

## Representation and its Discontents

*La noche de Tlatelolco: Testimonios de historia oral* (1971)  
Translated into English as *Massacre in Mexico* (1975)

The President is not only the highest political authority: he is the incarnation of all of Mexican history. Power itself in the form of a magic substance passed on from generation to generation in unbroken succession, from the first Tlatoani down through the Spanish viceroys to each president as he takes office. Unlike the Hispanic and Latin American pattern of dictatorship by *caudillos* [military dictators], Mexican authoritarianism is legalistic, and the roots of this legalism are religious in nature. This is the real explanation of the terrible violence visited upon the students. The military attack on them was not only a political act; it also assumed the quasi-religious form of chastisement from on high. The morality of a wrathful God the Father Almighty. This attitude has profound historical roots; its origins lie in the country's Aztec and colonial past.

Octavio Paz, "Introduction" to *Massacre in Mexico*

Elena Poniatowska's *Massacre in Mexico* is not an interpretation of these events. It is something that far surpasses a theory or a hypothesis: an extraordinary piece of reporting, or, as she calls it, a "collage" of "voices bearing historical witness." A historical chronicle—but one that shows us history before it has congealed and before the spoken word has become a written text.

Octavio Paz, "Introduction" to *Massacre in Mexico*

If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony.

Elie Wiesel, "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration"

Everybody repeated the same experience and I told myself: "If I repeat one hundred times *at 5:30 in the afternoon . . . etc.*, the effect will be lost." I decided to choose the most striking or the most significant part of each testimony. That is why I say that my book is a sort of collage or montage, or what Americans would call *editing*. All are oral histories. People speaking.

Elena Poniatowska, Interview with the magazine *7 Días* (cited in Schuessler)

7 *Días*: Have the testimonies been modified?

*Poniatowska*: Many of them have, because they were long and repetitive. Some were even bizarre. People, when relating the events, did not have an accurate idea of the time or the hour or of distances.

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They also relate events that have never been verified, such as that in Tlatelolco the bodies were cremated, that there were bodies in the trash bins. This I do not believe. The Tlatelolco massacre was completely out of proportion. It was absurd. It is absurdity itself. Besides it is still not known what really happened.

Interview with the magazine 7 *Días* (cited in Schuessler)

From the account of a journalist—José Antonio del Campo, of the newspaper *El Día*—who spoke to me for two hours, the equivalent of twenty pages of testimony, I chose only one phrase: “They are corpses, sir . . .” This was spoken to him by a corporal, and it seemed to me more eloquent than forty pages describing the horrors.

Elena Poniatowska, Interview with the magazine 7 *Días* (cited in Schuessler)

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