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In the Crossfire

Rascón Banda's *Contrabando* and the "Narcoliterature" Debate in Mexico

by
Sophie Esch
Translated by Richard Stoller

So-called narcoliterature in Mexico faces bitter controversy about its merits, duties, and scope. Compared with the three dominant discourses about the narco phenomenon in Mexico (the state, the media and music), literary texts harbor the possibility of presenting a more complex viewpoint. In particular, the novel Contrabando, *by Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, draws an especially ambiguous and complex image of the narco enterprise and avoids moralist, sensationalist, and romanticizing perspectives. The novel challenges hegemonic discourses about the narco world in Mexico by depicting the drug producer or trafficker not as a deviant, outlaw, or outsider but as intimately ingrained in both public and private spheres. In addition, the novel represents a critical reflection on the relationship between fictional literature and drug trafficking. It questions the role of writers and intellectuals in the context of narco violence. At the same time it proposes fragmentation and intermediality as possible literary strategies for narrating the narco phenomenon.*

La llamada narcoliteratura en México se enfrenta a una fuerte polémica sobre sus méritos, deberes y alcances. Al lado de los tres discursos y fuentes dominantes sobre el narco en México (el estado, los medios y la música), textos literarios guardan la posibilidad de presentar una visión más compleja. En particular la novela Contrabando *de Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda pinta un cuadro especialmente ambiguo y complejo de la gran empresa del narco y evita miradas moralistas, sensacionalistas y románticas. La novela desafía los discursos hegemónicos sobre el narco en México al no representar al narco como el fuera-ley, fuera-estado, fuera-sociedad. Por el contrario,* Contrabando *presenta al narco íntimamente arraigado tanto en la esfera pública como en la privada. Además, la novela misma es una reflexión crítica sobre la relación entre literatura ficcional y narcotráfico. Haciendo referencia a* narcocorridos, *la novela cuestiona el rol de los letrados en el contexto de la violencia del narco. Al mismo tiempo propone la fragmentación y la intermedialidad como posibles estrategias para narrar el narco.*

Keywords: *Narcoliterature,* Corridos, *Intellectuals, Mexico, Discourse, War on Drugs*

No word causes more controversy and consternation in Mexican literary circles than "narcoliterature." The negative connotation of the prefix "narco"

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and the fear of being reduced to this theme and catchphrase discomfit Mexican writers. The origin of the term is hazy: while some people say that it was created in the late 1990s by publishing houses eager to sell books (Palaversich, 2009: 9), others say that it is an invention of the mass media (Villalobos, 2012). What is certain is that the term has taken on a life of its own and the writing associated with it has been the subject of academic and artistic controversy. In this debate different issues overlap: the conflict between the old guard of literary power rooted in the capital and the emerging cultural power centers of the North, market(ing) concerns, and broader considerations about the ethical and aesthetic duties of literature in general. The common denominator is the question what literature can and should contribute in relation to narco violence. This article discusses the possibilities and limits of narcoliterature and locates the novel *Contrabando*, by Victor Hugo Rascón Banda, within this debate, emphasizing its particular discursive and metaliterary strategies as opposed to readings that tend to reduce the novel to its ethical positioning.

Contrabando, whose author is more widely known as a playwright, is a unique text in the literature about drug trafficking in Mexico. The novel was written in the late 1980s[1] and focuses principally on the world of marijuana and poppy cultivation. The unpublished manuscript won the Juan Rulfo Prize for First Novel offered by the Mexican National Council for Culture and the Arts in 1991, and a theatrical adaptation was presented in 1991. While the play was published two years later, the original novel was hidden away in a drawer until it was published posthumously by Planeta in 2008. It is unclear why it was not published earlier. Some say that it is because Rascón Banda never authorized its publication (Moreno de Alba, 2008), while others say that publishers rejected the manuscript at that time (García Ramírez, 2011). While critical works are only now beginning to appear (Iribe Zenil, 2012; Moreno de Alba, 2008; Oliver, 2012; Palaversich, 2012a; 2012b; Trejo Fuentes, 2009), some critics already consider *Contrabando* "the great novel of drug trafficking" in Mexico (García Ramírez, 2011, Palaversich, 2012a; 2012b).

Diana Palaversich argues that the novel stands out from others with similar subject matter because of its "ethical stance" (2012b). According to Palaversich this ethical positioning manifests itself in the focus on victims, the empathy cultivated in the reader, and the perspective of the socially committed writer. While the novel can be read along these lines, here I instead propose a reading that spotlights its discursive and metaliterary interventions as well as the ambiguity with which it treats the topic. These discursive interventions consist of the author's decision to a) treat the narco not as the Other, a deviant outside of law, order, and society, but rather as someone who is part of society; and b) depict the drug war not as a war between criminal elements and the state but as a civil war in which the state forces constitute just one of several competing parties. Furthermore, the novel itself is a metacommentary on the relationship between fictional literature and drug trafficking, recognizing the limits to the ability of writers and of literature to take on the phenomenon. The novel reflects upon the decentering of the writer by acknowledging that, when it comes to the narco phenomenon, fictional literature not only competes with governmental and media discourses but also with musical ones: with the *corrido* (popular ballad)—the genre most identified with the narco. Next to the corridos, the

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fiction writer appears as somewhat out of place, not trusted to be able to relate the violence of Chihuahua's mountains. Part of this metacommentary is also a question that extends throughout the novel: What is the right way to relate what is happening? Rascón Banda uses various narrative strategies, including multiplicity of voices, intermediality, and fragmentation, to draw a complex picture of drug trafficking that avoids romanticism, sensationalism, and hasty moral judgments. Ultimately, these deliberations on content and form end up vindicating the role and potential of fictional literature by showing that it contributes important perspectives on the narco phenomenon that are not that visible or allowed in other discursive spheres.

FICTIONAL LITERATURE AND THE NARCO: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

The prefix "narco" is used to excess in Mexico, creating neologisms whose meaning is not always clear (Reguillo, 2012; Villareal, 2010). While there is some consensus on what constitutes narcoculture,[2] that clarity dissolves when it comes to literature, a realm not as organically related to the drug world as narcoculture. Many Mexican writers[3] dislike the word "narcoliterature" (Villalobos, 2012), and many critics find it inadequate as a descriptor. Orlando Ortíz (2010) and Paul Goldberg (2008) deem the prefix derogatory, used merely to marginalize and delegitimize certain forms of cultural expression. Rafael Lemus (2005) instead argues that it is inadequate because this kind of literature writes only about but not from within and like the narco. In accordance with these critiques, and in the absence of a less bulky term I prefer to speak of "narco-themed literature." Some critics will question the definition of a literary text in terms of its topic, but the reality is that the topic has ruled the definition while formal particularities have been identified a posteriori. In fact, only the topic itself encompasses these texts, while their formal and structural aspects have diversified enormously over the past few years. Mexican narco-themed literature used to be characterized by genres such as the detective novel and *costumbrismo* (a literary genre dealing with local customs) and by exclusively male narrators and protagonists. Yet now it includes fables, the picaresque, *testimonios*, and works with female or child narrators.[4] Oliver (2012) has made an interesting attempt to define narco-themed literature as a proper subgenre, but its still recent and experimental nature makes any definitive demarcations premature.

It is worth clarifying that "narcoliterature" is at times defined more broadly to take in investigative journalism (Bosch, 2009; Ortiz, 2010; Palaversich, 2009: 8). These works aim to present facts and journalistic or academic analysis, but they are not devoid of literary aspirations. For reasons of personal safety, taste or lack of information, at times it is easier to fictionalize. However, in this article I will draw a narrower definition, one limited to works commonly labeled literary in which fictional elements predominate. This is not to deny that fictional literature competes with journalism when it comes to the narco as theme. In fact, fiction operates in a setting dominated by three discourses: those of the state, the media, and popular music. Mexico's national imagination is dominated by the epic and tragic tone encapsulated in the *corrido* and the moralistic

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and/or sensationalist tone of the mass media and the state. In this context, readers seek more complex answers and analysis in works of investigative journalism that sell by the thousands. Alida Piñon (2011) notes that publishing houses like Random House Mondadori and Planeta have sold 310,000 copies of a group of five books dealing with narco topics. The three best-sellers were *Los señores del* narco, by Anabel Hernández [2010], *La reina del Pacífico*, by Julio Scherer García [2008], and *El México narco*, by Rafael Rodríguez Castañeda [2009]. Fiction about the narco, often by the same publishing houses, is big business as well, if not quite on the same scale. The publishing house Planeta, for example, sells both *El México narco* and Rascón Banda's novel *Contrabando*. Yet fictional texts face far more scrutiny and resistance.

Since the genre is so new, much of the debate about narco-themed literature has taken place online, in digital journals or blogs. Some writers defend the genre as a valid depiction of the social reality that surrounds the writer, particularly in northern Mexico (Parra, 2005; Yépez, 2009), while its detractors have a long list of grievances. One major complaint is that this type of literature exoticizes the Mexican and Latin American experience (Serna, 2009; Volpi, 2011). Enrique Serna argues that there is an enormous fascination with Mexico's narco violence abroad, accompanied by a strange notion that at least something interesting is happening in Mexico. Yet this is not to say that Mexicans themselves are not also spellbound by the narco phenomenon. People are horrified and terrified but are unable to take their eyes off the spectacle. Another criticism is that so much literary output is of low quality, produced solely for a market hungry for more grist for the public's fascination with the narco, without any constructive agenda (Ortiz, 2010; Palaversich, 2009). This discussion is complicated by the escalation of violence since Felipe Calderón declared war on the drug business when he came to power in 2006. Today's extreme and spectacular acts of violence seem different, and the desperation and disorientation about what to say and do about them are enormous (Vericat, 2012). Specifically, some observers criticize the literature's avoidance of moral judgments (Bosch, 2009; Palaversich, 2009: 9) or lack of an ethical stance in terms of empathy and social commitment (Palaversich, 2012a; 2012b). While I do not doubt that a lack of moral judgment or ethical stance may be questionable for some readers, these considerations strike me as the least fruitful, since literature has no general obligation in this regard. The potential of fiction is precisely that it can express ideas that are not so permissible in other discursive spheres (without forgetting that literature itself is a practice of power). Moral concerns run the risk of discursively censoring cultural expressions without necessarily adding to our understanding of this emerging literature.

More worthwhile are the criticisms that focus on form and context, as in the debate between Rafael Lemus and Eduardo Antonio Parra in the pages of *Letras Libres* in 2005—a debate that already seems distant, something to be recounted with amusement (Carrera, 2010: 10), but that still contains important points. Lemus, in a deliberate attempt to stir things up, argued that the new genre suffered from deficiencies in narrative strategy and in creativity. His concern was not a lack of morality but rather the continuing use of costumbrismo and realism and the same old linguistic, thematic, and structural elements without any creative attempt to come up with new ideas. He claimed that fiction was not

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adequately depicting the devastating, explosive, and out-of-control reality of the narco because it was too docile and orderly, creating the mistaken impression that the phenomenon could be controlled. For Lemus, the necessary transition was from "literature about the narco" to true "narcoliterature," which would not merely copy reality but attempt to become reality. He called for antinovels that would express the incoherence, brutality, and absurdity of the narco, since it was not possible to neatly wrap the narco within a generic novelistic structure. Lastly, he argued that the existing literature could not help but attempt to write a saga of the Northern/border region and thus was unable to imagine itself beyond a regionalist celebratory gesture in which the narco is part of the peculiar local customs.

Lemus's gambit of equating literature about the narco with Northern literature in general is highly questionable, since the latter is very heterogeneous (Palaversich, 2007; Rodríguez Lozano, 2002). Yet there is something to his concern about the early literature's costumbrista tendencies and quest for a border saga. In his "Norte, narcotráfico y literatura" (2005), Eduardo Antonio Parra strongly rebutted Lemus but largely on the conventional ground that this was the North's reality. Parra did not engage Lemus's critique about a general lack of creativity, a critique that referenced Parra's own novel about a paid assassin, *Nostalgia de la sombra* (2002). It was left to the literature itself to counter this critique. Novels such as *Trabajos del reino*, by Yuri Herrera, published in 2004 (and not referenced by Lemus in his 2005 article, for whatever reason), *Fiesta en la madriguera*, by Juan Pablo Villalobos (2010), and *La Biblia vaquera*, by Carlos Velázquez (2011), took narco-themed literature far beyond the detective novel of the original "father of narcoliterature," the Sinaloan Élmer Mendoza (1991; 1999). The first two works seek to imagine the lives of the new narcoelites, while the third is a fantastic journey through the popular culture of the North in which the narco theme is more of a backdrop.

There is certainly more variety and creativity in literary approaches to the narco theme today than in 2005, but this variety also shows that fictional literature is still seeking a suitable voice in relation to the phenomenon. I think that Parra is correct to note that the narco is not merely chaos, as Lemus claimed. For Parra, the notion of the narco as chaos represents a Mexico City bias, while in the North it is understood from direct proximity that the narco has some internal coherence and a system of values, albeit one distinct from that of other members of society. Lastly, Parra challenges Lemus's critique as a bourgeois vision shaped by the superficial and hysterical tone of the media. He is suggesting, in my reading, that literature can supply a perspective distinct from the three canonical sources of information about the narco in Mexico: the media, the government, and the corrido. While fiction may still be marginal compared with these other sources, it can take a more complex stance because of its relative autonomy as art.

This brings us to Rascón Banda's novel, whose approach transcends both hysteria and glorification: it burrows into the complexity of the phenomenon with aesthetic intentionality and without sensationalism. Through the use of ambiguity and fragmentation, *Contrabando* displays a carefully crafted tale of the narco's invasion of rural society in Chihuahua. The novel depicts a writer who travels from Mexico City to his birthplace, the village of Santa Rosa in

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Chihuahua's Sierra Tarahumara, to write the screenplay for a *ranchera* movie in what he hopes will be the idyllic country setting of his parents' home. Instead he finds a region that is under siege from drug violence. At first glance the plot seems to exemplify some of the usual criticisms of narco-themed literature, but a more detailed analysis shows that the novel represents a break with those schemes and stigmas.

Rascón Banda's own life escapes the facile contraposition of Mexico's "New North" versus its "Old Center." Born in Chihuahua, he not only made his mark as a dramatist in Mexico City—the goal of the "provincial" writer—but reached the summit of the capital's artistic elite (Olmos de Ita, 2010). The novel's own history goes against the current: in a time when, with rare literary exceptions, only corridos and movies were taking on the topic of drug trafficking in Mexico, *Contrabando* erupted onto the scene only to be forgotten for years, at least as a novel (as noted earlier, it existed as a play of the same name, with a smaller audience than the Planeta-published novel would eventually garner). The already successful writer ventured to his native land and returned to the capital with what would eventually be considered "the great novel of drug-trafficking," a category that scarcely existed at the time. Written before the great wave of interest in narco-themed literature, it was published at the crest of that wave, and by a leading publishing house. Although the novel eschews sensationalism in its writing, the physical presentation of the book—its cover kept in bright red and yellow—does not. And while *Contrabando* has its costumbrista aspects, such as the constant use of Northern slang and a focus on small farmers and rural entrepreneurs, it certainly transcends the simplistic and paternalistic stigma of that genre.

Rascón Banda's novel seeks out the complexity of the phenomenon while experimenting with form in order to find the best way to narrate the narco. *Contrabando* is a novel that draws small sketches of violence, and fragmentation is its narrative strategy. As the chapters proceed, the reader becomes aware of various violent episodes, generally told by the relatives of the deceased: the massacre of a family in the crossfire of narcos and police, the tragic life of a former beauty queen who marries a trafficker, the disappearance of a local mayor (the narrator's own relative), the strafing of marijuana fields, and the violent end of a spectacular narco wedding. One chapter consists of a play based on a corrido and the protagonist's impressions and another of a screenplay that he manages to produce despite the violence all around him. The stories follow each other quickly, name after name, told by people who want to bear witness to their tragedies. While there is one narrator of record, there are really multiple narrators, voices, and changes in perspective. *Contrabando*'s 23 chapters can be read independently, but taken together they constitute the novel: the innumerable stories intertwine, with the last sentence of one chapter serving as title for the next. The novel thus seeks a certain order, recalling Lemus's criticism that literature about the narco fails to depict the chaos wrought by the phenomenon. But the tension between fragmentation and multiplicity of voices as an aesthetic recourse and the desire to order what is disordered is in the interest of a wider project of creating an image of a region at war. This strategy represents the narco—long before the Lemus-Parra debate—as

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the simultaneous presence of order and disorder, just as the violence that afflicts the mountains is both ordinary and extraordinary.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss in depth the continuities, differences, and interactions between the novel and the play that debuted in 1991 (followed by its publication in 1993). It is, however, worth noting that although the two versions share certain narrative features, the overall treatment of the theme is much more complex in the novel. In the hyperrealist theatrical version, the writer is sitting in a telephone office in Santa Rosa and strikes up a conversation with three women who tell him about violent trafficking-related events. These three stories also figure importantly in the novel and in almost the same words: Damiana and the massacre of her family, the former beauty queen Jacinta married to a vanished narco, and Conrada's son's being killed while tending to his marijuana plants. The play ends with armed men coming to the town, killing all four characters. While the play does experiment with different voices—Myra Gann (2004: 182) notes that with this play Rascón Banda pushes the limits of theater because it is so narrative and there is hardly any action on stage—the narration is much more traditional and ordered than in the novel.

The theatrical version also contains some of the same fissures present in the novel, such as the introduction of doubts about the women's narratives and the role of the writer (Rascón Banda, 1993: 59, 65, 78). While these fissures are restrained in the play, in the novel they feed the overall sense of disintegration and fragmentation. The play displays a linear narration and a relatively clear, didactic message. The novel, in contrast, follows multiple strands, and the prevailing notion is that of ambiguity despite the clear sense of sadness and desperation the text conveys. This complex treatment is expressed through the novel's several interventions, both discursive (the representation of the narco) and metaliterary (the place of the writer).

THE NARCO IS NOT THE OTHER

From the opening pages of the novel, violence invades the text and the lives of the characters. Upon his arrival at the Chihuahua airport the protagonist is overcome by fear for no apparent reason, and suddenly he witnesses the fatal shooting of two people. The two checkpoints that he and his father pass through on the way to the Sierra Madre Occidental —the first by police checking for arms and alcohol (which is banned in the mountains), the second by the army checking for drugs—confirm the impression that in this region everything is governed by the rule of force (Rascón Banda, 2008: 10). It also becomes apparent that the state is a principal perpetrator of this violence. What seem to be preventive measures are themselves acts of repression and criminality of the state forces that contribute to the atmosphere of fear: the police confiscate alcohol to drink it themselves, and the army lets them pass only when the protagonist threatens to write about the incident in the Mexican news magazine *Proceso*, for which he works (11).

The novel's language expresses the violence both crudely and beautifully, evoking a fantastic atmosphere reminiscent of the work of Juan Rulfo, as both

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Palaversich (2012a) and Oliver (2012: 114) note. One chapter begins with a mother saying, "I myself prepared my son's death" (Rascón Banda, 2008: 69), for having helped him in his endeavor to start sowing marihuana. Death runs throughout the narrative: "Death arrived in Santa Rosa, and now it doesn't want to leave" (97). The violence and sense of tragedy are repeated in the novel's internal texts. All of the characters in the protagonist's theater play, "Guerrero Negro," end up dead (169). In his screenplay, "Triste recuerdo," the hero fails to rescue the woman he loves from the grip of a possessive narco, but she dies when she puts herself in the line of fire to save the hero (206). Another chapter starts with the village itself—"Santa Rosa awoke in mourning" (Rascón Banda, 2008: 85)—and later describes a night spent under siege when armed men (are they traffickers or police?, wonders the text) enter the village and bring about a bloodbath, which leaves 16 dead and many more injured (91).

One important discursive intervention in the novel is the representation of the conflict as a civil war. In the chapter "The River of Death" (97–101) helicopters suddenly attack the marijuana plantings, catching the protagonist and his father along the riverbank. The narrator cannot help but compare the scene evolving in front of his eyes to a war movie (100). Later, in a dream, he sees himself as an actor in a movie about the Salvadoran civil war, which was at its peak at the time (207–208). When he awakes he realizes that he is in fact in the new Mexican civil war; his driver fails to stop at a military checkpoint and dies in a hail of gunfire while he and his father are wounded (208). The novel draws scenes of war, with people killed, disappeared, or driven insane by the fear and violence.

Another discursive intervention is that the novel makes it impossible to view the narco as the Other. It does not permit the distancing that, as Juan Villoro noted in his prize-winning article "La alfombra roja" (2010, first published in 2008), is so common in Mexico's collective discourse. Depicting the narco as Other and claiming that "they" kill only each other and that one is not part of "these" people is the key rhetorical recourse for denying Mexico's reality while keeping the speaker at a discursively and morally safe distance. There is no such distance in *Contrabando*, which shows on a local scale—allegorically extendable to the national context—that the narco is intimately close to everyone and extends throughout society. It is true, as Palaversich (2012b) notes, that *Contrabando* is one of the few examples of narco-themed literature that focuses on victims, but it is noteworthy that hardly anyone is depicted as simply a victim of chance. Nobody is wholly a spectator from without, because all have been slowly absorbed into the narco world in one form or another, thus reproducing and sustaining it. Police, politicians of all levels, acquaintances, friends, relatives, everyone is involved in the great narco enterprise, diversified into branches such as cultivation, contraband, money-laundering, protection, and assault. The novel depicts people who refuse to see that they or their relatives are now directly or indirectly part of the drug enterprise: Damiana's story and those of the relatives of the mayor Julián and Bernabé González are not fully coherent, and they leave the reader in doubt (Rascón Banda, 2008: 22, 41, 209). Although the relatives deny any connection to trafficking, the text repeatedly insinuates that there will always be conflicting versions and that any form of truth is hard to discern.

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The inhabitants of the mountains are drawn to the drug trade by the economic benefits it offers, but then they become overwhelmed by the violence it entails. Yet the novel spends little time on the characters' initial decisions to get involved: it just happens, as something natural, as Fernando García Ramírez (2011) points out. One could argue that this is just part of a long tradition of marijuana and poppy cultivation in Chihuahua—despite the fact that the latter crop was more prevalent in Sinaloa, Durango, and Sonora (Astorga, 2005: 104). But it is rather that the novel can be read as the depiction of the moment when the drug business in Mexico took a huge quantitative and qualitative leap. The novel testifies to a moment of professionalization, increased production, and violent intensification of competition in Chihuahua. Similarly, it exemplifies drug trafficking's leap into the national, lettered imagination. Before the early 1990s narco themes had been mostly confined to the yellow press and popular culture such as corridos and the films of the Almada brothers. *Contrabando* neither glorifies narcos nor issues value judgments about them. Just as readers often cannot distinguish between narcos and police in the text, nor can they distinguish between friends and enemies. Although the novel has a chapter called "Portraits in Black-and-White" (Rascón Banda, 2008: 54–62), nothing is black-and-white. As the protagonist's mother says, in Santa Rosa general norms and the law as an institution do not exist anymore; "You can't discern what is good or what is bad," and there is nobody who is "without sin" (26, 209). The narcos of the novel are neither heroes nor beasts but ordinary people. The text consistently stresses their humanity. After the shooting at the airport, the crowd is furious with the gunmen, who try to exculpate themselves by signaling that the men they shot were narcos. The crowd is outraged and tells them that that was no reason to kill them (9). At another point in the novel, the narcos themselves highlight their humanity, if only jokingly and mockingly: "We're narcos, but we also have our little heart" (48). One of the novel's singular aspects is this complex representation of the narco: while the diffuse violence of the "narco-machine" (Reguillo, 2012) provokes terror, the individual narco himself is not a monster (like the bandit in some nineteenth-century narrative [see Dabove, 2007]) but a neighbor, a lover, and a son. He is dangerous and intimately close.

And the narco is also the state, in particular the *judiciales* (the most feared branch of the Mexican police because of its criminal and violent practices, nominally abolished in 2002). The novel repeatedly notes that the aggressors may have been narcos but could equally well have been judiciales: "At this point we don't know if they were narcos with judicial IDs or judiciales dressed up as narcos" (Rascón Banda, 2008: 41, 87). The police even face off against each other, as in the "Yepachi massacre," when Damiana's family is killed in a battle between federal and local judiciales. The military is depicted as a state actor not necessarily involved in trafficking but largely inept, incompetent and equally violent (10, 208). The state may have a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, but it loses that legitimacy by engaging in illegal activities, becoming just another actor in the violent struggle for drug markets. The narco cannot be marked as the Other or as an outlaw—as outside the state and the law—if he is so clearly part of society and the state apparatus.

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THE WRITER AND THE NARCO PHENOMENON

Another intervention of the novel is not discursive but metaliterary in that it self-critically problematizes the relationship between power and knowledge in narco-themed artistic production. The novel ponders not only the writer's decentered position when faced with narco violence but also several aesthetic considerations. Rascón Banda's proposes to narrate the narco phenomenon through fragmentation, intermediality, and the overlapping of multiple literary genres. This multiplicity of genre and media in *Contrabando* speaks to a constant search and lack of certainty about how to represent what is happening. Yet this fragmentation and uncertainty precisely become a narrative strategy for telling what seemingly cannot be told. Through the incorporation of different texts and media (music, scripts, two-way radio dialogues), *Contrabando* sketches the many faces of drug trafficking. The novel intertwines many sentiments: paralyzing terror and kitsch, heroism and cowardice in the ranchera film and the testimonios as well as an *engagé* stance and cynicism in the figure of the writer. It thus depicts the dilemma of the professional writer who in a violent and commercial context is torn between social commitment, the market, and safety concerns (Rascón Banda, 2008: 112, 134, 210).

Although the novel itself does not privilege any one form of narration, it makes apparent that the market privileges certain approaches. In the final chapter the reader learns of the various destinies of the novel's texts and characters. The chapter is set three months after the rest of the book—the writer is back in Mexico City trying to sell his two finished products and planning to burn and forget the testimonies he has recorded in Chihuahua as he promised his mother. In an interesting twist, his narco tale is eagerly received within high-brow culture but rejected by mass culture production: his play, "Guerrero Negro," is staged with a musical group playing narcocorridos and a backdrop of enormous photos of well-known traffickers (Rascón Banda, 2008: 133, 211). Meanwhile, the actor and singer Antonio Aguilar rejects the writer's screenplay, which he has commissioned, because the narco-ranchera does not fit the bill of a rural idyll; the writer also hears that Aguilar is unwilling to offend his narco friends (210).

By emphasizing both the spectacular and the quotidian aspects of the narco enterprise and the full range of cultural appropriations (popular, mass, and highbrow), the novel illustrates the complexity of the phenomenon and avoids hysteria and moralizing hypocrisy.[5] For instance, while narcocorridos appear frequently in the novel and sometimes form part of the narrative (Rascón Banda, 2008: 42), they do so simply as part of regional culture rather than as a violent incentive. This goes against official discourse, which condemns the supposed glorification of the narco figure in the songs and has tried to censor them in several states. The ubiquity of narcocorridos in the novel demonstrates the futility of this approach and invites the reader to distinguish between true and spurious incentives to violence: it is the clandestine nature of production and trafficking itself that causes violence rather than the music, which merely documents it.

Contrabando defends the discursive importance of corridos in documenting tragedy, and in a sense the novel imitates that function. Damiana says that she

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will be writing a letter to denounce the killing of her family, but it is more important to her that a song be written about it: "Someone should write a corrido so that it's not forgotten" (Rascón Banda, 2008: 13). At another point in the novel, family members find out about someone's fate only when they hear a corrido about him (133). A notion predominates in the novel that it is in corridos that "truths" and "real events" are chronicled and archived—a notion that was immortalized in the famous song "Jefe de Jefes" by Los Tigres del Norte in 1997. Corridos represent a popular mass cultural expression with regional roots that lettered culture has enthusiastically appropriated, as is suggested by the novel itself and its staging of "Guerrero Negro" with 21 songs performed by a Northern trio. These appropriations should be understood as more than simple costumbrismo or the lettered elite's own fascination with Mexico's "exciting barbarism" (Serna, 2009). Rather, the use of corridos is a way to validate and legitimize one's literary work through the use of symbols from popular and mass culture.

Within this same logic, it is revealing that the role of the writer is repeatedly questioned in the novel: he does not really fit in. He is from what Ángel Rama (1984) called the "lettered city" and, in the novel, people in the countryside clearly perceive the profession of being a writer as a practice of power. People ask him whether he is a judicial or a narco: "You glare the same way they do" (Rascón Banda, 2008: 12). His penetrating glance, born of a desire to absorb the reality of his setting (in order to transform it into fiction), makes him another violent actor. Apart from the violence he exudes, he is somewhat of an unfathomable being to the locals, as seen in this brief conversation with Damiana (12):

> And what do you do for a living?
>
> I'm a writer.
>
> Ah, a writer. Well, write me a corrido about what happened to me, so that the world knows.
>
> I don't do corridos.
>
> That's a shame. I thought, since you were a writer . . .

This decentering of the writer and the intellectual figure[6] evokes Horacio Legrás's (2008) analysis of Martín Luis Guzmán's novel *El águila y la serpiente* (1969 [1928]). Legrás claims that not only politics but also literature was surprised by the Mexican Revolution, and many of the so-called novels of the Revolution demonstrate a lack of understanding. For Legrás (2008: 121), *El águila y la serpiente* is a search for a new hermeneutic framework, as the intellectuals come to realize that the subalterns they thought they understood are illegible. Guzmán recognizes his own decentering in the text, and he thus returns repeatedly to the figure of Francisco Villa as he searches for a new essence of Mexico in the armed men of the Revolution (Guzmán, 1969 [1928]: 91). *Contrabando* resembles *El águila y la serpiente* in that both examine a violent situation in which the man of letters is out of place. His tools are considered inadequate to describe the reality of the narco, since he does not write corridos. Worse, his violent appearance and gaze puts him in danger, to the point where

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his mother seconds Damiana's observation that he looks like a narco and begs him not to return to the mountains for his own sake (Rascón Banda, 2008: 209). That his mother asks him to forget everything he has seen and heard is the ultimate denial of the writer's capacity to describe what is happening. The novel ends with the writer's transcribing the 21 corridos to be used in the play "Guerrero Negro" (211). The man of letters is no longer a writer, just a copyist.

Today there is undoubtedly great permeability between "lettered" and "popular" culture, both being subject to mass consumption. Corridos and literature are interrelated worlds, but the hermeneutic centrality and affective expressiveness of corridos destabilize the interpretive power of literature. Corridos referencing drug trafficking date back to the 1930s, and the song "Contrabando y traición" by Los Tigres del Norte became a hit in Mexico and beyond as long ago as 1973. As Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison argue in *Music and Social Movements* (1998: 162), music generally has a greater social impact because of its affective power. The narcocorrido is a powerful and distinctive narrative, celebrated as the authentic voice of the "people" but also criticized as commercial and immoral (Simonett, 2001; Wellinga, 2002). While there is probably a little bit of each of these three aspects in narcocorridos, overall this view is too simplistic. More promising is the approach of Miguel Cabañas (2008: 520, 524), who sees the heterogeneous genre as a way for marginalized populations to insert themselves into narratives of globalization. The corrido opens another epistemic horizon and represents a way to tell stories outside the official discourse—and literature needs the corrido and its "unofficial" position to find its own voice.

LITERATURE'S POTENTIAL

Literature brings several new elements to our understanding of the complex narco phenomenon. It offers ways to narrate the violence, to give testimony, to decipher the chaotic world of the narco. One could, of course, subject the search for order itself to critique, but I would argue that one of the goals of literature is precisely that. Literature represents a way to explain and order the world, to digest it and make it digestible. It can also be a vehicle for moralizing and educating about the narco, although I would question whether that is necessary or desirable.

The central contribution of *Contrabando* resides in its discursive and metaliterary interventions, which offer other perspectives than those of the state and the media and simultaneously call literature's role into question. Paradoxically, this ultimately vindicates the role of literature by showcasing its possibilities. The novel seeks to give testimony to violence and its impacts, but from a position of ambiguity—one of the prime elements of literary representation—and not from a Manichean one. This is not to deny Rascón Banda's *engagé* starting point as he systematically describes the violence, but the novel is not a simple condemnation of the narco; rather, it represents a social reality in which all of the characters (and, by extension, all of Mexican society) are in some sense involved. This includes the protagonist himself, through both his family and his artistic contributions.

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Although *Contrabando* seeks to unite its fragments in a master narrative of how trafficking has penetrated Chihuahua's rural society, it is a novel that looks for the little stories and the fragments. In this regard it is worth asking if the eager pursuit of "the great narco novel" might already belong to another time, situated before the 1990s: to paradigms of the boom of Latin American literature, and an era still characterized by a belief in grand narratives, which are no longer attainable in today's short and often dark novels. Rascón Banda suggests with *Contrabando* that the narco in his totality is not "narratable," at least not in a clear, coherent, linear narration without any fissures. Instead he proposes to narrate the narco through fragmentation and complexity rooted in constant doubt and suspicion of anyone participating in the discourse about the narco—the government, the witnesses, literature itself. No one is objective, and no one stands outside events. But this cautious warning not to trust anyone and the aesthetic of fragmentation end up redeeming literature's potential.

Narco-themed fiction may not be as powerful or well-liked as the corrido or investigative journalism, but it harbors the potential for approaching the the narco phenomenon differently. This is not because, unlike journalists and musicians, fiction writers need not fear for their lives, as Élmer Mendoza recently claimed by alleging that "narcos don't read" (quoted in Ramírez, 2011). Rather it is the institution of literature itself that gives writers the tools for exploring different angles. As Derrida (1991: 33) once put it, literature's very fictionality gives it the ability "in principle" to say anything and to break all rules. It remains to be seen whether Mexican fiction about the narco will be able both to maintain its freedom of expression and to fully explore its power of imagination in order to continue opening up different discursive spaces.

NOTES

1. Taking the autobiographical features of the novel into account, we can situate the events of the novel around 1987, since Rascón Banda was born in 1948 and the writer/protagonist is 39 years old.

2. What is considered narcoculture in Mexico is based largely on the often stereotypical image people have of a "particular way of life" (Williams, 1983: 90) of narcos based on honor, a low value on life, conspicuous consumption (of corridos, armored SUVs, and elaborately decorated weapons, houses, and tombs), and a style of dress including fine leather boots, hats, and cowboy and polo shirts (Peyote Inc., 2003). For an excellent discussion of these questions for Colombia, see Rincón (2009).

3. For reasons of space, this article deals only with Mexico and not also with Colombia; for a comparison see, for example, Ruchansky and Polit, 2011.

4. For some initial mappings of fictional literature and journalism about drug trafficking in Mexico, see Bosch (2009), Palaversich (2006; 2009; 2012a; 2012b), and the reviews by Fernando García Ramírez throughout 2011 in *Letras Libres*.

5. The play is more rigid and less ambiguous when it comes to corridos. Armando Partida's (1991) review of the performance sees the corridos as complementary, but, going by the script (I have not seen it performed), the corridos appear largely as an unwanted interruption: Damiana in particular sees them as an insult and repeatedly expresses the desire that the trio in the street stop playing (Rascón Banda, 1993: 47, 78). In the play she asks the writer for a newspaper article, not a corrido (47).

6. This ambiguity about the writer's role also predominates in the play, when Damiana asks the writer if—assuming that he really *is* a writer and not a narco or judicial as she suspects—he will write about what is happening (Rascón Banda, 1993: 47, 78). In the play, the writer dies before it can be determined which side he is on.

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