

2022-09 | September 2022

Stephen, Lynn. *Stories That Make History: Mexico through Elena Poniatowska's Crónicas*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021, 328 pp. \$27.95 (Paperback). Reviewed by Litzy Galarza, University of Pittsburgh, litzy-galarza@pitt.edu.

Lynn Stephen's book *Stories That Make History: Mexico through Elena Poniatowska's Crónicas* (2021) documents how Elena Poniatowska's collective reporting and eventual activism created strategic emotional political communities across time and space to foster political engagement. Stephen focuses on Poniatowska's reporting and coverage of the 1968 massacre of students at Tlatelolco, the devastating 1985 earthquake, and the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN). In addition, Stephen addresses Poniatowska's activism in leftist creative performance politics, including her support for Mexico's current president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO), and her role as spokesperson for justice for the forty-three disappeared students from Ayotzinapa.

The book is broken down into six chapters with the introduction connecting major theories and frameworks to set the stage for how Stephen is thinking about testimony, social memory, and imagined communities. In the first chapter, Stephen contextualizes Mexico's news and publishing industries between 1959-1985 to give the reader a broader understanding of the nation's major news organizations and publishing houses. The 1968 massacre of students at Tlatelolco is addressed in chapter two. In this chapter, audiences get a glimpse of Poniatowska's writing style in addition to a mix of testimonies, photojournalism, and reflections from readers of the book *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1998). Chapter three includes a discussion of the 1985 earthquake and the government's lackluster response in recovery efforts. Poniatowska's blurring of the lines between advocacy and journalism is addressed in both the coverage of the 1985 earthquake and the EZLN, in chapter four. This discussion is followed by AMLO's request for Poniatowska to help him in his 2006 campaign for the presidency in chapter five.

Lastly, in chapter six, the author addresses Poniatowska's activism around the 2014 disappearance of students from Ayotzinapa. Stephen concludes the book by restating her argument regarding how Poniatowska has made history as a journalist and public intellectual.

Drawing on Carlos Monsiváis, renowned writer and chronicler, Stephen writes that crónicas prioritize language and form above merely reporting the facts in reconstructing historically verifiable events. Importantly, crónicas are a hybrid of fiction and non-fiction, and often referred to as testimonial narratives.

This book presents a complex and multi-layered argument that has important implications in the fields of anthropology, history, political science, and most importantly—journalism. Stephen argues that Poniatowska's multi-decades' volume worth of work, particularly crónicas, in journalism has fostered what she calls "strategic emotional political communities." Stephen connects Myriam Jimeno's "emotional community" to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "strategic essentialism" and Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" to suggest Poniatowska's reporting, and chronicles connect survivors and audiences across time and space to foster political engagement (18-19). This work is important to the field of journalism because it focuses on the role of journalists in shaping the national narrative and historical record of events. The book offers a blueprint for exploring the role of influential US Latina/o journalists, such as Maria Hinojosa, Iliá Calderón, Jorge Ramos, and José Díaz-Balart, on national memory.

It would be simplistic to suggest that Poniatowska is a literary, or advocacy, journalist. Stephen presents us with an analysis of Poniatowska's work and draws on the importance of Latin American literature in defining the style and

impact of crónicas on civil society and the critical public sphere more broadly.

Poniatowska's work is hybrid and defies simplistic categorizations, particularly those in mainstream US journalism studies. This is most evident in chapter five of the book where Stephen addresses Poniatowska's involvement in AMLO's 2006 presidential campaign. In this chapter, Stephen shows how Poniatowska's journalistic influence brought communities of diverse backgrounds together to support a political campaign. Stephen's interviews with Poniatowska, in addition to others' coverage of Poniatowska's work, in this context reveal the limits of strategic emotional political communities in action.

Stephen's book is especially important in documenting Poniatowska's self-reflection regarding the ethics of newsgathering and the trauma associated with coverage of massacres and natural disasters. A deeper reflection on ethics in engaging in ethnographic work would be a welcomed addition.

Stephen had unprecedented access to Poniatowska. This is evidenced by her reference to, and reliance on, personal interviews with the journalist. Stephen turns to photographs from Poniatowska's foundation (Fundación Elena Poniatowska Amor) and museums such as Museo de la Ciudad, as well as her photography to highlight

how the journalist's work has been institutionalized and embraced as part of Mexico's memorialization of major events. The early chapters of the book also include the author's interviews with people, from various walks of life, who read Poniatowska's crónicas in chapters two and three. Others' voices, however, fade to the background in later chapters, as the author mainly turns to solely relying on Poniatowska's crónica *Amanecer en el Zócalo* (2007) in chapter five.

In the context of journalism studies, this book is relevant in exposing US students to the Latin American approach to the field. In the past decade or so, journalism educators have moved away from the simplistic and problematic embrace of objectivity toward fairness and balance. Poniatowska's journalism is a hybrid of literary and civic or public journalism, and worthwhile reading in journalism methods (ethnography) and international journalism courses.

Overall, Stephen's book is commendable in its engagement of interdisciplinary scholarship addressing Mexico's political, social, and economic history in contextualizing how Poniatowska's crónicas and strategic emotional political communities challenge the government's official historical narratives on massacres, response to natural disasters, and elections.