CONVERSATION

Bell Gale Chevigny: We're going to begin. I want to say that although I’ve been asking Elena questions for 22 years, I have some trepidations about doing a public interview with her because she is the most notorious, mischievous interviewer for more than 22 years and I...once, La Jornada published a special issue called “La Impertinente” in honor of her 60th birthday a while back and there was a self-interview by Elena in it in which she dodged all her own questions. [Laughter] But she's going to behave tonight.

I want to begin by talking about the way she began, about her audacious journalistic style. Elena, you once told me, and I want to ask if it's true, did you ask Diego Rivera when you were 20 or 21, doing your first interviews, why he had such a fat belly?

Elena Poniatowska: Yes, I did, because I was in a convent, Sacred Heart Convent, in Philadelphia, that's where I learned my English -- well, it's called academic years but it's about half a year, for two years, and when I came to Mexico, I knew absolutely nothing about Mexico and especially I knew nothing about Diego Rivera because in my home they hated him because he painted my aunt, Pita Moore, completely naked and it was a great scandal [laughter] and she... and it was a big, enormous painting and she looked awful, she looked like a little pink fish, you know, and it was awful. So it was the only interview my mother accompanied me to, but I hadn't -- as I came from this, the only interview, but she stayed in the car because she was so mad at the man she didn't want to see him. So she stayed and waited for me and I went upstairs and did an interview in his studio and then I didn't know anything about him because I hadn't seen his murals or anything. Besides, in my family they all thought that he painted awful things.

So I looked at him and he was very fat. He had an enormous belly and he had very small teeth, like this. So I asked him, they are baby teeth before you have the real teeth? So he answered, yes, they are baby teeth and with these teeth I am used to eating Polish journalists. [Laughter] So,...and then I continued, because I got so nervous, I continued with, How come you have these teeth? So he said, because my mother was a goat and she fed me, she gave me milk and all this.

So the interviews were published exactly -- I published exactly what had happened. So everyone was saying, what is this stupid girl is going to ask again, you know. [Laughter] That's how I started. I had never been a journalist before. [Laughter]

Chevigny: And you did an interview, you told me, every day of the year?

Poniatowska: And then I got sort of crazy. There is a saying on a knife in Mexico, there is a machete, a big knife. When this viper (Spanish).... how do you say in English?

Chevigny: Viper?

Poniatowska: ...viper bites, there is no remedy in the pharmacy, no. So I was taken by journalism and I wanted to learn. I knew absolutely nothing about my country, didn't even know Spanish, and so I did an interview every day for 365 days. And I didn't even know the people I was going to interview. I just saw, for instance, in the street, Amalia Rodriguez. She sings fado. They wouldn't let me in because they said (Spanish spoken). Who is calling? And I used to say, the newspaper, which was very well known, Excelsior. So they gave me the room number and I could do all these interviews. That's how I did them.

Chevigny: Well, you explained it once that your interviewing style was a product of your ignorance and your social class. You said when you were in the top of society you can get away with being daring and charming, but then you learned your vocation, you did your homework. But I think maybe ... was it the turning point, the real Jesusa was Josefina Bórquez, and I think maybe that was a turning point in your whole work because you speak of it as the fundamental encounter of your life. I wonder if you'd talk about how you met her.

Poniatowska: I listened to her on the rooftop. I went to jail during many months because for a journalist, the best thing in the world is to go to jail. And you go to jail and you're not a journalist and because people are so... they want someone to listen to them and they are so willing to tell their life story and they are so willing to have you ... to justify what happened to them and -- so I had this luck of being this wonderful opportunity to go to the jail because General Martin del Campo who was the head of the jail, let me go in with a huge....

Chevigny: Tape recorder?

Poniatowska: Tape recorder. And I did the life of Siqueiros, who was a great Mexican painter, and of many political prisoners, Demetrio Viaje and other prisoners and homosexuals and people who were there for instance los conejos, the very poor prisoners that come in and out and would rather stay in jail than be outside because at least in jail they eat. So for me...and I saw a very great Colombian poet, Alvaro Mutis, who was in jail reading Marcel Proust and Melville and it was a wonderful opportunity. And Jesusa was also in jail because she had fights in the streets all the time, but when I met her she was on the rooftop. She was a washing woman, una lavandera she washed clothes for the people in the building. And I heard her, and her language was so extraordinary and the things she said were so extraordinary that I thought, I must see this woman, I must go and see this woman. So it took me a lot of time to conquer her...

Chevigny: Tell about that, how you conquered ... she wasn't enthusiastic at first?

Poniatowska: No. She told me I was a bourgeoise woman who was going to take her time, that I knew nothing. She told me, you take care of my chickens. While I am cleaning up, you take care of my chickens. She had chickens that had to be taken into the street and tied, their feet, one feet to the other chicken. There were only five chickens...

Chevigny: Chickens?
Poniatowska: I had to tie them with a little cord like dogs and take them into the street. But they went down into where the cars were and I was worried they were going to be killed. So she told me to take them on the roof, but I did it very badly...

Chevigny: Why was she telling you to take them in the street?

Poniatowska: Because she said that if they didn't get sun, the eggs would have no shell, no shell at all. So the eggs...they needed the sun for the shells. So... and I stayed there sitting in the street with the chickens. [Laughter] Then I had to... the other story was she told me to help her wash the overalls. She worked at a printing shop,... is it a printing shop? And she brought the overalls that were covered with oil and ink and all this and she only gave me a little table like this...

Chevigny: Washboard?

Poniatowska: A washboard like this. And those things were so tough and so hard like cardboard and you had to put them in gasoline, gasolina, in oil.

Chevigny: Gasoline you said before. I don't know.

Poniatowska: Yes, to get...

Chevigny: Soften them?

Poniatowska: To soften them. And I couldn't do it and she said that I was really stupid, [laughter] that I wasn't worth anything. But then one day I was late, I arrived late, and I saw her at the corner of the street waiting for me and so she said, (Spanish spoken). I knew that she cared. [Laughter]

Chevigny: And then you interviewed her with a tape recorder?

Poniatowska: And then I interviewed her. I started with a tape recorder, but she asked me, are you going to pay for my light? Who is going to pay for my light? You are stealing my light. So she didn't like me to have the tape recorder. So I wrote on a little block like this, journalist's block, and I wrote down and she kept saying, oh, your handwriting is awful, how are you going to understand any of it. But she didn't know how to read and write anyway. [Laughter]

Chevigny: But she could tell bad handwriting?

Poniatowska: Yes. And when I read what she told me, when I read it to her, she said, you made up this, you made up that, it's not true. [Laughter]

Chevigny: Talk about that. Did you make things up? [Laughter] You had these little notes and you went home...

Poniatowska: Yes, I made things up because at night, for instance, her language was... we're all this way. For instance, we all... we get, how do you call it, we get very repetitious. We start saying, oh, this day my stomach hurts and I hate this woman and I hate this other man and he was mean to me and you go on and on and on like this. But it was also... well, you speak of her as Jesusa but her name was Josefina and there was a kind of...I often wondered whether Jesusa was the child of you and Josefina; in other words, was the product of your relationship and... Josefina was very important as a character. You've spoken of her helping you to find your own voice and your own sense of being a Mexican, your own sense of belonging. Would you speak about that?

Poniatowska: Well, she gave me what no one in my class has given me because she was unpredictable. She taught me, ...she had great courage and she was very... every time I'm sad or every time I have to do something which bothers me or which I say I don't want to do it, I think of her. She is a role model, what you call... she gave me... no one has ever given me what she gave me. Not lessons, because it sounds like teaching, but her poverty, her way of facing poverty. Once I helped her move to another house and I remember we took little things like that that were all broken down and things that were all... I would have thrown into the garbage, no, to me were useless, and to her they were so important. And she built on top of her roof where she lived, she built a little country house with pots and pans and pots with flowers, and the chickens, of course, and the dogs and the cats and it was so... and the birds, she had canaries. And it was so important to see how she took care of every little thing and how she kept every little
thing. Things that I thought were junk and for her it was… I don’t know, she gave me the value of what poverty is, which is so important… to live without all this consumer thing, you know.

**Chevigny:** The longest piece you read or one of the longest you read tonight was the piece from Nada, Nadie, about the earthquake, and I was asking… I was wondering whether …-- I think it’s Antonio Lazcano, who is the student you were quoting who told the story about going to fumigate the corpses. How much of it is his language and his feeling and how much is it yours? Is this also a bit of a novelized testimony?

**Poniatowska:** It is also novelized. It is also a synthesis of what he said because he was very upset and he went over and over again the same thing and he said… he was sometimes very sentimental and cried and all this, so I just did the pure story.

**Chevigny:** You were writing to me at the time …at the time of the earthquake when you were going out all those days and it was killing you emotionally to go out every day and see these horrific scenes of suffering and then come home and write about them and go out the next day. You wrote to me, “Our poor city, how it hurts me. There is a part of the body in which the city has taken refuge. I think all Mexicans almost feel it. It’s located between the brain and the heart and trembles continuously. I believe that we carry the tremor inside us.”

**Poniatowska:** I don’t remember writing that.

**Chevigny:** Well, I can show you. I save all your letters.

**Poniatowska:** You keep everything?

**Chevigny:** I feel it’s a paradox, that it’s really endlessly fascinating to me that you are a Polish-French woman coming from France to Mexico, indeed your mother was Mexican, of course, that you really did feel yourself, coming at nine and so on and well into your 20s (still) a great outsider to Mexico. And yet you are so much more intensely empathetic and involved with the details of Mexican poverty, as you gave examples of, or the details of Mexican language. You’re a much more purely Mexican writer than, say, Carlos Fuentes, who writes with reference to the rest of the world. Your focus is so purely Mexican and it’s always kind of an interesting riddle to me. I suppose it has something to do with your being a woman. You also told me once that at fifteen you wished you would… you wished to be a man. Well, that didn’t work out. [Laughter]

**Poniatowska:** I would have been a very short little man.

**Chevigny:** You would have been a very little man. I wonder how much you think your vision and way of looking at things and the way of asking questions has to do with your being a woman?

**Poniatowska:** Yes, it has to do with being a woman, but also I think it has to do with my journalism. As I started working in Mexico and I found out about the country and I started loving the country. I had loved it before when I was young through the maids and, of course, maybe through my mother, but it was sort of a Mexico, very unreal, that you saw from very far away, because in my house we spoke French, we didn’t …I didn’t learn Spanish really, I never learned Spanish, I never had to. So Spanish was the language of the colonies. It wasn’t a real language in my family. So afterwards, when I found out what Mexico was, I was so taken by it, so taken especially by the people that were so sweet and so humble and so… they didn’t ask for anything and they didn’t, they didn’t… they were not self-assertive like Americans are. They just stood in the back. And reality in Mexico is also very strong. It comes in through the window. You are trying to write a poem or something, about how you feel or how your boyfriend has told you to go to hell and you try to … you’re writing about this and suddenly reality comes in and there is an earthquake. And reality is like rabbits that jump into the window and they start telling you to go outside and things that are more important or things that are more vital are happening outside. That’s how I started, I think, because of the journalism and because of all the tragedies in Mexico, all the natural disasters like the earthquakes or…

**Chevigny:** Or this last hurricane?

**Poniatowska:** Or the hurricane in Yucatan, or the Zapatistas in January, 1994, or the children in the streets that I speak to and who are so wonderful, what they say. That’s how I started living in the streets and asking people in the streets and then coming in the afternoon, by night, and writing it all down.

**Chevigny:** What about being a woman and why do you write so much about women? I mean, the earthquake story, perhaps it is the true story of the earthquake, where yours is the story I know about the earthquake because it was the seamstresses that were especially afflicted. Wasn’t that because they go to work early?

**Poniatowska:** They had already entered in their buildings.

**Chevigny:** 1997. And it was the seamstresses who were so docile, even childlike, loving the bosses and forgiving them everything, giving them birthday parties, who had this dramatic turnaround, the way you tell the story, because they heard the boss say, save the machines first, and they thought, oh, and they began to organize and they… When I was at your house once you had seamstresses’ literature and banners and so on all in your house, and I think it’s because of the… does it have something to do with the more extreme deprivations of women in Mexico than most men that you gravitate toward them?

**Poniatowska:** Yes, because the seamstresses were the most forgotten of all during the earthquake. No one remembered them because they work in clandestine factories, because they had no social security, because they took work home also, and they were really completely forgotten. So, many of them were killed, the ones who ran to the elevators in the middle of the building. Besides, the buildings were very badly built and all the machinery was upstairs, the heavy thing was upstairs and not downstairs. So they ran to the elevators. The ones who ran to the elevators got killed and the ones who saved their lives, very few, about 700 were killed, because like Tarzan they took rolls of, how do you say, material …

**Chevigny:** Yes, cloth.

**Poniatowska:** ...cloth and then they swung themselves out of the building this way. That’s the way they saved their lives and then suddenly they found out that their bosses were only concerned … the boss they loved so much and the boss who was like their father, no, because we have this father image in Mexico which is so strong because we have no fathers at all. The bosses, the boss said he
only cared about the safe. So they were completely deprived and they started a syndicate and they asked me to be the treasurer. I don't know, I'm so bad at numbers, but they always ask me to be a treasurer because in Mexico if you don't steal, you can be a treasurer. [Laughter] I mean, we have such corruption.

Chevigny: There are few but you who they can rely on.

Poniatowska: The only way you need to be is not to steal. So I became their treasurer and we worked for a long time and I heard them... they were very strong and striking persons and women and we worked a lot with Evangelina Corona and they built -- they did the first very clear syndicate in Mexico, El Sindicato las Costureras. But now it doesn't work anymore.

Chevigny: I want to be sure to mention a little bit about your last novel, the one that's called _La Piel de Cielo; The Skin of the Sky_ or _The Skin of Heaven_, because it's so different from your other work because it's chiefly about a man, an astronomer, who draws a lot on your experience with your husband Guillermo Haro, the great astronomer, no longer alive. But in the novel, and in the case with Guillermo, the astronomers were very eager to stop the brain drain from Mexico, that scientists wanted to go and earn the big bucks in the United States. And so Guillermo was very dedicated, as was Lorenzo in your novel, to keeping science in Mexico, to making a strong native scientific community, and he was the builder of the (Spanish) in Puebla?

Poniatowska: The observatory.

Chevigny: ... the observatory and you've taken a new interest in that recently since finishing your novel, _The Skin of the Sky_. What are you doing with... tell a little bit about what the town is like.

Poniatowska: Tonantzintla...well, it's a very beautiful little town near Puebla which has the baroque church that everyone goes to visit because it's so extraordinary, full of angels, and it looks like a cake, like bread, it's incredible, and it's beautiful. And then next to it is the Instituto del Electronica that was built by Guillermo. But science in a Third World country is very difficult because of the brain drain, because of the lack of laboratories, because of the lack of the instruments, and usually students are sent to do their doctorate in the United States or in England or in Germany or in France, wherever, and sometimes many -- really, it's very frequent. They don't come back because they are offered better work and this is a brain drain. And we believe in Mexico; the politicians, who are very stupid and corrupt, believe as we are so near the United States, we don't need...we only need to import the science, the American science, the American technology, we don't need to do our own science.

Chevigny: What about the school? There is something you're working on in the school?

Poniatowska: The institute, the Astrophysical Institute, has had such influence. Now the peasants, they know all about computers, they all are starting to be physicists, and there are wonderful teachers of mathematics in Puebla and they have changed completely and they want a school in Tonantzintla to continue.

Chevigny: A high school?

Poniatowska: It's really...

Chevigny: A prep school?

Poniatowska: ...before the university. So they now have to go to Puebla every day on their bicycle and I think it's going to be if we can start this school, it would be a very wonderful thing to do for the Mexicans, especially for this Tonantzintla town, no. But he was as passionate as you are with all your meetings in New York and all the "Not In Our Name" things you do all the time.

Chevigny: Thank you, Elena. Thank you very much.

Poniatowska: That was wonderful. Thank you.