

Demanding the Political: *Widows*, or Ariel Dorfman's *Antigones*

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Introduction: American Dialogues¹

“Anthropophagy” (to invoke Oswald de Andrade’s famous manifesto²) practiced in relation to Sophocles’ tragedy in the American continent goes back almost two hundred years. Far from simply assimilating it or making cosmetic adjustments to it as though it were to be used as a decorative object external to the body (a ring for the finger, or a tie for the neck), American cultural practices have gnashed the Sophoclean tragedy with their teeth. *Antigone* has been cannibalized, creolized, trans-culturized. In fact, this cultural cannibalism is such a longstanding tradition that it may be time for a different metaphor to describe the circulation of *Antigone* in the continent—and maybe even the circulation of Greek culture in general. I am thinking, for instance, of the image of “rumination” instead of that of anthropophagy, if only because the latter does not necessarily connote the “obstinate memory” (recalling the felicitous title of Patricio Guzmán’s film) suggested by the verb “to ruminate.”³ In the case of *Antigone*, its American “rumination” points to the continental obstinate remembrance of, and political concern with, unburied corpses, symbolized in the Greek tragedy both by the body of Polyneices and by that of Antigone herself. Buried alive, Antigone will also be deprived of the honor of ritual.

To ruminate is to turn over and over something that has already been “ingested” (and not properly digested) physically or mentally. The metaphor of cannibalization stresses the first moment of the violent encounter with that which is foreign and external to the body; that first bite, which tastes of rebellion (with regard to the European canon). This metaphor may no longer suffice to account for certain aspects of the rewriting of New World *Antigones*. Come to think of it, cannibalism is

limited as an image in comparison to rumination: humans are monogastric, and their canines stop growing at a certain point in their lives. Ruminating animals have four stomachs, and their teeth never stop growing. They digest in two stages—they regurgitate. What they ingest circulates through several places and in different directions. The “ingested” *Antigone* is cannibalized as a foreign artifact, a colonial legacy, in the early nineteenth century. But, having ceased to be *external* to the Creole symbolic-digestive system, it returns from within the system to be re-created in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. *Antigone* will be reused time and again by the 1940s nationalisms, the 1968 Mays, the human rights discourses of the last quarter of the twentieth century, and the current fight against new forms of globalized violence against women. This endless rumination allows us to envision the construction of a corpus of American *Antigones* that engage in regional dialogues with their own internal dynamics.

In this essay I discuss one of the vicissitudes of such rumination of Sophocles’ play: Ariel Dorfman’s *Viudas* (Widows) (1988). A product of Dorfman’s exile from Chile after Augusto Pinochet’s 1973 military coup, the play’s form traveled a long way from its 1978 novelized version to its first 1988 theatrical version, which was later revised several times by the author.⁴ This play has been read as the recovery of the memory of resistance, and of those who disappeared, under Pinochet’s military regime. I will argue that the play’s politics of memory concerns first and foremost the recovery of the memory of the political as such, rather than of any specific type of remembrance or forgetting practices.

But, as a preliminary note to my analysis, I pause to briefly illustrate what the internal dynamics of the American corpus of Antigones might begin to look like after proper study. From a comparatist point of view, Dorfman’s version is a late development in the long American rumination of *Antigone*, which seems to have started, as far as I know, with Antigone’s first appearance on the American stage, actually in South American territory, when Juan Cruz Varela wrote his *Argia* in the then-revolutionary port of Buenos Aires in 1824.⁵ One should say, Antigone’s first “disappearance”: a poet of the 1810 May revolution, Varela decided to kill the ancient virgin Antigone before the play began and transform his heroine not into a modern, Christian virgin but into *a mother whose child is kidnapped by the state*. For Latin American readers familiar with the region’s history, Varela’s transformation of the character undoubtedly constitutes a chilling presage of the Antigones that would appear in theatrical and real-life settings when the continent became one of the bloodiest Cold War landscapes. Playwrights have found boundless inspiration (and their nightmare, perhaps) in the ancient Greek myth to depict state terrorism and its “neco-politics” (my homage to Achille Mbembe’s apt phrase), one of whose strategies was the practice of forced kidnappings and disappearances.⁶ A vicissitude of this mother of a kidnapped child reappears on Dorfman’s stage.

I recall *Argia* here so that we may envision the birth of a tradition in post-independence South American theater history that performs a twofold appropriation. In appropriating the Greek myth, this tradition appropriates also the theater stage to meditate on the specific historical fate of *motherhood* since independence. Such fate would transform most American Antigones into figures of political motherhood—of “political maternalism,” to use Marcela Nari’s (2004) expression. Discourses of political maternalism turned women into public bastions in defense of the nation across the region. On the theatrical stage, I suggest, these figures for motherhood became an alternative imaginative horizon for political action itself. Varela’s *Argia* is one such political mother on stage.

Varela has *Argia* ask Creon for the body of Polyneices, her husband, but the tragedy does not focus on this conflict. Creon does not refuse *Argia*’s request. Rather, he kidnaps her son and tries to bribe her with a trade: the life of the child in exchange for her marriage to Creon. *Argia* refuses to give in as a woman and she is killed. At this time the final battles for independence from Spain were being fought in the region (Junín and Ayacucho, 1824). It is also at this time (1823) that the national government was promoting the creation of the elitist women’s organization “Sociedad de Beneficencia” (Charitable Association). The Sociedad de Beneficencia granted elite Creole women’s “maternal instinct” a political role. As a *republican* mother, Varela’s *Argia* must be the mother of the nation. She has produced an offspring, who will be saved, while she dies as a woman. Varela has *Argia* choose to be a “heroine” rather than the “mother” of her singular biological child. If she must be a mother, she will be the mother of the nation. As such, it will be her fate to embody the heroic figure of freedom. She is thus forced to partake in the narrative of “freedom or death,” which justifies her sacrifice. The nation is founded both on the corpse of the tyrant and on the sacrifice of the heroine, who dies to rid her fatherland of its oppressor. Her child-country, in turn, is rescued by the “good” republican men—represented in the play by *Argia*’s father.

Argia’s political maternalism is worth mentioning for two reasons. First, because of the uncanniness of a scene (a mother, a kidnapped child, a state that kidnaps its children, a mother appealing to the state) that appears so early in history heralding the dramatization in twentieth-century *Antigone* plays of the real-life political practice of “forced disappearances” orchestrated by multiple states in the territory. Second, because as an example of a scene that repeats in later plays (and in the case of Dorfman’s, mother and son are pivotal to the denouement), it inspires research into possible dialogues within the corpus of American *Antigones*. As I have argued elsewhere in favor of taking distance from the critical gestures that analyze American *Antigone* reincarnations by comparing them directly with their ancient Greek precursor, these dialogues internal to the region might give us greater insights into its cultural history.⁷

Varela's play may be seen as a precedent to the tribute offered by American playwrights to a "politics of memory," which seems to be intrinsic to the tragic genre. The Argentine dramatist used the myths learned in the past—the classical culture taught at elite colonial schools, one of which he had attended in Córdoba city—to tackle pressing matters of his present. The choice of a mother for the leading role must be read, in my view, in correspondence with political narratives bringing mothers to the fore at the birth of the Creole republic. Recall for a moment, the famous motto "to govern is to populate," which Alberdi would write in 1852 and which he would supplement with his view of mothers as the basis for the state.⁸

As Dionysian and dithyrambic as we may envision its origins to be, Athenian fifth-century tragedy resulted also from political transactions between the polis's past and present. This cultural operation involved what we may call "political uses of the past." In present-day language, we might say that underlying the invention of tragedy lay a politics of memory that helped instate a *memory of the political invention of Athens*. Such an invention – the invention of direct democracy—may be conceived of as structured around ritualized antagonisms in the democratic assembly that would, in turn, regulate civic memory. These political rituals allowed the Athenians to negotiate the border between political antagonism (*sensu stricto*) and civil war and thus remain in relative peace for almost two hundred years.⁹ One of those rituals was tragedy itself as it contributed to regulating civic memory. Nicole Loraux reminds us that the fifth century started with a ban against the representation of current defeats as a result of the production of Phrynicus's tragedy on the fall of Athens at Miletus, and ended with a law of amnesty passed by the new democracy in the wake of the dictatorship of the thirty tyrants (411–403 BCE).¹⁰ Amnesty precluded both memory (Phrynicus's mistake) and "memory against," that is, revenge (Loraux, "De la amnistía" 26–27).¹¹ Tragedy, in turn, avoided certain memories while staging others. Staged memories, regulated by myth, represented the antagonistic conflict characteristic of the democratic politics Athenians had invented.

The political transaction between past and present that configures tragic form and, as I suggest here, stages the antagonistic space of "the political" (the opposite of the space of war, or of negotiation and consensus) has inspired many playwrights since Varela to use the myth of Antigone in critical dialogue with the region's peripheral modernity. Interestingly enough, whereas we may say that the conditions of peripheral modernity have fostered meditations on political motherhood on the tragic stage, we may note also that the ancient Sophoclean version of the myth already contained an incredibly fruitful image that came in aid to dramatize the necro-politics of peripheral modernity. What is the ban against burying Polyneices but the *forced disappearance*, not so much of a corpse (Polyneices lies rotting under everyone's eyes) as of a *name* (a symbol) of the community? And why

not add, of that other symbol on his shield, the warrior guided by a woman—justice? And what is the corpse that returns to pollute the city but one of the figures of the inherent difficulty of political “disappearance”? If South American peripheral modernity has depended on a “necro-politics” and its systematic practice of forced disappearance (a practice that is not exclusive to military dictatorships, suffice it to think about present-day Colombia), such a “disappearance”—of the names, of the bodies—is also the disappearance of something else, namely, of the antagonistic space of *the political* as it is transformed into the militarization of politics. This is the gist, in my eyes, of Dorfman’s play.

Dorfman and the Critics

The immediate historical context to understand Dorfman’s *Widows* is Augusto Pinochet’s militarization of Chile between 1973 and 1990. As is well known, the regime aimed to implement a neoliberal economic model. Nobody could describe the military’s goal more succinctly than Pinochet himself: “Nation means trying to transform Chile into a country of property owners rather than proletarians” (*El Mercurio*, April 24, 1987).¹²

With the propertied and the non-propertied *Widows* is cast. Criticism of the play has been so scarce that readers are not likely to know the play in detail. It is worth, therefore, recalling the plot. The setting is the peasant town of Camacho, which has lost practically all its men after an eight-year war. Camacho is a Chilean “Macondo” of sorts, surmises the spectator, alert to the reference in the Captain’s discourse: as he says, he has arrived in Camacho with a plan to end “the great loneliness and sadness” (9) of the town by bringing progress, science, democracy, and of course amnesty. Two families symbolize the kind of armed conflict that has decimated the community, namely, the Fuentes family, peasants who descend from the indigenous population, and the Kastorias, local landowners. The Kastorias have acquired their property by way of colonial theft, which has resulted in the circulation of land tenure among Camacho’s “fourteen families” from one generation to the next for the last four hundred years (14).

The “progressive” Captain suggests that the town build a fertilizer plant where women wash clothes in the river. On the riverbank Yanina lulls to sleep a child that does not talk despite being old enough to do so. Grandmother Sofia Fuentes—Dorfman’s major Antigone character—has been waiting for months, motionless, by the riverbank for the water to bring back her disappeared men: her father, husband, and sons. The river current delivers the first body in an unrecognizable state, and she claims it as her father Carlos.¹³ The local lieutenant burns the body out of fear of the consequences of a funeral. A second unidentifiable body appears in the river, and Sofia claims it as her husband Miguel. Emanuel, a

peasant who has gone over to the Kastorias' side and advises the Captain, suggests that his girlfriend Cecilia claim the body as her disappeared husband Theo. The latter will then be buried as if he had died in an accident.

The Captain kidnaps Sofía's grandson Alexis to force her to collaborate, which calls to mind that first mother-in-distress, Argia, in 1824 Buenos Aires. Sofía collaborates in this first instance. Once Alexis has been freed and the funeral taken place, Sofía and the rest of the women go to the tomb and share the bread they baked during the night. They all come to see the body buried under the name of Theo as their own disappeared relative; the dead body belongs to them all. And thus it is that the thirty-six widows go to the Captain's office asking him for permission to bury their relative, who they tell him lies beneath "Theo's" tomb.

The Captain's second strategy fails to silence the women—Alonso, Sofía's son, is freed after "singing" names under torture. Sofía "understands" that she must keep waiting for her men by the river. All the women join her and start a bonfire. Yet the third strategy is final. The Captain kidnaps Alexis and Sofía and, like Varela's 1824 Creon (another flash backwards), places Sofía in an impossible dilemma. In order to save the child's life she must surrender to the Captain and stop demanding for burial. Like Argia, Sofía refuses to give in. She and Alexis are killed. Now the women face the soldiers by the river, and a third unrecognizable body surfaces. The women lift it in their arms as they would a child and start walking. The soldiers are ready to shoot.

Though the play has been read as the recovery of memory, of the drama of resistance against the dictatorship, and of the emerging human rights discourses in the region, I analyze in the play not so much the drama of a "politics of memory" as the drama of "the memory of the political."¹⁴ A politics of memory (always plural) can only operate as such when the field of "the political" exists. It is the specific memory of the antagonism that constitutes the political sphere, that the play stages. This antagonism makes it possible for all the practices of memory and forgetting (including amnesty, which is a memory of those who might be absolved) that constitute a "politics" of memory. The play does not dramatize the memory of names (of monuments) as such or, alternatively, the memory of politics as consensus or contract. Rather, the play contrasts two types of memory—one that paralyzes (and monumentalizes) and one that mobilizes—thus catalyzing the emergence of the political as a field of antagonism. The latter is founded on the women's demand (maternal, in this case) for the type of universality that we may adjudicate to the field of the political proper. The universality advocated by Camacho's women falls outside the field of "ethics" (there is no return to ethics here) and transforms the women's demands into an "impossible" claim (as expressed by the women in the play) on account of the kind of public sphere where the demand takes place, which as we will see does not make room for more than the singular claims allowed

by the military. One could formulate it thus: *Widows* dramatizes the memory of “the political” through a group of women who demand the *existence* of politics with a motto that posits an “impossible” universal: *all* the bodies must appear, and *all* those who are guilty must be tried. This “impossible” is what supports a properly political antagonism—that exceeds the terms of the contract, consensus, or negotiation—and produces the conditions of possibility for the debate that allows for the politics of memory to exist. It is also “an impossible” claim that has only emerged by sacrificing the illusion of the universal ethical imperative.

I do not try to decipher the complexity of this play in these few pages; I aim only at an interpretation of the women’s actions. Critics unanimously find in *Widows* either a tribute to Chilean resistance or an attempt to recover the memory of those “disappeared.” Sophia McClellenn stresses “the story of extraordinary will and rebellion” (133) that puts into play identity, power, and the recovery of “local memory” (126). The mute child “is a metaphor for a human society that has consistently refused to name and narrate the atrocities of the past” (188). Women fight “over who has the power to define the dead body” (126). It is a matter of “life and death” that illustrates “the extreme connections between language and life” (127).¹⁵

Jennifer Wallace, in turn, considers that Dorfman’s piece is one of the many plays that reinstate “the existence of the disappeared” (106). For Euisuk Kim we are dealing with the return of the Real (in the Lacanian sense). As the living dead, the corpses in the river return to collect the symbolic debt represented by their lacking a burial, and transform the widows in living dead as well. Compelled to act by the “drive” (in the Freudian sense), these women “offer themselves to the Other as a gift of reconciliation and become the memories of the future generations” (68).

Finally, in his essay “The Apolitics of Antigone’s Lament (from Sophocles to Ariel Dorfman),” Clifton Spargo places the widows, Antigone, and the women who search for the disappeared in real life in a space he calls “apolitics.” This space is formed by discourses and values constructed as “universalist obligations that supersede the political ordering of the public realm” (119). The human rights discourse is an example, for it comes “as if from elsewhere than the polis, beginning as it were, from nowhere, from amidst people who do not count, whose daughters and sons have been terrorized and disappeared . . . Antigone [is aligned] with those who would speak apolitically insofar as they find themselves violently excluded from the polis” (134).

For this author, apolitics is dual; it is “the sign . . . of the realm outside the polis and of claims exercised . . . against it” (130). Dorfman’s play “politicizes” the “apolitical” voices of women. Yet his reading of the “apolitical” as a point of departure leads Spargo to see in Sofía’s actions a “cult of the ancestors” (131) that prompts her either “to do violence on other women for claiming the corpse she believes is her husband” (131) or to demand “only that the officer return to her a real,

alive husband, without explanation of his absence” (132). Still, the author sees in the end that Sofía’s apolitical stance is not convincing: “so thoroughly political is Sofía’s own paradoxically apolitical conviction, however, that the appeal to apolitics as a rhetorical mode expressing indifference to, or agnosticism about, political culture is entirely unpersuasive to this Latin Americanized Antigone” (132). The problem seems to lie in finding a way to articulate the paradox of considering “apolitical” a discourse that can speak the language of the polis.

I have found the views above insufficient to account for the women’s actions in Dorfman’s play. I should begin with questioning the “apolitical” nature of universalistic human rights discourses, of which the play would be an example. The very definitions of “human” and “right” are constantly being subject to strenuous political debates, and originate in distinct political junctures.¹⁶ Further, it is hard to imagine an “apolitical” space that is so well protected from the influence of the interests of the state but can still be understood by it—and even harder if we consider women’s social experience. In so far as it needs to reproduce soldiers for its armed forces and factories, can the state afford *not* to intervene at all times shaping the discourses that account for women’s experience? A historical look at the alleged division between the private space, “protected” from “contamination,” and the public space would reveal how such division has been ideologically naturalized.¹⁷

As to the women in Camacho, their lines in the play appear to organize their actions in political terms and, as with the women in real life, in full awareness of the political dangers their actions entail.¹⁸ Whereas they are led by the discourse on family values, the latter is a direct response to the family discourse carefully developed *by the state*, represented in the play by the military. As is the case with many real-life women, the Camacho widows do not use a language produced in a space mysteriously protected from state influence. They actually respond to and use the state’s idea of motherhood. The militarization of the home in real life was not reduced to the invasion of domestic space (tapped phones, nocturnal watches, raids, and so on). It was performed in the first instance by means of a discourse on the “defense of the family” against its alleged enemies (in this case, socialism), a discourse that constructed the family precisely as a bastion in the fight against these enemies. Camacho’s captain defends the family. The widows react against his rhetoric because this very defense has transformed them into a specific figure within the family, namely, “family of the politically disappeared.” Camacho’s militarized state interpellates the widows with the contingent construction of the figure of the “mother (or wife, or sister) of a *politically* disappeared,” which is *neither* that of “a mother” *nor* that of “a mother of a disappeared.”

It is because Camacho’s women situate themselves in a dialogue with power, moreover, that the psychoanalytic concept of “the drive” is not enough to account for their actions. In the sphere of the drive there is

pure silence; the drive returns always upon itself, to its source, leaving nothing to be interpreted. However, and Kim mentions this in passing, the women in the play want to make the bodies visible *in the eyes of the military*. This action is a demand to the other and (if we want to stay within the psychoanalytic framework) it must find words that the other may hear—it is subject to the requirements of language and of the material conditions in which this language may be uttered. It is in this sense that a demand asks for the other's recognition, for something that exceeds its content. The widows enter into a structure of interlocation with a (military) subject that, according to their assumptions, has knowledge (the knowledge they lack concerning the missing bodies). Furthermore, their demand dramatizes the change that might occur if it were heard.

Describing the content of the widows' demand is not enough either. It is not just a question of a demand for “burial” but rather to whom they demand it, and under which conditions of possibility they can carry out their demand. While she considers that what is at stake is “who” has the power to define the dead body,¹⁹ McClennen believes that this power points to the connection between language and life. Being named means being “alive.” Yet the main question, in my eyes, is what facilitates this connection and qualifies it in a special way. In this play all parties involved name the corpses: the military and the women. What is striking is that all the names given to the corpses that appear in the river are fictitious—both the military's reconstruction and the names the women attribute to them. The “true” names are not recovered. Rather, unrecognizable corpses are endowed with narrative constructions. Since the language with which corpses are named and the corpses themselves are not connected by any “truth” (the real names won't be known at any point in the play), what matters is then the structure of interlocation that has required the donation of fictitious names. The donation of names is dependent upon the structure of political interlocation with the military in which the women are placed. The women's fiction is structurally opposed to the fictions of the military, who construct narratives such as “they have no name” (they cannot be recognized). In this way, the women inaugurate not so much a connection between language and life as a connection between language and *political* life. With the demand for a name they antagonize, that is, they configure a political space *par excellence*. It is in this space of opposition where a horizon of social change may emerge.

On Impossible Universals, or the Importance of Being Carlos Fuentes

That for the women it is a question of “endowing names” becomes clear in the first scene; that it becomes clear through the trope of gestation time, or maternity time, which permeates the entire play, is not

surprising. It is the mother's desire that names. In the first scene, Sofía waits motionless and mute for the waters to "give birth," so to say, to a corpse that will arrive in the river without a name. Yanina lulls to sleep a child that is mute and nameless. The child's muteness finds its equivalent in Sofía's stillness. Sofía cannot live *because* of memory, and that is why the play is not about recovering the memory of mourning. Sofía says: "Yes. I'm a stone. I remember the missing so sharply I've forgotten everything else. I can't move. . . . I'm waiting. Because *I can't bear waiting any longer*" (11, emphasis added). The reason behind the boy's silence, according to Katherina, is also a "memory" that paralyzes him: "He misses his papa" (4), who actually disappeared before he was born and of whom he only "knows" what Yanina "knows" (90).

If what we are dealing with here is the connection between language and life, the question should rather be what type of life is bound to what type of language. In Camacho life is already tied to a certain mnemonic language that halts it. The initial scene shows that Sofía's wait is inextricably linked to Yanina's. For Yanina's son to be human and not just mute "life," Sofía's wait for the appearance (of a corpse) must be resolved. Sofía and Yanina's maternal wait and lullaby indicate the time of a production, a production that is above all *symbolic*. These two mothers, as mothers in general in this play, must give birth to the name, the word, the ritual, which grant not simply biological but more importantly communal life.

It is interesting to note the reversal of cultural symbols occurring in the play. If motherhood is traditionally associated with material production, here it is the Captain, not the women, who uses the motherhood metaphor as he refers to the production of *matter*, when he finds Sofía sitting by the riverbank. He talks to her about "fertilizing" to increase "harvests, exports": "Does your husband ever mention to you the need for modern fertilizers for his land" (5, the Spanish version adds: "Something more modern"). The final scene, where the thirty-six widows cradle the corpse and sing it to sleep, creates a parallel between the child and the corpse, as the women endow the latter with symbolic life. This parallel may give us more than one reason to meditate on the presence of mothers (in both fictional and real-life theaters) under these political circumstances. Neither the child nor the corpse is autonomous, and both must enter into symbolic life. If in real life motherhood is above all symbolic activity, the play insists on this aspect of motherhood and thus indicates in it a trope for the political.

Sofía takes the lead in expressing the maternal desire for a name, the knowledge of the fiction of name-endowing and its political value. When the first body surfaces in the river, it is so disfigured that Rosa says, "It hasn't got a face" (18). "It belongs to no one, it doesn't look like anyone," says Teresa (18, translation modified), echoing the discourse of the military, who are very far from wanting to recognize a corpse. Katherina summarizes the women's feelings to the Lieutenant: "How could I be sure? How *could I want* this one to be *my* brother?"

(22, emphasis added). Sofía, instead, immediately “knows” and “wants” this body to be her father, Mr. Carlos Fuentes. When she sees the body she yells, “I knew it. . . . I knew it . . . it’s my father” (18).

If the Captain resorts to the fiction of scientific “evidence” so as to endow the corpse with a proper name (and he knows it is fiction insofar as the destroyed body can never provide scientific evidence), Sofía puts forth a corresponding antagonistic fiction—that of myth and desire. Her father “came to [her] from the land of the dead. He sent his body because he wanted [her] to bury him” (25). Sofía’s fiction is that of a desiring corpse—her father, who disappeared for political reasons, “wants” to appear politically. Sofía knows that it is not possible to determine “with certainty” (as the Captain wants) if it is he. One must *decide* that one knows it is his corpse and not any other.

The second corpse to surface cannot be identified either, though it is clearly distinguishable: it is “entirely different from the first” corpse (32). The same, furthermore, happens with the third and last. Like the repetition of the very act of “disappearing,” the physical multiplicity of the nameless bodies dramatizes the inherent impossibility of the political practice of forced disappearance to be carried out in full. The first corpse is “disappeared” twice; the disappeared bodies “come back,” doubtlessly a dramatization of what *returns* in memory, what cannot be forgotten, and thus what necessarily enters the field of the disputable, of ebbs and flows, of fictions and decisions that may become political practice, debate, plight.²⁰

Sofía’s “wanting” becomes political in so far as it constructs a fiction that is antagonistic to the fictions of others. The corpse belongs to somebody, even if the official investigation that may lead to its identification is not feasible. When the physician who first sees the body finds “burns, broken bones,” the Lieutenant fictionalizes the doctor’s finds to produce a discourse of “evidence”: “I think the river is responsible. . . . I don’t see burns. Look closer” (21). The Captain, in turn, suggests to Sofía that perhaps he had “an accident or. . . . Well, sometimes men run away for . . .” (24). Sofía’s appropriating gesture is hence eminently political. Her fiction is the language that situates her in an antagonistic position with regard to the military fiction. She says that she “knows” what the military say they “don’t know.” Just as he explains to the Captain, the Lieutenant knows nothing of the fate of the man he himself jailed: “I detained him. . . . I let him go. The next day. What happened after that . . . is not for us to say” (27).

The Captain and the Lieutenant try to prevent the only action they envision as possible, namely, that of the legal (liberal, bourgeois, modern) institution founded on the figure of the rational individual who may or may not be accused of a crime. “It will end with me on trial” (35), says the Lieutenant, thinking about his guilt. In his view, only an individual, not a society, may be guilty. In his speech there is a “one-to-one” correspondence; a child has only one mother, a wife has only one

husband, a murder victim has only one murderer (or a group identified with a name).

Sofía's "wanting" produces a body, *habeas corpus*, that challenges identification by the legal institutions of the Captain's liberal rhetoric—a rhetoric comprising plans for future "fertilizers," "progress," "scientific methods to breed animals" (5), in short, "something more modern," as he tells Sofía by the riverbank. The initial excess of Sofía's fiction constitutes the other side of the "legal," the "scientific" impossible. The body has no legal identification; only Sofía's political action (that of political fiction) will save it from falling into the political narratives construed by *the others*.

The culminating moment that stages this possibility is the burial of the second corpse, which Sofía "identifies" as "Miguel" but is buried as "Theo." Emanuel has convinced Cecilia to claim the corpse as that of her husband, even though Cecilia still trusts the logic of "truth"; she is not sure whether to identify it because "that is not him" (37). Emanuel reminds her of the power of fiction: "It is *if you say so*" (37, emphasis added). In a true dramatization of how fiction always guides action, Emmanuel assures Cecilia, "Bury him and he'll *never come back again*. You do this for the Captain and the Captain will make sure Theo never appears again" (38, italics added and translation modified).

Emanuel's "never again" means "never again the appearance" and presages the play's *dénouement*—the "never again" that is familiar to us as part of the human rights discourse in the last quarter of the century. Just as Sofía antagonizes the military's "not knowing" with her "knowing," the Camacho women will antagonize the "never again the appearance" by using the same rhetoric to reverse it: "never again the *disappearance*." Since the condition of possibility of the military order is the disappearance of the corpse, the condition of possibility of participation in an antagonistic interlocution with that order is the corpse's appearance. They say that her father disappeared; Sofía says that he appeared.

What Sofía "knows" from the start the Camacho women will learn throughout the play. At first they want to see their husbands alive individually. Teresa says, "when my husband comes back" (12), and Alejandra yells to Sofía not to name the relatives: "MY HUSBAND IS NOT DEAD!" (31, uppercase in the original). The shift from individual wanting to the formulation of a collective claim occurs after the burial of the second corpse. Each woman will go through a mourning process. It is not a psychological mourning for the loss of a relative (a process that is as individual as it is inscrutable in real life and that the play, we should recall here, does not dramatize save for an isolated line by Alejandra to her daughter), but a mourning for the lost possibility *to petition for an individual life*.

Such petition must cease to be a contractual transaction, a negotiation, or a consensus in order for it to become properly political. This "becoming-political" is effected through its passage from a frame

of possibility (the individual claim) to a frame of impossibility (the universal claim). The desire for the relatives' "appearance alive" becomes a political demand—that is, the premise of an *impossibility* within the system—when it is reformulated as a universal. It is now a demand for the appearance of *each and every one* of the (disappeared) men, and not of "one's own" husband, father, or son. Paradoxically, then, the petition for "appearance alive" can only be political in so far as it points to its own impossibility in the framework within which it is being formulated.

The second corpse is buried under the fiction "Theo, killed in an accident." That evening the women bake bread; at dawn they will share it on "Theo"'s tomb. While they eat it, each one begins to "recognize" the buried man as her own, and for the first time the word *impossible* is used:

TERESA. So does everyone think . . . ?

KATHERINA. Maybe it isn't anyone's. Maybe everyone's wrong.

MARILUZ. Maybe everyone's right.

TERESA. *Impossible*. It can't belong to all of us . . . (italics added)

KATHERINA. Yes. And it's my son, Eduardo . . .

TERESA. But it's only one body. And everyone wants to bury it. What are we going to do about that? . . .

SOFIA. That's not our problem. You identify? Then you must bury. Ask permission. Let the captain figure it out. (48–49)

Gathered around the tomb in a circle, all the women speak in unison. Each says the corpse is hers: "and it's mine, it's mine, oh please don't let it be mine, it's mine, oh please don't let it be mine" (49).

Then Teresa utters the impossible: the body *belongs to them all*. Sofía reminds them that if they all recognize it as their own, they must bury it (153). And so it is that the Captain is handed a petition signed by the thirty-six widows. First comes Teresa: "If this is not my husband, then where is he? . . . If this is not his body, then give him to me alive. If you won't do that, then let me bury him. (51–52). The Captain points out ironically to Emanuel that the country now has a "record" to be proud of: "More widows per corpse than any other country in the world" (50).

The equation of traditional motherhood or, for that matter, of traditional marriage (which involves a "one-to-one" relationship between mother and child or husband and wife) has been broken. A mother is everyone's mother, a wife everyone's wife. All the mothers and wives in the public space are not "individual" mothers or wives but political actors. When the Captain responds to the women's claim he does so thinking about a type of motherhood and marriage that these women no longer have or practice. The Captain hands them *one* prisoner alive, Sofía's son Alonso, thus appealing to *one* mother, to the traditional notion of motherhood. His move, however, only serves to signal the distance between the women's collective claim and his

individual offer, a result that he is able to understand only thanks to the Lieutenant. The Captain complains that he has just “shown how it was possible to get some of their men back” (65), but the Lieutenant heard something else: the “impossible.”

LIEUTENANT. They want all their men back. Not just one. Not just some. All.

CAPTAIN. All? That’s impossible.

LIEUTENANT. Impossible. No more.

CAPTAIN. What?

LIEUTENANT. No more. That’s all they’ll say.

CAPTAIN. No more what?

LIEUTENANT. Ask them. No more. (65)

The play on words in the Spanish version of this dialogue is fruitful. The expression “no more” reads “never again” in Spanish. Thus in one phrase— “impossible, never again”—the Lieutenant articulates the visions of the Captain and the women precisely where they converge and diverge. The word that unites these visions—“impossible”—is the “out-of-place” premise that reinstates the political antagonism. According to the Captain, what they must do is not to make something “possible” but to make the women understand that it is “impossible.” According to the women, by contrast, what they must do is not to understand that something is “impossible” but to make “possible” that which seems impossible.

The “never again,” as we all know, refers to real-life human rights reports that resulted from investigations of crimes against humanity committed by South American dictatorships. By coupling it with the word “impossible” that precedes it, the line suggests that the “never again” also participates in the fictional dynamics of the “impossibles.” In the context in which it is formulated, the phrase is a political premise rather than a legal order that may be dictated or planned, or shaped, by reason. Moreover, its status makes it imperative to envision how to transform the “never again” into a memory that can be *appropriated* by future generations. In other words, it makes it imperative to envision the field of the political, so that different politics of memory may exist. Indeed, the Captain and the Lieutenant emphasize the “impossible”: “No more what?”

The Captain will insist on the need for the women to envision something “possible,” namely, the individualized claim. Nonetheless, even in jail Sofía insist on the opposite:

SOFIA. We want the men to come home. All of them . . . we want them back alive. If they’re dead, we want to bury them.

CAPTAIN. But I offered you that, I . . .

SOFIA. And after that we want the killers punished. (71)

The Captain offers her one life, that of Alexis: “This boy . . . could learn to read. Could vote . . . could be a citizen, someone valuable. His pain, his ugly death . . . is your dream for him. Not mine” (72).

The question for *each* antagonistic agent on stage is certainly dreams—dreaming the death of one world and the birth of another. The Captain dreams of a new world, that is, of eliminating those who are at the opposite end of the antagonism so that they will not return “ever again”; so that they will all “disappear.” Echoing a political imaginary that has persisted in the Southern Cone for two centuries (construed by the Creole elites that became the heirs to colonial power after nineteenth century independence), he envisions a nation of immigrants. In the last scene he looks at the women gathered on the riverbank and says to the Lieutenant: “This country’s hopeless. They’ll have to depopulate it, the whole country, and bring in other people, people from outside, people with some other kind of mind” (74).

For the Camacho women too the question is dreaming about the death of one world and the birth of another, a new world where every single one of the lives that peasant women give birth to would be possible. The novelized version of *Widows* leaves a crack open; the fate of Alexis is not clear, for the military take him to the concentration camp alive. In the final scene of the play, by contrast, the soldiers prepare their weapons, “assume positions” (74), and the women move forward, “perhaps dancing, perhaps singing, perhaps only moving forwards” (74).

The structure of interlocution that the women have decided to occupy instates the demand that there be politics by means of a universal premise (that every disappeared appear, that every culprit be punished) that cannot be met within the Captain’s logic of negotiation. Far from occupying the sphere of the “apolitical,” the Camacho women inhabit the true premise of impossibility that sustains any properly political antagonism in so far as it calls into question the entire system. In Camacho, women do not want contracts, consensus, commerce, business, legal petitions. They want politics.

The Last Instant: Sofía’s Prompt Decision

So political is their action that any illusion that the universal claim may belong in the field of ethics also vanishes. These women do not formulate “the right” of every human being to a decent burial. The crumbling of the ethical illusion is perhaps best staged in the dénouement, which reveals Sofía’s final decision in its political dimension. She appears to occupy the same position as Varela’s 1824 Argia. Argia must choose between saving her son and living with her surrender, and dying without surrendering and letting chance decide her son’s fate. Behold an impossible situation from the ethical perspective that may be considered possible only from a political point of view.

It is well known that all real-life dictatorships in the Southern Cone used this strategy to torture concentration camp inmates. The latter were faced with dilemmas aimed at dismantling their subjectivity; they were forced to choose between the life of a child and that of a grandchild, for instance, under the threat of death.²¹ Camacho's Captain challenges Sofía as a mother/grandmother in the traditional sense by threatening her at gunpoint to kill her grandson if she does not surrender. The Captain relies on the view of the mother-child union as harmonious and absolute on the one hand, and on the discourse of traditional maternal ethics, on the other. For the Captain, mothers must defend their children's lives at all costs, even at their own expense. Indeed, this is what a biological mother does—she risks her own body when she gives birth.

The Camacho mothers, however, are neither biological nor traditional. In Sofía's view things are less harmonious; she does not deceive herself. Doubtlessly, saving her grandchild's life would involve wishing a future for him, even at the expense of her political demand. Yet, what kind of future? An imponderable one: her grandson might become a revolutionary like his father, a traitor like Emanuel, a torture victim like Alonso. To put it differently, no decision based on the fantasy of the unmediated, unbreakable mother-child union may be safe from political considerations. The value of life for life's sake—life in the abstract—bears no trace in Sofía's thinking. No decision may take refuge in the illusion of its apolitical, purely ethical nature. By surrendering and allowing her grandson to live Sofía would abide by the power of the day, which imposes a dilemma on her and conditions the value of life (the life of her grandson) to particular material conditions, namely, Sofía's renunciation.

Is Sofía's sacrifice, the sacrifice of her private interests (saving her grandson's life), based on the hope of articulating these interests into a universal ethical imperative? Is she attempting to save everyone at the expense of one? Sofía clearly knows that this is another illusion—the ethical illusion. She sacrifices her individual interests to maintain her political claim: the universal impossible of demanding that all the disappeared come back. Nonetheless, she also knows that this universal is a historical articulation; it is not autonomous from the political sphere, which imposes material conditions for the realization of any universal. Sofía's universal, after all, is her people, the peasants who fight, as Sofía tells her grandson before she dies: “people *like us* don't die” (73, emphasis added). She sacrifices not only her private interests but also the illusion that her “universal” is in fact realizable outside the realm of political definitions.

Nothing but political action is left for the Camacho women. What would happen if their motherhood became a political model? If their impossible demand (being mothers of all bodies) transformed the fantasy of unity between a biological mother and her biological child into the fantasy of unity of all women? Camacho's mothers, in the end, offer such a vision: politics modeled after socialized motherhood.

Notes

1. Throughout the essay I use “American” in the continental sense, and not in reference to the United States only. This essay was originally written in Spanish; this essay was translated into English by JF and myself. All translations of quotations from Spanish texts are mine.
2. See his renowned *Manifiesto Antropófago* (1928) (Cannibal Manifesto).
3. See *Chile: La memoria obstinada* (1997).
4. See the novel *Viudas* (México ed.). All quotes from the play are from the English version of *Widows*. In the cases where I modify the translation I use the Spanish version of the play *Viudas*. Also see the author’s website for information about the play’s rewritings (www.adorfman.duke.edu).
5. *Antigone* did not reach the New York theaters until 1845, and not as a rewrite but as an adaptation. See Karelisa Hartigan, 11. Varela was inspired by Alfieri’s plays *Antígona* and *Polinices* (1782). Alfieri, in turn, rewrote a first-century Latin version, appearing in Book 12 of Statius’s *Thebaid*.
6. See Achille Mbembe 11–40.
7. See Fradinger.
8. For his description of mothers as the “basis for the state,” see Juan Bautista Alberdi.
9. As Moses Finley put it, among the Greek civil war (*stasis*) was “the chronic evil,” 43.
10. In *The Persian Wars* Herodotus tells how Athenians became so sad when they watched the Miletus tragedy on the stage that the whole theater burst out crying, and Phrynicus had to pay a fine for reminding them of their own miseries. It was hence decreed that the play would never be produced again, see Book VI, 21.
11. See “De la amnistía y su contrario.”
12. The quote in Spanish reads: “Nación es tratar de hacer de Chile un país de propietarios y no de proletarios” (4/24/1987). Translation is mine.
13. Two real-life episodes under Pinochet are being evoked here. The appearance of bodies with signs of torture in the Mapocho River in late September 1973, and the uncovering of fifteen corpses in the limekilns of Lonquén in November 1978 (they had been kidnapped in October 1973).
14. These discourses are tied to social movements, which were led mostly, but not exclusively, by women who were mothers or grandmothers, or by human rights organizations and truth commissions. We should recall here that the Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (Association of Relatives of the Detained Disappeared) was formed in Santiago as early as 1974. This organization comprised mostly women, many of whom had been politically active during Salvador Allende’s government.
15. For an analysis of the play as “activist” literature, see McClennen and Oropesa.
16. So much so that since June of 2011 the United Nations have incorporated “internet access” as a human right. For a summary of the political debate around the definition of these rights, see Jacques Rancière, 297–310.
17. A brief tour through each country’s reproductive policy and treatment of domestic violence will suffice; we will return from it with renewed awareness of the dangers concealed in such naturalizations.
18. Due to space constraints I can only provide a few brief examples. With a political consciousness worthy of a centenarian combatant, Sofia tells her grandchildren about her great-grandmother’s grandmother’s fight against the Spaniards: “*She was fierce*. The Spaniards believed she ate the eyeballs of her

enemies” (16, my emphasis). Sofía thus establishes herself as heir to an ancient women's fight. She asks Rosa to be patient when the landowners take away her land (11). She does not delude herself when the Captain talks to all the women and asks them to forget; rather, she realizes what his actual (financial) plan is: “Fertilizers, that's what he said. I know what he said” (10). Finally, when it is time to bury the bodies she asks for the murderers to be punished, a claim that all the women will make in the end (71).

19. I would like to recall here a line from the poem “Identity” that Dorfman wrote in 1976 (before the novelized version of *Widows*), a poem considered by the author to be the germ of the play: “I am the one who will bury my dead.” See *In Case of Fire in a Foreign Land*. For the Spanish original see senocri.blogcindario.com/2009/07/00273-ariel-dorfman-identidad.html.
20. In the 1978 novelized version this first corpse is buried by the military without Sofía's authorization or presence, and therefore her first demand is that of disinterment, not of interment. She wants to bury him again *in the proper way* according to the rituals she has followed her whole life. Not just any funeral will suffice.
21. For a heart-rending example quoted by Ulises Gorini in his history of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, see *La otra lucha. Historia de las madres de Plaza de Mayo* 351–364. Also for the example recounted by Chilean filmmaker Patricio Guzmán, see *Nostalgia de la luz* (2010).

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