

# Introduction

More than twenty-five years ago when I first read Elena Poniatowska's highly acclaimed book *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío*, I read it rather unproblematically as a novel. That is, I read it as a work of fiction, which I took to mean that its narrated world, while it might have a connection—even an easily recognizable one—to what we call reality, did not bear any particular responsibility to that reality. As a novel, its story could not be held up for scrutiny or subjected to a process of verification concerning the accuracy of its information or its claims about the present or the past. The format and the marketing of Poniatowska's book, and the narrator-protagonist's improbable opening salvo—"Esta es la tercera vez que regreso a la tierra . . ." (9) [This is the third time that I have returned to earth]—invited its reading as a work of imaginative literature, autonomous from the "real world" and employing language and literary conventions to inscribe its own internal logic and coherence. My role as a reader was to discern and to enjoy the textual construction of character, dialogue, place, time, and action as a process of making meaning through storytelling. However, I was soon to discover that other readers, better informed than I about how the book had been conceived and written, were examining it as a "true-life" story, a *testimonio* within the tradition of contemporary Latin American writing. While I was preparing to undertake an analysis of *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* as a work of fiction, others were busy debating to what degree the published text was faithful or responsible to the interviews that Elena Poniatowska had carried out with a living, identifiable woman—"known," albeit mistakenly, by the name of Jesusa Palancares. At stake was an argument over whether to classify the text as a *testimonio* or a novel, or perhaps a *testimonio novelado*.

I have told the story of the multiple critical readings of *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* in my book *The Writing of Elena Poniatowska: Engaging Dialogues*, and I will not reiterate that work here.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, I mention this bit of my own history as a reader, because my engagement with what I have called the “creative confusions” surrounding the writing and the reception of *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío*, and my study of Poniatowska’s other, more transparently fact-based works such as *La noche de Tlatelolco* and *Nada, nadie: las voces del temblor* awakened an interest in thinking more deeply and more critically about the categories of fiction and nonfiction, to use the most commonly accepted terms in literary studies. Questions of what might differentiate nonfictional discourse from fiction, and how and why the distinctive textual practice of nonfiction matters to writers and readers alike were my points of departure for an inquiry that I soon found would not lead to ready-made answers. In reviewing the existing criticism, I encountered a general acknowledgment among scholars that in the world of literary history and analysis both in Mexico and in the United States, the fictional narrative genres of the novel and the short story regularly attract far more attention than the traditionally conceived nonfiction forms such as autobiography, biography, and chronicle. The extensive attention given to testimonial literature has been the outstanding exception to this rule in studies of Latin American literature of the past thirty years,<sup>2</sup> an exception that proved that nonfiction writing comprised a field of research with ample room to roam and to explore.

The most acknowledged foundational account of the difference between fiction and nonfiction in the Western literary and philosophical tradition is the passage in Aristotle’s *Poetics* in which he distinguishes between poetry and history writing. “It also follows from what has been said that it is not the poet’s business to relate actual events, but such things as might or could happen in accordance with probability or necessity. A poet differs from a historian, not because one writes verse and the other prose . . . but because the historian relates what happened, the poet what might happen. This is why poetry is more akin to philosophy and is a better thing than history; poetry deals with general truths, history with specific events” (18). This passage gives the basic criterion upon which our culture’s commonsense notion of fiction and nonfiction is still grounded today: the difference between telling general truths or “what might happen,” and relating “actual events.” Across the centuries, it has proved to be a durable distinction that readers and

writers continue to employ in the process of creating, receiving, classifying, and interpreting the verbal and visual texts that surround us.

At the same time, in the twentieth century, certainly, and even much earlier, this convenient and apparently “natural” distinction has been a highly contested issue in Western theories of representation. In the past one hundred years, the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, the nature of facts, the relationship between linguistic representation and the lived reality it might claim to imitate, and the status of knowledge-producing discourses including the quantitative and the human sciences, have been subjected to an intense process of critical scrutiny. Modern linguistics and the transformations that it has inspired in the study of all aspects of human society and culture, have created a deep skepticism regarding what we know about the world and how we know it. This skepticism toward the reliability of knowledge and the attainability of truth is in constant tension with an equally urgent desire and need for what we can consider to be accurate knowledge about past and present realities outside of our immediate experience. I believe that the tension between our desire to know and our skepticism toward how knowledge is produced and organized in language is particularly acute in our reading of nonfiction texts, and in this book I examine a number of narratives produced across a century of Mexican literature in order to explore the distinction of nonfiction as a practice of writing and reading. The first chapter of the book treats a variety of theoretical approaches to key concepts in the discussion of nonfiction writing, concepts that are useful for formulating questions and strategies for the textual analyses in the chapters to follow. In this introduction, however, I wish to establish the continuing relevance of the fiction/nonfiction binary, however contested it is, for contemporary readers.

The importance of the distinction for U.S. writers, publishers, marketers, cataloguers, and readers (both academic and popular) is easy to demonstrate, because it is visible in the cultural marketplace in a number of ways. Best-seller lists, book advertisements, book stores, and libraries all rely on the categories of fiction and nonfiction to organize their materials for consumption, and the division is taken quite for granted until something occurs to violate its parameters. For example, in the 1960s and 70s the rise of the North American New Journalism and the proliferation of the documentary novel and other hybrid forms of narrative challenged the prevailing ideas about journalism and nonfiction writing in the United States, and both book reviews and scholarly studies

questioned what was happening to long-established literary conventions. Indeed, over thirty years ago E. L. Doctorow announced the demise of the categories of fiction and nonfiction as meaningful ways to organize literature when he said that, "There's no more fiction or nonfiction now, there's only narrative."<sup>3</sup> However, as Phyllis Frus McCord points out in her 1986 article on the nonfiction novel, Doctorow's statement was neither prophetic nor performative, and it did not abolish the effective force of the fiction-nonfiction distinction for American writers and readers.

In 2006 the controversy that raged in the print and the electronic media over the "memoir" *A Million Little Pieces*, shows that readers take very seriously a book's claim to nonfiction status, and they don't like to be fooled. In this brouhaha, the public indignation over the author James Frey's inventions and exaggerations of episodes of his "life story," which was sold to publishers as a memoir only after it was rejected as a novel, occupied our notoriously short national attention span for several weeks. The popular talk show host Oprah Winfrey, who had promoted the title in her on-air book club in October 2005, at first spoke out in Frey's defense. She called in to the January 11, 2006 taping of *CNN Larry King Live* to affirm that in spite of numerous factual inaccuracies, "The underlying message of redemption in James Frey's memoir still resonates with me."<sup>4</sup> However, when public opinion turned more strongly against the book and against her endorsement of it, the talk show host recanted her previous support and excoriated Frey during a second appearance by the author on her show later in the same month. More recently, *Three Cups of Tea*, Greg Mortenson's wildly popular account of his experiences traveling in Pakistan and Afghanistan and his mission to build schools in rural areas there, was subjected to an exposé done by the television show *60 Minutes* in April 2011. Their investigation into significant distortions and misrepresentations in the book created a particularly strong reaction in light of the author's use of the book in order to raise tens of millions of dollars for the charity that he directs. People felt fooled and betrayed on various levels by the blurring of fact and invention in this putatively "true story."

Although I am not carrying out a comparative study of nonfiction in the United States and Mexico, these examples of popular debates over nonfiction literature and its transformations have relevance for my project. In general terms, U.S. cultural productions are seen to have a strong influence on Mexican writers, and North American popular culture permeates the Mexican market, including in the form of the

sale of translations of U.S. best sellers. More specifically, the lessons of the New Journalism have been absorbed and transformed by Mexican writers of chronicles, a prominent form of nonfiction that I examine in Chapters 5 and 6 of this book.

The debate over holding nonfiction literature to a high standard of “truth telling” has played out in regard to several prominent Spanish American texts as well. In the Mexican context, Elena Poniatowska’s *La noche de Tlatelolco* was subjected to a public critique by Luis González de Alba, one of the student movement leaders interviewed by the author, who was not satisfied with the accuracy of some of the material used in the book. In an article published in the magazine *Nexos* in October 1997, González de Alba identifies twenty-eight paragraphs of testimony that he asserts are incorrectly attributed. That is, he says that Poniatowska, as editor, attached the names of the wrong individual witnesses to some passages of testimony, and he demanded that a new, revised edition of the canonical text about 1968 be issued. A far more widely known and hotly discussed controversy arose over the accuracy of certain episodes in Rigoberta Menchú’s *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* with the publication of anthropologist David Stoll’s research in 1999. These controversies have made questions about the reliability of memory and eye-witness testimony and the relative responsibility of nonfiction writers to accuracy as opposed to aesthetics or a more poetic concept of truth, visible for a wide reading public outside of academic circles.

An overall evaluation of the status of nonfiction discourse in Mexico reveals a somewhat different situation than that encountered in the United States, without implying that the distinction has been in any way abolished for Mexican readers. In Mexico, the term nonfiction is less consistently used as a tool to classify works of narrative literature than what is common practice north of the border. Nonfictional discourses appear to be primarily the preserve of historians and other social scientists, while literature is not systematically divided into fiction and nonfiction texts. For example, best-seller lists that I have consulted place all books into one ranking without distinction as to form. A May 1, 2006 list that I located online at the “buscabiografías” Web site, included among its ten titles the novel *El león, la bruja y el armario* by C. S. Lewis, alongside *México, lo que todo ciudadano quisiera (no) saber de su patria* by Denisse Dresser and Jorge Volpi, which is a history text, albeit one that takes a rather unconventional approach; and Erick

Guerrero Rosas's political essay *Perredistas al poder*. This is typical for the several months that I checked the online list in early 2006.<sup>5</sup> The Web site for the Fondo de Cultura Económica (FCE) makes available a monthly "Boletín de Novedades" and a list of "lo más vendido" (best sellers). The "Boletín" features new FCE publications grouped into the following categories: Ciencia y Tecnología, Economía, Historia, Lengua y Literatura, Niños, and Política. The language and literature section presents scholarly work in linguistics and literary criticism and theory, as well as an inclusive mix of fiction and nonfiction literary genres: autobiography, essay, novel, short story, drama, and poetry. A perusal of shelves at the well-known Gandhi bookstore in Mexico City reveals a similar organizational strategy, somewhat complicated by the tendency to group books according to publisher rather than by topic or genre. All of this is simply to make the point that on the surface it can appear that the Mexican book industry is not particularly invested in a distinction that is usually clear-cut and widely employed in the United States.

Moving from the selling of books to the academic study of literature, a review of several standard histories of Mexican literature confirms the impression that nonfiction is not generally regarded as a distinct literary practice requiring a mode of reading attentive to its specific demands. Ermilo Abreu Gómez's anthology *Cuatro siglos de literatura mexicana* published in 1946 divides its selections by genre and by century, such that poetry, theater, novel, short story, and *relato* (account, story, or tale) are treated in chronological order from the colonial period to the 1940s. Surprisingly, the chronicle of the conquest is excluded entirely, but under "relatos" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries one finds some narrative nonfiction in the forms of biography and memoir. José Luis Martínez's history *Literatura mexicana, siglo XX, 1910-1940* (published in 1949), also organizes its material according to the traditional genres, but he includes a miscellaneous category of "Varios" where he curiously accommodates indigenous literature and writing by women. Finally, the extensive *Mexican Literature: A History* (1994) edited by David William Foster opens the door to significant examples of nonfiction in the chapter on the colonial period, in which a discussion of historical writings, legal documents, and ethnographic compilations predominates. The chapters on Romanticism, realism, Modernismo, and literature of the twentieth century, however, overlook such nonfiction forms as essay, chronicle, and autobiography in favor of a focus on the novel, poetry, and theater.

Nevertheless, Mexican literature since the colonial period contains a wealth of well-known and influential texts produced in dialogue with

the traditional fact-based genres of autobiography, biography, chronicle, essay, ethnography, memoir, testimony, and travel writing. These works acknowledge the conventions of nonfiction writing as it is constituted in Western culture both by conforming to established expectations and by challenging and stretching their limits. The letters of Hernán Cortés, Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's collaboratively produced ethnographic writings, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's essays are only a few of the best-known examples of nonfiction writing that are part of the canon of Mexican literature and that demonstrate its diverse forms and uses. Clearly, Mexican writers have always been well aware of contemporary debates over nonfiction literature, and they have creatively contributed to the ongoing innovations and transformations of these genres. In the textual analyses to follow, I will frequently make references to the authors' own prefaces, essays, and interviews in which they reflect on the practice of nonfiction writing for insights that have been overlooked by the literary histories.

In a further effort to create a context for my study, I examined book reviews in search of the assumptions—explicit and implicit—that inform the reading of nonfiction literature in Mexico. In almost thirty years of the monthly journal *Vuelta*, reconceived as *Letras Libres* in 1999, its substantial book review section demonstrates that nonfiction texts occupy a prominent place among those titles chosen for review by the professional reader. History books are particularly favored, but chronicles, biography, and autobiography are also prominently featured. Based on the many reviews that I read (without my making this an exhaustive project in itself), I can offer several observations. First, the terms “no-ficción” or “no-ficticio” never appeared, their absence substituted by phrases such as “historia verdadera,” “personajes de carne y hueso,” “vivencia personal,” “base documental,” and “respeto a la verdad” [true story, flesh and blood characters, personal experience, documentary basis, respect for the truth]. Second, when reviewing histories and biographies, regular contributors such as Christopher Domínguez Michael, Adolfo Castañón, and Fabienne Bradu repeatedly attest to the value of in-depth research and knowledge of the documentary archive when writing nonfiction, as well as the imperative to avoid “myth,” “legend,” and “speculation” in favor of a strictly fact-based account. However, the questions of what constitutes a fact, a document or a historical source, and how reality is rendered by language do not generally arise. One can only suppose that a series of unspoken assumptions are at work that take for granted

popularly accepted notions of these key critical terms. Interestingly, reviews of historical novels were sometimes the site of inquiry into the distinctions between history and novel, or reality and fiction, although these inquiries did not delve very far into the matter. Even keeping in mind the length limitations of a typical book review, the overall failure to acknowledge the complexity and ambiguity inherent in terms like fact, document, and true story is striking.

In the study that follows, I undertake an analysis of the practices of nonfiction narrative literature in twentieth-century Mexico within a broad conceptual framework derived from theories produced in Mexico, the United States, and Europe. It is not a survey in the sense of a comprehensive treatment of a large number of texts throughout the given time period, but rather, it examines selected titles, some well-known and firmly ensconced in the canon of Mexican literature, and other less widely regarded and even marginalized by the standard literary histories. The specific modes of writing that I have included under the rubric of nonfiction narrative literature include autobiography, ethno-autobiography, memoir, historical essay, and chronicle, as the following outline of the book's six chapters shows.

Chapter 1 presents contemporary theories of nonfiction literary writing, which are often conceived in relationship to theories of historiography, in order to formulate pertinent questions and to define necessary terms and concepts for the textual analyses. Chapter 2 treats nonfictional representations of the Revolution of 1910, with a particular emphasis on the figure of Pancho Villa. Primary attention is given to *Memorias de Pancho Villa* by Martín Luis Guzmán, *Apuntes sobre la vida militar de Francisco Villa* by Nellie Campobello, and *The Wind That Swept Mexico* by Anita Brenner, supplemented by references to Guzmán's and Campobello's novels, *El águila y la serpiente* and *Cartucho*. Guzmán's wholesale appropriation of Villa's voice through a kind of textual ventriloquism, the tension between the legendary and the historical dimensions of the figure of Villa, and Brenner's incorporation of the visual into the verbal through the reproduction of documentary photographs are unique features of these texts that appeal to and challenge the reader's expectations.

Chapter 3 studies the elite production of autobiographical writing by considering the traditionally conceived autobiography *Ulises criollo* by José Vasconcelos and three examples of life writing by María Luisa Puga. Puga's works included here are the brief autobiography *El espacio de la*

*escritura*, a collection of chronicles titled *Crónicas de una oriunda del kilómetro X en Michoacán* and *Diario del dolor*, a journal that explores the author's experience of living with the chronic pain of rheumatoid arthritis. Chapter 4 continues the discussion of diverse forms of life writing, now from a popular perspective with analyses of a testimonial autobiography, Benita Galeana's *Benita* and an ethnography in first-person form, *Juan Pérez Jolote* by Ricardo Pozas. In all of these books, the constitution of human subjectivity and the cultural construction of voice and life story are key concerns.

The chronicle is a genre of major importance in Mexican letters, and Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to this manifestation of literary journalism. The crisis provoked by the Mexican government's violent reaction to the 1968 student movement, and the disaster caused by the 1985 Mexico City earthquake and by the government's ineffectual response to it, are the topics of numerous chronicles by the nation's best-known writers. Books such as Elena Poniatowska's *La noche de Tlatelolco* and *Nada, nadie*, and many of Carlos Monsiváis's chronicles have been the objects of numerous critical studies. In the concluding chapters, I have chosen works that narrate and analyze crises in the form of two urban disasters (the gas explosions of 1984 and 1991 in Mexico City and Guadalajara, respectively), and a wide-ranging social and political movement, the Zapatista uprising. The primary texts studied in Chapter 5 are "San Juanico: Los hechos, las interpretaciones y las mitologías," Carlos Monsiváis's chronicle of the gas explosions in San Juan Ixhuatepec (popularly known as San Juanico), and Rossana Reguillo's mix of chronicle and anthropological study of the similar explosions in Guadalajara in her book *La construcción simbólica de la ciudad: Sociedad, desastre y comunicación*. In Chapter 6, writings by Elena Poniatowska, Carlos Monsiváis, Juan Villoro, and Alma Guillermoprieto offer four perspectives on the Zapatista rebellion and its leader Subcomandante Marcos.

*Documents in Crisis* claims a place at the center of literary studies for the theory and the practice of nonfiction narrative literature in Mexico in its diverse forms. I seek to complicate and enrich our reading of nonfiction by treating selected texts in the light of contemporary theories of historiography, subjectivity, narrativity, and genre. My analyses attend to the distinction of nonfiction by examining the interplay of conventions and expectations that inform the production and the reception of nonfictional narrative and that structure our reading of its particular relationship to material reality and human actions, past and present. By

taking seriously the challenge that the theory and practice of nonfiction poses to our habits of reading, this book seeks to expand its prominence in the history and criticism of Mexican and Latin American literature.