



## Elena Poniatowska Finds Her Place: From Polish Princess to Re-creator of the Voice and Champion of the Mexican Oppressed

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**Abstract:** In this paper, we analyze the five strongest works of Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska: *Hasta no verte*, *Jesús mío*, *La noche de Tlatelolco*, *Fuerte es el silencio*, and *Nada, nadie*. This Polish-descendant journalism has played a major role in the development and maturing of literary journalism in Mexico and had, in her books, conveyed an Oral History of the poor people of Mexico, among earthquakes, political repression and the nefarious consequences of the misuse of science and technology.

**Keywords:** Literary Journalism; Mexican Journalism; Crónica; Elena Poniatowska; Oral History.

### 1. Introduction

For some Latin American literary journalists, Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska is the mother and grandmother of us all. Coming from a world of white European education and wealth, Poniatowska's outsider status gave her the ability to understand, listen to, and recreate the lives and voices of the Mexican poor. In this essay I wish to spotlight Poniatowska's four strongest works of literary journalism, the ones that show how this privileged stranger translated a deep respect for the poor into a lengthy career of indignation raging at the injustices in the country of her choice.

The two greatest Mexican writers of the twentieth century, Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes, have highlighted features of Poniatowska's writing that have changed the course of journalism and literature in her country. According to Fuentes, "[H]er portraits of famous or infamous, brilliant or anonymous women, have gradually created a great

biographical gallery of the feminine being. Like almost no other writer, she has contributed to giving women a role, central, yet not sacramental, in our society.” (FUENTES, 2003). The 1990 Nobel Prize winner Paz stressed in an interview that Poniatowska “has transformed herself into a literary character. She achieves a musicality that carries you away, that winged and true feature, that poetry we find in her language.” (SCHUESSLER, 2003).

She was born in Paris in 1932 and baptized as Hélène Elizabeth Louise Amélie Paula Dolores Poniatowska Amor, daughter of a Polish prince. When she was ten, Poniatowska was sent to study at an elite school in the US, and returned to her family in Mexico in her teens. There, she quickly joined the left-wing intellectual movement and started writing for newspapers in the early fifties, regardless of the fact that she had no formal education in Spanish.

Since then, she has published more than forty books, mainly literary journalism and novels that closely follow following closely true lives and factual incidents. All are deeply Mexican in content, substance, language and viewpoint. Her prose reflects the vibrant popular culture and the rich vocabulary of her adopted land. Her writing focuses on the main political issues of her day (the memory of the Mexican revolution, the plight of poor women, the massacre of students in 1968, the devastating earthquake of 1985). This infuses her books with a sense of urgency that has made many of them both timely and perennial.

## **2. Finding Her Place: Mexico on Sundays**

According to biographer Michael K. Schuessler (2003), the beginning of Poniatowska’s career was similar to that of other female journalists in the fifties, that is, not promising at all. A well-bred girl with contacts, she had returned to Mexico from Eden Hall, a posh religious high school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, only to discover that her father had no money to pay her a university career. She was nineteen years old, and decided to look for a job. “A friend from Eden Hall, María de Lourdes Correa, told me her uncle was the director of the ‘*sociales*’ section (a common Latin American report on the comings and goings of the rich and famous] at the newspaper *Excélsior* and went with

me to tell him I wanted to be a journalist,” she told her biographer. She was assigned to produce an interview, and when she accompanied her mother to a cocktail party, Poniatowska found her prey: the new US ambassador was present at the soiree, and she requested an interview with him. “Good child, good child, let her come to my office tomorrow,” was the reply, as Poniatowska told Schuessler half a century later. During that first interview she discovered, as she later told Schuessler, that her youth, gender, tiny frame and permanent smile made powerful sources feel at ease, not the least threatened. She was thus able to ask hard questions and get candid answers.

Poniatowska did not stay long on the *sociales* beat, and soon started interviewing writers, actors, film directors, painters, presidents, and tycoons. During the following three decades, she published interviews with the likes of Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz and surrealist Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel. Her collected interviews were published in eight volumes under the name *Todo México [All Mexico]* (PONIATOWSKA, 1999), and historians now consider them a formidable gateway to those who shaped the country in the twentieth century.

In the early sixties, Poniatowska suggested to the famous vignette artist Alberto Beltrán that they begin a series of stories and drawings about what the working classes did on leisure days. Her colleagues found the idea absurdly trivial, yet Poniatowska’s observations—her keen eye for finding convincing characters, her ability to pinpoint defining scenes, and the way she captured revealing conversation—created a new genre which was in fine blend with Beltrán’s funny, precise, and artful work. As Schuessler’s book discovers, later Beltrán expressed surprise and criticism for Poniatowska’s growing status as a poetic-prose journalist who gave a voice to the poor. Their joint book is called *Todo empezó un domingo [It All Started on a Sunday]* (PONIATOWSKA & BELTRÁN, 2000). Beltrán remembered her as a rich kid looking at the entertainments of the poor with surprise, while he depicted himself as a working-class intellectual who related to them as one who came from his own background (SCHUESSLER, 2003). Yet that is exactly why she could achieve such an advanced intellectual, artistic and moral stance.

When anthropologist Oscar Lewis was writing his seminal work, *The Children of Sánchez* (LEWIS, 1961), and social scientists were discovering, reporting, and analyzing the terrible conditions of the Mexican poor, Poniatowska started a life-long project that

focused on descriptions of everyday activities. She chose to allow the poor to tell their stories and reflect on their lives in their own words. She highlighted their suffering, but also their dignity and fierce joy. She noted their stubborn optimism and undeniable common sense, along with a clear sense of justice. She showed their elegance with words, which had come from old Spanish sources and indigenous languages. Of course, not all the Mexican downtrodden expressed themselves to the same degree, but early on in her career Poniatowska started to look for those representatives of the oppressed classes who were able to tell the stories that she felt the whole country, and especially her own class, needed to know.

### **3. Josefina/Jesusa: Her Virgil**

In the mid-sixties, Poniatowska found the character that would secure her place in the Latin American literary canon. As Susana Rotker (2005) and Pablo Calvi (2010) state in their analyses of twentieth-century Latin American literary journalism between the years 1950–80, the *testimonio*—a nonfiction storytelling strategy in which a character representing either an activist or a victim tells his or her life story—became an important genre. The goal was for the public to identify strongly with this character and, ultimately, acquire the point of view of the protagonist. This arc of this first-person narrative also brought suspense and mystery, as the narrator told the story as if not knowing what would happen next. Latin American works of *testimonio*, such as Gabriel García Márquez’s *Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* (1970), Miguel Barnet’s *Biography of an Escaped Slave* (1966), and Roque Dalton’s *Miguel Mármol* (1971), exemplify the power of this approach.

Poniatowska’s contribution to this genre was to find a desperately poor informal worker, Josefina, and record hundreds of hours of conversation with her. Josefina then became the immortal character Jesusa Palancares in *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* (PONIATOWSKA, 1969).

Jesusa was born at the turn of the century. In her teens, she married a violent boaster who fought in Mexico’s Revolutionary War in the decade of 1910, and followed him and the troops for years, cooking for them, transporting war equipment, and even

fighting the enemy. Finally, her husband was killed and she was sent back home. With no home to go to and no money, she traveled to Mexico City, where the few property items she had were stolen. Hence began her years of menial jobs in private homes, factories, and stores. Sometimes she earned a miserable wage; sometimes not even that. She slept in dirty corners and in doorsteps until she managed to hire a room where she also brought an orphan who ended up taking away the little money she managed to save. In the middle of her tragic fight for survival, Jesusa found a sect that promised her direct communication with the dead, and she followed their absurd rules faithfully. As a reward, she managed to make peace with her dead father, but had no such luck with her husband.

The story is heartbreaking, but the verbal bravado and the storytelling mastery, through the combined effort of Jesusa and Poniatowska, transformed the book into a classic of Mexican literature. Moreover, Jesusa became a protagonist that belonged in the company of the great *pícaros* (cunning go-getters), which has had a long tradition in the Spanish language, dating back to Cervantes. *Here's to you, Jesusa!* (1969) introduced the *mestizo*—the hardworking, uneducated woman who was at the core of Mexican society but absent in its literature as a recognizable voice. She was the million-faced character who had a lot to protest against but who usually kept silent. Even today, Jesusa's story, and her way of telling it, sounds relevant, true, dramatic, and funny.

#### **4. A Political Awakening: The Tlatelolco Massacre**

In October 8, 1968, the Mexican army and the national police savagely repressed a peaceful demonstration of students and workers at the central Tlatelolco plaza in Mexico City. The city was organizing the Olympic Games, which were set to start in a few weeks, and the government of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz decided not to let the protest grow. He needed to show the world a safe city, the achievements of modernization, and an obedient population with no dissenting voices. Even today, the narrative of *La noche de Tlatelolco* (PONIATOWSKA, 1971) rings with a universal voice. For months, Poniatowska visited the demonstrators detained at the Lecumberri prison, and collected documents, police orders, newspaper stories, and mimeographed pamphlets. Her allows her own voice to

disappear. It is replaced by the testimonies of hundreds of victims, witnesses, and their families, in a vibrant example of oral history.

*La noche de Tlatelolco* includes the voices of university professors, students, workers, union leaders, bureaucrats, housewives, lawyers, foreign journalists, and observers. Some speak several times (and for long stretches) about the preparation, the demonstration, the massacre, and the jailing. Such are the cases of Buho and Nacha, two outspoken student leaders who found their mission and courage as the drama unfolded. However, their long narratives are combined with short, expressive outbursts. An especially noteworthy collective source is the parents of the protesters. They feel their children are escaping their control and getting involved in dangerous activities, and express fear, frustration, admiration, love, and devastation at what has happened to them. At the same time, they are forced to review and change the way they have always looked at the PRI, the government and establishment in the middle of its seventy-year grip on Mexican politics.

Poniatowska shows how the young female demonstrators change and grow as the protest develops. Two female demonstrators, a mathematics student and an actress, discover that they are wanted by many of their male companions as supporters and helpers but not as decision-makers, and they start to rethink who they are and what they want. The book shows how the clash at Tlatelolco mixes political, social, class, gender, and identity issues into a multidimensional whole. As a result, the progressive intellectual elite in Latin America saw Tlatelolco as “our” 1968 revolt, as important and symbolic as the revolts of Paris or Prague.

## **5. The Poetic Voice of a ‘Chronicler’: Angels and Warriors**

*La noche de Tlatelolco* transformed Poniatowska into one of the most important voices in the national discourse, and solidified the central themes of her work: the Mexican identity, and the plight and fight of the oppressed. She successfully created a voice of the people, in style, vocabulary, rhythm, and meaning. When the characters in Poniatowska’s nonfiction speak, they sound true but, at the same time, the reader cannot help but notice the careful textual construction.

Poniatowska's next important book combined various stories and deepened and expand her tools. In *Fuerte es el silencio* [*Strong Is Silence*; no English translation], Poniatowska's own narrative voice appears as in no other of her books, combining poetic prose and reportage. The first story, "Angels in the City," describes the lives and shattered dreams of the urban poor, especially street children and indigenous housemaids. Poniatowska calls them angels, but the quality of her writing, the verbal precision of her quotes, and the specificity of her descriptions never allow all this angel talk to become kitsch or sentimental.

Sometimes a newborn dies and the survivors quickly transform him into an angel. When the people are sure there is not a single wheeze in him, they place him on a table surrounded by *cempasúchiles* [a Mexican yellow flower used during the Day of the Dead] they wrap him up with China paper and glue a star on his forehead. Nobody cries, so as not deprive him of his glory. On the contrary, the women bring their kids and say: "Look at him because he is a little angel, let's see if some of it sticks to you"; and they comfort the mother: "It's great he died so young, so now he's in Heaven!" (PONIATOWSKA, 1980, p.16-17)

Some of the stories are specific, about one person or a small group, like child street vendors in one corner or landless peasants who occupy one plot of land. But most of the descriptions refer to many: the births, lives, and deaths of the Mexican poor. Poniatowska has obviously seen hundreds of child burials, distills their essential features, and elevates them to the realm of poetic prose.

The last story in the book is a masterful epic in miniature of a group of landless poor in Cuernavaca who take a patch of uncultivated land and start building a rustic settlement, Colonia Rubén Jaramillo. Its hero is a local leader, "Güero" Medrano, a charismatic, humane, incorruptible dreamer. Poniatowska's writing gets tighter, her investigation more precise, and her capacity to draw general conclusions from specific incidents more developed. But one thing remains unchanged: as a practitioner of what in Latin America is called *crónica*, her narrative always remains strictly chronological. In Poniatowska's hands, language is malleable but time is sacred. For her readers, that aspect certifies that she is still in the land of journalism and true events, and that there is an unshakeable and reliable map to read stories that become more complex and sophisticated with every new book.

However, there is another reason, a political or ideological reason, for this development: as a dedicated member of Latin America’s left-wing democratic intelligentsia, Poniatowska believes in the progress of humanity and the spiritual and material development of her country. Everything moves forward in her stories because she chooses as characters individuals and groups that become aware of their fate and change their reality. Furthermore, all her books are invitations for the reader to grow, understand, and change, and to become aware and act in consequence—just like the characters and voices she brings to our attention.

## 6. Constructing Oral History: The 1985 Earthquake

In the early morning of September 19, 1985, a devastating earthquake struck Mexico City, then and now one of the most populated and chaotic megalopolises on the planet. Nature struck, but most of the thousands of deaths (official figures were never released, a symbol of the criminally inefficient political system) occurred because of human corruption and mendacity. From the moment the earth stopped shaking, Poniatowska started covering the tragedy for the left-wing newspaper *La Jornada*. The book that resulted from her coverage, *Nada, nadie* [*Nothing, Nobody*] (PONIATOWSKA, 1988), has the urgent feel of a collection of reports written as the story unfolded. Unlike *La noche de Tlatelolco*, her work as a journalist was not subject to censorship, so she created a dialogue with her readers, responded to the official answers to her accusations, and interviewed experts, volunteers, and witnesses who wanted to contribute to a work-in-progress. The process lasted for almost a year.

Working like a newspaper reporter, Poniatowska managed to use all the tools she had mastered during her four decades of literary journalism. The most striking example of this is on page thirty-five of *Nada, nadie*. She is describing one of her sources, Alonso Solano González, an indigenous teacher from Guerrero, who arrives at the Education Ministry office where he works to find it flattened and surrounded by dust. All of his colleagues and friends are either dead or trapped under ruins. “Alonso Solano González is a pretty man, not because he is pretty but because his words ring with a deep, sonorous music, like bells,” she writes. “He is strong and small, *xocoyotito* [an old indigenous



word for the smallest child in a large family], as Jesusa Palancares would say.” (PONIATOWSKA, 1988, p.35). I was surprised to find this precise peasant word describing the earthquake survivor; and then Poniatowska says that these are the words that the protagonist of her previous book, *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío*, would use. There is no trace of arrogance in the author, as she knows readers will recognize Jesusa, her memorable creation.

In *Nada, nadie*, dozens of victims, volunteers, and relatives speak through Poniatowska’s created voice—the voice of Mexico. They tell the story of their sudden tragedy, their mourning, and their struggle. Just like the law-abiding citizens in *La noche de Tlatelolco*—who discover the government they believe in has massacred their children—the poor citizens in *Nada, nadie* found a way to scrape by in a cruel city only to discover their buildings have been constructed with low-quality materials. Corrupt politicians and constructors stole the money that could have saved most of the buildings and the lives trapped inside them. Moreover, a combination of corruption, arrogance, and stupidity forced volunteers away from the rescue operation in the vital hours when hundreds of lives could have been saved. When the Army took over, the expert rescue troops that had been sent by France or Israel were kept away. Mexico could take care of its own earthquakes, said Miguel de Lamadrid, the pompous and vain president.

And the soldiers did nothing. Desperate relatives, eager to clear stones from holes where loved ones might be trapped, were driven away as if criminals. In one of the book’s saddest scenes, an old widower runs after an Army officer absconding with a box of jewels found in the man’s demolished flat. The box contains valuable rings, necklaces and brooches the widower has given as presents to his wife of forty years on each wedding anniversary. When cornered, the officer says he must take the jewels to the regiment. The widower then goes daily to the regiment door, where a bureaucrat informs him that he must fill out a form and wait. This prolonged Kafkaesque battle is a way for the man to cling to the last bit of hope he has in his forsaken life. (PONIATOWSKA, 1988, 124-130)

Like Poniatowska’s previous books, *Nada, nadie* is an example of oral history, a recreation of voices, and a narrative of the struggle and the fury of the weak. But it also includes a new feature: science and technology come to the service of her arguments. She interviews experts in architecture, engineering, city planning, geology, and economy. These learned voices drive the text to a powerful, convincing conclusion: that most of the

victims died not because of the earthquake, but because the buildings were constructed with poor material and sloppy methods. Cheap buildings means corrupt money funneled to the pockets of construction tycoons and politicians.

This book brings voices of Mexican scientists, technicians, and other experts who want to introduce scientific rationality to mend a Third-World nation. The plight of scientists and researchers is a common theme in the US narrative nonfiction. Examples of this include Trady Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003) and *The Soul of a New Machine* (1981), Richard Rhodes's *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (1986), Sylvia Nasar's *A Beautiful Mind* (1998), and John McPhee's *The Control of Nature* (1989). However, in Latin America it is unusual, and nobody has travelled down this path with the persistence and eloquence of Poniatowska.

## **7. The Novels, the Builders of the Nation and the Female Perspective**

Into the second decade of the twenty-first century, Poniatowska's three main issues are still the tragedy of the oppressed and misunderstood, the feminist viewpoint, and oral history, most specifically: the exact yet poetic representation of the popular classes through the form and content of their way of speaking. But she has also included a new theme: the struggles of innovators and scientists in her beloved developing country of choice. This she has done in two books about astronomy and Mexican astronomers: the novel *La piel del cielo* [*The Skin of the Sky*] (PONIATOWSKA, 2001) and the nonfiction narrative, *El universo o nada* [*The Universe or Nothing*] (PONIATOWSKA, 2013) which portrays Poniatowska's late husband, the astronomer Guillermo Haro, as a stubborn, difficult scientific leader, a boss, and a father. Both books show the hardships and joys of attempting high-level science in a country mired in bureaucracy, corruption, and slim prospects of success.

Poniatowska has also written "novelized" biographies of two free, powerful, and fascinating women, the surrealist painter Leonora Carrington (*Leonora*) (PONIATOWSKA, 2011) and the communist photographer Tina Modotti (*Tinísima*) (PONIATOWSKA, 1992). Both artists were involved in international artistic and political

movements, but Mexico was their base they used to try to change the world. Another of Poniatowska's books of the twenty-first century, *El tren pasa primero* (The Train Comes First) (PONIATOWSKA, 2007) is a novel closely based on the life of the railway workers' union leader Demetrio Vallejo. As she had constructed with Josefina/Jesusa, she changed his name [to Trinidad Pineda Chiñas] but retained the narrative of his life and recreated his voice.

There are many sides to Poniatowska. In Mexico there are more opinions about her strong political views than about her books. Feminist circles highlight her role as writer about (and from the viewpoint of) the female psychological universe. In the other countries of Latin America, her oral histories and first-person narrative *testimonios* are both studied at universities and avidly read in the newsrooms.

Outside the Spanish-speaking world, the knowledge of her output is limited. Some of her novels, like *Leonora* and *Tinísima*, have achieved some success in English, French, and Italian. But her literary journalism has been largely restricted to the academic world. In US universities, two fields have shared the study of her oeuvre: gender studies and Latin American societies (with numerous theses and conference papers focusing on the female subject in *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío*), and oral history and Latin American literature (mostly centered on *La noche de Tlatelolco*). Examples of the importance of Poniatowska's work in books about both fields are Beth Jörgensen's *The Writing of Elena Poniatowka: Engaging Dialogues* (JÖRGENSEN, 1994), Jean Franco's *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (FRANCO, 1989), Amy Kaminsky's *Reading the Body Politic: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers* (KAMINSKY, 1993), and Raymond Leslie Williams' *The Postmodern Novel in Latin America: Politics, Culture and the Crisis of Truth* (WILLIAMS, 1995).

Meanwhile, Poniatowska keeps working and receiving honors. In April 2014 she was handed the most prestigious literary honor in Spanish, the Cervantes Prize, from King Juan Carlos. There she described herself not as the Don Quijote many of her readers consider her, but as a humble Sancho Panza, and promised to continue writing about the Mexican poor. At the ceremony, she wore a ceremonial *sarape*, a delicately embroidered and colorful indigenous dress. It reminded me of a similar dress she wore when she received her Cabot Prize for Latin American Journalism at Columbia University in 2004.

For those of us who were there, the scene was unforgettable: in perfect high-class English, smiling widely and standing tall even if she had to bring the microphone down to her 1.57-meter (five-foot-five) height, she vehemently spoke in the name of the silenced Mexican poor. It was clear she had definitely found her place.

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