FOREWORD: THE SHAKING OF A NATION

AURORA CAMACHO DE SCHMIDT AND ARTHUR SCHMIDT

On September 19 and 20, 1985, two powerful seismic movements devastated Mexico City.[1] Ten years later, the words of those who suffered in this tragedy still speak with force and dignity. In *Nada, nadie: Las voces del temblor,* Elena Poniatowska has offered a testimony to the resiliency of the human spirit, reaffirming the claim made by Gabriel García Márquez on behalf of all Latin Americans in his 1982 Nobel Prize address: "to oppression, plundering, and abandonment, we respond with life."[2] Suffering and injustice abound in *Nothing, Nobody: The Voices of the Mexico City Earthquake,* but they are never disconnected from compassion, indignation, and hope.

MEXICO CITY, GIANT AND HOME

In recording the voices from the earthquake, Elena Poniatowska has reasserted the inherent value and latent power of the working people of Mexico City. All too often over the last half century, both Mexican and foreign observers have regarded Mexico City with a sense of horror, viewing it as a malignant organism whose gigantic dimensions and profound social rifts could portend only human disaster. In his 1950 classic *Los olvidados* (The Young and the Damned), Spanish film director Luis Buñuel used the Mexican capital to portray a vision of urban poverty and lawlessness whose cruelty extinguished all the tender and hopeful aspects of human nature Others agreed with Buñuel that catastrophic danger lurked beneath the dazzling image of the metropolis. According to former U.S. Undersecretary of Commerce Philip Alexander Ray, "the sights and smells of incredible human misery" and the menace of Communism lay hidden behind "the fashionable Paseo de la Reforma." When Mexico hosted the United Nations–sponsored International Con-

ference on Population in 1984, *Time* magazine warned against the "prospect of urban apocalypse," quoting the well-known Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes in labeling the city "the capital of underdevelopment." Headlined *Time:* "Overcrowded, polluted, corrupted, Mexico City offers the world a grim lesson."[3]

Most social science scholarship has long since repudiated such one-dimensional views, stressing instead the underlying economic and political reasons that have converted Mexico City into an "urban giant." Analysts have emphasized not just the city's innumerable problems and the highly worrisome conditions facing its future. They have also depicted the opportunities for social advance that its growth has offered both residents and migrants fleeing from poverty elsewhere in the country.[4] In *Nothing, Nobody,* Poniatowska looks at Mexico City with eyes of wonder, gazing upon the vast metropolis as it awakens on September 19, when its inhabitants commence their daily routines, turning over in bed, facing the early morning cold, and venturing out to work or school. As the voices of the earthquake so forcefully make clear, Mexico City is not a horror—it is home. Horror is the earthquake and its brutal shattering of human life. Horror is the arrogance, indifference, and impotence of a government unable and unwilling to protect its people or to trust in their spontaneous solidarity.

Mexico City is not an impersonal urban agglomeration, but a mosaic of *colonias,* or neighborhoods, assembled in *delegaciones,* or districts with distinct socioeconomic profiles, ambiance, and history.[5] An estimated ten thousand people died in the 1985 catastrophe, yet most of the metropolitan region experienced only a scare. The heaviest damage and loss of life took place in the central delegations of Miguel Hidalgo, Benito Juárez, Cuauhtémoc, and Venustiano Carranza.[6] This area constituted the old urban core of the metropolis that had witnessed the city's foundation by the Aztecs in 1325, its destruction and rebuilding as a colonial capital by the Spanish in the early 1500s, and its extension westward in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The nucleus still held almost 90 percent of the metropolitan zone's population as late as 1940, before dropping to less than 20 percent in 1980 and under 13 percent in 1990.[7]

Profound historical roots endowed the quake-damaged areas with a strong sense of place. The voices of *Nothing, Nobody* do not lament an abstract catastrophe. Instead, they speak of the disruption of individual, family, and neighborhood lives. They speak of the destruction of a hu-

man landscape: of homes, workplaces, and particular institutions, of Tehuantepec 12, of the Nuevo León Building, of Tepito, of Colonia Roma, of Super Leche, of Televisa, of Hospital Juárez, of the city as lived and loved, of the city as remembered.

From the collective loss of the personal came the strength for many residents to act together after the earthquake. Thousands of earthquake victims refused "to go back to normality" or just to "pretend we are nobody." Their survival had endowed them with a new will to live, as it did for the informants of Poniatowska, like Pedro Ferriz de Con, Héctor Sen Flores, or Elia Palacios Cano. They shared the sentiments of journalist Hermann Bellinghausen: "I didn't want eyes to see what I saw, but if the things that my eyes saw happened in the city of my life, then I wouldn't change myself for anyone; I am happy to be here, among everyone." But like earthquake survivors Capt. Gustavo Barrera, Marco Antonio Sánchez, Consuelo Romo Campos, or Gisang Fung, what their eyes had seen happen in the city of their lives caused them to demand, with Alonso Mixteco, "decent treatment for all Mexicans."

BACKGROUND TO THE EARTHQUAKE

From the vantage point of ten years later, the 1985 earthquake can be seen as one of a series of powerful shocks that have jarred the foundations of Mexico in the last three decades: the 1968 student movement and the massacre at Tlatelolco just before the opening of the Olympic games; the collapse of world petroleum prices and the declaration of the debt crisis in 1982; the "lost decade" of economic austerity and deteriorating living conditions; the highly controversial presidential elections of 1988; the subsequent structural reorientation of economic and foreign policy under President Carlos Salinas de Gortari that culminated in the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in December 1993; and closer to the present time, the remarkable indigenous rebellion in Chiapas in January 1994, the August national elections, the two stunning political assassinations of Luis Donaldo Colosio in March and Francisco Ruiz Massieu in September, and the collapse of the Mexican peso in December.[8] Mexico is now experiencing a deep need for renewal. In comparison to the stability that prevailed for a generation after 1940, each of the last five presidential terms in Mexico has ended in a significant crisis.[9]

These recent times of uncertainty now contrast with the experience of 1940 to 1970, when Mexico City presided over a process of rapid in-

dustrialization combined with political stability. Over those thirty years, the country's economy grew at an average annual rate above 6 percent, a phenomenon dubbed "the Mexican miracle" by many commentators despite its flagrant social inequalities. Formerly "an underdeveloped nation with a troubled and revolution-ridden history," wrote Columbia University scholar Frank Tannenbaum in 1964, Mexico had now "moved into the modern world."[10] As the concentrated embodiment of that progress, Mexico City reaped a substantial share of its fruits. By 1970, its metropolitan area accounted for about 38 percent of Mexico's GDP, 47 percent of its manufacturing output, half of the value of its services, more than one-third of federal government employees, over 40 percent of the nation's demand for durable consumer goods, and almost 70 percent of its bank assets. Migration from the provinces and high internal demographic growth rates quintupled the capital's population as the size of its urban area kept pace, spilling over beyond the boundaries of the Federal District into the neighboring State of Mexico.[11]

Aspects of this strong centralization might appear highly irrational. After the earthquake, when all telephone lines were dead for more than a day, Poniatowska asked, "How is it possible that 55,000 branches that connect the south with the north of the country and the whole country with the world were all concentrated in one single old building on Victoria Street?" Nevertheless, Mexico City's preeminence followed the logic of the country's economic development after 1940. For a whole generation, Mexico City seemed the most worthwhile site for extensive private and public investment. It offered producers the country's largest market, its most experienced labor force, its most comprehensive services, its most cosmopolitan milieu, and, as the national capital, its most powerful decision-making levers. In the view of Associated Civil Engineers (ICA), an influential construction firm, the growth of the capital city symbolized the modernization of the nation as a whole. Mexico's former "purely folkloric" image of "sun-drenched siestas" had been transformed into "a vision of dynamism, enterprise, and expansion."[12]

For the middle and working classes and for the poor, the rapidly growing metropolis provided their best chance for an improved future during this period. The voices of *Nothing, Nobody* faithfully reflect these opportunities: engineer Francisco de la Torre, who ascended into the professional classes by attending the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM); seamstress Evangelina Corona, who found ex-

ploitative but steady work that valued her skilled hands; or Salomón Reyes, watchman at the Tlatelolco housing complex, who also "took care of 104 automobiles," making "a little money washing cars and waxing them," with his seven children, "all of them in school . . . and doing well in all their subjects."

As Mexico industrialized, a highly unequal social system evolved, sustained in all its contradictions by the institutions and practices of the national government. Metropolitan Mexico City reproduced this social inequality, the industrial zones and the poorer neighborhoods expanding north and east; the wealthier areas, like Las Lomas and El Pedregal, and middle-class zones developing west and south. Federal government housing and land-use policies encouraged those trends, while the ever more complex service and infrastructural needs of the capital yielded lucrative government construction contracts for firms such as ICA.

The Federal District, an administrative unit which made up most of the Mexico City metropolitan area, was ruled directly by the national government. Its mayor or *regente*, one of the President's most important cabinet appointees, attempted to oversee the complex and often contradictory insertion of the national government into the city's physical and social fabric. A politically well-connected social elite lived in opulence. (*Nothing, Nobody* gives us a taste of this life when former First Lady Carmen Romano puts a vast number of precious presidential gifts on sale.) Meanwhile, a huge web of government organizations and policies provided housing, security, employment, and services to a broad clientele amid the lower and middle classes, exemplified in *Nothing, Nobody* by the Tlatelolco housing complex and the Multifamiliar Juárez; by the State Workers' Social Security Institute (ISSSTE), the Hospital Juárez, and the Hospital General; and by the artificially controlled low rents throughout areas like Tepito or the Colonia Guerrero.[13]

Neither the private nor the public sector, however, ever met the needs of the majority of the city's residents. Even before the earthquake, for example, only about one-third of the families in Mexico City could buy or rent affordable housing in either the formal real estate market or government-subsidized housing.[14] As the metropolitan area expanded, increasing numbers of people were forced to rely on informally organized housing and work strategies to survive a precarious existence. By the early 1970s, authorities became overwhelmed by the difficulties of managing the city's growth and the politics and economics of the country at the same time. As the costs of Mexico City's social and infrastruc-

tural needs rose, serious structural conflicts developed between the policies of the national government and the demands of the residents of the capital.

The administration of Luis Echeverría Alvarez (1970–1976) tried in vain to promote a more socially and geographically balanced national development. Crucial to this effort was the attempt to limit government investment in Mexico City and to distance urban policy from the influence of the powerful vested interests associated with the city's growth. Echeverría failed. His successor, José López Portillo, sought to satisfy Mexico City's requirements for better transportation, housing, and services by lavishing federal resources upon the central metropolis. His policies left both the country and its capital city in a "fiscal quagmire."[15]

In 1968, the student movement for greater official openness and accountability had ended in the government's wanton killing of more than three hundred students at the Plaza of the Three Cultures at Tlatelolco.[16] Succeeding years witnessed a steady decline in political support in Mexico City for the government's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), especially as independent movements of urban residents multiplied, demanding better housing, transportation, and services. "By the late 1970s, Mexico City had become a city of highly mobilized and well-organized urban residents who were ready to seriously challenge the PRI's urban policies and priorities; and among their principal concerns were the scarcity and high cost of urban services."[17] Some 180,000 residents were said to be active in urban social movements in Mexico City by 1982; many organizations worked not only at the neighborhood level, but also began to coordinate their efforts together through the National Coalition of Urban Popular Movements (CONAMUP). Moreover, the arm of the PRI that had traditionally been effective in linking the national government to the residents of the capital, the National Confederation of Popular Organizations (CNOP), found itself debilitated by these rival, independent organizations and by the futile efforts of officials under Echeverría and López Portillo to implement limited political reforms intended to pacify the growing urban discontent.[18]

The onset of the debt crisis in 1982 accelerated the alienation between the residents of Mexico City and the national government under President Miguel de la Madrid (1982–1988). New austerity measures left authorities bereft of resources to devote to Mexico City. Tax reve-

nues for the capital plummeted, and living standards fell drastically; real wages for most workers in Mexico's domestic economy dropped by 40–50 percent between 1983 and 1988.[19] Public services declined in both volume and quality. In response both to the debt crisis and to economic globalization, de la Madrid promoted an administrative and economic rationalization that would hurt the nationally privileged position of Mexico City. Efforts to decentralize some of the concentrated power of the capital were not popular among its residents, especially at a time of widespread suffering. Demands for self-government grew steadily louder in the Federal District. For a time, de la Madrid hoped to regain popular support for the PRI in Mexico City through reforms that would allow for direct popular elections of officials in the Federal District. Important members of the government and the PRI, not the least of whom was Mayor Ramón Aguirre, opposed these changes, however, and they never materialized.[20] By 1985, many residents of Mexico City looked upon de la Madrid as a remote, technocratic figure responsible for economic austerity and deteriorating urban services. For them, pre-earthquake "normality" had already acquired the traits of a vast disaster.

THE EARTHQUAKE AND ITS AFTERMATH

Mexico City is situated in a highly dangerous seismic zone. More than 340 earthquakes have been recorded in the area of the capital since Aztec times in the mid-fifteenth century.[21] Several smaller quakes take place each week in various parts of the country. Yet the 1985 quake caught government unprepared despite the adoption of building codes that met advanced international standards and other research and regulatory measures that were taken after the tremor of 1957. Planners did not anticipate earthquakes of such a combined magnitude, duration, and intensity.

While the medical service network was relatively well equipped to deal with a mass public catastrophe, the city lacked a sufficient number of firemen and the other elements of an emergency infrastructure. Moreover, the historic core sections of Mexico City rested on the soft soil of a former lake bed and were subject to stronger vibratory patterns than surrounding areas. The particular trepidatory and oscillatory patterns arising from the lake bed especially afflicted high-rise buildings between six and fifteen stories, with the result that many newer constructions fared much worse than older buildings. No certain figures

exist for casualties and physical damage, but the residents of Mexico City witnessed enormous and highly concentrated destruction. Central communications, finances, and government were totally disrupted.[22]

Distrust defined the mutual relations of government officials and urban society in their responses to the earthquake. Not quite a year earlier, on November 19, 1984, a liquefied natural gas processing plant belonging to the state oil monopoly Pemex had exploded in San Juan Ixhuatepec, a low-income section of northern Mexico City known as San Juanico. Hundreds of thousands were affected in this highly populated area.[23] For many, the events of San Juanico became the framework for interpreting the government's reaction to the earthquake—years of futile complaints about the dangers of official negligence, an inept and authoritarian reaction to the catastrophe, suppression of the widespread public urge to aid the victims, and a failure to hold officials accountable for their conduct. For the first few days after September 19, 1985, this pattern reappeared. Officials at the highest level acted in a confused and uncoordinated manner. President de la Madrid and other civilians evidently feared putting a national emergency plan known as "DN-III-E" into operation, lest the military gain undue control and perhaps even political support over an area as crucial as Mexico City. Moreover, it was not clear whether this plan was ever intended to apply to Mexico City.[24]

Elements of the public immediately rushed in to fill the void, even though the official schemes had left no room for either spontaneous or autonomously organized participation in relief efforts. "Let us not forget the days following the earthquake of September 19, 1985," insists Francisco Pérez Arce of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, "when, weighed down by the tragedy, the people of Mexico City yet showed themselves ready to organize and run their own lives in the face of the complete failure of government to find an effective response."[25] Some of the most severe damage took place in areas where popular movements were already strong in the years before the earthquake. Organized popular efforts were joined by the spontaneous participation of hundreds of thousands. Over half of the *brigadistas* came from outside the damaged parts of the city. Most were young, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine.[26] Disaster analyst José da Cruz argues that September 1985 proved that spontaneity and decentralized mobilization could work rapidly and effectively: "The official response

should have supported spontaneity instead of attempting to gain control over it in the name of order, efficiency, or specialized skills."[27]

Earthquake victims were not the helpless suffering lot that government thinking had expected. Spurred on by the newly formed Coordinadora Unica de Damnificados (CUD) (Overall Coordinating Committee of Disaster Victims), tens of thousands marched over the next few months, denouncing plans for relocation of downtown residents and demanding that new housing be built in the heavily damaged neighborhoods. The earthquake revealed the presence of a socially conscious "civil society" that would no longer permit the state to be unchallenged in setting the terms of Mexican life. As noted journalist and intellectual Carlos Monsiváis said:

> Not even the power of the state . . . managed to wipe out the cultural, political, and psychic consequences of the four or five days in which the brigades and aid workers, in the midst of rubble and desolation, felt themselves in charge of their own behavior and responsible for the other city that rose into view. If it is true that in a strict sense people organized a specific movement on behalf of earthquake victims in the weeks that followed the tremor, the will to take action in a broader arena was strengthened among hundreds of thousands.[28]

Postearthquake organizations like the CUD and the Asamblea de Barrios (Neighborhood Assembly) joined with CONAMUP to constitute a vocal urban movement of middle-class, working-class, and informally employed people. One of the most visible elements of the urban popular movement was Super Barrio, a masked male dressed as a professional wrestler in red and gold full-body tights who symbolized the struggle of the urban downtrodden.

The urban popular movement pressured the government on behalf of earthquake victims and also promoted broad popular housing and service needs. Its demands linked the fulfillment of social needs to other issues, such as the repudiation of the foreign debt and democratization of Mexico's political life. On September 19, 1987, it marked the second anniversary of the earthquake with a march of nearly 90,000 people to the Zócalo.[29]

Women were particularly important in the functioning of the urban

popular movement, indicating "one more time that women are the social group that responds with the greatest agility to the needs and emergencies in the realm of housing and community life."[30] One of the most impressive cases of women's organizing power was the Nineteenth of September Garment Workers' Union, whose voices speak so strongly from the rubble in *Nothing, Nobody*. Some four hundred production centers were destroyed or damaged by the earthquake; eight hundred garment workers were killed, and another forty thousand left without work. Just a few weeks after the catastrophe, the union gained legal recognition and set about attempting independent labor organization in an industry previously characterized by either a total absence of unionism or by "sweetheart" and *charro* unions, the former created by the employers themselves, the latter by PRI, government-affiliated unions. Organization in a context of high unemployment and official harassment proved a very difficult challenge for the Nineteenth of September, but the union learned to make effective use of its ties with the women's and urban popular movements in maintaining its autonomy and gaining a toehold in the garment industry.[31]

The years immediately following the earthquake were an important high point in popular organization in Mexico.[32] Yet ultimately the high hopes of a powerful future for grassroots solidarity remained frustrated. "The experience of the earthquake gave the term *civil society* an unexpected credibility," noted Monsiváis, but the immense obstacles to continued popular self-expression surfaced almost immediately. "There is no such thing as absolute independence," he warned. "The resources of the state and the business class are great enough to be able to frustrate independent projects. It is not simply a question of consolidating autonomous spaces. Historical barriers of collective psychology and of power structures have to be broken down."[33] After their initial moment of confusion, authorities did develop a more coordinated response to the earthquake. They admitted their need for foreign assistance, and in the end, Mexico received help from sixty sovereign states as well as from nongovernmental and multilateral organizations. As time went by, the volunteer teams obtained the equipment necessary to do their difficult tasks. Official information networks and shelter and relief programs for victims were put into place. Within two weeks of the initial tremor, the period of acute initial emergency had ended, and a longer time of reconstruction and political readjustment had commenced.[34]

Regaining its political skills, the government soon abandoned its ini-

tial commitment to decentralized reconstruction. On October 11, following the first meeting of the National Reconstruction Commission (described in *Nothing, Nobody*), the government expropriated thousands of properties damaged by the earthquake by extraordinary decree, yielding to popular pressures for the restoration of downtown housing. With the help of major financial assistance from the World Bank, the de la Madrid administration provided close to 50,000 new and rehabilitated housing units over the next two years through the Popular Housing Renovation program. Former renters in these central neighborhoods were able to buy these units at substantially subsidized prices. In all, roughly 100,000 families benefitted from a variety of postearthquake housing programs by 1988. More than 10,000 of these were residents of the Tlatelolco housing complex. Despite the government's agreement to an official investigation, no one was ever punished for negligence in the case of the Nuevo León Building. Nevertheless, Sedue head Guillermo Carrillo Arena lost his job. His replacement, the more politically skilled and cooperative Manuel Camacho Solís, managed to conduct more successful negotiations with the angry residents' associations.[35]

While many inhabitants of the capital shared the sentiments expressed by Cuauhtémoc Abarca to Poniatowska that it was "about time we get rid of all these Neanderthals in politics," events would not prove so easy. All the government would offer to *citadinos* anxious for self-rule was an advisory assembly, elected but virtually powerless.[36] Popular organization, public distrust, and economic suffering produced an electoral revolt in 1988 that almost denied the government its ability to manage the presidential succession. Nevertheless, after a week of "fallen" electoral computers, the official candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari was proclaimed the winner with a fraction over 50 percent of the votes. As cartoonist Alberto Beltrán told Poniatowska in *Nothing, Nobody,* "Humans do not change only because an earthquake has shaken the earth. . . . Solidarity cannot be stretched, just like that. . . . Mexican society moves slowly, little by little, not in leaps." Civil society in a country with so many social, cultural, and geographical divisions could not bring about systemic change overnight. Organizations established as a result of the earthquake to express local needs and aspirations were not, as Beltrán warned, "the harbinger of a social transformation."

In the wake of the earthquake and the election of 1988, the governing

system realized that it had to restore economic growth and to improve the provision of services to potentially vocal grassroots elements if it were to survive. A reform from the top after 1988 brought a renewed emphasis on market forces along with the North American Free Trade Agreement with the United States and Canada. New political strategies like the National Solidarity Program indicated that the government's postearthquake experience of making deals with the numerous components of the urban popular movement had been instructive. It now knew how to rebuild local bases of support for existing politics without yielding to a widespread democratization of the ruling system.[37]

ELENA PONIATOWSKA AND POPULAR TESTIMONY

> I like to sit under the
> sun among the people, those
> of my city, in my city, in
> the center of my country, in the
> navel of the world.
>
> Elena Poniatowska, *La "Flor de lis"*

Born in Paris in 1932, the daughter of a Frenchman of Polish origin and a Mexican mother, Elena Poniatowska first arrived in Mexico City in 1942 in a journey of escape from World War II. Her somewhat autobiographical novel *La "Flor de lis"* (1988) shows the child and young woman discovering Mexico in its capital city, dazzled not by its magnificence, but by its people: by her own aristocratic Mexican mother, first of all, but also the by servants of Indian origin from whom she learns a Spanish full of domestic warmth and popular texture; and by the proletarians who take the buses that become her "secret life." She becomes fascinated by the large square by the cathedral, where the Aztec Temple of the Sun once stood in majesty, "my great intense *plaza,* the Zócalo, electric, charged with currents and resistance."[38]

After an education that included boarding school in the Philadelphia area, Elena Poniatowska began conducting interviews for the Mexico City newspaper *Excélsior* in 1954, transferring to the daily *Novedades* the following year. She is fondly remembered by television audiences of the late 1950s as the young woman who interviewed major Mexican cultural icons of the size of Diego Rivera, in a program titled, like her newspaper column, "Crosswords." In time, she established herself as a major fiction writer, chronicler, critic, and journalist. She has also writ-

ten texts for several photographic essays dealing with Mexico City, Mexican architecture, and the women of Juchitán, Oaxaca, site of confrontations between political opposition and government forces.

Many of Elena Poniatowska's books remain to be translated into English, but she is well known to scholars in the United States, who consider her one of the major Latin American writers of the present hour. She is a master of testimonial literature whose work defines and defies the boundaries of this new genre. Her writing is characterized by a disarming but carefully crafted simplicity of language, the language of kitchens, of telephone calls between old friends, the language of the street and the proletarian bar, of an urban bus that goes too fast, of a group of students in a stadium. The written text holds the textures of spoken Mexican Spanish in a variety of registers that capture nuances of gender, social class, political affiliation, age, place of residence in the city, occupation, and even moral intention. The French-speaking refugee girl who had to listen so hard to learn her mother's tongue in this new world preserved a love for speech as music to be savored in every note and in every cadence and silence.

Elena Poniatowska writes about women. She is a practical feminist who believes in women's power of authorship, and who has influenced a generation of young women writers in Latin America. She loves to find and recreate female characters from history and present-day life who allow her to tell intensely feminine stories. Often these are foreign women who look at Mexico City as outsiders and are seduced by its powers. She believes in the power of ordinary women, especially poor women, to have intelligent notions about life, politics, and art.

The testimonial novel *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* (1969; Here's Looking at You, Jesus) fictionalizes the life of Jesusa Palancares (Josefina Bórquez), who migrated to Mexico City from Oaxaca after being married to a revolutionary.[39] The vicissitudes that she confronts every day of her life make her a survivor whose only constant companion is the city, at times merciful and motherly, at times a debasing, hostile actor. In this novel, as in her two other major testimonial works, Elena Poniatowska writes intensely about the city of Mexico as a live and formidable force.

The city is not background in Poniatowska's narrative; it is not a stage where the drama of the student movement unfolds or the earthquake shatters lives; it is not the unifying space where the tough life of a woman gets tougher. It is itself, as critic Cynthia Steele has established,

a "literary and political protagonist."[40] Poniatowska textualizes the historical geography that at once integrates and disintegrates, devours and consoles.

In *Massacre in Mexico,* readers hear the voices of eyewitnesses of the events of October 2, 1968, when the army brutally repressed the student movement by firing on a demonstration at the Plaza of the Three Cultures at Tlatelolco in the heart of the city. *Nothing, Nobody* depicts the earthquakes of September 19 and 20, 1985, which destroyed downtown Mexico City, caused thousands of deaths and mutilations, and left hundreds of thousands of poor people bereaved, homeless, and jobless overnight. There is a dialogue and a semantic contagion between these two texts. In fact, a scene in *Nothing, Nobody* establishes that parallel as it reveals the senseless series of objects that, taken out of the collapsed apartments, form piles of personal belongings in a baseball field in an absurd juxtaposition: sofas, mattresses, photos, a black velvet jacket, shoes, and more shoes, "just as on October 2, when the Plaza de las Tres Culturas of Tlatelolco awoke covered with odd shoes like crushed flowers!"

But the parallel goes further. Both the action of the army and the earthquake are acts of betrayal. In 1968 the citizens of Mexico learned that there was a deep fissure between them and their government, a sort of telluric fault. The army exists not to defend them but to control them. In 1985, after the ground of the city gives way, the government of Mexico fails to respond. The destruction of the facades of many buildings unveils sordid poverty and obscene working conditions, at the same time as it unmasks the hypocrisy and incompetence of the nation's costly state institutions.

The city then, is not unity, but fragmentation, especially after the devastation of the Mexican army's action and the tremor. But it is precisely this fragmentation that Elena Poniatowska relies on to build a whole chronicle, to reintegrate the dismembered city into a body and a text. In this sense the structure of Poniatowska's testimonial works reflects their content, as critic Ronald Christ underscores:

> *Massacre* consists of quoted graffiti, placards, speeches, journalistic reports, firsthand accounts, interviews, hindsight interpretations, official declarations, and private comments. Like a movie, then, the book is conceived and presented in fragments, in staccato "shots" and more developed "sequences."[41]

Nothing, Nobody is similarly made up of fragments At times those fragments are jarring, and may sound as foreign in English as they do in their original Spanish. The informants of Elena Poniatowska are angry, or full of sorrow and grief. Some of them are also prejudiced: anti-Semitic, sexist, homophobic, or outright arrogant in the security of their own social class as they look down on poor people to whom they are offering help. But most of the voices in the book are there to do Elena Poniatowska's job, a job that critic Beth Jörgensen identifies with the business of testimonial literature: "to offer an alternative view of official, hegemonic history."[42] This view is presented by a not-so-innocent bystander who injects her testimony with humor, tenderness, and the contagious ability to be amazed by the quotidian characters and realities of the city. Poniatowska's writing is celebration at its core.

Throughout the text, the writer gives form to the voices of her informants and helps them to impart their collective testimony. In this intense editorial role, the borders between fiction and oral history blur. We find a master narrator who is all eyes and ears most of the time, only to become self-conscious and give herself a voice at key moments, when she is one more character invented by a mischievous author. What emerges is a truth bigger than the truth of a tape recorder.

Nothing, Nobody began as a series of articles in the Mexico City daily *La Jornada* after *Novedades* refused their publication.[43] Poniatowska compiled her chronicle from newspapers, official speeches, and the voices of countless interviews. Some readers may find this format somewhat unusual and even confusing at times. A few simple points about the text may make it clearer.

Eighteen writers helped Elena Poniatowska assemble her testimonies. Their names appear in the text as subheadings of the sections for which they were responsible. Most parts of *Nothing, Nobody* have a single major narrator with whom a journalist like Poniatowska or one of her helpers is engaged in dialogue at any one given time. Usually that person's voice does not appear within quotation marks unless he or she is recounting a previous conversation. Quotation marks thus indicate the voice of the interviewer or of other persons in that part of the story. While the text does not always announce a switch from one major narrator to another, it introduces personages in such a way that the reader will be able to determine who is speaking to Poniatowska or to one of the writers who assisted her.

One Mexican critic of Poniatowska's work wrote, "Impelled by a

sense of both obligation and commitment, Elena Poniatowska . . . continues to help the people of Mexico elucidate who we are and what we want."[44] With her friends and colleagues Carlos Monsiváis and José Emilio Pacheco, Elena Poniatowska is a voice of moral force in Mexico. Only someone who loves her country as deeply as she does can dare to tell its intimate stories.

TEN YEARS LATER

A decade after the earthquake, the urban needs that gave rise to the popular movement remain in massive housing shortages, a serious lack of basic services, and growing environmental problems.[45] The Nineteenth of September Garment Workers' Union still exists, but barely, buffeted by low-cost imported clothing and problems among the seamstresses themselves. Ironically, the difficulties and dangers of the city itself drive more residents to enclose themselves within the confines of a privatized world of "cultura a domicilio" as the television and video cassette recorder replace the old public culture of the park and the cinema.[46]

Nevertheless, popular movements still insert themselves into the changing fabric of Mexican life. Hundreds of thousands of people have participated in organizations and campaigns associated with human rights, labor, environmental, and political education issues in the context of the free trade pact, the Chiapas conflict, and the elections of 1994. Mexico continues to be a society that is organizing and constantly reinventing itself.[47] New testimonies follow in the tradition of *Massacre in Mexico* and *Nothing, Nobody* to illustrate "the remarkable flexibility, clear-headed thinking, ingenuity, and courage of people who take great risks to meet challenges they might wish had never come their way."[48]

Elena Poniatowska recorded some ancient Aztec words, repeated by Miguel León-Portilla before the National Reconstruction Commission: "For as long as the world is world, the glory and fame of Mexico-Tenochtitlán will endure." In assembling the voices from the earthquake, Poniatowska shows that this glory and fame derive from the very members of Mexican society, at once ordinary and extraordinary. Their testimony projects a collective message of importance to the wider human community. As the twentieth century draws to a close, the economic and technological forces underlying contemporary globalization have privileged the position of social elites and economic bureaucracies,

giving them an almost unchallenged power to determine the fate of peoples around the world. In the midst of the disruptions, uncertainties, and estrangements attendant to these changes, the voices of the earthquake lay claim to the right of ordinary people to exercise influence over the forces that shape their daily lives. They attest to the creative power of solidarity to triumph over human tragedy, if only for a moment. In a fast-paced world order in which "a huge and increasing proportion of human beings are not needed and will never be needed to make goods or to provide services," the voices from the earthquake reassert the primacy of human dignity over the production of wealth, affirming the capacity of ordinary people to make history.[49]

Their voices must never be forgotten.

NOTES

1. Following the practice employed by many writers, this introduction will use the word *earthquake* in the singular to refer to the two tremors of September 19 and 20, 1985.

2. Elena Poniatowska, *Nada, nadie: Las voces del temblor* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1988); Gabriel García Márquez, "Nobel Speech," *Americas: An Anthology*, ed. Mark B. Rosenberg, A. Douglas Kincaid, and Kathleen Logan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 269.

3. John King, *Magical Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America* (London and New York: Verso, 1990), pp. 130–131; Philip Alexander Ray, *South Wind Red: Our Hemispheric Crisis* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1962), pp. 3, 13–14; "A Proud Capital's Distress," *Time*, Aug. 6, 1984, pp. 26–27.

4. For responsible, balanced treatments of Mexico City, see Martha Schteingart, "Mexico City," *The Metropolis Era*, vol 2., *Mega-Cities*, ed. Mattei Dogan and John D. Kasarda (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988), pp. 268–293; Peter Ward, *Mexico City: The Production and Reproduction of an Urban Environment* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990); and Bernardo Quintana Arrioja, "The City of Mexico, Its Future," *México-Tenochtitlán, 1325–1975: Pasado, presente y futuro de una gran ciudad* (Mexico City: Fomento Cultural Banamex, A.C., 1976), pp. 77–84.

5. Following the 1980 census and the figures originally accepted by most experts, Poniatowska refers to the population of metropolitan Mexico City as about 18 million. The 1990 census brought a downward rectification of earlier figures with the result that the Mexico City metropolitan zone was estimated to have slightly more than 15 million inhabitants then and a growth rate that would leave it with between 15 and 16 million today. See María Teresa Esquivel Hernández, René Flores Arenales, and María Eugenia Medina, "La Zona

Metropolitana de la Ciudad de México: Dinámica demográfica y estructura poblacional, 1970–1990," *El Cotidiano* 54 (May 1993): 11, 13.

6. Alan Gilbert, *The Latin American City* (London: Latin America Bureau, 1994), p. 137. Estimates of the number of dead range from slightly under five thousand to twenty thousand, with ten thousand serving as the mostly widely accepted conventional figure. See José da Cruz, *Disaster and Society: The 1985 Mexican Earthquakes* (Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1993), pp. 118–122.

7. Ward, *Mexico City*, p. 35; Esquivel Hernández et al., "La Zona Metropolitana," p. 14.

8. For short accounts of Mexico's post-1968 history, see Peter H. Smith, "Mexico Since 1946: Dynamics of an Authoritarian Regime," *Mexico Since Independence*, ed. Leslie Bethell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 356–396; and Héctor Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer, *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution: Contemporary Mexican History, 1910–1989*, trans. Luis Alberto Fierro (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), pp. 199–267.

9. Miguel Basáñez, "Is Mexico Heading Toward Its Fifth Crisis?" *Political and Economic Liberalization in Mexico: At a Critical Juncture?* ed. Riordan Roett (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1993), pp. 95–115.

10. Frank Brandenburg, *The Making of Modern Mexico*, intro. Frank Tannenbaum (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. vii.

11. Ward, *Mexico City*, pp. 19–21; Schteingart, "Mexico City," p. 272.

12. Special edition "El México de Hoy," *Auge Internacional de México*, April 1973, p. 26.

13. See Ward, *Mexico City*, chapters 2, 4, 5–6.

14. Keith Pezzoli, "The Urban Land Problem and Popular Sector Housing Development in Mexico City," *Environment and Behavior* 19.3 (May 1987): 378.

15. Diane E. Davis, *Urban Leviathan: Mexico City in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), p. 238.

16. Poniatowska recounted the events of the student movement and the horrifying brutality at Tlatelolco in her testimonial work *La noche de Tlatelolco: Testimonios de historia oral* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1971), translated by Helen R. Lane as *Massacre in Mexico* (New York: Viking Press, 1975; later paperback edition, University of Missouri Press).

17. Davis, *Urban Leviathan*, p. 237 and, more broadly, pp. 219–253.

18. Ibid., pp. 237, 272.

19. Nora Lustig, *Mexico: The Remaking of an Economy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1992), pp. 66–69.

20. Davis, *Urban Leviathan*, pp. 264–270.

21. Linda Manzanilla, "Relación de los sismos ocurridos en la ciudad de

México y sus efectos," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 48.2 (April-June 1986): 265–282.

22. da Cruz, *Disaster and Society*, pp. 99–102, 112, 115–116, 120, 122–125, 132–135. See also J. Flores, O. Novaro, and T. H. Seligman, "Possible Resonance Effect in the Distribution of Earthquake Damage in Mexico City," *Nature*, April 23, 1987, pp. 783–788. According to sources cited by da Cruz, the September 19 and September 20 quakes, respectively, had durations of four minutes and one minute, magnitudes of 8.1 and 7.3 on the Richter scale, and intensity levels of VIII–IX and VI on the Modified Mercalli scale. Ultimately, the official figures of the Department of the Federal District declared 12,747 buildings damaged, yet researchers from the University of Delaware Disaster Research Center considered such estimates well below the total of structures that experienced some form of damage or loss of services because of the earthquake. Official estimates of the number of injured survivors range from 35,000 to 45,000 people, while the homeless may have exceeded half a million. University of Delaware analysts claimed that as many as 2 million may have left their homes at least temporarily.

23. Carlos Monsiváis, *Entrada libre: Crónicas de la sociedad que se organiza* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1987), pp. 123–150. Ultimately, some 10,000 residents suffered damages, while 375 were killed and over 26,000 injured. Less than a thousand collected some form of indemnization. See "A diez años de la explosión, San Juanico continúa en riesgo," *Siglo 21* (Guadalajara), Nov. 30, 1994, p. 16. PEMEX was also responsible for a gasoline leak and explosion that devastated low-income neighborhoods of Guadalajara in April 1992.

24. Luis Pazos, "El ejército y los desastres," *El Financiero*, May 18, 1992, p. 56; da Cruz, *Disaster and Society*, pp. 178–185.

25. Francisco Pérez Arce, "The Enduring Union Struggle for Legality and Democracy," *Popular Movements and Political Change in Mexico*, ed. Joe Foweraker and Ann L. Craig (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1990), p. 120.

26. Results of the University of Delaware surveys as reported in da Cruz, *Disaster and Society*, p. 156.

27. Ibid., p. 229.

28. Monsiváis, *Entrada libre*, p. 13.

29. Daniel Rodríguez Velázquez, "Mexico from Neighborhood to Nation," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 23.4 (December 1989): 22–28; Tom Barry, ed., *Mexico, a Country Guide* (Albuquerque, NM: Inter-Hemispheric Education Resource Center), pp. 196–203.

30. Alejandra Massolo and Martha Schteingart, comps., *Participación social, reconstrucción y mujer: El sismo de 1985* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1987), p. 23; see also two other publications of the Programa Interdisciplinario de Estudios de la Mujer at the Colegio de México: Alejandra Massolo, *Por amor y coraje: Mujeres en movimientos urbanos de la ciudad de México* (Mex-

ico City: El Colegio de México, 1992), and Alejandra Massolo, comp., *Los medios y los modos: Participación política y acción colectiva de las mujeres* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1994).

31. Teresa Carrillo, "Women and Independent Unionism in the Garment Industry," *Popular Movements and Political Change in Mexico*, ed. Foweraker and Craig, pp. 213–233. According to Carrillo, the union won seventeen contracts and had a membership of less than 1 percent of the workers in the industry.

32. Vivienne Bennett, "The Evolution of Urban Popular Movements in Mexico Between 1968 and 1988," *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy, and Democracy*, ed. Arturo Escobar and Sonia E. Alvarez (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 253–257.

33. Monsiváis, *Entrada libre*, p. 13.

34. da Cruz, *Disaster and Society*, pp. 154–160.

35. Ibid., pp. 210–225. Analysts vary in their interpretation of the results of these efforts, particularly the Popular Housing Renovation program. Ward sees the land expropriation as a populist-style gesture that paid landowners inflated prices for deteriorated properties. The replacement housing, while of high quality in his view, represented the government buying off internal popular organizations with the aid of international subsidies, giving the former renters a windfall benefit that created an irrational downtown land use for small residential property ownership. On the other hand, Eckstein along with Gamboa de Buen and Revah Locouture see the measure as a practical, economical reinvestment in the downtown that enabled the former renters to preserve their neighborhoods and jobs, and the PRI to regain voters from among the beneficiaries. See Ward, *Mexico City*, pp. 194–195; Jorge Gamboa de Buen and José Antonio Revah Locouture, "Reconstrucción y política urbana en la Ciudad de México," *Foro Internacional* 30.4 (April-June 1990): 689–690; and Susan Eckstein, "Poor People Versus the State and Capital: Anatomy of a Successful Community Mobilization for Housing in Mexico City," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 14.2 (1990): 274–296. Camacho Solís later became mayor of the Federal District during 1988–1994.

36. Davis, *Urban Leviathan*, pp. 286–287.

37. See Susan Eckstein, "Formal Versus Substantive Democracy: Poor People's Politics in Mexico City," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 6.2 (Summer 1990): 213–239, as well as the essays in Wayne A. Cornelius, Ann L. Craig, and Jonathan Fox, eds., *Transforming State-Society Relations in Mexico: The National Solidarity Strategy* (La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 1994).

38. Elena Poniatowska, *La "flor de lis"* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1990; primera edición, 1988), p. 261.

39. Elena Poniatowska, *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1969).

40. Cynthia Steele, *Politics, Gender, and the Mexican Novel, 1968–1988* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), p. 29.

41. Ronald Christ, "The Author as Editor," *Review* 75 (Fall 1975): 78, cited by Elizabeth Starcevic, "Elena Poniatowska: Witness for the People," *Contemporary Women Authors of Latin America: Introductory Essays*, ed. Doris Meyer and Margarite Fernández Olmos (Brooklyn: Brooklyn College Press, 1983), p. 73.

42. Beth E. Jörgensen, *The Writing of Elena Poniatowska: Engaging Dialogues* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), p. 68.

43. Jörgensen, *Ibid.*, p. 71.

44. Eugenia Meyer, "Elena Poniatowska, Task and Commitment," *Oral History Review* 16.1 (Spring 1988): 5.

45. See the articles on the problems of housing and environment in Mexico City by Victor Ballinas, *La Jornada*, May 3–4, 1993, and Angélica Enciso, *La Jornada*, May 5–6, 1993.

46. Remarks of Eduardo Nivón of the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana at the Conference on Globalization and Resistance, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, November 12, 1994.

47. The phrase "society that organizes itself" derives from Monsiváis, while the idea of Mexico reinventing itself comes from Héctor Aguilar Camín, "La invención de México: Notas sobre nacionalismo e identidad nacional," *Nexos*, July 1993, pp. 49–61.

48. Judith Adler Hellman, *Mexican Lives* (New York: New Press, 1994), p. 13.

49. Richard J. Barnet and John Cavanagh, *Global Dreams: Imperial Corporations and the New World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 17.