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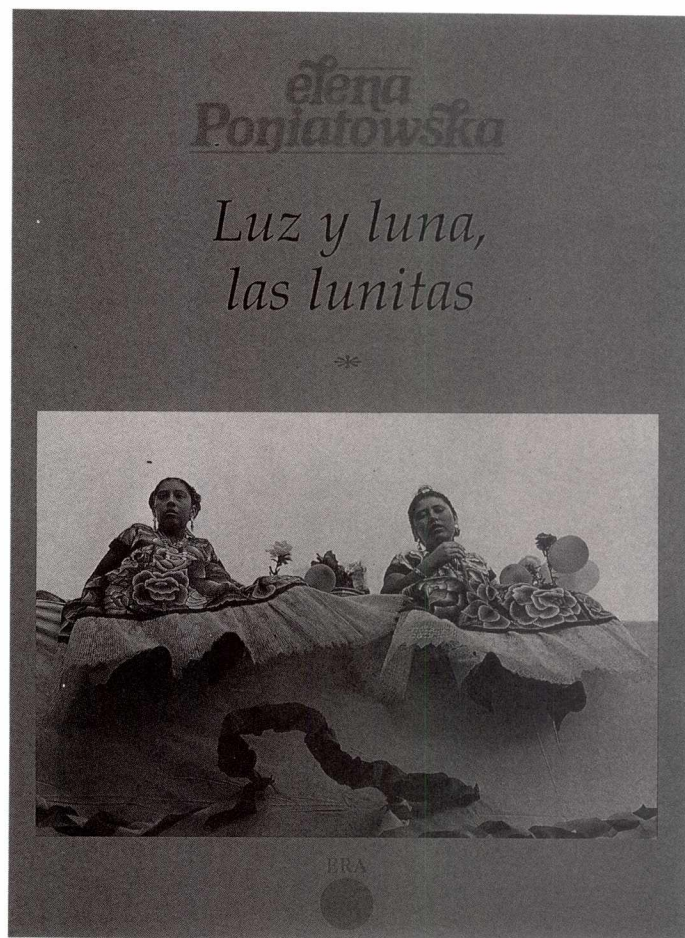
Marisse corrects his memory, offering an alternative beginning to their relationship, thus casting a veil of doubt over the narrator's accuracy. And the book's last sentence is printed in italics, a visual code Bruce-Novoa uses to convey that what is being read is actually from a film, and as such not a "real" experience, but an image contrived by the narrator.

Other postmodern techniques constantly interrupt the narrative flow, making it impossible to read this as a straightforward, traditional novel. Footnotes appear in which the narrator argues with his editor over writing style, factual details, or changes the publisher imposes. He includes a letter from the "real" Ann Marisse in which she gives her prosaic, angry version of a key scene written in highly romantic, poetic fashion by the narrator. Movie scenes replay what readers have already seen as factual material. While the essence of the scenes remains the same, details are altered to give the experience a feeling of intense observation possible only when reality is preserved in artistic representation. The characters involved in the narrative also discuss the text. Finally, film and the characters' lives are so intricately interwoven that it is difficult to distinguish them.

However, what attentive readers will retain above all from this complex novel is the power of the vision of love—the image of the loved one—to take hold of the

imagination and the heart of the artist. In the end, it is the image of Ann Marisse that endures here, despite the distractions of reality; her ability to center the world with a simple movement of her body. Bruce-Novoa's obsessive insistence on making the image of love our image of his book wins out. A highly recommended addition to the new U.S. Latino literature. **W**

Mike Estrella



Luz y luna, las lunitas

(Light and Moon,
the Little Moons)

Elena Poniatowska

Ediciones ERA

Mexico City, 1994, 206 pp.

Luz y luna, las lunitas (Light and Moon, the Little Moons) is a book of essays and feature stories, memoirs and experiences, interpretation of different realities and recreation of myths. It does not seem to belong to any particular genre and, though at first glance the different texts do not seem related, a common thread actually runs through them: the author's sensitivity toward, sympathy with and compassion for the dispossessed, as well as her genuine admiration for Mexican artisans' artistic ingenuity and ability and Mexican women's strength. The collection of these texts makes for a book of nostalgia, yearning and enchantment with a reality we can neither trap nor be part of.

Elena Poniatowska's writing here is a juxtaposition of fragments, writing I would call feminine, that produces a fresh, spontaneous sensation. It does not seem to be a literary text, even the most consciously literary of all the parts, "Las señoritas de Huamantla" (The Señoritas of Huamantla). I say it is the most literary of all because the author plays with the myths about Malinche Mountain and others like Xochiquetzalli¹ and Our Lady of Charity.

Each text is constructed on the basis of scenes relived from a book or recreated from her own experience, but they are scenes that seem to bump up against one another all at the same time in the author's mind, and yet they each need to wait their turn when written down. One idea follows another; an image, a reflection, a memory, each linked to the next with no continuity.

This is the case of the first essay that deals with occupations in Mexico City, including the ones Elena never

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actually saw but has heard about from other people, plus the ones that have lasted until today. The occupations, loudspeakers blasting sales pitches, noises, items for sale and tools, from the *mecapal*² and knife sharpeners to strong backs for carrying wardrobes or people. In "Juchitán de las mujeres" (Juchitán of Women), we discover women's open eroticism, right on the surface, their customs, their initiation or matrimonial rites, their lives in the market or at home and their playful, pleasurable relationship with men. "Se necesita muchacha" (Maid Wanted) comes and goes from Mexico to Peru or other places in our hemisphere, making us feel deeply the pain of peasants' physical and spiritual oppression, but particularly that of peasant women who come to the cities to "serve" as hired girls, servants, maids, *gatas*, *cholas*, *kikapú*,³ etc. Perhaps the only chapter which seems like a more tightly woven story is the portrait of Jesusa Palancares; it is, however, divided into two parts written nine years apart. And even so, it goes from the description of her room in a tenement, to her conversation, her hostility toward Elena, the cigarette she smokes while listening to the radio, the photos that Jesusa tore up because they were not "from a studio," her spiritualist religion and so on until the day of her death.

¹ Also known as Xochiquetzal, the Mesoamerican goddess of flowers and dances and the protectress of pregnant women, weavers, embroideresses and painters. Companion to Xochipilli, she was also known as "the bird flower" or "the plumed flower." [Translator's Note.]

² Leather band used by stevedores. [Translator's Note.]

³ Extremely derogatory terms for maidservants. In Spanish, for example, *gata* literally means "cat." [Translator's Note.]

Luz y luna, las lunitas tells us about the peasants, both men and women, who come to Mexico City to look for work doing odd jobs or “going into service”; about the pride and sensuality of women from Juchitán, the fierceness and strength of Jesusa Palancares, domestic workers’ struggle for dignity, as well as the painstaking labor done by the magic hands of Huamantla embroidresses, the makers of flower rugs or women who collect mushrooms beneath the threatening shadow of Malinche Mountain and the sweet gaze of Our Lady of Charity. And all this with the surprise of a little girl who is seeing her surroundings for the first time. Let us look at what she says about the women from Juchitán:

You would have to see them arriving like walking towers with their windows open, their heart-windows, their night width that the Moon visits. You would have to see them arrive, they, who are already government, they, the people, guardians of the men, distributors of foodstuffs, their children astraddle their hips or lying in the hammocks of their breasts, the wind in their slips, flowery vessels, their honeycombed sex overflowing with men; there they come, belly swaying, pulling the machos along, those machos who, contrasting with them, wear light pants and shirts, sandals and a straw hat that they throw into the air to shout, “Long live the women of Juchitán!”

In this vivid and sensual description, there is enchantment, but also yearning for a life not lived, taken

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responsibility for, shared. This is a book written from “the other side,” from foreignness, from strangeness, and not because Elena is not Mexican, which she is and says she is, but because everything she presents to us with profound wonder is seen from outside, from her condition as an urban woman, a “catrina,”⁴ a writer: her class position in a terribly classist country.

Elena tells us about other countries, other worlds that we, like her, have only heard about, have glimpsed, but that we have not experienced. We visit them like she visits Jesusa Palancares on Wednesdays, and we forget them to go on living our lives. There is a reason behind what Jesusa Palancares asks Elena, “What country do you live in?” Elena, aware of this dilemma, makes a sincere, frank statement about Jesusa Palancares/Josefina Bórquez, the character who was the basis for her novel *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* (Not Until I See You, My Jesus):

Neither the doctor in anthropology, Oscar Lewis, nor I really took upon ourselves the lives of others. Ricardo Pozas never left the indigenous people... they were his life, not just a piece of academic research. For Oscar Lewis, the Sánchezes became the splendid protagonists of the so-called anthropology of poverty. For me, Jesusa was a character. The best of them all. Jesusa was right. I profited from her just as Lewis did with the Sánchezes.... The life of the Sánchez family did not change at all; it got no better and no worse. Lewis and I earned money from our books about Mexicans living in tenements. Lewis kept on living the antiseptic life of an American anthropologist... and neither my life today nor my life in the past can be in any way compared to Jesusa’s. I continued to be first and foremost a woman sitting in front of a typewriter.

At the same time, Elena recognizes that Jesusa did something for her. When she identified with Jesusa, Elena felt that she was growing, she felt Mexican and

⁴ *Catrina* in Mexico is someone “ritzy” or “swanky.” [Translator’s Note.]

“The women from Juchitán have very strong personalities and temperaments.... they impose their will with the white ruffles of their headdresses, the tinkling of their jewelry, the flash of gold in their smiles.”

she could finally say, “I do belong.” She could leave behind the “I don’t belong” of her aristocratic European family. What is painfully ironic is that it should be Jesusa who feels like a foreigner in her own land:

At bottom, I have no homeland. I’m like the gypsies: from nowhere. I don’t feel Mexican; I don’t recognize Mexicans. Here there is nothing but personal, vested interest. If I had money and things, I would be Mexican, but since I’m worse than trash, well, I’m just nothing.

And the book, because it is written from outside, is also written from the perspective of guilt. Elena is, in Jesusa’s words, “A *catrina*, and good for nothing.” A woman who, like many of us, needs a maid to be able to do what we do and be what we are: writers or academics or professionals. When Elena reflects on this, you cannot help but feel guilty like she does and grieve at the dilemma we face every day:

The *patrona* has another fate; she has cultivated her mind, she has nourished it. What is more, the government has paid for it. It’s only right that another human being, with no destiny, no trade, no advantages, the maid, do what would waste an enormous amount of her valuable time.... As I write, María, in the kitchen, is heating up the milk to give my children breakfast. Of me, they will say later “What a good book!” (or what a bad one) and “How intelligent!” or “What an idiot!” but one way or another I’ll be in the so-called cultural limelight. María will probably find herself in front of the stove again, turning on the gas, not to put her head in the oven like Silvia Plath (a ruling class privilege), but to make sure the milk

boils to give the children breakfast number 17159374628430000.

An extremely eloquent quote, whose guilt feelings I share completely.

Margo Glantz, in her essay “Las hijas de la Malinche” (The Daughters of Malinche),⁵ tells Elena Poniatowska:

The same guilt feelings that Elena Garro and Rosario Castellanos suffered make her tend to embrace “the cause” of the helpless, those who, like her servants, speak an inferior language, the domestic language, and belong to that vast social layer which makes up what she calls “the denseness of reproach.”

I am inclined to underline this, and I would like to add that it is perhaps not only guilt that makes Elena protect and be the voice of the helpless. A certain insecurity can also be perceived (“my weak character”), curious in such a brave woman, which induces her to admire what she considers to be her opposite: strong, fierce, severe women who, like Jesusa Palancares, need nothing and no one. “My God, what a great old woman! she has no one in life; I am the only person who visits her, and she is capable of sending me to Hell.” Or women who stand up for themselves, like the ones from Juchitán:

The women from Juchitán have very strong personalities and temperaments, in contrast with other regions where women make themselves small and cry, in Jalisco, in the Bajío, in Mexico City. Not them. There’s nothing of the little self-sacrificing Mexican mothers drowning in tears about them. In the Isthmus, they impose their will with the white ruffles of their headdresses, the tinkling of their jewelry, the flash of gold in their smiles.

Luz y luna, las lunitas centers on characters, places, customs and myths of different regions of our country,

⁵ Malinche is a derivation of the name Malintzin, the conquistador Cortés’ mistress and translator, today a symbol of betrayal and the hatred for everything Mexican. [Translator’s Note.]

which are partially alien to us. However, it tells us a great deal about the author because it is sprinkled with frank, spontaneous comments about herself and her reactions to what she observes. And when we reflect upon them, the book tells us a lot about ourselves the readers, both men and women. ❧

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**México en los informes presidenciales
de los Estados Unidos de América**

(Mexico in U.S. State of the Union Addresses)

Ricardo Ampudia

Fondo de Cultura Económica/SRE

Mexico City, 1996, 259 pp.

A considerable amount has been published about relations between Mexico and the United States of America because their complex history of interaction has been of constant interest to outstanding scholars at research centers of both countries, as well as to political leaders who interact and actively participate in this difficult association. For those familiar with the topic, the day-to-day doings shared by these two nations come as no surprise since they not only share a very long border, but also differ in an infinity of historic, economic and social ways.

Knowing your neighbor is vitally important to achieving a fluid day-to-day relationship based on common interests but without sidestepping individual points of view and interests which are usually contradictory.

Ricardo Ampudia's book *México en los informes presidenciales de los Estados Unidos de América* (Mexico in U.S. State of the Union Addresses) is unique in that his enthusiastic research highlights references to Mexico, the historical development of the bilateral relationship documented in the State of the Union Address's that each first executive is required to present to the joint

Ampudia points out interesting inconsistencies in U.S. foreign policy toward Mexico which reveal ambivalence and contradictions, a result of the pragmatic pursuit of its interests.



SRE

Ricardo Ampudia
*México en los informes
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Estados Unidos de América*

