



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oral History Association

Review: "¿Quién Quiere Usted Que Sea Bueno?"

Reviewed Work(s): Hasta No Verte, Jesus Mío by Elena Poniatowska; Massacre in Mexico by Elena Poniatowska and Helen R. Lane; Fuerte es el Silencio by Elena Poniatowska; Domingo 7 by Elena Poniatowska

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Source: *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 14 (1986), pp. 73-82

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the Oral History Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3674787>

Accessed: 09-08-2017 20:20 UTC

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“¿Quién Quiere Usted Que Sea Bueno?”

RICHARD CÁNDIDA SMITH

HASTA NO VERTE, JESUS MÍO. By Elena Poniatowska. México: Ediciones Era, 1969. 316 pp. Softbound, n.p.

MASSACRE IN MEXICO. By Elena Poniatowska, translated by Helen R. Lane from *La noche de Tlatelolco: testimonios de historia oral*, introduction by Octavio Paz. New York: Viking Press, 1975. 333 pp., with illustrations. Hardbound, n.p.

FUERTE ES EL SILENCIO. By Elena Poniatowska. México: Ediciones Era, 1980. 278 pp., with illustrations. Softbound, n.p.

DOMINGO 7. By Elena Poniatowska. México: Ediciones Oceano, 1982. 284 pp., with illustrations. Softbound, n.p.

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On the staff of *Novedades* since 1955, Elena Poniatowska is one of Mexico's preeminent journalists, particularly lauded for the candor and depth of her interviews. Indeed, in 1978 she won, the first woman to do so, Mexico's Premio Nacional de Periodismo, an honor equivalent to the Pulitzer Prize, for her interviewing. Despite her success, Poniatowska has complained of having to spend so much of her time doing journalism when her real interest is literature. "Newspaper work has always been a terrible struggle for me," she told María Luisa Mendoza. "Instead of spending my energies in literature, I spend them in newspaper work . . . it pains me . . . and for this reason I always write my own material along with my newspaper articles."¹ Still, her most critically acclaimed work might not exist were she not at heart an interviewer. *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío*, winner of the Premio Mazatlán in 1970, is a documentary novel based on the life story of a laundress. María Luisa Mendoza reports, "Three times a week Elena went to Jesusa's house . . . there she recorded and recorded their long talks, full of the wiles of that Mexican woman, an Adelita [a camp follower in the Mexican Revolution], who today washes and irons clothing in the old way with irons heated by charcoal . . . Her stories, typed by Elena time and time again, constitute a firsthand confession of how a common woman was able to have such a fertile yet unknown life."²

Based it may be on oral testimony recorded onto tape, but *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* shares quite a bit with other Latin American novels published in the sixties and seventies. The narrative unrolls impressionistically with broad disjunctions of time and place that span the half century from the 1910 Mexican Revolution to the mid-sixties. Jesusa's belief in spirits blends fantasy and reality in ways comparable to "magical realism," a major literary trend of the period.³ *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* is also a picaresque novel in the tradition of *Lazarillo de Tormes*, one of the classics of early

¹Quoted from María Luisa Mendoza, *Oiga usted* (Coyoacán, México: Samo, 1973), 90.

²Ibid.

³The most well known work of "magical realism" is Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

Renaissance Spanish literature. Jesusa, a representative of the bottom of society, experiences an unending series of threats to her survival. She develops a repertory of tricks to save herself. The structure thus embodies a critique of social institutions and a role model for rebellion. Similar to other Mexican novels of the period, such as Carlos Fuentes's *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (translated by Sam Hileman [New York: Farrar, Straus, 1964]), Poniatowska's novel refuses to idealize the Mexican Revolution and critiques the social structure that emerged in its aftermath. What is quite different from most other works treating the same general issues is that this critique is made from the viewpoint of a working-class woman.

Since *Hasta no verte, Jesus mío* is a novel, Poniatowska remained free to rework the material for her own ends, but the degree of Poniatowska's intervention is a question. Throughout the novel, the laundress Jesusa Palancares comes across as a real person; it is she who appears to speak directly to the reader, through the medium of Poniatowska. Jesusa is an illiterate peasant woman from Tehuantepec in southern Mexico. She lives at the very bottom of society (she constantly refers to herself as “garbage”) but rebels and finds ways to achieve self-determination. Although not without a price.

Jesusa rebels against Catholicism and joins a spiritualist group. The reader can view spiritualism as a surrender to superstition, but the spirits are clearly a reification of Jesusa's own internal voice, which she must listen to if she is going to survive. The spirits guide her to stop drinking, to stop getting into fights, to pull herself out of the fringes of Mexico's underworld. The spirits also strengthen her sense of generosity and justice.

Jesusa rebels against nationalism. She states, “No me siento mexicana ni reconozco a los mexicanos. Aquí no existe mas que pura conveniencia y puro interés. Si you tuviera dinero y bienes, sería mexicana . . .”⁴ (I don't feel like a Mexican, and I don't recognize the Mexican heritage. Here there is nothing but personal convenience and private interest. If I had money and property, I would be a Mexican.)

⁴*Hasta no verte, Jesus mío*, 218.

The novel is a record of work. Jesusa moves from job to job in the growing Mexican economy of the twentieth century. Working as maid, factory hand, waitress, or laundress, she comes to see money and class as the important factors in society. (Her dream is to return to Tehuantepec and become a farmer, but she always lacks the funds.) The rich exploit, and Jesusa continuously gets into trouble by rebelling. The poor take advantage of each other, and here Jesusa is defenseless. Her compassion for those in trouble leads her again and again into situations where she is victimized. Even her adopted children betray her.

Jesusa rebels against marriage. When she was fifteen, she was forced into marrying an army officer. For him the attraction was the thrill of taming this woman's independent spirit. A war ensues which she wins by drawing a gun on him. She stopped him from beating her, and no man ever again succeeded in physically mistreating her. She tells of how she beat up other husbands who abused their wives, and how she tried unsuccessfully to convince other women to become like her. She is aware that Mexican women of her class do not want to live like her, so alone. Widowed at seventeen, she had many subsequent proposals of marriage but met only one man she ever wanted to marry. He respected her, but, being a taxi driver, he came from a higher social class and his family intervened to stop the marriage.

Jesusa is certain that God has a message for her, and she must interrogate the people and the incidents of her life for their meanings. This gives the novel a philosophical tone, although expressed entirely in earthy, unacademic language. The novel is the voice of a rebel who has come to terms with herself, but not with the society surrounding her.

How much of this is Poniatowska and how much Jesusa (or the degree to which Jesusa is only one person or a composite) is unknown. Most critics have ignored the oral sources of the novel and have analyzed it purely as a brilliant piece of feminist imagination, marked by strongly innovative use of spoken Spanish.⁵ The actual

⁵For examples of English-language criticism of Poniatowska, see Octavio Paz's introduction to *Massacre in Mexico*; Charles M. Tatum, in *Latin American Women Writers: Yesterday and Today*, ed. Yvette E. Miller and Charles M. Tatum (Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1977); Celia de Zapata, "One

book itself not once explicitly acknowledges its oral source, neither in the text nor in an introduction or afterword. If the reader knows the story behind the book, clues pointing to an oral history interview process seem to be present throughout. Carl Ryant in his review of *Lise du Plat Pays* commented on the possibilities of oral histories taking the form of popular romantic novels.⁶ It remains unclear the degree to which Poniatowska is responsible for the structure of the incidents, but the very way Jesusa speaks raises questions that parallel Ryant's about the forms which interviewees use to recount their stories. There might be a tendency to follow patterns derived from popular and traditional literary forms, as these provide easily available narrative frameworks for interviewees to use in conceptualizing and interpreting their lives as “stories.” The distinction between the published text and the original sound recordings/transcripts (hopefully preserved) should provide fruitful research for literary scholars.

While Poniatowska was working on *Hasta no verte, Jesus mío*, Mexico was rocked by increasingly violent battles between police and students demanding the release of Demetrio Vallejo, the president of the railroad workers' union, jailed since 1958 for leading a national railroad strike. As police tactics became more brutal, the student movement grew rapidly with strikes closing universities and preparatory high schools in the capitol. The government sent in the army to occupy UNAM, the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Students were then joined by hundreds of thousands of workers, peasants, and professionals who marched peacefully in support of the students' program: release of all political prisoners, reform of the penal codes, disbanding of elite police units identified with corruption and brutality, punishment of police officers abusing their authority, indemnification of the injured and of the families of those killed. Student protests in

Hundred Years of Women Writers in Latin America,” *Latin American Review* 3 (Summer 1975); Lucia Fox-Lockert, *Women Novelists in Spain and Spanish America* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1979). None discusses *Hasta no verte, Jesus mío* as an oral testimony based work.

⁶*Oral History Review* 13 (1985): 171-72.

Mexico became a national movement for accountability in government.

The protests of 1968 climaxed October 2 when police and army opened fire on several thousand peaceful demonstrators packed into the Plaza de Tlatelolco. Between three and four hundred persons were killed, many of them residents of the apartment blocks surrounding the plaza, many of them small children. The exact number who died remains unknown; as Poniatowska reminded her readers twelve years later, in *Fuerte es el silencio*, the official government position has continued to maintain that only two soldiers died that evening. Mexican newspapers, many dependent on government advertisements for revenue, spoke in terms of twenty or so casualties. Those who survived the massacre and relatives of the victims know the truth. Among them is Poniatowska; her brother, Jan Poniatowska Amor, a high school student, was killed at Tlatelolco.

Massacre in Mexico, first published in Spanish in 1971 and winner of the Premio Villaurrutia, is constructed in its entirety from interviews conducted in October and November 1968. The anguish and the anger of both interviewer and her informants are raw. Poniatowska quotes over 200 people: 68 students, 33 teachers, 31 "mothers of a family," 20 workers, 12 residents of Tlatelolco, 6 shopkeepers, 6 fathers, 6 policemen and soldiers, 8 professionals (including doctors and attorneys), 3 members of the press corps, and an assortment of children, nursery school teachers, communist militants, hippies, tourists, and staff working for the Olympic games that began October 12. Each interviewee is identified by name and occupation, by political affiliation if relevant, and, if a student, by school and field of study. Militants and leaders are clearly distinguished from bystanders and rank and file.

Many of the interviewee quotes are as short as one line; the longest runs about fifteen pages. A dozen voices emerge that are developed as characters. Their personal testimony comes to form the backbone of the narrative.

Massacre in Mexico is divided into two parts. The first 172 pages cover a period of 4 months, July through October 1968. Poniatowska sketches the emergence of the movement, its goals, its clashes with police, arrests, torture, divisions, arguments over goals and models and language (e.g., should posters bear the portrait of Che rather

than Benito Juarez?), conflict with parents over life styles, suspicions of stool pigeons, and self-defenses by those suspected. After a one-page prologue, the oral-based text is presented without any direct commentary by Poniatowska. Interview segments are broken by frequent quotations from leaflets and banners. The puzzled, if often sympathetic, observations of the older generation are included. The picture presented is neither coherent nor analytical; demands and strategies are understood differently by different informants. What the book captures brilliantly is an emotional truth about four months of youthful rebellion and the students' faith that they could reform their country nonviolently no matter the physical punishment dealt them.

The second half focuses entirely on the night of October 2. In this part of the book, as Poniatowska says, “there echo the cries of those who died and the cries of those who lived on after them.”⁷ To telling effect, Poniatowska has intercut her narrative with newspaper reports and official statements. The government's version was straightforward: sniper fire started from the rooftops; government forces returned fire in self-defense with every effort to minimize casualties; only a few people were killed or injured, even though the battle continued for several hours. Poniatowska does not deny this version; it is presented in the book alongside the fragmented and fragmentary accounts she has collected from her informants. Brutal images linger: the curious eleven-year-old boy who peeped up to see what's happening and is shot in the head; two mothers and a nursery school teacher who stop soldiers from bayoneting prisoners; a young couple lying in their own blood who pledge to marry if they survive. The eyewitnesses contradict each other over details, but out of the assembled points of vision a unified picture does emerge. Oral history and literature here converge: the recording of emotion points to the truth of lived experience, the *meaning* of the past. As long as we can relive the emotions of past events, those events can be said to be still alive. For general reader and historian alike, *Massacre in Mexico* provides an exceptionally vivid starting point for looking at the events of 1968.

⁷*Massacre in Mexico*, 199.

Fuerte es el silencio, written nine years later, continues Poniatowska's investigation of the events unleashed by Tlatelolco. The depth of the silence her work investigates is dramatized by her in the prologue. She begins an interview with a construction worker, a resident of one of the shantytowns which ring Mexico City, by asking him for his name. His response: "Pues póngale nomás Juan" —Just call me Juan. She continues, ". . . como si con dar su nombre temieran molestar, ocupar un sitio en el espacio y en el tiempo que no les corresponde." (. . . as if by giving a name, they [the poor] are afraid of making a disturbance, of occupying a place in space and time which isn't properly theirs.) When Poniatowska persists in pressing the question, "Como se llama usted?" it bounces back to her, "Quien?" "Usted." "Yo?" "Si, usted." "Pues póngale nomás Juan, o lo que quiera, Ciro me llamo pero puedo responder a otro nombre, al que usted mande, cualquiera es bueno."⁸ ("What's your name?" "Who?" "You." "Me?" "Yes, you." "Oh, just call me Juan, or whatever you want. My name is Ciro, but I can answer to another name: whatever you want to use is fine.")

The book is divided into five chapters, of which three are constructed from interweaving oral testimony and Poniatowska's editorial comments. The text includes her questions and lengthy descriptions of the context in which the interviews were conducted. In "Diario de una huelga de hambre" (Diary of a Hunger Strike), Poniatowska interviews mothers and relatives of Mexico's 481 *desaparecidos* during a 1980 hunger strike and sit-in at Mexico City's cathedral. "Los desaparecidos políticos" (Missing Political Prisoners) follows with lengthy interviews with two imprisoned militants, a woman and a man for whom urban guerrilla warfare seemed the only possible response to Tlatelolco. Poniatowska has sympathy for them as victims of violence but becomes impatient and curt as they speak of "historical conjunctions," "the essential concatenation," and theories of historical change drawn from Mao, Guevara, and Debray without any concern for what the Mexican people actually want in their lives.⁹

⁸*Fuerte es el silencio*, 11.

⁹Poniatowska does not deny that some of the political prisoners who have "disappeared" were *guerrilleros* who broke the laws; her complaint is that a system of law requires formal charges, court proceedings, and punishment based on recorded verdicts.

In the concluding chapter, “La colonia Rubén Jaramillo,” the book goes back to 1972 when Poniatowska traveled to an agricultural cooperative in the state of Morelos, not far from Mexico City. Armed peasants had created a liberated zone to free themselves from police depredations and the banditry of the local merchants. Poniatowska focuses on a portrait of the peasants’ leader, the charismatic el Güero, Florencio Medrano Mederos, drawn from interviews with him and with his followers. The chapter ends tragically: the local police occupied the cooperative; el Güero slipped into the sierra and became a guerrillero. Poniatowska later received unconfirmable information that Medrano may have been killed by the police in 1978.

Fuerte es el silencio builds a troubling picture of a country slowly sliding into a situation where violence, both from the government and from its opponents, replaces intelligent dialogue. There is no question where Poniatowska’s sympathies lie: the political system exists to provide for the actual material and spiritual needs of people. The government’s authoritarian policies, coupled with greed for power and money on the part of many functionaries, silence the people, and those with grievances come to feel they have no alternatives but armed rebellion. Still Poniatowska does not idealize those who walk around with guns or think they can change society simply through violence.

The mothers and relatives of the *desaparecidos* emerge as the most sympathetic figures. They are breaking tradition and endangering their lives by challenging the government, since to speak and be heard would entail a political revolution. One figure, Rosario Ibarra de Piedra, stands out in particular. She is a woman transformed by her battle to get the government to admit they have arrested her son and to tell her where he is. She appears later in *Domingo 7*, where the reader meets her as the first woman ever to run for president of Mexico. *Domingo 7*, one of Poniatowska’s more recent books, consists of conversations with the seven candidates for president in the 1982 elections.¹⁰ It is a topical book of more

¹⁰Since 1929 all of Mexico’s presidents have been members of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). The PRI’s control of all levels of government, with the exception of a handful of local governments, in effect makes Mexico a one-party state. While national elections are free, Mexicans never have had any doubt that the winner will be the PRI candidate.

limited interest than the earlier three books discussed here, but for the United States reader there will be surprising insights: the U.S. is discussed on only 4 of 284 pages, the conflicts in Central America are not mentioned at all; only one candidate (and he's in the opposition) shares the North American faith in private enterprise. The mainstream of Mexican politics sees the world very differently, and we in the United States perhaps ought to have more familiarity with the Mexican perspective.

Poniatowska through her fiction and her journalism has committed herself to giving voice to those who have been excluded from social discourse: women, peasants, workers, students, even revolutionaries. As analyses of Mexico's political and social problems, her books are provocative and disturbing. They demand much from their readers. We all might consider the statement and question that Jesusa, impatient to be left alone again now that the interview was coming to its end, poses to Elena on the last page of *Hasta no verte, Jesus mio*: "Yo no creo que la gente sea buena, la mera verdad, no. Sólo Jesucristo y no lo conocí. Y mi padre, que nunca supe se me quiso o no. Pero de aquí sobre la tierra, ¿quién quiere usted que sea bueno?"¹¹ (I don't think that people can be good, the real truth, no. Only Jesus Christ, and I never met the man. And my father, who never knew whether he loved me or not. But here or anywhere in the world, who would you like to become good?)

¹¹*Hasta no verte, Jesus mio*, 316.