

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elena Poniatowska, Aurora Camacho de Schmidt, Arthur Schmidt. *Nothing, Nobody (Voices Of Latin American Life)*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995. xxix + 327 pp. \$84.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56639-344-7; \$30.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56639-345-4.



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On September 19, 1985 at approximately 7:20 A.M., an earthquake registering 7.8 on the Richter Scale shook Mexico. Its epicenter was located off the coasts of Guerrero and Michoacan. Though damage occurred in seven states, most of the death and destruction occurred in Mexico City, which, because of its large population, uncontrolled growth, poverty, and pollution, many thought of as a disaster even before the disaster. An estimated 10,000 died in the quake and its aftermath, many with minimal wounds who had been trapped alive. *Nothing, Nobody* relates the stories of victims wounded by the failures of their government. It also relates the stories of survivors; those who, by sheer luck, walked away or were rescued and those who participated in rescue efforts.

The voices of the Mexico City earthquake that offer testimony in Elena Poniatowska's *Nothing, Nobody* sometimes approach cacophony. The reader is constantly challenged to determine who is speaking – a victim of the earthquake, one of the eighteen writers who assisted Poniatowska with interviews, or the author herself. By offering a multiplicity of viewpoints, Poniatowska risks presenting a view of the world that is incoherent. The seemingly haphazard arrangement of voices and stories, however, reflects the event it relates. Just as the volunteers discovered it did not matter who received credit for

the rescue of a survivor, so too, the reader discovers the words, not the attribution, are what count. Most important is survival - of the victims and of their testimony.

In the foreword, translators Aurora Camacho de Schmidt and Arthur Schmidt provide a succinct overview of Mexico City, highlighting its social, economic, political, as well as seismic characteristics. They place the 1985 earthquake within the framework of other recent foundation-rattling events in Mexico, starting with the student massacre of 1968 and including; the oil collapse of 1982, the contested presidential elections of 1988, the passage of NAFTA, the Chiapas rebellion, and the recent political assassinations. This background to the temblor, along with the notes about Poniatowska and popular testimony included in the foreword, make this book a good choice for those wishing to introduce the student to Mexican history and/or testimonial literature. With this book Temple University Press initiates a new series, *Voices of Latin American Life*, edited by Arthur Schmidt, of which testimonial literature will be a part, and which promises to be “less concerned with being representative than with being authentic” (vii).

Archaeologist Dr. David Pendergast, in a speech delivered December 1, 1989 at Tulane University regarding the archaeology of Spanish contact with the Maya, lamented that neither the written record nor the arche-

ological record can tell us what the Maya were thinking before, during, and after contact. No matter how hard one strives today to understand contact from the mind of the Maya, that knowledge is lost to us. That aspect of the past which Dr. Pendergast cannot reclaim, the authentic voices, is what Poniatowska has undertaken to provide us in relation to the Mexico City earthquake of September 1985.

Elena Poniatowska is not a disinterested vehicle for the transmission of these authentic voices. The choice of speakers and the absence of testimony from government officials reflect a decidedly anti-government point of view. There is no attempt to be representative of all sectors of Mexican society. This is a change from *Masacre in Mexico*, Poniatowska's book about the 1968 student massacre, in which Poniatowska chose to balance the voices of students with those of newspaper reporters, police officers, and government officials. Explanations and excuses are offered and represented in the account.

There are no excuses nor explanations offered for the failure of the government in *Nothing, Nobody*. Though geology can be blamed for the quake, only the government is to blame for the loss of life. This is the message Poniatowska presents. Only the government can be blamed for treating the people of Mexico, especially the poor of Mexico City, as if they are nothing, nobody. Only the government can be blamed for corruption, for failing to enforce adequate building codes, for failing to listen to and act upon reports of poor construction, for not planning for such an expected natural disaster, for not responding when it occurred, for telling the world no

help was needed, and on and on and on. Only the government, according to Poniatowska, is responsible for the fact that, both before as well as after the quake, the poor of Mexico City are trapped alive with no machinery to save them.

In marked contrast to her treatment of the government response, Poniatowska celebrates the response of the people of Mexico. The people of Mexico were not powerless, "no organization that I know of to date did more than the people themselves" (46). The failure of the government to help was no surprise to the people of Mexico – there was no disaster plan, outside help was at first rejected because of pride and fear of foreign intervention, there was no coordination of volunteer efforts, and "the government went so far as to prevent citizen action" (75). Nevertheless, the voices of the Mexico City earthquake tell us that, without second thoughts, the people helped each other. There was unity of effort, "there was practically no one who didn't do something" (61).

The people of Mexico are the heroes of Poniatowska's book, especially the poor of Mexico City, not just because of their response to the earthquake, but because of their heroic daily struggle to survive. Though the earthquake raised consciousness about their social problems, "Mexico's social problems go way beyond the earthquake" (85). The question the reader is left with is, will the people of Mexico continue to act heroically, keeping their faith in themselves and their ability to survive against great odds, or will they be like the mother, "who lost faith and suffocated her daughter three days before she was rescued alive" (310).

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