the English translation of Poniatowska

and Brimmer's text (out of print in Spanish) by Trudy Balch, was published in 2009 in time to include it in the course readings and thereby extend my original concept to consider disability as a crucial and often overlooked factor in the "coming of age" process. Some of the other titles studied were *Iphigenia* by Teresa de la Parra (also using the English translation), "El árbol" by María Luisa Bombal, *Los ríos profundos* by José María Arguedas, *Los cachorros* by Mario Vargas Llosa, and *Antes que anochezca* by Reinaldo Arenas. After reviewing definitions of the traditional European *Bildungsroman*, including a concise article written by P. Dahl for the *History of European Literature* (2000, Benoit-Dusausoy and Fontaine, editors), the students began to observe how virtually all of the Spanish-American versions of the novel of development differ from and challenge the assumptions implicit in the canonical examples from nineteenth-century Europe. The diverse protagonists' experiences of racial and ethnic marginality, gender oppression, stigmatized disability or illness status and/or prohibited sexual orientation were to profoundly influence their identity formation and their success or lack of success in fully integrating themselves into established social roles in their respective communities. While in today's multicultural environment most students no longer simply assume that the normative human being is white, male, middle-class, able-bodied and neurotypical, the fact remains that deeply entrenched cultural discourses continue to promote that model and to influence all of us. Throughout the semester, the class also had ample opportunity to question the commonplace idea of "identity" as a fixed, unique and essential or in-born quality possessed by each individual through the reading of texts that posit identity formation to be a fluid, unstable process subject to myriad cultural, social, economic, corporeal and psychic variables.

Our study of *Gaby Brimmer: An Autobiography in Three Voices* opened new perspectives on matters of narrative genre and structure, and on society's processes of valuing and marginalizing certain types of bodies. Although the text is specific to mid twentieth-century Mexican reality in many ways, there are commonalities in the experience of disability that cross national boundaries, and *Gaby Brimmer* proved to be an excellent choice for introducing the complexities of that experience and its impact on human subjectivity and the implications for human rights. The "Introduction" to the 1979 edition, reproduced in the translation, explains that Elena

Poniatowska became involved in the writing of *Gaby Brimmer* in response to an appeal from Sari Brimmer that the famed journalist meet her daughter and write a newspaper or magazine article about her. What started as a commitment to publish a single article based on interviews with Gabriela and Sari Brimmer, and Florencia Morales Sánchez, turned into a full-blown, book-length life story over a period of several years. The epigraph that introduces this essay comes from Poniatowska's introduction, and it alludes to the internal and external obstacles that she faced in undertaking the representation of the life of a severely disabled woman in Mexico in the 1970s.² There was no sustained disability rights movement in Mexico until the early 1990s, and until more recently most families kept their disabled children or adult family members hidden at home or in institutions.³ The visibility of disabled people in public was generally limited to those who had to beg on the streets. As a result of this invisibility and a long history of stigmatization of people with disabilities, Poniatowska encountered opposition from friends who warned against getting involved in the project because "sick people" just "wear you down," and their stories have nothing to do with literature.⁴ (14) According to her own testimony, she experienced an internal resistance to the larger project as well, taking it up only rather reluctantly when the Brimmers pressed her to do so: "When I published my interview, I thought: 'Well, that's that, the interview came out, I have my burden to carry too, Gaby's situation has no relation to mine.'" (24) This frank admission of her hesitation to reengage with Brimmer and her story after completing the initial interviews is an accurate reflection of the social devaluing of disabled bodies and the concomitant devaluing of their lives at that time.

Characters with disabilities have a pervasive presence in Mexican literature, as is true for literature from virtually all cultures throughout history. Nevertheless, *Gaby Brimmer* was produced against an almost complete absence of texts that foreground the lived experience of people with disabilities narrated from *within* that experience in Mexico.⁵ Therefore, in addition to the social stigmatization of the real-life body and experience that Gabriela Brimmer presented, nothing in Poniatowska's literary formation would have led her in 1977 to conceive of authoring a life story centered on such a protagonist. The writing of *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* and *La noche de Tlatelolco*, among other projects, had brought the author

into social and political spheres that were quite different from her own comfortable existence, but disability proved to be a more challenging reality to confront, absorb and transform into narrative art. Reading the book today in the context of disability studies theory and criticism, especially that concerned with the study of literature, reveals much about the groundbreaking contribution that it makes to Mexican letters.⁶ As I will show, the book reflects its own times and some aspects of its discourse about disability may seem outdated today, yet the narrative remains remarkably contemporary thirty-five years after its publication.

Disability studies as an academic discipline arose in response to the disability rights movement that took shape in the 1980s and 90s, inspired to a great degree by the civil rights and women's equality movements of the previous decades. The field has had a significant impact on research in the humanities over the course of the past twenty years. Our reading of literature, film and the visual arts, in particular those of Europe, the United States and Canada, has been challenged and enriched by the contributions of disability theory. In contrast, until very recently relatively few scholars of Hispanic literature have engaged in disability studies research, in spite of a long history of cultural production that represents disability in its many diverse forms. These representations raise questions about the biological bases and the cultural constructions of illness and disability; processes of stigmatization, appearance-based discrimination; body identity; medical history; the meanings and limits of "rehabilitation"; the right to privacy and sexual intimacy; the legal status of those with disabilities; and the racialization of corporeal and cognitive difference, among other concerns. *Gaby Brimmer: An Autobiography in Three Voices* is an ideal text through which to study and to teach many of these cultural responses to disability. In what follows, I will focus on the book's representation of human interdependence, its correspondence to established genre categories, its engagement with distinct models of disability and the disability lexicon, and the construction of subjectivity and the power of the gaze, all within the paradigm of disability life writing.

DISABILITY LIFE WRITING: VOICES OF HUMAN DIVERSITY

Life writing by persons with disabilities was uncommon until after World War II in the United States,

but it became increasingly prominent there and in other societies as a consequence of the large number of disabled war veterans and the impact of the polio outbreaks of the 1940s and 50s. The consciousness-raising effect of the disability rights movement has further stimulated the production of this subgenre of traditional autobiography.

Today, personal narratives of illness and disability authored or co-authored by their “real life” narrator-protagonists regularly appear on best-seller lists in the United States, and they are the object of research by disability studies scholars, although in Mexico there are still relatively few examples that reach a mainstream audience.⁷ G. Thomas Couser, Susannah Mintz, and Nancy Mairs are a few of the scholars who have made important contributions to our understanding of the unique role of disability life writing in providing alternative representations of this historically marginalized sector, and their work connects well to *Gaby Brimmer*. For an introduction to this genre, Couser’s brief essay titled “Disability, Life Narration and Representation” (2005) is a valuable resource. The thought-provoking opening lines challenge common attitudes toward disability in our health and wellness-obsessed culture, and can be used to prompt a discussion: “Disability is an inescapable element of human existence and experience. Although it is rarely acknowledged as such, it is also a fundamental aspect of human diversity.” (602) After justifying this statement, the essay efficiently and concisely reviews the literary uses to which disabilities have been put and makes the case for the importance of disability life writing as a means for the disabled to control the image of themselves, assert their agency, and counter the predominant moralizing and pathologizing representations of disability. These qualities speak directly to the project undertaken by the four women who were central to the writing of *Gaby Brimmer*.

Susannah Mintz’s book, *Unruly Bodies* (2007), focuses on life writing by women with disabilities, and the insights that these books give into family dynamics, medical intrusions and structural barriers also resonate with much of the content of the Brimmer autobiography. Perhaps the most illuminating ideas to carry from Mintz’s study to the reading of *Gaby Brimmer* are the assertions that disability life writing has the potential to reject the sentimentalization of disability, refuse the urge to apologize, defy the habit of seeing a person in terms of his or

her disability, reconceptualize disability “as a constitutive but not diminishing feature of identity,” and advance “a notion of disability as a complex social, political, and embodied position from which an individual might legitimately narrate her life experience.” (17) Remarkably for a text produced in the late 1970s, *Gaby Brimmer* exemplifies this potential to subvert hegemonic values and “challenge the troping of disability in able-bodied culture as deviance, helplessness, insufficiency and loss.” (Mintz, 1) Finally, Nancy Mairs’ provocatively titled “On Being a Cripple,” originally published in 1986, is not an academic study of disability life writing, but a stunning performance of the genre in essay form. Mairs’ reflections on living with multiple sclerosis fruitfully accompany the reading of *Gaby Brimmer* by orienting the student new to disability studies to the disability lexicon (for example, the reasoning behind her choice of the highly-charged word “cripple” and her adamant rejection of “differently abled”), and by providing an eloquent testimony to the writer’s experiences of loss and depression, our inevitable interdependence, matters of body image and the refusal to “be” a disease or a condition, among other issues also raised by the Brimmer story.

... disability studies places a positive value on the reality of our human interdependence.

The process of writing *Gaby Brimmer* as revealed in the introduction and in the autobiography itself is a tribute to a central tenet of disability studies: the insight that human beings are fundamentally interdependent and not independent, in spite of the prizing of individual autonomy and independence in many Western societies. While dependence on others for meeting basic needs is usually viewed as a negative attribute that may lead to feelings of humiliation on the part of the one who is in a position of dependency, disability studies places a positive value on the reality of our human interdependence. The attribution of co-authorship of the book to both Brimmer and Poniatowska is one sign of the cooperation and collaboration—that is, the relationship of interdependence—that made the recording of the life story possible. The narrative further highlights interdependence both structurally and thematically. The text is

presented as a montage of fragments “voiced” by the three protagonists: Gaby, Sari, and Florencia (or “Nana”).⁸ One of Poniatowska’s highest achievements as author-editor and co-creator of the autobiography was the decision to juxtapose the three voices as if in a conversation, a conversation that carries the narrative thread from Gaby’s birth to adulthood and that respects the differences and the contradictions as well as the unanimity among three person’s memories and perspectives. Thematically, it is no surprise that the criss-crossing relationships among the three women are a frequent object of discourse, with Gaby acknowledging the frustration caused by her physical dependence on Florencia and also praising the strength of the positive bond between them. The tension inherent in the desire for greater independence placed against the recognition of one’s necessary interdependence is constantly evoked by Gaby’s testimony, and it illustrates a key disability studies and disability rights concern. Gaby’s reliance on assistance for virtually all of her self-care and for communication and mobility may look like an extreme case that has little to do with the experience of the majority of readers. Nevertheless, the reception of her life story informed by disability studies research shows that an anomalous body does not signify a radically different type of human being, an Other to our “normal” selves, but rather it makes fundamental human realities more visible to a wide audience.⁹

I have used the terms autobiography, collaborative autobiography, life writing, and *Bildungsroman* in reference to *Gaby Brimmer*, and some readers also connect the text to the tradition of Spanish-American *testimonio*. Therefore, another fruitful approach to reading beyond the details of “the story,” fascinating though they are, is to use it as a means of discussing genre and the access of non-traditional writing subjects to the production of literature. It is not a conventional autobiography, nor does it exactly fulfill the criteria of Philippe Lejeune’s famous “autobiographical pact” in spite of its telling the life story of its protagonist largely in her own words. At the same time, it is not a classic *Bildungsroman* either, although the focus on Brimmer’s youth, adolescence and young adulthood corresponds to the coming-of-age thematics. It also recalls elements of Spanish-American *testimonio* to the degree that it narrates the life of a member of a marginalized, oppressed minority: the language of the text has a distinct oral quality, and there is a strong political and ethical dimension in its exposure of the barriers

and prejudices that limit the full participation in society of a person with profound physical disabilities. In her “Introduction to the English-language Edition,” Lauri Umansky briefly addresses the hybrid nature of *Gaby Brimmer*, which combines elements of *testimonio*, the epistolary, biography and autobiography. (xvii) Appearing in the same year as the English translation, Susan Antebi’s chapter on the original text and its film version in her book *Carnal Inscriptions* offers the most subtle published analysis to date, and it usefully engages John Beverley’s seminal work on *testimonio*. Antebi confronts challenging issues such as the truth value of the text and the film, the centrality of the body and its representation, Poniatowska’s role in writing the autobiography of another, and the political impact of the book in comparison with the iconic *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. She analyzes these elements in depth, integrating disability studies theory with criticism of *testimonio* in order to advance a complex discussion of intercorporeality in both text and film.

CHALLENGING TRADITIONAL MODELS OF DISABILITY

Historically in Western societies, disability has been constructed in different, but similarly limiting, usually stigmatizing ways that are defined by several predominant and often overlapping paradigms. Colin Barnes, one of the foremost theorists of the British “social model” of disability, offers an overview of some of the traditional models of disability which *Gaby Brimmer* illuminates through its multi-voiced narration. Addressing Britain primarily, but with applications to other Western societies, Barnes’ essay, “A Brief History of Discrimination and Disabled People” starts by discussing the religious model, which conceives of disability as a divine punishment or, less often, a gift and the emergence of the charity model, the responsibility for which passed from Church to State control in the 18th century. Like many scholars, he then focuses his attention in greater detail on the contrast between the medical or deficit model that arose in the 19th century and still predominates today in many places, and the social model.¹⁰ The medical model defines people with disabilities as being defective or deficient in some respect, and it prescribes treatments to bring the individual “patient” up to “norm.” It pathologizes disability and places responsibility on the person with a disability to adapt to society’s expectations through therapies and rehabilitation. In Mexico in the 20th century, the assistance

model, which is informed by the medical paradigm, governed social policy. *Asistencialismo* determines that the proper approach to dealing with the disabled is simply to provide the minimum support (or assistance) required to meet their basic survival needs. Under all of these models society has no obligation—moral, ethical or legal—to construct itself in such a way as to permit the full realization of all persons' abilities and agency. The social model, in contrast to the medical paradigm, locates disability in society's construction of barriers and limitations to the life of people who have a variety of impairments. These barriers take the form of stigmatizing attitudes and architectural features of the built environment that "disable" those with anomalous physical, sensory, intellectual, and psychosocial conditions. Current disability theory acknowledges that real limitations and impairments exist in the body and the mind and that the somatic experience is as central to human life as social factors. Work such as Tobin Siebers's seminal *Disability Theory* (2008) therefore complicates the social model by insisting that disability be seen not as a purely social construction but also as an effect of biological realities.¹¹ More recently, the notion of respecting the equal human and legal rights of people with disabilities and viewing disability as a form of human diversity has begun to be discussed and promoted. Mexico's proposal to the United Nations in 2002 to create the "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" and their subsequent signing of the Convention in 2007, as well as the adoption in 2011 of a national "Ley General para la Inclusión de Personas con Discapacidad" (General law for the inclusion of people with disabilities) are landmarks in the struggle for equal rights and inclusion.

Therefore, when the character Gaby refuses pity and struggles against self-pity, she is resisting the old yet still widespread perception that people with disabilities are suffering, lamentable creatures who need compassion (the charity model). Her eventual decision to stop devoting time and energy to physical rehabilitation and to concentrate on her studies, her intellectual life, and her writing is a rejection of the requirements imposed by the medical/rehabilitation model. In opposition to her mother's fond dream that she would one day be able to walk, Gaby herself realizes that the tremendous effort required to achieve at best a very limited physical mobility would be an effort better spent on learning. In contrast, Sari's thorough-going internalization of the medical model

means that she continually seeks a cure for her daughter and is unable to accept Gaby as she is, as the following passage illustrates: "I never resigned myself to seeing her that way [...] I looked for medicines, doctors, specialists, some kind of cure. I made the rounds of the hospitals, I can tell you that! But Miguel [Gaby's father] simply loved her. I never had that capacity for acceptance; I thought something had to be done, that my daughter couldn't stay that way." (31) The juxtaposition of the two women's voices respects and records the unresolved tension between Sari's attachment to the medical model and her focus on finding a cure, and Gaby's focus on her education. This is a prime example of how the text presents ideas that were both very conventional (the medical model) and well ahead of their time (Gaby's exercise of agency in abandoning the regime of rehabilitation) by narrating the life story of a person who experienced disability through a structure that respects the principle of interdependence. *Gaby Brimmer* provides innumerable examples of the socially constructed obstacles that were imposed on Brimmer in her quest for mobility, access to public spaces, education, experiences of friendship and love, adoption of a child and, in general terms, her exercise of agency. At the same time, nothing in the text suggests that modifications to the built environment such as ramps and elevators would ameliorate all of the consequences of living with physical impairments.

REFLECTING THE STATUS QUO AND BREAKING NEW GROUND

One way in which *Gaby Brimmer* accurately reflects its own time period and reproduces limiting, discriminatory attitudes is in the language employed by all of the four voices: those of Poniatowska and the three main characters of the narrative. In the Spanish original, a number of terms are consistently used that would not be accepted today by anyone promoting the equal worth and human rights of people with disabilities. The English translation preserves that language, rather than substituting less stigmatizing vocabulary, thus communicating the text's cultural context. Words such as "lisiado" (crippled), "normal," "sufrir" or "padecer" (to suffer a disability), "tortura" (torture, to refer to Sari's "martyrdom" as a mother), and "inválido" (connoting the state of being without value) appear without any critical reflection, but rather they are given as the "natural" way to refer to conditions classified as disabilities. Today disability rights activists continue

to combat this kind of discriminatory language, with increasing but far from complete success.¹² By attending critically to the language of *Gaby Brimmer*, readers based in the United States can also increase their awareness of the power of the language that is used in U.S. society and its potential to cause harm.¹³

Finally, the teaching of *Gaby Brimmer* from a disability studies perspective creates an opportunity to examine critically the meaning of human subjectivity and identity—the question of the self. The liberal humanist subject, a legacy of the Enlightenment, remains an influential ideal, a concept that is largely taken for granted even after more than a century of philosophical, linguistic and psychoanalytic challenges. The humanist model privileges the mind over the body and posits the existence of a stable, coherent, able-bodied self who is autonomous, rational, self-sufficient, and free to exercise his or her individual agency. To be fully human is to realize these characteristics and to exist separated by clear boundaries from the surrounding environment and its technologies and diverse life forms. The reconceptualization of traditional notions of disability that is facilitated by a text such as *Gaby Brimmer*, also leads to a questioning of the ideal humanist subject. Disability studies asserts that rather than wholeness and independence, the human condition is fundamentally marked by limitations, imperfection, vulnerability, contingency, the centrality of the somatic, interdependence among ourselves and a dependence on prosthetic devices that erases the human-machine boundary. Couser observes that bodily dysfunction, whether due to illness or disability, heightens our awareness of our own fragility and contingency (*Recovering*, 5), and disability life writing often displays an exercise of agency realized in collaboration with others and not in splendid isolation. (“Disability”, 114-15) Lennard Davis’ study of the history of the concept of normalcy and disability studies’ challenge to its hegemony, leads him to the conclusion that difference is what we all have in common, anomaly and limitation are the rule, and “normalcy” and the striving for perfection are the fantasy.

The thematics, the language, and the narrative structure of *Gaby Brimmer* stimulate consideration of these challenging ideas, and contribute to a necessary questioning of the prevailing ideology of ableism and each one’s relationship to it. For example, the centrality of the wheelchair, the alphabet board and the typewriter which make mobility and communication possible remind us

that we all depend on technological prostheses to extend our capabilities and expand our reach into the world. One person is no more “confined” to a wheelchair or defined by it, than another is confined to his or her shoes or car or personal computer. These are all prostheses that make it possible to access the world in expanded ways. This is not to say that it isn’t often easier to navigate the world by walking in one’s own shoes or driving one’s car, nor is it to deny the biological reality of the body and the mind, and the added limitations created by a variety of physical and cognitive conditions. It does, however, suggest that the basis for the predominant preference for “ability” (ableism) and the stigmatizing of those who utilize what we commonly identify as “prosthetic devices” is flimsy and even delusional.

I have already mentioned the complex portrayal of the relationship of interdependence among Gaby, Sari, and Florencia, as well as the necessary role of Elena Poniatowska in crafting and publishing the life story. The “autobiography in three voices” enacts the high degree to which the story of the self is a story lived and told in relationship with others. Another element in this interrelationship is the importance of the gaze of the other in constructing each person’s sense of self. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has studied the impact of the other’s gaze on persons with disabilities, showing how they are often the objects of curiosity, evasion, fear, and outright hostility, rather than respect and affirmation. *Gaby Brimmer* tells of many such instances when Gaby was seen as radically other and not as fully human, or when people turned away from contact with her, and it recalls Sari’s and Florencia’s efforts to protect her from these aggressive, dismissive gazes. The book also shows that such protection is a double-edged sword for the disabled, as it made it difficult for Gaby to make friends among her peers and fulfill her need for companionship. Finally, Gaby’s perspective, gained through the experience of living with particularly severe physical limitations, enables her to see the impairments and the weakness in those around her; those who might appear to be “normal” (able-bodied and neurotypical).

In closing, it is important to remember that the rich and still very up-to-date insights that can be gained from reading *Gaby Brimmer* from a disability studies perspective are all the more remarkable when considered in the context of Mexican society in the 1970s. The text exposes and critiques the harsh regime of stigmatization

and exclusion to which people with disabilities continue to be subjected, and it challenges its readers, whether they identify as able-bodied and neurotypical or as living with a disability, to grapple with the profound implications of understanding disability (or what is currently labeled “disability”) as a form of human diversity and part of the continuum of imperfection, incompleteness, vulnerability, and dependence that defines our common humanity.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The “Afterword,” written by Avital Bloch for the English translation, provides an excellent overview of Brimmer’s activism in defense of the rights of persons with disabilities, and especially her founding of the organization ADEPAM (Asociación para los Derechos de Personas con Alteraciones Motoras).
- 2 All textual quotations from the *Brimmer’s* Poniatowska text are taken from the English translation by Trudy Balch.
- 3 Numerous organizations to provide services to and advocate for persons with disabilities arose in the 1980s in Mexico. The nascent, more politically-oriented disability rights movement held its first national demonstration, the “Marcha de la Amistad” (friendship march) in February 1994. (Bloch, “Afterword,” 174)
- 4 There is a debate among disability studies scholars and activists over the use of the terms “people with disabilities” or “disabled people.” “People-first” language was initially favored as a means of emphasizing the person before the diagnosis, and it was seen by many as a positive step toward overcoming old stereotypes. More recently, the term “disabled people” has been revived in a move to claim disability as a positive and integral attribute of a person’s identity and resist seeing the disability as an incidental “add on.” Seeing merit in both arguments, and also in recognition of the virtually unanimous use in American Spanish of the term “persona/s con discapacidad,” I tend to alternate between the two terms.
- 5 In his book *Aesthetic Nervousness*, Ato Quayson establishes nine categories of traditional literary representations of disability. These include disability as a moral test, as an interface with otherness, and as a bearer of moral deficit (see pages 31-53). Significantly, he distinguishes disability life writing from fictional accounts, stating the biography and autobiography do not engage aesthetic nervousness.
- 6 The chapter titled “Updating the Epistolary Canon” in Claudia Schaefer’s book *Textured Lives* (1992) views both *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela* and *Gaby Brimmer* as conservative texts produced by Poniatowska in reaction to the radical politics of the late 1960s and as a sign of the accommodation with the government made by Mexican intellectuals during the Echeverría regime (1970-76) and into the López Portillo presidency (1961-62). Her analysis, which does not take into account the disability studies theory that was just emerging at the time of her research, demonstrates what might be missed when reading such a text outside of the context of disability life writing.
- 7 A few examples of well-known disability and illness life writing in English of the past twenty years are Lucy Greely’s *Autobiography of a Face*; Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted*, Oliver Sacks’s *A Leg to Stand On*, William Styron’s *Darkness Visible*, and Audre Lorde’s *Cancer Journals*.
- 8 When referring to the historical person, I will use her full name, Gabriela Brimmer, or her surname. When referring to the subject of the autobiography, that is to the textual representation of Gabriela Brimmer, I will use her nickname, Gaby. I believe that it is crucial to model for our students a distinction between “real” living human beings and their textual counterparts, no matter how conventionally autobiographical a text may be; and I further believe that we must resist the tendency, less prominent than before but still seen today, to refer to women writers or women historical figures by their first names (think: Rosario, Elena, Rigoberta) in contrast to the common usage of last names for men (Borges, Fuentes, Montejo).
- 9 The concept of normalcy is one that disability studies has thoroughly interrogated and deconstructed. The pioneering work of Lennard Davis is a good starting point for encouraging students to question their own use of this contested term. His book, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*, is a fundamental source, but for students I would recommend his essay “Constructing Normalcy,” included in *The Disability Studies Reader*. The entire Reader is a highly useful anthology with a comprehensive selection of field-defining work.
- 10 The article “Disability: Definitions, Models, Experience” from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available online, also brings together a wealth of information that

can assist students in defining disability terminology and discerning attitudes expressed in *Gaby Brimmer*. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/disability>>

- ¹¹ In his “Introduction” to *Disability Theory*, Siebers recognizes that apart from the barriers created by society, some conditions are inherently painful or particularly limiting in ways that have a significant negative impact on the individual and cannot be fully ameliorated through changes in the built environment or cultural attitudes.
- ¹² In June 2011, I received a draft of a forthcoming publication by Marité Fernández, then with the Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Distrito Federal, which compared discriminatory language with preferred terminology regarding disabilities. The examples that I have cited from *Gaby Brimmer* are all identified in this document.
- ¹³ I recommend the article “Reassigning Meaning” by Simi Linton for helping students to think about the ways in which many of our linguistic conventions assign negative meanings to disability. It also defines the term “ableism” (223).

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