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CHRONICLE AND DIARY, POLITICS AND SELF-PORTRAIT IN ELENA PONIATOWSKA'S *AMANECER EN EL ZÓCALO*

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RE-READING Elena Poniatowska's *Amanecer en el Zócalo. Los 50 días que confrontaron a México* (2007) during the spring and early summer lead-up to the July 1, 2012 presidential election heightened my sense of anticipation and even anxiety about the predicted —and predictable?— results. Andrés Manuel López Obrador's second run for the office, this time as the candidate of the Movimiento Progresista, and his recruitment of Poniatowska again to support his campaign actively over an extended period of time recall the events of 2006 and raise questions about what was learned then and what the writing of the lengthy, detail-filled chronicle-diary of the fifty-day “plantón” and the frustrated demand for a recount “voto por voto, casilla por casilla” meant to Mexican readers and to the country's foremost living chronicler. Now as I complete this essay in the immediate aftermath of the election, familiar-sounding accusations of fraud, vote-buying, violation of campaign spending limits and media complicity in Enrique Peña Nieto's declared, but contested victory are being voiced by López Obrador and his supporters as well as by many others. Echoes of 2006 and the language of Poniatowska's “plantón” chronicle resonate in today's media coverage and create a dispiriting appreciation for how difficult and unlikely it is that real change can be achieved in Mexican politics. I cannot foresee the impact of the 2012 elections for Mexico or predict the official certification of the results and the public response to them, but as a reader of Poniatowska's writing over a period of many years, I am alert to and skeptical of officially sanctioned accounts of contested events. I am also skeptical of other versions of the past, even a dissident version, and that too is a lesson learned from my engagement with Poniatowska's extensive corpus. This essay addresses the representation of the political and the personal in *Amanecer* with an eye toward examining how the book constructs its version of the politics of 2006 and of the chronicler herself as a protagonist of that complicated story. I will show that the overarching defense of the legitimacy of the occupation and the demands for a complete vote recount in light of extensive evidence of fraud, and the

favorable portrayal of López Obrador are tinged with some ambivalence about his leadership, while the self-portrait of Poniatowska as political actor is largely in line with the image of the writer that has emerged over the years in interviews and in the autobiographical elements of her work.

The treatment of political themes and the language of politics from a critical or contestatory perspective is a prominent feature of the contemporary urban chronicle in Mexico that virtually all of its readers have acknowledged.¹ In his now-canonical contributions to the theory of the chronicle, which include the introduction (“Prólogo”) to his anthology of the genre published in 1980 and the 1987 article “De la Santa Doctrina al Espíritu Público,” Carlos Monsiváis traces the political orientation of the Mexican chronicle to the liberal press of the first half of the 19th century. After a turn toward costumbrismo and the “nota roja” during the Porfiriato and the Revolution of 1910, political themes reappear in the work of Salvador Novo in the 1930s and then, most strikingly in Elena Poniatowska’s seminal texts *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971) and *Fuerte es el silencio* (1980) (“Santa Doctrina” 768, 771). In another early essay, Ursula Kuhlmann (1989) characterizes the contemporary urban chronicle as a socially committed genre, and she advances the familiar image of Elena Poniatowska as an ally of the poor and the marginalized. Later titles such as *Nada, nadie: Las voces del temblor* (1988) on the 1985 earthquakes and *Las mil y una... (la herida de Paulina)* (2000), Poniatowska’s investigation into the denial of a legal abortion to a fourteen-year-old rape victim, are products of her continued pursuit of investigative journalism and the writing of chronicles as instruments to denounce the corruption, abuse of power and politically repressive manipulation of events, people and information that are endemic to Mexican society. Hilda Chacón introduces her 2003 study of *Las mil y una... (la herida de Paulina)* and postmodern aesthetics in the age of globalization by reiterating the general consensus that the chronicle genre plays an important role in questioning the political status quo (97).²

At close to four hundred pages, *Amanecer en el Zócalo* is Poniatowska’s most lengthy chronicle, although it “covers” a period of only about eight weeks in the political life of the Mexican nation and in particular of its capital city. It narrates the story of the occupation of the center of Mexico City from the end of July to mid-September of 2006 by supporters of Andrés Manuel López

¹ Other topics regularly treated by the chronicle in Mexico since the 19th century include manifestations of high culture such as theater and literature, popular culture spectacles (circus, rock concerts, sports contests), natural disasters, daily life, urban spaces, crime, consumer society and Mexico’s uncertain accession to “modernity.”

² Important articles and books by the following scholars also address the overtly political content and contestatory point of view of many chronicles, and in particular of Poniatowska’s work: Linda Egan, Juan Gelpí, Anadeli Bencomo.

Obrador. They were responding to his call for a sustained and highly visible protest against a pattern of “dirty” campaigning targeting the candidate for the Coalición por el Bien de Todos in his run for the presidency, and the evidence of widespread fraud in the voting process. Both activities, as well as the lopsided media coverage of the campaign, favored the Partido de Acción Nacional’s candidate and eventual “victor” Felipe Calderón. For fifty days, the Zócalo and several blocks of each of the avenues that lead into the center of the city were occupied by a tent encampment that housed thousands of people from all over Mexico and was the site of rallies, cultural events, educational activities, and community organizing around the demand for a complete recount “voto por voto, casilla por casilla.” The thirty-one states and sixteen boroughs of the Distrito Federal were assigned to distinct sections of the “plantón,” like little neighborhoods with rudimentary housing, food, medical care and entertainment all provided, largely through donations.

The dominant point of view throughout the text is one that is sympathetic to López Obrador and his supporters, who include Poniatowska as chronicler and a principal actor in the story, although opposing perspectives are also recorded in selections taken from a variety of newspaper and interview sources. The demand for a full recount and the decision-making process of the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) are constant themes. The IFE’s ultimate refusal to meet the demand and instead to carry out a recount of selected voting stations only, and then their refusal to attach importance to the many irregularities that were identified in the limited recount process, capture the very definition of the term “partial” with its meanings of “incomplete” and “biased.” Other principal themes are the atmosphere of solidarity in the “plantón,” the opportunity for encounters between people of different social classes and regional origins, portraits of key figures such as López Obrador and the performance artist Jesusa Rodríguez, the candidate’s nightly speeches, Poniatowska’s movements and activities in the capital and as an invited speaker in other parts of the country, and the ever-present leitmotif of rain, signifying the physical hardship experienced in the encampment and sorrow over the inevitable defeat of the protest movement and Calderón’s installation as president.

The book opens with a series of black and white photos that provide an impressive visual image of the enormous number of people who gathered for the occupation and the vast urban space that they filled. Details of daily life and scenes of the protest activities are also depicted in photos showing a boy getting a haircut, the workings of a soup kitchen, the banners that carried messages of protest and indignation, people sleeping on rows of cots, López Obrador greeting his supporters, a hail storm, and rain, rain, and more rain. The message communicated by the selection of photos is

that of a massive but well-organized tent city that served to bring Mexicans together in a powerful, peaceful display of opposition to the status quo and the promotion of a more truly democratic society. A brief paragraph of acknowledgments follows the photo gallery, and then the chronicle unfolds, telling its story in largely chronological sequence. The narrative is divided into four large sections titled “La decisión,” “Llamado a mi puerta,” “Somos millones” and “Un nuevo derecho: la felicidad.” Each section is further subdivided into small units set off by either a date or a topical subtitle, an organization that facilitates the reader’s navigation through the massive amount of information. The creation of narrative suspense around the question of what the IFE will decide and the countdown to their decision, which is reinforced by the chronological retelling of the intrigue, is undermined by the informed reader’s knowledge of how it all turned out. This causes Oswaldo Estrada in an article that I will discuss below to call the book a kind of chronicle “de una muerte anunciada” (119). However, the tension between the demands of the protesters, represented as just demands, and the inevitable injustice of the outcome, is effectively maintained throughout.

Amanecer en el Zócalo has received little critical attention to date, and at least one piece, a book review from 2007, is singularly uninformative except as it reveals the reviewer’s own prejudices. Rafael Lemus reviewed the book for *Letras Libres* soon after its publication, and his critique quickly becomes a personal attack on Poniatowska’s character, intelligence and journalistic independence. His repeated use of the derogatory term “caudillo” to refer to López Obrador, his dismissive reference to the writer as “Elena,” and his possibly racist description of the Zócalo as “infestado” with tents and people, are examples of his language that betray a vehemently anti-López Obrador bias and a corresponding inability to speak dispassionately about the book. Two research articles appeared in the special 2008 issue of *América sin Nombre* that was dedicated to Elena Poniatowska. Claudia Parodi’s essay “México álgido, las voces de la resistencia en la ciudad” (2008) addresses three of Poniatowska’s book-length chronicles (*La noche de Tlatelolco*, *Nada, nadie* and *Amanecer*) as expressions of popular protest against a dysfunctional government in critical moments for Mexico. However, by considering three complex texts in a scant six pages, her analysis is limited to a descriptive treatment of the books. Oswaldo Estrada is able to offer a coherent set of insights into Poniatowska’s chronicles within the scope of a relatively brief article by focusing on two themes that they have in common: 1) the representation of the rich diversity of Mexican society within the reality of processes of globalization that are often thought to exert pressure toward homogenization, and

2) manifestations in several of her works of the seemingly inescapable continuity of oppression, bad government, ethnic discrimination and economic inequality across centuries of Mexican history (113-14, 117).

My analysis of *Amanecer en el Zócalo* owes a debt to Anadeli Bencomo's chapter on Carlos Monsiváis in her book *Entre héroes, fantasmas y apocalípticos: Testigos y paisajes en la crónica mexicana* (2011). In the second chapter, she discusses Monsiváis's *No sin nosotros: Los días del terremoto 1985-2005* as a "discurso a dos voces" or a text with a "doble personalidad" because of the way that the writer integrates the conventions of the essay and those of the chronicle in order to offer both an interpretive meditation and a narrative about social movements and the place of civil society in the two decades spanning the transition from the 20th to the 21st century (41-44). This prompted me to see *Amanecer en el Zócalo* as a book with its own unique double personality, in this case one that combines a chronicle of contemporary political events with an autobiographical narrative in the form of a diary. Politics and self-portrait come together in telling the story of the presidential campaign of 2006, the encampment in the Zócalo and Elena Poniatowska's own exceptional participation as a protagonist as well as a chronicler of these extraordinary events.

Although the chronicle most often takes the form of a relatively short piece of writing and is frequently published first in a newspaper or a cultural supplement, a book such as *Amanecer*, while unusual for its length, incorporates most of the structural and linguistic features that characterize the "liminal genre" (Corona and Jörgensen, 2002). Perched on the threshold between literature and journalism, narrative and essay, document and fiction, elite and popular culture and investigation and advocacy, the contemporary chronicle as practiced by leading Mexican writers makes a contribution to democratizing culture (Gelpí 86) and to imagining a more inclusive and authentic democracy. Without a doubt, Carlos Monsiváis dedicated some of his most powerful work to advancing the hope that a strong civil society would take shape in Mexico, and Elena Poniatowska is an equally vocal proponent of the potential for change that resides with the people, or "la gente" to use her preferred term from *Amanecer*.

Far more than a treatment of social and political themes is at stake in fashioning a literature that might advance ideals of inclusion, equality and justice in a nominally democratic country that remains highly divided along class, ethnic, political, religious and gender lines. The chronicle relies on a variety of structural and linguistic devices to challenge official history and to challenge its readers to think differently about how the national narrative is told. In *Amanecer* Poniatowska employs the gathering and reproduction of multiple voices, extensive intertextuality, and the

portrayal of López Obrador, the text's protagonist, in order to create a version of events and political actors that reflects others' experiences and viewpoints and is at the same time very much her own personal account. By examining examples of these features of the book's "political personality" I will interpret how the story of the López Obrador's candidacy and the "plantón" is shaped and what meanings are attached to it.

A universally acknowledged hallmark of Elena Poniatowska's work is the imprint of the voices of others in her writing. Ever since the early days of her career in the 1950s, she has sought out and listened attentively to the stories of thousands of people from "all walks of life," to use the old cliché, and her interviews and chronicles capture the enormous human diversity of Mexico. *Amanecer* continues the practice of gathering and recording many voices speaking to a common experience. The book embodies Rossana Reguillo's observation that the chronicle is a "language of encounter, a place from which communication, that primary vehicle of our sociability, can extend a bridge between worlds" (58). The world of the encampment was a microcosm of Mexican society, and Poniatowska is continually struck by the way that the fact of leaving one's own home and familiar surroundings and joining others in a highly public, shared space to support a common cause made possible acts of communication and solidarity across social boundaries that are rarely witnessed. In fact, solidarity is a major theme of her depiction of the encampment, as this typically enthusiastic passage shows: "¡Qué sonrisa la de la plaza! Con razón los jóvenes se sienten bien en las manifestaciones. La solidaridad abraza, hace feliz" (19).

The oral quality of many passages of *Amanecer* is the textual trace of this remarkable experience of sociability. Here as in *La noche de Tlatelolco* and *Nada, nadie*, Poniatowska resists producing a homogenized, monologic version of events by weaving others' words into the narrative and allowing linguistic diversity to model social reality. She reconstructs fragments of her conversations with Jesusa Rodríguez and with other friends, extensive quotations from López Obrador's speeches and informal conversations, and hundreds of statements overheard on the street or recalled from the dialogues that she sustained with many individuals. While we cannot know exactly how accurate these transcriptions are, the writer's well-known penchant for note taking and her long on-the-job training as an interviewer create confidence in the reader that the text represents the other's voice as it was heard. The diversity of linguistic registers that are on display also attests to the "democratizing" impulse behind the chronicle. Everyone in the encampment lives under the same crowded conditions and suffers from the same daily deluge of rain, and each person's voice lends its bit of knowledge and wisdom to the account on an equal footing with all of the others. The

vast majority speak of their support for López Obrador and they denounce the IFE, and the tone is often one of hope and determination to carry the act of resistance to a successful conclusion. On the other hand, Poniatowska includes the voices of some of her long-time personal friends who oppose the candidate and the encampment and who try to convince her to scale back her involvement. She also reproduces a series of late-night phone calls in which unidentified male callers accuse her of being a traitor to her family and her class and threaten to harm her. These disturbing incidents remind the reader that the festive atmosphere of the “plantón” should not obscure the very serious nature of the challenge it posed to the status quo and the strength of a possible backlash against it.

A second principal element of the narrative discourse in *Amanecer* is the variety of published sources that Poniatowska draws on to construct her story of the July 2, 2006 election and its aftermath. While all literature is intertextual in the sense that it inevitably engages in a dialogue with existing literary conventions and with specific texts, the chronicle often foregrounds an overt intertextuality that consists of importing previously published documents and placing them side by side on the page or alternating them with segments written by the chronicler. Julia Kristeva, speaking of intertextuality in the broadest sense, states that “any text can be read as a mosaic of quotations; any text is an absorption and transformation of another” (*Desire* 66). *Amanecer* presents a highly visible mosaic of quotations, mostly taken from the Mexican press, and the role of the cited newspaper headlines and articles must be examined. The majority of the quoted reports come from three Mexico City dailies, *La Jornada*, *El Universal* and *Reforma*, but the foreign press is also represented by such newspapers as *Le Monde* and *The New York Times*. Poniatowska has had a long-standing relationship with *La Jornada* starting with their publication of her 1985 earthquake chronicles when *Novedades* refused to carry them. In line with their consistently critical editorial stance toward the PRI and the PAN, and their sympathetic reporting of the PRD and other organizations of the Mexican left, *La Jornada* gave ample coverage to López Obrador’s campaign and the tactics used against him, and to the election, the allegations of fraud and the “plantón.” *El Universal* is often characterized as a centrist publication, while *Reforma* cultivates a reputation for independent journalism and editorial diversity. Reporting and editorials that are critical of López Obrador and the occupation generally come from these two sources.

The inserted newspaper articles serve several functions. At the most basic level, they simply advance the narrative by reporting on all aspects of the political events taking place, and they fill in a great deal of information that Poniatowska could not have personally researched and acquired. The assembling of found textual materials conceives of the chronicle as collective project under the

direction of a compiler or editor rather than a solely authored text, and it is another manifestation of the genre's regard for heterogeneous voices. Then, in terms of how the narrative is shaped, the privileging of source materials taken from *La Jornada* plays a large role in conveying the overarching message of support for López Obrador and denunciation of the PAN's campaign strategies and the behavior of governmental institutions, in particular the IFE. However, what makes the book a valuable resource for reviewing the events of 2006 is the inclusion of articles that represent a variety of political opinions about López Obrador. Poniatowska chooses to represent the heterogeneity of thought that prevailed at the time, albeit framed by her own political position and by the fact of her participation in the events portrayed. The reader is able to consider diverse viewpoints offered by intellectuals and journalists in the context of a story that seeks to denounce corruption and fraud and vindicate the controversial act of occupying the center of the city for a period of seven weeks. The voices that question, challenge and even oppose López Obrador's leadership come from both the political right and the left, and the idea that support can —must— also be critical is articulated in statements by Carlos Monsiváis and Juan Villoro, among others. On one hand, this reflects the divisions that some would say “plague” and weaken the left in Mexico, and yet it also shows a positive move toward a posture that resists dogmatism and blind adherence to one individual's platform or personality. The recourse to multiple, conflicting sources of information and analysis constructs the narrative as a debate and advances the idea that a debate around contested “facts” and controversial events is necessary for a democracy to flourish. Observations about the monopoly that controls television and radio coverage of politics in Mexico, however, remind the reader that the political debate represented in the mainstream media is strongly skewed toward the interests of those who are in power. Poniatowska occasionally lends the weight of her editorial presence to the pro-López Obrador side by qualifying certain accounts with phrases like “Tiene razón Julio [Scherer]” (105) or “René Drucker Colón es muy claro” (307), although most often she simply inserts the quoted material without comment. While there is no mistaking, ever, what side she is on, her use of intertextuality opens the door to a dialogue among opposing viewpoints and enhances the message about democracy and participatory politics that the author endorses.

The image of López Obrador throughout the book is another significant piece of the puzzle of its meaning, and his representation in *Amanecer* is both highly admiring and also cautionary. The attribution of positive qualities to “AMLO” as he is always called, combined with the expression of certain doubts and reservations about his leadership and numerous references to the question of his “charisma” ultimately convey an unexpected degree of ambivalence toward the candidate. In this

way, too, Poniatowska's "plantón" chronicle raises questions about important issues in Mexican politics.

López Obrador as a character in the chronicle takes shape through the words of many individuals including the first-person narrator-*cronista*, numerous supporters from a variety of social backgrounds, almost equally numerous detractors, and the candidate himself, via the text of his daily speeches in the Zócalo. He is a protagonist, but not the only protagonist, because he shares the role with Jesusa Rodríguez and Elena Poniatowska. The collective image has an undeniably positive side, starting with descriptions of his physical appearance, condensed into this brief passage: "Su camisa es blanca, su pelo entrecano. Nadie sonríe como él" (23). The purity of his person (and his politics), the dignity acquired at a certain age, and the warmth of his encounters with the people define a new model of Mexican politician. His difference from the old model ("dirty," grasping and distant from the people) is further reflected in the testimony to his relatively modest means. In a country where politicians regularly enrich themselves while in office, López Obrador's VW Jetta and his "departamentito" (24) in the capital speak to honesty and selflessness.

The quality that most compellingly draws Poniatowska into his camp is the respect and concern that he shows for the majority of Mexicans who are poor and whose needs and aspirations have not been served by decades of post-revolutionary political leadership. In contrast to the traditional political class of Mexico's "perfect dictatorship" (Juan Villoro, quoting Mario Vargas Llosa, quoted by Poniatowska 239), AMLO "les enseña a sus seguidores a ser mejores, a respetarse a sí mismos, a no dejarse, a creer que sí pueden" (172). This is his central value as a leader, and Poniatowska witnesses the people's desire therefore to be close to him, to receive an embrace and an acknowledging smile or word, and she remarks on how attentive he is to each individual who approaches him. "Cada día la relación con AMLO se vuelve más familiar . . . los pobres lo convierten en hijo, padre, hermano, novio, protector, guía. Lo abrazan, que no le pase nada, cuídelo, cuídelo, nos hace mucha falta" (186) The subtle shift into indirect free style in the final phrases captures the voices of others and melds them with her own narrative perspective.

The veneration felt toward López Obrador has its dark side as well, although it might not be apparent to the rank and file of his supporters. Any number of passages about his relationship with the people use the word "charisma" to describe the quality of his personality that attracts and holds them. Charisma is a double-edged sword, and societies in which the cult of personality has a long history are often betrayed by charismatic leaders who substitute their personal strengths for an investment in worthy institutions. The phenomenon of giving gifts to López Obrador, "ofrendas" of

embroidered pillows, photographs, painted portraits and little figurines left at the altar of the “templete” in the Zócalo where he officiates over the nightly “mass” produces an unease in Poniatowska, who characterizes it as “un culto preocupante” (79). The references to charisma recall the different reactions on the part of Carlos Monsiváis, Juan Villoro and Poniatowska to Subcomandante Marcos’s charisma at the height of the EZLN’s activities. In their three separate chronicles about the Convención Nacional Democrática held in the Lacandón rainforest in August 1994, Monsiváis and Villoro express reservations about the meaning and the effect of charisma, while Poniatowska identifies with the crowd of six thousand people who waited long hours to hear him speak and she includes herself in the plural subject of admiration: “Los seis mil lo abrazamos con los ojos” (“La CND” 324). Villoro, in contrast, criticizes charisma as a simplification of a complex personality behind an attractive facade, and he is suspicious of the legitimacy of the charismatic leader’s appeal to public trust (“Convidados” 274). Villoro repeats a similar concern with regard to López Obrador in a statement quoted in *Amanecer*: “AMLO apareció como un líder carismático ante las multitudes y poca paciencia ante las ideas” (240). He goes on to warn against “la tentación del mesianismo” (240), and Poniatowska also uses the word “mesías” in a cautionary context. When a young woman declares that “Yo estoy dispuesta a morir por él,” the chronicler confesses that “me espanta su convicción al igual que la de esta inmensidad de mexicanos que aquí aguardan” (42).

Just as she includes reporting that was critical of the “plantón” alongside sympathetic opinions, Poniatowska quotes a number of harsh criticisms of López Obrador made by others in her portrayal of him as a leader. However, what I find even more interesting is her own critical take on some of his actions and attitudes, because they reveal that she did not hold a one-sided view of the candidate, but she made an internally complex assessment of his strengths and weaknesses. Fear of messianism and the cult of personality is one aspect, and López Obrador’s stubbornness and his refusal to acknowledge those who disagree with him are other causes for concern. Several times Poniatowska comments on how his face “closes down” when he hears an opposing position. “Cuando no quiere escuchar al otro, se le cierra la cara” (24) and “Cuando no está de acuerdo con algo, se tensa, se le cierra la cara” (67). On another occasion he is “tajante” in his rejection of an idea that Poniatowska expresses, and she admits that these are not positive leadership traits. Finally, the unanimous approval of his proposal to lead a parallel government given by the huge crowd attending the Convención Nacional Democrática of September 16, 2006 provokes her to ask: “¿Qué una convención es unánime? ¿Todos piensan igual? ¿La lluvia nos ha anegado la voluntad? . . . no

hay una sola voz disidente en la unidad del coro y eso me inquieta y desordena” (385-86). The willingness to endorse a candidate or a platform in a lock-step, unquestioning manner is contrary to democratic vitality.

Returning to the expectation that a political chronicle by a writer like Elena Poniatowska or Carlos Monsiváis will offer an alternative narrative of events and will challenge official versions voiced by the government and its preferred media outlets, my reading of *Amanecer* shows that it fulfills those expectations. It furthermore demonstrates how the hybrid, polyphonic and intertextual nature of the genre moves a piece of advocacy literature such as the “plantón” chronicle beyond the monologue of most political rhetoric and makes it an internally complex document that can contribute to democratic debate. López Obrador is clearly the hero of the story, and his call for transparency in government and for nonviolent civil resistance to abuses of power is represented as a positive sign in opposition to the political status quo. Nonetheless, the incorporation of opposing viewpoints and, more importantly, the active, albeit subdued questioning of messianism and the fatal attraction of charisma in the book’s portrayal of “AMLO” are crucial components that alert the attentive reader to issues beyond the denunciation of the IFE, the idealized version of the organization and functioning of the encampment, and the celebration of López Obrador’s appeal to “la gente.”

The other half of the double personality of *Amanecer*, which Poniatowska acknowledges to be a “crónica” and a “diario,” is its status as an act of life writing in which the chronicler-narrator inscribes her own protagonism during the events of the summer of 2006. This dimension sets it apart from her other well-known chronicles, which are distinguished by the writer’s effacement of her own presence and her assumption of an editorial role, working behind the scenes and behind the words of others to tell the story of the student movement of 1968 or the 1985 earthquakes, for example. Although I have shown previously how her editorial labors in *La noche de Tlatelolco* exert a strong shaping force despite her relative invisibility on the surface of the text, and others have noted the autobiographical elements of a chronicle like “La colonia Rubén Jaramillo” (*Fuerte es el silencio*), in *Amanecer* Poniatowska is a principal actor and personal narrator in addition to serving as the compiler-editor of the textual mosaic.³ The diary aspect of the political chronicle is therefore exceptional in her corpus and merits a closer reading.

³ In chapter 3 of my book *The Writing of Elena Poniatowska: Engaging Dialogues* (1994) I employ Jacques Derrida’s theory of the function of the frame in works of art to argue that in the oral history of the student movement, her editorial labor shapes, “authorizes” and empowers the voices of others and is not merely a neutral recording device (81-

An often-ignored subgenre of autobiography, the diary has its own distinctive features that make it an ideal form of writing for responding to crisis and reflecting on the self when it is under pressure. Illness and holocaust diaries are manifestations of the impulse for self-preservation that lies behind the keeping of a journal, but other, less drastic life experiences may also motivate a person to become a diarist. Theorists of the diary have identified a number of trends and characteristics that help us interpret the representation of a version of herself by Elena Poniatowska in *Amanecer* and establish a certain compatibility between the diary and the chronicle. Felicity Nussbaum remarks that the diary is written in the moment and it records a serial, fragmented narrative that shows the self to be a product of specific discourses and social processes (128-30). It also narrates crisis and change from within those experiences, and it presents a self that may be lacking a stable center or a unitary identity (Nussbaum 133-34). In their introduction to the volume on the diary that they co-edited, Rachael Langford and Russell West offer this appraisal that places the diary alongside the chronicle as liminal forms of writing:

The diary, as an uncertain genre uneasily balanced between literary and historical writing, between the spontaneity of reportage and the reflectiveness of the crafted text, between selfhood and events, between subjectivity and objectivity, between the private and the public, constantly disturbs attempts to summarise its characteristics within formalised boundaries. The diary is a misfit form of writing. (8)

Virtually all contemporary theorists emphasize that life writing, whether in the form of a unpublished journal or a formal autobiography, is an act of self-interpretation and self-invention and not a matter of revealing the “authentic” or “true” identity of the writing subject.⁴ In what follows, I will briefly examine *Amanecer* as a response to crisis, and I will interpret the version of Elena Poniatowska, understood as a character in the narrative and not as a “real life” person, that emerges from the text.

In my book *Documents in Crisis: Nonfiction Literatures in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (2011), I have explored at length the connection between personal and societal crisis and the production of documentary forms of writing, which serve to make meaning and impose order on chaotic or

84). Cynthia Steele addresses her autobiographical presence in “La colonia Rubén Jaramillo” in her article “La mediación en las obras documentales de Elena Poniatowska” (1998).

⁴ To give just a few examples of influential theories of autobiography that start from the premise that the autobiographical subject invents a version of the past and the self, I would mention Liz Stanley’s book *The auto/biographical I: The theory and practice of feminist auto/biography* (1996), Paul Ricoeur’s essay “Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator” (1991), and John Paul Eakin’s “What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?” (2004).

disturbing experiences. The political chronicle side of *Amanecer* is a response to the crisis of the 2006 election and the narrow, manipulated “defeat” of Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The diary dimension is also a response to crisis on a more personal level, in that the I-narrator represents her own participation in events that challenged and exerted pressure on her idea of who she is and what the role of the writer in Mexico should be. I will look at the textual signs of a subject in crisis in the conclusion of this essay. I should note that in one important regard *Amanecer* is not a true diary, although I believe that the process of its writing served the function of a diary of crisis, albeit in a somewhat delayed form. Poniatowska wrote the text after the events were concluded, and therefore the “diary” is not a daily account recorded moment to moment.⁵ However, throughout the campaign and the occupation she kept a running notebook that provided the basis for her reconstruction of her experiences and observations very soon after they occurred, and these notes account for the tone of immediacy and the self-questioning that takes place in many of the passages narrated by the chronicler. Her decision to emphasize the orderly passing of the days by marking many sections with dates, like entries in a true diary, is another detail that speaks to the book’s striking of an “uneasy balance” between spontaneity and retrospective reflection.

Elena Poniatowska had not previously taken an active role in partisan politics in Mexico, but rather she has been known as an independent voice of opposition to the government and its exercise of power and authority. She explains her support for López Obrador and her participation in his campaign as a consequence of his reaching out to recruit her in April 2005, backed by her eldest son Mane Haro and her friend Jesusa Rodríguez. The personal connection proves to be much more influential than any particular knowledge of or appreciation for the candidate’s political agenda. This background to her involvement is not revealed until Part II of the book, “Llamado a mi puerta,” which opens with the questions “¿Por qué estoy en esto? ¿Cómo empezó todo? ¿Por qué sigo en esta parrilla de carbones ardientes?” (139). However, the personal nature of her commitment and the conflicts that it causes her in the absence of a deeply informed engagement with politics are already evident on the very first pages of Part I. The diary opens on Saturday, July 29, 2006, the day when López Obrador made the decision to call for an occupation of the Zócalo in order to exert pressure on the IFE to agree to a complete recount of the July 1 vote. Huge rallies on July 16 and 23 had not had the desired effect, and an all-out occupation is to be the next step in the protest. In contrast to

⁵ Poniatowska confirmed this for me in an email exchange on July 8, 2012. She wrote: “El libro lo escribí después y es un homenaje a los reporteros que se quedaron bajo la lluvia y escribieron. Claro, siempre tomo notas en una libreta de taquigrafía que tú conoces. Lo escribí rápido para que se publicara como una protesta después del fraude.”

Jesusa Rodríguez's immediate and unqualified enthusiasm, Poniatowska recalls her private, unspoken reaction as one of fear and doubt: "¡Qué compromiso! Tengo miedo, me angustio, qué es eso de que nos vamos a quedar, ¿cómo nos vamos a quedar?" (15). Expressions of doubt and concern about the validity of the "plantón" continue to appear throughout the book in a dialogue between the diarist's own personal thoughts and the reasons given by others to justify the action. This dialogue, which is visible in the text but would have been a private, internal debate during the events themselves, constitutes a dynamic form of self-reflection that is very much in line with Poniatowska's life-long cultivation of conversations with others in search of answers to her many questions about her society and her place in it.⁶

The call for the "plantón" soon creates a second crisis for Poniatowska, as López Obrador invites her to speak at a rally on July 30, the very day she is due to leave for a previously scheduled speaking engagement in Calgary, Canada. The chronicle tells how Jesusa Rodríguez pressured Poniatowska to cancel those long-standing plans, and throughout the book her friend is both an inspiring, respected figure for the writer, and the cause of considerable self-doubt and questioning. One constant of the self-portrait is the contrast that Poniatowska draws between Jesusa's determination, energy, strength and confidence, and her own more complicated, ambivalent relationship with the politics of the "plantón" and the heavy demands it makes on her time and energy. These reservations, appearing on the first two pages of the text, suggest that Poniatowska's political activities and her commitment place her into conflict with her own self-image, her past conduct and her life plan. She later claims that public speaking is not her forte (140), she denies any real interest in politics or politicians, whom she sees as talkers more than doers (229), and she yearns to return to her incomplete novel and her life as a writer and a mother and grandmother. To some extent, the writing of *Amanecer* may be a kind of compensation for the months lost to her other projects, as well as a way to work out deep-seated feelings of frustration, confusion, anger and disappointment.

The diary-like elements of the text reveal that the occupation created other crises in the narrator's personal life beyond her initial hesitation to embrace the action. She records conversations with her sister and with several old friends who berate her for her involvement and even try to instill guilt in her for ruining her children's future by backing a losing cause. The very personal cost of supporting "AMLO," who is much despised by many members of Mexico's elite, finds its

⁶ The subtitle of my 1994 book, *Engaging Dialogues*, tries to capture the essence of Poniatowska's writing as an act of communication with others.

expression in passages of self-reflection that serve to reaffirm and/or reinvent a sense of self that is under tremendous pressure. Two specific pressure points, among others, are her identity as a writer and her social class affiliation.

Elena Poniatowska has often remarked that writers in Latin America cannot easily avoid a commitment to a social reality defined by poverty, inequality, suffering, injustice and, often, tyranny. In *Amanecer* she struggles to reconcile the demands of political action and the writing life. She cites José Revueltas as an exemplary model of the engaged writer in Mexico, and she meditates on a conversation that she had with fellow novelist Rosa Nissan immediately after the announcement that there would be no recount. “En primer lugar somos escritores pero también somos ciudadanos” (118). This sentence explains why, even though she cares little for politics and a great deal for writing, the decision by the election tribunal (TRIFE) depresses her and she feels compelled to continue to support the occupation even though it has completely taken over her life and prevents her from writing. In this book, as in many others, she strikes an uneasy balance in her professional life by forging an identity as a citizen-writer. While she has made the decision time and again throughout her career to take on projects that are, in a sense, “assignments,” in 2006 at the age of seventy-four she has still not completely come to terms with how to meet competing demands.⁷ The chronicle-diary that is *Amanecer en el Zócalo* records the pull between political action and the author’s study as an intimate conflict between the citizen and the writer in Poniatowska’s life.

A primary attraction of López Obrador’s movement for Elena Poniatowska is his identification as a protector and promotor of the needs and the interests of the poorest, most marginalized Mexicans. She observes the participation of indigenous peoples, peasants and members of the lower working class in the campaign rallies and during the occupation, and their loyal presence draws her in. Speaking directly as the narrator of the story and not quoting others, the I of Poniatowska declares her admiration for the poor, at times in idealizing terms. “La pobreza es ingeniosa, la pobreza no se arredra ante nada, la pobreza no tiene miedo. Los pobres son prestidigitadores, sacan una flor de por aquí, un salero de por allá y del sombrero de copa salta el conejo de la risa y de la creatividad. No quepo en mí de admiración” (35). Setting aside the question of the usefulness of such a description for understanding the suffering and the strength of the poor in Mexico, their majority presence in the Zócalo reminds Poniatowska that they are the foundation of her country’s wealth and vitality, and the motivation for her own continued involvement in the

⁷ *Gaby Brimmer*, co-authored with Gabriela Brimmer (1979), and *Las mil y una... (la berida de Paulina)* are two examples of books that Poniatowska began in response to requests made by others.

occupation. As a member of Mexico's elite, she is equally aware that many of her social peers do not share her opinion, and in fact think of them as "muertos de hambre," "pelados" and "nacos buenos para nada" (40). Poniatowska has never renounced her own privilege, although she can be seen as one example of a way to live responsibly in an unequal society by her championing of the diversity of the Mexican experience. This again creates the need for negotiating an uneasy balance between the demands of her social and moral conscience and her position in the "1%." During the fifty days of the "plantón" her diary tells of luncheons at expensive restaurants and the pleasure of attending a high-society wedding, not to mention some nights spent at her own comfortable home rather than in the tent city. Moving between two worlds causes anxiety and guilt, and there is no question that the occupation places her into direct conflict with old friends, her sister Kitzia and even total strangers who make threatening phone calls late at night. This from Kitzia: "¿Te crees Juana del Arco o te pegaste en la cabeza? Estás totalmente zafada, nunca has estado en la realidad pero ahora menos. AMLO es un engañabobos que va a llevar al país al desastre y tú allá pegada" (170). By recording both their scolding words and her tendency to absorb the criticism and the threats without taking aggressive counter action, the diary constructs a space for measuring the weight of conflicting loyalties and working toward a difficult, elusive equilibrium.

The diary side of *Amanecer* similarly exposes other problematical identity signs that Elena Poniatowska has often addressed in her writing and in interviews. Her need to belong fully to Mexico in spite of being born in France and educated in a high school in the United States, and certain personality traits that she laments (her inability to say no, her naïveté, her tendency to distraction) are accentuated under the pressure of extraordinary circumstances, and the act of writing about them may serve to relieve that pressure, although it leads to no definitive resolution. The final section of the book, the five pages of reflection "Una semana después," express a combination of exhaustion and nostalgia, disillusionment and hope, and they leave open the need for future analysis of the meaning and the impact of the occupation for Mexico and for Elena Poniatowska. The four-hundred pages of the many-voiced double-discourse of the political chronicle and the diary that constitute *Amanecer en el Zócalo* ultimately do make a contribution to the fight for democracy in Mexico, regardless of the further controversies and disappointments of 2012. The heterogeneity of thought reflected in the complex play of opposing viewpoints and the tone of ambivalence, doubt, and tension in this chronicle of political struggle and failure participates in the chronicle genre's challenge to the imposed homogeneity of authoritarian discourse and power.

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