Constant and Daring, The Life of Elena Poniatowska: An Interview

Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez
DePaul University

Elena Poniatowska

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Cover Page Footnote
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Mexico's great contemporary writer, Elena Poniatowska, and her younger sister, were born in Paris during the 1930s. Her father was Polish-French, and her mother's family from Mexico, having fled during the Mexican Revolution. Her parents were volunteer ambulance drivers during the French Resistance; as conditions worsened in the Second World War, mother and daughters traveled to Mexico in 1940, where Poniatowska has lived since (except for most of 1954, when she returned to France to await the birth of her oldest son). For this interview, we decided to begin by addressing the origins of her last name.

Elizabeth C. Martínez (ECM): You have stated that in Polish heritage, surnames are differentiated by gender. Thus, your father's name was Poniatowski and yours, as a female, is spelled Poniatowska. Is that correct?

Elena Poniatowska (EP): Yes it is, but this happens in many different Slavic languages. If you read Tolstoy, if you read Tchaikovsky, the sex [gender] is in the second name. For women, it is always an “A” [ending] and in men it's usually an “I” or “Y.” I had a good friend, a photographer, Mariana Yampolsky, and her name finished with a “Y.” We never spoke about it, and she never changed it.

ECM: Are there other women with the last name Poniatowska, who use it in that style?

EP: No, everyone. Everyone. It's the Polish language. Everyone in Poland, and here in Chicago, I think there are many Polish people in Chicago. I gave a conference here two days ago and many Polish arrived and they told me there were other Poniatowskis here in Chicago. But I don't know if it’s easy to find a … how do you call it?

ECM: A phonebook?

EP: A phonebook here and look up the Poniatowskis and find out who they are. That would be fun.

ECM: But no Poniatowska? That is unique?

EP: No Poniatowska is for all women. It's not unique at all. If there is a woman, she will be a Poniatowska. It's a way of declaring a name.

ECM: Thank you. To continue, during your extensive publishing trajectory, do you see different stages, etapas? How do you see your contribution through the years?

EP: I see it … at the beginning, the first little story I wrote was *Lilus Kikus*, a story of [about] a teenager or younger [child]. Afterwards of course … you change as you mature, as life goes by. And also I started to see what was happening in my country. [Through] interviews with all kinds of people. First many, many famous people, painters like Diego Rivera, actresses like Dolores del Río, and María Félix. And then, I don't know, seeing people like Luis Bañuel. So I did many, many interviews, but I also saw what was happening in the streets of my country. And of course this had an influence on the things I would choose to write on my own.

ECM: So that was your first stage? Is there a second? Third?
EP: The first stage was really to [explore], because I was, I studied in a convent called The Sacred Heart in a little town [near] Philadelphia. I remember there was only an insane asylum, the convent where we were, and the train station where we arrived. And a drugstore was the only thing in the neighborhood. So afterwards everything got larger and everyone got more complicated. But more complicated in a beautiful way because I got to find out about a country, I tried to find out about my country, Mexico. And to understand it. It is very difficult to understand a country as complicated as Mexico.

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After her basic education in English and French at private schools, Elena Poniatowska was sent to a convent school in the U.S., when it was still common for girls to be educated at religious-finishing schools. The experience is somewhat the context of the short novel, Lilus Kikus (her classic satire or subversive strategies are present). She has often stated that early on she learned Spanish from the household help. When she returned to Mexico City at age 18, her father would not grant her request to attend college; instead, he told her to learn typing and seek secretarial work. In the process, she asked Excélsior newspaper if she could submit an article; they asked her to bring an interview with a noted person, which she did, and continued to do each day for a year, until she secured a job. That was her entry to journalism. The newspaper had no women journalists, only a society columnist who went by the pen name of “Bambi.” When asked what pen name Elena would like to use, she offered: “Dumbo?”

Between 1954 and 1963, she published books: a between-the-lines story about a little girl coming of age in Mexico (Lilus Kikus), a satirical play (“Meles y Teles”), and two collections of interviews, Palabras cruzadas, and Todo empezó el domingo. She spent 10 years interviewing a feisty woman she met working at a laundry, creating an extensive novel on her life, and in representation of the many women and peasants who aided the struggle of the Mexican Revolution (without recognition): Hasta no verte, Jesús mío (1969).

In 1968, Poniatowska, newly married to astrophysicist Guillermo Haro, was at home with a new baby when friends arrived at her house to tell her about the massacre of students and other protestors at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco the night before. Alarmed, she went to the plaza, and was shocked to see the bloodied walls and many shoes left behind. She spent weeks interviewing the families of those killed, and others in jail or hospitals, in order to publish the first book released, uncensored, on the terrible tragedy: La noche de Tlatelolco (1971).

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ECM: Is there a middle stage in the 1960s/70s when you feel your work reached another level?

EP: I’ve never felt that. I’ve had my work … As a whole I think it’s been the same thing ever since I began. Maybe what you’re asking is that I became very political in ways because in 1968, I was shocked by the students’ massacre in Tlatelolco. In less than four months I wrote this book called Massacre in Mexico in English. And it was published immediately. And maybe this of course made me more political for the public. But I think I was already very political in my heart: The injustice in Mexico. The way people live. People living on top of [at the expense of] very poor Mexicans was a shock. And it continues to be a shock, so I’ve continued writing about all these social differences because there’s an abyss between one social class and another in Mexico. For instance, for a Mexican that comes from Mexico (and not that comes from Chicago, because they have better conditions), for a peasant to come into this room and a hotel like this, it would be unthinkable, no? And this is the wonderful thing about America, that everyone really has a chance, no? Everyone can make of his life. Of course it’s difficult, but everyone has this possibility, and in Mexico you feel that there are people whose lives will never change, never be anything else that it isn’t already. It will continue. I remember I asked a little girl out in the country and we were in a field of maíz … ¿Cómo se dice maíz?

ECM: Corn.

EP: Corn. A very poor field of corn. And I told her, you should go to school, and she didn’t want to go to school. You should go to school. You should go learn, You should write. I’m going to give you a beautiful notebook, un cuaderno, un lápiz, una pluma, colores. I’ll give you all this. And she said, “Why do I have to go to school if I’m going to continue eating beans?” It happens in Africa and many countries in Latin America, that people simply don’t have a chance, you know?
ECM: Did she agree to go to school?

EP: No. She said, Why do I have to go to school if I am going to continue eating beans. ¿Por qué voy a ir a la escuela si de todos modos voy a seguir comiendo frijoles? But at least she had frijoles. Some don’t even have that.

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Poniatowska’s writing has often captured the lives of peasants, of women, and of indigenous populations, in pursuit of their lives and experiences. Most notably, Oaxacan life, such as her delightful essay on “Las mujeres de Juchitán,” which accompanies acclaimed photographer Graciela Iturbide’s photographs. In her novels as well, main characters are often real-life people. She uses their lives to dig into history and complex social issues, such as the extensive novel she prepared on photographer Tina Modotti.

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ECM: In 1992 when other major Latin American writers were publishing books to bring new light on the encounter [European arrival] 500 years earlier, did it occur to you that you were being different and unique when you published a book about how Mexico conquered Tina Modotti?

EP: No, it has never occurred to me. Anything about being unique.

ECM: So your objective with publishing Tinísima was coincidental in terms of that year?

EP: No, it was just published that year because the book was finished that year. But it had nothing to do with anything. It was published because I had been working on it for two years before. Tina Modotti was to be a script for a movie, by a man that I liked a lot called Gabriel Figueroa. He was the cameraman and photographer for all the best period movies in Mexico. And after he asked me to write a script, then he told me that there would be no movie at all. And as I had been to Spain and to France and to Italy and I had interviewed many people, especially Tina Modotti’s last lover, called Carlos Vidali. I stayed at a hotel near his house for ten days in Italy, and as I had done all this work, I said, well, I’m going to do a novel because [all the people I interviewed], communists and very old people [would be] very disappointed. They had spoken to me for hours and hours. You ask them to speak about themselves and what life meant to them and what they had done. So I said, Oh, I’m not going to disappoint them; it’s like failing, no? I’m not going to disappoint them and I’m going to do a novel. That’s how Tina Modotti came to be.

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Based in the early 20th century like many of her novels, Tinísima reveals Mexico City in the era of avant garde artists and writers, meticulously examining politics after the Mexican Revolution, and the impact of the overthrow of Spain’s republic by an army allied with Mussolini’s forces.

Throughout the 1990s and into the next decade, Poniatowska published more collections of essays, several biographies of distinguished figures, and a short novel, Paseo de la Reforma (none of which have seen English translation yet). The new century began with an extensive novel on the development of modern science in Mexico, as well as her husband’s work building an observatory in Puebla: La piel del cielo (2001; The Skin of the Sky) received a major literary award, by Spain publisher Alfaguara. A few years later, she became one of only two women who have received the Premio Rómulo Gallegos (awarded every two years to eminent Latin American writers, and one of the more lucrative literary awards in the world), for El tren pasa primero (The train passes first), published in 2005.

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ECM: Your literary and journalistic awards are extensive. Are there special memories connected to one or more of the awards you received or perhaps one that is most meaningful to you?

EP: Yes, I was very delighted to receive the Alfaguara Prize. The Alfaguara and Rómulo Gallegos also, I was very happy with the prizes. This last prize, which is called the Biblioteca Breve, [by publisher] Seix Barral [was for] Leonora, que se publicó el año antepasado. Son tres, los grandes premios de literatura española que he recibido.

ECM: ¿Cuál fue el impulso que llevó a la creación del texto El tren pasa primero?

EP: Demetrio Vallejo Martínez me llamó la atención por su valentía. Era un oaxaqueño chaparrito, inteligentísimo y muy bravo. Decía lo que pensaba. Fui a verlo a la cárcel
de Santa Marta Acatitla porque pensé en hacerle una larga entrevista. Los trenes siempre han ejercido sobre mí una enorme atracción y me gustó mucho también que fuera ferrocarrilero. Conocí a toda su familia y a dos de sus mujeres que aparecen en el libro: Laurita, la madre de sus hijos, y Silvia que fue su amante en la cárcel. La que más me conmovió fue Laurita. Vallejo decía que un líder no tiene vida personal, que lo que importa son sus discursos. A mí me interesaba dar una imagen lo más completa posible de lo que es un líder, y más un hombre tan original como él, un “self made man.”

ECM: Is there a novel that was the most difficult to create or had the greatest impact on you?

EP: All novels make a great [experience]. I just published my biography of Guillermo Haro. I didn’t bring a copy because I don’t have any but I’ll send it to you. It’s called El Universo o Nada (The Universe or Nothing): it’s a [saying], I think by H.G. Wells. I think it’s because I had this opportunity. I have all his papers, all the letters he wrote. So this is why.

ECM: Yes, your book is over 400 pages. But this is a biography.

EP: A complete biography. And I am very happy it’s a biography because everything there is true.

ECM: And Tina Modotti, there was some controversy about whether your book Tinismas was a biography or a novel.

EP: To me it was a novel. Now I’m starting another one because I have to work because I don’t have much more time left. I’m starting another one about Guadalupe Marín, Diego Rivera’s second wife. And it’s going to be a novel because I don’t have all the material, all the exact material like I had for Guillermo Haro. I don’t have it. So I want it to be a novel. And as fair as possible to Guadalupe and be as exact as I can. But it’s going to be a novel. Tina Modotti was also a novel because it was very difficult for me to make it a biography because I don’t think there can be biographies of people after so much time if you don’t have the material.

ECM: Is there a journalistic book that had the greatest impact on you, in the process of creating it or gathering information?

EP: No, I don’t think so. I couldn’t say. Of course there’s a chronic, una crónica … ¿se dice cronic en inglés?

ECM: Chronicle.

EP: Chronicle of the Colonia Rubén Jaramillo. And I was very taken by it because of all the peasants that had built their houses overnight and were living peacefully. A very small [plot]. This room for instance is much bigger [than one house]. And they were very generous because people kept coming in, so they used to make their piece of land even thinner or smaller because of the people coming. So it was a very wonderful experience for me to see that and to see what having land means, to have your own house, your own piece of land. Your own tierra.

ECM: I notice you use the word “peasant.” I wondered if you have encountered this: I have noticed that my students, the younger generation, they do not want to use the word peasant. They consider that peasant is like a bad word, a bad description now. Have you …

EP: In Mexico it isn’t. I just translate campesino. To me it is nothing bad.

ECM: Here is something that is sometimes asked in the U.S., how you happened to do the translation of Sandra Cisneros’ novel House on Mango Street. I believe it was a suggestion I think from the agent that you and Sandra shared at the time. You have not done any other translations, right?

EP: I have done other translations for myself, from French or English. But I have not taken a book and translated it. I did it to be nice to Susan Bergholz, who was the agent and she said that Sandra had wanted [to work with me], but the one who did it was Juan Antonio Ascencio, he’s the one who really worked on that translation.

ECM: The House on Mango Street?

EP: The House on Mango Street. Only the credit was given to me because Susan Bergholz had talked to me. She doesn’t even know Ascencio, no? It’s a sore subject.
[though], something that didn’t work out well. He was hurt at me, you can imagine. But in [the] Spanish [version] it says “traducción de Elena Poniatowska y Juan Ascencio.” Ahí sí le dan el crédito. Pero eso fue una cosa que se manejó muy mal. Pero tú lo puedes poner ahí, pues fue así como te lo digo.

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Critics state that Poniatowska invented the interview/description style of narrative, but the content of her narratives is also impressive, memorable, and at times shocking, from revelations of government repression and corruption in *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971), *Fuerte es el silencio* (1980), and *Nada, nadie, las voces del temblor* (1988); to accounts that demonstrate that women are less equal citizens than men, in *Gaby Brimmer* (1979) and *La herida de Paulina* (2000); and enlightening, critical essays, such as her depictions of new writing style in *Ay, vida, no me mereces* (1985), women artists in *Las siete cabritas* (2000), and the unique aspects and perspective she brings forth in her many biographies of figures such as Octavio Paz, Juan Soriano, Álvaro Mutis, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Pablo O’Higgins, Miguel Covarrubias, Mariana Yampolsky, and her just released book on Guillermo Haro. Other biographies, like Tina Modotti and Leonora Carrington, are captured in novels.

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**ECM:** Is there a non-fiction, journalistic award that is perhaps very meaningful to you?


**ECM:** ¿La primera mujer?

**EP:** Sí, la primera mujer.

**ECM:** Among your accomplishments, many years ago you helped inaugurate a newspaper called *Fem*, and you are a founder, I think, of the publishing company Siglo XXI, of the National Film Library Cineteca, and UNAM’s Taller Literario, Writers Workshop, where you coached several now-prominent Mexican writers. How do you accomplish all of this while also writing and publishing extensively, and giving generously of your time?

**EP:** Well, Siglo XXI is a publishing house, now, that publishes Galeano and many leftist books, but the story [of its beginning] is really fantastic, in a way the story of Arnaldo Orfila Reynal, who was a great publisher, who came to Mexico from Argentina and he published *The Children of Sánchez* (1961), [anthropologist] Oscar Lewis’s book. The government took it very badly. It was called a book that denigrated Mexico. So he was asked to leave the direction, la dirección, ¿cómo se dice? To stop being the head of el Fondo de Cultura Económica. So a group of intellectuals was really outraged about that, because Oscar Lewis’ book is very true to reality, no? And so we all got together and I offered my house because I could [go] sleep at my parents. So I offered my house and this is how I became the founder. But now it’s another kind of publishing house in Mexico. What was the other question?

**ECM:** You helped found *Fem* (in the mid-1970s)?
**EP:** *Fem* was a magazine, the first woman's magazine in Mexico. I think it was the first one. A small one done by Alaíde Foppa, who disappeared and was murdered in Guatemala. And a wonderful woman, Margarita García Flores. I think you met her, no? And she also died. So many people died. And they decided to found this magazine and they called me. But I was a very bad feminist. I knew absolutely nothing, no? But then I read *Our Bodies, Our Selves* and then I found out about the great American feminists. I met Betty Friedan and everyone. But it was a lovely adventure, no?

**ECM:** It was short-lived. Ten years or so?

**EP:** It was short-lived because they couldn't continue. But now there's a magazine by Marta Lamas called *Debate Feminista*.

**ECM:** How did you get involved in the National Film Library Cineteca?

**EP:** The Cineteca, they just asked me to be part of it because I was a good friend of Carmen Toscano, who is the founder, the sister of el que hizo “Memorias de un mexicano”, que es una película maravillosa.

**ECM:** And the Taller Literario for Women Writers?

**EP:** But it was also men. There were fewer men than women. And that [experience] was lovely because they won many prizes.

**ECM:** You taught classes in that workshop for many years.

**EP:** Yes I stayed there many years.

**ECM:** I think 20?

**EP:** More than 20, I think. Now it doesn't exist anymore. It's completely dissolved.

**ECM:** Well, you helped lead, and create a path for many, many Mexican woman writers. What advice would you give to young women writers today?

**EP:** To young women writers? What would I say? To write is to read. Read what others have written. Especially read the classics, no? Read your companions also. The people that want to write like you. And read in other languages. It helps to read in French. In my case it helps to read in English also. And because I write Spanish. But I think to read is one of the [most important] paths and the other one is to hear, to listen to what people have to say. How they do it, how they pick up a piece of paper. How they look at you when you’re talking or how they feel what it's about. Writing is about thoughts and feelings. You have to love what you're doing also.

**ECM:** Is it more difficult in Mexico for women to create a professional career in writing?

**EP:** It is very difficult because in Mexico there's absolutely no recognition. For women, usually women have to follow this rule and shut up. Women are not greatly taken into consideration. And the women who stand out are usually satanized. No sé si en inglés se dice …

**ECM:** Demonized.

**EP:** Demonized. And you can see it in the women, even Frida Kahlo. When she was alive she was just called “La Coja:” The Lame One. Or la señora Rivera. La esposa de Diego Rivera. But she was not considered that important. And now she's more than the Virgin of Guadalupe. She's an icon.

**ECM:** Is this true in Mexico also?

**EP:** Oh absolutely. You can see photographs and things like that of Frida Kahlo. She's everywhere. And even her family has made money out of her because there's lipstick Frida Kahlo, there are scarves Frida Kahlo, there is all an industry to Frida Kahlo. Bags with Frida Kahlo's face.

**ECM:** Is there a woman writer in Mexico that you think currently is going to make a strong cultural impact like Frida Kahlo?

**EP:** I don't know, but there are … there is a woman, a wonderful writer and I loved her deeply. María Luisa Puga. And she died. And her family doesn't help her at all. I don't know why her books are [not re-issued]. There's nothing. No one working on her work. And I keep saying it every time I can. Talking about her, speaking about her
at conferences. But the work, the family has to … and they do absolutely nothing! Because, finalmente el trabajo literario tiene que ser constante. Entonces sus libros no han sido re-publicados, [lo] cual es una tragedia. Para mí me parece una tragedia. Y una falta de respeto para todo lo que hizo. La están dejando morir como autora.

ECM: Para terminar, You have Sansimonsi, is that your fourth children’s book, published last year? Can you tell us why you are doing children’s books?

EP: Pues eso siempre he hecho un poco porque tengo mucha relación con mis nietos. Pero Sansimonsi, me pidieron que hiciera la biografía de Carlos Monsiváis. Tengo mucho material. Alguna vez la haré. Pero dije, ay no, mejor—como él amaba tanto a los gatos—voy a convertirlo en un gato. Entonces le hablé a mi gran amigo, Rafael Barajas, el Fisgón, y le dije, ¿qué te parece que hagamos un telito de la vida de Monsi [popular term for Monsiváis]: Monsi es un gatito. Y me dijo, ¡sí, sí!, claro que sí. Le gustó la idea. Eso fue lo que sucedió. Y era más fácil para mí que él porque tengo muchísimo material sobre Carlos y yo lo quise mucho.

ECM: ¿Para un libro futuro?

EP: Pues sí, pero no lo voy a hacer ahorita porque ahorita quiero hacer lo que te dije de Lupe Marín.

ECM: A novel?


ECM: Will there be a lot of cooking, because she is famous for preparing extensive meals for many guests?

EP: Sí, pero hay muy poquito. Ella era famosa … pero eso [the cooking] se le atribuye a Frida Kahlo: las recetas de Frida Kahlo. Pero, ¿qué hizo Lupe Rivera?

ECM: Elena, what one word would you use to describe yourself?


ECM: Definitivamente leal a México.


ECM: How would you like to be remembered in a hundred years? The great writer Elena Poniatowska.

EP: No, I would like to be remembered as someone who is asked to do something and always does it unless of course dying or being sick or whatever. Yo siento que soy súper responsable. Pero no sé, ahora me estoy, como decimos, poniendo mucha crema a mis tacos.


EP: No hay de que, no hay de qué.

Just as Poniatowska’s conversation flows, so do her books and essays, often with the strong voices and stubbornness of her characters, but also with minute descriptions, esthetic and the vulgar aspects of life. More of her books need to be translated to English, but for now, the many good translations available are highly recommended, even the poetic essays and forewords she pens on request for special books, including beautiful essays in Frida Kahlo: The Camera Seduced (1992), and in Mexican Color (1998), where her conversational tone weaves from fairy tales, to indigenous customs, to Mexican architecture and tapestry.