2014

Exploring Disaster Experiences through Elena Poniatowska's Nada, nadie: Las voces del temblor

Dawn Slack
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

Follow this and additional works at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo

Part of the Latin American Languages and Societies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol17/iss1/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Latino Research at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Diálogo by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact wsulliv6@depaul.edu, c.mcclure@depaul.edu.
Exploring Disaster Experiences through Elena Poniatowska's *Nada, nadie: Las voces del temblor*

**Dawn Slack**
*Kutztown University of Pennsylvania*

**Abstract:** A study of Elena Poniatowska’s *Nada, nadie: Las voces del temblor*, based on the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, through recent critical theories on trauma and human experience in catastrophic events. This article explores the narrative context of personal and collective response to disasters as well as pedagogical approaches to disaster narration.

**Key Terms:** Elena Poniatowska, disaster narration, urban chronicles, hybrid narratives, literary journalism, trauma pedagogy, liminality

Disasters, man-made or natural, are usually unpredictable yet always destabilizing events. Throughout its history, Mexico has seen both of these kinds of extraordinary events, from the initial conquest of indigenous nations and ensuing waves of disease plagues to the bloody wars of independence and the Mexican Revolution a century later. In the contemporary era, the government massacre of student protestors in Tlatelolco in 1968, the fatal PEMEX refinery explosions of 1992, 2012, and 2013, as well as hurricanes and earthquakes have extorted human and financial tolls. But, the extraordinary earthquake on September 19, 1985 is still one of the most tragic disasters experienced by Mexicans, in that while caused by nature, its terrible casualties were compounded by acts of inhumanity. Although the epicenter was in the Pacific Ocean, 220 miles east of the nation’s capital, the 8.1 Richter Magnitude Scale tremors devastated Mexico City, destroying at least 400 buildings and damaging an estimated 3,000 more. There were 10,000 confirmed deaths and countless people left injured and homeless. This information does not capture the full toll of the disaster: “The significance of the disaster is the social context of the episode, not the mechanical details.” (Coates and Morrison, 138)

A natural disaster undermines everything: predictability and orderliness are disrupted, if not destroyed. In addition to lives lost, structures, systems, and relationships hang in the balance as societies in distress need to rely on government and social systems; “The extraordinary event evokes responses of shock, disbelief, incredulity […] and] a crisis of meaning.” (Browne and Neal, Introduction 5)

Complex questions address teaching disaster narrations such as 1) When complex disasters shake us to our very core, how can the depth and breadth of the experience possibly be captured through narration? 2) Should the aftermath even be narrated? 3) If catastrophe is to be represented, how can such experiences be taught? This article explores representational and ethical issues related to the teaching of *Nada, nadie: Las voces del temblor* by Elena Poniatowska, the first text published about the 1985 Mexican earthquake’s aftermath, when the emotional aftershock and physical evidence were still an open wound in the Mexican psyche.

**DISASTER NARRATION AS TEXT AND IMAGE**

The first issue is whether or not disasters can even be narrated because the chaotic nature of catastrophes complicates the discursive process. Although in reference to the 9/11 disaster in the U.S., the following scenario is equally applicable to the Mexico City earthquake: “In the days after the attack, there was a word-glut. Everyone had to write and to say what they felt … Words are surviving shards that will be used to reconstruct this time.” (Brill, 54)

Poniatowska uses words, verbal shards comparable figuratively to the rubble of the buildings, to create a hybrid text as narrative focalization is distributed among the *nadas* and the *nadies*, the diverse and distinct voices, sources, and images of the text: “‘Ya no tengo a nadie.’ ‘Yo ya no soy nadie.’ ‘Yo ya no soy.'” (Poniatowska, 51–52)

By its very own nature, a disaster is the negation of the norm, it is “a liminal time during which ordinary distinctions make no sense” (Gray, 226); to narrate such an extraordinary event demands a liminal genre, such as the non-canonical narrative hybrid, *Nada, nadie*. To express such a destructive and emotional event with words, tone, texture, and narrative form is not an easy task: There is no single voice that can encapsulate the terror and chaos of the earthquake or the losses and fragmentation that
continued for weeks. Poniatowska’s unique approach included weaving journalistic question/answer interviews, short transcripts from radio and television broadcasts, and reprints from numerous newspapers. In other textual instances, Poniatowska enlists graphic/dramatic headlines from different newspapers:

¡OH DIOS!, dice Ovaciones.
TRAGEDIA, Últimas Noticias, primera edición.
CATASTRÓFICO, El Sol de México.
TERREMOTO, El Gráfico.
FUE ESPANTOSO, Novedades.
MILES DE MUERTOS, Últimas Noticias, segunda edición.

(Poniatowska, 20; use of capitalization and format are Poniatowska’s)

Some narrative components insert basic information to address people’s urgent needs, including guidelines for proper hygiene from the Red Cross or information about food, water, and shelter. Poniatowska integrates narrative segments containing data with a scientific focus, such as explanations of the causes of earthquakes, definitions of plate tectonics along fault lines, damage estimates, and excerpts from government reports. Juxtaposing the objective nature of fact-driven information, the Mexican author textualizes emotional poetic expressions composed by survivors in an eclectic blending of the tangible, evocative, and personal affects.

Emotional and affective response is evoked at the beginning of Nada, nadie when Poniatowska shares a recounting of her own personal earthquake experience. Her morning musings on the enormity of Mexico City, the beauty of her hotel in the Zona Rosa, and the snarled traffic jams are interrupted by the initial mini-movements at 7:19:30, and then by the larger tremors in the minutes that follow, finally ending at 7:23. As the earth undulates underneath her, she maps an emotional wave: disorientation (“Por un momento, todavía sin despertar bien, me pregunto quién entró”), recognition (“Caramba, ‘por supuesto, es un temblor”), confusion (“Trepidaciones, choques ensordecedores, se onda el suelo”), numbness (“No pienso en nada”), serenity (“La calma vuelve”), the innate impulse to join other survivors on the street (“Un inmenso alivio me invade”), and ultimately, the incomprehensibility and fear associated with post-traumatic shock:

“Fue hasta ese momento cuando de verdad tuve miedo.” (Poniatowska, 12-14) In the immediate aftermath of disasters “[f]eelings of meaninglessness reach their highest level of intensity under conditions when everyday life is seriously disrupted.” (Browne and Neal, Introduction, 5)

Although many other post-quake stories are embodied in the text, the descriptive density evoked through written discourse does not capture the disaster’s magnitude. Nada, nadie includes three four-page sections of black and white photographs, thirty images with brief captions and commentaries. The combination of these two artistic genres sets in motion an “ongoing dialectic of word and image” (Mays, 9); each photograph in Nada, nadie contributes its own voice/image and demands to be heard, seen, and ultimately understood. Some photographs display piles of rubble with the hint of a body buried underneath; others reflect the resilience of the human spirit as rescue workers, exhausted and covered with dust, search for survivors. The focus on the human tragedy in these images and written discourse connects deeply with the reader, fulfilling the “penetrative” nature of photographs (Kozloff, 21); these images evocatively speak to the viewer: “I have a ghost for you; a photograph might whisper. One look … the intruder is already inside the house.” (Parry, xiii; ellipsis is Parry’s)

RATIONALE FOR NARRATING DISASTER

In Nada, nadie, the written word is cemented by interfacing photographic images, and both conform a current context of the disaster narration for the reader, illustrating not just Mays’ aforementioned word/image dialectic, but also Fisher’s argument about the level of social responsibility and civic engagement of documentary photography to awaken “an interrogative relation to the present.” (Fisher, 162) Verbal recollections remind the readers that “memory itself is conceived as a collection of images.” (Gualtieri, 32) Visual disaster not only can be narrated, but it must be narrated because by its nature “literature … is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing.” (Caruth, 3) The writing of disaster involves “not instability (the opposite of fixity) so much as disarray, confusion [and chaos]” (Blanchot, 7), resulting in investigation and discovery.

Verbal and graphic post-disaster narration may indeed be emotionally difficult for the reader since “silence cannot be kept—it demands language.” (Blanchot, 29) Caruth refers to this process as “bearing witness” (5)
while Browne and Neal suggest that “with the conditions of crisis, individuals are unable to remain indifferent and apathetic.” (Introduction, 2) The need to narrate disaster reflects the sense of purpose and community identity created in the post-disaster scenario, which Poniatowska depicts with painstaking detail: nothing, positive or negative, is left out. This narrative layering is vital because “triumphs and tragedies surface with the occurrence of extraordinary events. Both spectacular accomplishments and shocking disasters extend our awareness of the prospects and the limitations of the human condition.” (Browne and Neal, Introduction, 1)

In Nada, nadie, poignant triumphs are discovered by learning about everyday people becoming heroes during extraordinary circumstances: “No, yo no soy valiente, cuando me salvé, mi primera idea fue marcharme a mi tierra, ver a los niños … pero dije 'Soy muy cobarde si no rescato yo a esa gente’” (Poniatowska, 39) Although the speaker does not perceive himself as a valiant figure, the reader perceives him as a hero, exemplifying the unifying nature of disasters as individuals overcome the fear of unknown circumstances and lack of experience to help others. (Zykofsky Anhalt, 34) Narrative discoveries also reveal acts of selfish indifference and limitations of the human condition. Many voices in Nada, nadie are pointedly critical against the government’s stubborn pride: “México rechaza la ayuda exterior.” (Poniatowska, 24) They skewer the State’s priorities: “Con el Mundial que viene, es probable que pongan unos árboles … pero nada de hospital” (Poniatowska, 33) and directly accuse those who did not act with a humanitarian feeling: “¿Por qué los miembros del ejército llegaron con metralletas en vez de picos y palas?” (Poniatowska, 82)

The overwhelming tone of the text also includes a positive and proactive call for action, which reaffirms that while extraordinary events expose vulnerabilities, there is a desire for normalcy. (Browne and Neal, Introduction, 9) This response is achieved through a community-focused strength and unity—coping mechanisms responding to the chaotic present. For many citizens, there really was no decision about helping; it was what needed to be done in that moment. Nada, nadie displays narrative discoveries from the chaos that serve as rationale for the disaster narration, also providing instances of models of survival for the reader.

**RATIONALE FOR TEACHING DISASTER NARRATION**

Disaster narration fulfills the responsibility to discover the survivors’ and victims’ voices with the purpose of understanding the meaning of recovery, healing, and future outcomes, interplaying “the event, the media, and the viewing audience” (Browne and Neal, Introduction, 2) and, more importantly, providing the fundamental rationale for teaching disaster narration. Although in reference to photographic images, Kozloff’s comment is equally applicable to the hybrid narration in Nada, nadie: “The palpable distance in space and time which separates viewers from subjects, immobilized in the frame, reminds us of the obstacles to our connection, and, therefore, the reality around us. To talk about this distance, observantly, is to stretch the mind.” (318) The reader of disaster narration is distanced from the occurrence, but the teaching of disaster narration facilitates pedagogical methods to overcome the distance/obstacle/disaster, fulfilling the purposeful meaning of teaching and learning to stretch the mind.

Discussing a post-disaster scenario can be problematic because “traumatic experience involves a paradox, that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it.” (Caruth, 91) Browne and Neal describe this as the individual’s inability to capture the event’s meaning within the scale of “the larger society.” (Introduction, 5) Therefore, it is necessary to teach and learn how to deal with disasters as engaged agents in the new post-trauma scenario, starting with the individual, but encompassing an inclusive perspective of the larger community: “It [is] clear that we need to give students a deeper understanding of the meaning and implications of trauma.” (Spratt, 1)

Perceiving this larger community context and moving beyond the trauma, defined by Seligman as the “post-traumatic growth” (Enayati, 2) scenario, is not enough: unity, perception, and learning only take place as we face the horrors of the immediate disaster which “can be transformed into the imperative of a speaking that awakens others.” (Caruth, 108) Moving beyond an extraordinary event through the awakening of one’s own mind, as well as that of others, supports a pedagogic framework fundamental to teaching and involves interpretive strategies that can be taught through disaster narration.
APPROACHES TO TEACHING DISASTER NARRATION

Traumatic occurrences, and the texts that narrate them, cause a “disassociation of our attention to events from our rhetorical capacity to respond to those events.” (Marback, 55) Reconnecting is the basis for teaching and there are many different, yet equally acceptable, pedagogical approaches to discuss disaster narration that include individual/group/whole class oral discussion, formal written analyses, informal blogging, debates, artistic retelling and interpretation, Pinterest postings, filming, academic research, tweeting, photographic explorations, creative writing, and/or alternative investigation. Whichever methodology is used to foment the post-disaster growth scenario, it should be solidly grounded in a blending of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language’s common core components: real world skills, literacy, practicality, and standards (communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities). These common core components should be coupled with the framework of Shulman’s table of learning, including engagement and motivation; knowledge and understanding; performance and action; reflection and critique; judgment and design; and commitment and identity.

One of the most effective techniques to discuss disaster narration as discourse analysis includes the use of descriptive images, the incorporation of irony versus black humor, the immediacy and intimacy of the “yo” narration, the use of all senses, and representational narrative techniques in relation to the readers. The previously referenced shared narrative could be approached as “communication across traumatic and cultural boundaries” according to Caruth. (49) Whether reflecting a different narrator or in relation to a switch in narrative directionality, these abrupt narrative changes, although confusing for the reader, ultimately reinforce the chaotic and incrementally disturbing nature of the disaster itself: “A medida que avanza el día se acumulan los desastres. Las consecuencias son inimaginables.” (Poniatowska, 24) The words and images fall upon the reader, metonymically mimicking the way bricks and mortar fell upon the victims, which illustrates in Nada, nadie that there is a “fragmentary nature of the writing of disaster” and that such fragments represent “unfinished separations.” (Blanchot, x, 58) However, this forceful means of conveying disaster also allows connectivity between the subjects of the text and the reader, thus uniting Blanchot’s concept of separations, creating a reading response of what Dine perceives as a sense of unity that “eases the uncertainty, the amorphous fear of being alone, out of control.” (84) Fulfilling multiple ACTFL and Shulman objectives, this defragmentation and sense of solidarity are meaningful outcomes of teaching/learning these narratives.

The analysis of a non-canonical genre and its implications in a male-dominated literary landscape is also another alternative pedagogical approach. Poniatowska is a respected and valued literary figure described as “outside of Paz and Fuentes, […] the most important writer in Mexico today.” (Martin, 205) Sometimes she is situated as marginal in relation to the male literati, not just because of her gender, but also because of her roots in journalism, considered to be “less than” literature. Her focus on the marginalized sectors of society and her creation of hybrid texts are also factors to consider in relation to the canon. Considering critics accepting of canonical changes such as Dimock, who welcome fluidity, Owen, who highlights the canon’s territorial and political nature, and Pratt, who focuses on the relationship between the canon, value systems, and hegemonic power, might be stimulating. Approaching Nada, nadie in relation to various debates such as genre and the canon, liminality and hegemony is valid, particularly as it examines the text within a larger socio-cultural context, fulfilling Goggin and Goggin’s empirical, historical, and culturally critical reflections. (42)

While there are multiple disaster narrative curricular topics that can be incorporated into the classroom with a variety of pedagogical approaches, the importance of group or peer work dealing with disaster narrations is essential: “It is through interpersonal communication in small groups that the symbols of mass society take on meaning for personal thought and action.” (Brown and Neal, Introduction, 8) This type of focus begins at the individual level involving the personal reaction to the retelling of the disaster event, and then incorporates a collective component, including sharing and comparing peers’ reactions. Ultimately, the text is taught on a more international angle, incorporating discussion and analysis of the victims’ and survivors’ reactions in relation to this catastrophic event. This progression meshes with Payne’s insistence that “we need to infuse the term ‘national’ with a sense of the inter- or even trans-national” to these types of extraordinary events. (12, use of italics is Payne’s) Students are challenged to examine critically
their reactions and to explore how responses are affected by their own individual upbringing and experiences, and by their national socio-cultural contexts. They can be guided to consider those same factors in relation to other audiences, beginning with their peer group or class and eventually broadening their perspective to include voices of the individuals narrating the disaster. This individual-to-community approach leads students to be engaged in multiple ACTFL and learning table goals. Investigating responses and the background influencing them is studying what Boulding terms “learned” responses (49), a process that involves important teaching/learning strategies dealing with disaster narration.

Regardless of the course, students can contribute with questions that disaster narration raises and attempt to answer them. Facilitating a peer-directed approach is recommended because it empowers students as agents of their own learning process, leading to a higher level of engagement and to a more successful completion of learning objectives. Considering Doll and Marrow’s suggestions, it is important to delve into the questions raised through “the depictions of … disasters and extraordinary events: Who was reporting the story? Whose voices were being heard? Whose perspectives shaped the public’s reaction to the event? And, how does that influence our interpretations of the disaster now?” (206) It is imperative and equally important to consider analyzing 1) who was not reporting, 2) what was not reported, and 3) who was not heard.

Additional questions to be considered embedded in Nada, nadie are reflective of the immediate need for connecting: “¿Dónde está Jorge? ¿No has visto a Patricia y a Roberto? No hay respuesta” (Poniatowska, 35), while others criticize the society that worsened the natural disaster by exposing corruption: substandard construction materials and falsified permits, looting and abuse by the authorities, a government focused on the glitz of hosting the World Cup, and pre- and post-earthquake horrors in the garment district: “Vieron cómo se llevaba la maquinaria antes de preocuparse por las 600 compañeras sepultadas.” (Poniatowska, 145) Some questions in the chronicle facilitate metanarrative reflections and investigate the process and impact of journalism and writing. Poniatowska reflects on her own work:

> Finalmente lo que me pregunto sobre la escritura y el temblor no concierne a las crónicas escritas en caliente sino a algo más reflexionado. ¿Dejarían que su escritura fuera sacudida también? ¿Es posible dejar que las frases estallen y estallen las imágenes y quien las escribe también? (310)

If an experienced and published author questions her own writing process, the student can be called upon to reflect about his/her own writing related to the disaster narration and can be, to use Blanchot’s terminology, “transgressive” and grounded in the “respect for thought, rejection of pathos.” (Blanchot, 139)

**CAUTIONS FOR TEACHING DISASTER NARRATION**

After a disaster, the survivor has changed forever:

> My daily life goes on as it did before, my country was attacked by hate and evil. I get up in the morning, prepare breakfast for my husband, sip coffee while I read the paper, sit down at my desk and write … But I think differently since September 11. (Carlson, 66)

Change of perspective happens with the individual who reads/learns disaster narration; the reader/learner acquires a unique understanding from survivors and as such will think differently. Engaging with Nada, nadie: Las voces del temblor is a sensory and cognitive process parallel to the earthquake. The reader/learner, in trying to make sense of the multiple voices, images, and often tumultuously contradictory information, confronts the chaos of the earthquake, drawn into its drama. The reader perceives and internalizes its fundamental message of transformation, hope, and strength, which is a process with profound educational ramifications.

Disaster narration is not like any other discourse, and the most vital component of teaching this narrative must be the safety of the student. Teaching disaster narration involves “writing about trauma,” defined as working with discourses from or about those who experienced the disaster. (Goggin and Goggin, 33-35) Within the classroom setting, connecting with a disaster-related experience can also potentially trigger “writing trauma”
CONCLUSIONS

For the teacher and student engaged with disaster narration there is a telling and retelling, a living and a reliving, a traumatic connection, and ultimately catharsis. Elena Poniatowska is renowned for her ability to express the intricacies of life in Mexico with a critical eye and profound words which do not shy away from difficult topics. Her goal is not to incite, but rather to expose that which is at the root of the injury so that it can be exorcised and ultimately healed and/or politicized. Poniatowska offers to the readers a narrative hybrid allowing multiple voices to tell individual stories within a collective post-disaster setting. The Mexican earthquake demands to be written, read, taught, learned, and reinterpreted because even though the earthquake happened in 1985, its aftershocks still reach us today and can help us understand other disasters like extraordinary events in the U.S. (the Columbine school shooting, 1999; the attacks on September 11, 2001; and the East Coast Hurricane Sandy, 2012) and in the world (the Norwegian administrative center bombing and massacre of youth, 2011; and the Japanese Kashiwazaki-Kariwa Nuclear Power Plant catastrophe, 2011).

López-Lozano observes that “within the context of post-apocalyptic visions, it is important to note that the most populated city in history [Mexico City] continues to survive and indeed thrive—for every disaster there is also hope and faith as a new form of citizenry emerges from the rubble.” (236) In Nada, nadie, Poniatowska creates a space in which this citizenry expresses itself and breaks the silence in the earthquake’s aftermath. Engaging with this disaster narration, students also become connected and informed citizens. The teacher and student listen to the narrative voices, adding their own to create a “dialogue, transcending the silence and isolation that the urban experience of modernity promotes.” (López-Lozano, 228)

Elena Poniatowska closes Nada, nadie: Las voces del temblor with a profound question: “Si el temblor marcó tanto a los mexicanos, si invadió tanto sus vidas, sus recuerdos, sus mentes, si los sacudió tanto y si a cada rato de una forma u otra resurge, ¿cual será la marca que dejó?” (310) Her query is an invitation for both personal and collective responses engaging Rocha Nakazawa’s post-disaster philosophy that “we can't change the world by ourselves, but we can and must change ourselves to be in the world” (155)—a transformative change which happens in the classroom in the process of teaching and learning disaster narration.
WORKS CITED
—. Introduction, 1-10.
Brill, Alida. “From the Shards.” Agosín and Craige, 53-60.
—. Epilogue. In Browne and Neal, 257-264.
—. Introduction. In Browne and Neal, 1-19.
Rocha Nakazawa, Laura. “Is This the Road to Peace?” Agosín and Craige, 151-156.

Photo by Graciela Iturbide, Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, Mexico, 1974