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DECOLONISING DEMOCRACY IN MEXICO?

GENDER, VIOLENCE AND REPRESENTATION IN ELENA PONIATOWSKA'S EARLY TESTIMONIO[1]

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Abstract – Elena Poniatowska has long been celebrated for her testimonial narratives that construct alternatives to the authoritarian discourses of the Mexican post-Revolutionary state. This article takes as its focus her testimonio that has proven most controversial in critical scholarship – Hasta no verte, Jesús mío *(1967) [Here's to You, Jesusa! 2002] –, celebrated by some for its progressive feminism, dismissed by others as a failure both as a literary narrative and as a political act. My argument is that the narrative weaknesses and ideological contradictions of this* testimonio*, in fact, reveal deeper faultlines that provide answers to eminently contemporary questions about representation, violence and subjectivity that have been asked by postcolonial scholars since the 1980s; questions about what democracy might mean in a country like Mexico, still marked by the wounds of racism, classism and sexism.*

Keywords: Elena Poniatowska, *Testimonio*, Violence, Democracy, Decolonisation

The act of writing *testimonio* [testimonial narrative] as a contribution to a broader process of democratisation has long been a lingering question in the critical work on Elena Poniatowska's writing; yet where it is addressed, it is often done in passing. Claudia Parodi, for instance, concludes her article on the Mexican writer's testimonial writing by insisting that the key word of *Amanecer en el zócalo* (2007) [Dawn in the Zocalo] is "democracy"[2]. Two authors that address the questions of writing, representation and democracy in more detail are Beth Jörgensen and Lynn Stephen[3]. Jörgensen argues that the contemporary Mexican chronicle is "perched on the threshold between literature and

advocacy, narrative and essay, document and figure, elite and popular culture, and investigation and advocacy" and in this hybridity is able to "make a contribution to democratizing culture and to imagining a more inclusive and authentic democracy"[4]. In relation to *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971) [translated as *Massacre in Mexico* (1975)] – the *testimonio* chronicling the 1968 massacre orchestrated by the Partido Revolucionario Institucionalizado (PRI) – she further demonstrates how Poniatowska creates "an image of democracy in action" by confirming "from the outset the democratic claims made by the students" and by "portraying the student movement as representative of a broad spectrum of Mexican society", including student leaders, rank-and-file activists, professors, blue-collar workers, passing observers, parents, and schoolchildren[5].

In a more recent monograph, Stephen places the question of writing and democratisation in the context of a wider sea change in Latin American cultural politics in the 1960s. She builds on the work of Mary Kay Vaughan who shows that, in mid-twentieth-century Mexico City, "the media participated in the creation of publics and subjects" and "the formation of a more critical and demanding subjectivity and a new notion of rights"[6]. Against this backdrop, Stephen argues, creative expression (through print media and elsewhere) was paramount in generating a critical public of youth insisting on "rights to affection, protection, and freedom of expression"[7]. It is within this shifting political landscape that Stephen asks us to (re)consider Poniatowska's *crónicas*:

> The emergence of a critical public in Mexico through the Cuban Revolution of 1959; the formation of a broad leftist movement known as the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (MLN, Movement of National Liberation) that united major intellectuals, left politicians, and activists in favor of social justice; and the explosion of youth activism focused on the right to freedom and protesting adult authoritarianism and corruption all acted to consolidate a critical public in the 1960s[8].

Building on the work of Jörgensen, Stephen and others, this article does a deep dive into the links between Poniatowska's early *testimonio* and the construction of democracy, with a particular focus on the fundamental socio-political question of what democratisation might mean in the particular context in which these works were created – Mexico in

the 1960s – and within her wider testimonial oeuvre that would extend well into the twenty-first century.

My contention is that Elena Poniatowska's *testimonios* might be productively (re)read within a broader, emerging body of feminist and decolonial feminist thought in Mexico and Latin America, a range of praxis-led thinking that includes thinkers from Marcela Lagarde and Breny Mendoza to Aída Hernández Castillo and Rita Segato. From some of her earliest testimonial novels, the young Poniatowska's narrative preempts lines of thought and praxis that, particularly since the 1990s, problematise the tenets of Western liberal democracy in the region and the highly one-sided categorisations of violence that have accompanied it. As Marcelo Sanhueza puts it, "the systemic violence on which capitalism and liberal democracy in the West has been founded and continues to function" is obscured by prevailing discourses of democracy, "the tolerance and dialogue promoted by the liberal Western world"[9]. While Sanhueza's essay is focused on the decolonial work of Frantz Fanon, what follows is an analysis of testimonial narrative by Elena Poniatowska and the strategies she uses to uncover and denounce the relationship between the modern Mexican state and colonial violence.

My focus is on the first book-length *crónica* [chronicle] this now-iconic Polish-French-Mexican-princess-turned-chronicler-of-the-oppressed: *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío mío* (1967), translated by Deanna Heikkinen as *Here's to You Jesusa* (2001); a work that has largely been excluded from the testimonial canon alongside the rest of Poniatowska's work[10]. I address the following questions: How does Elena Poniatowska's represent violence against marginalised – poor, working class, Indigenous, and female – citizens in *Hasta no verte*? And how does her narrative problematise concepts of voice, representation, and equality that are integral to our liberal democratic ideologies? Where does Poniatowka's early *testimonio* stand between a will to represent and what George Yúdice terms a shift "más allá de la representación" [beyond representation]?[11] To what extent might we trace lines of continuity between *Hasta no verte*, *Jesús mío* and later works like *La noche de Tlatelolco*, which has been interpreted as a form of "democracy in action"?[12]

In order to answer these questions, I bring Poniatowska's early *testimonio* into dialogue with subsequent texts that shed light on *Hasta no verte*: her own, later *testimonios*; a more explicitly political speech titled *Mujeres,*

medios y democracia [Women, media and democracy], delivered on International Women's Day in 1997; and a range of theories and critical debates over the testimonial form itself in postcolonial studies, with a focus on essays by John Beverley, Roberto González Echevarría, George Yúdice and Santiago Colás that revolve around questions of literature, representation and democracy in postcolonial Latin America. These in turn lead to a critical discussion regarding Poniatowska's *Hasta no verte* and the way it lays the ground for a consistent contestation of the possibilities of democracy in a post-revolutionary Mexico still marked by colonial violence.

Gender and Democratisation in Mexico: Poniatowska's Women's Day Talk

Since the 1990s, the construction of alternative democracies has become an important issue both in the social sciences and in the humanities, with feminists like US political theorist Carole Pateman and Mexican anthropologist Marcela Lagarde interrogating patriarchal conceptions of democracy and attempting to think through its alternatives[13]. In order to bring the gender issue to the centre of the question, Lagarde has called for the development of new socio-political paradigms such as "democracia desde las mujeres" [democracy from women] or "democracia genérica" [gender-based democracy][14]. Subsequently, thinkers such as Breny Mendoza, Rita Segato and Mabel Moraña have proposed critical perspectives and opened up alternative possibilities to liberal democracy from an explicitly decolonial feminist theoretical stance. Segato, in an essay on Aníbal Quijano's "coloniality of power", denounces "las categorías liberales modernas y republicanas en que se asienta la construcción de los estados nacionales" [the modern liberal and republican categories on which the construction of nation states is based] incapable of "diseñar una democracia tan abarcadora como para permitir que en ella se expresen los intereses y proyectos de la multiplicidad de modos de existencia presentes en el continente" [designing a democracy comprehensive enough to allow for the expression of the interests and projects of the multiplicity of modes of existence present across the continent][15]. More recently, Mabel Moraña (2024) has pronounced on "the limited success of democracy has had in the re-

gion over the centuries" since the formation of the new Republics in the period of Independence, a partial failure that she relates to the clashes between European Enlightenment ideals and the realities of (post-)colonial Latin American[16]. Mendoza, seeking answers in grassroots actors and activisms, proposes the idea of "the other transition to democracy" based on diverse Latin American feminist, non-violent and anti-colonial movements based on "los conocimientos alternativos que se producen en los sótanos de las sociedades latinoamericanas, es decir, los conocimientos producidos particularmente por las mujeres, en particular, mujeres pobres, indígenas y afro-descendientes" [the alternative modes of knowledge produced underground and out of sight in Latin America, in particular in the knowledges produced by poor, Indigenous and Afro-descendant women][17].

Discussions and debates about democracy in Latin America – its past and present (hegemonic) forms and its future (counter-hegemonic) alternatives – is far from restricted to the world of academia, however. In fact one might well say that more recent decolonial thinking around democracies in Abya Yala are the continuation of the radical creative expression of a group of intellectuals that, in Mexico, were most active during the 1950s and 1960s: Juan Rulfo, José Revueltas, Rosario Castellanos, Elena Garro, Carlos Monsiváis, and of course Elena Poniatowska herself. In this section, I focus on a particular speech written and delivered by Poniatowska for a Women's Day conference organised by the Fundación Internacional de Mujeres en los Medios on 7-8th March 1997: *Mujeres, medios y democracia*[18]. This talk reveals a skepticism regarding liberal democracy that, as I argue below, concerned the writer from the 1960s onwards: What does democracy mean in twentieth-century Mexico? More specifically, what does democracy *do* for women, especially for working class and Indigenous women? How, in summary, does democracy materialise in a country whose politics still rests upon the firm foundations of coloniality, and what might it mean moving into the twenty-first century?

Poniatowska begins with a firm statement about the enduring sexism, racism and classicism of the 1990s Mexican media:

> Lo primero que se pide en México a una mujer profesionista para darle empleo, antes que el título, es buena presentación, ser joven y bonita

> como *top model*. Inútil presentarse sin estos requisitos. En televisión, las noticias las dan ojos verdes y azules, cabelleras rubias, naricitas respingadas. A los verdaderos habitantes de México los vemos sólo a la hora de las catástrofes, de los terremotos o las explosiones de gas […]: los casos de alarma ahora se transmiten en vivo y a todo color; en la moda televisiva actual, la sangre mancha las pantallas[19].
>
> [The first thing required for a woman in Mexico to get a job in the media, above and beyond her qualifications, is for her to look the part: young and pretty, like a *top model*. There is no point applying if you don't meet these requirements. On television, the news shows women with green and blue eyes, blonde hair, small button noses. We only see the real inhabitants of Mexico at the time of catastrophes, earthquakes or gas explosions [...]: emergencies are now broadcast live and in full colour; in today's television fashion, blood soaks the screen.]

Two forms of violence are implicit here: the coloniality of the media that in spite of its democratising promises excludes racialised – Indigenous and *mestizo* – subjects and subjectivities; and the violence of television narratives that focus only on "Mexico's real inhabitants" in moments of violence and catastrophe, in the spectacular cases of natural or not-so-natural disasters. Unsurprisingly, this reflection leads the author to dialogue with Frantz Fanon, one of the thinkers that has most influenced decolonial thought in Latin American and the Caribbean since the 1960s[20]. As Poniatowska points out, rhetorically,

> Franz Fanon olvidó incluirnos dentro de *Los condenados de la tierra*. Somos 93 millones de habitantes, la onceava nación más poblada de la tierra y, según los analistas, México se encamina a la dependencia total, a punto de convertirse en una gigantesca cadena maquiladora. […] El desempleo y la nula capacidad de compra, la inflación, los salarios de hambre, no permiten el acceso de las mayorías a la vida cívica y ni siquiera a la ciudadanía. Hasta 1994 nuestros casi diez millones de indígenas no podían considerarse mexicanos[21].
>
> [Fanon forgot to include Mexicans among *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). There are 93 million of us in Mexico, the eleventh most populated nation on earth and, according to analysts, we heading towards total dependence, on the verge of becoming a giant *maquiladora* chain. […] Because of unemployment, zero purchasing power, inflation and poverty pay, the majority of Mexicans do not have access to civic life or even to citizenship. Until 1994, the almost ten million Indigenous people living in our country could not even consider themselves Mexicans.]

The Mexican press and the role of women within the process of democratisation, Poniatowska implies, can only be analyzed within the context of dependency and coloniality; in the Latin America context, in relation to dependency theory proposed by the likes of Aníbal Pinto, Enzo Faletto, Celso Furtado, who from the 1950s onwards unmasked the ideology of *desarrollismo* [developmentalism] that had dominated Mexico's economic policy since Lázaro Cárdenas's presidency in the 1930s[22]. Poniatowska's own reference to Fanon, moreover, points to another frame of theoretical reference, one much more contemporary to 1990s Poniatowska: an emerging anti-colonial or decolonial thought which in the Latin American context was first represented by Aníbal Quijano, who in 1991 coined the now-well-known concept of the "coloniality"[23]. Indeed, it was precisely in 1997, the same year that Poniatowska wrote her Women's Day speech, that Quijano begins to develop his concept of the "coloniality of power"[24]. Yet Poniatowska's gender-focused thinking around coloniality in some sense goes yet one step further, anticipating the decolonial feminist work of María Lugones, who transposes Aníbal Quijano's "coloniality of power" into a concept – the "coloniality of gender" – in which gender hierarchies are integral to the construction of colonial power[25].

Having positioned herself squarely as an anti-colonial, feminist thinker, Poniatowska then proceeds through an argument that forcefully intersects issues of gender inequality with ones of race and class discrimination in ways that anticipate the ideas that the likes of Lugones, Segato and Mendoza would develop in the early 2000s. Two examples are key to Poniatowska's argument. The first is María Victoria Llamas, a Mexican journalist who produced the Televisa series *Mujeres trabajando*, "donde dejaba hablar a las empleadas domésticas, a las obreras, a las artesanas, a todas las que sin ella y otras como ella no tendrían manera de hacerse oír"[26] [in which she gave a voice to domestic servants, female workers, craftswomen – all those who without her and others like her would have no way of making themselves heard]. In spite of the violent attempts to censure her work, she and other female journalists managed to open a space for the representation of the silenced working classes, and to demonstrate that "lo personal es político y lo individual colectivo" [the personal is political and the individual is collective]. The innovative feminist contribution their

work makes towards a more democratic society, Poniatowska argues, results from the fact that "al lado de la búsqueda del poder, de la productividad, de la autoridad, colocan el afecto y las necesidades más íntimas, generalmente despreciadas en el mundo público" [alongside the pursuit of power, productivity and authority, they place affection and the most intimate needs, which are generally disregarded in the public world].[27] Democratisation, then, is explicitly linked by Poniatowska to the participation and representation of historically marginalised subjects – women and working classes – but also to a certain form of representation, or aesthetics, linked to affect and intimacy.

Poniatowska's second example is a set of women-led social movements, which in Mexico include the Madres del Zócalo, the Unión de Madres con Hijos Desaparecidos, and particularly the Zapatistas whose first uprising Poniatowska locates not in 1994 – as most history books would have it – but in 1993 when Zapatista women began to take to the streets to demand their rights. The Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional [Zapatista Army of National Liberation] is advanced by Poniatowska as a model for *another* democratic politics grounded in its *Ley Revolucionaria de las Mujeres*; a law that, as Aída Hernández Castillo explains, "fue un parteaguas para los feminismos que se vieron interpelados por sus demandas antirracistas, anticapitalistas y antipatriarcales" [was a turning point for feminisms that were called into action by their anti-racist, anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal demands][28]. Poniatowska highlights the EZLN's Revolutionary Law as an illustration of a new politics founded on women's rights: to education, health, work and fair pay, to sexual choice, to occupy management positions, and to personal security; the right *not to be* abused or raped[29].

Building on these powerful illustrations of what would come to be known as decolonial feminist politics, Poniatowska reaches the following conclusion:

> De todos los logros hacia la democracia obtenidos por las mujeres periodistas, quizá lo más importante sea que a través de ellas se han hecho oír grupos humanos y voces aisladas que antes no tenían el menor acceso a los medios de comunicación. La brecha abierta ya no puede cerrarse. Los testimonios recogidos por muchas de nosotras quedan allí para siempre. Campesinas, obreras, taquilleras del metro, prostitutas, mujeres de distintos niveles socioeconómicos y diferentes

> edades cuentan sus experiencias, a veces con fuerza sobrecogedora. […] El día en que ellas, a quienes hoy les damos voz, tengan las mismas oportunidades que nosotras, las privilegiadas, ese día habremos alcanzado, entre todas, la democratización de los medios a la que tanto aspiramos. El día en que se reconozca nuestro esfuerzo y recibamos el mismo pago que un hombre por igual trabajo, habremos dado un paso hacia la democracia[30].
>
> [Of all the steps towards democratisation made by women journalists, perhaps the most important is that through them, marginalised groups and voices that previously had no access to the media have been heard. The gap can no longer be closed. The testimonies collected by many of us remain there forever. Whether peasants, workers, underground ticket sellers, prostitutes, women of different socio-economic levels and different ages tell their experiences, sometimes with overwhelming force. (…) The day when those women to whom we give voice today have the same opportunities as we, the privileged ones, that day we will have achieved, among all of us, the democratisation of the media to which we aspire. The day when our efforts are recognised and we receive equal pay, we will have taken a step towards democracy.]

This powerful rhetorical statement reveals what democracy means for Elena Poniatowska and for many women who in the twenty-first century have come to ally or align themselves with decolonial feminist movements. What is particularly interesting for the purposes of the present article, and for a wider consideration of the issues of representations of (gender) violence in and beyond Latin American literature, is that Poniatowska affords a privileged place to women journalists who have contributed to a more representative democracy by bringing into the realm of public discourse the voices of the most disenfranchised groups; voices that have been historically silenced due to colonial hierarchies of race, class and gender.

Poniatowska, in this 1997 speech, thus makes a strong case for women's journalism as a tool for democratisation in the context of Mexico's "authoritarian" or "failed" democracies[31], particularly through narrative forms that provide a platform for gendered and racialised subjects and therefore open up towards a decolonial politics. Key to building "otra democracia"[32], a different democracy or a democracy *based upon* difference, Poniatowska suggests, is forging alliances between society's privileged few, including writers and journalists like her, and some of the most marginalised citizens: including Jesusa, whose *testimonio* I will

go on to explore below. Before doing so, though, I take a short detour through some of the debates that have preoccupied postcolonial critics since the 1980s around the oft-problematised relation between the writer and the disenfranchised speaking subject. Journalists dressed in tailored suits, Poniatowska provocatively suggests, open spaces for women who have much more to say than any of us. But does the *testimonio* actually represent these women?

Debates over Testimonio and Representation: George Yúdice vs. Santiago Colás

In order to understand the complex political-literary legacy of *Hasta no verte*, we must begin by situating it in the highly contested and conflictual terrain to which it belongs: that of the *testimonio*, defined by Yúdice as

> An authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.). Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity[33].

Of particular interest for the following discussion of Elena Poniatowka's early testimonial work are the questions of representation, collectivity and democracy raised by George Yúdice and Santiago Colás[34]. Yúdice sums up the *testimonio* through the following, fairly uncontroversial, words:

> Testimonial writing, as the word indicates, promotes expression of personal experience. That personal experience, of course, is the collective struggle against oppression from oligarchy, military, and transnational capital. […] Testimonial writing also emphasizes a rereading of culture as lived history and a profession of faith in the struggles of the oppressed[35].

This "struggle of the oppressed", in contrast to elite, postmodern narratives, takes a very particular form. As Yúdice exemplifies through Joan Didion's *Salvador* (1982), – a gritty account of El Salvador's brutal civil war, and Elizabeth Burgos's *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983) [I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala (1993)], the *testimonio* "is not at all about representation

or about deconstructing representation by the violence to the marginal. Instead, it is a practice, a part of the struggle for hegemony"[36]. And in order to undertake this struggle for hegemony, he argues, the principal weapon of activists like Menchú is not representation, but "the practical aesthetics of community-building, of solidarity" which bring master discourses – Christianity, Marxism – "into the service of recognition and valuation of the marginalized"[37]. Menchú's *testimonio*, in short, goes "más allá de la representación" [beyond representation] and also, by extension, beyond narrative, and beyond literature[38]. The witness of the *testimonio*, rather than representing an existing position or group of people, is creating it. Beyond representing violence, Menchú is strategically forming alliances and collective subjectivities that would allow for a broader Indigenous community's resistance against that very violence.

In this view, narrator and speaker (Elizabeth Burgos and Rigoberta Menchú, or in the case we analyze below, Elena Poniatowska and Josefina Bórquez/Jesusa Palancares) are bound together in a relationship whose task is not that of representation – a subaltern identity or an oppressed community – but rather the political act of constructing that community through solidarity and collective action. The main character of the *testimonio* – whether Menchú or Borquéz/Palancares – is thus not a literary protagonist, but a social actor. This connects with the position that John Beverley would later conceptualise as "cultural agency": "what *I, Rigoberta Menchu* forces us to confront is not the subaltern as a 'represented' victim of history, but rather as agent of a transformative historical project that aspires to become hegemonic in its own right"[39]. Less than a cultural product, then, the testimonial novel must be considered as a part of socio-political process. The new Latin American literature that *testimonio* most vividly inaugurates, in a region politically inflamed by the Cuban Revolution and a series of violent civil wars, goes beyond literature: it proudly and urgently occupies the realm of the political.

Other scholars, though, are less than convinced by this idea that the *testimonio* takes its reader "beyond literature". Roberto González Echevarría, in relation to Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón* [Biography of a Runaway Slave], argues that:

> As a runaway he did not join others in a maroon society, as generally happened, but remained instead alone in the wild for years, talking to no one, brooding about life and acquiring the kind of self-knowledge granted only to introspective memorialists: each flight into the bush is a flight into silence […]. Though he did have many relationships with women (he refers to them as "ambulatory marriages") he recognized none of the children that his mistresses told him were his. He was a true skeptic who rarely established lasting affective bonds[40].

In this sense, González Echevarría suggests, the runaway slave Esteban Montejo is less a representative of Cuban society – and the country's collective history of racialised violence and oppression – than a kind of cultural anthropologist in his own right: a mirror, in effect, to Barnet, rather than a mouthpiece for a common subaltern identity. This isolated position, though, is from González Echevarría's perspective the very value of the *testimonio*: in its reversal of subject positions, "the native – as in the *crónicas de la conquista*, the chronicles of conquest – in the very process of being written, turns the tools of writing back on the colonizer"[41]. Montejo's critical distance and *unrepresentativity*, therefore, is crucial to his particular form of anticolonial resistance.

Santiago Colás takes an altogether different view, taking a step back from the binaries of representation/unrepresentativity. Bringing the *testimonio* debate over the relationship between literature, representation and politics to the heart of the problem of democracy raised by Elena Poniatowska, Colás takes issue with Yúdice's opposition between writing as a form of transformative politics and writing as a mode of representation. Citing Gayatri Spivak, who in her famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" insists – against the colonialist penchant of post-structuralism – that "representation has not withered away"[42], he asks: "What's wrong with representation? Why does the construction of the testimonio as radical political object require its placement 'beyond representation'?"[43] Following Spivak's logic, he suggests that it may be "because of what representation has implied in Latin America".

> Consider just two of the social practices in which representation functions centrally: literature and democratic politics. Both have operated historically as practices of exclusion. If representation, as I have argued above, always presupposes a distance, then in Latin America, literary representations and representative democracy always seem to extend the distance under the illusion of narrowing it[44].

For Colás, it is from this postcolonial perspective, from this desire to move away from a democratic politics based on exclusive and Eurocentric notions of citizenship, that Yúdice rejects the *testimonio's* representational character in favour of its novelty and radical politics. Colás offers an alternative argument, though, building on concepts developed by Argentine political theorist Ernesto Laclau: that "representation cannot simply be the transmission belt of a will that has already been constituted, but must involve the construction of something new"[45]. With the rise of new social movements that formed the historical backdrop of the literary development of the *testimonio*, Colás argues, the very concept of representative democracy went through a profound upheaval; one that inscribes "a contestatory, oppositional discourse that seeks to reoccupy and redefine – not escape or flee – the terrain of representation"[46].

> In this sense, what is at stake in constructing the function of representation in the testimonio may be nothing less than reestablishing the parameters of democracy's function within Latin American society at large and of suggesting, perhaps, that representation […] need not be an alienating marker of the distance to be traversed in the struggle for emancipation, but rather the ineluctable form that all emancipatory practices must take[47].

My argument is that with her testimonial work, from the 1960s onwards, Poniatowska situates herself on the faultlines in emerging thinking around democracy and representation (in its political as well as its literary sense) and their *limits, dangers and emancipatory possibilities.* In the final section of this article, I ask how Elena Poniatowska's *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* might be situated within the often polarised debate around the slippery relations between testimonial writing, (un) representative democracy and the (non-)representation of marginalised or oppressed subjects.

Colonial Violence in *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío*: Questions of Representation and Resistance

The testimonial of Josefina Bórquez – renamed Jesusa Palancares by the author – is best known for its alternative representation of the

Mexican Revolution through the lived experiences of the conflict by the former *soldadera*. Yet Palancares' experiences of the violence of warfare as a female soldier is part of a continuum of intersecting violences that begin from her childhood and last until her death. Cynthia Steele interprets her narrative, steeped as it is in Catholic doctrine, as a form of confession that, unlike a Foucauldian confession based on the sins of sexuality, "toma la violencia, en vez del sexo, como su enfoque narrativo" [takes violence, rather than sex, as its narrative focus][48]. Jörgensen expands on the subject, describing *Hasta no verte* as "a journey traveled along the margins of Mexican society and narrated from a position constrained by multiple oppressions"[49]. As a child, Jesusa experiences poverty and the early death of her mother. As a teenage *soldadera*, she is forced to marry the lieutenant Pedro, who subjects her to continual abuse. And as an adult in the margins of Mexico City's society, "she supports herself with a variety of low-paying jobs as a live-in servant, waitress, factory worker, healthcare aide, beauty shop operator, and laundry woman", experiencing "varying kinds and degrees of exploitation in all her employment" and maintaining her economic independence "only at great physical and psychological cost"[50]. In this section, I dialogue with Poniatowska's critics to try to make sense of how this early *testimonio* by Poniatowska might be read in relation to her more overtly political production, most particularly *La noche de Tlatelolco* and *Nada, nadie: Las voces del temblor* (1988) [Nothing, Nobody: The Voices Of the Mexico City Earthquake (1995)].

Interestingly, one scene links Jesusa's early *testimonio* thematically with both of these later works, through two childhood experiences: the trauma of imprisonment and the experience of a violent earthquake. The scene is set in a women's prison in the capital, where – because her stepmother Evarista is the daughter of the warden – the young Jesusa lives and sleeps, sharing a cell with one of the prisoners. That is where she was in 1911, the night of the Michoacán earthquake, whose magnitude of 7.6 led to the destruction of houses as far as Mexico City: "At four in the morning", Jesusa recalls, "buildings, lampposts, and monuments fell. I was alone with the prisoner"[51]. Awoken by the earthquake, her cellmate

> ran to the bars and begged for me to follow her. I opened my eyes and saw that the dome of the jail had cracked into four parts. She knelt down and called out desperately, with all the strength in her soul, for them to have compassion and open the door. But my stepmother and her mother had gone out into the street and didn't hear her. […] In Mexico City, they say, the quake lasted fifteen minutes, the ground turned inside out, furiously tossing houses around. […] The prison was wrecked. No one came to get me out until it was all over[52].

As a young child, then, Jesusa is left alone, with a terrified inmate, in a crumbling prison building. Her experience of the earthquake, described in vivid, dramatic terms, sums up her life experience: abandonment, neglect, violence, entrapment, and isolation. This is not her only experience of an earthquake, though: "I've never been afraid of earthquakes", the older narrating Jesusa insists, "because I've felt them since I was little; my whole life has trembled. Where I'm from, the ground shakes two or three times a day and you can hear it creaking; it thunders and pounds everything"[53]. The expression she uses here – "my whole life has trembled" – takes us very deliberately beyond metaphor: for Jesusa, the violent shaking of the earth beneath her feet is not representative of her life; it is her life; a life filled with danger and violence. This, in turn, leads the reader to reflect on the relationship between the natural disaster of the earthquake and the "not-so-natural disasters"[54] that would punctuate Jesusa's life and that are inseparable from her status as a poor *mestiza* woman born in Mexico in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Below I argue that the social injustice and human rights abuses at the heart of these two later *testimonios* – abbreviated from now to *Tlatelolco* and *Nada, nadie* – are already present within *Hasta no verte* in the form of the not-so-natural disasters that would characterise a life marked by poverty and exclusion. Much later in her *testimonio*, Jesusa reflects on an utter sense of unbelonging that always haunted her:

> I really have no country. I'm like the Hungarians, the gypsies: not from anywhere. I don't feel Mexican nor do I identify with the Mexicans. If I had money and property, I'd be Mexican, but since I'm worse than garbage, I'm nothing. I'm trash that the dog pees on and then walks away from. A strong wind comes along, blows it all down the street, and it's gone… I'm garbage because I can't be anything else. I've never

> been good for anything. My whole life I've been this very same germ you see right in front of you…[55]

As the reference to Romani people suggests, her lifelong experience of social exclusion is linked to two elements of her identity: her nomadic life – as a young girl uprooted from her home in Oaxaca to follow her father, the Revolution, and employment –; and her ethnicity. "Left alone" after her husband's death, she continues, "I intended to go back to my homeland. I'd have had a better life in Salina Cruz or in Tehuantepec and I would have seen my stepmother, but the years went by and I was never able to get the money together for bus fare"[56]. The intersecting injustices of internal displacement and extreme poverty lead to a profound feeling of ostracisation and solitude in Jesusa. Both, in turn, link back to the internalised racism that she has felt since childhood:

> Petra's skin was darker than mine. My face is tan, but I'm not dark; her face and her body were dark. She had more Indian blood in her than I do. Two of us had my father's coloring and the other two were dark-skinned: Efren and Petra, Emiliano and I, half and half[57].

"De acuerdo con la ideología mexicana dominante", Steele explains, Jesusa "valora su abolengo europeo por encima de su linaje indígena" [in line with the dominant Mexican ideology, Jesusa values her European ancestry above her indigenous lineage][58]. The long-held nationalist Mexican myth of *mestizaje* and social integration – most famously captured in José Vasconcelos's 1925 essay *La raza cósmica*[59] – is thus decidedly problematised by Jesusa, whose "half and half" ethnicity leads to her keen sense of racial hierarchies, leading her to feel distant from her older, more "Indigenous" siblings Petra and Efrén; a symptom of internalised racism, which sociologists Mónica G. Moreno Figueroa and América Nicte-Ha López Chávez describe as "an inevitable condition of the structures of racist oppression in the Mexican context and its racial project, *mestizaje*"[60]. The impact of internalised discrimination and stigma is a profound sense of social exclusion, or in Jesusa's words, her sense of "hav[ing] no country". In the context of Mexico's Revolutionary nation-building project, which was deeply intertwined with the myth of *mestizaje*, Jesusa's sense of unbelonging points to the failure of *mestizaje* to truly "include all races". As Peter Wade explains, while "ideological nation-building discourses about

mestizaje as democratic and racially tolerant drew on interpretations of Latin American histories of mixture as a social practice", "these were always in tension with the persistent racism and racial hierarchy that were also evident in this practice"[61].

In turn, internalised racism, and the psychological and physical oppression that results from it, intersect with Jesusa's continuous experience of gender violences throughout her life, experienced most acutely during her forced marriage to Pedro. One of the novel's most shocking scenes, perhaps, is the beating she receives at an encampment in Chihuahua:

> He hit me until he'd had enough. I remember I counted up to fifty blows from his machete. He hit me on the back. But I didn't bend over. I just sat on the ground with my legs crossed and covered my head with my arms and hands. I was used to it, since my stepmother treated me that way when I was a kid. I don't know why I'm still here. I don't remember if it was this hand that I held up but I have a scar, my left one; the machete went into my back. Look, he cut me open. You can see the scar here because that cut went all the way to the bone. It bled but I didn't feel it; after so many blows I didn't feel anything; I hadn't gotten over one blow when there was another one on the same spot. I never did anything to take care of the wounds, I didn't put anything on them, not even water. The wounds healed on their own[62].

Two elements of this passage are crucial to understanding the representation of violence in *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío.* First, the specific violence Jesusa receives at the hands of Pedro is linked in this passage to a broader pattern of abuse to which she has been subjected since childhood, particularly at the hands of her godmother. Second, Jesusa links her personal experience of violence during the armed conflict to that of other women: "Pedro beat me for everything, like most of the men in the company, who spoke to their women through the snap of their whip: 'Walk, you cunt, move it!' The point was to make their lives miserable"[63]. Jesusa's individual experience of abuse is thus connected to a much more widespread, collective experience by Mexican women during the Revolution that goes far beyond the fighting of the armed conflict itself: that of systematic gender violence and collective trauma. Her statement of survival – "I don't know why I'm still there" – could thus be translated into the first person plural: "I don't know why we're still there". Indeed, in its implications about racialised, gendered violence, it prefig-

ures Audre Lorde's famous poem *A Litany for Survival*, and the searing intergenerational pain captured in the repeated verse: "We were never meant to survive"[64].

Jesusa does not merely accept these intersecting racial and gender violences, however. Before her marriage to Pedro earlier on in the Revolution, when her father gets angry with her and scolds her for speaking Zapotec "with the boys from Tehuantepec", she reacts with rage:

> As I walked I got madder and madder, and when we reached Tierra Colorada, I was burning with rage like an ember that keeps smoldering. I don't care if he gets here or not! *Ora*, I won't put any food aside for him!
> I sat there and made no attempt to find him food or anything. He showed up and yelled at me again, but he was so mad he grabbed a plant, one this big, he pulled it right out of the ground, root and all, and raised it up to hit me. I was furious:
> God help you if you hit me! God help you if you think you dragged me away from my home to beat me… Why didn't you leave me where I was? I want you to give my brother back to me alive and to send me home.
> He turned around and didn't hit me, he just took off[65].

Racial discrimination is evident here in her father's angry rejection of Jesusa's use of Zapotec, the Indigenous language of her place of origin, her late mother and her community in Tehuantepec (Oaxaca). The extended metaphor of telluric forces continues here: her burning rage is described as "an ember that keeps smoldering", an enduring sensation which could well be interpreted as a visceral sense of social and racial injustice.

Jesusa's volcanic rage, connected to a deep feeling of intergenerational injustice, arguably dates back to the death of her mother, which Poniatowska narrates in the first chapter in which she literally tries to move the earth to fight for her mother's dignity:

> They wrapped her in a *petate*, a straw mat, tossed her body in a hole, and threw dirt on top of her. (… My father) didn't notice when I jumped into the hole and covered my mother's head with my dress so the dirt wouldn't fall on her face. No one did. Suddenly, he remembered I'd been with him and he called out for me. I answered him from below. He asked them to stop shoveling. I didn't want to get out. I wanted them to cover me up in there with my mother. I was all covered with dirt and crying when they pulled me out. Ever since then, whenever it's windy, my eyes sting. They say it's because I breathed in cemetery air and that's why my eyes turn red[66].

The instinctive sense of injustice that the six-year-old Jesusa experiences at the sight of the corpse of her young, Zapotec mother being "tossed in a hole" in a *petate* sleeping mat leads her to throw herself into the grave to try desperately to stop the dirt from covering her face. This dirt, in turn, becomes linked throughout the narrative with the social stigma carried by Indigenous or lower-class *mestizos* in Jesusa's Mexico; the same stigma that leads Jesusa to identify herself as "worse than garbage", as "trash that the dog pees on"[67].

This brings us to the long-debated question of whether Jesusa is subservient or resistant to these multiple violences. Jörgensen points out that "early studies of the novel discovered in Jesusa Palancares both a model feminist and a failed revolutionary, establishing two ideological poles between which later analyses would locate themselves"[68]. On one level, it can (and has) be argued that the young Jesusa accepts the violence inflicted upon her.

Let's return to the abuse she receives at an encampment in Chihuahua at the hand of Pedro. During this brutal beating, she stays quiet, and in the aftermath, she does not speak to the other women: "What did I have to gain by spilling my guts? Nothing. It's not as if telling them my life story would take the pain away. I don't explain anything to anyone"[69]. Jesusa's silent subjection to her husband's violence might be interpreted in similar terms to those González Echevarría uses to describe Esteban Montejo's experience as a runaway slave: "each flight into the bush is a flight into silence"[70]. Each beating leads the teenage Jesusa to retreat further into silence. And in this way, in line with the Cuban critic's analysis of Montejo's *Biografía*, Jesusa's *testimonio* is far from being representative of the wider experience of an oppressed class; far from conforming to the norms of a genre that Marc Zimmerman designates as "a means of popular-democratic cultural practices closely bound with the same forces that produce political and military insurgency"[71]. Instead, one might surmise, the narrative can only be read as deeply introspective, or even self-negating. The violence it portrays – in line with her own self-representation as worthless "trash" – might be likened to that which critics in relation to accounts of extreme oppression or slavery have theorised as "self-violence"[72]; that is, colonial violence directed inwards. Poniatowska, as she explains in her introduction, perceives this self-violence in the way Jesusa responds to

her presence and even to her touch: "Don't touch me, leave me alone. Can't you see that I don't want anyone near me?' She treated herself like an outcast animal"[73]. Indeed, her marriage to the lieutenant Pedro during the Revolution leads her to extremes of self-neglect:

> If I was filthy and full of lice as a child, my head was even more lice-infested when I was with my husband. He hit me, split my head open, and I lost my long wavy hair because of all the sores and blood. There was filth encrusted on my head and it stayed there[74].

Yet the Mexican Revolution is also credited by Jesusa for her new-found ability to resist her husband's gender violence as a *soldadera*. Reflecting on a later moment in which she confronts Pedro and threatens to shoot him, the older Jesusa ponders:

> Pedro got nicer after I threatened to shoot him. But then I got mean. From the time I was little I was mean, I was born that way, terrible, but Pedro never gave me a chance to be nasty. The blessed Revolution gave me self-confidence[75].

Here, as elsewhere, the reader is left to grapple with the narrative's internal contradictions: while Jesusa appears to be asserting her empowerment in the face of patriarchal violence, she is also once again displaying the internalisation of this violence. The naturalisation of "meanness" as a born trait, a genetic feature – rather than the product of a lifetime of abuse and neglect – reflects the manner in which, as Peter Wade summarises, racial ideas originating in "historical categories of colonial origin" produce "naturalizing explanations of culture"[76].

On another level, Jesusa's self-neglect might be interpreted as a "weapon of the weak", as conceptualised by American anthropologist James Scott[77]; a form of subaltern resistance against being a "good wife" in the highly patriarchal context of Revolutionary Mexico. Jesusa's use of self-neglect as a form of resistance is suggested in the following assertion, mediated of course by Poniatowka: "I hated him. I could scrape the dirt off my dress, it was so thick"[78]. Given the context in which Poniatowska was writing her *testimonio* – the Mexico of the 1960s infused with the fervour of the Cuban Revolution – Jesusa's hatred of her husband could be interpreted as an act of anti-colonial

resistance. In his *Message to the Tricontinental*, a speech delivered on April 16, 1967 in Havana, Ernesto Che Guevara discussed the struggles of oppressed peoples around the world, calling for solidarity and revolutionary action against imperialism, and insisting on "hatred as a factor of the struggle", on

> the intransigent hatred of the enemy, which pushes beyond the natural limitations of the human being and turns him into an effective, violent, selective and cold killing machine. Our soldiers have to be like that; a people without hatred cannot triumph over a brutal enemy[79].

These words, as Sanhueza explains, "express the rhetoric and sensitivity with which certain sectors of the leftist Third World thought that the revolutionary task should be carried out during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s: through hatred and violence"[80]. It is hard to think that the tone of this famous speech, delivered around the time that Poniatowska was preparing her manuscript, do not lurk in some way behind the narrative of *Hasta no verte*. In this way, Jesusa's/Poniatowska's *testimonio* might be compared with that of Joan Didion, whose discourse, Yúdice argues, serves as part of a sometimes violent "struggle for hegemony"[81]. Jesusa's youthful hatred of her violent husband, through Poniatowska's youthful and idealistic act of testimonial mediation, overspills the territory of the literary to become part of the writer's emerging activist struggle for Indigenous and women's rights as part of a broader project of democratisation. It therefore preempts, in many ways, Poniatowska's later, more explicit writing on women's liberation:

> El día en que nuestra voz se escuche y se valore, nuestro país estará caminando hacia la democracia. El día en que los movimientos de mujeres tengan la misma importancia que otros, habrá democracia. El día en que la mujer sea la única dueña de su cuerpo y las decisiones que tome dependan sólo de ella y de su pareja, habrá democracia. El día en que se le dé igual trato político a ella que al hombre, habrá democracia[82].
>
> [The day our voice is heard and valued, our country will be moving towards democracy. The day when women's movements have the same importance as others, there will be democracy. The day when a woman is the sole owner of her body and the decisions she makes depend only on her and her partner, there will be democracy. The day when women are given equal political treatment as men, there will be democracy.]

Yet I align myself with Colás, for whom this active – or activist – construction of an alternative democracy does not exclude a firm grounding in the act of representation; an act that, as Poniatowska shows already in *Hasta no verte* and as she highlights in her 1997 speech, belongs simultaneously to the realms of literary representation and radical politics. What Poniatowska does, in both her 1997 speech and her 1967 *testimonio*, is to qualify concepts of democracy and representation: Mexico, which in theory if not in practice has been a "representative" democracy since the Revolution, will only truly be able to *represent its people*, she insists, when women are included in the process of democracy; and particularly women like Jesusa and her Zapotec community, through a politics of gender, class and racial equality.

This broader question of representation, in Jesusa's testimonial account of a life marked by gender, racial and class-based exclusions, brings us back to our guiding question regarding the representation of violence: can *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* be described as a testimonial novel by Yúdice's standards, as a form of "collective memory and identity?"[83] It might be tempting to give a straight "no" to this question, as Doris Sommer does (implicitly) by contrasting Poniatowska's *Hasta no verte* to her later collective testimonials and to other more politically-ethically consistent testimonials like Elizabeth Burgos's *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*[84]. "Casting herself as an outsider to everything – country and kin and kindness –"[85], Sommer sees the isolated, solitary Jesusa as inherently resistant to the intellectual (and predominantly US-led) desire to see the testimonial narrator as a convincing mouthpiece for a broader oppressed community; and to see the *testimonio*, in John Beverley's terms, "as a nonfictional, popular-democratic form of epic narrative"[86] that might prove to be a literary-political conduit to the construction, from below, of more inclusive forms of democracy in Latin America.

Certainly, as I have argued, it might be tempting to read Bórquez's *testimonio* in line with González Echevarría's interpretation of Esteban Montejo's *Biografía*: as deeply unrepresentative of a popular-democratic expression of a collective condition of oppression. Particularly after the Revolution, Jesusa finds herself profoundly isolated in the capital:

> I was always alone, and the boy that I took in when he was little left me and I was even more alone, say goodbye and never come back, […] and me, imprisoned in my pots and pans, but I'm not much of a fighter anymore or as mean on the streets now, because I got old and now my blood doesn't boil and I've lost my strength and my hair fell out and I just have pegs for teeth, I'd scratch myself, but I don't have any fingernails left after so many got ingrown and came out in the laundry sink[87].

In this passage, Jesusa speaks to the multiple abandonments she has experienced in her life: her mother's untimely passing, her younger brother's and father's deaths during the Revolution, and her abandonment by her adopted son in her later life. Her consequent solitude, in a sense, makes her story difficult to relate to the affirmations of community and solidarity by the likes of Menchú, who claims to speak for "all poor Guatemalans"[88]. Just as Montejo finds himself "alone in the wild for years"[89], Jesusa describes how, following her return to Mexico City after the Revolution, she would "always" be alone. Yet once again, Jesusa seemingly contradicts herself in insisting on her silent solitude: at the same time as making the claim to a vow of silence in relation to the multiple abuses and exploitations she has suffered – "I don't explain anything to anyone"[90] – she is paradoxically telling her interlocutor Elena Poniatowska a novel-length tale about her lifelong encounters with different forms of colonial violence.

I do not see this as a contradiction, though: or rather, I do not see the contradictions of Jesusa's narrative as undermining her *testimonio*, for two main reasons. The first is provided by Jörgensen, who skillfully situates these internal contradictions – and the resulting polarised interpretations of *Hasta no verte* – in relation to the complex, plural narrative of

> a textually and ideologically split self, a seeing I, and an acting I, and a speaking I who exist not as coordinates of a stable identity but as forces engaged in a relationship marked by tension, contradiction, and separation. Jesus Palancares is, by this view, not one but many subjects in constant conflict with society and with her own past and present selves[91].

In line with Jörgensen, I would suggest that the apparent contradictions of this particular, early *testimonio* reveal the multiple faultlines within Jesusa's own life story that point the reader to a racialised and

gendered subjectivity; deep cracks that lead to a lifelong experience of geological and genealogical fractures. As Jesusa insists in her retrospective account of the earthquake with which I opened my analysis: "my whole life has trembled". These cracks, visible throughout a narrative that is filled with experiential and ideological contradictions, can be glimpsed in the above scene in which Jesusa confesses to Poniatowska the abuse Pedro inflicted on her. In this way, Jesusa's experience of social isolation is perhaps paradoxically connected to a collective condition linked to the systemic violence of coloniality and its structures of racism, sexism and classism[92].

As suggested in the above-cited passages of brutal violence and subsequent self-neglect, Jesusa's solitary body bears the marks of poverty and violence, as represented by her later "imprisonment" in her pots and pans. This metaphorical incarceration links back to her experience of being literally trapped during the 1911 earthquake. Both scenes featuring Jesusa first as a young child, later as an ageing woman, linked by their common setting – the margins of Mexico City – are underpinned by gender violence: the multiple forms of violence to which poor, proletarian, racialised Mexican women have been submitted due to enduring structures and strictures of coloniality[93]. As Poniatowska recounts of Jesusa's marginalised neighbourhood:

> The women's hair sticks against the nape of their necks, beaten down by sweat. Sweat dampens the air, clothes, armpits, foreheads. The heat buzzes, like the flies. The air in those parts is greasy, dirty; the people live in the very frying pans where they cook *garnachas*, those thick, filled tortillas covered in chile sauce, and potato or pumpkin-flower quesadillas, the daily bread that the women heap on tables with uneven legs along the street[94].

Through her vivid picture of life for the lowest-class sectors of Mexico City in the 1960s, Poniatowska uses her introduction to encourage the reader to interpret Jesusa's story as part of a story that extends backwards historically and outwards geographically: a much more collective experience of colonial oppression in which the minute materialities of everyday life – the beads of sweat, the buzzing flies, the *tortillas* and *quesadillas* – manifest in women's bodies; their sticky necks, their damp hair, their bowed legs. "Jesusa is dried up, too", Poniatowska continues. "She's eighty-seven and the years have made her smaller, as

it has the houses, bending their backbones"[95]. Jesusa's body, as the ensuing *testimonio* reveals, betrays a lifetime of extreme poverty and hard work; of exploitation at the hands of Mexico's upper-middle classes; and of continuous race-, class- and gender-based violences.

Through her early testimonial narrative, Poniatowska links Jesusa's (literally) beaten-down body to the condition of her entire, dilapidated neighbourhood. The inhabitants of these tenements, the author suggests, are the results of the rundown conditions in which they live. And it is this connection drawn between the individual and the collective, the narration and denunciation, violences and imprisonments of various forms – and the resistance against these – that Jesusa and Poniatowska, together, as an ever-unfolding, oft-contradictory, plural voice, prefigure the much more overtly political *testimonios* that would follow, from *Tlatelolco* to *Nada, nadie*. The faultlines of the earthquakes that defined Jesusa's life according to Jesusa herself would become, with time, the literary-political faultlines of Mexican (un)representative democracy with which Poniatowska would go on to grapple.

Conclusion: Towards a Decolonial Democracy?

In his 1989 essay *The Margin at the Centre*, John Beverley proposes an alternative to reading *testimonio* as part of an "emerging culture of an international proletarian/popular-democratic subject in its period of ascendancy":

> Literature, even where it is infused with a popular-democratic form and content, as in the case of testimonio, is not itself a popular-democratic cultural form, and (pace Gramsci) it is an open question as to whether it can ever be[96].

Beverley's point is that by reading *testimonio* as "a new form of literature or by making it an alternative reading to the canon", we may "occlude a vision of an emergent popular-democratic culture that is no longer based on the institutions of humanism and literature"[97]. Writing this article in 2024, I do not have the same problem as Beverley did, in 1989, with seeing testimonial literature as part of a broader popular-democratic cultural shift. More than three decades have passed since Beverley first published his essay, decades that have seen the rise of trans-

national social movements – from *Ni una menos* to Black Lives Matter – whose very premises are centred on the notion of rewriting history and shifting the locus of enunciation/representation. Alongside, in dialogue with, and as part of these movements, we have seen the emergence of a wide range of decentralised, grassroots literary practices that overspill the boundaries of what was traditionally defined as "literature"[98].

Josefina Ludmer theorises such literatures as "post-autonomous", a term that indicates the "desdibujamiento de las clasificaciones que operaban en la literatura concebida como esfera autónoma" [blurring of the classifications that operated with "literature" conceived as an autonomous sphere][99]. Beverley himself, in a 2019 essay, examines the emergence in the twenty-first century phenomenon of cartonera literature as a "militant practice at the edge of literature" that "dislocates or resituates our sense of literature"[100]. And in my own work, I have theorised cartonera publishers as a form of "literature in action" in which "a deeply processual approach to literature" places the acts of writing, making and circulating books at the heart of a complex weft of cultural, material, economic, social, political and environmental practices[101]. In the wake of this much broader – more popular-democratic, one might say – mushrooming of cultural activities in which literature is treated very much, as Yúdice preempted, as a "practice"[102], we might look back to *Hasta no verte* not so much as a "struggle for hegemony", but rather as a systematic search on the part of Poniatowska for a new form of literary production that is also an emerging way of "doing politics", of reshaping relations, and the relationship between writing and life. In line with Colás, one might say, Poniatowska's early testimonial writing gestures towards a mode of representation that is also a radical form of changing the subject of enunciation/representation; and thus might be fruitfully regarded as a transformative political act.

For Doris Sommer, *Hasta no verte* is ultimately dull, monotone, boring, and for that reason it exceeds the critic's grasp: "for all its transgressive excitement, its gender-crossing, border-crossing, double-crossing, and spiritually enhanced complexities, that life is replayed here with a tone of indifference; it is one of Jesusa's signatures, not Poniatowska's"[103]. In some ways, I agree with Sommer. The endless material details of everyday life of a poor Mexican woman lead to a form that is difficult to consume as a reader. Yet in my reading, the detailed attention to the materialities

of everyday life that punctuate the narrative that lead it to be "undigestible", are ultimately part of the writer's – Poniatowska's – commitment to what we might call "testimonial practice" or "testimonial as political praxis", to the simultaneously literary, material, political, ideological and ethical process of writing, of *representing* that would ultimately allow her to capture the gritty details of the violent realities of Mexico in the second half of the twentieth century: gritty details that, in their messiness, reveal the complexities of colonial and colonised realities.

In portraying the often contradictory political and ideological details of Jesusa's life, *Hasta no verte* lays the ground for Poniatowska's next *testimonio* – *La noche de Tlatelolco* – which in its use of multiple, juxtaposed, and sometimes conflicting first-person accounts, takes as its narrative construction a logic of "fragmentation and plurality, to convey the often dissonant voices of civil society"[104]. These dissonances, as I have argued, are present within this early *testimonio* in the "mosaic of splintered pieces" that constitute Jesusa's own life story, one characterised by the structural violence of classism, racism and sexism[105].

In 1978, Poniatowska would reflect back on the editorial process that went into the making of Jesusa as a literary character: "Maté a los personajes que me sobraban, eliminé cuanta sesión espiritualista pude, elaboré donde me pareció necesario, podé, cosí, remendé, inventé" [I killed off excess characters, eliminated as many spiritualist sessions as I could, elaborated where I felt necessary, pruned, sewed, mended, invented][106]. Steele points out the ambivalence displayed by the author, who describes the editorial process of turning a year's worth of conversations into a single narrative "en términos que combinan metáforas de la domesticidad 'femenina' con otras de la violencia 'masculina'" [in terms that combine metaphors of 'female' domesticity with ones of 'male' violence][107]. Reflecting on her complicated relationship both with the "real life" Jesusa and her fictional narrative construction, Poniatowska arguably unveils the tensions and conflicts – between groups and agendas, genders and classes – that form the complex terrain of both "literature in action" and radical politics.

In this sense, in dealing with Poniatowska's testimonial narrative and the popular-democratic cultural impulse encapsulated in Latin American *testimonio*, we must problematise not only the concept of "literature", but also that of "democracy" itself as an ideological abstrac-

tion, a political praxis and a lived experience. In the earthshattering eruptions that occur at the faultlines marked by race, class and gender, the act of literary-political representation is neither unified, nor unproblematic. Poniatowska is all too aware of this, as demonstrated in her repeated and insistent qualification, and Derridean futurisation, of the notion of "democracy" in *Mujeres, medios y democracia*:

> El día en que la maternidad voluntaria sea reconocida constitucionalmente, el día en que el machismo quede sepultado, el día en que la sociedad se feminice, ese día habrá democracia[108].
>
> [The day when voluntary maternity is constitutionally recognised, the day when machismo is buried, the day when society becomes feminised, that day there will be democracy.]

As we have seen, Poniatowska considers the testimonial writer as playing an important part in that "democracy to come"[109]; a part that consists not only of *representing* the subaltern, but above all of creating alliances across the faultlines of race, class and gender. And it is arguably the challenges and complexities posed by this alliance-building that lends her testimonial narrative – from *Hasta no verte* to later works like *La noche* and *Nada, nadie* – its plurality. By situating her writing at the intersection of often clashing voices of multiple Jesusas and Elenas, and through the consequently dialogical practice of literary narration and political representation, Poniatowska from the 1960s onwards preempts what Marcela Lagarde would call for in the 1990s: the development of a new paradigm of "la democracia desde las mujeres" or "la democracia genérica" [women's democracy or gendered democracy][110].

What *Hasta no verte* uncovers, I have argued, is that such a gendered democracy – or what Breny Mendoza terms "la otra transición a la democracia"[111] [the other transition to democracy] – must be thought and practiced from the intersectional standpoint of gender, class and race. Such an "*other* democracy" necessarily involves grappling with the question of representation. Instead of seeking to go "beyond representation" to construct less unequal, more pluralistic worlds, as Yúdice suggests, my analysis of *Hasta no verte* in relation to her later work indicates that, instead, Poniatowska invites us to locate in an ongoing literary-narrative-political praxis both the violent faultlines of so-called "representative" democracy – the racist, classist and sexist

violences narrated by Bórquez/Poniatowska – and the possible routes towards inclusion, equality and peace not as European (colonial) democratic abstractions but rather as lived and living experiences.

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[2] Claudia Parodi, *México álgido, las voces de la resistencia en la ciudad: La noche de Tlatelolco, Nada, nadie y Amanecer en el Zócalo*, in *América sin Nombre*, XI-XII, 2008, p. 131.

[3] For a succinct account of the role played by Poniatowska among a broader group of journalists and writers in constructing a narrative of the '68 massacre that would come to replace the PRI's hegemonic version, see Stefano Tedeschi, *Remembering violence: The narrative of '68 in Mexico*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Violence in Latin American Literature*, edited by Pablo Baisotti, Routledge, New York & London 2022, pp. 231-252.

[4] Beth E. Jörgensen, *Chronicle and Diary, Politics and Self-Portrait in Elena Poniatowska's* Amanecer en el Zócalo, in *Textos Híbridos: Revista de Estudios Sobre Crónica Latinoamericana*, II (I), 2012, pp. 4-21: p. 8.

[5] Beth E. Jörgensen, *The Writing of Elena Poniatowska: Engaging Dialogues*, University of Texas Press, Austin 1994, pp. 83-84.

[6] Mary Kay Vaughan, *Portrait of a Young Painter: Pepe Zúñiga and Mexico City's Rebel Generation*, Duke University Press, Durham 2014, p. 13.

[7] Lynn Stephen, *Stories that Make History: Mexico through Elena Poniatowska's Crónicas*, Duke University Press, Durham 2021, p. 32.

[8] Ibidem.

[9] Marcelo Sanhueza, *Frantz Fanon in his Third World*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Violence…*, pp. 123-146: p. 129.

[10] Going back to one of the first books on the *testimonio* edited by Georg M. Gugelberger, *The Real Thing*, Poniatowska's contribution to the genre is reduced to a brief mention in Margaret Randall's essay "Reclaiming Voices Notes on a New Female Practice in Journalism", which revealingly celebrates the pioneering work of Latin American women writers in the testimonial form through a footnote: "Moema Viezzer gave us the testimony of Domitila (Barrios de Chungara 1978), and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray that of Rigoberta Menchú (1984). Elena Poniatowska was the first to publish the story of what really happened on the night of 1 October 1968 in Mexico City (1971)", and so on (See Georg M. Gugelberger (ed.), *The Real Thing: Testimonial discourse and Latin America*, Duke University Press, Durham 1996, p. 68). Likewise, in spite of the stated goal of "tracing the development of testimonio from its emergence in the Cold War era to the rise of a globalized economy and of U.S. political hegemony" (John Beverley, *Testimonio: On the politics of truth*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2004, back cover).

[11] George Yúdice, *El conflicto de posmodernidades*, in *Nuevo Texto Crítico*, VII, 1991, pp. 19-33: p. 19.

[12] Beth Jörgensen, *The Writing of Elena Poniatowska…*, p. 84.

[13] Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women. Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1990; Marcela Lagarde, *Género y feminismo. Desarrollo humano y democracia, Siglo XXI*, Mexico City 2018.

[14] Marcela Lagarde, *Género y feminismo...*, pp. 189-202. For a more detailed discussion of feminist and decolonialist feminist theory in relation to contemporary writing practices in Mexico, see Lucy Bell, *Narración y sanación: La sorografía y las nuevas formas feministas en la escritura de Leo Zavaleta*, in *Altre modernità*, 32, 2024, pp. 195-227.

[15] Rita Laura Segato, *La crítica de la colonialidad en ocho ensayos y una antropologia por demanda*, Prometeo Libros, Buenos Aires 2013.

[16] Mabel Moraña, *Decolonizing Democracy in Latin America: Perspectives from the Humanities and the Social Sciences*, in *Twenty-second International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities*, Sapienza University of Rome, 26-28 June 2024. Walter Mignolo also questions "the uncritical use" of the word "democracy", a questioning based on decolonial options that open up possibilities for "the re-emergence of other local histories dismissed in the name of democracy", in *Democracia liberal, camino de la autoridad humana y transición al vivir bien*, in *Revista Sociedade e Estado*, XXIX (I), 2014, pp. 21-44: p. 21.

[17] Breny Mendoza, *Los feminismos y la otra transición a la democracia en América Latina*, in *Ensayos de crítica feminista en nuestra América*, Herder, Mexico City 2014, pp. 235-260.

[18] Elena Poniatowska, *Mujeres, medios y democracia*, conference paper presented at *El acceso al poder y fortalecimiento de las mujeres en los medios de comunicación*, Fundación Internacional de Mujeres en los Medios, 7-8 March 1997, Mexico City, pp. 19-24.

[19] Ivi, p. 19.

[20] Marcelo Sanhueza, *Frantz Fanon in his Third World…*, p. 126.

[21] Elena Poniatowska, *Mujeres, medios y democracia...*, pp. 19-20.

[22] Eugenia Romero Sotelo, *La ortodoxia frente al desarrollismo mexicano (1934–1945)*, in *Economía*, IX (XXVI), 2012, pp. 3-42.

[23] Aníbal Quijano, *Colonialidad y racionalidad / modernidad*, in *Perú Indígena*, XXIX, 1991, pp. 11-29.

[24] Aníbal Quijano, *Estado-nación, ciudadanía y democracia: cuestiones abiertas*, in *Democracia para una nueva sociedad: modelo para armar*, edited by Helena Gonzáles & Heidulf Schmidt, Nueva sociedad, 1997, pp. 139-155.

[25] María Lugones, *The Coloniality of Gender*, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development*, edited by Wendy Harcourt, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2016.

[26] Elena Poniatowska, *Mujeres, medios y democracia...*, p. 20.

[27] Ivi, p. 21.

[28] Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo, *La ley revolucionaria de mujeres: una justicia*

nueva para las indígenas, in *Revista de la Universidad de México*, X, 2023, pp. 50-55.

[29] Elena Poniatowska, *Mujeres, medios y democracia*..., p. 23.

[30] Ibidem.

[31] Lorenzo Meyer, *Nuestra tragedia persistente: la democracia autoritaria en México*, Debate, Mexico City 2013; Gerardo Ávalos Tenorio, *La democracia fallida en México*, in *Veredas. Revista del Pensamiento Sociológico*, XXVI, 2013, pp. 121-142.

[32] Breny Mendoza, *Los feminismos y la otra transición*...

[33] George Yúdice, *Testimonio and postmodernism*, in *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, edited by George M. Gugelberger, Duke University Press, Durham & London, 1996, pp. 42-57: p. 44.

[34] The most influential of these debates is the infamous polemic unleashed by David Stoll over the truth of Rigoberta Menchú's and Elizabeth Burgos's now iconic *I, Rigoberta Menchu*. "The inaccuracies and omissions Stoll claims to find in Menchu's account lend themselves, he feels, 'to justify violence. That issue – 'how outsiders were using Rigoberta's story to justify continuing a war at the expense of peasants who did not support it' – is the main problem for Stoll, rather than the inaccuracies or omissions themselves. By making Menchu's story seem, in her own words, 'the story of all poor Guatemalans,' *I, Rigoberta Menchu* misrepresented a more complex and ideologically contradictory situation among the indigenous peasants." (John Beverley in *Subalternity and Representation…*, p. 66).

[35] George Yúdice, *Testimonio and Postmodernism*…, p. 54.

[36] Ivi, p. 57.

[37] Ibidem.

[38] George Yúdice, *El conflicto de posmodernidades*, in *Nuevo Texto Crítico*, IV (I), 1991, pp. 19-33: p. 19.

[39] John Beverley, *Subalternity and representation: Arguments in cultural theory*, Duke University Press, Durham 1999, p. 82.

[40] Roberto González Echevarría, *Biografía de un Cimarrón and the Novel of the Cuban Revolution*, in *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, XII (III), 1980, pp. 249-263: p. 261.

[41] Santiago Colás, *What's Wrong with Representation?: Testimonio and Democratic Culture*, in *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, pp. 161-171: p. 162.

[42] Gayatri Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1988, pp. 271-313: p. 308.

[43] Santiago Colás, *What's Wrong with Representation?*..., p. 168.

[44] Ivi, pp. 168-169.

[45] Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, Verso, London 1990, p. 38.
[46] Santiago Colás, *What's Wrong with Representation?...*, p. 171.
[47] Ibidem.
[48] Cynthia Steele, *Testimonio y autor/idad en* Hasta no verte Jesús mío *de Elena Poniatowska*, in *Revista de crítica literaria latinoamericana*, XVIII (XXXVI), 1992, pp. 157-183: p. 162.
[49] Beth Jörgensen, *The Writing of Elena Poniatowska: Engaging Dialogues*, University of Texas Press, Austin 1994, p. 30.
[50] Ivi, pp. 30-31.
[51] Elena Poniatowska, *Here's to you, Jesusa!*, translated by Deanna Heikkinen, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2001, p. 34.
[52] Ivi, p. 35.
[53] Ibidem.
[54] For a reading of not-so-natural disasters in post-revolutionary literary production in Mexico, see Lucy Bell, *Viscous Porosity: Interactions between Human and Environment in Juan Rulfo's El llano en llamas*, in *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, XXI (III), 2015, pp. 389-404.
[55] Elena Poniatowska, *Here's to You, Jesusa…*, p. 219.
[56] Ibidem.
[57] Ivi, p. 27.
[58] Cynthia Steele, *Testimonio y autor/idad...*, p. 164.
[59] José Vasconcelos, *The cosmic race/La raza cósmica*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore (1925) 1997.
[60] Mónica G. Moreno Figueroa and América Nicte-Ha López Chávez, *'A lo mejor yo soy auto-racista': Un acercamiento al estudio del racismo internalizado en México*, in *Revista Euro latinoamericana de Análisis Social y Político (RELASP)*, III (VI), 2023, pp. 82-108: p. 82.
[61] Peter Wade, *Mestizaje and conviviality in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico*, in *Convivial Constellations in Latin America*, edited by Maya Manzi, Luciane Scarato, and Fernando Baldraia dos Santos Sousa, Routledge, New York 2020, pp. 85-98.
[62] Elena Poniatowska, *Here's to You, Jesusa!...*, p. 97.
[63] Ivi, pp. 96-97.
[64] Audre Lorde, *The Black Unicorn: Poems*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 1978.
[65] Elena Poniatowska, *Here's to You, Jesusa!...*, p. 77.
[66] Ivi, p. xx.
[67] The metaphor of dirt, and its links to Indigenous women (and men), is recurring throughout the novel. Her playing in the dirt during her childhood is interpreted through a profoundly internalised racism: "The Lord made His whole creation white in His own image and likeness, but it's been getting darker over the years, from use and because of evil. That's

why little kids play in the dirt; it looks very pretty and clean-white to them. As they grow older, the devil enters them and their thoughts. The evil transforms everything they see, making things dirty, muddy, changing the color" (Ivi, p. 14).

68 Beth Jörgensen, *The writing of Elena Poniatowska…*, p. 31.

69 Elena Poniatowska, *Here's to You, Jesusa!...*, p. 98.

70 Roberto González Echevarría, *Biografía de un Cimarrón...*, p. 261.

71 Marc Zimmerman, *Testimonio in Guatemala: Payeras, Rigoberta, and Beyond*, in *The Real Thing…*, pp. 101-129: p. 101.

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73 Elena Poniatowska, *Here's to You, Jesusa!...*, p. xxiv.

74 Ivi, pp. 95-96.

75 Ivi, p. 101.

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77 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1985.

78 Elena Poniatowska, *Here's to You, Jesusa!...*, pp. 95-96.

79 Ernesto Che Guevara, *Message to the Tricontinental*, 1967, available at https://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1967/04/16.htm [May 5th 2024].

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81 George Yúdice, *Testimonio and Postmodernism…*, p. 54.

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87 Elena Poniatowska, *Here's to You, Jesusa!...*, p. 149.

88 Elizabeth Burgos, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú, y así me nació la conciencia*, in *Siglo XXI*, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Madrid 2007, p. 21.

89 Roberto González Echevarría, *Biografía de un Cimarrón...*, p. 261.

90 Elena Poniatowska, *Here's to You, Jesusa!...*, p. 98.

91 Ibidem.

92 Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2011.

93 See Marcela Lagarde, *Los cautiverios de las mujeres: Madresposas, monjas, putas, presas y locas*, in *Siglo XXI*, Buenos Aires 2016.

94 Elena Poniatowska, *Here's to You, Jesusa!...*, p. vii.
95 Ibidem.
96 John Beverley, *The Margin at the Center*…, p. 39.
97 Ibidem.
98 See Lucy Bell, Alex Ungprateeb Flynn and Patrick O'Hare, *Taking Form, Making Worlds: Cartonera Publishers in Latin America*, University of Texas Press, Austin 2022, pp. 110-151.
99 Josefina Ludmer, *Literaturas postautónomas 2.0*, in *Propuesta Educativa*, XXXII, 2009, pp. 41-45: p. 41.
100 John Beverley, *The Failure of Latin America: Postcolonialism in Bad Times*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh 2019, pp. 98-99.
101 Lucy Bell, Alex Ungprateeb Flynn and Patrick O'Hare, *Taking Form, Making Worlds...*, p. 115.
102 George Yúdice, *Testimonio and Postmodernism*…, p. 57.
103 Doris Sommer, *Taking a life*…, p. 927.
104 Diana Sorenson, *Tlatelolco 1968: Paz and Poniatowska on Law and Violence*, in *Mexican Studies*, XVII (II), 2002, pp. 297-321: p. 297.
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