

On Reading About Violence, Drug Dealers and Interpreting a Field of Literary Production Amidst the Din of Gunfire: Culiacán - Sinaloa, 2007

The Shots Ring Out.

I am writing this article while listening to recorded gunfire, shots fired by drug dealers to celebrate the start of the New Year, or perhaps to celebrate that they made it to the end of the year alive. When I arrived in Culiacán on January 15th, the press was still reporting on authorities' statements congratulating themselves there was only one death that New Year's Eve: a two-year old girl killed by a stray bullet. Another sector of the population was puzzled, for they found no reason for this horrible death nor did they understand the paradoxical relief with which the authorities greeted it.¹ In the background of the recording, one can hear dogs barking, faint rhythms of Christmas carols and snippets of conversations of a Culiacán family gathering for a New Year's Eve celebration.

The Shots Continue.

I understand that in Culiacán a number of problems coexist which are common to many societies, but here they are magnified. The reason is a slow and constant naturalization of a variety of types of violence which, for many years, have been developing in the region. Such violence flourished amidst older practices related to the production and smuggling of marijuana and heroin. For over thirty years this phenomenon has been known as narcotrafficking.² The corrupt official discourses which try to reduce it to a legal problem are part of the

complexity of the phenomenon. Narcotrafficking may not be wholly understood without factoring in the logic of the government's practices, which have always responded to private and sectarian interests as well as to the constant pressure of the United States when it comes to making decisions.³

Culiacán is not a beautiful city. Made up of middle class, lower middle class and poor neighborhoods, the humble houses are adjacent to walled houses with hideous white iron grating and Greek columns; some houses display statues of saints and Virgins almost one meter tall in the carports. There are also modern and wealthy neighborhoods where the business kingpins reside, and where impressive mansions remain hidden from view. The car park makes quite an impression: Hummers, Grand Marquis and Jaguars, all with darkened windows, circulate in large numbers. Many have US license plates and stereos which blast local band music as loudly as possible. The drivers take the haughty attitude that ceding the right of way or respecting traffic rules is a sign of stupidity or weakness, as in any big city. The only difference is that in Culiacán, the street interaction is marked by more arrogance on the part of the aggressor and infinitely more fear on the part of the possible victim. Unfortunately, the codes of conduct among the former prevail. Everyone has a story to tell: a distant cousin involved in the business, a grandfather who grew pot in the country, an uncle who years ago made a delivery to keep his sports store afloat. A young man who brought a childhood friend home for a visit, only to find out the friend is now a hired gun. A cleaning lady's relative from the Sierra, who was in charge of delivering bags of money to some former president. Almost everyone has seen a body lying dead in the street, wrapped in a blanket or simply lying face down, a result of a score having been settled.⁴

The day before I arrived, President Felipe Calderón sent an impressive army contingent to combat planting in the fields. The initiative against the illegal business undertaken by the brand-new government had begun weeks earlier in the states of Michoacán and Durango. Despite the enormous support the press offered this armed mobilization towards Sinaloa, the *culichis* talked of it with irony and even with some sarcasm; no one took it seriously.⁵ Many of my friends told me that in these raids, which are used as government propaganda, the small farmers and peasants who cultivate independently are the ones who fall. Everyone agrees that even the army would never dare go into the larger cultivated fields in the valleys of the Sierra Madre.⁶

Culiacán lives an extreme situation in which the ambiguity of our culture towards death is experienced with a special intensity. Like that of the dentist who decided to record the New Year's Eve gunfire in order to alter the connotations behind this deadly sound, and sent the recording to his friends via Internet. Those who heard the gunfire first hand, perhaps while quickly gathering their children inside the house and hiding from the bullets to avoid adding to the number of victims lost to fate of steel, might have a different attitude when listening to its sound on the computer. As a cruel metaphor, it is the vast space between the path of a real bullet and its sound caught on a recording where many *culichis* search for an explanation for the drama which is crushing their lives.

My interest in Culiacán began as a literary experience, not only because of the books I read about the city, but also because I needed to analyze the meaning books have in such a violent society where quite often it is not easy to determine the side of victims and that of the victimizers. How do people write fiction in a place where tripping over a dead body in the street is by no means an entirely unusual experience? A city where a desperate citizen records the sound of gunfire and, stepping back from violence, tries to find a coherent explanation for it? It should be said that this is happening in a democracy, in a nation which is not at war with another nation. What place, then, does literature have in a society which cannot recognize itself in the news reporting on its own crises by the official press corps, nor in the newspaper accounts which ironically could be considered foundational fictions?⁷ My inquiries tend toward a concern for ethics, which should be understood as the imperative search for meanings. Ethics necessarily illuminates a path, not an end point; it implies a constant compromise with what should be, and as such, there can be no ethics without imagination; thus its importance in literature.⁸

During my visit to Culiacán I spoke with cultural leaders, painters and sculptors, writers, journalists, lawyers, university professors, and government workers associated with cultural programs. I found all of them in and through DIFOCUR. A great part of the cultural and intellectual work of the city functions around this state institution; and almost all the artists living in Culiacán and those with whom I spoke are connected to DIFOCUR, either teaching or conducting workshops.⁹ In all my conversations I tackled the topic of their work in and from

the culture of the violence which has developed alongside and because of narcotrafficking. Some of them resented that the image of their city would be so tied to the world of drug smuggling and crime. This resistance to the identification of their land with narcotrafficking has to do with the connotation of the word itself. As Luis Astorga acutely observes, narcotrafficking is a universalizing term which says little or nothing about the origin, tensions, and logic of the practices which in Sinaloa have been linked to the traffic of illegal drugs for almost a century (*La mitología*, 90). For local intellectuals, the violence linked to narcotrafficking is something which has to do with local idiosyncrasies, the history of the region, the position taken by the Mexican government in dealing with pressures from the US and even the commoditization of certain products of popular culture tied to these forms of the drug trade. It is these issues which researchers seek to reconstruct from various angles (see works by Astorga, González y Córdova).¹⁰ In literature, the term narcotrafficking has the suspicious connotation of becoming a simple variation of the aesthetic search, an easy formula for guaranteed success.¹¹

Among all the stories I listened to, perhaps the one told by a well-known local writer best condenses an explanation of my own search. He leads writing workshops for young inmates. Working with language and words, he said, creates an energy which enables the young men to articulate a narrative about their experiences, whether as common criminals, thieves or even murderers. It took him some time to assimilate the rawness with which most inmates write about their participation in the business. His anecdote shows that in their stories the young men produce the testimony which they have not offered to the law. A testimony—as a literary genre and not a legal discourse—makes it obvious that fiction surpasses the limits of the law when attempting to comprehend certain human conflicts, in this case, the ones connected to life experiences located within the traffic of illegal drugs.¹² The difference between legal discourse and fiction brings us back to a primordial concern with ethics. When analyzing the trials of the SS members after World War II, Giorgio Agamben asserts that there was an identification of justice with ethics. This, he considers, is one of the grievous errors in modern thought. The legal discourse which speaks of responsibility depends on a trial and the justice meted out in the sentencing; that discourse is an end unto itself (7–21). From an ethical standpoint, the

concept of responsibility is beyond our reach because ethics have to do with the search for meanings; it is the search, not the conclusions, that makes an action ethical. These reflections serve to show that upon talking about their lives, the young men were able to articulate their testimonies within the world of fiction. Literary discourse, in its eagerness to explore the human condition, is a search for meanings and thus conveys an ethical reflection.

This explains why, after my trip to Culiacán, I returned to my starting point: books. Naturally, the site of the gaze was no longer the same, nor was the way I framed my questions. The work I did in Culiacán cannot be described as an ethnography which allows for a "thick description" of the field under observation.¹³ My research focuses on literary works, therefore, the methodology of my research and the type of observations and interviews I undertook allow me to get closer to what Pierre Bourdieu calls the social universe of "subjective relations" between the cultural producers and writers in Culiacán.¹⁴ I want to examine how the people I spoke to positioned and defined their work with respect to the culture of narcotrafficking. The resistance many writers exhibited to having their work categorized as literature on narcotrafficking forces one to take into consideration how the authors of these works, who supposedly comprise this universe, position themselves in it. Although some of them strenuously deny creating literature on narcotrafficking, it has been this heading which has guaranteed them a certain success in local and foreign publishing companies. From a critical reading of three specific works, I try to maintain an active dialogue with the dynamics of the local intellectual community. My intention is to understand how the term "narcotrafficking" is used to structure a dynamic which many works end up reinforcing in spite of their attempt to deconstruct it. In other words, understanding the local community allows me to draw up the counterpoint to my question: What function does narcotrafficking have when writing fiction? How does the theme of drug violence condition the literary search? Sinaloa is then the place of creation and at the same time the place created through the works which deal with a social phenomenon affecting its inhabitants directly.

The term "narcotraffickers" (in plural) first appeared in local newspapers in 1956. Although it was not used frequently, in subsequent years it became the universalizing term which Astorga criticizes in his books. To understand the nuances and tensions in the culture associated

with narcotrafficking Astorga underscores the necessity of revising the historical memory of Sinaloa. Some scholars have recently undertaken this task, and report that in the 1950s, Sinaloa's violence was associated with banditry and prostitution, characteristics found in rural life (González 41). Little by little, by the end of that decade and into the next, new forms of criminality and delinquency appeared. These new types of violence were identified with the emerging drug culture, especially during the presidential term of Leopoldo Sánchez Céliz, when the drug business flourished (Córdova 134).¹⁵

The term "narcotrafficker" appeared in literature in 1962, with the publication of A. Nacaveva's book, *El diario de un narcotraficante*, which is the first of three works I will comment on below. The other two, *Tierra Blanca*, by Leonides Alfaro (1996), and *La novela inconclusa de Bernardino Casablanca*, by César López Cuadras (1994), although published decades later, describe events which also take place in the late '50s and early '60s. I chose these novels because each one in its own unique way places itself at the dawn of the culture of violence which now defines Sinaloan society. In addition, even though they have little in common, all three illustrate specific ways in which the culture of drug trafficking affects, influences, and is viewed in local literary production. These books also signal three particular forms of conceiving literature and conferring value onto books. The narrative proposal of each novel requires a critical gaze which takes into account the place assigned to the reader.

The starting point of my analysis is the motif of the book as used within each text. I analyze the scenes in which the book appears or is described as an entity which takes on meaning within writing itself. The book described becomes the key to understanding the position of the authors towards their own work; it explains the starting point of their own writing. The book is also useful in examining the formation of a literary field around the topic of narcotrafficking.

The Shots Continue.

The First Moment: Reality.

El diario de un narcotraficante is a classic which contributes significantly to studies on the culture of narcotrafficking. The author

seeks to experience and bring to life all stages of heroin production. He involves himself with the sowing of the seeds, he learns the chemical process to transform the sap into morphine and later heroin, and finally crosses the border carrying some of the substance. Nacaveva integrally joins a group of smugglers, learns their language and their codes, embracing their values as if he were, in fact, one of them.

The book starts with a warning by the author in which he explains his intention in writing the piece and offers a key to its reading. This book should be read, he tells us, if one likes intense emotions, and should not be read if one is a puritan: "Si en verdad te interesa saber los problemas sociales de los que estás rodeado, si no te escandalizas, puedes leerlo con confianza, nada hay de malo en ello" (7). If by writing the book the author almost loses his life and orphans his children, he insists, it is not important, "lo único interesante en este caso es que te agrade a ti, amable lector, que me acompañarás en una aventura desde las páginas de la presente obra. Si no te gusta, todo el esfuerzo todo el riesgo, fue inútil, pero si te agrada, valió la pena; todo fue barato y no hay tiempo perdido" (7). At the beginning the book constitutes a means of knowledge, which can be confidently read because, despite its subject matter, we have been told there is nothing wrong in reading it. In this first description, reading is conceived as a neutral act. After a few lines, the author says that during the course of the story we, the readers, are to "accompany" him on his adventure. Here, our reading makes us accomplices or witnesses of his adventure, which is writing. However, the true and final value that he confers on his book is that of an object of interest, of pleasure to the reader. At this point our reading implies a necessary identification with the author.

Such contradictory requirements set forth by the author have also to do with the ambiguous genre of the book. Nacaveva writes a diary as if he were an ethnographer, making it explicit that he takes part in certain events with the only intention of gathering information for his book. When he explains the process of compiling data, it is clear that the value of the diary is not in recounting his personal history, but rather in the intention to narrate the histories of others. Nonetheless, he does not define his work as that of an anthropologist, and the book makes no theoretical claims. Neither can the book be defined as a testimony, because the experiences of the author are forced by him; that is to say, he is not an *authentic* member of the group, but one who

observes. As a journalistic chronicle, the book cannot escape a certain fetishization of the real, since the title speaks of the book as a diary, not a chronicle or a report. The work is unquestionably one of the first to concern itself with the nuances in the practices of men involved in the business: the routines of the mountain peasants and their vulnerabilities at the dawn of what we now conceive of as narcotrafficking. Other examples of these nuanced observations include the description of the motivations and principles of some of the characters who become involved in the business as a temporary undertaking, and the codes of masculine behavior and loyalties, among others. However, the reader assumes at all times that writing comes from within the experience of the drug trade, not from outside of it. As the author states: "para poder escribir necesito vivirlo, solo así podré conocer la realidad" (23). Despite the risks implied in the writing, the book itself is presented as the only objective of the author

"Al despertar son las siete de la mañana, ya no puedo dormir, los nervios quizá. ¿Será el cargo de conciencia? El consciente me dice que no me apure, que dentro de unas horas estaré rico, pero el subconsciente me recuerda que no voy a eso, que no es el dinero lo que me interesa, *es mi libro*, si fuera lo primero, estaría muy contento, pero no es así. (133; emphasis mine)

Leaving aside the epistemological arguments pertinent to Nacaveva's way of conceiving reality, we should read the text as it is, a diary whose interest is not an introspective analysis but, in fact, the exact opposite. From a literary perspective we can also question his obsession with having an experience in order to be able to narrate it. Following Paul Virilio's ideas, we can say that Nacaveva—free from all ethical or sentimental commitments—is attempting to eliminate all obstacles between his book and reality, as well as between reality and his reader (57). Nacaveva's weakness for experiencing as the basis for his writing causes him to undergo a transformation that brings to the book its profound meaning. The transformation, the author notes, is physical: "Ya no tengo ningún nerviosismo, como anoche. Me dirijo al lugar indicado, noto que todo lo hago con naturalidad, la nerviosidad de anoche no existe, en esta vida todo pasa, el dolor, el amor el miedo, *a todo se acostumbra el cuerpo*" (37; emphasis mine). The transformation of the body, which the author needs to recognize, is something he reiterates at the end of the story, when he is victim to savage torture at the hands of the Mexican Federal Police force, the *Judiciales*.

There are two moments which clearly demonstrate the transformation of Nacaveva-the-writer into Nacaveva-the-character. The first is when, despite the fact that the *Licenciado*—mentor and friend of Nacaveva who initiates him into the business—suggests that he should not trust anyone, least of all the men in the drug world, Nacaveva decides to involve himself with these dubious friends. When participating in a certain transaction behind his friend's back—with the only intention of compiling material for the book—he enters just as his companions realize that they are being betrayed by their contact. They decide to take revenge, and Nacaveva is to participate. When Nacaveva's friends talk of murder, he repeats his resolution to know in depth the world of drug smuggling, in order to write his book. He understands that at this stage he cannot give the wrong signals to his business colleagues because it would be a sign of betrayal and lack of manhood. Thus he decides to go as far as he can and takes part in the ambush set up to kill the traitor. At the site of the action, he writes, despite remaining behind, he is still forced to confront a member of the opposing gang. Nacaveva has an advantage because his enemy is wounded and lying on the floor; the darkness of the night allows him to pardon the enemy's life and so he fires two shots in the wrong direction. Since nobody dies, the episode trivializes the violence by means of the proto-heroic action of the protagonist. At the same time, it is clear evidence of Nacaveva's manly code of behavior, since he needed to show his friends that he had the nerve to kill. The episode establishes him as a man among men.

The event that underscores Nacaveva's bravery is also what makes him fade into the background as a writer. I have stressed the various moments in which the author emphasizes his goal to write a book that would describe *everything*.¹⁶ The book—as its fundamental goal—ends up being more important than life itself, whether that life be the author's own or the others'. His experience, according to what he says, quite naturally eliminates the distance regarding the material he is narrating. His transformed body has become the site of writing. Death is naturalized as it is for the drug-traffickers who confront it simply as part of their business.¹⁷ At this point Nacaveva's book demands a careful reading in which the role of the book and its necessary limitations should be questioned.

After this incident, Nacaveva's friends disappear, some because the survivor sent somebody to have them killed, and others to hide

from the man who is now their executioner. Nacaveva is lucky because the shooter assigned to murder him is the same man whose life he spared. Yet this is not what redeems him in the story. Nacaveva's redemption comes towards the end, when he decides to undertake his last incursion into the business and crosses the border with 20 grams of heroin. He is caught by the US authorities. They torture him and, once it becomes clear they will not get anything from Nacaveva, they deport him to Mexicali. The Mexican authorities almost kill him in the torture chamber; Nacaveva describes in detail the brutality he suffered at their hands. After explaining that his head aches from the beating he received, he writes: "Me acordaré de todo lo que me ha ocurrido *para mi libro*" (334; emphasis mine).¹⁸ Yet again he underscores the violence with a phrase which plays with time and functions as a flash of light, returning us to reality: Nacaveva went through all of this with the only intention of writing the book we now have in our hands.

Nacaveva is released from custody when two police officers from Culiacán recognize him. They know of Nacaveva's courage and his total commitment to writing the book, in which they express great interest. In this last example, it is again the book which becomes his safe conduct card, that which causes him to be one of the assassins and at the same time, that which makes him different from them. The book becomes an object of his own predicament because reality swallows the author, it consumes Nacaveva. *El diario de un narcotraficante* shows that violence has become naturalized in the process of writing. The book has justified everything just as the author warned us at the beginning; it constitutes an end in itself.

Nacaveva's book reproduces the vices of that culture of violence which was settling and occupying all the spaces of Sinaloan life by the end of the '50s. The danger is that a book is written in order to circulate in another realm. It is a symbolic production for readers who, if they cannot recognize Nacaveva's transformation, will also be trapped in a reality in which the only possible value becomes the author's ability to uphold the masculine code of behavior.

The Shots Continue.

The Second Moment: The Amendment.

I get into Leonides Alvaro's car to head to a restaurant near the Church of La Lomita, which has an excellent view of the city. As we are waiting for our food to arrive and looking out at the panorama from a point of view which favors Culiacán, Leonides points out the mountain chain we can see in the far distance, the Sierra Madre. Near there is the "Triángulo del Diablo," he tells me as colorful small planes cross the clear sky¹⁹. We are enjoying seafood, the regional specialty, and talking about how it is he entered into literary activity. Leonides tells me that despite being a voracious reader, writing came to him later in life. He was working and continues to work in the private sector as a salesman. Of all the local resident writers in Culiacán, he is perhaps the only one whose career and literary activity are not in some way tied to DIFOCUR.

Leonides does not consider his work to be narco-trafficking literature, but rather confesses that he felt compelled to write as a need to denounce a specific act of violence that traumatized him. He explains that in 1971, traveling to Mazatlán for work, he had just arrived at the main street in front of the ocean, when he heard gunfire. The bullets rang out so close to him that for a moment he thought he had been shot. He tells me he was terribly afraid because he thought his life had come to an end. He waited for a minute, crouched on the floor of his car, until he heard the sound of sirens and knew he could get up. It was then he saw seven bodies on the sidewalk, drug dealers and *Judiciales*, equally dead, all covered in blood. Just like in the movies, he tells me. It was precisely this event that filled him with absolute indignation: Why must the Sinaloans be subjected to this type of spectacle? He felt the need to do something, to denounce what he had seen. His initial reaction was to write a letter to the newspaper, outraged that ordinary citizens such as himself were exposed to this type of barbarity. Soon after, he abandoned the idea of writing to the newspaper. A short story dealing with all the aspects of this life would be much more effective, he thought. Thus he began to write and write and write in a notebook that just kept filling up, page after page. The material seemed to grow into something longer than a short story. It could be a novel. "La gente

de la Sierra que ves ahí—said Alfaro while pointing with his finger toward the horizon—empezó a mudarse a la ciudad para comercializar con drogas, venían a Culiacán y vivían en Tierra Blanca, ahora es una colonia más de la ciudad, pero en ese entonces, era conocida como la cuna de los narcos. De ahí viene el nombre de la novela”.

Tierra Blanca is Leonides Alfaro's first novel on the subject. It was published in 1996 and since then has been republished five times, the last one in Spain by Almuzara Publishers, who have taken on four more of his novels. The story is about the life of Gumersindo, a young man living in the Tierra Blanca neighborhood, victim of life's injustices—one of which is that his father was killed by a *Judicial* as the fall guy, a scapegoat of some drug dealers. Gumersindo is the oldest of a large family, whose mother is ill. Upon his father's death, his is the only family income. Doing so out of necessity and with a deep desire to avenge his father's murder, Gumersindo enters the world of narco-trafficking. When dealing with his bosses, he always shows himself to be intelligent, courageous and loyal.

At various points throughout the book we, the readers, wonder if the world Alfaro describes is the one he observes or the one he would like to observe. The book's realism is undermined by constant explanations of events, from the decisions the characters make to the force of destiny which affects them. Alfaro's novel never transcends reality; it describes it with the same simplicity with which a pedestrian might mention the dead he finds one day on the street, only that his language is somewhat more flamboyant. Thus Gumersindo's death towards the end of the novel evokes the tragic luck of the draw, where the opposing forces of good and evil meet. The trick in using tragedy as the narrative's paradigm, as in this case, is that the character's luck is decided by circumstances beyond anyone's control, which has little or nothing to do with the complex framework set in motion by local historical and social circumstances.

Perhaps the best way to explain the book rests inside the novel itself, in a scene in which one of the characters is caught off-guard by a book. Victor García, Gumersindo's boss and the Sinaloan representative for an organization involved in the growing and trafficking of drugs, takes a trip. He heads to Mexico City in order to report to his boss on an attack perpetrated against his men in Sinaloa. He describes a mansion in one of the most expensive neighborhoods of the city, where he

has an interview with a government official because, he explains, every sixth year brings a new man to office, showing all too transparently that his orders come from the government. At the end of the interview, he pauses next to some bookshelves of the enormous library where he has met with his boss:

volvió sobre sus pasos y acercándose a los estantes tomó un libro que con letras doradas decía: Obras completas de Molière. Sorprendido constató que era auténtico, encuadernado en piel e impreso en papel cebolla. El deseo de poseer un ejemplar igual le hizo buscar la dirección de la casa editora y otra sorpresa lo asaltó: en la primera página encontró con grandes letras góticas la siguiente leyenda: Edición especial para el Exmo. Señor Antonio Morales y Beltrán, Madrid, España. “*Vaya, no cabe duda, sigo siendo un palurdo provinciano, jamás pude imaginar: ediciones especiales para una sola persona, ¡hágame el favor! Necesitaría ser el más estúpido de los presuntuosos para creérmela y pagar por una farsa como ésta*”. (102)

Alfaro's book, which we hold in our hands, seems like the one García finds in his boss's library, because in many scenes we have the same sense of disbelief that his character exhibits. *Tierra Blanca* is consistent with Alfaro's vision of literature: it is a redemptive craft conceived to build up a better reality. Such a symbolic representation of the world which surrounds him has without a doubt earned him a certain success.²⁰ As our conversation draws to a close, Alfaro takes me to one of the main bookstores in town. In the huge posters facing the street, *Librería México* displays Alfaro's works recently published in Spain: *Tierra Blanca*, *La maldición de Malverde* (2004), *Las amapolas se tiñen de rojo* (2006). From the titles, the photos on the covers and the book's blurbs, it is difficult to accept—despite Alfaro's denial—that his is not literature on narcotrafficking.

The Shots Continue.

The Third Moment: The Impossible Book.

I met César López Cuadras by chance. Despite the fact that he is from Sinaloa, he lives in Guadalajara where he works as a university professor. I was lucky enough to run into him visiting Culiacán while

I was there. I found him and Elmer Mendoza in DIFOCUR, the epicenter of my best meetings.²¹ Elmer took us to a cafe where César had breakfast and I ordered water while we talked about literature. Copies of *La novela inconclusa de Bernardino Casablanca* (1993) had run out, and by this meeting, I still had not read the book.

Do you write narcotrafficking literature?—I asked him. César answered with an emphatic “no.” He sees narcotrafficking as one more experience, part of the local reality but not necessarily the defining one. “Cuando escribes acerca de lo que vives, eso es algo que está en el horizonte,” he told me. The characters in his novels, he says, are not drug dealers, it is what they do; they are fathers, husbands, brothers. For López Cuadras, the so-called narcotrafficking literature has produced a number of clichés which combines guns, police, blood, everything readers like, so the subject becomes an excuse to please the publishing houses and the market. “La gente cree que la realidad supera la ficción, pero no es así, la realidad no escribe novelas. La literatura no viene de lo real, viene de ti,” César concluded.

The very words César said to me in that Soho-style cafe in the middle of Culiacán, I read a few days later in his book. Truman Capote says them to his friend Narciso Capistrán, the main character in *La novela inconclusa de Bernardino Casablanca*. Narciso met Truman in New York, they became friends at a casual encounter on the streets of the Big Apple and now Truman goes to visit Narciso to give him some literary advice. Narciso wants to write a novel about a murder which happened a few months earlier. The victim is Bernardino Casablanca, kingpin of white prostitution and a man involved in all types of dirty affairs, one of which involves selling drugs. Despite all that, Narciso tells Truman, Bernardino was a man of some standing, with a certain prestige in Guasachi, a town in the state of Sinaloa near Culiacán, where he ran his cantina. He was also a man who had more than one enemy, because of his temperament and the nature of his business. Narciso's criminal investigation of the case—with Truman's participation and complicity—includes several other stories within the same novel. These other stories focus on Bernardino's life from his birth to his death, on women working in his brothel and their families, on Bernardino's wife's affair with his *compadre* and on other characters suspected of the crime. The various narrations cause the story to move back and forth in time, from the '50s, when Bernardino was a child, to the '70s, when he is

murdered and when Narciso is attempting to write the novel. The different stories form a complex framework which exposes the Sinaloan society, its towns, the culture of the cantinas and bars, and the picturesque characters from the Sierra. It is reminiscent of the descriptions of the Sinaloan criminal world from the '50s which we read in González's book (41). In addition, the narrative trails are interconnected and maintain an agility of dialogues between the protagonists of the world of criminality and prostitution which López Cuadras depicts.

Among all the stories in the novel, the wanderings and investigations of Narciso and Truman stand out because they give meaning and cohesion to the rest. The conversations between the writer-to-be and his mentor make up a Cervantine scene in which they are the characters of the novel already written and, at the same time, the authors of a novel still unwritten. They are the protagonists in our reading and characters of a story which is impossible to narrate. The conversations between Narciso and Truman build a theory of the novel which underscores the significance of writing about a society like that of Sinaloa. This is how the author articulates his definition of what it means to write literature in Sinaloa. When Narciso compares his work to that of Truman's *In Cold Blood*, he tells him:

Tú pudiste platicar con el fiscal encargado del caso, y él tuvo interés en atenderte y proporcionarte información valiosa; recurriste, además, a los archivos, donde se pormenorizaba el avance y los resultados de las investigaciones; tuviste también a los criminales en la cárcel, y te dedicaron, si se puede decir, todo el tiempo del mundo para contarte su desgraciada existencia. Ése es tu país; Guasachi es otra cosa. (120)

With this comment, Narciso is not only saying that Bernardino's crime will be told in a different way, but also—and more importantly—that a book like *In Cold Blood* never could have been written in Guasachi. Narciso's concerns are not only with the US legal system, which, unlike its Mexican counterpart, functions on a collective level, and which allows Truman access to files and opportunities to interview the prosecutor. He is more interested with one of the richest elements of literature, which is the need to drench the reader intimately in the specific dramas of the characters, the density of the particular historical moment, the social contradictions and the singular cultural features. All the elements that Levinas describes as the "exterior vision set up as a method" (10)

find expression here. This is what truly produces a text of transcendental value. The originality of López Cuadras's novel lies in the achievement of all these minuscule details of local scenes.

The week of Truman's visit to Guasachi, the friends decide to speak with some people who knew the victim, so they talk to Bernardino's right-hand man (whom the author names "the squire", another reference which evokes Quixote), and they reconstruct the truth of the facts. "La realidad no fabrica novelas," Truman had said to Narciso at one point in their conversations, to which Narciso replies that, regardless, it does feed the writer (120). Even so, Narciso's true conflict is that reality swallows him up (as it does Nacaveva). In his need to know all the facts as precisely as possible, Narciso discovers the murderer and his motives. He does this despite Truman's insistence that he should leave the truth alone and refuse to allow reality to deceive him.

After a week of discussing literature and investigating the case, Narciso and Truman also party, consume all types of substances, and have fun. However, all of this comes to an end; Truman has to go back to his country at the very moment when Narciso has found all the pieces he needs to reconstruct the crime. Narciso puts all of what he has discovered about the case on his desk, thinking of these materials as notes for his novel, and heads out to see Truman off at the airport. At that point, Palemón, author of the crime and chief of the local police, enters the house and, taking advantage of Narciso's absence, ransacks the papers. He finds the notes on the investigation and confirms his suspicions that the writer-to-be has unmasked him. Whereas throughout the entire novel López Cuadras has insisted on exploring the limits of the craft of writing within a society like his own, when Palemón reads Narciso's notes and interprets them as evidence of his crime, the author confronts us with overarching questions on our own work as readers. The corrupt chief of police cannot walk away from the evidence presented to him in those papers and believes that Narciso has put them together solely to write a novel. It is Palemón who thinks that reality is stranger than fiction and thus decides to kill the potential writer. Narciso does not return home. Palemón's people arrange it so death catches him in a car accident on the way home from the airport. Narciso's novel on Bernardino Casablanca remains an unfinished work. López Cuadras's story, on the other hand, ends with a funeral, not Narciso's, but Bernardino's.

On his way back from the airport, tired from staying out late and thinking about the enormous burden of work still before him, Narciso ponders:

¿Cuál es, entonces, el significado de los “hechos”, frente a los tormentos del alma? Todo esto no lo puede cubrir la nota roja, y para hacerlos material literario habría que situarse más allá tanto de la novela policíaca como de realismos radicales. Aquí no cabe más que la exploración de posibilidades de la condición humana, vampirizando la realidad con la imaginación “¿quién dijo esto?”, en desesperado intento por comprenderla. (286)

López Cuadras's book is not taken up by reality as the novels previously discussed have been, but Narciso's thinking is. As the narrator reminds us just before he dies, “quería ser un escritor, no un policía” (289). *La novela inconclusa de Bernardino Casablanca* is stranger than the reality it narrates, or, more precisely, it contains that reality because López Cuadras creates a *mise-en-abyme* in which the book we are reading is, at the same time, the book which has never been written. One of the dilemmas that López Cuadras seems to encounter when he talks of his work as narcotrafficking literature is precisely found in this situation. For many people, as the author told me during our conversation, the Sinaloan society—for ridiculous and violent as it seems—is always stranger than fiction. For a writer such as López Cuadras, this declaration denies him the possibility of searching for meanings by way of literary language. He then goes on to do the opposite, playing with a criminal novel in which a police officer commits the crime against the writer because he does not believe in literature. In this case, his novel gives the role of fiction that of imagining, creating and subverting reality, neither reproducing nor amending it.

For Palemón, representative of a useless and corrupt legal system, member of non-functioning state, Narciso's notes are dangerous evidence of facts. Yet for us, readers of a novel whose plot is impossible by virtue of its very structure, they reiterate that stories are concocted in literature because their main value is that of probing situations. Works of art gain significance when they offer the universal through the particular: the fine work with local languages, the almost distorted identity of characters, the playful precision of dialogues. This micro-universe is what critics call atmosphere, and what Levinas so neatly describes as the “[precise] darkness of images” (10). It is this slight-of-hand by which López Cuadras narrates a local history, so completely

full—saturated I would say—of cultural practices linked to the world of narcotrafficking. It is also here where the richness of his literary search resides: in the rhythm and plasticity of the words. His work rebuilds the private human tissues of the historical Sinaloan memory which Astorga claims to be an essential element for understanding the phenomenon of contemporary drug trade culture. The space literature offers to memory—unlike legal or social science discourses—recuperates the details of intimacy. It recaptures rhythms and images, and only through the specificity of this work can it be considered as a discourse of knowledge. As Ouaknin asserts, the book places the need to think of the narratives as fundamental aspects of our existence (28).

César and I have been talking for almost two hours when Elmer Mendoza returns to the café with the manuscript of César's new novel under his arm. César makes a joke to celebrate the anxiety this encounter produces in him—what will his friend say about his new novel? As I leave them to their discussion, I think about my research material, some of which I could never have put down on paper before now: the image of two writers sitting at a table with a novel between them. It seems to me a clear physical representation of the breach between the created object and the creative process; that which is of one person and much more than one person. This image is a treat to my research in which I try to maintain a balance with one eye on the works themselves and the other on the social situation which makes them possible; between the literary field that sustains and underwrites them; and within the social science discourse that articulates a reality that comes before the moment and a world which will follow. Literature on narcotrafficking cannot be swallowed up by reality, because it would then cease to be literature. At the same time, criticism cannot let itself be swallowed up by the works produced, because a book must search for meanings, ask for different readings: a final and determined reading will always be impossible.

Coda. The Shots Cease.

A literary representation of violence necessarily implies an ethical approach which either reifies or questions the aestheticization of certain practices and their agents. A work of fiction, in its intent to

represent the external world, constitutes an important site to decipher how violence works at the symbolic level. Literature can thus contribute to a discussion on the phenomenological approach to reality. To classify this group of books as novels on narcotrafficking, before undertaking a careful close reading of each of them, can invert the order of things and put the cart before the horse. In representing and contributing to the understanding of the nature of violence in the local culture of narcotrafficking, each author offers up his own position on it, and discloses his view on the role of literature.

In Nacaveva's case, reality does not require any search but that of experience. He writes with the certainty that he is not representing reality, but 'presenting' it. He denies his own subjective perspective and, in doing so, presents himself free from any ethical consideration. The novel itself justifies his actions. If we as readers agree with Nacaveva and share his position regarding the value of his work, our ethical position would also be defused. The book presented as an end in itself veils the process of its own making, which at the same time provides a conception of reality as an objective, uniform and simple thing.

Alfaro, on the other hand, writes with the intention of intervening in the real world. The author attempts to amend the situation in which he finds himself, and writing becomes a short cut to construct a set of certainties. A novel conceived from a self-defined commitment to reality does not offer an original approach to language, nor does it propose a challenge to the writer or the reader. It rather imposes words on a reality defined from the very beginning as something that has to be improved. Fiction in this case presents itself much like the legal discourse of which Agamben writes. Art, argues Levinas, does not know any particular type of reality; it contrasts with knowledge (3). Literature, as an art form, confronts us with an image of reality which shows us its irrational side, its shadow. In Alfaro's novel the morals of the characters are defined from the start; the author displays his knowledge on what he needs to say about that reality and thus his writing makes the experience of reading comfortable, secure. It also guarantees the book's success, because the novel clearly distinguishes good from evil, and violence is an outcome of tragedy and not the result of human relations. It is not surprising that Alfaro's book comes closest to fitting the definition of literature of narcotrafficking and that his novels have the highest sales.

Among the three works, probably López Cuadras's is the only one which makes it problematic to talk with certainty about what a narrative on narcotrafficking implies. Instead of portraying agents and victims, in his work he explores the internal contradictions of this extreme human experience as well as its particular cultural forms. López Cuadras creates a stage on which reading is an impossible act; we read a novel that has already been described as inconclusive. This opens up an infinite space, where readers do not have any certainty. The indefinite world of reading/writing that López Cuadras creates in his book shows his own struggle with the reality he describes, as well as our own limitations to completely understand it. That opened gap serves to understand how the constant tension between ethics and aesthetics works in his literature. Reading, then, becomes "la demostración de la trascendencia, el movimiento de retirada necesario depende ante todo y esencialmente del intérprete, de su modo de ser enfrente del texto, de su manera de acercarse a él. A este modo de ser, lo llamamos 'caricia'" (Quaknin 14). To define reading as a caress is neither skepticism nor nihilism; it means to understand it as an experience rather than knowledge; and most of all, it suggests an encounter (Quaknin 31).

These ideas on the act of reading sum up my vital experience analyzing these books. An experience, I must say, that would not have been so powerful and intense without my visit to Sinaloa. It was through my trips around town, the many conversations with *culichis*, and my meetings with the authors that I was able to grasp the challenges of writing/reading about the narcotrafficking culture of violence. Reading, of course, conceived as a way of being in front of the text, but also as a way of understanding books within that culture of violence.

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

NOTES

* My special thanks to Juan Esmerio Navarro, editor at DIFOCUR (Dirección de Investigación y Fomento de Cultura Regional), to whom I dedicate this article. Although without Juan's help it would have been impossible for me to read the books I analyze or interview the people who appear on these pages, he is in no way responsible for anything I write. Thanks also to Elizabeth Moreno, and to everyone who offered me their time and hospitality. I write hoping that these ideas in some way pay tribute to

their generosity and that this work may be the continuation of the intellectual dialogue begun in January. My work in Sinaloa was possible thanks to the Grant offered by the Fine Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Initiative FAHSS of Stony Brook. When I returned from my trip, I decided to write about my experience in the language in which it happened to preserve its glow. The decision to translate this piece into English is in the hope of reaching a broader audience. Special thanks to Monica Sanning, who translated this essay.

¹ The New Year's gunfire, according to González, appears to have originated in fairly common rural practices. Sinaloa is not the only place where it happens. Among Cubans living in Miami it is also quite common to celebrate New Year's Eve with shots (thanks to Antonio Vera-León for the information). Nonetheless, it is important to understand, first, that the guns of Sinaloans are more sophisticated than the guns of Cubans in Miami, and that the framework within which this gunfire works in Culiacán is now linked to the presence of the drug trade and the authorities' lax attitude.

² We decided to use the term *narcotraficking* for the Spanish *narcotráfico* to convey the nuances and complexities of the word which are further explored in this paper. The term applies to the wide range of cultural and economic practices which make up this phenomenon

³ In his various works, Luis Astorga gives a wide historical, cultural and sociological perspective on Mexico and the traffic of illegal drugs.

⁴ Lilian Paola Ovalle has written an illuminating (and harsh) piece analyzing the numerous meanings that a death has in the business given the physical characteristics of the dead bodies.

⁵ *Culichis* is the name given to the people born in Culiacán.

⁶ From January 2007 to the present there has been a severe increase of violence in the region. However, throughout the week I was in Culiacán and during my short trip to Mazatlán, which is three hours from Culiacán by bus, I did not see more soldiers than the ones I saw in August, or on any given Friday afternoon in the center of Bogotá.

⁷ These can be read by reversing the argument put forth by the nineteenth-century specialists (Anderson, Sommer) who define the purpose of the newspapers as a means for imagining communities. In this case, they are used to erase them or at least, to disfigure them.

⁸ The reflections on ethics in this article engage with the readings of Emmanuel Levinas and Mark Alain Ouaknin, two thinkers whose theoretical concerns come out of their studies of the Talmud and the definition of reading as a never-ending act. While I don't mean to reduce Levinas' ideas on ethics to the act of reading, I want to stress the ethical role of criticism, as the author explains in "Reality and Its Shadows" (*Collected Philosophical Papers* 1-13).

⁹ Rolando González, General Director of the institution, was traveling the week of my visit, so I could not interview him. His latest book, *Sinaloa: Una sociedad demediada*, offers an official view of what he considers are the complexities in the culture of narco-trafficking and the violence in Sinaloa. He analyzes the influence of left wing social movements: unions, student and agrarian movements, etc., from the '50s until now.

¹⁰ Some scholars claim that the local expansion of the long lasting poppy and marijuana plantations was part of the US demand during the Second World and the Vietnam Wars (Córdova). Thus Astorga claims that, even though the cultivation of these plants began in the nineteenth century, a historical construction of "crime" surrounding practices related to the growth of these plants began in the second part of the twentieth century.

¹¹ Many local authors feel more comfortable using another rubric established by literary criticism which has to do with the context of literary production within the country and place them as producers of 'Literatura norteña'. In a wider analysis I try to explore how a local literary field is situated at the crossroads of northern/narco-trafficking literature and compare it to the center's literary production (D.F.). The theoretical schemes in which the aesthetic proposals and their criticisms are inscribed are expressions of the place that the topic of narco-trafficking has in the imaginary of the country, as well as the regional prejudices surrounding the subject. For an analysis of northern literature see Ramírez Pimienta, ed. Informed readers will be familiarized with the issue of *Letras Libres* (October 2005), which caused a stir in its discussion of narco-trafficking as a northern matter. The controversy Rafeal Lemus generated with his article "Balas de salva. Notas sobre el narco y la narrativa mexicana" procured incredible sales for the magazine and fed some subsequent publications on the debate.

¹² "Traffic of illegal drugs" is the expression many scholars prefer when referring to the phenomenon (Astorga, *La mitología*; Ovalle).

¹³ Nery Córdova's *La narcocultura: simbología de la transgresión, el poder y la muerte. Sinaloa y la 'leyenda negra,'* offers a compelling, and probably the most illuminating, view on the subject.

¹⁴ See "How to Read an Author" (*Pascalian Meditations* 88–92).

¹⁵ News about opium trafficking begins to be more frequent during this time. Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo, later known as Don Neto "hace su debut en las notas policíacas en 1955" (Astorga, *El siglo de las drogas* 93). Córdova also analyzes the importance of Governor Leopoldo Sánchez Céliz in strengthening the business during his term (1963–1968) (134).

¹⁶ On numerous occasions, the question of cultural relativism has been raised by anthropologists, including the limits of ethnography for a participating observer when confronted with extreme situations. Perhaps the finest example to mention is the scene

which discusses the rape in *In Search of Respect*. In it, the author, Phillip Bourgeois describes his own problems as a participating observer in the life of drug dealers in El Barrio, Manhattan.

¹⁷ Naturalizing death does not eliminate fear. It is worthwhile to explore this relationship, as it stands as a fissure where the human element of the experience is seen in a trade which requires a certain level of dehumanization. The assassins whom Alonso Salazar interviews in his book *No nacimos pa'semilla* (1990) speak to this topic at one point.

¹⁸ Today it would be impossible to imagine US authorities sending a drug-dealer immediately back to Mexican territory. This simple event illustrates how the policies towards drug-trafficking have dramatically changed in the past few decades.

¹⁹ This name is given to the lands between Durango, Chihuahua and Sinaloa, where the best poppy and marihuana plantations are.

²⁰ With Alfaro, I visited the chapel of Malverde. He took me to see the Buelna market, where dollars are sold on the black market. Another improbable character in narcotrafficking literature comes from here, but her fame has the prestige of being a picturesque point of reference for *culichis*. I am talking about Teresa Mendoza, the heroine of Arturo Pérez Reverte's *The Queen of the South*. This novel, although equally implausible, is popular because it combines certain elements readers find simple and even enjoyable. This is due to Pérez-Reverte's seductive and journalistic language. In his story the characters get involved in narcotrafficking because their destinies are (also) determined by tragedy and they are protagonists of impossible love stories. I also owe Alfaro the recording of the gunfire that inspires the rhythm of my writing.

²¹ Elmer Mendoza is the author of *Un asesino solitario* (Tusquets, 1999) and *El amante de Janis Joplins* (Tusquets, 2001). For many people, he is the great literary author of narcotrafficking in the region. See Juan Villoro's introduction to González's book, cited in this article. I analyze his work in "Las seducciones del crimen en la obra de Elmer Mendoza" (currently under review).

WORKS CITED

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Lo que queda de Auschwitz. El archivo y el testigo. Homo Sacer III*. Pre-Textos. España: 2005.
- Alfaro Bedoya, Leonides. *Tierra Blanca*. México: Editorial Godesca, 2004.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Astorga Luis. *Drogas sin fronteras*. México: Grijalbo, 2003.
- . *La mitología del narcotraficante en México*. México: Plaza y Janés, 2004.
- . *El siglo de las drogas: el narcotráfico, del Portiriatto al nuevo milenio*. México, D.F.: Plaza y Janés, 2006.

- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Pascalian Meditations*. California: Stanford UP, 2000.
- Bourgois, Philippe. *In Search of Respect. Selling Crack in El Barrio*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2003.
- Córdova, Nery. *La narcocultura: simbología de la transgresión, el poder y la muerte. Sinaloa y la 'leyenda negra'*. Mazatlán. Unpublished manuscript, 2006.
- González, Rolando. *Sinaloa, una sociedad demediada*. Culiacán: DIFOCUR, 2007.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987.
- López Cuadras, César. *La novela inconclusa de Bernardino Casablanca*. 2nd ed. México: U de Guadalajara, 1993.
- Nacaveva, A. *Diario de un narcotraficante*. 5th ed. México, D.F.: Costa-Amic Editores S.A., 1994.
- Ouaknin, Mark Alain. *Elogio de la caricia*. Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2006.
- Ovalle, Lilian Paola. "Ajustes de cuentas. Sicarios y muertes en Baja California." *Arenas. Revista Sinaloense de Ciencias Sociales*. (10): 71–88.
- Ramírez Pimienta, Juan Carlos, and Salvador C. Fernández, eds. *El norte y su frontera en la narrativa policiaca mexicana*. México, D.F.: Plaza y Valdés, 2005.
- Sommer, Doris. *Foundational Fictions. The National Romances of Latin America*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1991.
- Virilio, Paul. *El procedimiento del silencio*. Intr. Andrea Giunta. Buenos Aires: Espacios del Saber. Paidós, 2001.

Copyright of *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* is the property of Washington University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.