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Capital Crimes in the Americas

The contents of this special issue emerge from a larger conversation about crime and detective fiction in the Americas that began at the American Comparative Literature Association Annual Meeting (New York University, 2014), during a seminar that Dawn Taylor and I co-organized. As scholars of comparative literature interested in crime and detective fiction in the Americas, we thought that the multivalence of the title “Capital Crimes” enabled a flexible interpretation that encompassed the urban, deadly, and economic nature of the crimes present in the texts and films analyzed here.

Corrupt cities that are either seats of government or hubs of crime, both of which could be considered “crime capitals,” constitute the fictional and actual scenes of crimes, from Buenos Aires to Mexico City (D.F.) to Los Angeles to New York City to Quito to Rio de Janeiro. Thus, integral to the following essays are meditations on the nature of the cityscapes and urban contexts that produce criminals and, at the same time, the nature of the detective who must have the street smarts necessary to navigate and negotiate entry into the most dangerous sites of the “American” city.

Capital crimes are not only, in our reading, urban, but also deadly, in the sense that the crimes themselves often (directly or indirectly) result in the victim’s or victims’ death and often carry with them the penalty of death. Indeed, many of the essays blur the distinction between capital crimes, which often fall under the jurisdiction of the state, and crimes against humanity [1], which can be subject to a combination of local, state, and/or international laws, and even transcend the jurisdiction of any government, into the realm of natural law.

In the economic sense, capital crimes also signify those crimes made possible by and perpetuated within neoliberal capitalist systems where the global flows of capital result in sites of concentrated and extreme accumulation of wealth and disparate sites of utterly abject poverty. Within the context of the Americas, where economic policymakers were heavily influenced by the neoliberal agenda inaugurated by the Chicago school (United States), contemporary global capitalism structures and shapes crime and its detection in inextricable ways.

This volume incorporates and responds to a variety of different taxonomies of the genres of crime and detective fiction in the Americas, which have a complicated and interlaced genealogy. Although classic and golden age detective fiction from the United States and Europe, and their derivatives, were popularized in translation throughout Latin America, the hard-boiled detective and *noir* traditions were the forms that resonated deeply with Latin American authors and audiences, especially given their experiences with police corruption, military dictatorships, and authoritarian states. According to Glen S. Close in *Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Detective Fiction: Essays on the Género Negro Tradition*,

Hard-boiled narrative remains prominent in contemporary Latin American fiction as a medium of reflection on the new urban violence, but largely gone is Chandler's redemptive, chivalric vision of the detective hero as cynic and outsider, but also as a man of honor and populist avenger. What is left is the sharp, hard language, the sordid and sinister atmosphere, the plumbing of criminal underworlds, and the sensational narration of violence no longer understood as a social transgression requiring investigation and punishment, but rather as a prevailing norm of behavior, a tool for survival, a fundamental instrument of power. (156)

On some level, each of the essays in this volume demonstrate how central the hard-boiled and *noir* traditions have been for the American context, even as "palimpsest," parody, or a radical break from the expectations of the genre. [2]

Indeed, the internal comparative structure of crime and detective fiction is oft-remarked upon by literary critics of the genre. In *Detective Fiction from Latin America*, Amelia S. Simpson observes:

Above all is the consistent and purposeful cultivation of the palimpsest form, a strategic transparency that provides the opportunity to address, by means of comparison with the underlying model, a variety of issues—from economic and cultural imperialism in Latin America to the problem of institutionalized violence and injustice, from questions about narrative systems and structures to metaphysical speculation. (183)

For Simpson, "the palimpsest form" in Latin American detective fiction is best-articulated in subgenres particularly prevalent in the region, which she codifies as "satirical, solutionless, and documentary" (180). Indeed, similar attributes can be found in other taxonomies of Latin American detective fiction and postcolonial detective fiction.

For example, relatively newer forms such as the *neopolicia*/*neopoliciano* (new detective fiction) or the *antipolicia* (anti-detective fiction) have emerged and begun to shape and shift our visions of the "original" hard-boiled and *noir* models. A term coined by Paco Ignacio Taibo II, "El neopoliciano rompió con la tradición de una novela basada fundamentalmente en la anécdota y abrió las puertas experimentales hacia una novela cuyo eje central es la atmósfera." [The new detective fiction breaks with tradition of a novel based fundamentally in anecdote and opened experimental doors toward a novel whose central axis is the atmosphere"] (qtd. in Ramírez and Rodríguez-Sifontes 43), which serves, as Franklin Rodríguez Abad argues, "as a mechanism of denunciation and reflection about social and political problems." In the *neopoliciano*, variable traces of Simpson's categories can be found.

In an earlier comparative study of U.S. American and Italian detective fiction, *The Doomed Detective: The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American and Italian Fiction*, Stefano Tani systematizes "anti-detective fiction" into three classes:

In innovative anti-detective fiction the stress was on social criticism and on a solution without justice; in the deconstructive category I emphasized the non[-]solution, the ambiguous perception of reality from the point of view of the detective. [...] Thus, when we get to metafictional anti-detective novels, the conventional elements of detective fiction (the detective, the criminal, the corpse) are hardly there. (113, my emphases)

Here, we can observe, in U.S. American anti-detective fiction, strands of thought comparable to what Simpson describes in her observations about Latin American anti-detective fiction.

Rodríguez Abad recently published a comparative essay that explores the linkages between the *neopolicial* and *antipolicial*: “The Bind between *Neopolicial* and *Antipolicial*: The Exposure of Reality in Post-1980s Latin-American Detective Fiction.” He does not read the *neopolicial* and the *antipolicial* as antithetical to each other, but rather imagines, as it were, that anti-detective fiction functions as “a palimpsest form” (I borrow Simpson’s term here) in relation to the social critique inherent in the *neopolicial*. Rodríguez Abad argues that “[a]ntidetective fiction and its philosophical and aesthetical focus on disorienting the mystery are not blind to the *sociolocal* realities emphasized by the *neopolicial*.” Rather, for Rodríguez Abad, “The overexposure of reality, as addressed in antidetective fiction, is not concerned with denunciation or showing the truth, which is already evident, but with the analysis of the relation of intersecting discourses and versions of reality.” The tension between categorizing the subgenres present in crime and detective fiction of the Americas, seem to be captured quite well in the introduction to *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World*. Here, Nels Pearson and Marc Singer claim that “the detective novel is generically, structurally, and historically suited for creating precisely the kind of dynamic interplay between the modern and postmodern, the material and the metaphysical, the investigation of truth and of investigation itself, that local understanding within a postcolonial and transnational world demands” (12). Indeed, it seems that comparative approaches to these fictional forms can best to decipher, code, and capture the “dynamic interplay” at work.

Introducing this volume is Annika Eisenberg’s essay, “The Sound of L.A. Noir – Listening to Marlowe’s Los Angeles in Raymond Chandler’s *The Long Goodbye* and Benjamin Black’s *The Black-Eyed Blonde*,” catalogues and interprets what she calls “the city soundscape of *noir*.” By revealing the semantics of sonic devices, she proposes an alternative hermeneutics, namely to listen for the “point of audition” (a term analogous to “point of view”), and reconsider the privileging of our interpretive visual lenses. Eisenberg’s formidable study beckons the reader to listen more attentively, not only to the music and human sounds and utterances in noir film, but also to the mechanical and technological sounds of the urban soundscape, the sound making of natural forces and animals, and even the sound of silence, all of which hold auditory power.

Like Eisenberg’s work, which posits an epistemology of sound in *noir* film, Erik Larson’s “*Donde todo se paga*: Ricardo Piglia’s *Blanco Nocturno* as a Lesson in Noir Economics” traces

the epistemology of capital in this Argentinian *noir* fiction. For Larson, “one of the bases of the dystopian and alienated tone of noir is the capital that feeds corruption and mediates all social and political relations.” Through a skillful reading of Derridian “excess”, Lacanian “debt,” and Adorno’s “negative dialectics,” Larson classifies Piglia’s *noir* detective’s failure to solve the mystery of capital crimes as “a plaguing epistemological debt,” which resists meaningful participation in the “economy of justice.” The ensuing semantic excess, as Larson argues, renders the novel *ficción paranoica*, to cite Piglia’s own term.

Leisa Rothlisberger’s essay, “Detective Fiction in the Monster, Mexico City,” exposes the way in which the authors of *Muertos incómodos: falta lo que falta* (2005), namely Paco Ignacio Taibo II and Subcomandante Marcos, “uses Mexico City’s characterization as a monster to dismantle the power of the capital.” Rothlisberger’s insightful interpretation of *Muertos Incómodos* reveals the urban, deadly, and economic valences of “capital crimes,” through its anti-neoliberal politics and comparative epistemologies. Her detailed analysis of neoliberalism, as it functions to shape government capitals like Mexico City, demonstrates how the stories of crime and its detection can reveal the larger truth about the serious and deadly implications of neoliberal policies.

Also engaging with neoliberalism is Andres Aluma-Cazorla’s essay, “Violence and Globalization in *De que nada se sabe* (2002) by Alfredo Noriega: A Dark Account of Late Twentieth Century Ecuador in a Glocal Noir Ecuatoriano.” Here, Aluma-Cazorla explores “Quito, as a representation of what French Anthropologist Marc Augé would call a ‘non-place,’ read through Roland Robertson’s theory of “glocalization.” Noriega’s novel, according to Aluma-Cazorla, involves multiple dissections, not only in terms of its forensic crime-solving doctor, but also in terms of the city itself.

Jayashree Kamble’s essay, “From Barbarized to Disneyfied: Viewing 1990s New York City Through Eve Dallas, J.D. Robb’s Futuristic Homicide Detective,” demonstrates how detective fiction can be used to interrogate official histories and provide space for alternative ones. For example, J.D. Robb’s futuristic murder mystery novel *Naked In Death*, according to Kamble, challenges “the ‘spiritual renewal’ narrative pushed in the press by Mayor Giuliani and Police Commissioner Bratton—a diachronic one of an 80s crime wave New York followed by the 90s’ crime crash and a cleaned-up New York—the novel presents these New Yorks as synchronic, with one existing side by side with the other.” Indeed, Kamble’s astute analysis highlights the power of speculative fiction to challenge the hegemonic narrative of development perpetuated about New York City and the actual “tale of two cities, where New York’s “barbaric” pre-1993 past and Disneyfied post-1993 future both exist in the same moment and defy any claim that New York was saved by corporate capitalism.”

The final essay, “Difficult to Digest: Rubem Fonseca’s “Intestino Grosso” [“Large Intestine”] as a Scatological Theory of Crime Fiction,” which I authored, examines the ways in which

Rubem Fonseca, a Brazilian writer and former police commissioner who sets his fiction in Rio de Janeiro, uses figurative language to explore the connection between the representations of the body and the body politic in crime fiction. Fonseca's "bandit-poet," I argue, proffers his own version of "poetic justice," which critiques urban capitalism and military dictatorship, both of which participate in a politics of consumption. By assaulting the reader with a "terrorist pornography," the "bandit-poet" exposes the corporeal violence that the bourgeoisie refuses to see and that the government does not want to openly admit. Whereas Fonseca's "Intestino Grosso" re-incorporates or "desexcomuniga" [un-excommunicates] scatological material into language, it is only by analyzing that which society expels, conceals, abandons, and eliminates that the reader-detective can discern the ugly truth.

Endnotes

[1] an immoral or destructive act; spec. (in later use) an unlawful act which causes human suffering or death on a large scale.” (OED)

[2] For an in-depth discussion of “the palimpsest form” see Amelia S. Simpson’s *Detective Fiction in Latin America*. In *Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Detective Fiction: Essays on the Género Negro Tradition*, Renée W. Craig-Odders remarks, “Although clearly informed by the hard-boiled tradition, many contemporary [Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian] detective works do not adhere closely to the conventions of the genre” (1)

Works Cited

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