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Elena Poniatowska: Then, Now and Forever

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Abstract: Elena Poniatowska’s extraordinary literary output and her delightful personality justly merit her position as Mexico’s most dearly loved and highly respected author. I consider myself truly fortunate to have had the luxury of intensively studying her writings during the process of my doctoral dissertation. In this essay, I recall my introduction to Poniatowska’s work, her impact on my postgraduate studies, and how I, as a historian, employ her testimonial literature in my classes and the teaching of undergraduate students in the United Kingdom.

I first became aware of Elena Poniatowska’s work when I was an undergraduate student in Comparative American Studies at the University of Warwick, UK. We were asked to read one of her short stories, “The Night Visitor.” Its ending line, “Effective suffrage, no re-election,” seemed rather incongruous and intrigued me. In fact, in this fictional story, Poniatowska was providing a political signpost for her more enlightened readers (a statement based in the rhetoric of the Mexican Revolution of 1910). This phrase would haunt me time and time again when working with official documents in the Mexican archives, and the strength of Poniatowska’s subtlety in this short story would become ever-present in my analysis of her prose.

Poniatowska’s attachment and commitment to matters of political importance was a crucial element of my postgraduate studies. I had been eager to study “something about Mexico” and the solution came in August 1994 in an article in the UK Financial Times that mentioned Elena Poniatowska attending the Zapatistas’ Convención Nacional Democrática in the Lacandón Forest of Chiapas. Surprised by her presence there, I began to investigate. Studying her work in more detail revealed the tremendous wealth of her writing about significant events of political and social importance: specifically, the 1968 Student Movement, the victims of the terrible earthquake of September 1985, and her work to foster and sustain public awareness of the plight of the indigenous peasants of Chiapas since January 1994. Her incredible contribution provided more than sufficient material for my dissertation.

It has been said that one of Poniatowska’s many attributes is her natural ability to put people at ease. For example, Beth Jörgensen draws attention to Poniatowska’s “tremendous capacity for engaging people in dialogue, […] especially people with whom she has little in common.” This was certainly the case when I, as a terrified tongue-tied postgraduate student from England, arrived at her door in Mexico City in September 1996 with a long list of questions and a dubious command of Spanish. The sound of laughter inside the house greeted me as I rang the bell. I was invited inside and Poniatowska emerged from her study, smiling and friendly. She proposed that the interview be in English, which helped me relax and after a while she reverted to Spanish to ensure that I did not feel totally inadequate. Noting that I anxiously watched my battery-operated portable cassette recorder to check that it was working, Elena told me that her greatest fear when conducting her own interviews was that her tapes would turn out to be blank afterwards. She was tremendously patient and incredibly generous with her time. The resulting interview, in which she discussed her political convictions and her empathy for people without a public voice in Mexico, had an enormous impact both on my graduate work and in my later teaching. Her passionate interest in “ordinary people” was evident: long after the interview should have ended, she asked me about the current popular recreation activities in the Zócalo, Mexico City, near which I was then living. She laughed with pleasure when I described how I observed children who would spend hours launching small plastic figures wearing parachutes over the metro ventilation shafts, to see them rise into the air and flutter down. Some toy parachutes soared over the National Palace and the Cathedral, before their owners, with a mixture of wonder, pride and sorrow, realised that they would never be seen again. As one of the parents explained, “We don’t have much money, so we make our own entertainment.”
While renowned for her testimonial narrative, Poniatowska resists being pigeon-holed into a specific genre. As she candidly underlined in 1990, “I don’t believe in ‘isms’—I believe in people.” She claims to have had no formal training: “I do everything by instinct.” Regarding her political work, she explains, “I write when something causes me great indignation.” Poniatowska responds to a sense of need: “I chose Tlatelolco because the massacre infuriated me.” “I write books to give a voice to those who have none, those who are forever silenced.” She has called her distinctive format simple: that she presents her work in a certain way “because that’s how it comes out of me.” This simplicity, and her natural ability to take readers straight to the heart of important political and social issues, leads her to vividly recreate situations and events while underscoring their human dimension. Jörgensen explains: “Poniatowska is profoundly disturbed by the world in which she lives, and as a writer she knows herself to be uniquely authorized to speak in and about that world.” Wherever possible she directly communicates with those affected by political change, re-telling their stories. As Kathy Taylor notes, “the testimonies of Poniatowska […] allow those who suffered the repression of the government to speak.” In doing so, Poniatowska takes her readers directly into the hearts and minds of her subjects. It is this that makes her work an invaluable tool for teaching and understanding history. By enabling the accounts of those without a public voice to speak, she ensures that their thoughts and experiences will forever resonate.

Elena Poniatowska, as any cursory research will reveal, was not born in Mexico. The daughter of a Polish emigré whose family lived in France (descended from royalty), and an upper-class Mexican mother born in Paris, she herself was born in France in 1932. After the Second World War broke out her parents volunteered as ambulance drivers. But when conditions became more dangerous, her mother, younger sister, and Poniatowska relocated to Mexico City in 1942. There she was educated in an English school, and learned Spanish from household servants, which she attests inspired her “sympathetic feelings” for the poor, and understanding of their concerns. I was able to appreciate the true meaning of this sentiment after exposure to different societies in Mexico. During the 1990s, I was living in a now demolished rickety casa de huéspedes in Mexico City’s historic centre that housed some 40 migrant workers from all over Mexico. As a result, my Spanish improved. One of the expressions that I picked up was from a woman who was working there as a caretaker in return for lodging for herself and her young daughter. This woman, also named Elena, would reply “¿mande?” whenever anyone called her name. Assuming that it meant “pardon,” I often used the expression. Later, when staying with middle class friends in the provinces, I was advised not to reply in this manner “because it means ‘command me,’ and constituted an expression that only lower class people use.” Only then did I, in one word, understand that the poor in Mexico really do have their own language. It is a language that reflects a reality that is very different from those with more privileges.

MEXICO WAS BORN IN ELENA PONIATOWSKA

Poniatowska’s birth outside of Mexico has both benefits and drawbacks; she states: “There are many things I can’t do because I wasn’t born in Mexico.” While she was writing La noche de Tlatelolco, she was under surveillance; her husband, Guillermo Haro, insisted that she take Mexican citizenship to prevent the possibility of her being deported to France. Yet Poniatowska also uses her nationality as a shield for situations in which she may not be comfortable. For example, in January 1994, shortly after the Zapatista rebellion erupted in Chiapas (coinciding with the enactment of NAFTA), her tactic backfired in the most poignantly complimentary way when Poniatowska was invited to become one of the mediators in the conflict. After she refused on the grounds of her birthplace, seventeen Mexican artists and journalists sent an open letter to the daily newspaper, La Jornada, stating, “Poniatowska has asked us to clarify that she is not Mexican by birth, but we would like to state that we believe that Mexico was born in her.”

Mexico was not only born in Poniatowska, but the vivacity of her prose also transports Mexico beyond its geographic boundaries. Although she preferred not to act as a mediator in the Zapatista rebellion, Poniatowska led the popular response that resounded at home and abroad and temporarily brought a ceasefire in the Mexican army’s intervention in Chiapas. In July 1994, she travelled to Chiapas and interviewed the rebel spokesman, Subcomandante Marcos, at length. In her interviews—published in advance of the Zapatista Convention for National Democracy in August 1994—her intense support for the Zapatista cause is apparent. Without directly stating her views, Poniatowska deliberately adopts a
technique that gently compels her readers to agree with her. She used prose such as, “I look into the eyes of the Subcomandante; […] there’s great goodness in them. […] I sense that] these people are good, these people want peace […] the certainty returns again and again.” Wherever one is, whatever one's political persuasion and personal feelings about the rebellion, it is impossible to read her words without empathising with Mexico’s most marginalized and hitherto forgotten people: in this case the indigenous majority in Chiapas.

TESTIMONIES AND EARTHQUAKES

Both within and outside Mexico, Poniatowska is probably best known for her book about the 1968 Mexican Student Movement, La noche de Tlatelolco (1971). This book plays a vital role when teaching, outside of the country, this painful episode of Mexican history, especially to students who have had no direct experience with Mexico. Recalling Poniatowska’s “I don’t believe in ‘isms,' I believe in people,” I lead my students straight to the at times simple and raw, but always powerful and honest words of Poniatowska’s informants, and then we evaluate the way in which she weaves their stories together. Here lies the immense strength of Poniatowska: her testimonial literature allows her informants, those who have been denied a public voice, to be heard. Moreover, she blends and directs these voices to make compelling and persuasive political points. Thus her work enables our students to read and identify with the thoughts and views of Mexican students during the 1960s: these young adults are on the brink of their own careers and, through Poniatowska, some of them become politically aware for the first time. Although of diverse eras, our students and these students share similar experiences. And although they diverge in cultural and geographic backgrounds, Poniatowska’s faithful reproduction of the Mexican students’ own words instantly bridges and seals the gaps.

I should add here that I currently teach twentieth-century Mexican history in the School of History, Classics and Archaeology at Newcastle University. Most of my students are history undergraduates, but also students of politics, sociology, modern languages and combined honours may opt to take this module. The majority of my students do not read Spanish, hence I use translations, such as Helen Lane’s Massacre in Mexico (1975; the above title), and Aurora Camacho de Schmidt’s Nothing, Nobody: The Voices of the Mexico City Earthquake (1995). These high-quality translations make Poniatowska’s texts accessible to a non-Spanish speaking audience. Her intense focus on the people behind statistics, or more accurately in the case of the students of 1968—those whose existence was denied in official figures—vividly and poignantly brings Mexican history to life in the most effective way possible to students: through the words of their peers. This is an invaluable teaching resource: Poniatowska’s testimonial literature enables witnesses of the past to bridge the time gap and communicate directly with a succession of readers. The insights of her work cross continents and cultures.

The latter book, Poniatowska’s testimonial account on the impact of the magnitude 8.1 earthquake that struck Mexico City on September 19, 1985, originally published in Spanish Nada, nadie: Los voces del Temblor (1988), vividly, movingly and constructively recreates the terror, pain and outrage that accompanied this tragic episode of Mexican history. This is an excellent text for teaching as she again establishes links with students, this time they are her own (from her writing group). In the ensuing days following the earthquake, Poniatowska was among the many volunteers who clawed through the rubble, trying to dig for survivors, until her friends and colleagues, Julio Scherer and Carlos Monsiváis, persuaded her that she could offer more effective aid and support through her literary skills. Poniatowska then enlisted her students to help. As one of them, Alicia Trueba, explains, “Elena asked us for help, help we knew she didn’t need. Her intention, like a good teacher, was to awaken concerns in her students.” Each day Poniatowska went to the temporary shelters, speaking to those who were anxiously awaiting news, giving them food, putting people in touch with volunteer support groups, and above all listening to those who desperately needed to talk. It was a tremendously difficult task, as Poniatowska later admitted: “It wears you out emotionally.” Trueba illustrates the physical toll: “Day after day Elena arrived, [...] each time her eyes were bigger, darker, and seeing her so small, so fragile, we thought, ‘How can she stand it!’”

The testimonies of the earthquake survivors, voiced through Poniatowska, were published prominently on the pages of La Jornada newspaper every day until December 1985. As the accounts drew to a close, readers and victims sent letters of thanks to the newspaper voicing their gratitude for her practical assistance in publicising, and thus increasing, the number of volunteer groups, as well as...
highlighting what still needed to be done, and for her time, patience and care in listening to their plight. Trueba later stated that amid the dust and devastation, Poniatowska managed to bring “what she is herself, a breath of fresh air.” La Jornada political cartoonist, Antonio Helguera, depicted a weary Poniatowska providing comfort in the form of a bouquet of pens. My own students pointed out in some surprise that his cartoon is not a physically flattering rendering of Poniatowska; in fact, when I used it in one of my classes, some of them leapt to her defence. Obsession with physical appearance is no doubt stronger and deemed to be more important today than it was in 1985, especially in a country that was trying to recover from such a devastating natural disaster. Our discussion thus turned to the nature and power of cartoons: We discussed how Helguera, in portraying Poniatowska this way, was underlining the depths of her compassion. This deeply caring woman may have been worn down but she was not defeated. Her own human fragility had been revealed through her empathy for others. In his cartoon, Helguera was giving a different and intensely powerful form of praise: Poniatowska’s inner strength and beauty were all the more apparent precisely because of the impact of her work on her outward appearance.

STUDENT PROTESTS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

As outlined above, for classes in twentieth-century Mexican history, at UK universities, Poniatowska’s work, particularly that on the 1968 Student Movement, constitutes an invaluable teaching device. Through her powerful testimonial texts, UK students can identify with their Mexican counterparts, successfully bridging time and space, and learn how crisis is handled in another nation. Although UK students come from a variety of backgrounds, and may passionately support different issues and causes, the subject of mass protests had a connection for them in November 2010, when Newcastle, and many other English universities, protested in response to proposed official increases in tuition fees. Sixty students occupied the Newcastle University’s Arts Building, and although none of these self-disciplined and highly-motivated young people missed any of their own classes, the Occupation Committee invited their lecturers to show support by visiting the sit-in and participating in a series of alternative lectures.

It seemed appropriate to talk to them about the Mexican students, their brutal suppression, and how Mexican society eventually started to change. In my short lecture, I stressed Poniatowska’s long-term commitment to the student cause: Recently, in October 2007, she opened a permanent exhibition to the Mexican Student Movement, sponsored by Mexico’s National Autonomous University (UNAM), in a building overlooking Tlatelolco plaza. The extensive commemoration, titled “Memorial of ‘68,” includes interviews with many of the surviving former student participants. One comment, by a man now in his 60s, particularly sticks in my mind: Taking part in the student protests of 1968, he said, was “like taking a 2-month intensive course in citizenship.”

I ended my lecture at the Newcastle sit-in by quoting a message of support to our students from Noam Chomsky, who was, fittingly, at that moment in Mexico City, at UNAM. He told them, “Pleased to learn about what you are doing. The savage cuts, hardly concealed class warfare, are likely to harm Britain for a long time to come. Best of luck in your important efforts. Noam Chomsky.” Of Mexico, he added, “ten years ago the government proposed tuition [fees]. There was a student strike that was so successful that the government backed down, and tuition remains free in a university with quite impressive standards, and hundreds of thousands of students.” Poniatowska’s work in keeping the 1968 Mexican Student Movement in the national conscience had likely helped ensure that Mexico’s future students are now more freely able to protest, and in the case of their stand against tuition fees in 2000, achieve their demands.

Unfortunately, the English protesters of 2010 were less successful, although they played an important role in making their peaceful, orderly and dignified protest. I was tremendously proud of them. The opportunity to participate in their series of alternative lectures has been the most rewarding experience of my academic career. While representing a variety of academic disciplines, most knew nothing about Latin American history. Afterward, they told me that hearing about the Mexican Student Movement gave them greater understanding of how their small protest could be just and worthwhile.

In April 2013, as my teaching year was drawing to a close, I was approached about this special theme on Poniatowska’s texts. As I reflected on how she and her work has shaped my research and teaching, I invited my final year undergraduate students in history to summarise briefly what they thought about Elena Poniatowska, adding their own name if they chose. In homage to her, it
seems appropriate to end my essay with the voices of these students, albeit from a different time and place from those she has immortalised:

- “Elena Poniatowska helped me to gain a greater understanding of the views of society, as well as the influence of journalists and academics on the growth of civil society.”
  Lisa Davison, History
- “She helped me to gain an insight into the victims of Mexican society rather than just the people in power.”
  Jen Moore, History
- “A non-Mexican national who wrote extensively in support of the causes that I would have supported.”
  Ben Layton, Combined Honours
- “Elena provides me with the real feelings and thoughts of Mexicans at the time that [the] events occurred. It seems as if she really cares about the people and wants to find out the truth.”
  Felicity Mortimer, History
- “Poniatowska gives examples of the human responses to events void of over-politicisation.”
  Chris Jackson, History/Archaeology
- “Elena Poniatowska has humanised events in Mexico to compensate for the Mexican government’s indifference to the welfare of its people.”
  –Final year student
- “Elena writes the truth that the government tried to hide/refused to acknowledge.”
  –Final year student
- “Elena is a rare female commentator. Her book gives a revealing account of the night about which few people wrote openly.”
  Pip Trahearn, History
- “Elena offers an ‘outside’ view of Mexico from the inside.”
  –Final year student
- “Elena Poniatowska identifies with the masses and highlights their grievances.”
  Katherine Mills, History/Archaeology
- “She gave us a real insight into the horrific experiences of the Mexican students of 1968.”
  Alicia Ingham, History
- “She provided an eyewitness look from those actually involved which would otherwise have been unavailable.”
  –Final year student
- “Poniatowska provides the viewpoint of those who would otherwise not have their voices heard.”
  –Final year student
- “Elena Poniatowska provides a subaltern view of the Mexico City earthquake and the student movement.”
  Ralph Blackburn, History
- “She gives a fantastic insight into the student massacre through the eyes of those who witnessed it first-hand.”
  Conor Wilson, History/Politics
- “She uses first-hand accounts, voices of people who would be typically silenced by the PRI.”
  Becky Carrahar, Combined Honours
- “She provides a critical analysis and emotive, thought-provoking descriptions.”
  Catherine Anderson, History

ENDNOTES
4 Claire Brewster, unpublished interview with Poniatowska, Mexico City, 13 September 1996.
7 Elena Poniatowska, “Marcos: quieren desaparecer a los indígenas; los creen un lastre,” La Jornada, 2 August 1994, p. 17.
8 Jörgensen, Engaging dialogues, p. 65.
11 This word is used, however, in general Mexican society, by many.
12 Brewster, interview with Poniatowska, 1996.
13 Several authors, “Carta: Proponen a Elena Poniatowska y Antonio García de León como mediadores en Chiapas,” La Jornada, 19 January 1994, p. 2. Among the 17 signatories of the letter were: Alfonso Morales,
Braulio Peralta, Jesusa Rodríguez, Eugenia León and the political cartoonist, Antonio Helguera.

14 Elena Poniatowska, “Si sólo fuera cosa de Marcos, el EZLN ya hubiera tronado, dice el Sup,” La Jornada, 31 July 1994, pp.1, 18.

18 Trueba, op. cit.
20 Trueba, “La odisea de Nada, nadie”, p. 3.