

Writing emotional communities

Lynn Stephen, *Stories That Make History: Mexico through Elena Poniatowska's Crónicas*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2021. 312 pp. ISBN 978-1-4780-1464-5

Born in Paris, France in 1932, Poniatowska came to Mexico with her family during the Second World War. In 1953, after attending school in the United States, she was hired by the *Excélsior* newspaper in Mexico City. Working as a young journalist, Poniatowska wrote for the society section and became a passionate interviewer of well-known individuals. Soon moving to *Novedades*, Poniatowska's subjects began to include an ever-widening cross-section of Mexican society.

At the time, Mexican print media reflected the changing times. Alternative publications such as the embattled 1960s era *Por Qué?* and later, *Proceso* and *Unomásuno* in the 1970s and *La Jornada* beginning in 1984, sought to challenge policies and the power of the ruling party. In this transformative social and media climate, Poniatowska diligently pursued her writing career and was profoundly politicized in the process. She collaborated with visual artist Alberto Beltrán who was then associated with the Taller de Gráfica Popular and possessed a keen sense of city life. "He showed me all around Mexico" she later remembered (52). With assistance from Luis Buñuel, she met painter David Alfaro Siqueiros and talked with railroad workers in Lecumberri prison.

Thanks to Beltrán, Poniatowska developed a friendship with a woman named Josefina Bórquez who lived in one of Mexico City's lower income *vecindades*. Ensuing interviews with Bórquez became the inspiration for the leading protagonist Jesusa Palancares in Poniatowska's 1969 novel *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* (Here's to you, Jesusa!) about a revolutionary *soldadera* who subsequently experienced the growing disappointment and deepening marginalization of Mexico's popular classes. As Poniatowska's biographer Michael Schuessler has written, "[t]he impact these interviews [...] had on Elena was so strong and so deep that it altered her personal if not her genetic

condition” (quoted in Stephen p. 54). Thus, the stage was set for Poniatowska to join with several other of her contemporaries such as writer Carlos Monsiváis to begin “constructing a critical narrative of Mexican history” that mixed journalistic, historical, literary, ethnographic and testimonial approaches in a hybrid expression that came to be known as the *crónica*.

To read Elena Poniatowska *crónicas* is to perhaps feel a slight glimmer of hope amid overwhelming tragedy. Her widely read books *Massacre in Mexico* and *Nothing, Nobody: The Voices of the Mexico City Earthquake* along with her writings on the Zapatista uprising, reflections on national politics in the mid-2000s and, more recently, public support for the families of the September 2014 disappeared students of Ayotzinapa are all deeply engaging, emotional works that intimately portray the life struggles of ordinary Mexicans.

Veteran anthropologist Lynn Stephen’s treatment of Poniatowska’s highly influential career is based on a series of long interviews with the writer in conjunction with a close analysis of her many published pieces. Configured differently than a biography, Stephen instead critically engages the journalist’s *crónicas* painstakingly constructed using interviews, oral histories, personal testimonials, newspaper articles and more along with her life as a public intellectual. Stephen’s book centers on how Poniatowska has effectively shaped historical memory through what she calls a “strategic emotional political community” (2). Drawing on the work of Colombian anthropologist Myriam Jimeno, Stephen explains that Poniatowska’s “process of creating emotional community is centered in the act of one person narrating his or her experience of suffering to another so that it is not identified only with the victim ‘but extended to other audiences who can identify with the experience and be moved by it’” (21). As Stephen elaborates, “[t]he experiences of testifying, listening to, and reading others’ testimonies are key to how political perspectives develop not only in individuals but also in how these individuals connect with others to analyze the world” (22). Various “levels” of emotional community can exist, of course, ranging from those who have experienced the same event firsthand to people who have lived through a similar history to individuals more distant in time and space yet still sympathetic and perhaps even committed to working to bring about social change.

Using this idea of creating an “emotional community” as a frame to organize and focus her discussion, Stephen’s six chapters range from Poniatowska’s first blockbuster work on the 1968 student massacre *La Noche de Tlateloco* to her emotionally powerful collective testimony on the 1985 earthquake and then subsequent activist/public intellectual endeavors concerning the ongoing Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas and the more recent tragic drug war *desaparecidos* of Ayotzinapa, Guerrero. Carefully describing how Poniatowska has shared with us not only several critical moments in the larger social history of Mexico, Stephen also effectively argues that the pioneering journalist’s vast body of work conveys key “strategies of representation” that “can become [powerful emotional, social and] political tools for influencing change” (248).

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