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DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2025.49.3.117-132

Between Social Commitment and Distinction: The Life Writings of Elena Poniatowska

ABSTRACT

This article examines the life writing of Elena Poniatowska from a sociocritical perspective, with particular focus on the chronicles compiled in *Fuerte es el silencio* [Silence is Strong] (1980) and the novel *El amante polaco* [The Polish Lover] (2019, 2021). While these works appear to exhibit thematic discontinuity and ideological divergence, given that the social commitment embedded in the chronicles seems to contrast sharply with the homage paid to the last king of Poland in the author's most recent novel, ostensibly aligned with the tradition of canonical biography – both ultimately articulate “politics of recognizability” (Butler, 2009) and a reconfiguration of the “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière, 2010). The analysed life writing enables a critical interrogation of hierarchies and social norms as well as transformation of the hegemonic discursive order (Cros, 2002; Malczynski, 2006, 2009), while also probing the boundaries and possibilities of testimonial and auto/biographical literature (Anderson, 2011; Arfuch, 2002, 2018).

KEYWORDS

Fuerte es el silencio; *El amante polaco*; life writing; ideology; counter-hegemony

1. Introduction

The widely discussed and celebrated oeuvre of Elena Poniatowska has firmly established itself within the canon of Latin American, auto/biographical, and feminist literature. Her critical and popular success, sustained over decades, may be attributed not only to the subversive nature of her narrative – both thematically and formally – but also to her remarkable capacity to encode, interrogate and transform social discourses. Poniatowska's writing actively engages with the mechanisms of exclusion and the enduring logics of patriarchal, class-based power structures. In this respect, her work might be read not merely as literary production but as a discursive intervention – one that foregrounds the entanglement

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between literature, ideology, “sociability” and power structures¹, as analysed by sociocriticism. Among contemporary authors, Poniatowska distinguishes herself through her ability to combine a sophisticated artistic vision with theoretical and political reflection, particularly in her explorations of social exclusion, gender, identity, representation, and life writing.

From a sociocritical perspective, every literary text functions as a historically situated discursive artefact. It is embedded in, and responsive to, diverse social discourse practices: a complex matrix of voices, positions, and tensions that constitute what may be said, thought, or imagined in a given conjuncture (Angenot, 1998; Malcuzyński, 1991, 2006, 2009). Poniatowska’s narrative practice, deeply attuned to the lived experience of marginalised subjects – especially women, the poor, Indigenous communities, and political dissidents – exposes and challenges the tacit limits of hegemonic discourse. Her literature interrogates the conditions under which certain subjectivities and certain life experiences are rendered intelligible and others consigned to the margins of the unsayable.

As she herself acknowledges in the prologue to *El amante polaco* [The Polish Lover], “the life of [her] country absorbed all [her] strength”². Consequently, in order to engage with Mexican reality from a distinctly social and political position, she often embeds her narratives within what Arfuch (2002) terms the “biographical space”. In both her fiction and non-fiction, Poniatowska constructs and reconstructs life-narratives – memoirs, diaries, letters, autofictions, fictionalised biographies, chronicles, and testimonial novels based on oral autobiographical accounts – as she conceives history as genealogy and genealogy as testimony rooted in the narration of life experiences. She feels compelled to recreate the voices of the voiceless so as to establish her own voice. Since the publication of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* [Until I see You, My Jesus] (1969), she has consistently interrogated the strategic use of life-narratives in forging connections between discursive practices and the material, corporeal conditions of those who articulate them. In her literature, life writing becomes a political tool employed to codify the experience of marginalised subjectivities and vulnerable bodies, of pariahs (Arendt, 2004), defectors (Leibovici, 2011) and rebellious women (Varikas, 1995).

The act of recovering lives – primarily women’s lives – that have been silenced, marginalised, or misrepresented has become a key challenge that Poniatowska has embraced from the outset of her literary career in the tumultuous 1960s. She chronicles the lives of working-class women, excluded on the basis of both

¹ In her article on Poniatowska’s chronics – among others *Fuerte es el silencio* – Carmen Perilli refers to the Mexican author as a “chronicler of the alterity” that does not interpret it but (re) produces it in her texts, focusing on women as subjects in history (1996, p. 65). For more on the texts by Poniatowska that Perilli places in the “space of the chronicle” see Amar Sánchez (2013), Negrin (2019), Poot Herrera (1996).

² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Spanish and Polish are by the authors.

gender and class, while also paying tribute to numerous women artists and writers who endured the harsh constraints of male domination in the artistic and literary fields (Bourdieu, 1995): Angelina Beloff, Lupe Marín, Leonor Carrington, Tina Modotti, Frida Kahlo, Nahui Olin, Pita Amor, Rosario Castellanos, Elena Garro, among others. Building upon this dedication to narrating lives at the margins, Poniatowska's engagement with life-narratives – chronicles, biographies, and autobiographies – becomes central not merely as literary forms but as epistemological interventions into the question of what constitutes a “liveable life” (Butler, 2004, 2009).

Following the theoretical trajectories laid out by Malcuzyński (1991, 2006), and Chicharro Chamorro (2005, 2012), we understand Poniatowska's literary project as one that negotiates the “given,” the “created,” and the “projected”. Her texts not only emerge from pre-existing social discourses – the “given” – but also actively reshape them – the “created” – while pointing toward alternative epistemologies and collective imaginaries – the “projected”. This triadic movement, central to sociocritical analysis, underscores her capacity to make visible that which hegemonic discourse tends to obscure: the voices of those excluded from normative structures of representation and legibility.

Life writing, in her oeuvre transcends the inscription of the personal and emerges as a mode of contesting normative frameworks of intelligibility and worth. In presenting stories of those denied institutional recognition – Indigenous communities, the poor who are outside the social bracket, artists marginalised by politics or patriarchy, victims of sexual abuse – Poniatowska engages in what Judith Butler has termed the “politics of recognizability” (Butler, 2009), challenging the existing “distribution of sensible” (Rancière, 2010). These narratives not only restore agency to historically silenced subjects but also articulate alternative grammars of life, affirming the lived experiences of those who persist despite exclusion. The lives encoded in literature thus become a site of resistance: a means of inscribing recognition into spaces from which it has been violently erased. Through this literary recuperation, Poniatowska invites us to reconsider how value is assigned to human lives, and whose life-stories are deemed worth telling.

2. “I am what I am because of the thousands of voices I have listened to”³

In “La colonia Rubén Jaramillo” [Rubén Jaramillo Neighbourhood], the final of the five chronicles comprising *Fuerte es el silencio* [Silence is strong] (1980),

³ Words spoken by Elena Poniatowska on 10 October 2012 during the opening speech of the conference *Nuevos Cronistas de Indias 2*, organised by the National Council for Culture and the Arts (CONACULTA) and the Gabriel García Márquez Foundation for New Ibero-American Journalism (FNPI). (Poniatowska, 2012).

Elena Poniatowska projects her *alter ego*: a humble and silent secretary, wholly dedicated to recording the life and struggle of Güero Medrano, a guerrilla fighter and peasant leader who, in 1973, alongside thirty destitute families, occupied wasteland in Villa de las Flores near Cuernavaca. There, they constructed a settlement of makeshift dwellings fashioned from corrugated iron sheets and cardboard, devoid of electricity and potable water, yet fiercely defended as their own against the government, police, and army – defended, indeed, as one defends one's homeland. Poniatowska named the secretary of the Jaramillo neighbourhood after herself since, as she once confessed to Verónica Volkow, “[she] wanted to be [that] character” (Volkow, 1981, p. 41), placing in her mouth the following words: “I write down what I see, I pay close attention. I like to observe; I have always lived by paying attention. [...] Sometimes my eyes hurt, my temples ache, my body aches from being so alert” (Poniatowska, 2006, pp. 245, 259).

The chronicler herself assumes the role of an attentive observer, a witness with eyes and ears wide-open, who merely recounts what she sees and hears. Carlos Monsiváis wrote of Poniatowska: “She has mastered the art of seeing and hearing, and has brilliantly conveyed us what impatience and oppression have relegated to the shadows or to invisibility” (1981, pp. 3–4). It is precisely this ability that constitutes the political gesture of her literature – not through the direct representation of political ideas as its foundation or central theme, nor through the expression of specific ideological positions in her characters' words and actions, nor by aligning her work with any particular political stance.

Her literature is political in Rancière's sense, as it alters the parameters of our sensorium, making us see how power discourse naturalises and legitimises the hierarchical and violent distribution of bodies in the social order and, above all, by its capacity to incorporate the invisible sectors into the dominant order (cf. Rancière, 2010, pp. 37–38). Rancière insists that “the political” consists not only in “making what was unseen visible”, but also in “in making what was audible as mere noise heard as speech and in demonstrating that what appeared as a mere expression of pleasure and pain is a shared feeling of a good or an evil” (Rancière, 2010, p. 38). Her literature is also political from a sociocritical standpoint, not merely because of its subject matter, as has been stated above, but because it intervenes in the discursive mechanisms that construct and legitimise hegemonic reality. Her texts expose the contingency and constructedness of hegemonic discourse – the ways in which it configures social hierarchies as natural, fixed, and self-evident, and ultimately, as the social discourse per se. By foregrounding marginalised lives and voices – those traditionally excluded from the “speakable” (Malczynski, 2006) – her work renders visible the processes through which certain forms of knowledge are authorised while others are dismissed as anecdotal, excessive, or incoherent. In doing so, she reveals that what counts as reality is itself a discursive production, one maintained through repetition, citation, and institutional power.

Hence, she does not merely codify the invisible sectors into the dominant order to represent them, but rather to make them heard, to amplify the countless voices “of those who have never had the right to anything, not even to be designated by name” (Poniatowska, 2006, p. 11): the voices of marginalised indigenous peasants who swell the slums of Mexico City, of the desperate peasants of Morelos and Guerrero reclaiming land, of the radicalised youth of 1968 risking their lives in the name of solidarity, of the mothers of the disappeared *guerrilleros* [guerrilla fighters]. The chronicler follows the daily wanderings of street vendors, domestic and urban workers, gathering evidence of those consigned to non-existence, recovering the life stories of those for whom life has been little more than “an unbroken endurance of being cast aside” (p. 11). These fragile, immediate experiences of the world are refracted through the dense prism of dominant ideology.

There are many narrative strategies employed in this book that highlight the disjunction between the institutionalised discourse of the Mexican Revolution – with its professed ideals of social justice and universal economic welfare – and the lived reality of the neglected majority, between the mask of the rule of law and the true face of the police and criminal state. Nowhere is this clearer than in the nuanced modulation of the chronicler’s own voice. In “Diario de una huelga de hambre” [Diary of a Hunger Strike] and “Los desaparecidos” [The Disappeared], Poniatowska (2006) makes audible the ingenuous voice of the upper-class woman confronted by the values of her own class. She asks a guerrilla fighter whether he would not prefer to own a house, an ultra-thin wristwatch, or a cashmere sweater. Following the account of the hunger strike led by the mothers of the disappeared – some of whom could not even afford their return fare – she provides a meticulous description of her visit to a luxury department store, where she blends into the crowd, seduced by the allure of designer clothing. Meanwhile, as she interviews Paquita Calvo Zapata from the Frente Urbano Zapatista, she fantasises about being the victim of a guerrilla attack in the same department store, imagining projectiles tearing through “your Puritan shirt, your Vanity blouse, [...] your Kiwi T-shirt” (p. 161).

As a bourgeois woman, she condemns violence of the *Guerrilleros*. As a bourgeois woman, she cannot befriend a *Guerrillero* or even greet him if he carries a weapon (as shown in her dialogue with the *Guerrillero* Benjamín Pérez Aragón, p. 169). As a bourgeois woman, she remains the guardian of order, unable to refrain from questioning what Rosario Ibarra, leader of the hunger strike of the “madwomen” in the Cathedral, says and does against the government – *her* government – claiming that it: “persecutes [...] its opponents, especially if they choose arms. I do not know of a single guerrilla movement that has ever been permitted to roam freely with the consent of the authorities!” (p. 84). And yet, the chronicler’s vocation as devil’s advocate soon runs out, and she

proceeds to catalogue, one by one, the crimes and atrocities committed by this very government: The kidnappings and the torture – even that of parents in front of their children, and of infants in front of their parents – the killings, and the concealment of the whereabouts of hundreds of victims – and declares: “One feels the urge to build a bomb: X kilos of trilit, X kilos of plastic, X kilos of sugar – because sugar accelerates combustion – or, simply, a few kilos of good Mexican dynamite to obliterate such insolence and arrogance” (p. 121).

It becomes thus evident that it is not merely a principle of sincerity that compels Poniatowska to make her upper-class identity visible – a bourgeois identity that, to paraphrase Gil de Biedma in *Moralidades*, engages in social literature out of bad conscience⁴: “my so-called social concerns [...] come from who knows where to try to prove who knows what, to demonstrate what? To do what? Because what the devil do I want in life, other than to write?” (p. 165). For this *I* does not speak solely on its own behalf. The chronicler’s assumed mask of bourgeois naivety is indisputably a tactical manoeuvre – an approach to her own class designed to scrutinise it more effectively, to interrogate its silence, its apathy, and its indifference: “Strong is the silence that we citizens maintain, whether out of negligence or induced resignation” (p. 12).

In “Ángeles de la ciudad” [Angels of the City] and “La colonia Rubén Jaramillo”, the authorial *I* – the bourgeois *I* – ventures forth to encounter the *other*, “this people who are missing” (Deleuze, 1997, p. 4), and in doing so... it dissolves. It is as if, in seeking to render them visible – to make visible those millions of Mexicans whom “the dominant class has reduced to non-existence” (Poniatowska, 2006, p. 11) – in surrendering herself to a profound passion for them, she allows herself to be traversed by their voices. Linda Egan emphasises that Poniatowska does not “give voice to those who lack it” but rather “speaks with those who do have a voice – a speech that is rich, colourful, and forceful – but who, due to state terrorism, tend to remain silent until someone like Poniatowska hands them the microphone in the form of a book like *Fuerte es el silencio*” (2008, p. 104). The distinction is crucial. While the chronicles undoubtedly capture the nuance and the rich lexical diversity of popular language, its most significant aspect is not merely the preservation of a recovered orality. Rather, Poniatowska compels us to hear the voices of her innumerable characters, which, set in contrast with that of the chronicler herself, constitute, in Bakhtinian (Bajtín, 1986) terms, autonomous ideological perspectives. She allows us to hear the moans of anguish, the cries of hunger and suffering from the precarious, but also the muted murmur of growing distrust and anger among the *pariahs* who begin to mobilise, the voices of the perpetually marginalised heard during community assemblies, and those

⁴ We refer here to the verses “out of bad conscience, writers / of social poetry” from “En el nombre de hoy” [In the Name of Today] (Gil de Biedma, 2010, p. 76).

that challenge her own – when it is still the voice of her class. Indeed – and here we follow Rancière’s argument in *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010) – Poniatowska’s chronicles make visible and transform into political subjects those whom society refuses to recognise as such. Rather than merely offering them space to express their condition – to voice their pain and suffering – she grants them the power to be seen and understood as agents of discourse, articulating their own arguments and asserting their own reasoning. Her literature thus functions as a counter-hegemonic practice in sociocritical terms, calling attention to the political operations of the hegemony that determine who is heard, who is seen, and who remains silenced and “unspeakable” (Malcuzyński, 2006). In this sense, Poniatowska not only gives narrative form to subaltern experiences but also strives to challenge the epistemic foundations of the social order, insisting that literature must participate in the struggle over what is thinkable, sayable, and imaginable, becoming a discursive space in which social conflicts are made visible, reworked, and contested.

3. From many voices, one self: auto/biographical subversion in *El amante polaco*

The novel *El amante polaco* [The Polish Lover], published in two volumes in 2019 and 2021, diverges from the first-person discourses codified in other works by Elena Poniatowska as tools of “the oppressed”, insofar as it centres on the life of Stanisław August Poniatowski, the last king of Poland and the author’s distinguished ancestor. Indeed, the task of studying Stanisław August’s diaries, from which the text draws extensively, seems more characteristic of Georg Misch – regarded as the precursor of auto/biographical studies – than of Elena Poniatowska. It is noteworthy that the German philologist devoted his scholarly efforts to life narratives of historical figures who, in his view, shaped Western civilisation. In accordance with the tradition inaugurated by Misch, scholars of the canonical auto/biographical corpus, established in the mid-twentieth century, conceived of auto/biographies as “life-stories of great men” (Anderson, 2011)⁵.

⁵ As noted by Anderson (2011), Arfuch (2002, 2013), and Holroyd (2023), among others, canonical forms of life writing – such as autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, or intimate diaries – emerged in close association with the construction of the modern subject and the dominance of the bourgeoisie, a process that became particularly pronounced in the eighteenth century. According to scholarly consensus, this development finds its origins in *Les Confessions* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1782) and *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* by James Boswell (1791), which are regarded as paradigmatic models of modern autobiography and biography, respectively. As capitalism and the bourgeoisie consolidated their hegemony, a new sensibility and subjectivity emerged, bringing with them novel forms of life narration. Consequently, within the broader critical trend that interrogates canonical texts as instruments of power, particular attention has been given to the demystification of classical autobiography and biography as literary genres that have historically privileged white men from dominant social classes (Anderson, 2011; Arfuch, 2013).

The prologue appears to reinforce this initial hermeneutic suspicion; the author persistently emphasises, in the manner of canonical biographers, the decisive role played by the last Polish king in his country's history. We learn, for instance, that Poniatowski "proposed that [...] all possible opportunities for growth be granted to creators and artists; for this reason, Poland is, at the heart of Europe, a furnace of talent and creativity in film, painting, engraving, sculpture, and literature (it is the only country with five Nobel Prize winners)" (Poniatowska, 2022, p. 11). And yet... Despite appearances, and as devoted readers of Elena Poniatowska may have intuited from the outset, this life-narrative profoundly subverts the conventions of a classical biography.

Thus, while at first glance it may seem that there exists a thematic discontinuity between Poniatowska's chronicles or testimonial novels and her exploration of the novelised biography in *El amante polaco*, a closer reading reveals a persistent thread: her ongoing concern with unravelling power structures and giving voice to those whose experiences have been ignored or distorted. In her chronicles from *Fuerte es el silencio*, this commitment manifests in her portrayal of marginalised communities – the vast numbers of the excluded arriving in Mexico City, expanding its areas of extreme poverty; the inhabitants of the Rubén Jaramillo neighbourhood; or the mothers of disappeared guerrilla fighters. In *El amante polaco*, this approach is reconfigured: although Stanisław August Poniatowski is the protagonist, the text does not celebrate him from a conventional biographical perspective but rather employs his figure as a backdrop against which the author explores her own life narrative: that of a survivor of gender-based violence and a single mother who resisted mechanisms of power and became a writer.

Indeed, by narrating both lives, the novel seeks to challenge the status quo and the dominant mechanisms of power. In the first instance, Stanisław August is depicted as a rebel who endeavours to oppose not only external adversaries – Catherine the Great of Russia and Frederick II of Prussia – but also internal ones, namely the Polish magnates, including those from his own kin, such as the Czartoryski clan to which his mother belonged. Furthermore, the king, according to Poniatowska, aspires to improve the living conditions of the Polish people and to provide his compatriots with educational opportunities that would enable them to combat social injustices and alter their destiny.

There is little need to elaborate on the gulf that separates this portrayal of the courageous and benevolent king – defender of the "humiliated and insulted" – from his actual stance towards the plight of the popular masses⁶. Undoubtedly,

⁶ Adam Leszczyński (2020) states that Stanisław August was not in favor of freeing the peasants from serfdom and, during the work on the Constitution later known as the Constitution of 3rd of May (promulgated in 1791), emphasized that Poland, unlike the countries of Western Europe, "had not yet matured enough to grant freedom to the peasantry" (p. 281). What it meant to be "under

Poniatowska idealises her protagonist, though she does not attempt to obscure this idealisation beneath a veneer of supposed narrative impartiality, as is characteristic of mainstream biographies (cf. Podlubne, 2024, p. 51). However, this idealisation is not solely a product of her loyalty to lineage. For, if “all good biographies are intensely personal, since they are really accounts of the relationship between a writer and the subject”, as Michael Holroyd (2011, p. 79) asserts, the bond that unites the Mexican writer with the last king of Poland is not confined to the evident ties of blood, but extends to the affinity she constructs by projecting onto Stanisław August her own vocation to give visibility – and voice – to the people. The “red princess” thus transforms this eminent ancestor of hers into her own double, thereby integrating him into the broader project of her writing – one that, by incorporating the lives and voices of the countless marginalised, unsettles the rigid social divisions dictated by class, wealth, and gender.

Likewise, *El amante polaco* acquires what Bakhtin (Bajtín, 1982) describes as a “biographical value”: a concept that not only shapes the narration of another subject’s life but also structures one’s own experience and narration of the self. In this sense, the novel dedicated to the life of Poland’s last king attains such a dimension when it becomes a means of interpreting, envisioning, and giving form to the author’s own life-narrative (p. 134). That is, the biography of the monarch unfolds alongside Poniatowska’s own autobiographical writing; through this interplay, she engages with discourses of the self to construct a literary self-portrait – one that reflects the identity of an immigrant child, a refugee of the Second World War, a survivor of gender-based violence, a single mother, and, above all, a writer.

Moreover, the novel’s temporal and narrative complexity shows Poniatowska’s broader political project: to resist the closure imposed by dominant historiographical paradigms and to insist on the permeability of history, memory, and subjectivity. In drawing on her own transatlantic experience – caught between Europe and Latin America, aristocratic ancestry and left-wing commitment – she exposes the limits of fixed identity categories. Her self-portrait emerges not from a coherent narrative arc, but from a process of constant negotiation between disparate selves, historical (con)texts, and discursive traditions.

the protection of the law and the national government”, as guaranteed to the peasants by Article 4 of that Constitution, became clear when, that same year, 1791, peasant uprisings against serfdom erupted in the countryside. In the royal edict of August 2, we read: “With no small distress of our heart, we learn that in certain parts of our Commonwealth, there appear enemies of the common good, who, through audacity or a misguided understanding of governmental protection, become disobedient to their lords, refusing to fulfill their duties and render due tributes [...]”. For the reasons stated above, he ordered in all jurisdictions, “wherever they should perceive ongoing resistance, by means of military assistance, the peasants are to be kept in subjugation and obedience to their lords” (pp. 281–282).

Ultimately, *El amante polaco* can be read as a literary experiment that pushes the boundaries of both biographical and autobiographical writing. It reclaims both genres as a space not of reverence but of resistance, not of commemoration but of reflection. Through the dialogic interplay of past and present, individual and collective, noble lineage and marginal, embodied experience, Poniatowska reimagines life writing as a site of political engagement – a means of interrogating inherited histories and, simultaneously, of writing oneself into the dialogue with the fourth wave of feminism and the recent political movements. In the most harrowing passage of *El amante polaco*, we encounter the following autobiographical confession:

I am young, I smile at all times, I laugh easily. One afternoon, in the middle of class, the Maestro rises menacingly – thin, his hair standing on end, a stick also visible through his trousers. “You are a peacock that has come to strut about in a henhouse”, he hurls at me. [...] I move towards the door. “Ah no, it is not that easy”, he threatens. And I pay – for having climbed the stairs so hastily, for *The Four Seasons* by Vivaldi, which now turns its winter to shroud me, for the rooftop and for each step I now descend at full speed towards the exit. Once in the street, I do not understand; all I know is that, like him, the rooftop with its billowing sheet has struck me across the face. (Poniatowska, 2022, p. 222)

At that moment, the narrator did not comprehend what had just happened to her; she was incapable of comprehending how she had found herself in such a traumatic situation, nor did she know “what to do with (her)self from now on” (p. 234), particularly when she discovered that the violence she had endured had resulted in pregnancy. “I am alone. I do not know what love is. What has happened to me – the cot, the threat, the attack – has nothing to do with what I read in books or saw on the screen of the Vanguardias cinema” (p. 243). Above all, it bore no resemblance to the books of the Maestro, “impeccably written, filled with imagination, grace, and freshness” (Oviedo, 2005, p. 53)⁷. Yet the autobiographical subject also confesses to having failed to grasp other cultural conditions that, despite remaining unarticulated, profoundly shaped her existence and conduct. Hers is not an isolated case. No “I”, as Judith Butler cautions, can give a full account of itself (Butler, 2005), for it cannot narrate a life story that is separate from the history of its social relations: “the ‘I’ has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation – or set of relations – to a set of norms. [...] The ‘I’ is always to some extent dispossessed by the social conditions of its emergence” (p. 8). Our ways of seeing and experiencing the world, Poniatowska

⁷ In this way, in his *Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana* [History of Latin American Literature] the Peruvian critic José Miguel Oviedo characterises the writing of Juan José Arreola. As the author of *Confabulario* and *Other Inventions* and one of the most significant Mexican writers of the 20th century, he is referred to as “Maestro” by the autobiographical *I* of the novel – a designation that Poniatowska repeatedly affirmed after the novel’s publication.

seems to suggest in the same line of thought, are shaped by sociocultural norms that we have never actively chosen – just as she herself never chose to grow up in a heteropatriarchal society that allows “masters” to feel entitled to the bodies of their female students, inculcating in them limitless admiration and blind obedience. From the perspective of the present, the autobiographical *I* understands that patriarchal norms rendered the experience of her sexual abuse “unspeakable” (Malcuzyński, 2006) and “ungrievable” (Butler, 2004, 2009); hence, at the time, the narrator neither knew how to defend herself nor dared to share her experience with anyone.

From a sociocritical perspective, *El amante polaco* powerfully exemplifies how hegemonic discourse operates by delimiting not only what can be said, but also what can be known and even felt. The narrator’s inability to name her experience of sexual violence in the moment is not a sign of individual failure or naïveté, but rather the effect of her subjectivation within a patriarchal symbolic order that renders certain experiences illegible or incoherent. As Malcuzyński (1991, 2009) and Cros (2002) have argued, the hegemonic order constructs the “sayable” and the “thinkable” through a tacit politics of legitimacy, authorising particular modes of intelligibility while expelling others and other experiences to the realm of the inarticulable. Poniatowska’s autobiographical subject thus inhabits what Angenot (1998) might call a discursive periphery: she subverts the the social field in which patriarchal violence is not only permitted, but also disavowed, concealed under the guise of pedagogical authority, artistic genius, or romantic idealism. The trauma she suffered in her youth was not merely physical, but also epistemic: she was dispossessed of language, and thus of social recognition and proper mourning (Butler, 2004, 2009). Literature, in this context, becomes a counter-discursive act, a retrospective “biographical space” in which the unsayable is reclaimed and reconfigured. By making visible the ideological apparatuses that produced silence and shame, Poniatowska not only gives narrative form to a formerly “unspeakable” event but also exposes the broader structures of domination – gendered, aesthetic, institutional – that rendered such events invisible and non-narratable in the first place. In this sense, *El amante polaco* exemplifies the political potency of life-writing, attributed to counter-hegemonic literature in sociocritical thought, understood as a site where the limits of hegemonic meaning are contested and redrawn.

Thus, the novel contains a reflection on the mechanisms of the cultural subject (Cros, 2002): through the narration of a life, an “authentic self” or a fully realised “authority over the self”, one that exists outside or prior to culture and the very process of subjectivation, does not emerge. Nevertheless, *El amante polaco* does not deny agency to the subject; rather, the text invites us to engage critically with how a self is both produced and reproduced in discourse and what possibilities exist for appropriating social norms, or, at the very least, renegotiating them.

By the end of the first volume, the autobiographical *I* succeeds in renegotiating patriarchal rules and resisting the logic that has constituted her as a cultural subject. She chooses to leave behind innocence in order to confront the violence of the patriarchal world and the prejudices surrounding single mothers, prejudices deeply entrenched within her own social class. Despite the insistence of those around her to do otherwise, Elena Poniatowska resolves to raise her child alone and to become a writer. Indeed, the final lines of the first volume recreate the image of the author who remains inseparable from both her son, and her typewriter: “For Mane, the sound of the typewriter keys and their ring-ring every time I reach the end of a line is his lullaby. What upsets him most is when I say, ‘I’ve finished, let’s go out’, and yet I continue typing. ‘Mum, are you going to do this to me for the rest of my life?’” (Poniatowska, 2022, p. 271). And the rest belongs to the history of literature.

In the second volume of *El amante polaco*, Elena Poniatowska offers a self-reflective meditation on her literary and ideological trajectory. Here, she not only reaffirms her commitment to marginalised subjects and her practice of “daily denunciation”, but also confronts the arduous and ongoing process of becoming aware of the dimensions and consequences of her own privilege. This analysis places Poniatowska’s narrative within the framework of *critical epistemologies*: it stages both a critique of social hierarchies and a meta-reflection on the cultural forms and aesthetic decisions that sustain or contest them. Through a sociocritical lens, we see that Poniatowska does not depict herself as a stable, sovereign “I” but as a subject who is continually constituted and interpellated through systems of class, gender, cultural “distinction”, on the one hand, and socio-political commitment, on the other. Her autobiographical voice – marked by irony, discomfort, and doubt – reveals the extent to which her perception of the world has been shaped by ideological structures of the hegemonic order that operate largely through *doxa*: those naturalised, unspoken assumptions that govern the relationship between self and other, centre and periphery, the visible and the unsayable. This becomes painfully evident in the following confession, where the litany of grievances voiced by the dispossessed disrupts not only her sense of self, but the very stability of the symbolic world she inhabits:

I live deafened by the sound of the typewriter keys and by another, even more grating noise: the daily litany of grievances that blurs my vision. “They lied to me.” “I haven’t eaten.” “I was assaulted.” “They took everything from me.” “I was raped.” “I don’t even have enough for the bus.” “What house? What are you talking about, Elena?” “Did you really think I had a house?” “Did you think I had a job?” (Poniatowska, 2022, p. 383)

From the marked self-critical perspective of the present, the autobiographical subject exposes the dissonance between her own social experience – saturated by privilege – and the realities of those she seeks to give voice to in her writing. This moment does

not merely signal guilt or class anxiety; it represents a rupture within the subject's ideological formation, a confrontation with what Angenot (1998) calls the limits of the *sayable*. It is precisely this encounter with the unsayable – the experience of being interpellated by marginalised voices that the dominant discourse renders unintelligible and that are codified in her chronicles – that forces a reconfiguration of her own positionality, and subjectivity, within the discursive field.

In this regard, the figure of Alberto Beltrán, a graphic artist of humble origins, plays a pivotal role in this process of gaining self-awareness, as her friendship with him is increasingly marked by a growing sense of guilt. Through Beltrán, Poniatowska becomes conscious not only of the privileges she has enjoyed since childhood but also of her unspoken attachment to the lifestyle of the *haute bourgeoisie* and aristocracy, as well as to the artistic objects that adorn her family home: the paintings by Boldini and Canaletto, the Napoleonic ceramics, the Chinese trees... This tension between “inherited” taste and social commitment generates an identity conflict that manifests in the second volume of the novel through acute introspection and self-criticism. The narrator questions why she continues to feel these objects as “hers”, while her mother and other relatives, alarmed by her increasing political engagement, ask whether she is “becoming a communist” (Poniatowska, 2022, p. 383).

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of “distinction” provides a valuable interpretive lens for this internal conflict. As Bourdieu (1988, pp. 238–241) demonstrates, aesthetic preferences and symbolic investments are not merely matters of individual taste but are deeply structured by social class and the embodied dispositions of the “habitus”. What Poniatowska articulates is a subject caught between two fields of value: one shaped by elite cultural refinement and another oriented toward solidarity, critique, and the political labour of bearing witness. The Canaletto paintings and the refined soirées of her youth, like her fascination with the history of the last king of Poland, persist as part of a symbolic legacy that inscribes her within a dominant class narrative – even as she successfully writes against it.

However, Poniatowska does not attempt to disavow this contradiction. On the contrary, she transforms it into a productive tension that informs her authorial posture. Rather than adopting the guise of disinterested observer, she writes from within contradiction, using the autobiographical mode to interrogate the very mechanisms that have shaped her own complicity and subversion. This is where her work acquires a new sociocritical dimension: her life-writing stages what Malczynski (1991) would term a “monitoring” of the subject's own discursive construction, while at the same time contributing to a broader contestation of hegemonic knowledge. Fully aware of her privilege, she employs life-writing to render social issues visible and, above all, to give voice to the *other*, thereby contributing significantly to a “new distribution of the sensible”, in Jacques Rancière's (2010) terms. She succeeds in articulating an ethics and aesthetics

of alterity that challenge social hierarchies and norms, exploring the limits and possibilities of testimonial and auto/biographical literature.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of Elena Poniatowska's diverse experiments in life writing reveals not only the breadth of her literary contributions but also the depth of her critical engagement with the ideological structures that underpin contemporary society. Across genres – including testimonial fiction, journalistic chronicle, novelised biography, and autobiography – Poniatowska consistently mobilises literature as a site of epistemic inquiry and discursive resistance. Her testimonial works, particularly those collected in *Fuerte es el silencio*, offer a powerful response to systemic erasure by rendering visible and audible those whom dominant discourse deems irrelevant or illegible. Through a writing practice that merges journalistic rigour with radical empathy, she elevates the voices of domestic workers, Indigenous communities, political prisoners, disappeared persons, and women subjected to violence – voices that are often reduced to noise or rendered “unspeakable” within hegemonic formations.

What is also notable from a sociocritical perspective is that Poniatowska does not disavow her own class privilege; rather, she subjects it to sustained scrutiny. Her self-reflexivity does not function as confession or moral catharsis, but as a narrative tool (*Fuerte es el silencio*) or structural critique of the bourgeois habitus from which she emerges (*El amante polaco*). Her life-writing practice thus becomes a form of “monitoring”, in Malcuzyński's (1991) sense: a critical examination of the conditions of discursive production. She writes not *from* the margins but *towards* them, seeking to realign the field of the sensible, to reconfigure who is seen and who might, or might not speak. In this regard, her self-positioning becomes part of a broader interrogation of how “cultural subjects” (Cros, 2002) are produced, interpellated, and differentially granted access to the discursive order.

This dynamic determines *El amante polaco*, where the boundary between biography and autobiography is deliberately blurred. In merging the life of the last king of Poland with her own narrative of gendered violence and political awakening, Poniatowska constructs a layered meditation on the workings of power, not only historical and institutional, but also intimate and embodied. The violated female body becomes, in this (con)text, both a site of inscription of power and resistance, a figure through which the author confronts the hegemonic order and the ideological contradictions of her formation. These contradictions – between inherited privilege and political solidarity, between aesthetic sensibility and class critique – are not resolved but rendered productive, enabling a form of writing that challenges the separation between the biographical and the autobiographical, the personal and the political, the historical and the intimate.

Thus, Poniatowska's writing exposes the apparatuses through which the hegemonic order delineates what is socially sayable and thinkable. As sociocritical theory, on the one hand, and Poniatowska's literature, on the other, remind us, discursive hegemony does not merely operate by what it states, but by what it renders "unspeakable" through silencing, marginalisation, and symbolic erasure. Poniatowska's attention to "minor" voices – housemaids, street children, prisoners, disappeared persons, victims of gendered violence – resists this erasure, insisting on the political and aesthetic necessity of listening otherwise. Her texts thus become sites where the unsaid and the not-yet-said emerge as critical interruptions within the discursive field. Her work not only reproduces the hegemonic configurations of her (con)text to criticise them, but also intervenes in them, contesting the discursive norms that govern visibility, subjectivity, and recognition. In doing so, Poniatowska helps to articulate what we might call a counter-hegemonic epistemology – an aesthetics of disruption that demands we reconsider who may speak, whose experience counts, and how life-writing itself participates in the struggle over meaning.

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