Documenting the Earthquake of 1985 in Mexico City

Introduction:
Elena Poniatowska, Task and Commitment

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Elena Poniatowska defines herself as a journalist, recognizing in journalism the starting point, stimulus, and motive force behind her work as a writer. Yet in the fecund and uninterrupted stream of work that has made her one of Mexico's most eminent authors, one sees much more than the mere business of a journalist: creativity and commitment are, without doubt, the elements that have defined and delimited her task.

These elements, in turn, are grounded in a search for roots and identity especially complex because of the remarkable ambiguity of her background. She was born in Paris in 1933, the daughter of a French prince of Polish origin and a Mexican woman, one of those privileged exiles who had "left the country during the Revolu-
tion, whose properties were confiscated, reactionary Mexicans, very foreign-like.

Brought back to Mexico as a child, Elena was sent to elite schools where she learned English, not Spanish. The latter language, in fact, the language in which all her works would be published, came to her gradually and very late, via the servants and the common people whom little by little she began to discover, to draw and shape in her imagination out of an enormous need to understand. Later, it is among these people that Elena would locate almost every one of her heroes or heroines.

She began her career in journalism, focusing initially on interviews with people connected to the worlds of politics and culture, in which she turned assumptions about a young female reporter’s innocence, charm, and fragility to powerful advantage: her subjects would be surprised as tough questions abruptly turned pleasant conversation into an unexpected interrogation, with candid answers the almost unavoidable result.

Step by step, she forged a style marked by a splendid ability to capture the significant fact, and to build images by the accumulation of carefully chosen small details and observations. Gradually, too, candor and technique deepened to maturity, to writing at once more introspective and politically grounded. Her vision came to serve, in the words of the distinguished writer Carlos Monsivais, as both “an excellent vehicle of transmission and as a creator of experiences and attitudes”; the partly autobiographic title character of her first novel, Lilus Kikus, sees “reality as from a swing, or like a window display, or a trip to the center of the mirror.”

After several years honing her skills, typing out and carefully constructing the interview mosaics that so many readers awaited weekly in periodicals like Novedades and Excelsior, in 1969 Elena published the remarkable documentary novel Hasta no verte, Jesus mio, which a year later won the coveted Mazatlán Prize. This work revealed her maturity, and more, the woman in her writing and vision.

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2 Carlos Monsivais, “Everything is the Same in the Studyroom,” La Cultura en Mexico, Suplemento Cultural de Siempre, Mexico, July 12, 1978.
The book is an extraordinary effort that recounts the life of Jesusa Palancares, a humble maid from Oaxaca who embodies the centuries of courage of so many Mexican women, as she struggles and resigns herself, suffers and fights and is carried away by the effort to find an ultimate sense to her existence. Elena listened and made the effort to understand, giving us Jesusa's untiresome self-portrait of a woman who peers into her own identity, using memories to try to understand the meaning of her own life. Elena conveys this life in all its everyday routine, and all its subjective complexity, using parts of conversations, direct observations, and reflections from her own living and sharing. In this magnificent work of imagination, empathy, and oral history, a colloquial way of speaking is recorded and preserved, as well as a popular culture grounded in that very particular mixture of races that is the inheritance of all Mexicans. As masterfully interwoven by Poniatowska, this legacy defends a certain nostalgia about the past while denouncing an unjust social present.

This work was followed by *La Noche de Tlatelolco*, published in English as *Massacre in Mexico* (New York: Viking, 1975), an effort of testimonial rescue, preserving narratives of the 1968 student movement that culminated in the horrific massacre in the Plaza de Tlatelolco. The book brings everything together: the interviewer's technique, the journalist's skill, the witness's anguish and courage, and a deeply legitimate desire as a Mexican, a woman, and a mother, to recover the memory and meaning of what had happened. To this end, Elena spoke with hundreds, from every vantage; she visited hospitals, prisons, and collected countless versions of the story, together with pamphlets, leaflets, and propaganda. All were woven together to give us a literally monumental book.

There is an almost overwhelmingly modest and sincerely self-effacing quality in Elena's work; much of her empathy is grounded in an awareness of the contradictions of her own social position and background. If it is indeed true that class origin need not determine class position, the most orthodox and doctrinaire Marxists notwithstanding, Poniatowska shows why: she deprives herself of protective vestments, and strips away pretense and fantasy. Involving herself in the problems of her subjects, she commits herself and binds the reader to this commitment. Reading *La Noche de Tlatelolco* touches us deeply, forcing a restatement of values in the face of an ultimate truth.
Elsewhere Elena has broken into the field of history proper, almost without intending to. Her epistolary novel, *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela*, is an imaginative reconstruction of Angelina Belof, the first wife of the artist Diego Rivera. A deep need to understand our heritage drove Elena to try to understand this almost legendary woman, who came to live for a long-anticipated reunion with the painter, a hope abruptly destroyed when she finally encounters Rivera in Mexico at the Palacio de Bellas Artes and he fails to recognize her.

In such writing and indeed in her work generally, I think Elena's literature could only have been written by a woman. Without being explicitly feminist, her work compels a kind of collective reflection grounded in woman's experience, in feelings, passions, and sensibility uniquely under a woman's skin. This has helped her recover characters without history, who in her narratives acquire new dimensions and an undisputed grandeur, born from the eager determination with which she sketches her portraits.

Her interest in the helpless and struggling has expressed itself in many ways. Some characters seem to lead her to an almost cathartic process of reflection, and it is almost as if others have been waiting patiently to have their biographies told. Sometimes she acknowledges that she doesn't understand her characters as, in their own flesh and bone, they confront the present. At other times those very "lives of useless hunger and suffering" manifest a compelling strength, seeming to take her by the hand, sit her in front of her typewriter, and force her to record and mold them for the reader.

It is in all these senses that in 1968 Elena found herself immersed in the student movement, and that once more, in 1985, the earthquake catastrophe that so physically and emotionally devastated Mexico City's inhabitants became a compelling matter for her. She sprang into action at once, declaring in her actions and writing her solidarity with the earthquake victims. She particularly identified with and became deeply involved in the organization of seamstresses who in a few moments had seen their workplaces literally smashed, their livelihoods, tools, and many of their workmates destroyed. To a great extent, it was the activity and commitment of this little "French-Mexican princess", embarrassed at having what others needed, which helped these women to become aware of the need to struggle, to define their demands, and to make
themselves heard.

The earthquake documentary that follows expresses the qualities that have distinguished Elena Poniatowska's work throughout. In it, a committed writer gathers and rescues the voices of the "voiceless". The voices of anonymous suffering, of those without a history, contribute their individuality to the need to give shape and meaning to experience of a society as a whole. For Elena, common people remain the legitimate, central actors of Mexican history, and her writings, whether interview, oral history documentary, or novel, are but a means for permitting them to speak.

Beyond this, she understands the complexity of hearing, comprehending, and transmitting the meaning of their words. Perhaps this explains the intensity with which she advocates the active use, even the transformation of historical materials in her novels and mosaic documentaries, "so that people will go to history, so that they will read history. I believe that novels can be open doors that can lead people to history, to know what on earth we are and what on earth our country is."

Impelled by a sense of both obligation and commitment, Elena Poniatowska, winner of the National Prize for Journalism, continues to help the people of Mexico elucidate who we are and what we want.

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Flores, "Interview with Poniatowska".