

## Entrevista/Interview



### **Written in the Margins: “Doing the job right”. An interview with Elena Poniatowska.<sup>1</sup>**

**Pedro García-Caro**

University of Oregon

A Carlos Monsiváis  
“...no me calienta ni el sol”

*Elena Poniatowska received an invitation from the Latin American Studies Program at the University of Oregon to deliver the annual*

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<sup>1</sup> English translation by Pedro García-Caro. The original version in Spanish will appear in the journal *Cartaphilus* (Universidad de Murcia, Vol 7, 2010).

*Bartolomé de las Casas Lecture in May of 2010. Interviewing Elena Poniatowska, talking with her, creates an immediate feeling of deep familiarity that sustains the notion that literature and culture can help heal the world. Reading her works and meeting her are both equally satisfying confirmations that writing can be more potent and truthful than those well-known publishing schemes through which a multitude of writers endeavor to establish themselves as courtesans and hacks. One vaguely remembers the many arrogant writers, young and old, who are trapped in their looking-glass galleries of jealousy, recognition anxiety, disregard for critics and public fear, but they are summarily forgotten in the face of the real chronicler of a country and a century. Elena's gaze, her memory, her word shine and show the profound empathic humanity with which she writes—a true humility that allows her to disappear in order to give life to others, to help and rescue them. For Poniatowska, the people who inhabit her writings are the intended recipients of prizes and public recognition. When she rejected the prestigious Mexican “Xavier Villaurrutia” Award in 1971 for her chronicle *Massacre in Mexico*,<sup>2</sup> she invited the Mexican government to honor the victims of the 1968 massacre to whom her testimonial book had paid homage. In that chronicle, the polyphonic collage is not aimed at dazzling readers or trying out postmodern theories of the dissolution of subjectivity or the narrative voice, a prevailing obsession for many writers at the time. Instead, Poniatowska uses textual fragments and a wealth of different materials to challenge the narrowness of conventional testimonial representations and to open up the text to a whole community: the soiled, bleeding multitude. In sum, in *Massacre in Mexico*, as in so many other works, Elena performs a disappearing act in the face of a multiplicity of voices, witness accounts, graffiti, and paper clippings, and she manages to unravel a plethora of afflicted experience—the lasting testimonies of the state repression suffered by student activists and other citizens a week before the official opening of the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico. Her name is forever associated with the hundreds of nameless testimonies she helped record in this phenomenal instance of oral history. In the same way, “Mexico 68” will be forever associated not with sports or modernizing glories, but with the violence of the entrenched Mexican police state torturing its citizens in a public square. A conversation with Poniatowska confirms once more that she persistently watches over and cares for men and women on the street with a sincere disregard for personal recognition, literary success, or lasting fame.*

*She arrives in Oregon with heavy luggage full of her books to give away as gifts. These are copies she has personally bought in her local Fondo de Cultura Económica bookshop, and she generously inscribes them. She also signs bookmarks, cards, and she asks each person she meets about their children, their health, their lives. Editor-writer, chronicler-writer, Elena is a novelist who looks carefully at each of her characters and who knows and inhabits each of them the way the old realist Russian authors did. She knows their tastes and their memories;*

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<sup>2</sup> Elena Poniatowska, *La Noche de Tlatelolco: testimonios de historia oral* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1971), translated into English by Helen R. Lane as *Massacre in Mexico* (New York: Viking Press, 1975).

*she allows them to live and to fill the room with their very real presence and voice. It is not easy to interview such a genuinely humble thinker; she is more interested in listening and learning about other peoples' lives and problems than in propagating her opinions and analyses. Her word and her memory are both natural and distinguished—they are a repository of wisdom, the result of a long socially committed life.*

*The life and work of Elena Poniatowska Amor have constantly challenged any social prejudices or predictions anyone could maintain about a direct descendant of Mexican and Polish Catholic feudal lords exiled in France. She was born in Paris in May 1932, the first daughter of Polish Jean E. Poniatowski Sperry Crocker and the Mexican Paula Amor de Ferreira Yturbe, both of them members of aristocratic families exiled in Paris over the two previous centuries.<sup>3</sup> In 1942, after the German occupation of France, Elena traveled to Mexico with her mother and sister. As a victim of the overwhelmingly violent history of the twentieth century, Poniatowska has always been a conscientious witness, an ally of just causes and of the underdogs, and as she reveals in this interview, she has always had “a natural inclination to turn away from those in power.” The contrast between the last names and the personages populating her family tree, and the characters and people who inhabit her many novels, short-story collections, testimonials, chronicles, essays—is very illustrative: Poniatowska felt from very early on a need to understand the hidden world of rooftops and basements of post-colonial and post-revolutionary Mexico, the streets, neighborhoods, and popular markets of real Mexico, a profound country whose true voices are rarely heard except through exotic notes of local color. Poniatowska is, together with her close friend and collaborator, the late Carlos Monsiváis, the chronicler and defender of people fighting for effective democracy, human rights, and dignity. Mexico City is in her work a place where the people own the streets, and Mexico, a country where literature is not just an archive of beautiful texts but a site of resistance: words uttered in many voices, a spontaneous echo of a community before which Elena Poniatowska Amor surrenders her place and her voice.*

### **The (North)American Temptation**

**Pedro García Caro:** It is an honor to interview you today, May 19th, on your 78 birthday...

**Elena Poniatowska:** Thanks for having me.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Karl Schuessler, *Elenísima: ingenio y figura de Elena Poniatowska* (Mexico City: Editorial Diana, 2003).

**PGC:** Your knowledge of the US goes back to your high school time here in the fifties. I would like to start by asking you to assess the evolution of the relations between the two countries, Mexico and the US, during those sixty years.

**EP:** Well, it has been a very tense relation because, in a way, the US has finally taken over Mexico. That process certainly started after the [battle of] Álamo, in part because there were people prepared to sell them our lands. That has been over time one of the ways in which the two countries have related to each other: an invading country, and a country that sells its land. But I think that we have recovered many areas of Texas and California, and we have gone as far as Canada using migratory strategies...the poorest Mexicans arrive here...because it is the poorest Mexicans who are coming back, or coming over. Because Mexico, their country, does not offer them any opportunity...because they are hungry. So many of them come back to the US, or they come over for the first time. There are many millions who speak Spanish now in the US. There is an enormous Latino community here.

**PGC:** Regarding Mexican immigration to the US: the absence of the issue of immigration and the Northern border in public Mexican culture and institutional discourses is rather noticeable. Is there a conspiracy of silence involving the Mexican intelligentsia and the Mexican Federal government, who are conspicuously quiet about this large exodus?

**EP:** Many more people talk about it now. People like Carlos Monsiváis have talked about Chicano culture and undocumented workers on many occasions, so there are people who do talk. I am not sure about magazines such as *Vuelta* or *Letras Libres*. But look, even after the [Ciudad] Juárez's killings of women, there were films by Mexicans and Mexican-American filmmakers such as Lourdes Portillo and her *Señorita Extraviada*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Señorita Extraviada," dir. Lourdes Portillo, Distributed by Women Make Movies, 2001.

**PGC:** I am not suggesting that there is no discussion at all, but that it is surprisingly marginal in Mexican public discourse and imaginaries.

**EP:** There was a [Federal] program called “Bienvenido compatriota, paisano aquí te vamos a recibir, te vamos a tratar bien,”<sup>5</sup> geared toward the many Mexicans who come back to Mexico during the September celebration of independence or for Christmas, but I am not sure that it was very successful, I don’t know if it really took off. The truth of the matter is that many towns, especially in Oaxaca, are being emptied out. Zacatecas as a state is mainly supported by the remittances, the money sent by the migrants.

**PGC:** What is your assessment of NAFTA, the free-trade agreement with the US, fifteen years later? What effects has it had on Mexican society and its economy as it has become completely absorbed, as you suggest, by the US? Does the situation allow us to assume that Mexico has become a de facto colony of the US?

**EP:** You are indeed right, everything comes from the US and there are many Mexicans who would like to be or to have been born in the US. So, indeed, there is a craving for all things American, but there is also a strong defense of [Mexican] identity, in places such as Tijuana, or on university campuses...

**PGC:** What would those Mexican cultural national values be and how are they sheltered from the growing Americanization or globalization so conspicuous in Mexico?

**EP:** I think this is a worldwide phenomenon. In a trip to Beijing three years ago, I remember seeing girls and boys dressed in blue jeans, showing their belly buttons, dressed in the exact same fashion dictated by the US. The same thing happens in the [former] Soviet Union. Mexico, as a next-door

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<sup>5</sup> “Bienvenido Paisano” is a program promoted by the Mexican Federal government. See <http://www.paisano.gob.mx/>, visited June 21 2010, 15:35. [Editor’s note. The translation is: “Welcome compatriot, fellow countryman, here we will receive you, we will treat you well.”]

neighbor, is just the same as all the others: denim fabrics have become a uniform all over the world; the whole world wears blue jeans. And in a way it is a good thing, especially for women. Female students in Mexico go to the university with their blue jeans and that makes them equal to men.

**PGC:** What are, then, the values that offer resistance, those that resist a globalizing homogenization? Is there a discourse capable of resisting that globalizing process?

**EP:** You can even see it in the resistance to the Mexican government. You can see it in leftist resistance. There is resistance in Oaxaca, in the women from Juchitán, who do not give up their long skirts and their shirts with ornamented jewelry sown-in,<sup>6</sup> and they do not give in, but these are all the older women. The younger women are indeed succumbing to the American temptation. It is very difficult not to succumb; everyone wants to look like those who triumph.

**PGC:** And yet, this process turns culture into a set of imported references, an import creation not locally produced...

**EP:** But there are things produced locally. I can think, for instance, of newspapers. For example *La Jornada*, or the magazine *Proceso*, but also of people like Carlos Monsiváis, who defends sexual and gender minorities, who defends women, feminism.<sup>7</sup> I believe Mexican identity is very solid. If you go to Chicago, which I just visited, you can go to the Mexican Cultural Institute, a place where culture and art and all sorts of Mexican customs are defended, such as the day of the dead...Mexican culture is sold and this is important. It is sold to Americans, and I don't mean sold in the ugly mercantile sense, but in the sense of defending Mexican values. So, yes, there has been a colonization of Mexico by the US, but there is also a reverse colonization of the US by Latin America. When I was in Chicago I went to a Peruvian restaurant, and even though Peru is much further away

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<sup>6</sup> "Huipilies de cadena" in the original [Translator's note].

<sup>7</sup> Carlos Monsiváis died on June 19, 2010, exactly one month after this interview was recorded.

than Mexico, they follow the Mexican example and they impose their lifestyle, their food, customs. What do they call corn? Yes, “choclo”. There is such a mixture...It is clear: Mexicans have offered an imposing example.

**PGC:** You talk about cultural values such as music, food and folkloric and religious traditions, but what about political values, specific ways of organizing society?

**EP:** We must remember the Zapatista movement opposed NAFTA. It was indeed the Zapatistas who said, together with Marcos, “What will you do with us now? Are you going to kill ten million indigenous people?” They lived in a state [Chiapas] where they would die of curable diseases; they did not have electricity and needed to haul firewood on their backs; we are all familiar with their plight. So there are movements and insurrections. There are also now some radio stations. Now that I am visiting a place so well known for its wood [Oregon] I am reminded of many rural communities in Mexico which defend their lands, but whose members are assassinated by agents working for the lumber industry—by those who cut down forests.

**PGC:** These indigenous solutions, this autonomist localism have clear affiliations with local Mexican anarchist traditions. Is this a model that could be exported to the rest of Latin America?

**EP:** I would like to see it exported to the US, and also to the rest of Latin America. Look, that sign [in the hotel cafeteria where the interview is conducted] says, “Appropriate Attire required. Shirt and Shoes.” Fifty years ago it would not say that... When I arrived in Mexico fifty years ago, there were lots of people going barefoot. I remember I was very impressed, as a little girl coming from France, when I saw people in the street without shoes. But now that is no longer the case, even if their shoes are made of plastic, there are shoes for everyone.

**PGC:** Is this then a result of the policies implemented after the Mexican Revolution?

**EP:** No one ever talks about the Mexican Revolution anymore, not even now that we are commemorating its centenary. I remember it always used to be referred to as the “Glorious Mexican Revolution.” But that discourse became completely tired and empty. Now the policies of this government are directed toward fighting against drug trafficking, a war that is claiming many lives.

**PGC:** Drug trafficking is an economic model of illegal export-import serving the north, but it is destroying Mexican society. What kind of analysis could we begin to elaborate about its causes, as well as its social and economic effects on Mexican society?

**EP:** I don’t know. I think there was a commitment on the part of [President] Calderón with the US, but the effects have been disastrous because many people have died. Apparently several days ago Diego Fernández de Cevallos was kidnapped in Querétaro—by the way, he has no local following, he is even referred to as “el Jefe Diego” [boss Diego].<sup>8</sup> There is no news from him, for all we know he may have already been murdered at this point.<sup>9</sup> I gave a lecture in León, Guanajuato, a place with a conservative, reactionary reputation—it was, after all, the cradle of the Cristeros movement—and there was nothing, not a word of support or empathy toward Diego Fernández de Cevallos.<sup>10</sup> I think the youth is very decided already.

**PGC:** There have also been recent mobilizations in Ciudad Juárez against the assassination of several young people...

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<sup>8</sup> Diego Fernández de Cevallos is a former Presidential Candidate for the conservative party PAN who was kidnapped on May 14, 2010. His fate is still unknown at this time.

<sup>9</sup> Ver: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/ultimas/2010/05/15/diego-fernandez-de-cevallos-la-trayectoria>, <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/coberturas/esp309.html>, visited June 19, 2010, 09:40.

<sup>10</sup> The Cristero movement was a Catholic counterrevolutionary movement during the late twenties, which emerged in the wake of secular reforms instituted by the Mexican Constitution of 1917.



**EP:** Some protests have taken place, even against the law in Arizona that criminalizes immigrants.

**PGC:** President Calderón visited the White House today and met with President Obama, who has used the press conference to condemn the Arizona law, because it will use racial profiling and further criminalize Hispanic or Mexican people. Do you think the Obama administration has a new political outlook in relation to Mexico?

**EP:** I am hoping so. We have much faith in Obama. There was a general cheerful reaction to his election. The very idea that McCain or that lady, that crazy goat called Sarah Palin could make it, terrified us...the woman who could see Russia from her window. But Obama is very committed... Ultimately the people calling the shots are the big monopolies, the big transnational corporations that govern all countries. There have been some anti-globalization demonstrations, some in Cancún, in Mexico, in my own country.

### **The Red Princess and the Forgotten**

**PGC:** Thus far we have looked at the relations between the two neighboring countries, and I would like to talk a bit more about this last sentence: “Mexico, my own country,” and in particular about the way in which your journalistic and novelistic *oeuvre* has proven to be fundamental as a way to give voice to those who Buñuel called “The Forgotten ones” in his famous film. That is, those forgotten by the official narratives of Mexican society: the victims of Tlatelolco or of the 1985 quake... Your biographer Michael K. Schuessler echoes the friendly nickname some friends of yours came up with: “The Red Princess.”<sup>11</sup> Has your commitment to just causes changed over the years?

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<sup>11</sup> Schuessler, *Elenísima*.

**EP:** It hasn't. I believe that as I grow older Mexican reality becomes harsher and that we must be there. It is impossible to ignore it. Conditions are getting worse for everyone instead of improving; people have...well, there have been some gains, like women's right to end their pregnancy, some instances of feminist advances...but also the fact that the economic situation makes couples more similar. Because, at least in Mexico, if a couple wants to get married, they need the salaries of two people, the man and the woman, and if they want to have a child, she has all the right to go on with her career, so they both take care of the baby. In my time, well, the husband or the father did not know even what a diaper was. Now fathers get up during the night. The only thing they do not do is nurse the baby – they do everything else. I remember when my children were born; my husband was an astronomer, so he was completely out of orbit. I remember that I even had to baby-proof the house myself, covering the power outlets with medical tape. I was terrified the children might touch them...

**PGC:** Speaking about that crucial moment in your life when you were a working mom, I would like to mention your exemplary contribution as a woman and a public intellectual in a very male-dominated environment. However, there appears to be a clear glass ceiling in Mexico, as in other countries, not only for women, but also for other groups such as indigenous people. Is there really such a glass ceiling? What are those limitations and the possible regression we may be experiencing?

**EP:** It is obvious that women do not have the same opportunities men do, and worse, many of the women who reach positions of power adopt the same male models. Because they believe they owe something to the men that "allowed" them to get to those positions, so they forget about the other women. They are not the defenders of their own causes.

**PGC:** You are describing a sort of gender collaborationism...

**EP:** Yes. I remember a woman who became Federal Deputy, Macrina Rabadán,<sup>12</sup> but women in the chamber don't... in the first place they receive enormous salaries that they should just decline. I believe the representatives from the leftist party, the PRD, contribute some of their salary to the party or some other cause. Those salaries are sickening.

**PGC:** I would like to talk a bit about the dynamics of cooptation and perhaps bribery practiced by the Mexican government, just like so many other governments. Also about how you rejected the Xavier Villaurrutia prize in 1971. Here we have, on the one hand, an attempt by the state to co-opt and purchase an oppositional intellectual, and on the other, a non-conformist gesture that defined you well. What is, then, the role of Mexican intellectuals, and in particular of female intellectuals?

**EP:** The most important role for anyone who has a job is to do it right. I don't even know if I am an intellectual. Any job: this chair, for instance, is well made; this table is also well built...doing the job right. Because a writer who is very militant, even with the most difficult causes, if he is a bad writer...well finally everything turns out bad, their militancy, their...[writing]. This is something some people accused one of our greatest novelists of; they did it to destroy him, or to help him destroy himself. I am talking about José Revueltas. Revueltas was a great novelist and short-story writer, who spent half of his life in prison, or perhaps even more. He is someone who has not yet been valued.

**PGC:** You did interview Revueltas and also visited him in the Lecumberri prison. What is your relationship with other public intellectuals and writers of your generation, such as Fuentes, Pacheco, Monsiváis...?

**EP:** With Pacheco and Monsiváis we are like siblings. I feel we are really very fond of each other, we see each other. This goes back a very long time now, we have collaborated many times, and now that Monsiváis is so ill, I

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<sup>12</sup> Macrina Rabadán Santana (1910-2000). Representative and founder of the Popular Party in the State of Guerrero in 1948.

don't even feel the sun's heat. And with... [Fuentes] I have a tendency to distance myself from powerful people and I have always done it throughout my life. It is a natural inclination; it is inherent to my nature... I do not have relations with powerful people. Now, I admire the works of Octavio Paz, I also admire some of the works by Carlos Fuentes, such as *La región más transparente*, *Aura*, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, but no...I rarely see them. Well, Octavio, I would need to make a tunnel under the ground and I would then perhaps see him, but I rarely see them.

**PGC:** Carlos Fuentes is rarely in Mexico. Is his an imaginary country?

**EP:** No. I think he has a very real Mexico within himself but I seldom see him. Not because I do not want to. I would like to see him, because he is brilliant, but I just don't get to see him much.

**PGC:** Let's move from the literary scuffles to the political ones again. What three social reforms would you carry out if you were to occupy the presidential palace of Los Pinos tomorrow?

**EP:** The first social reform would be to feed everyone. How this could be achieved, I don't know. Let everyone have food. And then, I firmly believe in education. In my country many people go without schooling and only a few reach higher education. I also think it would be very important to promote science. No one promotes science and technology...well...it would be crucial to have a good National Council for the Sciences, because I believe there is a lot of talent in the country. I know there are very gifted people in Oaxaca, very creative and intelligent people, people who do not get the slightest chance.

**PGC:** However, in the face of the situation of poverty and desperation people experience in Mexico, the more recent generation of Mexican writers, under the name *Crack*, appears to be literally cracking after their open political association with Fox's and Calderón's PAN, who seem to see Mexico in a very different way. Do you think that perhaps that generation

or any other group of writers is ready to carry on the important work of people like you, Monsiváis, and many others, who have fought so strongly for a more just society?

**EP:** There are some individuals. I don't think people work in groups. You could say there are individuals, but there is no longer a group of creators around a person. Well, there is the magazine *Letras Libres*, around Enrique Krauze, *Nexos* around Héctor Aguilar Camín, and there was also a group around *México en la cultura* with Monsiváis and Pacheco. But there is no longer a big magazine uniting many...

**PGC:** Is there some disappointment on your part with regards to these new writers?

**EP:** The younger ones have a very personal search. There is a young writer, for instance, Cristina Rivera Garza, and many people are reading her. She teaches at the University in California, but she has a very personal search, she is looking into new literary avenues. We will have to wait and see who emerges...young people like Agustín Ramos. There are also young critics such as Christopher Domínguez, but they are more in the vein of Octavio Paz.

**PGC:** There are two important anniversaries this year: the bicentennial of the Mexican independence and the centennial of the Mexican Revolution. There have been several international summits where Spain and Mexico have participated. How do you see the postcolonial relations between Mexico and Spain?

**EP:** I believe there is little traction around those two commemorations in Mexico. I don't perceive much enthusiasm or participation. For instance, I haven't seen any new publication about Mexican history. Perhaps the government may have published one, but I haven't seen anyone publishing anything about either the revolution or the period of independence of any relevance. I just haven't seen anything remarkable. Our national heroes are

fomented so that they are then completely forgotten. I don't know more about Hidalgo this year than what I knew before, which was just whatever any teacher might have invented.

**PGC:** Is this lack of support for a national culture part of the collapse of the national state in Mexico?

**EP:** For a long time people have been saying that the stories told in national histories were all lies: that no children were heroes in Chapultepec against the Americans in 1848, dressing themselves in the national flag and throwing themselves into the void; that no Pípila had existed—that miner who had carried a stone in the back as a shield<sup>13</sup>—as it is hard to know what happened and what not.

**PGC:** Are any of these stories worth remembering?

**EP:** I think the educational project has to come from each person at this point. It has to be a modern narrative and needs to come from each young person who says: "I want to study science." Or that girl who says: "I want to study physics, or astronomy." There we can find a stimulating new young project. But trying to invent again some sort of national history, what for?

**PGC:** And finally a topic you seemed to avoid earlier: the Mexican Revolution—though no one seems to speak about it anymore. Your biographer talks at length about your affiliations with the nobility and how your Mexican Amor-Escandón relatives were feudal lords even before the times of Porfirio Díaz. Is there anything left from that time?

**EP:** Yes, they were hacienda holders, and the Yturbes too. Now politicians are starting to purchase haciendas. There is some sort of come back, and some large haciendas are also turned into hotels. And these are the same

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<sup>13</sup> During the first wars of Mexican independence in 1810 the storage house in Guanajuato became a military garrison and was assaulted by anti-Spanish forces. A miner named "Pípila" is said to have set the gates on fire so that the garrison could be stormed by insurgent forces.

haciendas that used to have indentured servants. I could tell you a story about my mother: my mother loved the hacienda system, she came from France, she was one of those Mexicans born in Paris, and she would come back to the hacienda, and she told me a story of the time of the Revolution. There was a worker there who complained about the revolution. He was called Nicho, and he was furious; he would say, “and now who will give us our cakes?” There was that odd mixture, the good master, the paternalism of the lordship, side by side with the voucher system and the corporal punishments.

**PGC:** Is there then a bit of nostalgia for that world in those who are purchasing haciendas?

**EP:** I don’t know who would feel nostalgia for that. Well, yes, maybe some of those hotels, usually US chains, and also some of the bankers. In Mérida a banker has purchased some of those old *henequén* haciendas. His name is Roberto Hernández.

### **Life Stories**

**PGC:** I would like now to move on to a series of more biographical questions to celebrate your 78 birthday. This is an attempt at a quick biography of your sixty years as a journalist, writer, novelist. Already at 18 you were quick becoming a political journalist...

**EP:** At 18 I was not yet a political journalist. I was merely learning shorthand writing, but I have forgotten it all...

**PGC:** Seven decades have passed since your arrival in Mexico in the forties. If we could think about decades and about the people, the ideas or images that would sum up each decade for you. Beginning in the forties, your parents, your education...

**EP:** I didn't see my father; we didn't see him for many years. All I could do was miss him, and pray that nothing bad would happen to him. As for the rest, I have very fond memories of a British School, Windsor School, with a superb schoolmaster. That woman deserves all my respects: those were beautiful formative years. I have not had a better model.

**PGC:** What was the atmosphere in Mexico at the time?

**EP:** We lived in a very privileged atmosphere, of "good people" as they used to say. It was such a setting... For instance, King Karol of Romania and his lover Mrs. Lupescu would visit and be received by Maximino Ávila Camacho, the brother of President Manuel Ávila Camacho. It was an atmosphere of people who would meet at the French Horse Riding Club, go to bullfights...the diva at the time was Dolores del Río, and she too was a girl from a "good" family. I was a young girl, but I remember it all the same way. In the case of a French visiting scholar, Jacques Soustelle, I felt there was a little bit more of interest for culture, though I only came to realize this after the fact; otherwise it was all about balls, parties, and entertaining.

**PGC:** And yet, in the early fifties you started to publish as a journalist and to leave that world behind. You have said on several occasions that you started out with little preparation, and that you learnt the hard way...

**EP:** No preparation at all. I still feel very unprepared. Everything I do, each book, I still have to plug away quite a bit. Unlike you, I don't have the fortune of an academic training, I did not finish any studies, and I only went to a school run by nuns.

**PGC:** How do you remember that decade in relation to women's emancipation in the workplace? Was it hard for you without academic studies to establish yourself in a world dominated by men?

**EP:** It did seem too difficult, but I was kind of pigeonholed, and I did not mean to step out of the corral. Women were immediately enclosed in the



section called “Social Life,” and they would say women were studying or working on their “WIGM”, that is, “While I Get Married.” There was no chance for women to get a good job, a good article...they were never given to women, always to men. I worked for *Excelsior* and the big investigative articles were regularly assigned to Julio Scherer García, who now works as editor for *Proceso*, and who is also a very close friend of mine.

**PGC:** And yet, to have been able to move up and publish so widely in that context is a real success. What was your strategy?

**EP:** Well, I didn’t have one. I just interviewed people. I didn’t know a thing about Mexico, [I had] no idea about who Diego Rivera, Orozco, or Siqueiros were. So working from a very ignorant point of departure, I would ask not only naïve questions, but also very uninformed ones. Of course, some people could say this was a strategy, but it was not, it was authentic ignorance. I did not have any idea or training. I guess readers would say, “OK, let’s see what she will ask now, what is her next *faux pas*.” And that is the way a group of readers emerged, readers who wanted to have fun. How does this one dare to ask Diego Rivera about his big belly, or about his small milk teeth?” Because his teeth were really small in proportion to his body, and so on. But why? Because I had never seen a single painting by him.

**PGC:** But by the sixties you had become very active and started to publish and by ‘68, with Tlatelolco, you started a very visible political activity, preceded of course by your feminist short stories. Could we discuss those two different moments?

**EP:** In 1959 there was a rail workers’ strike and I was surprised as I remember when I read in the newspapers that the government was blaming Russian agents and that two or three Russian citizens were expelled from Mexico. I started to visit the Lecumberri prison, which was not very common, and there it was relatively easy to obtain life stories, and I became very good friends with the rail workers who were imprisoned. What did I

have in common with them? No matter, they told me their lives and I was able to...later I published a novel called *El tren pasa primero*, based on the life of a rail worker leader, Demetrio Vallejo.<sup>14</sup>

**PGC:** How did you move from *Excelsior* to prison?

**EP:** It was the easiest thing. A prisoner wrote to me inviting me to see a play called *El licenciado Noteapures*. His name was Jesús Sánchez García, and I went to the prison with pleasure. It was one of those days when people were allowed to visit the prison. This was fifty-nine and it was not just the rail workers who were in prison. Alfaro Siqueiros was also there, and the Colombian poet Álvaro Mutis, who is a very good friend of mine to this day.

**PGC:** And whose correspondence with you has been recently published...

**EP:** No. It's just his letters that have been published, he never kept mine... No one ever keeps my letters; they throw them out with the trash. Seriously.

**PGC:** You are exaggerating! *El tren pasa primero* is a very recent literary project and yet it has a set of intellectual goals that seem to be from another time. It has been very well received and well read. Is there, then, a reading public who still demands social novels?

**EP:** I don't know. I wrote that novel... first I wrote a biography of Demetrio Vallejo. I read it to him so that it would be more accurate. And I remember I started to read it to him, I stopped and turned and he was sleeping, so I told him "readers too will fall asleep, and even harder, if you are not interested in your own life." So at that point, I put it away. He had also established a series of vetoes. He was always getting off with somebody or another, he loved women, and so he set some limits to what I could write.

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<sup>14</sup> Elena Poniatowska, *El tren pasa primero* (Mexico City: Alfaguara, 2005).

He said: “A social leader has no private life, no love life.” He was a very bad head of his family, a bad father and husband, I am not sure if he also was a bad lover. I kept all of that and then about twenty years later I asked a young student if he knew anything about Demetrio Vallejo and the rail workers’ strike, and he said to me: “No, I have no idea,” in a sweeping way. I thought: “this is really unfair to Vallejo, a real hero, and a rare leader, but it is also unfair to me because I went to that prison so many times, it was so far away...” At that point I dug out everything and wrote the novel. But yes, you are right, I feel it is a novel of its time, without much potential for innovation. I also know I am very critical of myself...it is a novel really marked by its time and by a style of writing.

**PGC:** This is an essential part of your project as a writer...

**EP:** Yes, writing about people no one usually talks about. Well, *Revueltas* does, and Monsiváis too in his essays, he doesn’t really need to write a novel, but these are not the general topics...

**PGC:** We still have several decades to cover... We haven’t discussed the sixties in depth. A decade marked by the expectations generated by the Cuban Revolution but which concludes with repression in ’68. Was literature and writing a form of exile, in the face of being unable...?

**EP:** It was a way of telling all the young people and those who had gone to prison that they were not alone, that there were people who were ready to fight for them. It was a good way of showing solidarity and telling them that they were right.

**PGC:** The seventies started with the publication of *La Noche de Tlatelolco* and your rejection of the Villaurrutia Prize in 1971, a clear political statement. It is also a decade in which the age-old public distrust toward the government was reconfirmed in the face of political repression and the “dirty war”. Was it a lost decade in the midst of the Cold War? Many Mexican intellectuals maintained their collaboration with the state working

in the diplomatic corps—Paz, Castellanos, Fuentes—though they all also voiced their protests and even stepped down from their positions. How could we evaluate that decade?

**EP:** Well, the personal reasons each of them may have had to accept public positions are often subjective. Rosario [Castellanos], the case I know best, was in the middle of a divorce from her husband, and I said to her “but, why?” and she told me that she felt a family obligation to the Echeverría, they treated her as one of their own.<sup>15</sup> And besides, she did her job as an ambassador splendidly. She had written the poem “Memorial de Tlatelolco.” Now, what would have happened had she lived on?<sup>16</sup> Would she have been fully co-opted by the state? That, I don’t know. I knock on wood hoping that that would not have been the case. But I don’t know. I don’t think so. All her Chiapas books are very relevant even today. Her books have much to do with the reality of Chiapas and are written from the viewpoint of the indigenous people. In her case, however, she had many problems as a woman. At one point I asked my husband, who was a member of the Colegio Nacional, “Why is Rosario not admitted to the Colegio?” And he said to me that “many people there think of her as a woman.” She then wrote to me: “How could I change my condition?”

**PGC:** Could you think of a person that defines the decade?

**EP:** Well, for me it is clearly José Revueltas’ blaming himself for the failures of ‘68 and Guillermo Haro, who was very committed. The chancellor of the UNAM, Barrios Sierra, was also very important.

**PGC:** Thinking about the eighties, the quake, neo-liberalism Reagan style and the Chicago Boys, the retreat of the national welfare state, a state that abandons citizens to their luck as you show in your chronicle of the Mexico

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<sup>15</sup> Luis Echeverría was Secretary of Interior at the time of the Tlatelolco massacre and later President of Mexico from 1970 to 1976.

<sup>16</sup> Rosario Castellanos died in August 1974.

City earthquake.<sup>17</sup> Would things have been different under the presidency of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas? How would you like to remember that decade?

**EP:** Well, I think it was very bad for Mexico that someone of Cárdenas's caliber did not become president, it was very bad. He is to this day a very important and valuable political leader. It is significant that someone like López Obrador—who I have been supporting since 2004,<sup>18</sup> since his legal prosecution—treats Cárdenas, the “engineer”, with such great respect.

**PGC:** Let's move on to the nineties: the collapse of the Soviet model, the fall of the Berlin wall, and their corollaries: NAFTA, neoliberal globalization. Can we narrate those years as a confirmation of Mexico's national failure through defeat and constant betrayal?

**EP:** Yes, I think those are years...except for the Zapatista movement, and what has been going on in Chiapas, which really was an infusion of hope for many. Otherwise, those years represented failures, drawbacks, the institutionalization of corruption in the country at large, which is, of course, linked to the ongoing process of “Colombianization” of Mexico, though I don't know much about this. This is not something new to the Calderón administration, it has been going on for many years now. Political posts are seen as an outlet for private enrichment and wealth. Popular wit sums it up: “a poor politician does a poor job at it.” That's what Mexicans say.

**PGC:** But other social movements are emerging, and you have discussed some of them at length in your books: the Zapatistas, the doctors, the APPO in Oaxaca. The left seems to be still able to find spaces of resistance...

**EP:** I know little of the APPO in Oaxaca. It's the teachers' movement. But you are right, there are spaces of resistance: the university, the UNAM, among the youth, social researchers, scientists. The chancellor [of the

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<sup>17</sup> Elena Poniatowska, *Nada, Nadie: Las Voces del Temblor* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Elena Poniatowska, *Amanecer en el Zócalo: Los 50 Días Que Confrontaron a México* (Mexico City: Planeta, 2007).

UNAM] Pablo González Casanova, who has maintained a very consistent and committed attitude over the years. There are others like him, like historian Adolfo Gilly. Newspapers like *Reforma*, with their editor Lorenzo Meyer, a great political analyst. There are many valuable individuals in Mexico. José Goldenberg had a very relevant role in the recent elections.

**PGC:** Thinking about the new century, its first decade dominated by the Bush administration, the completion of the “Colombianization” of Mexico—to use the image you evoked—leaves many without hope, cynical and immersed in a postmodern malaise. What are your new projects, your new commitments?

**EP:** I am a great believer in youth, I believe in young scientists like my son Mane and his colleagues, who ardently fight, and who having had job offers abroad, in the US and France, still persevere, they stay in Mexico to lead and realize the country they believe in.

**PGC:** I would like to finish this interview with an open question to a seasoned interviewer like you: what question would you have asked yourself?

**EP:** Well, perhaps what you suggested earlier, what is my work in progress, my new novel about? I am not working now on a social issue, but instead trying to think about a Mexican atmosphere I know little about. It is not a social project, but rather it deals with my European past, and my adaptation to Mexico in the forties and fifties. I had already written about this before, mainly in *La Flor de Lis*,<sup>19</sup> which is perhaps more personal. But that is what I am also writing about now.

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<sup>19</sup> Elena Poniatowska, *La Flor de Lis* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1988).