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Detective Fiction in the Monster, Mexico City

Abstract:

Muertos incómodos, a novel co-written by popular Mexican detective fiction author Paco Ignacio Taibo II and the Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos, demonstrates the difficulty of accessing the information required to uncover proof of state-supported crimes. The prospect of successfully deploying such information to stop injustice is further complicated by the disparity between urban and rural geography--registers often suggestively associated with aggressor and victim, respectively. The novel's two authors alternate writing chapters relating the travails of two detectives, one located in Mexico's capital and the other traveling to the city from his rural home. The rural, also inexperienced, detective assumes that the proof he needs to solve the mystery of pervasive injustice is concentrated in the capital. Over the course of the novel he learns the potential strength of peripheral information gathering; he discovers the falsity of perceiving the government capital as the center of knowledge and justice. The novel's authors have clear anti-neoliberal political goals and their didacticism is heavy-handed at times, but the act of depicting the process of discovery in detective fiction deliberately models how to question injustices that are glossed over as mysteries. It is through the interplay of the two authors' storylines and writing styles, which intrinsically allows comparison, that the novel shows the value of sharing information to crack capital crimes.

Keywords: Paco Ignacio Taibo II, Subcomandante Marcos, detective fiction

Mexico City Is a Monster

Mexico City is a monster. According to Paco Ignacio Taibo II's fictional detective Héctor Belascoarán Shayne, it is a "twelve-million-headed monster" (Taibo, *Cosa fácil* 466). Mexico's sprawling, heavily populated capital city is a character in its own right in Taibo's detective fiction. Its characterization is used to solve the mysteries of the crimes perpetrated by and in the monstrous capital. Such a connection is significant; it is also commensurate with Taibo's leftist, anti-neoliberal political stance. Specifically, Taibo's novel co-authored with Zapatista spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos, *Muertos incómodos: falta lo que falta*, or *The Uncomfortable Dead: What's Missing is Missing*, uses Mexico City's characterization as a monster to dismantle the power of the capital.

Muertos incómodos challenges the perceived and real power of the city. As with all capital cities, the decisions made in Mexico City or by the government officials the capital city metonymically represents have significant, often negative, consequences for individuals and communities throughout the country; *Muertos incómodos* demonstrates the severity with which that reality is overlooked. The novel is the result of an invitation to Paco Ignacio Taibo II, the popular and prolific Mexican detective fiction author, from the spokesperson, the so-called Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional. The Zapatistas are an insurgent group who staged a rebellion against the Mexican government on January 1, 1994 in the southeastern Mexican state of Chiapas to coincide with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Initially, the rebellion was violent, but soon after the 1994 uprising the rebels emphasized "words as their weapons" (see Marcos, *Our Word*). Their political ideology is deliberately and overtly against neoliberal globalization, which NAFTA exemplifies for them. Their insurgency aims to counteract the negative consequences of increased "free trade," decreased restrictions of corporations, privatization of formerly public services, which by their calculations and from their experience significantly negatively affects the impoverished by increasing income disparity between the ultra rich and the poor. They oppose the unjust hierarchy and uneven distribution of resources, and therefore power, perpetuated by Mexico's so-called modernization efforts that actually ignored and further marginalized the country's poorest, especially the "non-modern" rural peripheries, by exploiting them for capital gain.

Taibo's literary project similarly has a strong anti-neoliberal, leftist stance. His writing has shaped the tradition of the *neopoliciaca*, roughly the Latin American equivalent of US hard-boiled detective fiction, though it is different from its English-speaking counterpart in that it is "overtly political and leftist," as Persephone Braham convincingly argues (xiii). Taibo's most popular publications include a nine-novel series with detective Héctor Belascoarán Shayne, the same protagonist he writes about in *Muertos incómodos*, and more than a dozen other novels. In

addition to his popular *neopoliciacas*, Taibo writes as a leftist historian; he has written biographies of controversial political leaders, including Che Guevara, and histories of the 1968 student movement and massacre in Mexico. With these texts Taibo raises awareness of state crimes and the thinly concealed exploitation of citizens; these leftist motivations also clearly drive his popular detective fiction. In fact, Taibo articulated one characteristic of the *neopoliciaca* genre as “La obsesión por las ciudades; una incidencia recurrente temática de los problemas del Estado como generador del crimen, la corrupción, la arbitrariedad política” (quoted in Balibrea Enríquez 50 n.5). Detective fiction, especially in the way it is formulated by Taibo and other Latin American authors, uses urban spaces to make evident the disempowerment of the masses who live in them. As part of the *neopoliciaca* genre, *Muertos incómodos* has parallel tendencies. Given this background information about the authors and its genre, there are no doubts about the political ideology presented in *Muertos incómodos*; it is clear at first blush. [1]

The novel performs its political leanings overtly; consequently, how the authors communicate their points and prescribe remedies reveals as much about the system they are working against as what they are trying to prove. The role of the city and the duplicitous idea of capital in the novel brings to light important, often paradoxical, dimensions of the consequences of neoliberalism and attempts to resist them. The city figures prominently in both the manner in which the novel was published and its plot. The novel was first published in twelve installments in the weekly Sunday editions of *La Jornada*, a popular leftist Mexican newspaper based in Mexico City, between December 2004 and February 2005. Taibo and Marcos alternated writing installments, each author narrating the undertakings of his own detective. Taibo resurrects the independent detective, Héctor Belascoarán Shayne, of his popular series to investigate unsolved murders and mysterious telephone messages from a deceased person in Mexico City. Marcos’s chapters follow the Zapatistas’ model of inclusiveness by introducing all varieties of characters, though his main character, Elías Contreras, is a Zapatista “commissioned investigator” from Chiapas who is investigating other wrongful deaths, the exploitation of the natural resources of the Lacandon Jungle, the mistreatment of Zapatista individuals and communities by government officials, and other crimes on-going in Chiapas. Subcomandante Marcos (both the author and a character in the novel) sends Elías to Mexico City to get help from Belascoarán as a veteran detective and to find justice that seems inaccessible in Chiapas; the consequences challenge the pervasive notion that the answers to the mysteries can be solved in the capital. Over the course of the novel Elías learns the potency of gathering information in the periphery and discovers the falsity of perceiving the government capital as the center of knowledge and justice. The city therefore represents the locus of communication and discovery, but the way it is characterized makes it seem complicit in the crimes the protagonists are investigating.

Belascoarán and Elías each describe Mexico City as a monster and approach it with considerable trepidation. Elías continuously repeats that Mexico City is a Monster. In fact, “El Sup,” Marcos’s character in the novel, instructs Elías to refer to it in that way when he is giving Elías instructions about his mission into the city (68). Throughout the novel, Elías corrects himself (ad nauseum) by qualifying the description; for example, he tells someone he is “in the Monster, that is, Mexico City” (131). Similarly, Belascoarán refers to Mexico City as a creature with which he has a very complicated relationship. He has a “notion of being tied to the city by an umbilical cord, trapped in a love-hate relationship” (43). He also describes the components of the city as if it were alive; for example, he spends time listening to the noise of the street and describes the sound of traffic as a “roar” (153). Belascoarán often retires to high vantage points to observe the city and consider how to resolve the sundry mysteries he deals with as private detective: “he had begun to prefer seeing Mexico City from above. From the highest roofs and bridges he could find. It was less harmful that way, more like a city, just a single solid thing as far as the eye could see” (30). While the city seems more like a creature up close for Belascoarán, Elías’s first view of it emphasizes its monsterly characteristics that corroborate an observation Belascoarán makes about the city’s “jungle of antennas and lampposts” (30). Elías travels to Mexico City for the first time by bus and he says the many antennas are “like skinny little hairs growing on the heads of the houses” (72). Indicative of Belascoarán’s ambivalent relationship to Mexico City, he is described as being “accustomed to absurd enigmas because he lived in the most marvelously absurd city in the world” (31). Elías also quickly notices the paradoxes in the city; sometimes the residents of the city are genuinely part of the creature that is the monster and sometimes they are terrorized by the infrastructure that is a dangerous creature; he observes that “The Monster has big houses and small ones, tall ones and little bitty ones, fat and skinny, rich and poor. Like people, but without hearts. In the Monster, the most important thing is the houses and the cars, so people get sent underground, to the metro. If people stay up there in car country, well, the cars kind of like get very pissed and try to gore them, like bulls would” (91). Elías discovers that Mexico City is not only dangerous for someone from the countryside like him, but to the city’s resident pedestrians as well. Thus, throughout the novel, Mexico City is a potentially dangerous creature whose components--from antennae to cars--have monsterly violent tendencies.

Neoliberal Cities

The descriptions of Mexico City as a monster are more significant than a commonality between the two authors’ installments; characterizing a city in such a way is not unique to *Muertos incómodos* nor Mexico City. Similar descriptions are frequently found in fiction and non-fiction, film and print, newspaper and novel. Like other “megacities,” which geographer Fred Pearce argues

are often depicted “as out-of-control monsters [and] economic cuckoos sucking in the poorest people in the poorest countries” (84), Mexico City is a labyrinth with millions of people. Megacities are labeled as such because of their more than 10 million inhabitants and their monstrous depiction is warranted by the fact that many of their inhabitants “live in slums and squatter settlements with poor access to clean water, sanitation and garbage collection” (84). Megacities are also dangerous because of their extreme pollution—“more than a billion urban inhabitants breathe air polluted to dangerous levels”—and violence—“the largest causes of death among young people in [some such cities] are traffic accidents and homicide” (84). But the poor and dangerous living conditions are not the only reason for megacities’ monstrous depiction; they are renowned for rampant corruption. Take an (admittedly outdated, though relevant to the Zapatista rebellion,) newspaper article from 1997 titled “The Monster of Mexico” claiming that Mexico City’s “residents . . . love their city but admit it has become a monster” (Robinson 44). Specifically, the article suggests that the then recently elected Cuauhtemoc Cardenas won the election to become Mayor of Mexico City by campaigning for “democracy and for fighting poverty, corruption, crime, and pollution,” a platform that does not seem revolutionary in retrospect (44). The news report goes on to list the corrupt elements of Mexico’s capital city, from bribed politicians to dangerous police to drug lords to criminal beggars. Its laundry list of “plagues” is population, poverty, pollution, crime, and corruption. The point is that the authors of that article also label Mexico City as a monster and imply that its residents understand it to have those characteristics as well. The claims made by that article are not dissimilar from a much more recent July 30, 2015 article about the ties between a contractor, Grupo Higa, receiving billions of dollars in Mexican government projects and the current Mexican president, Enrique Peña Nieto (Villegas). Remarkable in these descriptions as well is the dichotomy between the people and the systemic mechanisms that make the city monstrous.

The political and economic conditions that contribute to the development of monstrous cities are precisely the conditions Marcos and Taibo aim to blame for the capital crimes in *Muertos incómodos* and their other political projects. The idea of “capital crimes” here plays on the various denotations and connotations of “capital”—including that it is the government seat, money, mortality, etc. Taibo and Marcos show the capital, or life-and-death, consequences of their message. Though their tone is parodic and often playful, both detectives are investigating murders and in fact both detectives have already died as a result of their involvement in uncovering crimes. Marcos enumerates what can be considered “capital crimes” in one of his, perhaps too heavy-handed, rants: Through Elías as narrator, he describes the files Elías and Belascoarán have been filling with information about corruption and crimes as “a dictionary of the shit, piss, and corruption in the system, which made them like a perspective of all the ways the system of the powerful fucked everybody else to benefit the rich and the bad governments. Then he said there

was a little of everything: There was repression, murder, prison, persecution, disappearances, fraud, robbery, land grabbing, the sale of national sovereignty, high treason, corruption. ‘In sum,’ [Belascoarán] said, ‘those at the top screw those at the bottom’” (191). The “system” and the “screwed” are often referenced in the novel and in Zapatista rhetoric to mean the neoliberal bureaucracies and hierarchies that make life difficult for the impoverished and the impoverished themselves, respectively.

There are strong connections among the capital crimes that are encouraged by neoliberalism and the development of megacities. Geographers and other social scientists have argued there is a connection between neoliberalism and the condition of the megacity. David Harvey argues for the “complex dynamic of urbanization” as they relate to major shifts in globalization in recent years; “the connection between urbanization processes and finance capital has become . . . more direct. It is unmediated by other institutional forms of control and much more prone to rapid and ephemeral geographical dispersal across the globe. Ideologically, it seems as if all urban places must submit to the discipline of free-floating finance” (Harvey 173). Moreover, there is a concept of a “neoliberal city,” which is one “whose mode of governance, social structure, and spatial development express the neoliberal vision of a free market utopia. Economic progress in the neoliberal city springs from individual initiative and unfettered markets in land, labor, and money. Government is modeled on the enterprise, the citizen on the consumer and governance on business management” (Hill 151). The consequences of such neoliberalization of urban spaces include that “national cutbacks in urban expenditures require cities to find new sources of revenue. Deregulation of finance simultaneously expands the range and availability of private capital. Federal retrenchment and the devolution of revenue raising responsibility to localities forces cities to compete for resources in the private capital market” (Hill 152). Furthermore,

state operations have become much more strongly disciplined by money capital and finance. Structural adjustment and fiscal austerity have become ‘the name of the game’ and the state has, to some degree, been reduced to the role of finding ways to promote a favourable business climate. Welfare for the poor has largely been replaced, therefore, by public subventions to capital. However, the power of the nation-state has not disappeared. It has been enhanced rather than diminished in certain areas such as labour control, fiscal discipline of state expenditures and infrastructural investments. The guiding philosophy of state action has increasingly been that of the ‘public-private partnership’ in which public investments are increasingly geared to securing private rather than social interests. (Harvey 174)

With increased urbanization has come bigger, more dangerous slums, which Teresa Almeida argues is a specific consequence of neoliberalism. According to her research, “slums are a result of a global economic system based on neoliberal principles that induced the formation

of large cities” as it “emphasized financialization at the cost of productive manufacturing and privatization at the cost of public investment and infrastructure. This new economic policy resulted in the dependence of developing countries’ economies on the global marketplace” (Almeida). [2] Neoliberal policy impelled urbanization as conglomerates decreased rural farm work so people migrated to cities, where less money was being spent on social services, wages were being depressed by the influx of more potential laborers, and the infrastructure as it was could not support so many more people. Consequently, the depiction of the city as a monster that endangers its citizens illustrates well the conditions precipitated by neoliberalism, under which the government protects business interests as much as if not more than its citizens even while more and more citizens are flocking to cities to find a livelihood.

In the monstrous cities made so under the influence of neoliberal globalization, power is pulled into the capital because the government seat has made commitments to protect corporations and make business favorable for their capital accumulation. People are also pulled in, but they do not receive such obsequious protection. Neoliberal policies favors money over citizens--they become consumers in the configuration and so if they have no money to purchase what is being sold they are unimportant to the system. Thus the capital city becomes purely focused on monetary capital and the citizens there are merely peripheral, or, as we see through the discussions of the metro in *Muertos incómodos*, subterranean. The components of the city that are monsterly are those components that are part of the “system” or the ones to which only the privileged business and government elite have access. The antennas that indicate consumption of media and the cars that endanger pedestrians and force them underground to the metro tunnels are indicators of participation in the market, which is protected above all else.

The “Real Mexico”

From this discussion of the well-used metaphor of the megacity, it should be clear that the citizens of the city, while they contribute to its monsterly condition, are endangered by it. The monster and the people in it are monstrous through no deliberate, conscious fault of their own; the conditions arise gradually more out of necessity and neglect than anything. Consequently, Elías and Belascoarán have ambivalent relationships with the city and its citizens. They see the dangerous conditions and model how to navigate them in order to find the answers they seek. As part of the *neopolicíaca* genre, *Muertos incómodos* addresses the monstrosity of the city to challenge the provenance of its powerful conglomeration and deconstruct the inaccessible mystique of capital crimes. The cityscape highlights the systemic corruption, perhaps because of its density and the propensity for extreme conditions.

Work by William Nichols especially helps place Taibo’s work in relation to the conditions

neoliberalism imposes on cities and citizens. As Nichols argues about Taibo's work generally, though it applies well to his and Marcos's joint project, "by setting the investigations of their detectives against the backdrop of Mexico City" they "expose the fragmentation and marginalization within the social reality as urban renewal projects adhere to the logic of capital" (Nichols 12). Indeed, "Mexico City's reality represents for the detective a maelstrom of violence, corruption, and danger that are an ever-present threat to the citizens there" (106). The city's infrastructure is dangerous for the citizens and Belascoarán's main goal is to protect individuals from that danger, which is most often the result of absurd exploitation. He distinguishes between the treacherous urban environment and the citizens who battle it. Earlier in Taibo's series with Belascoarán as the consistent protagonist, Belascoarán becomes disillusioned with the middle class and abandons his position therein by quitting his engineering job, divorcing his wife, and leaving his well-kept house behind. He becomes a detective on a whim in an effort to become part of what he calls the "real Mexico." He shares an office with an upholsterer, a plumber, and a sewer engineer to prove his work is connected to the real Mexico, or the actual, normal people of Mexico. In Taibo's novels' narratives, the detective often reflects on his ambivalent relationship with the city and its citizens. One such reverie gives a sense of the issues: "He averred, confirmed: There is no hatred. Just an immense, infinite sensation of love for this ever-changing city that he lives in and that lives in him, that he dreams of and that dreams of him. A determination to love that goes beyond all the rage, possession, and sex, and dissolves into tenderness" (*MI* 43). His work as detective leads him to interact on a personal level with the people and mechanisms of the city.

Most often, Belascoarán solves his mysteries by talking to people around the city; some he meets by chance and some he seeks out because of possible connections that would help solve whatever case he is investigating. When he makes major advances in solving the mystery in *Muertos incómodos*, he is reviewing the documents and other information he has collected with Elías. All of his various officemates contribute to thinking through the clues and issues of his cases; in fact, one of those officemates asserts that any success Belascoarán has as a detective is the result of "popular wisdom" (203). He emphasizes that he solves cases "by listening, watching, walking around, and, particularly, reading. But the most important things are what [he's] learned from [his officemates]" (203). Common sense or "coherence" are also essential concepts in his discovery process; if something seems to fit or if it seems to fit with someone's character or condition to have done something, Belascoarán trusts his instincts to believe they did. In other novels, he solves mysteries similarly by connecting to the "real Mexico" through his ally in a late night DJ who broadcasts messages to him and the rest of the late-night listeners. It's clear that this DJ represents the potential of mass communication to generate solidarity among the heterogeneous masses--the oppressed, often dejected, late-night listeners. Information about his cases get phoned in to the radio station and passed pack to Belascoarán in a collective

information exchange. The category of “late-night listeners,” with the sundry reasons for being awake in the middle of the night, encompasses more than the shift workers, the marginalized or oppressed, and the non-conformists who use the metaphoric cover of darkness to combat the system that threatens them. Gathering information from the oppressed--those endangered by the monster, but who are also average late-night listeners--represents a model of resistance to the systemic exploitation.

Taibo uses Mexico City’s mostly-unrealized potential in its highly concentrated population to shed light on the capital crimes and Marcos sends Elías to learn how to do so. At first Marcos seems to perpetuate and support the preeminence of the city. The fact that Elías had to go to the city to investigate the crimes committed in his rural state, and that he “had to hang around picking up city ways, and then [he] could do the job” (16) gives deference to the capital city as a center of power, information, and justice. However, over the course of the novel and through Elías’s interactions with the city and Belascoarán, we see that the right resources are concentrated in the city, but not because it is the seat of government and business power, but because it has a high concentration of people who are potential allies. For that reason it is where Elías is supposed to learn how to ask the questions, but doesn’t discover any of the answers there. Elías talks about the “screwed people” who are exploited by neoliberal policies and capital-driven decisions and he meets many and includes them in solving his cases. In one of Marcos’s most convincingly genuine narrative moments, Elías describes the process of understanding the difference between the monster city and its residents:

“All in all I had a real hard time in the beginning, but then later I began to understand city ways and I kinda liked it. El Sup had told me that if you want to know the Monster, you have to walk it. Walk through it, he told me, and you’ll see that the city is built on the people who can save it. So that’s what I did, I walked all around that city. And I went everywhere, and everywhere I went I ran into people like us Zapatistas, which means people who are screwed, which means people willing to fight, which means people who don’t give up.” (95)

In that process, Elías creates a powerful image of discovering the potential of Belascoarán’s “real Mexico.” Tapping into that potential jibes with the pattern the Zapatistas follow as they publicize their message and goals of raising awareness locally, nationally, and globally. [3]

In addition to the people that Elías and Belascoarán call upon locally to help solve the mysteries, they both reach outside Mexico City to gather the information necessary. Each detective has a computer ingenue/hacker in a US-Mexico border town to give him valuable information for explaining the confusing identity of the so-called Morales, who might be a murderer, and the even more confusing answering machine messages from a dead person. Additionally, in his sections, Marcos deliberately shows how the Zapatistas desire the solidarity that comes from concentrated

populations. In what has become a cliché of Zapatista inclusiveness, Elías's position as narrator is ceded multiple times to other characters who have peripheral connections with the story at hand. They all have something to say about the oppressive government or the injustices perpetuated by the neoliberal system. While these narrative techniques frequently feel heavy-handed—both Marcos's attempts, and the way they mirror Taibo's to show the importance of using the information gathered through individual experience to help other individuals, near and far—emphasize the potential of the population to overthrow the power of the capital system.

One example of this is a reference to a report about the findings of a human rights commission in Chiapas published in *La Jornada*, the newspaper in which the novel's installments were published originally. Elías expected readers to have read the report, which indicts the way the Mexican paramilitary have been treating the Zapatistas and citizens of Chiapas, and have an opinion about it. By referring to the news published in the newspaper just days prior to the novel installment, *Muertos incómodos* models the need for individuals to become detectives—not because there are simple answers, but because asking the right questions, being informed generally, and using that information to fight complacency presents opportunities to dismantle the oppressive conditions under which they live. Even if with no other method, they can do that through awareness of the mechanisms and systems to which they are subjected.

Each detective makes productive connections to solve their crimes, but the fundamental connection on which the novel is based is the two authors and their protagonists cooperating. Each detective investigates crimes perpetrated by someone called Morales. Because of the shared name of the criminal, the two detectives initially assume they should work together. The two detectives meet briefly in Mexico City to collaborate, but when they discover there are multiple criminals named Morales they decide to split their efforts and so each works to bring to justice the Morales who operates in his vicinity. The crimes relate to real events that have been either deliberately covered up, gone unnoticed, or are ongoing unhindered, including attempts to privatize and sell the land and resources of the Lacandon Jungle in Chiapas, the “dirty war” against Mexican guerrillas in the 1970s, and violent attacks on the 1968 student movement and, more recently, pro-Zapatista peasants in Chiapas. The authors and their respective detectives share information through a variety of methods to emphasize the benefits of collaboration—even from different locales. They have the common goal of wanting “to grab the bastard that was doing his dirty business here, or over there,” but they decide that only focusing on one Morales at a time is not the most efficient way of stopping the crimes the Moraleses are committing. They agree to have each “take off in his own direction and operate in his own territory--that would be Belascoarán in the Monster and [Elías] in Chiapas--but helping each other with constant information exchanges” (193). Even though it seems like all the information about criminal activity and the power to stop state-supported injustice is concentrated in the government capital, with

this decision the novel shows that because crimes have local consequences, they can be solved and brought to justice on the periphery. Thus, Taibo and Marcos dismantle the false perception that information and justice are necessarily concentrated in the capital in *Muertos incómodos*.

Popular Genre, Critical Message

Elías heads back to Chiapas empowered to find local solutions to the crimes committed in his vicinity and actually does succeed in taking down one Morales. He can because of the newfound dependence on peripheral information gathering. This is a skill and valorization he learns, or at least sees modeled in, the detective work of Belascoarán. In fact, the detective fiction genre is perfect for the modeling that Marcos practices in which he expects readers to mimic the habits that result in productive connections, both with information and among characters. Earlier I quoted from Persephone Braham to confirm that Latin American detective fiction is often overtly political, but there is also a logic to using the genre that reveals the frustrating paradoxes of the neoliberal market. It is a popular commodity with formulaic conventions that Taibo and Marcos use deliberately to challenge the consequences of advanced free market capitalism. Nichols, also mentioned earlier, argues that it is “a genre of popular fiction ironically located where market appeal and literature intersect,” (11-12) so it provides an excellent vehicle for communicating with the general population about the negative consequences of the neoliberal system while using the commodification that system encourages to disseminate that message. He argues that in general, Taibo uses it to “infiltrate the market with a ‘popular’ formulaic text while critiquing the neoliberal strategies that commodify it” (Nichols 14). Moreover, Taibo “take[s] advantage of the mass appeal of [the] genre [by] infus[ing] it with literary fragmentation, aesthetic experimentation, and self-referential parody. The result ... convey[s] deeply political messages that subvert the hegemonic narratives of modernity by investigating issues of truth, power, dominance, and justice in Mexico . . . during the age of neoliberalism” (Nichols 18). Perhaps it was Taibo’s evident success using the popular genre to subvert that inspired Marcos to seek him out as collaborator to access as wide an audience as possible with *Muertos incómodos*.

Muertos incómodos is no exception in Taibo’s use of a popular form to challenge the very system that disseminates it by encouraging investigation—a concept that fits perfectly with the detective form. Marcos as the Zapatista spokesperson similarly used popular media, like the Internet, to send his subversive communiqués. The Zapatista publicity efforts make a show of using conventional forms to show what’s wrong with them. When individuals are subjugated by the system, it takes the system to reach them, but giving them new messages and models has the great potential to empower them. The novel was published in installments in a popular newspaper to encourage readership and to make clear the connection between what was happening in

Mexico and the process of investigation modeled in the narrative. Using the popular detective fiction genre makes it accessible and enticing to a wide variety of readers. It also draws readers in by looking for the clues along with the detectives—a habit Marcos deliberately models for his textual community. Though Taibo's chapters are more oriented toward the popular genre, both authors draw on the popular mystery form that also models the type of attention readers would need to pay to injustices whose perpetrators are protected by the normative system. Typical of Marcos's ironic forms, though the mystery puts pieces together as they are discovered, those puzzle pieces are hidden in plain sight—in the newspaper, in the treatment of the indigenous, in the government programs developed, etc. In this way, the audience becomes detectives just as Elías and Belascoarán are.

The active audience participation encouraged by *Muertos incómodos* is typical of the serial genre, which draws large audiences because it is deliberately all-inclusive. Just as the Zapatistas' communities specifically seek large communities and include all, the serial form characteristically does so as well, showing the parallels between Marcos's intent and the form's potential.

A deepening of the all-inclusiveness of their selected form, Taibo and Marcos's texts are open-ended and deliberately defy simplistic resolution or expected patterns. For example, in *Muertos incómodos* as well as throughout his popular series prior to *Muertos incómodos*, Taibo's detective Belascoarán specifically disrupts the detective fiction norms and shows the shortcomings of the very act of detective work in a self-aware way. Taibo makes the narrative mechanisms of the detective genre transparent through the characterization of Belascoarán as an unlikely, sometimes inept, detective whose internal monologue often compares himself and his actions to those that would be expected in a formulaic crime fiction. Even though there are moments when Belascoarán seems to want to fill the stereotypical role, he often does the exact opposite of what the typical hero would have done. Though Marcos's installments can be criticized for their inclusive gimmicks that seem amateurish, Elías also is not the typical detective, though he is successful because he is willing to read and listen to people, showing that he is open-minded, inclusive, and helpful. Elías and Belascoarán also often avoid following step-by-step logic when solving crimes. They try to ask the right questions, but know that there will not be a simple answer to the questions. Consequently, *Muertos incómodos* essentially shows that the monstrous mess that is Mexico, or Mexico City specifically, frustrates the logic of the simple "whodunit" question and answer. The simple answer would be that the perpetrator of the crimes—the so-called Morales—is a single individual, but because there are actually many criminals called Morales, and the Morales that causes so many problems in Chiapas may actually be the system itself, we see that investigating the system defies resolution. There isn't a simple way to bring justice, but the point is asking the questions and using the right resources to find the multiplicity of answers—or at least one that will assist in a specific situation.

In *Muertos incómodos*, the capital landscape may be monstrous and intimidating, but the key is trying to find a way to use the monster against the right enemies. Like the answer to so many other neoliberal conundrums, the solution, which is really just the start to the solution, is a paradox: to survive, one must use the monster against itself. This may seem too optimistic or idealistic and there is certainly a troubling lack of connection between the message of the text and its medium of circulation, but neoliberalism thrives on that disconnect. That is one reason why the Zapatistas take such pains to be overt about the mechanisms of circulation. For them, it seems the first step is really to raise awareness and then grasp control of, at the very least, how they and information about them is circulated. Recall that once Elías is aware of his position in “the monster” the machinery is no longer intimidating and gargantuan. Instead, perspective allows him break it down to its constituent parts and get to know the people that reside therein. The people, the citizens, are not recognized by the system for their positive potential in the workings of the monster and if they continue unaware of the systemic violence, the capital crimes will continue to exploit them. However, when consumers recognize each other as citizens and potential allies and informants, as Belascoarán and Elías see other individuals, the monstrous system becomes useful to them. According to *Muertos incómodos*, detection is the first step toward a real, not monstrous, Mexico.

Endnotes

[1] I am aware of the extensive criticism *Muertos incómodos* has received because of its heavy-handed political message. Marcos's chapters are particularly derided for being amateurish or of a carnivalesque attitude. While I agree that its literary merits are not the best, the methods and ideas behind the text is important for navigating our advanced capitalistic world, and therefore worthy of study. Nevertheless, I want to give voice to the criticism. In particular Glen Close, who writes extensively on the recent large increase in detective fiction texts from Latin America, complains that Marcos's writing has "an indomitable persistence of . . . propagandistic rhetoric and voice, albeit filtered through a series of colorful intradiagetic narrators" (4). He calls Marcos an "ideologue" and argues that the emphatic diversity of the characters whose perspectives are shared is mere "surface diversity" in that it "belies an unmistakable or underlying ideological uniformity or monologism, leaving the reader with the ultimate impression of a central narrative intelligence clumsily delegating the expression of doctrine or preaching, as it were, *through* the choir" (9).

[2] For additional argumentation on the effects neoliberal policy has had on cities, see also Davis, Mike. *Planet of Slums*. Verso. 2007.; Ploeg, Frederick van der; Poelhekke, Steven. *Globalization and the Rise of Mega-cities in the Developing World*. Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society. 2008.; Saskia, Sassen. *Cities in a World Economy*. 2nd Edition, Pine Forge Press. 2000.

[3] Thomas Olesen's point regarding international connections made by the Zapatistas illustrates this as well: "The Zapatistas' relationship with transnational activists is highly globalised in the sense that it is based on mutuality; in contrast, solidarity relationships in the cold war period, including Third World solidarity, tended to have more of a one-way character in which there was a clear distinction between providers and beneficiaries of solidarity. These changes to a large extent result from social innovations on the part of the Zapatistas, that is, their ability to mediate constantly between the particular and the universal" (Olesen 256).

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