

## CRITICA/REVIEW

Persephone Braham, *Crimes against the State, Crimes against Persons: Detective Fiction in Cuba and Mexico*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 169 pp.

### La Novela Neopoliciaca at the Crossroads

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The short story “Hotel Frontera” by *mexicalense* writer Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz features a vignette in which Raymond Chandler’s fictional private detective, Philip Marlowe, has a chance meeting with the Mexican leftist author, José Revueltas, at a bar on the Mexican side of the border.<sup>1</sup> Marlowe has just settled an account with a narcofinancier in the Mexican desert. He drinks away the aftertaste of his deed, surrounded by sailors and soldiers, prostitutes and mariachis, when Revueltas walks in and the two exchange introductions:

—Entonces ambos sabemos hacer conjeturas, unir los datos que nos presenta la vida y encontrar el camino que lleva a la verdad que otros esconden—dice el detective.

—Pero a un periodista no siempre se le permite, aunque la haya encontrado, decir la verdad—responde Revueltas—. La verdad incomoda, pone de mal humor a los poderosos (Trujillo Muñoz 143).

At the end of this tale, the two men stagger out into the street like old friends, singing the *Corrido de Pancho Villa*. Their fraternal bond stems from the obvious similarity between their personal codes of honor: both are men-out-of-time, living under the constant threat

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<sup>1</sup> Trujillo Muñoz works in detective fiction among other genres; for studies of his work, see Fox and Insley.

of danger within a corrupt system that converts them into transgressors. And, as Revueltas suggests, detective fiction bears a certain generic kinship with journalism; it can serve as a beard for telling stories that might get one killed were they to be called non-fiction. The result of this literary *compadrazgo*, the *novela neopoliciaca*, is a hybrid combining various strains of left populism and existentialism with elements of investigative journalism, *crónica*, realism, and pulp fiction. The development and innovations of this relatively new genre form the basis of Persephone Braham's book, *Crimes against the State, Crimes against Persons: Detective Fiction in Cuba and Mexico*.

Through its sustained historical and theoretical attention to two significant national contexts of Latin American detective writing and their major authors, Braham's book is an important step toward redressing the paucity (for this fan, anyway) of good comparativist work on detective fiction in the Americas. Aside from groundbreaking studies by Amelia S. Simpson, Donald Yates, and a handful of others, Latin American detective fiction and its affiliate, science fiction, have not drawn as much scholarly attention as other types of popular literature (e.g., *fotonovela*), even though the former have become poles of attraction for a broad range of writers and readers who have created vibrant local and transnational scenes around 'zines, blogs, *tertulias*, and print publications.

Like Revueltas and Marlowe in "Hotel Frontera," Braham perceives the seriousness of this genre. She argues that the *neopoliciaco*'s coming to terms with the failure of unifying narratives in the neoliberal era resonates with currents of Latin American postmodern theory that are inflected with concerns about social responsibility and humanism (15). Not only is the Latin American detective novel "a locus for the

reenactment of the Latin American dilemma surrounding modernity” (5), according to her,

[It] also stands outside the modernist paradigm: overcoming the symptoms of an elusive modernity, it has sidestepped the merely postmodern and become authentically, autochthonously post-modern. The Latin American detective genre exemplifies the primary hermeneutic predicament facing the intellectual subject: how to interpret a reality that fundamentally resists ontological commitments. The premises of the *neopoliciaco* advance it toward a resolution of two ostensibly competing frameworks of meaning—the aesthetic/personal and the ethical/social—in a literature of ideological and creative dissent (17).

*Crimes against the State, Crimes against Persons*’ five chapters are written in a dense, concise prose laden with insights that will prove grist for many future studies. My advanced undergraduate students found the book eminently readable (a “page-turner”); they particularly responded to the third and fifth chapters, which discuss authors Leonardo Padura Fuentes and Paco Ignacio Taibo II, respectively. In her Introduction and first chapter on the “Origins and Ideologies of the *Neopoliciaco*,” Braham establishes the lineage of the *neopoliciaco* within a broad Latin American context. She argues that the genre’s leftist orientation and ethical commitment stem from global events of the 1970s (3); its historical points of reference are “the international student movements of 1968, Spain’s post-Franco transition period, Argentina’s Dirty War, and the Cuban Revolution” (xv). This genre’s intertextual archive has clearly developed along inter-American and trans-Atlantic axes. As Braham notes, detective fiction thrives during periods of social upheaval (1); thus, it is not surprising that in addition to Cuba and Mexico, innovative work has also arisen from war-torn and post-dictatorial contexts, such as Brazil, the Southern Cone, and Central America. The comparativist parameters of Braham’s book privilege questions of literary influence and genealogy; one by-product of this approach is a sort of organic teleology that superintends the project: “The Hispanic

detective model has matured in generic terms: from its mimetic beginnings, through a critical, parodic stage, to its current manifestation as a mode of reflection and judgment on a society that is declining” (17). Braham begins her discussion of Latin American detective fiction with Jorge Luis Borges’ influential essays on G.K. Chesterton dating from the 1930s. In spite of Borges’ mixture of bemusement and admiration for the genre, as well as his own stunning contributions to it, the Chesterton essays threw down a gauntlet that successive generations of Latin American writers would be at pains to take up—the devalued genre, the import, the Enlightenment. Because Borges’ interest in the work of Poe and Chesterton appears so removed from the politicized novels under consideration in this study, Borges’ essays are relegated to the “prehistory” (11) of the *neopolicíaco*. Yet, one imagines, if the national vantage points of this study were more inclusive, they might challenge that stagist metaphor: the Borgesian legacy is patent in Manuel Puig’s *The Buenos Aires Affair* and Ricardo Piglia’s *Respiración artificial*, for example, and Brazilian detective writers Rubem Fonseca and Patricia Melo are not simply stalled out in the genre’s parodic phase.

Cuba and Mexico provide a neat comparison set for this study, however, because these countries’ dramatic contrasts in terms of the “people-power bloc” configuration (noted in the title’s symmetrical phrasing) are matched by equally striking historical parallels with respect to the development of detective fiction. In Cuba, the government began actively to promote detective fiction in the 1970s, as it simultaneously grew Draconian in its censure of “formalist” aesthetics. Folding entertainment, a moral, and an opportunity for self-reflection into one narrative, detective fiction was to take on the huge task of reconciling an Adornian critique of the culture industry with Lukacsian realism

(30-31). Cuban detective novels of this period were “linked to a program of persecution of individuals who were perceived as imperfectly integrated into revolutionary society” (22); the reader was meant to identify with agents of the state, usually spies or police, as they sought out “a more or less obvious miscreant” (37). All this changed, however, with the “special period” that commenced in 1986. The economic hardship that descended on the country with the loss of Soviet aid during the late 1980s was also accompanied by a slight relaxation of previous cultural directives. Leonardo Padura Fuentes’s *Four Seasons Tetralogy* was pioneering in its adoption of hard-boiled conventions in order to create an unflinching and dissident portrait of Havana in the late 1980s and early 1990s that went against the grain of its social realist predecessors. This development, for Braham, represents the maturation of the Cuban *neopoliciaco*.

As for Mexico, the genre’s immediate heritage stems from the student movements of the late 1960s, which culminated in the government-ordered massacre of peaceful demonstrators at the Plaza de Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco in October 1968. The political consciousness of an entire generation of Mexican intellectuals was galvanized through that event. Braham sees the Mexico City-based “La Onda” writers who emerged in the 1970s as an important precursor to the development of Mexican *neopoliciaco*, in that they rejected the national myth of *mestizaje* and official history in favor of an irreverent, stylish cosmopolitanism that blended high and low art and diverse linguistic registers. Though not partial to La Onda’s glamour, Paco Ignacio Taibo II, historian, journalist, and a tireless advocate of the *neopoliciaco* in international arenas, is also a product of 1968. Braham discusses Taibo’s Héctor Belascoarán Shayne detective novels as a watershed in the development of the genre in Mexico. Taibo began to write them in the late 1970s,

and as in the case of Padura Fuentes, they garnered critical praise and international popularity through the 1980s and into the early 1990s. Post-Franco Spain (and its premier *neopoliciaco* figure, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán), by the way, is an absent third coordinate in this study. Braham acknowledges Spanish *neopoliciaco* throughout, but its important influence on the Cuban and Mexican work merits further discussion. Spain has provided a literal ground for dialogue between Cuban and Mexican detective authors at the Semana Negra, an annual meeting of detective writers organized by Taibo and held in Gijón, Asturias each year. In other detective novels, Taibo, a naturalized Mexican citizen of Spanish birth, has also looked to early twentieth-century Spanish leftist movements as potential models for the contemporary period.<sup>2</sup>

Chapters Two and Three correspond to Revolutionary Cuba, where crimes against people are *ipso facto* conceived as crimes against the state. Braham develops a complex argument in these chapters about Revolutionary discourses on gender, sexuality, and machismo. As she recites the milestones of Revolutionary cultural policy in Chapter Two, from Fidel's "Words to the Intellectuals" (1961) to the Primer Congreso de Educación y Cultura (1971), Braham highlights the Revolution's increasingly condemnatory identification of aesthetic experimentation ("formalism") with homosexuality. Citing precedents for this association dating to Rodó's 1900 essay, *Ariel* (27), Braham notes that in the more immediate context, the guerrilla struggle, waged primarily in rural areas, was accompanied by a codification of the countryside as wholesome, virile, and masculine, in contrast to corrupt, decadent Havana, where U.S.-

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<sup>2</sup> Taibo's *La bicicleta de Leonardo* intercalates plot lines from Renaissance Italy, early twentieth century Spain, the Viet Nam war, and the NAFTA era Mexico-U.S. border. Its complex narrative positions the Spanish anarchist tradition as a "third way" that avoids the pitfalls of Soviet-style communism and U.S. free market imperialism.

oriented sex tourism had flourished under Batista (22, 43). By the 1970s when the state began to promote detective fiction, homosexuality as both an outcast citizenship and aesthetic sensibility was metonymically tied to a range of other visible markers, symptoms, and behaviors, from racial difference to physical disability. These, in turn, provided a catalog of freakish, antisocial stereotypes that cropped up in the detective novels of the period. Long arms, limps, bulging eyes, slanted eyes, thin lips, thick lips, short stature—all suspect (47). As for U.S. spies and Cuban Americans, they cowardly rely on technology rather than valor and exhibit a “greasy, overly hormonal machismo” (51), respectively, in contrast to the detective hero, who is so normal that he often does not merit physical description (47).

Chapter Three offers a contrapuntal reading of Luis Rogelio Noguera's *Y si muero mañana* (1978), as exemplary of the officialist novels, and Leonardo Padura Fuentes' *Máscaras* (1995), as a harbinger of the *neopoliciaco*. Noguera's novel is in the vein of the 1970s novels described above, complete with delicately featured Jewish CIA agents and decadent *gusanos*. Padura Fuentes' detective Mario Conde, on the other hand, is a policeman who drinks, enjoys counterculture, and breaks the rules to get by. His cityscape includes “corrupt officials, dirty policemen, the black market, *jineteras* (prostitutes), and other facts of life that had been glossed over by previous novelists” (56). Braham argues that this shift from socialist realism to historical realism is accompanied by an allegorical plot structure in which the gendered discourses surrounding the crime become an extended comment on the Revolution, in effect challenging the officialist linkages between gender and citizenship established in the 1960s and 1970s. Braham reads *Máscaras* as a reaction to the 1989 Ochoa Trial, in

which Fidel and Raúl Castro repeatedly suggested that their former comrade was not who he appeared to be, that he was wearing a “mask” (55). In the novel Conde investigates the case of a party official’s son who has been found murdered, in drag. The main suspect is a gay dramatist, modeled on Virgilio Piñera, who has endured years of government persecution. At first Conde reacts with predictable homophobia toward his suspect, but he gradually comes to admire him for his survival and perseverance. As in Borges’ detective stories, the circumstances surrounding the crime and the victim’s identity become red herrings—whether the victim was in fact gay or a transvestite is less important than the destabilizing effect that the case has on Conde’s own gendered identity and his relationship to the Revolution (61).

Chapters Four and Five turn to consider the Mexican *neopoliciaco*. In contrast to the Cuban case, the genre’s early experiments in Mexico are marked by manifest suspicion toward the state, the police, the ruling class, and political machinations that exclude Mexican citizens from knowledge and participation in their government. Chapter Four surveys key early works by authors who anticipate the emergence of the Mexican *neopoliciaco*. Focusing on the cynical, anti-authoritarian stories of Antonio Helú from the 1940s and 1950s, Rafael Bernal’s tale of international conspiracy, *El complot mongol* (1969), and Jorge Ibargüengoitia’s anti-testimonial critique of the tabloid press, *Las muertas* (1977), Braham highlights the contributions that each of these made to the development of the genre (68).

In Chapter Five Braham compares Taibo’s Belascoarán Shayne novels to Chester Himes’ Harlem domestic series, featuring police detectives Coffin Ed Johnson and Gravedigger Jones. Although the latter novels are an acknowledged influence on Taibo,



his onomastic compulsions have yielded a list of influences so vast and wide-ranging (from Rodolfo Walsh to Santana and Sartre) that to select Himes among others seems somewhat arbitrary. Yet, this particular comparison is fruitful, especially in its argument that Himes and Taibo ratchet up their portraits of an unpredictably violent, apocalyptic cityscape so as to outdo the pessimism of their West Coast hard-boiled predecessors. The scars and injuries that accrue to the detectives' bodies in each successive novel are in fact one of the few indications of the passage of time in them. Braham sees Belascoarán Shayne, for example, as a sacrificial figure, who "offer[s] his physical body as both a catalyst and a stage for the battle between good and evil" (66); "[h]is scars symbolize the futility of metaphysical inquiry, and his continued physical existence is a declaration of protest" (81).<sup>3</sup> Braham thus suggests that the novels potentially transform a nihilistic vision into a revolutionary one. Just as Padura Fuentes' recognition of the extralegal strategies that Cubans use to survive amounts to a quasi-endorsement of them, so Braham argues, Taibo's novels challenge

...this construct of Mexico as a nation of victims by transforming victimization into a fulcrum of resistance. Belascoarán's personal identity as a Mexican of the masses—a victim who complains about the price of tortillas and the corruption of the transit police—is the source of his energy and diligence as a detective. Through it the powerlessness and suffering of the everyday citizen reconstructs itself as a critical stance that facilitates resistance and even action...(92)

This chapter concludes with a brief discussion of Carmen Boullosa's *La milagrosa* (1993), a novel that incorporates elements of detective fiction as it relates the story of its eponymous protagonist's migration to Mexico City and the subsequent fragmentation of her identity. The protagonist's fractured subjectivity mirrors the city itself, a city similar

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<sup>3</sup> Compare this to the representation of physical violence in the hard-boiled fiction of Raymond Chandler, which Sean McCann has argued is characterized by "a tacit image of mystic communication and high idealism" (156).

in many ways to Taibo's D.F. and Himes' Harlem: globalized, dismembered, segregated, heterogeneous, incomprehensible (96). Given that the *neopoliciaco* authors and protagonists discussed in this study are male, Boullosa's novel also raises questions about the relatively marginal role of women in the *neopoliciaco*, a topic for further discussion.

A brief epilogue, "Globalization and Detective Literature in Spanish" complements the literary analysis of preceding chapters with information about the international publishing infrastructure for detective fiction and recent developments in the genre. Among Braham's more surprising observations is that the serial detective is disappearing just as a broader category of crime fiction, or *novela negra*, is booming (102). Much of this new work (e.g., the *narconovela*) blurs the boundaries between heroes and villains, eschews a single protagonist in favor of a multiperspectival or fragmentary plot structure, and revels in ultraviolence. In these respects, Braham notes, Jorge Ibarguengoitia's *Las muertas* foreshadows this trend: "The unstable subject that constitutes the novel's most fundamental innovation anticipates the radical detective novels of the 1990s, whose chaotic narrative style and sordid (but fact-based) plots ultimately threaten to efface the subject entirely" (77). Meanwhile, as crime fiction in Spanish grows increasingly imbricated in international circuits of production and consumption, transnational authors and stories are also emerging. Braham mentions the work of "Argen-Mex" writers Miriam Laurini and Rolo Diez, Cuban American writers Alex Abella and Carolina Aguilera-García, and several Cuban writers who publish directly to English, given that the island's dollar economy has made the purchase of books prohibitive for most of their compatriots. To this emerging body of border crossing detective fiction, one might also add the work of Latin American and Latina/o

writers Luis Sepúlveda, Jorge Volpi, Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz, Lucha Corpi, and Francisco Goldman, who lie outside the scope of this study.

The arc of the *neopoliciaco*, spanning the 1960s to the 1990s, raises important questions for interpreting the historical trajectory of the Latin American left during the same period. The hard-boiled tradition is marked by a tension between the detective's desire for communion with his fellows and his self-imposed isolation as a guarantee of ideological purity. For an author committed to some notion of social justice, however limited, reiterating this tension over successive novels must become discouraging after a time. Patching up the protagonist only to send him into another shitstorm is analogous to the dilemma of the intellectual as the "memory of the class," for whom the next mass movement is infinitely postponed. Perhaps this is why some authors, including Padura Fuentes, Himes, and Trujillo Muñoz, sensing a franchise in the making, have either terminated their own serial detectives or taken hiatuses from them. At one point, Taibo even killed off Belascoarán Shayne, only to resuscitate him without explanation in a subsequent novel. At the end of her study, Braham sums up the paradoxical position that results from the *neopoliciaco* protagonist's Sisyphean struggle: "Through a genre that critiqued modernist ethics and aesthetics, Hispanic *neopoliciaco* writers move toward an ahistorical, alienated subjectivity" (101).

Do these developments spell the undoing of the critical intellectual, a vestigial emblem of the 1960s national popular movements? And, given this figure's masculine protagonism *vis-à-vis* the masses, is that such a bad thing? Braham suspends judgment on these questions, preferring to leave her study open-ended and trained on the increasing "impurity" of the genre, to borrow a term from Néstor García Canclini (106):

The aesthetics of the Hispanic detective novel are evolving in order to comprehend the ethical exigencies presented by historical circumstance, the economic conditions of global capitalism, and the increasingly international marketplace of culture....In effect, the *neopoliciaco* genre has naturalized itself in discursive terms: it will continue its metamorphosis as a posthermeneutic, deterritorialized, “impure” *género negro*. (108)

A recent example supports Braham’s observation about the “international marketplace of culture,” while nonetheless affirming the staying power of character-driven narrative and selective appropriation of the 1960s political movements. Last year, Taibo brought back Belascoarán Shayne after a nearly decade-long break for the novel that he co-authored with Subcomandante Marcos, *Muertos incómodos*. Published first in serial form in the Mexico City daily, *La Jornada*, the Sup introduced Belascoarán Shayne in one of his own installments, and Taibo was obliged to follow suit in order to sustain their rambunctious, improvisational narrative. *Muertos incómodos* has been tremendously popular within and outside of Mexico; numerous translated editions are currently in press. Cynthia Steele notes that it has substantially revived waning public interest in the Zapatista movement.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, then, the detective will find a future work as an international publicist in conjunction with local struggles for social justice.

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<sup>4</sup> Cynthia Steele, Latin American Studies Seminar, University of Iowa, 18 April 2005. Steele analyses this novel in her forthcoming book on Chiapas.

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