

Writing about Crime in Absentia: The Case of Sara Uribe's Antígona González

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the role of absence in Sara Uribe's *Antígona González* through the work's construction of characters, portrayal of violence, and conceptualization of justice. By considering *Antígona González* as a "narconarrative", this study illustrates how the work is innovative vis-à-vis most texts that stem from geographies and communities plagued by narcotraffic. Ultimately, this analysis examines how *Antígona González* engages in a dialogue with "narcoculture" and its glamorization by casting light on the often-ignored themes of absence and disappearance.

Keywords: Mexico, Narcotraffic, Antígona González, Narconarratives, Disappeared.

Este ensayo analiza el papel de la ausencia en *Antígona González* de Sara Uribe, a través de un estudio sobre la construcción de los personajes, la representación de la violencia y la conceptualización de la justicia. Al considerar *Antígona González* como una "narconarrativa", este estudio ilustra el modo en que la obra de Uribe es innovadora con respecto a la mayoría de los textos que provienen de geografías y comunidades plagadas de narcotráfico. Finalmente, este análisis examina cómo *Antígona González* entabla un diálogo con la "narcocultura" y su *glamour*, al arrojar luz sobre la ausencia y la desaparición, temas a menudo ignorados.

Palabras clave: México, Narcotráfico, Antígona González, Narconarrativas, Desaparecidos.

Hay que salvar a los vivos para rescatar a los muertos.

Helena González-Vaquerizo, 2014

Poco a poco, pero de manera ineluctable, no quedó nadie que no hubiera perdido a alguien durante la guerra.

Cristina Rivera Garza, 2013

According to the Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (SESNSP), 34,588 *homicidios dolosos* (first-degree murders) were committed in Mexico during 2019 – on average, more than ninety per day. The figure, as Arturo Angel has noted, has doubled since 2013, when there were 18,106 first-degree murders (Angel, 2020). More broadly, except for a drop in the first half of Enrique Peña Nieto's *sexenio*¹ (2012-2018), first-degree murders have tripled since 2008. Indeed, Felipe Calderón's 2006 War on Drugs has been one of the triggering factors and the exacerbation of violence has continued ever since.

Numbers alone, nevertheless, do not communicate much about the complexity of Mexico's current situation. If on one hand the figures show an astonishingly high number of victims, on the other hand they do not explain the variety of factors that underlie homicidal violence. In fact, numbers are misleading. The 34,588 homicides of the SESNSP report are categorized according only to the weapon used². However, it is common to see these figures used by authoritative news sources as representative of a broader, and vaguer, phenomenon: *la violencia en México* (Nájar, 2020).

In Mexico, the word 'violence' is often used by the media and politicians as an umbrella term. Even though violence can have different interpretations depending on geography, motives, and demographics, the discussions that revolve around it seem to seek a universal solution. The ambiguity that surrounds the debates around violence is amplified when it intersects with another decades-long phenomenon: *el narcotráfico*. 'Narcotraffic' is, per se, a term that oversimplifies a century-long process of cooperation between state authorities and individuals who provide illicit services – or licit services via illegal modalities – in an attempt to consolidate monopolies. In *Mitología del "Narcotraficante" en México*, Luis Astorga explains that this "transformación del

¹ Word used to designate the six-year Mexican presidential term.

² The SESNSP report separates *homicidio doloso* (34,588) from *homicidio culposo* (17,518). Each is divided into the same four categories: *Con arma de fuego*; *Con arma blanca*; *Con otro elemento*; *No especificado* (SESNSP, 2020, p. 2).

lenguaje” has resulted in the “creación de un campo semántico con vocación universalista” (Astorga, 2004, p. 11). As examples, Astorga uses the words *cártel* and *narco*, that come from the economic and the juridical fields, respectively, but that have ended up referring to a larger phenomenon that goes beyond cartels – “una organización de tipo básicamente *económico*” (*ibidem*) – and psychotropic substances (only one of many illegal businesses plaguing Mexico).

This terminological vagueness does not help explain the complex situation that Mexico has been enduring for decades. And indeed, one of the consequences of the simultaneous presence of a variety of conflicts is the increasing number of victims. Unfortunately, another issue arises when the debate on violence addresses the number of casualties. What consistently goes unmentioned is the number of people who have gone missing. The SESNSP report indicates that in 2019 there were 1,619 *secuestros* (abductions). As is the case for murders, terminology and figures raise a few questions. In regard to the former, terms such as *levantones* (Valdez Cárdenas, 2012) and *desapariciones forzadas* (Mastrogiovanni, 2014), for instance, intend to cast light on the scope of this phenomenon and its perpetrators while problematizing the legal categories used by the SESNSP³.

With respect to official numbers regarding abductions, two objections that are pertinent to the main argument of this article need to be raised. Firstly, it is unclear, from the data provided by the SESNSP, how abductions and first-degree murders are connected – namely, how many of the people reported missing were found dead. Secondly, the number of registered abductions is but a portion of the total, as missing people are not always reported to law enforcement corps for reasons spanning safety, corruption, and hopelessness but that also depend on the origin of the abductee. As a matter of fact, as Gabriella Citroni has noted, “Mexico is a country of origin, transit and destination for migrants” (Citroni, 2017, p. 739). To give an example, Citroni has explained that it is even harder to track the disappearance of migrants from Central and South Americans and to communicate with their families (Citroni, 2017, p. 737).

To this point, two things stand out: firstly, figures regarding homicides and abductions have gone up, barring a few exceptions, since the first third of Calderón’s *sexenio*; and secondly, the complexity of violent phenomena is accompanied by a persistent oversimplification and misrepresentation of the matter. For the latter, several scholars have demonstrated that state authorities are primarily responsible. Among them, Oswaldo Zavala has explained that “a mythic notion of narcos [has been] mainly fashioned and disseminated by Mexico’s governing political elites at the federal, state, and local levels” (Zavala,

³ “Secuestro extorsivo, secuestro con calidad de rehén, secuestro para causar daño, secuestro exprés, and otro tipo de secuestros”.

2014, p. 342). Zavala uses the terms “official discourse” (*ibidem*) and “hegemonic official discourse” (*ivi*, p. 347) to refer to the state narrative according to which “the criminal organizations profiting from the drug trade are a threat relegated to the discursive *exteriority* [...] of the power and the reason of the state” (*ivi*, p. 342).

Mexican and international cultural production that has depicted Mexican crime in the past few decades has not been immune to the pervasiveness of this discourse. As Roberto Cruz Arzabal wrote, there has been a multitude of debates on “la función de la literatura en la representación de la violencia por parte del Estado mexicano y su formalización literaria” (Cruz Arzabal, 2019, p. 69). Departing from the rhetorical field, the *discurso del narco* (the discourse about *narco*) has produced its cultural counterpart: *narcocultura* (narco-culture) – a term that has been discussed by Luis Astorga, Gabriela Polit Dueñas, Herman Herlinghaus, and Oswaldo Zavala, among others⁴. In this article, I will refer to narcoculture using various facets of these scholars’ definitions, in particular as a combination of two different perspectives: a practical and a conceptual one. With respect to praxis, paraphrasing Herlinghaus, narcoculture is the result of narcotraffic’s “habits and gestures that exert a fundamental impact on the concept of the everyday” (2013, p. 58). As regards a more conceptual lens, Zavala defines narcoculture as “the cultural imaginary surrounding the drug trade” (2014, p. 341). These two perspectives are blended in my literary analysis.

“Narconarratives” derive from *narcocultura* and are defined as “a dispersed but interrelated corpus of texts, films, music, and conceptual art focusing on the drug trade” (Zavala, 2014, p. 341). In this article, I use narconarratives in line with the definition provided by Zavala but with a minor distinction. Instead of ‘drug trade’ or ‘narcotraffic’, I will employ the term ‘organized crime’. By “organized crime,” I am referring to any illegal activities perpetrated by undefined groups of individuals as opposed to petty crimes. Even if this article discusses matters and situations related mostly to the drug trade, I believe that, in the absence of clear evidence, it is limiting not to include violence as related, for instance, to extractivism and the exploitation of natural resources⁵.

⁴ See Astorga (2004, pp. 23-28), Polit Dueñas (2013, pp. 5, 12-15), Herlinghaus (2013, pp. 53, 58, 91), and Zavala (2014, p. 341).

⁵ As Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo points out, the terms “crimen organizado,” “delincuencia organizada,” “cárteles,” “narcotraficantes,” and “narco” are employed on a daily basis in Mexico almost interchangeably (Escalante Gonzalbo, 2012, pp. 78-79). Here, I use the term “organized crime” borrowing from the social sciences and, in particular, from Federico Varese, who explains that organized crime “aspires to govern a given market [...] [and shares] crucial features with states and insurgent groups” (Varese, 2010, p. 20).

Looking at narconarratives, scholars like Zavala, Cruz Arzabal, Sergio Rodríguez-Blanco, and Federico Mastrogiovanni have agreed that some do not follow the binary-based structure of the official discourse (e.g. good vs. evil, legal vs. illegal, right vs. wrong). Some narratives regarding organized crime, as Cruz Arzabal writes, surpass “valores antagónicos” to push back the “sobrestetización de la violencia” or, in other words, the “visibilidad de la violencia estatal y sus instituciones, el despejo de los cuerpos como parte de esa violencia” (Cruz Arzabal, 2019, pp. 69, 75, 70, respectively). In addition to the extreme polarization of socio-political components, and the graphic character of displayed violence, narconarratives are also characterized by the presence of characters whose individuality is typically emphasized, thus facilitating their categorization within victim/perpetrator labeling.

Although the majority of narconarratives are built following the good vs. evil dichotomy proposed by the official discourse, some of these texts represent “cierto discurso literario [que] se realiza (...) como una oposición al modo tradicional del régimen político – que despersonaliza a las víctimas y simplifica las causas y desarrollo de los sucesos” (Cruz Arzabal, 2015, p. 316). The scope of these “counterhegemonic narratives,” Zavala explains, is to dismantle the mythical aura that nowadays characterizes the drug trade and narcotraffickers in order to reframe the phenomenon within a historical and political context (Zavala, 2014, p. 356; Zavala, 2018, p. 15).

In this article, I will analyze Sara Uribe’s *Antígona González* as an example of a counterhegemonic narrative that presents organized crime in a unique way since it centers on the theme of absence. While some have already studied the multifaceted role of absence in *Antígona González* (Williams, 2017), I argue here that it is especially the absence of three structural components that makes Uribe’s work stand out amidst the extensive and fluid corpus of narconarratives. First and foremost, however, it must be said that *Antígona González* is one of the very few texts that tackles the matter of the disappeared⁶. While many narconarratives use bodies and physical violence as a cornerstone (Zavala, 2014 pp. 342-349), Uribe’s work approaches the organized crime phenomenon from the perspective of bodies and physical violence *in absentia*. Published in 2012, *Antígona González* has already been the object of study by several scholars. For instance, Roberto Cruz Arzabal has analyzed Uribe’s work from the perspectives of the act of writing, the hybrid genre, and the anomalous representation of violence. Rike Bolte has scrutinized the function of the voice as related to the relationship between poetry and violence. Tamara R. Williams has offered an analysis of *Antígona González* in which Mexican society is re-politicized and where the state

⁶ In 2020, Andalusia Knoll published the graphic novel *Vivos se los llevaron*, on the kidnapping of forty-three students in Iguala, Guerrero in 2014.

is the only one responsible for Mexico's current situation. Finally, Luz Elena Zamudio Rodríguez has explained how Uribe's work revitalizes the spectrality that surrounds organized crime in Mexico.

Here, I argue that *Antígona González* is – among the texts that offer a critical recalibration of the organized crime phenomenon – unique for a threefold reason that is bound to the motif of absence. First, *Antígona González* does not present a specific protagonist or a group of well-defined characters. The lack of identifiable (and characterizable) individuals facilitates the de-polarization of the official discourse. Second, Uribe's work avoids any gruesome representations of violence; in fact, it is built on the absence of bodies. Third and last, *Antígona González* rejects, from the beginning, the good vs. evil dichotomy that grounds the official discourse on organized crime together with several fictional and non-fictional representations accordingly.

I aim to demonstrate that *Antígona González* not only stands out for engaging with the disappeared; that is, a major, traumatic consequence of the presence of organized crime that is often ignored. In addition, Uribe's work does so by pivoting its narrative on the multifaceted character of absence, thus revealing that one of the most dramatic aspects of Mexico's current situation is, in fact, all that has gone missing and that therefore often goes untold. As a narconarrative, *Antígona González* emerges from narcoculture production to underscore two features that the glamorization of the *narco* phenomenon systematically ignores: silence and disappearance. In particular with the challenges that the theme presents in the realm of literary production, absence in *Antígona González* – together with its consequences – denounces the popularization of the *narco* and its cultural celebration.

***Antígona* (I) González (we): a nation of protagonists**

The figure of Antigone, protagonist of the eponymous tragedy by Sophocles, has been scrutinized under vastly different lenses. The question that George Steiner poses at the beginning of *Antigone* applies to all scholarship that has studied Sophocles's character: what makes Oedipus's daughter a trans-historical figure whose popularity has not diminished over the centuries? (Steiner, 1984, Preface). Considering the historical and political context of Sophocles's tragedy, Antigone's act of civil disobedience cannot go unnoticed and it has been, in fact, recognized as extraordinary. Judith Butler is one of the scholars whose analysis of Antigone has been among the most revolutionary. However, at the beginning of *Antigone's Claim*, Judith Butler explains having approached *Antigone* like other scholars who came before: "to see if one could make a case for her [Antigone's] exemplary status as a feminine figure who

defies the state through a powerful set of physical and linguistic acts” (Butler, 2000, p. 2). In sum, the point of departure for both scholars coincides with Antigone’s exceptional individuality, even though Steiner and Butler proceed in different directions – enhancing and opposing it, respectively.

Stemming from this assumption, in this section I argue that Uribe’s *Antígona* is innovative with respect both to the Sophoclean figure and to her role as protagonist within narconarratives. *Antígona* differs from Antigone in her social position, her actions, and her mission. First, *Antígona* does not belong to the elite; she is simply “[u]na mujer [que] intenta narrar la historia de la desaparición de su hermano menor” (Uribe, 2016, p. 20). Second, *Antígona* does not disobey a direct order; rather, as Williams has argued, *Antígona* denounces the void left by the Law (Williams, 2017, p. 4). While the Greek heroine contests alone the ruler’s law (hence state law), the actions of Uribe’s character underscore the absence of law itself. Unlike most narconarratives, based on a two-sided conflict, *Antígona González* hinges on abandoned citizens as the sole protagonist. Ultimately, *Antígona* does not embark on a solo mission, unlike her Greek predecessor. Lara Schoorl explains that the presence of a name and a last name, in Uribe’s *Antígona*, suggests the disappearance of an “I” in favor of the creation of a collective voice (Schoorl, 2017).

In a 2017 article that details the genesis of *Antígona González*, Sara Uribe herself explains that the name *Antígona González* is based on real person: a volunteer who worked for the blog and Twitter account *Menos días aquí* in 2011 (Uribe, 2017, p.49). In the same article, Uribe also indicates that while most recent European Antigones are still set in ancient Thebes, “en América se sitúan en los territorios particulares donde se han perdido los cuerpos” (Uribe, 2017, pp. 54-55). The existence of a real *Antígona González* notwithstanding, the name is worthy of attention per se. In 2014, Zamudio Rodríguez talked of the full name *Antígona González* as a “mezcla cultural” that draws together time and space: from Sophocles’s Greece to present-day Mexico (Zamudio Rodríguez, 2014, p. 36). In line with this, Williams has drawn a connection between Mexico’s current situation and the fact that “Latin America has been especially fertile ground for the return of Antigone” (Williams, 2017, p. 3). Finally and more recently, Cruz Arzabal has explained that “[m]ore than offering spaces of enunciation or re-enunciation, *Antígona González* constitutes itself as spaces of a loss that is carried out, not named” (Cruz Arzabal, 2018, p. 248).

I will argue in this section that *Antígona González* does establish a connection with Sophocles’s Antigone, and yet a problematic one, in regard to her subjectivity and agency. However, the results are quite contradictory. *Antígona* works as a catalyst for the entire community and her subjectivity only adopts meaning and purpose if merged into the meaning and purpose of the

community. The author herself has stated that *Antígona González* “es un libro que desde su inicio fue escrito con, para y por otros” (Uribe, 2017, p. 55). Instead, the protagonists of most narconarratives are typically either archetypes or more complex characters that engage in conflicts of different nature. Even though the scholarship has yet to define the main features of narconarratives as a corpus, the extensive analyses of narconarratives and “narconovels” by Diana Palaversich (2006), Frauke Gewecke (2010), Polit Dueñas (2013), and Oswaldo Zavala (2018), among others, point toward that direction. Unlike the vast majority of narconarratives, Uribe’s work results in having one, many, and no protagonist(s) at the same time. And this tripartition problematizes the long-established dichotomy presented by the official discourse.

The first section of *Antígona González* opens with an ominous subtitle – “Instrucciones para contar muertos” – that comes from the collective experience *Menos días aquí*, one of the several intertexts of the work (Uribe, 2016, p. 4; Uribe, 2017, p. 49). Then, Uribe proceeds by presenting the scope of her work via a series of instructions, that precede the introduction of the protagonist to the reader. The incipit of *Antígona González* itself establishes a neat demarcation between Uribe’s text and the almost totality of narconarratives, especially for what concerns the use of characters. Here, as a matter of fact, the role of protagonist is given to the reader, as Williams argues (Williams, 2017, p. 7). The reader is invited to follow a three-step path to counteract the consequences caused by the official discourse in Mexico. In assigning agency to its undefined readership, *Antígona González* avoids, from the beginning, an ideological positioning.

Two impersonal commands follow the three steps: “Contarlos a todos” and “Nombrarlos a todos,” with the second command drawing a connection between the dead and the survivors: “para decir: este cuerpo podría ser el mío. El cuerpo de uno de los míos” (Uribe, 2016, p. 6). Before introducing herself to us, the protagonist continues her construction of a collective voice: “Para no olvidar que todos los cuerpos sin nombre son nuestros cuerpos perdidos” (*ibidem*). Only in the end does she, who speaks, reveal herself to us: “Me llamo Antígona González y busco entre los muertos el cadáver de mi hermano” (*ibidem*). In an interview with David Buuck quoted by Lara Schoorl, Uribe herself has explained that one of the “three avenues of meaning” on which she built *Antígona González* is the de-prioritization of the first-person subject pronoun (Schoorl, 2017). Schoorl explains that the polyphony of voices that constitutes *Antígona González* creates a space in which all of them are at the same time present and identifiable (*ibidem*). Uribe adopts two strategies to achieve this: the repetition of “we,” often juxtaposed to Antígona’s “I” – and often opposed to an unspecified “they” –

along with the insertion of texts, quotes, and stories in which Antígona is not the protagonist⁷.

As regards the first aspect, the “I”-“we” juxtaposition, it illustrates a substantial difference between Uribe’s Antígona and Sophocles’s Antigone and, furthermore, it constitutes a unicum within the corpus of narconarratives. As Williams has explained, if on one hand Antigone performs an exceptional and individual act of civil disobedience while being part of Thebes’s elite, then, on the other hand, Antígona “emerges not to oppose an edict or transgress a Law, but to reveal the devastation, the loss (...) and the grief experienced by her community” (Williams, 2017, p. 6). Moreover, as Williams continues, Tadeo (Antígona’s brother), “is neither an enemy of the state nor a criminal” (*ibidem*). Antigone decides to react to Creon’s edict insofar as she is moved by personal reasons. Hers is a defiance of the state authority based on a matter that, at least partly, piques her emotions. Quite oppositely, Antígona’s act is not one of insubordination. Rather, it reckons with “the collective experience of inexplicable absence and loss” (*ivi*, p. 7).

Antígona insists upon a contradiction: the perseverance of the citizens clashes with apathetic and motionless governing bodies (Uribe, 2016, p. 28). Most importantly, the inactivity of the latter leads to a disappearance (symbolic and physical) of the former. The failure in finding the corpses of the disappeared, or even refusing to listen to the petitions of family and friends, erases everyone from the political setting – turning citizens into petitioners and governing bodies into bureaucrats. In projecting herself (and her community) into being possible vanished individuals themselves, Antígona attributes the feature of invisibility to citizens: “Aquí todos somos invisibles. No temenos rostro. No tenenos nombre. Aquí nuestro presente parece suspendido” (Uribe, 2016, p. 100). This passage presents a clear dissonance with the majority of narconarratives, which are based on conflicts of different types (Herlinghaus, 2013, pp. 34, 51-53). In *Antígona González*, instead, the absence of the state acts like a plague that extends over the citizenry. The “we” is annihilated and rendered invisible by the lack of action of “they,” the state authorities.

Even though the “we” grows larger and louder, “Somos un número que va en aumento” (Uribe, 2016, p. 118), it ends up being silenced: “Un cuerpo hecho de murmullos. Un cuerpo que no aparece, que nadie quiere nombrar. Aquí todos somos limbo” (*ivi*, p. 120). This gradual fading of the community, which joins the vacuum left by the missing corpses of the disappeared, once again contrasts with the use of protagonists in many narconarratives, in which one or few protagonists often “become visible” either through killing or through death –

⁷ On the function of the intertext in *Antígona González* see Cruz Arzabal (2015), Williams (2017), and Zamudio Rodríguez (2014).

“como un desmedido ejercicio de semiosis que transforma el cuerpo victimado en un significante vacío” (Zavala, 2018, p. 30).

In analyzing the opening page of *Antígona González*, Rike Bolte suggests a “lectura de la ausencia” characterized by “agujeros textuales” (Bolte, 2017, p. 72). Both referring to the composite nature of *Antígona González* and the continuous shift between first-person-singular and first-person-plural subject pronoun, Bolte underscores the “displacement of the poetic voice” (*ivi*, pp. 72-73). Antígona’s mission is a collective one; her success is bound to her community’s success. However, the “I” and “we,” that build an “everyone,” are ignored by state authorities, thus turning into a “no one” that includes government bodies, who are responsible for the de-politicization of the community.

Cruz Arzabal and Williams have discussed the de-centralization and the polyphonic aspect of the voice, respectively, in *Antígona González* – an argument the author herself has highlighted (Uribe, 2017, p. 53). Cruz Arzabal has argued that Antígona does not make the victims speak, but rather she places them at the center of the “enunciación poética” (Cruz Arzabal, 2015, p. 323). Williams has explained that Uribe’s work re-constructs the political space through the presence of a subject with multiple voices (Williams, 2017, p. 7). However, while de-centralization and polyphony are indeed present in *Antígona González*, everyone’s voice ends up in a political vacuum. The voices of the disappeared, who speak through the community, grow louder but go unheard. At the same time, the state remains silent, thus voiding the endeavors of the citizens. Eventually, the multitude of protagonists who populates *Antígona González* epitomizes how existence gradually separates from presence. In the end, the absence of a real protagonist emerges. Uribe has described her work as a “poética polifónica, coral” (Uribe, 2017, 53). And it is a chorus of citizens that arises as equals within the Mexican tragedy, even though the audience – the state – has left the theater.

Displaying physical absence

In this section, I will examine the centrality of the body and, most importantly, the lack thereof, in *Antígona González*. In Uribe’s work, this aspect differs greatly from the way it is employed in most narconarratives – both those that follow the Manichaeian structure of the hegemonic discourse and those that contrast it. Cristina Rivera Garza has presented the objectification of the body in Mexico’s everyday discourse as related to the war on organized crime in the following way: “[l]os diarios, las crónicas urbanas y, sobre todo, el rumor cotidiano, todos dieron cuenta de la creciente espectacularidad y saña de los crímenes de guerra” (Rivera Garza, 2013, p. 18). The question approaching the

“normalization” of violence, and the language that discusses it, is also central to Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo’s scholarship and it has consequences not only in non-literary, but also in literary sources and artistic production (Escalante Gonzalbo, 2012, pp. 104-105).

Regarding the reification of the body in everyday discourse and its repercussions within artistic production, Rodríguez-Blanco and Mastrogiovanni have analyzed “la necesidad y la urgencia de redefinir las categorías interpretativas y de lectura del cadáver como síntoma de la violencia” (Rodríguez-Blanco, Mastrogiovanni, 2019, p. 113). As an example, the authors examined the photo exhibition *El estado de las cosas*, composed mostly of photographs from the press (*ivi*, p. 121). The exhibition emerged as “una bulimia de la mirada ante la contemplación [...] de la violencia;” since the photographs lacked basic information about the victims and the circumstances of their deaths, “el ser humano aparece como un mero trozo de carne que funciona como síntoma y signo de la violencia” (*ivi*, 2019, p. 122). As a result, “la cosificación y descontextualización del cuerpo violentado provocaba [...] que en lugar de identificarse, el público rechazara la imagen” (*ibidem*).

The employment of the body as an immaterial means is quite common in narconarratives, as Zavala has showed (Zavala, 2014, pp. 344, 347). I would also add that it differs greatly from the literary production of the *neopoliciaco* – Mexican detective novels that were one of the precursors of narconarratives and became popular in the late 1970s with Paco Ignacio Taibo II. While in the *neopoliciaco* the presence of the corpse, together with the details that accompany death, is at least instrumental to the detective process, in narconarrative violence is displayed for the sake of violence. Analyzing the incipits of six works that begin with “actual, imminent, or symbolic murders,” Zavala argues that “these novels project spectacles of subjective violence as prominent ‘lures’ for voyeuristic consumption” (Zavala, 2014, p. 348). Cruz Arzabal has also analyzed the use of the body in contemporary Mexican society and poetry as related to neoliberal practices. “The body,” he explains, “appears as a remnant: no longer as the space where mediations occur, but rather as what lies beneath them” (Cruz Arzabal, 2018, p. 245).

From the very beginning, *Antígona González* rejects the use of the body as a byproduct of violence as employed in most narconarratives, which Zavala describes as “a spectacle of iconography representing unmediated, excessive human suffering” (Zavala, 2014, p. 344). The first step of the “Instrucciones para contar muertos” – “Uno, las fechas, como los nombres, son lo más importante. El nombre por encima del calibre de las balas” – assigns a central role to the rehumanizing process within the work’s scope (Uribe, 2016, p. 6). One’s identity and story are given priority over the gory details of one’s death, as *Antígona*

González proceeds toward the de-objectification of the victims. Uribe's work is far from being a hymn to life – as it hinges on the attempts to find it – but it refuses to be a requiem for the dead: “Lo más cercano a la felicidad para mi a estas alturas, hermanito, sería que mañana me llamaran para decirme que tu cuerpo apareció” (*ivi*, p. 70).

One of the criticisms – and simultaneously paradoxes – *Antígona* addresses, consists of the centrality of the body for police work. While the whole community is struck by family members and friends who disappeared, “Ellos [the state authorities] dicen que sin cuerpo no hay delito. Yo les digo que sin cuerpo no hay remanso, no hay paz posible para este corazón” (*ivi*, p. 28). The enunciation of this procedural glitch confirms, though from a different perspective, the erosion of the community as perpetrated by the official discourse. *Antígona González* thus highlights a paradox: law enforcement corps would not enforce the law unless a body were found. And at the same time the search itself is a responsibility of the police, in addition to being the reason why the community turns to law enforcement corps to ask them to do their job.

The reification of the body in the official discourse and, consequently, in narconarratives has caused an emotional numbness to the degree that reports on violence are left to insist on two characteristics: spiking numbers and rising levels of gruesomeness (Rodríguez-Blanco, Mastrogiovanni, 2019, p. 115-119). In *Antígona González*, quite oppositely, the motif of unfound bodies not making the news is repeated several times throughout the work. By decentering the narrative from a first-person perspective, *Antígona* de-subjectivizes herself in an attempt to render her personal story one of the many: “Una mujer intenta narrar la historia de la desaparición de su hermano menor. Este caso no salió en las noticias. No acaparó la atención de ninguna audiencia. Se trata sólo de otro hombre que salió de su casa rumbo a la frontera y no se le volvió a ver” (*ivi*, p. 20). In a different stage of the search, *Antígona* explains that the disappearance of her brother not only did not make the news, but was not even added to the desk of state governing bodies: “[u]na mujer presenta una denuncia antes el ministerio público por la desaparición de su hermano. En su declaración consta que los hechos no fueron reportados de inmediato por temor a represalias” (Uribe, 2016, p. 32). As a disappeared body, Tadeo is unworthy of attention.

In addition to the inactivity of the state, what also emerges as disturbing is that silence and absence are entrenched in the community to the extent that they cover up the truth and, in fact, re-write it. In one of the passages in which *Antígona* addresses her disappeared brother, she explains that one of the reasons why she wants to locate Tadeo's body is to bring truth back to the everyday discourse:

No me dejan hablar con tus hijos, Tadeo. Tu mujer no va a decirles nunca la verdad. Prefiere que crezcan creyendo que los abandonaste. ¿Ves por qué tengo que encontrar tu cuerpo, Tadeo? Sólo así podré darle a tus hijos una tumba a dónde ir a verte. Eso es lo único que espero ya, un cuerpo, una tumba. Ese remanso. (*ivi*, p. 88)

In *Antígona González*, the question of the objectification of the body traverses the narrative in an instrumental way, differing from most narconarratives in which, as explained above, the body aims to please a blood-thirsty and numbed reader (Zavala, 2014, p. 348). In Uribe's work, bodies, when found as corpses, serve two precise purposes: they are the means through which family and friends can recognize the victim, and they constitute the starting point for the police investigation (Uribe, 2016, pp. 82 and 28, respectively). Against this reification of corporality, Antígona asks: "¿Qué cosa es el cuerpo cuando alguien lo desprovee de nombre, de historia, de apellido? *Que era una probabilidad. Cuando no hay faz, ni rastro, ni huellas, ni señales. Que los iban a traer aquí. ¿Qué cosa es el cuerpo cuando está perdido?*" (*ivi*, p. 110). In short, Uribe's work indicates that a de-humanizing process is set in motion as soon as a person disappears and only when the body is found does the family's mourning begin to re-humanize the victim. Rather than casting out the presence of death, *Antígona González* repeatedly invokes it, as the true suffering corresponds to the non-living-non-dead status of those who go missing (Uribe, 2016, p. 246).

The final section of *Antígona González* includes a series of questions that ultimately seek to re-humanize the body, once death is corroborated. Uribe has explained that the "hilera de preguntas" is taken from Harold Pinter's poem "Death" and that it is meant to intensify the utterance of families and friends who look for their disappeared and aim to restore their identity (Uribe, 2017, p. 52). This differs strikingly from narratives that tackle organized-crime-related violence as those analyzed by Rodríguez-Blanco and Mastrogiovanni, in which "la interpretación de la violencia en México" is epitomized by "el cadáver que se hace visible" (Rodríguez-Blanco, Mastrogiovanni, 2019, p. 113). The initial sequence of questions in *Antígona González* reminds us of police procedural practices: "¿Dónde se halló el cadáver? ¿Quién lo encontró? ¿Estaba muerto cuando lo encontraron? ¿Cómo lo encontraron?" (Uribe, 2016, pp. 130-136). To these interrogatives, a more personal set follows: "¿Quién era el cadáver? ¿Quién era el padre o hija, o hermano o tío o hermana o madre o hijo del cadáver abandonado? ¿Estaba muerto el cuerpo cuando fue abandonado? ¿Fue abandonado? ¿Quién lo abandonó?" (*ivi*, 138-146). The last series of questions adds the most intimate level of re-humanization of the victim, against the practice of sensationalizing death: "¿Estaba el cuerpo desnudo o vestido para un

viaje? ¿Lavó el cadáver? ¿Le cerró ambos ojos? ¿Enterró el cuerpo? ¿Le dio un beso al cadáver?" (*ivi*, pp. 148, 158-162).

Cruz Arzabal has focused on the comparison between the act of searching and writing as associated with the function of the body in *Antígona González*, "a work produced by the double movement of excavation and montage" (Cruz Arzabal, 2018, p. 249). Uribe's work, Cruz Arzabal has explained, "is written with writing's remnants, with the residue of the news, thus giving form to the absence of the missing" (*ibidem*). Stemming from this, I argue that *Antígona González* overcomes the use of the body in narconarratives to the extent that the centrality of absence adopts the features of a plague, and ends up affecting those who remain alive, too:

Yo también estoy desapareciendo, Tadeo. (...) Todos aquí iremos desapareciendo, si nadie nos busca, si nadie nos nombra. Todos aquí iremos desapareciendo si nos quedamos inermes solo viéndonos entre nosotros, viendo cómo desapareceremos uno a uno. (Uribe, 2016, pp. 164)

The *narco* phenomenon has been fueled by abundance *in praesentia*. In particular, as Gewecke argues, "narco-violence" has led to an endless mechanism of disregard for the body that affects all sides of the conflict (Gewecke, 2010, pp. 27-32). Even though *Antígona González* originates from the same warlike context, Uribe's work approaches corporality from an opposite perspective that is closely tied to its literary nature, as Cruz Arzabal has argued (Cruz Arzabal, 2018, pp. 248-249). Uribe herself has explained that in *Antígona González* "no hay nada original [...]. Este libro y la estrategia empleada para escribirlo es puro reciclaje" (Uribe, 2017, p. 55). Uribe's work can be conceived as one of those expressions of "necro-writing" and "disappropriation" that Rivera Garza analyzes in *Los muertos indóciles* (Rivera Garza, 2019, p. 19). In it, lies the major novelty of *Antígona González* as a literary text within the realm of narcoculture. Abundance consists of the abundance of voices, patched together in the literary text, to highlight their strength in numbers in what Rivera Garza defines as "condiciones de extrema mortandad" (Rivera Garza, 2019, p. 19). *Antígona González* fights against the accumulation of corpses in narconarratives and the gruesome violence of narcoculture to underscore the living agency of those who search and the absence of those who are missing.

Justice vs. Injustice

The third and last section of this article surveys how *Antígona González* rejects the Manichaean binary structure fomented by the official discourse and

upon which most narconarratives hinge. Barring a few exceptions – as those analyzed, for instance, by Zavala (2014, 2018), Gabriela Polit Dueñas (2013), and Palaversich (2006) – the good-evil dichotomy grounds the vast majority of literary and filmic fictions about Mexican organized crime.

This polarization, I contend, facilitates the narratological development of a given work of fiction. The dichotomy, as a matter of fact, establishes the basic scope and motives for the protagonists who seek to annihilate one another – as is the case, for instance, with the *neopoliciaco* and some *narconovelas* (Close, 2008, pp. 33-36 and Gewecke, 2010, p. 40, respectively). However, as Zavala has emphasized, the fictional oversimplification of the organized crime phenomenon only has, as a result, the propagation of the binary-centered narrative of the hegemonic official discourse (Zavala, 2018, p. 14).

The ‘we’-vs.-‘they’ war the Mexican state waged against organized crime in 2006 with president Felipe Calderón had, among its flaws, the idea that the situation could have been fixed with one universal solution throughout the entire national territory. However, as Escalante Gonzalbo has argued, “[l]a evolución concreta de la delincuencia en México [...] [tiene] que explicarse a partir de las características institucionales, jurídicas, productivas, geográficas, de estructura social y orden político” (Escalante Gonzalbo, 2012, pp. 89-90). Any analysis of the organized crime phenomenon would have suggested that solutions had to be thought of on an ad hoc basis regarding the categories provided, for instance, by Escalante Gonzalbo. And not, he adds, “como expresión de un fenómeno universal que remita únicamente a la conducta de ‘los delincuentes’” (*ivi*, p. 90).

The character of Antigone is not uncommon within the Mexican and, more broadly, Latin American cultural production. As Williams and Cruz Arzabal, among others, have pointed out, the Latinamericanization of Sophocles’s heroine embodies the reaction of citizens toward the tyranny of the state – which adopts, depending on the historical political context, distinct forms; in particular, it does so by emphasizing Latin American women as protagonists (Williams, 2017, pp. 3-4; Cruz Arzabal, 2015). *Podrías llamarte Antígona*, a Mexican drama written by Gabriela Yncán in 2009 presents some analogies with Uribe’s work.

The play, based on the tragedy that struck the miners of Pasta de Conchos in Coahuila, Mexico in 2006, has been analyzed by Helena González-Vaquerizo. González-Vaquerizo has explained that Yncán’s Antigone, Analía, manages to rescue her brother’s corpse in order to bury it. In doing so, Analía “ponía en entredicho las versiones oficiales que consideraban imposible el rescate de los cuerpos. Su gesto era una amenaza a los poderosos” (González-Vaquerizo, 2014, p. 100). Uribe’s Antígona does not defy the state: she, together with the

community, recognizes that the government itself is absent and that its volatility is erasing the efforts of the community.

In *Antígona González*, the relationship between the community and a missing interlocutor is central to the narrative. As explained in the first section of this article, the ‘we’ vs. ‘they’ polarization is present in *Antígona González*, as it is in most narconarratives. What distinguishes *Antígona González* from most narratives on Mexican organized crime is to whom the pronouns refer: no longer “honest Mexicans” vs. “criminal Mexicans,” but rather “proactive citizens” vs. “inactive citizens” – regardless of their class or job. Nevertheless, *Antígona* utilizes this dichotomy only as a narratological construction, since victims belong to all sides. Her message is that civic participation or lack thereof is the only distinction between citizens.

Antígona González substitutes the good-evil dichotomy with a justice-injustice one. However, it does not judge the protagonists of its narrative. The third instruction with which *Antígona González* opens, clarifies that there is no distinction among victims: “Tres, contar inocentes y culpables, sicarios, niños, militares, civiles, presidentes municipales, migrantes, vendedores, secuestradores, policías. Contarlos a todos. Nombrarlos a todos” (Uribe, 2016, p. 6). In this list, the good-evil polarization is erased in an attempt to focus on a more important goal: retrieving the bodies to return them to their families. This task is nevertheless voided by state absence and *Antígona* compares the search for her missing brother to a dreamlike adventure in which Tadeo’s presence is embodied by a form:

Como el sueño, eras lo que desaparece, y eras también todos esos lugares vacíos que no desaparecen. [...] Eras todas las horas del día. Sobre una hoja. Cerca del agua. Al borde. Frente a un agente del Ministerio Público. Frente a un Procurador o un Subprocurador o un Delegado de la PGR. (Uribe, 2016, p. 64)

In line with the priority set by Uribe’s protagonist, Williams has demonstrated that “*Antígona González* is [the] poetic embodiment of a community” (Williams, 2017, p. 13). To Williams’s argument I add that the concept of ‘community’ is, in Uribe’s work, an inclusive one which includes all the victims of the plague that has affected the citizenry. As a matter of fact, even though *Antígona* and the others recognize the liability of an unhelpful state, “good agents” and “evil agents” are in fact, from the beginning, listed as part of the same community (Uribe, 2016, p. 6).

Uribe has explained the context in which her work was conceived: the finding of the San Fernando mass graves on April 6 2011 was “[e]l hecho específico que detonó la escritura de *Antígona González* (Uribe, 2017, p. 48). In the same article, Uribe clarifies that *Antígona González* departs from the horror that has characterized Mexico – and in particular Tamaulipas – and that was

triggered by Felipe Calderón's War on Drugs (Uribe, 2017, p. 46). Nevertheless, *Antígona González* contains no mention of *narcos* or narcotraffickers. Relatedly, Uribe's work stands out for its novelty among narconarratives in that it presents the human tragedy caused by a decades-long conflict without focusing on the perpetrators. The counterpart to the community protagonist of *Antígona González* is an unidentified "they" that refers, throughout the work, to those agents that impede the search in different ways. This general antagonist, with no face or role, is presented by the epigraph that opens *Antígona González*: "¿De qué se apropia el que se apropia?" (Uribe, 2016, p. 2). The quote, which Uribe takes from Cristina Rivera Garza, also echoes Juvenal's verses "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" (Juvenal, 2018, vv. 347-38, pp. 67-68), thus establishing a connection between physical and literary appropriation.

At stake in *Antígona González* is the community – imbued with narcoculture and immersed in a warlike landscape. Narcotraffickers and governing bodies, predominant in most narconarratives are, here, latent, since they are the responsible for the conflict but invisible. What *Antígona González* insists upon is a call for the citizenship to move from "el pueblo de los muertos, mi patria" toward a restoration of the difference between dead and alive: "[s]iempre querré enterrar a Tadeo. Aunque Nazca mil veces y muera mil veces" (Uribe, 2016, pp. 104 and 168, respectively).

Antígona González also points out other consequences related to the absence of the state. Governing bodies and law enforcement corps not only fail to aid the citizens but may even constitute a threat. In one passage of the work, Antígona is imagining a conversation with her disappeared brother in which she reports a conversation that she had with their elder sibling and Tadeo's wife: "Nuestro hermano mayor y tu mujer diciéndome que Ninguno había acudido a las autoridades, que Nadie acudiría, que lo mejor para todos era que Nadie acudiera" (*ivi*, p. 24). Instead of relying on state authorities, Mexican citizens know that it is better not to get them involved. The consequences, based on the current situation, might be, not just pointless, but even disruptive: "Nos van a matar a todos. [...] Aquí no hay ley. [...] Aquí no hay país. [...] No hagas nada. [...] Quédate quieta, Antígona. [...] Quédate quieta. No grites. No pienses. No busques. [...] Quédate quieta, Antígona. No persigas lo imposible" (*ivi*, p. 26).

From the abovementioned examples, the scenario presented in *Antígona González* seems to reinforce the idea that the state is not an asset when it comes to resolving civic matters. However, Uribe's work also rejects the 'we'-vs-'they' dichotomy that the hegemonic discourse has presented for decades. Antígona embodies and builds the community and, as Zamudio Rodríguez has explained, her character works as a synecdoche insofar as "podría ser cualquiera de las mujeres mexicanas despojadas de un ser entrañable, de un 'hermano'" (Zamudio

Rodríguez, 2014, p. 38). And even though the third instruction with which *Antígona González* opens points out a series of neat juxtapositions (inocentes-culpables, sicarios-niños, militares-civiles, secuestradores-policia), the final commands (“Contarlos a todos,” “Nombrarlos a todos”) reject any polarizing intent and moral judgment (Uribe, 2016, p. 6). In some passages of *Antígona González*, the ‘we’ (the citizens) vs. ‘they’ (the state) dichotomy finds its way: “Rezo por los buenos y por ellos” (*ivi*, p. 36). Yet the “vivifying love” of Antígona, as Zamudio Rodríguez has defined it (Zamudio Rodríguez, 2014, p. 35), always overcomes morality to re-establish justice for everyone and to reassess the political ground of the tragedy of the disappeared: “No, Tadeo, *yo no he nacido para compartir el odio*⁸. Yo lo que deseo es lo imposible: que pare ya la guerra; que construyamos juntos, cada quien desde su sitio, formas dignas de vivir” (Uribe, 2016, p. 94).

In the end, *Antígona González* lacks the moral dichotomies and Manichean structure of most narconarratives even though it stems from the same conflict. Defined by the author herself as a “recycled” and collective work, *Antígona González* underscores one of the most dreadful aspects of the conflict – the disappeared – by emphasizing the phenomenon’s long-standing and plural nature. The search for justice in *Antígona González* does not necessitate the presence of an enemy; rather, Antígona looks for allies – regardless of their status, role, and provenance. Uribe’s character draws people together, acting as the only agent that moves in an edifying direction. Most importantly – and this is my attempt to draw together the practical and conceptual definitions of narcoculture provided in the introduction – Uribe centers her work on absence and disappearance to place the two among the “habits and gestures” that interplay with Mexican everyday life (Herlinghaus, 2013, p. 58). This suggests that the idea of narcoculture is a concocted one – imaginary, borrowing from Zavala (Zavala, 2014, p. 341) – rather than the product of a given community.

Conclusions

In line with the definition provided by Zavala, *Antígona González* is a narconarrative (Zavala, 2014, pp. 341-342). As a matter of fact, as the author herself has explained, this literary work emerges from the long-established conflict that has plagued Mexico since at least 2006. *Antígona González*, however, tackles the war on organized crime and the discourses that it has generated via three innovative perspectives that pivot on the theme of absence. Absence itself is as engrained as it is systematically unnoticed by narratives that both propel and

⁸The sentence in italic is a quote from Sophocles’s tragedy (Uribe, 2016, p. 172).

combat the hegemonic discourse. *Antígona González* renders absence – together with silence and disappearance – one of the main characters in the Mexican conflict. In doing so, it reveals a political vacuum that the War on Drugs – as well as its rhetorical offspring – is not fighting, but rather creating.

The three aspects of *Antígona González* I have analyzed add different perspectives to themes that have appeared in narconarratives. The creation of a collective character with no antagonist, the enumeration of voices and stories of violence instead of inventories of corpses, and the rejection of Manichaean structures – all together in the same work – point toward new directions for how to write about the Mexican conflict. Furthermore, they describe Mexican communities and how organized crime has plagued socio-cultural practices in a way that differ from the more trivialized narcoculture.

Antígona González therefore engages in a critical discussion with narcoculture. Uribe's work and the world it creates simultaneously completes narcoculture with the theme of absence while rejecting it by revealing its commercial nature that nothing has to do with the everyday life of Mexican society. Herlinghaus has argued that in the (global and hemispheric) South, "tragedy has become 'useless'" because law has lost its mediatory role (Herlinghaus, 2013, p. 49). Instead, *Antígona González* proves that tragedy, human and literary, still offers innovative approaches to understanding the most intricate conflicts.

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