FOREWORD

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And Let the Earth Tremble at Its Centers belongs to a genre with a long history in Mexican letters: the literary portrait of Mexico City. The practice began in the early sixteenth century, when the Spanish chroniclers of the Mexican conquest penned lavish descriptions of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, destroyed in 1521 by a victorious Hernán Cortés. Among the ruins—toppled temples and paved canals—the Spaniards edified a new city, built from the volcanic stone known as *tezontle* that can still be seen lining the façades of the Cathedral and other grand buildings. The Spanish city was immortalized by the poet Bernardo de Balbuena, who in 1604 devoted his epic *La grandeza mexicana* [*Mexico's Grandeur*] to extolling the rich palaces and vibrant life of the first metropolis on American soil.

Literary portraits of the city blossomed after Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821. The nineteenth century saw the emergence of a new figure, the "chronicler of Mexico city," a writer who made it his mission to depict every aspect of life in the capital: the experience of walking through its streets; the flavors of its dishes;

the endless changes and metamorphoses undergone by what began as a city of canals, morphed into an elegant grid of stone palaces, and finally recast itself as a metropolis of pavement and high-rises. The first chronicler of Mexico City was Artemio de Valle Arizpe, a turn-of-the-last-century dandy who immortalized the legends and urban tales of a sleepy town that had barely reached a population of about 300,000 by 1910. The city—like the entire country—was shaken by the Revolution of 1910, but when peace was restored in 1920, a new chronicler arrived on stage: Salvador Novo, an irreverent young poet who fashioned himself as a cross between Oscar Wilde and André Gide.

An ambitious young man if there ever was one, Novo decided to rewrite Balbuena's epic ode to Mexico City, bringing it up-to-date so it could account for the numerous changes brought by the twentieth century: shiny Packards, roaring Chevrolets, and elegant Cadillacs; wide boulevards modeled after Parisian allées; art-nouveau apartment buildings and art-deco neighborhoods that were the pride of forward-looking young architects—all of these appear in Novo's 1946 *Nueva grandeza mexicana* [*New Mexican Grandeur*], a chronicle of a modern Mexico City as seen from the seat of a speeding automobile.

The next major chronicler of Mexico City was Carlos Monsiváis, an essayist who began publishing in the 1950s and has devoted his entire career to analyzing the vibrant popular culture that flourished in the capital; from the old-fashioned love songs of Agustín Lara to violent wrestling matches, from the film divas of 1950s melodramas to the macho icons of the Ranchera song, Monsiváis immortalized the most important elements of a world that no writer before him had taken seriously. His urban chronicles were collected in the volumes *Amor perdido* and *Días de guardar* and a selection was translated into English and published as *Mexican Postcards*.

As Gonzalo Celorio has written in his essay "México: Ciudad de papel" ["Mexico: City of Paper"], an English translation of which can be found in a volume I edited called *The Mexico City Reader*, the most surprising aspect of the rich literary tradition of

chronicles is the fact that the Mexico City that appears in its pages is no longer there. Gone is the lake city of the Aztecs sung about by Nezahualcóyotl; gone is the "City of Palaces" immortalized by Humboldt; gone is the sparkling modern city described by Novo; even Monsiváis's city of cantinas and *lucha libre* now seems like a fading old photograph. The real city, Celorio argues, is always on the move, always reinventing itself, demolishing and reconstructing its buildings according to the latest architectural fashion; but parallel to this city of brick and mortar there is another Mexico City, a "city of paper" that lives on in the literature that has been devoted to it since the sixteenth century. "The lost city," writes Celorio in his essay, can only "be retrieved by the literature that builds it day by day, restores it, reveals it, ministers to it, and defies it" (64).

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Like Carlos Fuentes's classic *La región más transparente* [*Where the Air is Clear*, 1959], Celorio's *And Let the Earth Tremble at Its Centers* is a novel inspired by the long tradition of chronicles about Mexico City. But if Fuentes's novel aspires to represent the capital in its entirety—rich and poor, ancient and modern, the center and its peripheries, the autochthonous and the foreign—Celorio's focuses on only one neighborhood: "El Centro," the city's oldest quarter, home of the Cathedral and the National Palace, the main square officially called Plaza de la Constitución but affectionately called El Zócalo by virtually all of its residents. El Centro is graced by the Palace of Fine Arts, the Palace of the Inquisition, the Palace of Correos—grand constructions that once made the capital known as "the city of palaces." But many of these former mansions are now in ruins: they have been divided up into dozens of makeshift apartments in which destitute families squat; their baroque, wrought-iron balconies are now crowded with propane tanks and clothes lines; eighteenth-century stone courtyards are littered with trash; and many of these once aristocratic residences have been turned into motorcycle repair shops, taco restaurants, and, of course, bars and cantinas.

Many writers have lamented the decay of El Centro and its transformation into a neighborhood crowded by street vendors and eclectic repair shops. Historian Guillermo Tovar de Teresa, for instance, published a two-volume account of the destruction of historically significant buildings since the nineteenth century. The subtitle of his *City of Palaces* is "chronicle of a lost heritage," and the author spends every page of his study lamenting the demolition of a baroque convent, the transformation of a colonial cloister into a department store, the piercing of new avenues through the winding alleys. Dazzled by the elegance and glory of the baroque city, Tovar de Teresa can only see today's Mexico City as tragic ruin, a faint shadow of its former self.

And Let the Earth Tremble at Its Centers's portrayal of El Centro could not be more different from Tovar de Teresa's. Celorio, too, describes convents turned into shops and churches half-demolished to enlarge inner-city expressways. But rather than lamenting the loss of a glorious past, Celorio celebrates the vibrant urban life that continues to thrive in the center of Mexico City; its palaces might be in shambles and its baroque splendor might have faded, but its streets teem with vendors peddling every kind of imaginable object: from magic powders to cure evil eye to DVD players; from juicy mangos sprinkled with chili powder to the latest computer software; from t-shirts and pantsuits to wedding gowns. Amid the labyrinth of vendors and their stands, thousands of people from every imaginable social class rub shoulders: bureaucrats on their lunch break; housewives in search of the best deals; dazed visitors from the provinces; dancers clad in pseudo-Aztec attire for the amusement of American and European tourists. All one has to do is stand for a few minutes in any corner to witness the impromptu apparition of a veritable human circus.

It is this lively Mexico City—not the city of palaces but a city of people—that Celorio celebrates in *And Let the Earth Tremble at Its Centers*. The novel's protagonist, Juan Manuel Barrientos, is an erudite literature professor who also has a taste for popular culture—a happy combination of interests that makes him the perfect guide to

El Centro's nooks and crannies. As he wanders through San Juan de Letrán, Tacuba, or the alleys behind La Merced, Juan Manuel gives his readers an insider's tour of downtown Mexico City. He points out the columns of Aztec temples reused in the construction of the Cathedral; he discovers a Colonial cloister hidden behind the pink façade of an Evangelical church; he recalls the poetic names that used to grace an avenue that now bears the prosaic name of Eje Central [Central Expressway]. As he walks by these churches, convents, and palaces, Juan Manuel recalls their presence in Colonial Mexican literature: the glorious verses of Bernardo de Balbuena; the allegorical arches built on those very streets to welcome the new viceroy and immortalized by Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora.

But Juan Manuel is not only a well-read scholar; he is also a connoisseur of the city's bars and cantinas, and his itinerary includes a tour of the neighborhood's most famous watering holes: Bar La Ópera, a once fancy establishment steps away from the Palace of Fine Arts and furnished with red velvet banquettes (to amuse tourists, waiters point to a bullet hole on the ceiling and recount the story of how, during the Revolution, Pancho Villa came for a drink and when the bill came he took out his gun and began shooting away); the legendary El Nivel, which has since closed; and many others featuring exotic or even surrealist names: La Puerta del Sol, named after one of Madrid's landmarks; Las Sirenas, which in Spanish can mean both Sirens and Mermaids (who would ever think of placing mermaids in a place with so little water and so much cement?).

One of Juan Manuel's favorite pastimes is to take his students on a tour of El Centro—an itinerary that includes palaces as well as cantinas. The professor is in his fifties; his students are in their twenties. As the novel makes clear, for most of Mexico City's younger residents—those born after 1960—El Centro is as unknown and as exotic as a foreign country. Until the 1950s, the National University was located in El Centro and its streets were crowded with students. To be a student in Mexico meant to spend several years in the neighborhood's cafés, bookstores, plazas . . . and bars. But once the University relocated to the vast modernist campus designed

by Mario Pani and his team of architects on the southern edge of the city, El Centro lost its students and young people lost contact with one of the city's most dynamic neighborhoods. Juan Manuel's students were born in the suburbs, and their daily routine involves crisscrossing the city from north to south, from east to west, driving along the expressways built in the 1950s and 1960s and designed to bypass the crowded central neighborhoods.

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The title of the novel, *And Let the Earth Tremble at Its Centers*, is a verse from the Mexican national anthem, composed by Francisco González Bocanegra after Mexico obtained its independence from Spain in 1821. The anthem's lyrics are as bellicose as befits a nation emerging from a prolonged war:

¡Mexicanos! al grito de guerra
El acero aprestad y el bridón
Y retiemble en sus centros la tierra
Al sonoro rugir del cañón.
[…]
Más si osare un extraño enemigo
Profanar con su planta tu suelo,
Piensa, ¡oh Patria querida! que el cielo
Un soldado en cada hijo te dio.

[Mexicans! At the cry of war
Ready your swords and the horses
And may the earth tremble at its centers
At the canon's thundering roar

And if ever a foreign enemy
Dared to trample your land
Think, oh motherland! that heaven
Gave you a soldier in every one of your sons.]

To this day Mexican schools have their students perform an elaborate ritual in honor of the flag every Monday morning: boys and girls sing the anthem, salute the flag, and march around the schoolyard imitating the strut of military marches. Every schoolboy knows the anthem's lyrics by heart, even if the precise meaning of those bellicose utterances escapes him. There is even an old joke about the anthem's arcane language: a young peasant woman has just given birth; when the priest asks her what name she will give the boy she answers he will be called Masiosare. "Masiosare?" retorts the priest, "I've never heard such a name." "It's in the national anthem," the woman chirps back, "You know: the name of the foreign enemy, Masiosare, *un extraño enemigo*."

The novel gets its title from another pun on the national anthem. Wandering through the streets of El Centro, Juan Manuel recalls the verse "*y retiemble en sus centros la tierra*." What would happen, he wonders, if one took the bellicose verse and made "*sus centros*" refer not to the bowels of the earth but to the center of Mexico City? What would it mean for downtown to tremble? (El Centro did indeed tremble during the tragic earthquake of 1985, when dozens of tall buildings tumbled, trapping or killing tens of thousands of its residents). Lost in his associations, Juan Manuel remembers a curious detail about national history that will become important for the novel: in his original version of the anthem, the composer did not write "*centros*" but "*antros*"—a word stemming from the same etymology as the English term "entrails," but which has acquired an altogether different meaning in colloquial Mexican Spanish. An "*antro*" is a dive, a hole in the wall, a sleazy bar. And since Juan Manuel's tour of El Centro is also a tour of its *antros*, the anthem does poetic justice to the reality of downtown Mexico City. The center of the city trembles with people, with vendors, with crowds; and nowhere does it tremble as intensely and as violently as inside its rowdy cantinas. It is precisely the story of that trembling—that minor earthquake of Mexico City's nightlife—that Celorio's novel recounts.

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And Let the Earth Tremble at Its Centers is not only a novel about El Centro; it is also an inventive bildungsroman. Through a series of flashbacks—induced by beer, tequila, and other cocktails imbibed along the way—Juan Manuel evokes important moments of his childhood and adolescence: his first drink, during a weekend visit to his friend's Cuernavaca house; the death of his father; a formative trip to the northern city of Matehuala to stay with his half-brother Ángel; his initiation into the mysteries of sexuality in a dusty motel owned by an ex-pat named Mr. Prince.

Celorio has used a similar narrative technique in his other novels, most recently in *Tres lindas cubanas* [*Three Pretty Cuban Girls*], his most ambitious work to date, recounting the history of his Cuban-Mexican family and his three trips to Havana, before and after the generalized disenchantment with the Cuban Revolution. The novel narrates the story of three generations of his mother's family through a series of flashbacks and childhood memories.

In *And Let the Earth Tremble at Its Centers*, Juan Manuel's memories point to the evolution of Mexico City from the 1950s until the present. During his boyhood years, the city still had the atmosphere of a provincial town: its streets were lined with trees, a handful of American automobiles cruised down its boulevards, and the air was still clear. In the decades that followed, the population exploded, the city received a massive influx of migrants from the countryside, and gradually cement and smog smothered its streets. The novel opens in a chaotic Mexico City, an eternally congested megalopolis that forces Juan Manuel to spend time in his car, traversing the city from south to north to get from the university to El Centro.

Along with the population and the cityscape, Mexico City's famous nightlife underwent a radical transformation from the 1950s to the present. Juan Manuel recalls how as a little boy he used to walk by La Fuente, the famous cabaret where the legendary diva Ana Bertha Lepe performed risqué shows wearing—as

the ads proclaimed—"10 ounces of clothes." The 1950s were the glory days of the cabaret—that Mexican institution immortalized by Ninón Sevilla in the film *Aventurera*. In these establishments, men could pay to dance with one of the many women working the floor: one simply had to buy a *ficha*, a token, for the privilege of sharing a song with the pretty *fichera*, as these dancing women were known. The interactions between these mostly married men and *ficheras* were governed by an unspoken code of honor and civility. Gentlemen paid for the privilege of dancing, talking, perhaps holding hands, but no more. . . . The *fichera* was a lady and she had to be treated as such.

During the 1960s and the 1970s the sexual revolution brought profound changes to Mexico City's nightlife: the first gay bar opened in a discrete basement in Zona Rosa; the first American-style discos appeared in the city; and rock music, sung in Spanish, made the city's entrails tremble. The 1980s brought karaoke bars and other foreign imports. But it was the 1990s that brought the most radical transformation to the capital's nightlife.

During most of the seventy years that the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) ruled Mexico, the government kept tight controls on the city's nightlife. Health inspectors roamed bars and cabarets, and would shutter an establishment in no time if they considered the unspoken code of decency had been broken. But these rules were liberalized in the 1990s during the presidency of Carlos Salinas; after the signature of the North American Free Trade Agreement, nightlife got wilder. It was then that the famous "table dance" bars began sprouting like mushrooms throughout the city. No more honor code, no more quaint notions of chivalry or respect; these new places advertised, quite openly, sex for sale.

The last bar Juan Manuel visits during his *noche de ronda* is one of these tables, as the establishments are affectionately known in Mexico City. Readers witness the shock felt by this old-fashioned scholar, used to cantinas and cabarets, upon entering the table of iniquity. As in the old days, there are still tokens, but it is no longer possible to dance with a partner; instead, a topless woman wearing

a G-string will come to the table and dance on the paying gentleman. "You can touch any part of her, except the genitals. And if you purchase three tickets, you can go with her to a private room, where she'll dance three songs, just for you, but completely naked this time."

The rise of tables in Mexico City dealt the deathblow to the last remaining cabarets. Presented with the choice of either dancing with or being danced on, male patrons opted for the latter. In those same years, the capital was shaken again by an unprecedented crime wave. The Salinas boom years came to an abrupt end in 1995, when one of the most severe economic crises in the history of the country plunged Mexico City into an abyss; the peso tumbled, interest rates soared, and millions of middle-class Mexicans lost their jobs, their cars and their homes. There was an explosion of violent crimes: robberies, burglaries, kidnappings, and even murders. Mexico City became one of the most dangerous places on the planet, and going out at night now included the added thrill of anticipating thefts or kidnappings. In the first pages of the novel we see Juan Manuel preparing to leave his house and deciding to leave his credit cards at home . . . just in case he falls victim to an "express kidnapping," a misdeed consisting of driving the hapless victim to a cash machine and holding a gun to his head until he has withdrawn all available funds. We learn that Juan Manuel "didn't know the access codes anyway, which could be fatal in the event of a mugging."

It is no coincidence that Juan Manuel's night out turns sour at the table dancing club—and not at any of the dozen or so traditional cantinas he visits before. The rise of tables was part of the gangsterization of Mexico City—and it is inside this seedy establishment that a drunk Juan Manuel is robbed of all his belongings by a gang of thugs sporting police uniforms.

In the end, the death of Juan Manuel represents the death of a period in the history of Mexico City—a time when it was safe to walk the streets of El Centro, to hop from one cantina to another and visit one or two cabarets along the way. The city that Juan Man-

uel loved to share with his students is rapidly turning into another "city of paper," yet another one of the many aspects of city life that have ceased to exist, except in the pages of its novelists, poets, and chroniclers.

El Nivel is now closed. How long will Las Sirenas, La Puerta del Sol, or La Ópera remain open? But Celorio, unlike Tovar de Teresa, does not lament the ever-changing nature of Mexico City. *And Let the Earth Tremble at Its Centers* is not a nostalgic novel; it is a realist work that faithfully represents the never-ending metamorphoses undergone by the city. At least since 1521, the Mexican capital has never ceased to reinvent itself. It vanished as a city of canals to reemerge as a city of stone buildings; its baroque palaces changed façades in the nineteenth century to adopt the more fashionable neoclassical style; the quaint provincial city of 1900 was reborn as a bustling megalopolis around 1950; and the Mexico City portrayed in Celorio's novel—with its cantinas, its cabarets, its tropical music—has now been replaced by a globalized urban center where hip kids dance to the beats of techno music—sung in English, Spanish, French, or German.

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And Let the Earth Tremble at Its Centers leaves us with an apocalyptic vision of Mexico City as a place in which going out for a drink can turn into a deadly trap. The novel's dark ending reminds the reader of a paradox that Juan Villoro—another avid chronicler of the capital's popular culture—has explored in his essay, "The Metro," which also appears in English in *The Mexico City Reader*. Why, he asks, isn't there a mass exodus from Mexico City? Its inhabitants have made it a sport to lament the many plagues that have descended on the capital: poverty, overcrowding, traffic jams, pollution, violence, corruption. But if things are so bad, why do people stay? Villoro finds the answer to this puzzling question in an opera by Stravinsky. Mexico City's residents, he argues, are like that character in *The Rake's Progress* who falls in love with a bearded

lady at the circus. She might be hideous, overweight, and hairy . . . but love is blind. And the same has happened to Mexico City's residents, who continue to love, despite their frequent complaints, their smog-filled and crime-ridden hometown. *And Let the Earth Tremble at Its Centers* is one more family portrait of this hirsute but lovable urban hag.