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**Guest Editors of Vol. 10.1:**

Nicole Sparling Barco (Central Michigan University)  
Dawn Taylor (Penn State University)

## Vol. 10 No. 1 (May 2017):

Capital Crimes in the Americas

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**Nicole Sparling Barco** (Central Michigan University)

**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*/*neopolicia* (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 neopolicia 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 *neopolicia*, 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 ensuant 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)

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**Annika Eisenberg** (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt)

**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***

**Abstract**

Cities have distinct sounds. Some cities might sound alike, some may vary by subtle degrees, and others exhibit significant acoustic landmarks. But how does this play out for cities in literature? In this article Annika Eisenberg explores what Los Angeles sounds like in Raymond Chandler’s novel *The Long Goodbye* (1953), with the occasional glance towards earlier and later novels, and how Chandler’s sonic evocation of L.A. might find its equivalent in the latest Philip Marlowe novel *The Black-Eyed Blonde* (2014) by Benjamin Black (nom de plume of the Irish novelist John Banville), which ties in intertextually with characters and plot structures from *The Long Goodbye*.

**Keywords:** Raymond Chandler, Benjamin Black, noir, sound, city

## 1. Introduction

Cities have distinct sounds. Some cities might sound alike, some may vary by subtle degrees, and others exhibit significant acoustic landmarks such as London's Big Ben. But how does this play out for cities in literature? In this paper I explore what Los Angeles sounds like in Raymond Chandler's novel *The Long Goodbye* (1953), with the occasional glance towards earlier and later novels, and how Chandler's sonic evocation of L.A. might find its equivalent in the latest Philip Marlowe novel *The Black-Eyed Blonde* (2014) by Benjamin Black (nom de plume of the Irish novelist John Banville), which ties in intertextually with characters and plot structures from *The Long Goodbye*. Literature has a long tradition of urban novels that made the respective cities appeal to all of the senses of their protagonists (and their readers), from sight to sound to touch to smell. Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles is such a multidimensional city that can easily join the ranks of well-established literary urban classics of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Alfred Döblin's Berlin, John Dos Passos's New York or James Joyce's Dublin. Even earlier classics might be included in the list, since Frank MacShane claims that Chandler "create[d] the whole of Los Angeles in much the same way that such 19<sup>th</sup>-Century novelists as Dickens and Balzac created London and Paris for future generations" (MacShane 67). To Chandler, who famously noted that "[t]he ideal mystery was one you would read if the end was missing" (*Trouble Is My Business* viii), setting and characters were doubtless more important than the solution of the murder mysteries in his novels. Indeed, when Howard Hawks set out to turn Chandler's novel *The Big Sleep* into a movie starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, he discovered that the novel didn't disclose who murdered the Sternwood family chauffeur, or whether the man committed suicide. As the story goes, Hawks asked Chandler about this, who replied "dammit I didn't know either", as Chandler later recalled in a letter to Jamie Hamilton (Hiney and MacShane 105). In this context, Frank MacShane emphasizes the vital entanglement and immense potential of the city setting in crime fiction with regard to Chandler: "The detective story, so peculiar to the modern city, can involve an extraordinary range of humanity, from the very rich to the very poor, and can encompass a great many different places" (67). Thus, it may seem surprising that to date the majority of research on urban spaces in crime fiction from a sensory perspective adheres almost exclusively to a visual paradigm. It is the flashing neon lights, the inky shadows, and the blinds obscuring windows that come to mind as characteristics of the hard-boiled and noir genres. In my article, I want to shift the focus from visual spaces and places in crime fiction to the auditory qualities of the urban environment. In general, the sound of noir is still an under-represented field, with Robert Miklitsch's 2011 monograph *Siren City – Sound and Source Music in Classic American Noir* representing a notable forerunner in the field of film studies. While Miklitsch analyzes all different kinds of sounds with regard to film noir I focus on a specific subset of sounds: urban sounds, sounds

that are connected to and representative of a cityscape. This leads to a redefinition and precision of Raymond Murray Schafer's original coinage of the term 'soundscape', as in my definition soundscape comprises all of those sounds which the reader of a literary work perceives to be constitutive of a mediated experience of the respective cityscape. [1]

In a first phenomenological approach to a typology of urban sounds I have identified four main groups of sounds that are related to their urban environment in one way or another, moving from the more concrete and obvious urban sounds to the more abstract and unusual. The first group consists of all mechanical and technological sounds that are determined by the architectural and industrial features of the city such as traffic and transportation, sirens and bells (both mobile and stationary), factories and construction sites. The second group is similarly determined by the topography of the city. While most discourse on urban space sees this group as a distinct opposite to the city, the boundaries are surely not as strict: natural and animal sounds – ranging from bird song, squeaking rats and barking dogs to the sounds of the sea, lakes or rivers. The third group comprises the major audience for and at the same time prominent producer of urban sounds: human beings, whether as mumbling crowds, street vendors, or through a distinct way of speaking, such as the Berlin dialect in Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* or the Kansas accent in Chandler's *Playback*. And finally music can also have a great variety of connections to the city it is performed in, originates from, or is associated with in literature. This includes vocal music about the city, with Frank Sinatra's 'New York, New York' being one of the most famous examples, certain musical styles or forms, such as Chicago Jazz, but also buskers, nightclubs and bars, as well as radio or jukebox music played in the respective city. But not all of these sounds will be found in any city and not all of them at the same time and in the same place. So rather than merely identifying which kinds of sounds might be heard in an urban space, the more significant question should actually be: who hears them? This question is an addition to Gérard Genette's distinction between who speaks (narrator) and who sees (focalizer) in a literary text. [2] Who hears?

## 2. Listen, Marlowe

In Chandler's novels and in Black's pastiche the hard-boiled detective Philip Marlowe is the prominent first-person narrator and focalizer: everything is mediated through him, he is the one who speaks, sees, and feels. When he becomes unconscious, the narrative is interrupted; when he falls asleep, the chapter ends. Marlowe describes himself as a "lone wolf" (*The Long Goodbye* 493), [3] and Chandler wrote in 1959 to Maurice Guinness: "I see [Marlowe] always in a lonely street, in lonely rooms, puzzled but never quite defeated" (Gardner and Walker 249). He is usually short on money but doesn't really care about it; he regularly gets into trouble both with the city's racketeers and the police force; he lives in an impersonal rented house – "this was what I would come back to. A blank



wall in a meaningless room in a meaningless house” (*Playback* 869) – and he keeps an ‘office bottle’ in his desk, which he turns to more often than to his mostly female clients. This narrative perspective implies that all L.A. sounds related in the novels reflect Marlowe’s reaction to and perception of them, rather than an objective, matter-of-fact description of urban sounds, which an omniscient narrator might be able to convey. This becomes apparent, for example, when Marlowe wakes up with a hangover and discloses an acoustic sensation he would normally not perceive consciously:

Birds chirped in the shrubbery outside and the cars went up and down Laurel Canyon Boulevard endlessly. Usually, I wouldn’t even hear them. But I was brooding and irritable and mean and oversensitive. I decided to kill the hangover. (*The Long Goodbye* 600f)

To account for such a specific sensual perspective the descriptive category “Point of Audition” (POA) was developed as an acoustic analogy to the term “Point of View”. The POA became especially prominent in film studies and took on a significant role to describe the subjective reception of sounds. [4] A genuinely literary approach, as already mentioned, modifies Genette’s concept of the focalizer into the auscultator, which Melba Cuddy-Keane proposes as a narratological category. [5] In general, the most obvious indicators for a specific, personal POA or a prominent auscultator in literature are the use of verbs from the semantic field of “listening” such as ‘hear’, ‘listen’, ‘eavesdrop’, ‘overhear’, and so on. Looking for such indications as a starting point for a sonic reading of a first-person narration seems plausible as basically every phenomenon in the world may have an acoustic dimension, which – in theory – could be *heard*, as Toni Bernhart rightly observes (53f). Certainly, densely described sensory impressions of a cityscape are able to evoke certain sounds in the readers’ minds, even though there may be such no explicit indicators for them. But examining such an implicit evocation poses analytical difficulties since any investigation of this kind would have to turn from a text-immanent to a reader-response approach. This is why I refrain from drawing on indirect evocations of sound. This approach is supported by the first-person perspectives in Chandler’s and Black’s novels, where signifiers for Marlowe’s POA are employed throughout.

Identifying the percipient agency can only be a first step, however, since it is equally important to determine how these sounds are evaluated or semantized, which metaphors or similes are chosen to bestow and convey a certain meaning. This can be quite obvious, such as when Black’s Marlowe states: “I like the *glug-glug-glug* that the soda makes as it tumbles over ice; it’s a sound that always cheers me up” (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 111, original emphasis). This is reminiscent of a short scene in *Farewell, My Lovely*, when Marlowe finds shelter at Anne Riordan’s place after he has been drugged and held captive: “somewhere ice cubes tinkled and I closed my eyes and listened to the small unimportant sounds” (904). This listening experience is subtler in its connotation than Black’s positive assertion, and although the sounds might be described as unimportant, this short sequence points to an essential distinction between positive and negative

sounds. As a detective Marlowe often has to rely on his listening skills and his good sense of hearing, for example, when he operates at night, while being blindfolded, or while eavesdropping on possible suspects – the latter he does, for instance, most remarkably by using a stethoscope on the bungalow wall to eavesdrop on the conversation between Betty Mayfield and Larry Mitchell from next door in *Playback*. He describes himself as a “trained listener” to Terry Lennox in *The Long Goodbye* (434), which allows the inference of two meanings: of being able to listen patiently to someone’s story, as Marlowe does in this instant, and being a skilled and attentive listener for details. This attentiveness is one of the most crucial qualities in a detective, because he needs to anticipate dangerous situations; he needs constantly to be on his toes, or, as it were, prick up his ears. This quality is found in Black’s Marlowe as well, who is aware of a precarious slip in his attentiveness in *The Black-Eyed Blonde*, when he “half heard, very faintly, a car pulling up in the street out front. I took no notice of it, though I should have.” (112) This inattentiveness has disastrous consequences, as shortly after, two Mexican men enter the apartment, beat Marlowe unconscious, and kidnap Lynn Peterson, who was there with him. Time and again attentive listening is portrayed as an essential quality for survival, as for example in the novel *Playback*, when Marlowe finds out that someone is waiting in his bungalow:

I went on through the trees until I was below my room. It was dark, soundless. I went up the few steps very slowly and put my ear to the door. For a little while I heard nothing. Then I heard a strangled sob – a man’s sob, not a woman’s. Then a thin, low cackling laugh. Then what seemed to be a hard blow. Then silence. I went back down the steps and through the trees to my car. I unlocked the trunk and got out a tire iron. I went back to my room as carefully as before – even more carefully. I listened again. Silence. Nothing. The quiet of the night. I reached out my pocket flash and flicked it once at the window, then slid away from the door. For several minutes nothing happened. Then the door opened a crack. (848f)

As a result, Marlowe finds most comfort and pleasure in sounds that are outside of his professionally trained listening scope, sounds that do not pose an imminent threat he has to detect. It is the “small unimportant sounds” he prefers to other, potentially threatening, small sounds such as the loading of a gun, cracking twigs in a Canyon, or the almost noiseless opening of a door. Helen Hanson points to another importance of sound – or its absence – in private investigation: “the term ‘gum-shoe’ for a detective, moving silently and unnoticed through the crime world, underlines how audible footsteps can form an index to a character’s location, where darkness frustrates an investigator’s visual map” (289). Interestingly, Black inverts this well-known trope and has his Marlowe struggle with moving silently when he exits his office: “Rufus had gone home, and the floor he had been mopping had long since dried, though the soles of my shoes squeaked on it as if it were still wet.” (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 263) This seems more in line with Chandler’s character Bernie Ohls in *The Long Goodbye*, the rare representative of

an honest police officer in the city, whose “heels hammered down the corridor. I could still hear them when the phone on my desk started to sound” (ibid. 652). In Chandler’s works, it is not only the ‘gum-shoes’ who are able to hide their acoustic traces: the suspects and seedy figures are characterized by an equal capacity: “I listened but I didn’t hear their steps going down the hall. They walked as softly as cats” (*The Long Goodbye* 438), Marlowe says of gangster Mendy Menendez and his bodyguard, and the shady ‘dope doctor’ Dr. Lester Vukanich – although not the main suspect – “walked noiselessly on crepe rubber soles” (ibid. 528). But *The Long Goodbye* ends with the most remarkable fading footsteps that are bound to linger in the readers’ minds – and in Marlowe’s, too. *The Long Goodbye* is the first novel that gets Marlowe close to having a real friend in Terry Lennox, and close to a female companion when Linda Loring asks him to marry her, which would put an end to Marlowe’s days as a “lone wolf”. This change becomes apparent to the reader only later, in Marlowe’s unfinished novel *Poodle Springs*; but then again, maybe there is design in Chandler’s leaving the novel a fragment, since “[a] really good detective never gets married. He would lose his detachment, and this detachment is part of his charm” (*Twelve Notes on the Mystery Story* 1008). Inevitably, *The Long Goodbye* ends with Marlowe listening to Terry Lennox’s footsteps fading away: “I listened to his steps going away down the imitation marble corridor. After a while they got faint, then they got silent. I kept on listening anyways.” (734) This sonic figure stands not only for Marlowe’s disappointment that he has lost what might have become his best, his only, friend, but it points to a special kind of vulnerability and frailty of human relationships in the big city.

It seems no surprise, then, that Marlowe does not actively seek human companionship in the novels. Rather, he turns to and identifies with the animals of the city, who – in a similar way as Marlowe – do not belong to its cityscape (as for instance traffic noises do), while nonetheless being a pivotal part of it. Descriptions of singing birds are prevalent in both *The Long Goodbye* and *The Black-Eyed Blonde*. Chandler’s Marlowe projects a lot of his own dissatisfaction with city life onto these animals, when, for example, he claims that he can hear “[a] mourning dove exclaim[] against the miseries of life” (*The Long Goodbye* 533). He takes sympathy in the “little fat bird” (ibid. 508), a baby mockingbird that is trying to balance itself in the tecoma in front of Marlowe’s apartment, and Marlowe constantly uses the personal pronoun “he”, “his” and “himself” to talk about the bird in front of his window (“I spotted him hanging on to one of the top branches”, [ibid.], “a mockingbird [...] admired himself before settling down for the night” [ibid. 475], or “a bird was [...] talking to himself in low chirps” [ibid. 488]). It seems that Marlowe identifies with these animals and finds comfort in another kind of a “small unimportant sound”. The bird’s chirruping becomes human language, when the bird is “talking to himself”; something the silent listener Marlowe may recognize as a familiar habit as well, no less because he is a first-person narrator. Black’s Marlowe does not take such an interest in the birds around him; in *The Black-Eyed Blonde* they are mostly “crying” (“the gulls crying” [47], “the

odd seabird sleepily crying” [165], “night birds crying” [ibid.]), and are often used to create a sense of security and comfort in moments of extreme tension, which are shortly after revealed as illusory. When Marlowe hears “a scream, eerily thin and piercing” in the garden (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 50), it is Clare who has to explain to him that this was the cry of a peacock. While Chandler’s Marlowe can easily identify different bird songs (e.g. “Far back in the valley I thought I heard a quail” [*The Long Goodbye* 533]), Black’s Marlowe does not recognize the distinct sound that a peacock makes. In Black, the expectation of its cry becomes a sinister omen that Marlowe is terribly apprehensive about: “Then I caught a flash of blue, a deep, shiny blue, and there was a swishing sound that quickly faded. It must have been the peacock. I hoped it wouldn’t do its scream, my nerves couldn’t have borne it” (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 265). While Black’s Marlowe is afraid of the sound the peacock makes, Chandler’s Marlowe is much more fearful of those sounds less associated with animal life and more with big cities.

### 3. The Big Angry City

Marlowe’s troubled relationship with Los Angeles has been an endless source for discussion [6], and quite naturally it finds its equivalence in Marlowe’s audible description of Los Angeles. Any urban sounds that might be positively connoted are entirely absent from Chandler’s L.A. soundscape – and from Black’s, too. In a crucial scene in *The Long Goodbye* Marlowe returns home from the Wades’s house, where he discovered the death of Roger Wade, and he gives a glimpse of his stance on L.A. through an acoustic description of its properties:

When I got home I mixed a stiff one and stood by the open window in the living room and sipped it and listened to the groundswell of the traffic on Laurel Canyon Boulevard and looked at the glare of the big angry city hanging over the shoulder of the hills through which the boulevard had been cut. Far off the banshee wail of police or fire sirens rose and fell, never for very long completely silent. (*The Long Goodbye* 645)

Ceaseless traffic and sirens are the predominant sounds of L.A., indicating the motorization and velocity of modern life as well as the corrupt and criminal environment. This negative connotation becomes apparent through metaphors such as the “banshee wail” (ibid.) or, later, that the “traffic brawled endlessly” (ibid. 530), and of course through the characterization of the city as “angry”. Traffic interferes with Marlowe’s ability to draw deductions from the few facts he has accumulated so far, which is one of the key weapons of a private investigator: “The noise of the traffic outside the building on the boulevard made an unmusical obbligato to my thinking. It was too loud.” (ibid. 616) In Chandler’s other novels traffic is similarly connoted, especially when Marlowe is hung over (see above) or recovers from being drugged: “The noise of traffic from the

boulevard came in waves, like nausea. I felt lousy" (*Farewell, My Lovely* 832). Awakening from a bout of drinking or other intoxication seems to sharpen rather than dull Marlowe's hearing.

In general, traffic is a very complex acoustic phenomenon that might consist of honking cars, revving motors, squeaking brakes and the odd rumble and rattle of buses, trains or trucks. Subsuming these different sounds into a generic term avoids an aesthetization of L.A.'s traffic noise, which could be easily expressed in literature through devices such as onomatopoeia, paratactic sentence structures, metaphors, and similes. This strengthens the impression that to Marlowe Los Angeles is far from exhibiting what might be called an "urban sublime", but is rather a "neon-lighted slum" (*The Little Sister* 357) that affords no pleasure or joy for the private detective. But what is more, L.A. can actually turn into a threat, when the "big angry city" is venting its rage. In Marlowe's case this means repeatedly being beaten up by hoodlums or police officers as the brutal representatives of the relentless city, which often have quite a dramatic impact on Marlowe's sense of hearing in Chandler: "The blow traveled eight or ten inches, no more. It nearly took my head off. Bile seeped into my mouth. I tasted blood mixed with it. I heard nothing but a roaring in my head" (*The Long Goodbye* 455); and in Black:

It was as hard to get my head up as it had been in Nico Peterson's kitchen a few hours previously, though the bells that went off inside my skull didn't make quite as bad a din as before. In fact, I'd mistaken the sound of the doorbell for them when Bernie first pressed it. (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 125)

The angry city manifests itself also in several car chases at a breakneck speed through Los Angeles. An especially menacing scene takes place in Chandler's novel *The Lady in the Lake*, when a police car follows Marlowe, and the description of the car's sounds already alludes to the intentions of the police officers in it: "The car behind me gained. [...] The car came up level and started to cut in. [...] Behind me sounded the rough clashing of gears, the howl of an infuriated motor, and the red spotlight swept for what seemed miles over the brickyard" (128f). The police officers stop Marlowe, beat him up and fine him for drunk driving. Later on he recounts to Captain Webber: "I didn't bust Cooney in the nose until after he had forced me to drink whiskey and then hit me in the stomach when I drank it, so that I would spill it down my coat front and smell of it. This can't be the first time you have heard of that trick, captain" (ibid. 137). Black's novel is less prone to invoking traffic noises to allude to L.A. as a troubled city, but *The Black-Eyed Blonde* picks up a motif that is also prevalent in Chandler's soundscape in previous novels: the idea of nature not as an opposite to the criminal urban environment but as being corrupted by it. One example might be Marlowe's description of the ocean, which is not a source of comfort in either Black's or Chandler's novels: "down at the water's edge [...] pebbles hissed in the wash as if they were on the boil" (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 44). Marlowe himself might feel "on the boil" when talking

to his enchanting client Clare Cavendish at this moment, but beyond this externalization of an inner emotional state, “the sound of the waves, the pebbles hissing and the gulls crying” (ibid. 47) construes the ocean as a potentially dangerous place that does not provide shelter from urban criminality. This becomes further apparent for instance in the gambling ships on the ocean that Marlowe describes and visits in *Farewell, My Lovely*: “There was light on the *Montecito* also and music floated across the wet dark sea.” (947)

Gambling ships, casinos, shady nightclubs, and bars – time and again Marlowe has to return to L.A.’s entertainment district, Hollywood, which doesn’t foster a fondness for these environments within him. In all of Chandler’s novels a somewhat natural liaison between popular music and criminal environments is staged, because they are part of the same infrastructures of nightclubs, casinos, bars, hotels, and theaters as their centers and hubs of activities, and all people somehow associated with the music business usually belong to the circle of suspects, such as the night club owner Steelgrave in *The Little Sister* or the singers Velma Valento in *Farewell, My Lovely* and Lisa Conquest in *The High Window*. While it is impossible to give a comprehensive overview of the jazz discourse and its implications in 1940s and 1950s America in this short article, this liaison clearly reflects a certain racial discourse that finds “black” music to be the idiomatic representation of the urban, the secular, and the decadent. [7] Miklitsch summarizes this stereotypical reception of jazz when he states that “many white Americans enthusiastically embraced the music because it displayed elements associated with black popular culture such as ‘spontaneity, transgressiveness, and, most importantly, sexuality’” (12). [8] This might be one reason why Marlowe is rather biased towards the popular jazz music of his time, which is reprised in *Black* from a more nuanced 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, when Marlowe’s radio is “playing an old number by the Paul Whiteman band, hot music made safely cool for the masses. It beats me how a guy with the name Whiteman ever got up the nerve to play jazz” (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 264). Jazz music as the prelude to and soundtrack of crime renders Hollywood a shady and phony place. It has little to offer for Marlowe, as the movies are “just noises and big faces” to him (*The Long Goodbye* 488). That his investigations often lead him to Hollywood must seem like the irony of his life. In numerous instances Marlowe voices his contempt for Hollywood and everyone in it:

Real cities have something else, some individual bony structure under the muck. Los Angeles has Hollywood and hates it. It ought to consider itself damn lucky. Without Hollywood it would be a mail-order city. Everything in the catalog you could get better somewhere else.” (*The Little Sister* 358)

*Black* takes up the misanthropic attitude of Chandler’s Marlowe, which is expressed throughout all of Chandler’s novels (most prominently during a long car drive in the novel *The Little Sister*: “You’re not human tonight, Marlowe” [268]), when he has Marlowe waiting at Union Station “amid the noise and smells and the endless rush of hurrying, impatient, ill-tempered people” (*The*



*Black-Eyed Blonde* 251).

But it is not only crowded Hollywood, the movies, and jazz music that Marlowe does not find any pleasure in; he is also indifferent to the “Waltz King of Radio”, Marek Weber, whose music he has “in his ears” (*The Long Goodbye* 531) while waiting to be seated at a burger restaurant, and he isn’t too fond of classical music either. This doesn’t imply that Marlowe is ignorant of the musical arts. On the contrary, Marlowe is well-versed in (classical) music and its terminology, which becomes obvious in his repeated musical comparisons, for instance, when he relates the suspenseful silence after Eileen Wade enters a bar as “like just after the conductor taps on his music stand and raises his arms and holds them poised” (ibid. 490). Black’s Marlowe is not portrayed as the understated connoisseur of fine arts, who is educated and well-read. Rather Black’s Marlowe even outs himself as ignorant of classical music: “I heard the sound of a piano and stopped to listen. Chopin, I guessed, but I was probably wrong – to me everything on the piano sounds like Chopin” (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 265). In contrast, Chandler’s Marlowe describes the “noise of the traffic outside the building on the boulevard” as an “unmusical *obbligato*” (*The Long Goodbye* 616. added emphasis), and this paradoxical comparison points to his ambivalent relationship to urban sounds and to music in the most subtle yet precise way. One might argue that Marlowe construes music as an opposite to the urban sounds around him by calling the traffic “unmusical” and “too loud” (ibid.); but at the same time the traffic sounds are an “obbligato”, an obligatory and indispensable musical line in a performance, which might be seen to elevate these urban sounds to the sphere of music. As a result, the difference between the incidental chords of urban noise and the careful composition of classical music is, to a certain extent, revoked. Chandler’s Marlowe frequently draws on music metaphors as a means of connecting the cacophonous cityscape with the aesthetics of music, the latter of which might generally be perceived as more pleasing – all while degrading music as just another source of noise. This is further emphasized by Marlowe’s description of a violin concerto by Aram Khachaturyan, which he listens to when he is unable to sleep: “I was walking the floor and listening to Khachaturyan working in a tractor factory. He called it a violin concerto. I called it a loose fen belt and the hell with it” (ibid. 488). Consequently, music does not provide comfort or relief for Marlowe in the way it does, for instance, for Jessie Florian in *Farewell, My Lovely*, when she describes her radio as “[a]ll the comp’ny I got.” (785) In *The Black-Eyed Blonde*, on the other hand, Marlowe could not be less interested in his car radio: “I flicked on the radio. It was a thing I rarely did, and in fact I forgot for long periods that it was there” (264). So if neither typical city sounds, such as traffic noise, nor musical harmonies are pleasing to Marlowe’s ear, does silence do the trick for either Chandler’s or Black’s Marlowe?



#### 4. Silence

The most readily associated opposite to urban noise might be silence – although this can never mean complete silence as there is always something the human ear picks up, even if it is just the beating of one's own heart. When Marlowe is at Puma Lake outside of Los Angeles he remarks: "The air was peaceful and calm and sunny and held a quiet you don't get in cities" (*The Lady in the Lake* 37). Such a relative silence is reserved for L.A.'s upper classes, who can afford a place just outside of the densely populated downtown areas; closer to the canyons, mountains and the Pacific Ocean that provide natural barriers to the sprawl of Los Angeles. Although Marlowe often has clients from these parts of town – General Sternwood in *The Big Sleep*, Elizabeth Murdock in *The High Window*, Lindsay Marriott and Mrs Lewin Lockridge Grayle in *Farewell, My Lovely*, Terry Lennox and the Wades in *The Long Goodbye*, Clare Cavendish in *The Black-Eyed Blonde* – Marlowe doesn't like to associate with these circles, because they all exemplify the corrupt and phony society that Marlowe would find in Hollywood and every shady nightclub as well:

It was the same old cocktail party, everybody talking too loud, nobody listening, everybody hanging on for dear life to a mug of the juice, eyes very bright, cheeks flushed or pale and sweaty according to the amount of alcohol consumed and the capacity of the individual to handle it. (*The Long Goodbye* 560)

In contrast to the city's racketeers these "well-heeled people" make "quiet money", as Marlowe calls it in *The Long Goodbye*. This attribution strengthens the connection between (relative) silence and wealth:

I knew a good deal about Idle Valley, and I knew it had changed a great deal from the days when they had the gatehouse at the entrance and the private police force, and the gambling casino on the lake, and the fifty-dollar joy girls. Quiet money had taken over the tract after the casino was closed out. Quiet money had made it a subdivider's dream. (*The Long Goodbye* 498f)

In *Farewell, My Lovely* Marlowe describes such "great silent estates" as coming with "a special brand of sunshine, very quiet, put up in noise-proof containers just for the upper classes" (854). In an area that has plenty of sunshine but also long periods of droughts, real wealth and luxury is shown through a seemingly endless supply of water. Thus, the water sprinklers become the defining sounds of the wealthier parts of town as both Chandler and Black carve out: "High sprinklers revolved over the big smooth lawns and the water made a swishing sound as it licked at the grass" (*The Long Goodbye* 664) and "among the shrubbery there was a soft hushed hiss of

water sprinklers at work“ (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 67). It seems especially noteworthy that Black’s sprinklers are “at work” for the rich because this way another “small sound” becomes the agent of a larger, capitalist endeavor. These kinds of single sounds that can only be heard outside of the buzzing downtown areas, their faint acoustic signals only perceptible in an empty space, also allude to another kind of loneliness that is often confused with or attended by exclusivity: “[Idle Valley] was exclusive in the only remaining sense of the word that doesn’t mean merely expensive“ (*The Long Goodbye* 499). These small single sounds assume an explicit potential to highlight isolation or loneliness because they stand out as single sounds in moments of relative quiet. As Marlowe’s dismissive description of the Wade’s cocktail party already indicates, real friendship and companionship is a rare commodity in communities where money talks. In addition, the power to silence others with money is another privilege of the rich Angelinos that distinguishes them from the equally rich mobsters around town. For instance, in order to increase their bad reputation and silence an enemy, gangster Mendy Menendez and his boys beat up police officer “[b]ig tough Willie Magoon“ as an “advertisement“ in *The Long Goodbye* (656): “He gets well eventually and goes back to work. But from that time on something is missing – the last inch of steel that makes all the difference. He’s a walking lesson that it is a mistake to push the racket boys too hard” (ibid.). Quite contrary to the literal and figural *racket* boys, newspaper mogul Harlan Potter, for example, is able to silence the news coverage of his daughter’s murder with his “quiet money” to avoid a scandal that would damage his reputation and expose his daughter as the rotten apple of the family. But this kind of “wealthy silence” is not only imposed to distinguish the upper from the lower classes, it emphasizes their power and privilege to cancel out or just as well produce noise, too. This is why prestigious status symbols are made to stand out even more through their noise: when Marlowe sits outside on the patio in front of the Wades’s house, he hears a speedboat on the adjacent lake: “It was almost four o’clock when I heard its distant roar swell into an ear-splitting howl of noise. There ought to be a law.” (ibid. 627) Later on, this speedboat roar takes on a pivotal role because Roger Wades’s murderer “had to pull the trigger when that speedboat was making enough noise to drown the shot” (ibid. 638). This exemplifies how even the rich parts of L.A. are rife with crime – but they make a greater effort to conceal those bad deeds and try to keep up appearances, or more precisely, keep up the quiet.

But although Marlowe finds these phony surroundings repulsive, he finds no comfort in the buzzing urban center of Los Angeles either, as already discussed above. The only place for him to occupy, then, is a position of exclusion and being in between, where he is not part of the accelerated urban life but equally not of the wealthy seclusion. This becomes obvious, on the one hand, through a depiction of Marlowe’s frustrated waiting, a forced stillness, and, on the other hand, through acoustic demarcations that indicate Marlowe’s moral and emotional distance to the city he lives and works in. Marlowe often finds himself in a state of waiting, either when his

investigations have come to a dead end: “I waited, thinking about nothing. A speedboat came racketing down the lake” (*The Long Goodbye* 626); or in moments of extreme tension when an outburst of action is anticipated any moment: “I waited and listened, crouched against the bush, and there was nothing to listen to and nothing to wait for. Just a dark car motionless at the foot of my redwood steps, with the windows closed” (ibid. 626). Black takes up this coupling of waiting and an increased sensitivity to the sounds around him when he has Marlowe sitting in his car “with the window open, hearing the distant sound of the ocean, and the odd seabird sleepily crying” (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 165) or “listening to the engine ticking” (ibid. 264). In Black, waiting is turned into a distinct characterization of Marlowe, when he observes: “I settled down to wait. It’s part of the story of my life, sitting in cars late at night with stale cigarette smoke in my nostrils and the night birds crying” (ibid. 165). In addition, most of the city sounds he hears are located outside: “Outside in a bush a mockingbird ran through a few trills” (*The Long Goodbye* 475); “Outside on the boulevard the traffic brawled endlessly” (ibid. 530); “Outside on the road I could hear the dull thump of a folded newspaper hit the driveway” (ibid. 671). At the same time, Black adopts a language of uncertainty that leaves Marlowe equally removed from the cityscape and its inhabitants: “A mockingbird somewhere was going through its repertoire” (*The Black-Eyed Blonde* 67); “From somewhere nearby I could hear the slither and crunch of a gardener’s spade delving into what sounded like dryish clay” (ibid. 70); “Away in the distance, a police siren set up its wailing” (ibid. 132). Marlowe’s inability to locate a specific sound’s origin emphasizes the city’s opacity and his alienation from the urban environment, and the distinct demarcation of inside and outside points to Marlowe’s solitary and isolated position. Thus, neither the hustle and bustle, the movement and motion of the big city, nor the remote and aloof waiting as an outsider are pleasant instances for Marlowe to occupy – and his profession, ethics, and bank account balance keep him from joining the rich environment as a third option.

## 5. Conclusion: “The Traffic Brawled Endlessly”

At the end of *Playback*, Marlowe returns to his rented house on Yucca Avenue in Los Angeles that is as “stuffy and dull and impersonal as it always was” (869). It is only after Linda Loring has called from Paris to renew her marriage proposal to Marlowe that his perception of the living room changes: “Almost immediately the telephone started to ring again. I hardly heard it. The air was full of music” (871). This almost cinematic (and melodramatic) ending is a wonderful example of Marlowe as the prominent auscultator, his subjective listening perspective that the reader retraces. He is not only the one, who sees and speaks, but also the one who hears. As I have tried briefly to outline in this paper, it can be argued that Los Angeles is made to sound as an expression of Marlowe’s feelings about this city and its inhabitants. His intermediate position

in the city – a man going down “these mean streets [...] who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid” (*The Simple Art of Murder* 991f) – is reflected in his highly ambivalent, wary and cynical attitude towards L.A., which is mirrored in the use and effects of sonic devices. Traffic noise is not an aesthetic feature of an uplifting urban experience, but a disruptive and potentially life threatening force that is omnipresent in Chandler’s cityscape: Marlowe spends a considerable amount of time in his car surrounded by noise, his office on the busy Hollywood Boulevard is not exactly a quiet oasis in the city either, and his house on Yucca Avenue looks down onto the equally busy Laurel Canyon Boulevard. Ubiquitous police sirens characterize the city as corrupted and far from being salvageable, as Marlowe’s repeated brutal encounters with several police officers throughout all novels indicate. Others might find distraction and amusement in the Hollywood district with its jazz clubs and bars, but Marlowe is repulsed by the phony and tainted film industry and the unsound characters it attracts. Not even classical music is able to comfort him – it is frequently just another source of noise to Marlowe. While Downtown L.A. and Hollywood are marked by traffic noises and sirens, the wealthier and more secluded parts of Chandler’s and Black’s Los Angeles are defined by silent and more soothing technological and mechanical sounds that are closer to illustrating a domestic idyll: water sprinklers, gardener’s spades, and the odd piano lesson in between. And not only the noisy speedboat on the lake, which drowns the fatal gunshot that kills the writer Roger Wade, uncovers that these parts of town are no less criminal than the most shady downtown street or nightclub, but that they simply do a better part of covering their traces. An examination of Marlowe’s evaluation and semantization of silence has revealed that what might usually be considered the opposite of city noise is often just another disguise for bad deeds that are prevalent in Los Angeles.

Black falls slightly short behind Chandler’s numerous and elaborate descriptions of sound (as the imbalanced example quantity in this paper might have indicated), and occasionally Marlowe’s incredible listening skills and his extensive knowledge are reduced especially regarding his sensory experiences, so that Black’s Marlowe tends less towards the perceptive character from a Raymond Chandler novel than to one of the bumbling uncertain dupes from a novel by John Banville. This is especially surprising considering the lifesaving quality both attentive listening to and knowledgeable interpretation of ambient noises and specific sounds take on with regard to Marlowe’s profession as a ‘gum-shoe’. The example of the unrecognized peacock cry in *The Black-Eyed Blonde* hints at a fundamentally different depiction of Marlowe’s attitude towards animals in the respective novels. While the peacock and its cry are a sinister omen in Black’s installment, Marlowe is sympathetic and identifies with the various birds around Los Angeles in Chandler’s novel. Black’s characterization ties in with a general sense of nature being corrupted by the city space, which becomes most apparent with regard to the Pacific Ocean; and Chandler’s Marlowe is equally suspicious of this large body of water. But Chandler’s bird-friendly Marlowe exposes his loneliness and sense of dislocation when he

hears the birds express their seemingly own discomfort with the urban environment. Here, Marlowe can feel comfort in their “small unimportant sounds“, which provide the only real contrast to all the other negatively connoted urban sounds, and since his friendship to Terry Lennox isn’t meant to last, he might find kindred spirits in birds, almost as if they were friends, speaking not only to themselves but also to him. Marlowe’s ‘friendship’ with the birds emphasizes his alienation from fellow human beings and, again, his existence as a loner. All that remains from his friendship with Lennox are his fading footsteps, which signify the ephemeral nature of humanity and community in the big city, and provide an equally cinematic ending to *The Long Goodbye* as the reader encounters in *Playback*, mentioned above. Overall, both Chandler’s and Black’s soundscape of Los Angeles reflect the gloomy and shady impression of this city as presented in noir fiction. While Black’s recreation might not be a faithful reproduction, its use of urban sounds as an expression of Marlowe’s inner landscape ties in with its original soundtrack nonetheless. And, like Terry Lennox’s footsteps dying away slowly and prompting Marlowe to “[keep] on listening anyways” (*The Long Goodbye* 734), so Black’s recreation of Chandler’s sounds in an alternate way, may prompt the reader to return to Chandler’s works and trace the origins of seemingly “small unimportant sounds” (*Farewell, My Lovely* 904).

## Endnotes

[1] See Schafer's original definition of soundscape: "The sonic environment. Technically, any portion of the sonic environment regarded as a field for study. The term may refer to actual environments, or to abstract constructions such as musical compositions and tape montages, particularly when considered as an environment" (274-275).

[2] See Genette's discussion of his concept of focalization on pages 189-194.

[3] All subsequently quoted works by Chandler are taken from the Library of America edition (see Works Cited), but I will use the respective titles of Chandler's novels and essays for the in-text citations to allow for an easier and more obvious attribution of the quotes to the respective works.

[4] See Sonnenschein 163 and Hanson 291.

[5] See Cuddy-Keane, 71.

[6] See, for example, Babener: "Such a vision – of an empire built on a spurious foundation, decked in tinsel, and beguiled by its own illusory promises – is central to the Los Angeles novels of Raymond Chandler" (110).

[7] For a more detailed discussion see, for example, Kalinak 167f.

[8] Miklitsch quotes Krin Gannard.

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## ***Donde todo se paga: Ricardo Piglia's *Blanco nocturno* as a Lesson in Noir Economics***

### **Abstract**

Ricardo Piglia's 2010 novel *Blanco nocturno* rewrites the noir genre as an economy. Just as the novel's initial murder is the dark result of an expansive and disperse market conspiracy (thus alluding to Argentina's own problematic insertion into the neoliberal economy at the beginning of the 1970s), so too is crime an excess that overflows within the economy of detection. In this sense, crime and its converse, justice, constitute a transaction wherein the crime introduces an imbalance, much like the lavish excess of the potlatch, and justice realizes a counter-payment that supposedly restores equilibrium. However, Piglia's use of the noir mode complicates such a balancing of accounts by casting a noir detective—Croce—who is unable to close the case, ever afflicted by unresolved loose ends and other phantasmal remainders that disrupt the economy of detection. Besides merely questioning the conventions of more traditional crime fiction, such failure has allegorical implications. The detective's problems with deduction are able to stand in for the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, a supposedly hyper-rational system that ultimately unravels itself.

**Keywords:** Ricardo Piglia, noir mode, crime, economy of detection, neoliberal economy

Economy flows through the veins of most noir fiction and film. Money propels the intrigue, whether it is the shadowy deals brokered between closed doors or Marlowe's proverbial fee of twenty-five-dollars-a-day plus expenses. Indeed, one of the conditions of noir's dystopian and alienated tone is the capital that feeds corruption and mediates all social and political relations. Beyond the ubiquity and pernicious influence of money, however, the dynamics of crime and detection may be conceived as an economy in a more figurative vein. Crime and its converse, justice, can be seen as a transaction wherein the crime introduces an imbalance, much like the lavish excess of the potlatch, and justice acts as a counter-payment that restores equilibrium. Nietzsche offers an analogous economy of crime and punishment in "The Genealogy of Morals" wherein a penalty is meted out in strict accordance with the magnitude of the infraction. If justice indeed attempts a settling of accounts, the investigatory act of detection does something similar. The mystery creates an interpretive excess in the economy of narrative and understanding, and requires that detection reciprocate by explicating the mystery and restoring balance. Such a transaction is what we have come to expect of most texts within the traditional crime genre.

Noir, however, often refrains from offering harmonious closure, as unsettled debts and other forms of narrative excess obstruct a clean closing of accounts. The leftover debt or excess muddles any totalistic explanation or restoration of justice, while also cueing other points that have gone un-illuminated. In Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, for example, the detective takes on the role of a narrative broker who intends to document and ultimately clear the Sternwood family's account in arrears. Marlowe is charged by General Sternwood to investigate Geiger, who is blackmailing the well-to-do general with his daughter, Carmen Sternwood's, gambling debts. The family's illicit monetary debt, however, is just scratching the surface of the wealth of liabilities they have accrued. Geiger blackmails Carmen's sister, Vivian, claiming that he will reveal pornographic photos of Carmen if she fails to pay him \$5,000. As Marlowe further investigates the Sternwood family, he unearths other secret stories that have cast their shadow onto Vivian, Carmen, and the General. At the end of the novel, we find out that Vivian's husband, Rusty Regan, has, in fact, been murdered by the neurotic Carmen in a fit of jealousy, and that his body currently lies in one of the family's decrepit oil sumps. In the 1946 film adaptation, Marlowe attempts to clear the account by suggesting that they seek psychiatric help for Carmen, and let Eddie Mars take the fall for Regan's murder. However, both versions leave the impression that this account will not be closed. Regan's murder will always hang over the Sternwoods, and even Marlowe himself is "part of the nastiness now" (230).

In many ways, Ricardo Piglia's 2010 *Blanco nocturno* rewrites the now canonical Chandler novel. General Sternwood, who stands in for the fading Los Angeles aristocracy, is recast in Piglia's novel as the oligarch Cayetano Belladona, a similar invalid-recluse whose familial legacy also finds itself in a state of decadence. Vivian and Carmen are displaced to the Belladona twins,

Sofía and Ada, who are well-known to provoke scandal for a family name, which, if economically powerful, is already blemished by previous indiscretions. And traces of Philip Marlowe are easily found in both Croce, who follows the hard-boiled sleuth's intuitive mode of detection, and Renzi, who also becomes entangled in the family's nastiness.

By tacitly referencing Chandler's novel, *Blanco Nocturno* inserts itself into the realm of unresolvable debt, excess and noir. Within Piglia's noir fiction, economic debt has its corollary in epistemological and semantic excess. [1] Gareth Williams' reading of *La ciudad ausente*, for example, extols the flows of *différance* found in the novel's recasting of the utopian Finnegans Island: "there appears to be no single conclusion to be reached in, and no end to, the language that this totality enclave can articulate. As such, there is no hegemonic ground to be consolidated, no single sense to be made, and therefore no place from which to exorcise difference and negativity" (167). This hallmark feature of Piglia's work—linguistic instability and alterity—while surely utopian and anti-hegemonic, also problematizes detection. The author's detectives attempt to broker the symbolic transactions of investigation, but are often afflicted by a cacophony of secrets that exceed documentation and refuse to come into perfect figuration, as we see with Junior in *La ciudad ausente*: "La condición detectivesca de Junior, su afán por desentrañar la historia oculta, es lo que permite que salga a la superficie la otra novela, esa que está integrada por los relatos propiamente dichos, cada uno de los cuales podría ser, a su vez, núcleo de una nueva novela" (Fornet 161).

While most of Piglia's works involve some sort of investigation, *Blanco nocturno*, as according to Patrick Dove, is the novel that most closely follows the format of the hard-boiled noir novel. [2] More than a mere excursion into the genre, by citing the hardboiled tradition, Piglia is able to comment on the tragic traits of a more properly *noir* detective and apply such a figure to the Argentine context. This essay will offer a close reading of Piglia's most recent sleuth, Croce, and the overflowing dimensions of his economy of detection. As the novel demonstrates, the detective is unable to close the economic circle of investigation as he is constantly disoriented by phantasmal remainders that resist closure. Such failure, however, besides merely questioning the conventions of more traditional crime fiction, has allegorical implications. The detective's problems with deduction are able to stand in for the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, a supposedly hyper-rational system that ultimately unravels itself.

In its first few chapters, the novel seems to pose a standard *who-dunnit* premise. Tony Durán, a Puerto Rican-U.S. citizen, has been murdered in a rural town within the Buenos Aires province in 1972, and, as is expected, an investigation ensues. At this point, we can already see the contours of an investigatory transaction: there has been a crime, and the local justice system, headed by the District Attorney Cueto, will identify the guilty party, impose a punishment, and ostensibly restore balance. While on a gambling spree in Atlantic City, Durán has met and become

sexually involved in an unseemly *ménage a trois* with the Belladona twins. Durán follows them back to Argentina, allegedly in hopes of acquiring locally bred steeds to bring back to the U.S.. Upon arrival, his romantic involvement with the girls provides fodder for the local gossip circuits. The stories surrounding Durán are even more sensationalized because of his racial difference as a *neoyorquino* mulatto and his exotic and salacious tales of debauchery as a gambler in Atlantic City that he recounts in the local hotel bar. After finding Durán stabbed to death in his hotel room, district attorney Cueto pretends to close the case by alleging that the guilty party was Yoshio Dazai, the Japanese hotel employee with whom Durán purportedly had a homosexual relation that caused just as much scandal as his *ménage a trois* with the twin daughters. Cueto's version maintains that the murder was a mere crime of passion, motivated by Yoshio's jealousy.

However, as the novel progresses, we see that D.A. Cueto's overly simplistic explanation is a cover-up for other covert interests that are never completely illuminated. The town's police-detective, Croce, does not accept Cueto's explanation, and, much to the latter's consternation, insists that there is a much larger conspiracy at play that involves Luca Belladona's factory, venture capital, and Cueto himself. Croce can be seen as the noir hero who unveils a plethora of disorienting narratives that exceed the strictures of the story and create a surplus that the town authorities would prefer to conceal. Such excess takes the form of a bag of some one hundred thousand dollars in U.S. currency that Croce finds in the hotel basement that leads him to speculate about a possible financial conspiracy behind Durán's death. Here, capital is the synecdochal debt or liability that continues to haunt the town, and signals other secret stories that complicate the official version woven by the District Attorney. Croce alleges that Durán's true purpose was to deliver the overseas capital that the elder Belladona held in hedge funds in the United States. Supposedly, Belladona wanted the money to help his quixotic son, Luca, liquidate his failed automobile factory. Other opaque interests, however, that could include Cueto, certain factory shareholders, as well as a host of speculating venture capitalists inside and out of Argentina, may be involved in an effort to divert the money and buy out the factory and lot in order to construct a shopping mall, and thus cater to the needs of fluid, international capital. The murder, according to Croce's theory, would be a mere distraction from the real operation at hand: the maneuvering of flexible accumulation, which, in itself, is an excess that is difficult to trace.

Rather than imputing a charge against a tangible guilty party at the end of the novel, both Croce and Renzi face a web of power relations that is both ubiquitous and hidden at all moments. In a metafictional move, the disorienting climax gives way to what Renzi sees as a new genre of detective fiction: *la ficción paranoica*:

La investigación no tiene fin, no puede terminar. Habría que inventar un nuevo género policial, *la ficción paranoica*. Todos son sospechosos, todos se sienten perseguidos. El criminal ya no es un individuo aislado,

sino una gavilla que tiene el poder absoluto. Nadie comprende lo que está pasando; las pistas y los testimonios son contradictorios y mantienen las sospechas en el aire, como si cambiaran con cada interpretación. (284-85)

Croce's subversive and alternative theories open up a flood of uncertainties, suspicions and possible avenues of inquiry that haunt the novel and ultimately unravel Croce's own deductive abilities as a detective. Nicolás Bratosevich offers a similar prognosis of *ficción paranoica* within Piglia's work, wherein the detective is overwhelmed by an untraceable and yet ubiquitous threat:

Lo que detecta Piglia como crítico en una porción considerable de la narrativa literaria occidental (el policial como género, el *Facundo*, cierto Onetti...) es el relato montado alrededor de dos ítems: el sentimiento de amenaza (de persecución) / el delirio de su interpretación (que intenta conjurar, disipar, lo misterioso e inasible de esa amenaza)...Pero aún más ampliamente: el relato paranoico parece derivar hacia, o proceder de una categoría donde el poder del más fuerte, siempre arrollador para un actante que está a la defensiva, o que incluso ignora ingenuamente su amenaza, deshace al otro, lo anula o lo hace caer en la desazón angustiosa. (78-79)

The form of the mystery is thus excessive, as it opens up a plethora of coordinates and criminal angles that no one could adequately triangulate.

Excess can be seen as a secret or stain that is partially shrouded from view. Jacques Derrida's *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* offers a provocative analysis of both economic and semantic excess that occupies a space in-between—between, on one hand, being understood and accounted for, and on the other, a formless stain that resists full figuration. The gift, says Derrida, is a sort of excess as it is “promised to recognition, to keeping, indebtedness, credit, but also[...] *must be, owes itself to be...*excessive and thereby surprising” (147). According to Derrida, for excess to exist, it must defy thought and remain unregistered or forgotten. At the same time, however, it weighs on us and demands our recognition. For Derrida it is “The secret of that about which one cannot speak, but which one can no longer silence” (147). Excess is thus a Lacanian stain within the monetary or narrative economy that perturbs us and elicits our attention, yet at the same time, refuses to come into perfect focus, lest it cease to be a surplus.

Within the noir theoretical framework that we are tracing, the detective is he who is inexorably drawn to this splotch that betrays another hidden and often sordid dimension, rather than merely letting it drop out of the equation. The sleuth embodies the excess himself as he is overly involved with the case that he is investigating and loses perspective. He is unable to fully account for himself and becomes one more opaque variable that adds to and sullies the equation. Whether the detective realizes it or not, he is his own obstacle that muddles detection. In his essay, *El último lector* (2005), Piglia states that the noir detective, unlike a solely logical

Dupin-type detective, loses his distance from the investigation, and thus alters the nature of the enigma: “Por de pronto, el detective ha dejado de encarnar la razón pura...en la novela policial norteamericana la práctica parece ser el único criterio de verdad: el investigador se lanza, ciegamente, al encuentro de los hechos, se deja llevar por los acontecimientos y su investigación produce, fatalmente, nuevos crímenes” (97).

Consistent with Piglia’s theory, Croce adds to the mire of the case. His obstinacy inadvertently precipitates el Chino Arce’s suicide, who leaves a note claiming responsibility for the murder while also revealing that he took his life precisely because Croce would not let up in the investigation. Consequently, Croce takes responsibility for el Chino’s death and recognizes that his actions produce unintentional consequences that bedevil the *pesquisa* at hand: “Renzi notó que Croce estaba apesadumbrado, como si se culpaba por la muerte del Chino. Había tomado algunas decisiones y esas decisiones habían provocado una serie de resultados que no había podido prever” (160). Because Croce brought his dissenting views to the attention of the public, he has forestalled the possibility for a more thorough investigation. Now the murderer has committed suicide which, by extension, rules out the possibility of further questioning him and pursuing the disperse conspiracy of which he is a mere pawn. What is more, most of the official powers claim that the suicide note is just one more “delirio gauchesco” (163). Rather than open up a new avenue of inquiry, the suicide note becomes an object of mockery that invalidates Croce’s investigation and ultimately aids the cover-up.

Croce’s insertion of himself into the investigatory circle produces contradictions, seeing as he attempts to decipher what he is also partially creating. On one hand, he would like to objectively observe the events. However, his presence, which creates “una serie de resultados que no había podido prever,” is that wild card of his own subjectivity that influences not only his conclusions but also the object of analysis itself. His own subjective involvement is that extra variable which is always present and thus complicating analysis, and yet, is easily forgotten and difficult to account for.

Beyond his physical involvement in the events he investigates, the detective incurs a debt for the very act of detection. His own arrangement of the evidence, as an effort to make sense of the crime, simultaneously rules out any perfect, dis-interested objectivity, embedded as he is in the arrangement that he himself has charted. Croce seems to recognize that his subjectivity is that which gets in the way: “Todo es según lo que sabemos *antes* de ver...Vemos las cosas *según* como las interpretamos. Lo llamamos previsión: saber de antemano, estar prevenidos” (142). More than merely describing the nature of interpretation, however, Croce is signaling a contradiction at the heart of subjective thought: while metaphysics would purport to attain unity between thought and object, the subject that applies his or her own concepts onto the world beforehand rules out the possibility of airtight objectivity. Patrick Dove reads Croce in a similar



vein: “In order to see (track), a certain prevision (anticipation, postulation of a subject) is first required. This hermeneutic circle poses a problem when it comes to detective work, which, if it is to lead to a true and just outcome, must be unbiased and open to all possibilities from the outset” (31).

Through his theory of ‘negative dialectics,’ Adorno similarly complicates thought. According to Fabio Vighi, Adorno calls on us to recognize the intractable difference that remains between concept and object. For Adorno, in Vighi’s words,

the object of thought can never be fully subsumed under conceptual identity, as it leaves behind an ‘indigestible’ remainder of itself, an “indissoluble ‘Something’” (Adorno 2000: 135), that is to say a ‘hard kernel’ that resists thought’s urge to identify. (10)

Traditional, non-critical, conceptual thought, for Adorno, incurs a liability insofar as it does not account for this ‘hard kernel’ that resists cognition nor the unassailable difference between concept and object. Adorno thus proposes the framework of negative dialectics wherein thought thinks against itself by interrogating the coincidence of concept and thing. According to Vighi, “The defining mark of negative dialectics is that it forces the concept to turn against itself, towards the non-identity of thought, and from there it attempts to connect with the material surplus within the object of thought” (10). Negative dialectics is thus more in tune with the remaining surplus—that hard kernel that resists conceptual thinking. It interrogates thought in order to affirm this excessive debt that remains.

Croce’s own philosophy of detection is similar to Adorno’s notion of negative dialectics as the gumshoe opens the door to the constant non-identity between things and their concepts: “a mí me interesa mostrar que las cosas que parecen lo mismo son en realidad diferentes.” Later on he states that “Todo consiste en diferenciar lo que es de lo que parece ser” (144). The “es” can be seen as the unattainable kernel—the ‘truth’ of the issue, if we can speak of that. The semblances to which he refers, or ‘lo que parece ser,’ are precisely the concepts that we would like to impose onto the thing, but which, according to Adorno, we must constantly whittle down in order to expose the inevitable remainder.

Croce’s recognition of this difference that cripples traditional, conceptual thinking demonstrates his desire to face an epistemological debt that could eventually pull him down into a whirlwind of uncertainty. However, such radical negativity has a political charge that defies Cueto’s overly simplistic account and rules out the possibility of closing the case any time soon. Croce assumes the debt of otherness, of non-official narratives, of the imperfection of the conceptual and by so doing recognizes the differences that work against thought. His example of the conejo/pato drawing evidences the uncertainty that this debt brings with it: “¿Ve?—dijo—. Éste es un pato, pero si lo mira así, es un conejo. –Dibujó la silueta del pato-conejo—. Qué quiere decir



ver tal cual es: no es fácil” (142). While Croce seems, on one level, to be saying that knowledge and objectivity are merely a question of adopting the proper standpoint, “Comprender... es solo adoptar el punto de vista adecuado para percibir la realidad” (143), we cannot help but notice the Adornean tension latent within such a declaration—if ‘comprehension’ is merely a question of adopting the proper viewpoint, it also opens the doors to an infinite range of alternative readings that must be sifted through in order to find the one that is most proper. And this, in itself, is a debt that is difficult to close.

Of course, by affirming this movement toward negativity, the noir detective becomes tragically enveloped in this storm of contingency wherein the foreign outside always bursts in and ruptures the economy of detection. Indeed, the liability of the undiscernible kernel can be spatially adduced as a sort of outside. Derrida similarly conceptualizes the economic circle in *Given Time* in spatial terms—there is an inside as well as an outside to economic activity. There are the normalized transactions which exist within the circle, as well as the unforeseeable moments of exorbitance that are seemingly “without”, yet intrude into the economy of detection. In spite of the tense relation between the two, the inside depends upon the outside for its very being. The outside pushes the economic circle along, just as the opaque enigma propels a private investigator’s economy of deduction.

Such quantification of the outside, however, as we have seen, is not always easy in noir. The outside invades and agitates the inside’s set configuration and often entraps the private-eye. It introduces a debt that is free-floating and difficult to capture, yet simultaneously inescapable. For Lacan, this debt takes the form of a gaze from the outside that intrudes on our subjectivity. The gaze renders us another’s object, much like the Sartrean voyeur who looks through the peep hole, only to see that someone else is watching him. Rather than remain an autonomous subject, the other’s gaze catches us off guard and objectifies us. A gap, stain, or debt of otherness opens up within our existence that asks us to see ourselves as the other sees us. In order to close the gap, we now desire to look at ourselves from outside or, as according to Lacan, “see ourselves seeing ourselves.” As Lacan states, we would like to assume this gaze from outside: “From the moment that this gaze appears, the subject tries to adapt himself to it, he becomes the punctiform object, that point of vanishing being with which the subject confuses his own failure” (83). While difficult to access, this excessive debt from outside is indeed a necessary part of our own subjectivity and must be taken into account if we are to gain some degree of self-consciousness and understanding of our relation to our surrounding milieu. Žižek sees this as the “truth” of our being that we find outside: “I am aware of myself only in so far as there is, outside of me, a place in which the truth about me is articulated” (208).

We see a similar external intrusion with Croce’s intuitive mode of detection, where thought seemingly arrives *at* him from outside: “No es que oyera voces, esas frases le llegaban como

recuerdos. *El ojo blanco de la noche. Una mente criminal superior*. Sabía bien qué significaban pero no cómo le entraban en la cabeza” (97). This is but one of many instances when foreign thought almost fantastically bursts in and hijacks his analytical process. Not only does thought intrude at this moment, but he seems to intuit a particular gaze, that of his disperse conspiratorial enemy that challenges him from unknown corners. The “white eye” is of course the “luz del faro” (96) from Luca’s factory. The *comisario* intuits the conspiracy emanating from therein—*Una mente criminal superior*—and thus finds in the factory an enemy staring back at him. The gaze from outside creates this mystery or debt of an *other* that challenges what Croce knows about the case and himself. It is to no surprise that Croce describes this intellectual competition as a game of chess, wherein one must anticipate the enemy’s tactics and how one is viewed by the enemy: “Esto es como jugar al ajedrez, hay que esperar la movida del otro” (143). However, doing so is not so easy. The other’s gaze is the excessive, unknown dimension that bursts in and ruptures his epistemological surety. The only way to close this account, wipe the stain clean, and gain a sense of epistemological stability, would be, in Lacanian fashion, to see himself from outside, from the other’s viewpoint, to *see himself seeing himself*.

Croce attempts to settle this debt later on, after Renzi’s arrival. Renzi initially serves as an other that can return the gaze to Croce and allow him the illusion of seeing himself through Renzi’s eyes. Croce thinks aloud and requires that Renzi reinforce his conclusions. By gaining Renzi’s approval, he is able to not only evaluate his own thought process, but to pretend to see himself as Renzi sees him:

En la mesa haciendo dibujitos el comisario reconstruyó los hechos para sí mismo, pero también para Renzi. Necesitaba siempre alguien con quien hablar para borrar su discursito privado, las palabras que le daban vueltas siempre en la cabeza como una música y entonces al hablar seleccionaba los pensamientos y no decía todo, tratando de que su interlocutor reflexionara con él y llegara, antes, a sus mismas conclusiones, porque entonces podía confiar en su razonamiento ya que otro también lo había pensado con él. (141)

Such an effort at self-contemplation is redoubled by the novel’s narrative structure. After his arrival, Renzi effectively replaces Croce as principal protagonist and becomes the novel’s narrative eyes as Croce is ostracized from the town and eventually takes refuge in a *manicomio*. If not absent from the narrative, Croce is relegated to the margins. He becomes one of the objects at which the novel gazes. Such a drastic shift in focalization, from Croce to Renzi, fulfills a compensatory operation. It gazes at Croce as he himself cannot. Yet it also reiterates the contradiction at the heart of Lacanian theory: we want what we cannot have. Croce would like to survey himself. Doing so, however, requires Renzi’s line of vision, which the detective cannot fully assume.

As a noir detective, Croce confronts and is disturbed by this gaze from the outside, whether it is the voice of the townspeople, the thoughts that arrive *at* him, his foe who he knows is watching him, or, later, the panoptic gaze of the asylum where he is confined. While less neurotic people would pretend this excessive debt does not exist in favor of an individually harmonious existence, Croce confronts it head on and exists in it. As a tragic noir hero, he cannot *not* assume this epistemological debt that will not be settled.

If detection can indeed be conceptualized as an economy, as a series of transactions that are compromised by excessive remainders and unaccountable outsides, then the detective himself is able to stand in allegorically for the movement of capital within the age of neoliberalism, which also gets lost in its own fluid, dizzying movement. This correlates to Joanna Page's reading of Piglia's use of the hardboiled genre in *Plata Quemada* (1997) which, beyond the immediate crime and characters, investigates the capitalist system itself: "In Piglia's novel, as in the *novela negra* in general, the central enigma is not posed by the crime. What is under investigation here is not the motive or identity of the criminal but the complex relations between criminality, capitalist society, and the mass media" (29). An investigation into the *why* of Croce's downfall as cogito/detective, springboards us into a discussion of the specific antinomies of capitalism. This is one of Croce's most crucial semantic functions within the narrative, though easy to overlook, seeing as we typically cast the hero as a site of resistance to the conspiratorial dynamics of international finance. By standing in for capitalism, however, rather than resisting power from a clear point of separation, Croce is able to symbolize the system's endemic problems, contradictions and exorbitant surplus. The detective's *praxis* of rationality corresponds to the similarly 'rational' logic of the international market, and just as Croce's investigation ties itself into knots, so too do the diverse forms of flexible accumulation evince a more rhizomatic, excessive structure that presages its own crisis.

Neoliberalism's consolidation in Argentina in 1976 created an irrational excess, which, viewed from the novel's 1972 context, is difficult to foresee. As is already well-documented, the pressures of neoliberalism, at odds with the various revolutionary-militant movements in Argentina (*Los Montoneros*, *ERP*, etc.) led to the military junta's excessively violent measures, detaining and disappearing thousands of leftist 'subversives.' Of course, the large influx of capital into the Argentine economy in the early seventies can, in and of itself, be seen as an excess. As according to David Harvey, the global inflation of the time led international investors to search for alternative avenues to inject capital in order to alleviate inflation in first world economies (182-83). Argentina posed a promising venue for the reallocation of private funds and excess accumulation. Santiago Colás asserts that "Now, economically as well, the military's desire for foreign capital corresponded to foreign capital's need for release into new financial markets" (147). However, the military regime's economic restructuring strategies consisted largely of deindustrialization

and record levels of foreign debt, all of which had devastating effects on Argentine economic stability on into the 1980s. [3] Argentina's economic crises after the dictatorship thus illustrate the contradictions which, according to David Harvey, are endemic to neoliberal capitalism: capital must expand in order to thrive, yet its expansion also creates an excess that must be redirected in order to avoid economic crisis. At some point, as we see with the Argentine case, the system is left without an alternative avenue to redirect excessive accumulation, and crisis ensues. Harvey maintains the following:

The Marxist argument is, then, that the tendency towards overaccumulation can never be eliminated under capitalism. It is a never-ending and eternal problem for any capitalist mode of production. The only question, therefore, is how the overaccumulation tendency can be expressed, contained, absorbed, or managed in ways that do not threaten the capitalist social order. (181)

Just as Croce's enterprise of deduction is weighed down by phantasmal specters, the consolidation of neoliberalism in Argentina in the 70s and 80s brings a storm of inflation and excess which, though temporarily allayed at times, culminates in the 2001 crisis. And just as Croce faces the unstable contingency of rationality, so too does crisis take the form of an unknowable void that is, from the novel's 1972 context, unmentioned and unimaginable, yet imminent all the same.

What is more, the spatial and Lacanian problems of Croce's thought correspond to the geopolitical machinations of international capital. As Croce's thought blurs the line between inside and outside, so too does the neoliberal market confound the local with the global. What becomes excessive, at this point, is the confusion of inside and outside, where the one serves to supplement the other. We know there is a difference between the two—the rational and the irrational, the knowable and the excessively unknowable—yet actually pin pointing where the one ends and the other begins is difficult.

While we have already demonstrated the seemingly fantastic intrusion of the excessive outside into Croce's thought, we also see this confusion on the level of narrative focalization that weaves seamlessly between the hearsay of the people and Croce's own introspection. The third person narrator's perspective enlaces the two and confuses them, to the point where we are hard-pressed to distinguish between Croce's deductions and those of the town's inhabitants that he is interviewing. On one hand, the 3<sup>rd</sup> person narrator's perspective seems to be founded on the locals' collective oral accounts of Durán, as the narrator occasionally inserts qualifications such as "según decían" (22) or "según parece"(23). In this sense, rather than enjoying omniscience, the narrator seems to limit him or herself to the "decir" of the pueblo, with the background information offered in the first chapter basing itself on the local gossip surrounding Durán, his arrival in Argentina, and the tantalizing tales of the Belladonna twins' promiscuity. However, at other

moments, and rather contradictorily, the narrator ventures into Croce's more intimate reflections, which exist outside the realm of the town's hearsay:

A la tarde, en el bar del Hotel Plaza, Durán solía contar fragmentos de su infancia en Trenton, la gasolinera de su familia al costado de Route One, su padre que tenía que levantarse a la madrugada a despachar nafta porque un coche que se había desviado de la ruta tocaba la bocina y se oían risas y música de jazz en la radio y Tony se asomaba medio dormido a la ventana y veía los veloces autos carísimos, con las rubias alegres en el asiento de atrás, cubiertas con sus tapados de armiño, una aparición luminosa en medio de la noche que se confundía—en la memoria—con fragmentos de un film en blanco y negro. Las imágenes eran secretas y personales y no pertenecían a nadie. Ni siquiera recordaba si esos recuerdos eran suyos, y a Croce a veces le pasaba lo mismo con su vida.  
(17)

The intimacy of such an observation about Croce's and Durán's foreign memories makes us wonder where this observation is coming from. Was it something Durán said, now passed through the filter of the townspeople and, subsequently, through Croce? Was it Madariaga's observation with whom Croce is now conversing in the bar and has seemingly archived the town's gossip circuits? Or was it Croce's own reflection, seeing as he obviously experienced something similar and is the only one who could know that his memories are not his own? Consistent with Piglia's literary practice in which, according to Idelber Avelar, "se manejan combinaciones, barajamiento de viejos relatos, plagios, narrativas apócrifas" (426), the novel places Croce's thought at the crux of outside and inside, where it is unclear if his thought is his own, or if it is other—one for which he cannot totally assume responsibility nor account for, as he cannot he even lay sole claim to his own memories. Croce's own thought is thus marked by the debt or excess of otherness, of the strangely unverifiable, and thus exceeds the boundaries of the rational.

The spatial peculiarities of the novel's focalization likewise find their parallel in the disorienting overlap of inside and outside within neoliberalism, which, in the novel's context, is just beginning to consolidate its grasp on the Argentine nation. Indeed, it is precisely this confusion of the inside and outside, of the local with the global, that is the principal "excess" of neoliberal politics. A nationalistic practice like Peronism in the age of global neoliberalism, is rendered uncanny as it is determined by the needs of the outside, neoliberal market. This inability to parse inside from outside, national from global, familiar from unfamiliar, itself is the ghostly and uncanny debt that haunts national politics from the seventies on.

1972 was the moment when the ability to imagine an autonomous Peronist state that maintained its self-sufficiency and defiance of outside influences through import substitution was about to fade. The imminent obsolescence of the Peronist cause is attested to in the novel through the signs on Luca's dilapidated factory walls which read "*Perón vuelve*" (217). The sign's

placement emblemizes both the optimism and anticipation of millions prior to Perón's return, as well as the ruin that such a narrative would soon become, as it is found on tattered posters coarsely plastered to the walls of a factory that is on the brink of decrepitude. While the masses in the millions continued to anxiously await Perón's return and to believe in his cause of state protectionism, conditions in the international market had altered drastically since the previous Peronist government. Neoliberalism was underway in the early seventies, already actively chipping away at the viability of formerly state-protectionist models and making the effects of the global economy, as well as its crises, very much felt in Argentina. [4] The success or failure of a second round of Peronism would now depend upon the mercy (or lack thereof) of the international economy, thus betraying the interdependence of local and global. In spite of Perón's efforts to renew the traditional pact between labor and state, the world oil crisis left any state-labor reform in shambles. The administration's efforts to contain the effects of the international crisis within Argentina were fruitless. According to William Smith,

Finally, in 1974, the social pact among organized labor, the national bourgeoisie, and the state fell victim to the *coup de grâce* delivered by the Arab-Israeli war of the previous year. Argentina's favorable terms of trade were suddenly reversed as OPEC oil prices (and the price of exports from the industrial countries) sharply outdistanced the price of primary exports in international markets. Industrialists abandoned the price freeze, followed immediately by the CGT and the unions, who demanded large wage increases. Inflation, which had declined greatly in 1973, rebounded sharply upward. (229)

Like the detective who is unable to account for the outside voices that he hears in his head, the inside and outside of Argentine politics and economics are rapidly confused. Peronism, for example, which traditionally represented the *inside* of the state, is now beginning to be determined by the *outside* of international capital. Colás asserts that while Perón initially continued to court the leftist Peronist branch of the Montoneros, as a political "ace in the hole" (110), his other political alliances belied a more conservative, reactionary stance (110-111). According to Colás, Perón's post-'73 politics are increasingly unsympathetic to the left and their desires for socialist utopia, thus contradicting the Montonero's messianic view of Perón's return. [5] While Perón himself did not necessarily push for Argentina's further insertion into the increasingly global market, his more staunch, conservative stance upon returning in 1973 can be seen as a contribution to neoliberalism's imminent hegemony. His close advisor, López Rega, organized the *Alianza Anticomunista Argentina* death-squad that subsequently served as one of the blue-prints for the military regime's terror campaign to rid the nation of socialist resistance to free-market economics. The military regime itself purported to 'restore' the nation's true identity as a Western, Christian state that would continue the battle against Marxist infiltrators, all the while paving the way to



the nation's insertion into the free market. In hindsight, neoliberal capital is the surreptitious supplement that, in the seventies and on, renders nationalism uncanny. In this context, national culture is a mere masquerade. It is the disguise that international capital must assume in order to gain admittance into the local space. The uncomfortable alliance, of course, comes apart at the seams in the ensuing years.

The Carlos Menem administration, for example, brings the contradictions of nationalist rhetoric inflected by global capital to the fore. Menem's performance of the *justicialista* narrative conserved the histrionics of nationalist populism, while drastically re-semanticizing the content in order to cater to the needs of international capital. Such contradictions of the outside/inside are condensed in the administration's pegging of the peso's exchange rate to that of the U.S. dollar in order to ensure economic stability. While this maneuver can be seen as an effort on behalf of the administration to affirm its sovereignty over market flows, it also functions as a measure to better position the nation within the demands of the international economy. The artificial fixing of the peso's exchange value, however, is ultimately unsustainable, as outside neighboring currencies (Brazil, for example) without fixed exchange rates and growing inflation were unable to continually afford Argentine exports, thus freezing the Argentine economy and eventually causing the 2001 crisis. Whether the crisis is due to the state's desire to intervene in the fixing of value, or simply giving in to the excesses produced by capitalism itself, is difficult to discern. Like the detective who is disoriented by the thoughts and words that are not his own, yet a part of his thought process, the state is unable to account for the pressures of outside capital, which are now the intimate fibers of its very being, and capital is unable to account for its own tendency towards excess and crisis.

What this noir novel leaves us with is the inability to distinguish inside from outside, rational from irrational, secret from knowledge, or excess from system, within neoliberalism. The economic system is a mystery in and of itself and thus encloses its own uncanny remainder. This, for Piglia, is the central kernel of noir literature: "el único enigma que proponen—y que nunca resuelven—las novelas de la serie negra es el de las relaciones capitalistas" (Crítica y ficción 70). However, it is precisely the confusion of these dimensions, and the detective's downfall, which allows us to draw this structural parallel to the fluidity and imminent crisis of neoliberal capital. Rather than merely positing a disenchanting vision of Latin American politics and a lack of justice, the tragedy of Piglia's noir novel traces the coordinates of a capitalist system that is similarly laden with contradictions. Just as the novel ends in 1972, when a national crisis is imminent in both a political and economic sense, so too does it map the aporias of an economic system whose crises are always just over the horizon.



## Endnotes

[1] Semantic excess can be seen as a trademark feature of Piglia's work. Jorgelina Corbatta mentions the different levels of literary citation in *Respiración artificial* (1980) as a means of disorienting the reader and evading censorship: "De allí provienen el carácter de archive (ya mencionado) de la novela, de palimpsesto, de enigma policial que reúne diversos niveles cifrados con el propósito de borrar las pistas. Piglia reconstruye el pasado, y el presente, mediante cartas en clave, documentos, falsificaciones" (53).

[2] As Patrick Dove observes, "While echoes of the hardboiled/noir tradition can be found as early as the short story 'La loca y el relato del crimen' (*Nombre Falso*, 1975) and while the investigatory motif is clearly present in *Respiración Artificial* and *La ciudad ausente*, it is not until *Blanco nocturno* that Piglia writes what could be considered—at least by half—as a crime novel" (26-7).

[3] William Smith sees the basis of the Argentine economic crisis during and after the *Proceso* as one of excessive debt combined with deindustrialization, which the military leaders sought to ameliorate, contradictorily, by even more foreign debt: "Argentina's crisis was one resulting not from debt-led expansion but from the paradoxical combination of debt and de-industrialization. Argentina's was a crisis of shrinkage. The dilemma facing the architects of the new strategy during the Proceso was how to take advantage of the rapid expansion in international liquidity that took place in the 1970s. Given the recessionary consequences of their strategy, it was impossible to look to internal demand to absorb external loans, credit, and investment. The economy's general contraction, plus the rise in foreign-exchange reserves, meant that the only way to attract external capital was through expansion of the foreign debt" (260).

[4] Gareth Williams similarly refers to this problematic, liminal space between national and global in which neoliberalism cues the "coming into being of a historical, epistemological, cultural, and political limit at which the social imperatives and conceptual systems of the past reveal themselves as still here and, indeed, still as imperatives. But they do so precisely by uncovering themselves as inheritances and imperatives that are no longer viable as such—that is, as they used to be. In the current order of global accumulation it is becoming increasingly obvious that words such as "nation," "the people," "development," or "national culture," can no longer mean what they used to mean in Latin America" (8-9).

[5] Colás asserts the following: "The montoneros continued to spin their myth of a Perón genuinely converted to their socialist cause but surrounded by right-wingers alienating the leader from the people and the movement. But López Rega's Triple A death squads operated with the tacit, and sometimes active, support of the federal police under Perón's administration. Perón enacted tougher penalties for acts of terrorism while ignoring the frequent right-wing massacres. The 'University Law' passed in March of 1974 banned politics on campus, restricted student unions, and discriminated against leftist lecturers, but the leader of the University Peronist Youth claimed his organization was 'convinced...it was not thought up to throw us out.' Even after Perón directly denounced the Montoneros and Peronist Youth as 'callow and stupid' during a May Day celebration in 1974, the Montoneros refused to abandon Perón. Only after his death on 1 July 1974, the assumption of the presidency by his widow Isabel, and the rapid escalation of right-wing attacks organized by López Rega did the Montoneros, in September 1974, finally go back underground in an alliance with other disappointed Peronist and Guevarist guerrilla groups." (111)

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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 monsterly.

The political and economic conditions that contribute to the development of monsterly 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 back 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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**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***

**Abstract**

In Alfredo Noriega's novel, *De que nada se sabe*, we witness the entrance of Ecuador in the neoliberal and globalized world when the South American country is immersed in an unprecedented institutional crisis. The stories narrated in this novel create an account of an Ecuadorian postmodern social reality of the late twentieth century and beginning of this century. Quito, the capital city, is represented through a collision of narrations where the local melts with the global while describing the radical transformations of the city in a type of fictionalized chronicle.

**Keywords:** Alfredo Noriega, global Quito, local Quito, chronicle

In a recent interview to a major Ecuadorian newspaper, Alfredo Noriega refers to his novel *De que nada se sabe* as “una obra que habla del Ecuador, de su gente, de sus crisis” (“a work that speaks of Ecuador, its capital city, its people, and its crises” ) [1] (El Universo 2003). Thus, with this work, we witness Ecuador’s entrance into the neoliberal and globalized world of the South American region—an Ecuador of the late 1990s, immersed in an unprecedented institutional crisis. The stories narrated in this novel create an account of an Ecuadorian postmodern social reality of the late twentieth century and the beginning of this century through a collision of narrations where the local melts with the global. This assertion is based on the sociological studies of Roland Robertson and the argument outlined by Hubert Pöppel in his essay “Fuerzas centrífugas y centrípetas en Santiago Gamboa y Gonzalo España.” According to Pöppel’s observations regarding the Colombian crime novel, “la globalización de ideas, discursos y propuestas permite, por ende, volver a pensar, desde una nueva perspectiva, lo local y lo particular” (“the globalization of ideas, proposals and speeches can therefore make us re-think what it is considered the local and the particular”) (361).

The story narrates the life of a forensic doctor, Arturo Fernandez, who through his work attempts to reconstruct the tragic events of the deaths of the bodies arriving at the police morgue where he works, while describing the radical transformations of Quito in a type of fictionalized chronicle. In this novel, we clearly identify the narrator’s social concerns couched in colloquial expressions that reinforce Ecuadorians’ own dialect, but at the same time, with a meta-textual strategy that remains distant from the local. This starts with the title of the novel, *De que nada se sabe*, a fragment of the Jorge Luis Borges poem of the same name, and each chapter has an epigraph from that same poem announcing the motifs that govern the events of the story, as noted by Ecuadorian writer Cesar Carrion in the prologue of the novel (10). The protagonist of the novel works as a medical examiner in the police morgue, but he also assumes the role of a detective in pursuit of finding the criminal. He reminds us of the literary characteristics that direct the line of questioning used in classic detective novels. In this case, the protagonist reconstructs the stories of those bodies that he dissects, and, in the process, he even tries to prosecute the perpetrators of the crimes committed against them.

“(El cuerpo de María Chiriboga) cayó primero de bruces, tiene las rodillas y la cara raspadas (...) su agresor la agarró de los brazos (...) su mano izquierda está rota, hay restos de piel en las uñas (...) la violaron y estrangularon al mismo tiempo (...) cuando el asesino eyaculó, la víctima ya estaba muerta (...)”

Colombiano, leo, miembro de banda de asaltantes. Otro colombiano más, muerto de muerte violenta. (...) No lo mató la policía. El calibre del revolver no da. Seguramente fue un guardia de barrio; no será el primero que cae bajo las balas de estos guardianes del orden improvisados (...) necesarios, dicen, en esta ciudad cuya violencia la Policía Nacional no solamente no puede contener sino que ella misma ejerce (...)” (90; 95)



*“(Maria Chiriboga’s body) first fell on her face, her knees and face had scratches... Her aggressor grabbed her by the arms... Her left hand is broken, there are traces of skin on the nails... She was raped and strangled at the same time (...) When the murderer ejaculated, the victim was already dead (...)”*

*Colombian, I read, member of a band of assaulters. Another Colombian dead from a violent death... The police did not kill him. The caliber of the revolver does not match. (The killer) surely was a security guard; he won’t be the first to die under the bullets of these improvised custodians... They are necessary, they say, in this city whose violence the National Police not only can not contain but also executes itself...” (90; 95)*

In this narrative, we witness an oscillation between two alternating narrators. First, the forensic doctor who tries to give an identity to the corpses by reconstructing their life stories and pursuing the perpetrators of the crimes, attempting to uncover the reasons for their deaths within the organs of the bodies that he dissected. The second narrator is an omniscient one, whose judgments and visions focus on the description of Quito landscapes where the crimes take place. The correspondence of these two narratives allows the reader to speculate about the time of the crime, the type of weapon used by the alleged murderer, and the reasons he or she has committed the aforementioned crime. This omniscient narrator also assumes the description, in a historicist form, of the moral decline being experienced by the Ecuadorian capital of the end of the last millennium, “(...) Quito no le quita nada a Guayaquil o a Bogotá, ni México D.F., Río de Janeiro, Los Ángeles o Nueva York, en esta ciudad también se le teme a la policía (...) deberíamos tener un monumento al muerto desconocido (...)” (95) “(...) Quito does not take anything away from Guayaquil or Bogota, or Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Los Angeles or New York, in this city also the police are feared... We should have a monument to the unknown dead (...)” (95)

Framed in a distinctly urban setting, Noriega’s work describes the transformation of Quito, as a representation of what French Anthropologist Marc Augé would call a “non-place.” In anthropological terms, a place could be considered “as a site that can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity” (77). From the foregoing statement, the author defines those non-vital or ahistorical places as “non-places.” A “non-place,” then, would be an airport, a cafe, a hospital, a highway, a supermarket or a hotel room, or other area without a definite configuration, a place defined almost exclusively by transient individuals. The city of Quito, as narrated by the characters in Noriega’s story, is transformed into one of these anthropological spaces. For Augé, the “non-place” is the result of the inability to represent a space forged or modified by postmodernism largely due to technological, cultural and economic global capitalist breakthrough product innovations, which become creators of experiences or influences in art or in the field of knowledge; therefore, that territory is transformed into a mimetic effect and not a stable entity. Noriega’s character describes these spaces in a hyper-realistic way, such as detailed references to the Benalcázar building built during the oil boom of the late 1970s, public

transport, shopping centers, or “los kilómetros de la avenida oriental y los túneles de San Juan” (“The kilometers of Avenida Oriental and the tunnels of San Juan”) (*De que nada* 46). These “non-places” are sites frequented by transient, ephemeral and temporary subjects who are immersed in a state devoid of history, trapped in an area without knowledge (Augé 30-33).

The novel reveals a Quito from the end of the last century, a city that expanded thanks to the Ecuadorian oil boom of the 1970s and with a population that witnessed the return to democracy in the 1980s, where the absence of law and justice became an unavoidable presence. With the advent of the neoliberal economic model implemented under President Sixto Duran Ballen in the early 1990s and radicalized under the presidency of Jamil Mahuad at the end of that same decade with the dollarization of the economy, a new scale of values aroused powered by a widening gap between the rich and the poor and by the further displacement of social classes. In this late capitalist urban setting, interactions between people are minimal, exemplifying the distrust felt by all, with the presence of extremely marked social boundaries that divide the population. The characters in the novel include rich, poor, foreigners, men, women, homosexuals and indigenous, and although the division between these classes is clearly present, the city of Quito acts as their only binding tie. Each of the characters also responds to their own interests and characteristics: The apathetic librarian Osorio negotiates his emotionlessness with Hortensia, Arturo’s mother, who also refuses to express her feelings to a person from a lower social class. In contrast to the tenacity and solidarity of taxi driver Campos, there is the negligence of the medical student Maria Chiriboga. The commitment and professional ethics found in the protagonist Arturo are distinct from the excess of irresponsibility as showcased by Wilfrido, the immigrant from the Ecuadorian coast. And the only faithful and healthy relationship narrated in the story; represented by the clandestine love of Jorge, the homosexual brother of Arturo, and his partner; is abruptly interrupted by the assassination of one of the lovers, corroborating the latter as an impossible relationship. Therefore, the relationships that are told in this story, those considered healthy and the ones suffering from a terrible loneliness or in dysfunctional environments, fail sooner or later due to the presence of an external agent that interrupt these relationships in an abrupt way. This agent is related to the prevailing crime in the city, which acts as a universal element.

Murder and violent deaths that frequently occur in *De que nada se sabe* and Quito is the binding element that leads the different social classes to interact with each other. A single crime connects the characters of Gonzalo, Caceres, Eulalia—all of them from the lower middle class—with Arturo, the forensic doctor, whose office becomes the final destination of each death in the novel. The doctor, in his role of investigator, reconstructs the events of each of these violent deaths. He is dedicated to working with the corpses and then connects these facts with the deaths of other characters, the deaths of Campos, Wilfredo, Jorge, Mary and the indigenous. The presence of indigenous people is a particular element of the country that does not escape from

the universality of crime. The number of deaths continues to rise in a novel that serves as a social critique, capturing an Ecuadorian modernity of the late twentieth century defined by inequality and marginalization.

In both cases, Amir Valle 's argument can be taken into account. In his essay "Marginalidad y ética de la marginalidad en la nueva ciudad narrada por la novela negra latinoamericana" Valle describes the role of contemporary crime fiction as a type of writing that:

"[h]a dejado de ser negra para convertirse en la novela costumbrista de nuestros días. Sólo aceptando esos criterios podrá entenderse por qué y cómo en la nueva novela negra latinoamericana se esconden hoy las claves para entender esa Marginalia y esa ética de la marginalidad en la cual habitamos los latinoamericanos, una marginalidad que, lejos de convertirnos en seres inmundos, desvalidos, desesperanzados, nos recuerda que estamos allí por culpa de nuestra propia raza y que nadie, excepto nosotros mismos, nos puede ayudar a salir de esa fosa" (Amir Valle 100).

*"[h]as ceased to be noir to become today's novel of manners. Only by accepting these criteria will it be possible to understand why and how the keys to understand that Marginalia are found in the new Latin American noir fiction: A marginality ethic in which Latin Americans live today, a marginality that, far from turning us into useless, filthy, despairing beings; reminds us that we are there because of our own race and that nobody, except ourselves, can take us out of that ditch" (Amir Valle 100).*

*De que nada se sabe* can also be read as the dissection of a capital city, which itself is occupied by marginal spaces and subjects.

Just as the human body, organs located far from each other as the liver and the heart respond to an interdependent relationship. In the novel, characters distant from each other, like Arturo and Wilfrido, end up finding each other on the threshold of death. It is in this way that in the work of Noriega, Quito becomes a scenario in constant motion throughout the narration.

The descriptions of the omniscient narrator refer to the transition that this city suffers by the end of last century, which turns Quito into a cosmopolitan city full of foreigners and inhabitants from outlying areas of Ecuador. The narrator compares the expansion of the city with the growth of moral decay. This growth is perceived as a centrifugal movement in which the escape from the city center is also associated with the abandonment of the core principles of the community that once characterized this former Andean village of the mid-twentieth century. Through the descriptions of urban change in the city, which stretches from the center, "(el) Centro Histórico, único sitio en esta ciudad imbuido de un carácter propio", "(the) historical center, the only place with its own sense of identity" (47)" to the surrounding valleys and the foothills of the mountains that surround it, lead to a loss of geographical cohesion that is accompanied by a loss of social cohesion.

The author portrays a sort of a classist nostalgia of a smaller Quito from the 1950s and 1960s and well into the 1980s. This Quito was characterized by a community where everyone knew everyone, and its inhabitants were linked in one way or another by diverse ties of kinship, forcing them to comply with certain social conventions beyond the law.

In addition to the centrifugal movement of the city's urban expansion, there are multiple references to emblematic landmarks of the city, aimed to those readers who know the history and cartography of Quito. This geographic relationship is also a centrifuge to the extent that local expressions and regional symbolism that deviate from the dominant literary trends of the publishing market are highlighted in the text. Consequently, Noriega's novel also denotes a "glocal" crime fiction story of the transformation of Quito. The precept exposed by Roland Robertson, when defining what I would call an aesthetic of "glocalization," will serve as a foundational guide to understanding the influence of the global in this Ecuadorian novel. In his essay, "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity," Robertson explains some of the trading strategies used by multinational companies to adapt, from a global perspective, their products, goods, and services within a local market. Also, from a sociological perspective:

"[t]he description of a global world, understood as an economic and cultural manifestation of an imperialistic way to homogenize all of the local expressions, increased, in the same time, the debate about what is considered to be the local, and helped to stimulate the emergence of local cultural manifestations and discourses." (Robertson 77)

The descriptions of the neighborhoods and landmarks of Quito, and the author's concerns about the local regarding globalization are a confirmation of the above as the author includes in a colloquial tone, expressions of the Ecuadorian dialect such as *montubio* (a term to denote a native from a low social class from the Ecuadorian coast), *arrejuntados* (an expression to describe the action of setting up house together or to shack up together), *aguar* (to wait), *acollar* (to help) and *Bibidi* (a tank top shirt).

In some passages, the narrator gives extra-narrative opinions on Ecuadorean politics of the late twentieth century in an open and free manner. In those passages, the narrator mentions the names of real key players in Ecuadorian politics. These included former presidents Sixto Duran Ballen, Arosemena Monroy, Abdala Bucaram, León Febres Cordero, who are described in the story in a disgraceful way as the architects of the Ecuadorian neoliberal model that started "en la modernidad nacida en los años setenta, con la ostentación y la grosería del nuevo rico" ("In the modernity born in the seventies, with the ostentation and rudeness of the new rich") and led to the social and political crisis by the end of the last century (*De que nada* 37).

At the same time, beyond the references of Quito, the author jumps to other less restricted literature references, such as the epigraphs from a Borges poem indicating the events of each

chapter to the reader. These local and global references reveal the troubled relationship of the two narrators (both the omniscient one and the protagonist one) with the city of Quito. Arturo was upset, for example, with the typical inconsistent weather of a city built in the middle of the Andes, and this instability reflects the faltering social climate of the country:

“[o]tra farsa de esta ciudad llena de atavismos, de madrugada, frio; a media mañana, calor; luego viento; por la tarde, lluvia, lluvia desconcertante, y por la noche otra vez frio” (107).

*“[a]nother farce of this city full of atavisms, at dawn, cold; at midmorning heat; then wind; in the afternoon, rain, bewildering rain, and at night, cold, again” (107).*

The marginalization that creates social divisions within a city also creates a space where certain universal elements can penetrate the walls that separate the upper from the lower classes. As such, members of the lower class or lower middle class can be found in the homes of the wealthy, dead on the street, in the morgue being dissected by a forensic doctor, during the rape of a woman from the upper class, getting up from the bed with a prostitute, getting drunk with a homeless person or committing a murder without a reason. The protagonist of this story, a forensic doctor who has to dissect corpses with the objective of discovering the causes of a death, serves also as a detective who reveals a social radiography of the causes of the moral decay of the inhabitants of the city.

This social radiography displayed in this crime fiction reveals marginalization as the common cause or element that connects the tragic destiny of every person in this literary representation of Quito from the end of the twentieth century.

## Endnotes

[1] All translations from Spanish into English are provided by the author of this article.

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## **From Barbarized to Disneyfied: Viewing 1990s New York City Through Eve Dallas, J.D. Robb's Futuristic Homicide Detective**

### **Abstract:**

In 2058 New York, police detective Eve Dallas, the protagonist of J.D. Robb's futuristic murder mystery series *In Death*, is actually a throwback. In the first book, *Naked in Death*, Dallas's character is established largely as a personification of 1980s New York—a battered, but indomitable city struggling to curb crime, one haunted by a dark past. But the gritty world she represents comes face to face with a powerful capitalist New York when she encounters her eventual romantic partner, Roarke, the billionaire head of a multi-national corporation. In placing these vastly disparate New Yorks into the same narrative, Robb's novel challenges the "spiritual renewal" story that Mayor Giuliani and others had created to explain the sudden drop in New York's crime wave after 1993. Unlike that diachronic story—a fallen city redeemed by its leaders' adoption of corporate management practices—Robb insists on a 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.

**Keywords:** J.D. Robb, futuristic New York, corporate capitalism narrative

## 1. New York, Spiritual Renewal, and the Continuing Tale of Two Cities

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, New York appeared to be reeling under an unprecedented crime wave. In the press, it was spoken of as a “barbarized city” (Hamill 62). *Time* did a cover story in 1990 called “The Decline of New York” that included a poll on how the residents saw the city and found that people considered it dangerous and dirty, with no improvement in sight. In 1991, William Stern claimed in *Forbes* that gentrification had come to a halt because “[t]he best and the brightest now think three or four times before coming to New York” (154). Post 1993, this media coverage shifted dramatically as crime rates seemed to fall, nose-diving after the mid-1990s to such an extent that the phenomenon has been termed a “crime crash.” [1] Suddenly, New York became the city hailed by John Marks and Jack Egan as a “national model for how cities resurrect themselves”, the city that Andrew Karmen cites as appearing in *Fortune* magazine’s 1997 list as “the most favorable place to do business” and one he terms “Disneyfied” because of a huge rise in tourism as a result of a drop in the fear of crime (9). One explanation for this comeback is the one that was offered by the new mayor elected in 1993, Rudolph Giuliani, and his Police Commissioners (first William Bratton and then Howard Safir): they cleaned up the city through new management tactics. In other words, theirs is a diachronic narrative of New York: a fallen city redeemed over time by the Mayor’s office and a revolutionized New York Police Department. Several scholars like Steven D. Levitt, Benjamin Bowling, and Andrew Karmen have disputed this narrative by questioning the objectivity of media reports, disputing the meaning of crime statistics, and offering new socio-economic interpretations of what was occurring in that time in New York and across the U.S. [2] This period and the contradictions it poses is represented in the romantic suspense series *In Death* by J. D. Robb (a.k.a. Nora Roberts). Despite being set in the year 2058, the series relies heavily on New York’s crime-wave era for its backdrop and presents an alternative to Giuliani’s “spiritual renewal” story.

While New York assumes the status of a character in many movies and books, Robb’s protagonist, Eve Dallas, a homicide detective, actually embodies it in this series. A decade-old veteran of the force, Dallas tirelessly polices the city, mimicking its non-stop nature. Driven, gutsy, and used to violence (though far from blasé about it), she brims with a cold energy that she channels into catching murderers and other lowlifes, yet she displays unexpected bouts of kindness, another evocation of New York’s reputation for urban ruthlessness peppered with rare moments of softness. But a more significant expression of this mirroring of the city in Dallas is her evolving economic and social identity, which is intriguingly dualistic as well. Through Dallas, whose personal and work identity Robb constructs as a personification of a battered New York that repeatedly has to deal with a wealthy New York, she challenges Giuliani et al.’s diachronic narrative of a once-wild city that has been saved by neo-liberal policies.

In imitation of New York's reputation of always harboring two cities—current mayor Bill DeBlasio ran his campaign on the promise that the gap between the New York of the rich and that of the poor would be narrowed—Dallas ends up coping with these twin worlds almost from the first novel in the long-running series. As a police officer, she is a working class citizen who sees herself as blue collar and whose professional life unfolds in that milieu; by becoming the lover and eventual wife of a billionaire industrialist, however, she encounters the city's obscenely wealthy world and its occasionally criminal extravagances. Moreover, while she is an unwilling participant in this ritzy world, she slowly adopts the work strategies of its corporate czars, bringing the two New Yorks even closer, traveling from one to another both spatially and mentally. In creating this dualism in the protagonist, Robb offers us a New York that is always a patchwork of the disparities resulting from class war rather than one whose violent, seemingly working class past has been neatly replaced by a peaceful, law-abiding consumer capitalist heaven.

## 2. Working Class New York and Crime

Robb first positions Dallas as belonging to an unglamorous world through the personal history she gives her. Dallas has had an abusive childhood with a deadbeat criminal father, followed by orphanhood in an indifferent foster care system, leading to PTSD. In fact, her last name derives from the city in which she was found as a wounded orphan, making her a true urban refugee and street dweller. Dallas recounts that she received a very basic public school education and came to New York to be a police officer as soon as she could. She has been a functional workaholic for years, with little time or inclination for socializing outside of her job. When we meet her in *Naked in Death* (1995), the first book in the series, she is living alone and has nothing in her apartment that makes it seem more than a bare bones space in which to sleep between exhausting shifts at work. She doesn't cook, snacks on junk food, and often survives on coffee. Her clothing is utilitarian and she seems to have neither time nor money to spend on self-care beyond showering and trimming her own hair. It is a working class existence by profession and by lifestyle choice.

When Dallas starts to associate with a billionaire she meets in *Naked in Death*, the gap between her inherited (and chosen) class identity and his world is sharply drawn. Several scenes establish how she is made aware of her class (or lack thereof). For instance, take this confrontation with Roarke's butler in which she tells him to "pull the stick out of [his] ass" and explain why he treats her like "some sort of embarrassing rodent":

Shock turned Summerset's face paper white. "I'm not comfortable with crude manners, Lieutenant Dallas. Obviously you are."

"They fit me like old slippers."

"Indeed." Summerset drew himself up. "Roarke is a man of taste, of style,

of influence. He has the ear of presidents and kings. He has escorted women of unimpeachable breeding and pedigree.”  
“And I’ve got lousy breeding and no pedigree.” She would have laughed if the barb hadn’t stuck so close to the heart. (290-91)

Eve’s working class identity is thus an inalienable part of how Robb portrays her. Like a significant portion of the city’s population, she is a salaried worker with little sophistication and a great deal of the city’s street smarts and attitude. She knows nothing about classical music but enjoys action-packed narratives, views haute cuisine with healthy apprehension while hoarding candy, and lacks a grasp of metaphorical and poetic language and canonical literature but is comfortable with physical and verbal altercations. Robb also paints Dallas as one of the hoi-polloi through her professional life of cleaning up the city. Here’s another encounter with the above butler when she has arrived at Roarke’s mansion after a violent store robbery:

“May I take your coat?”  
She [...] thought she caught a flicker of smug condescension in those inscrutable eyes. Eve shrugged out of her jacket, watched him take the leather somewhat gingerly between his manicured fingers.  
Hell, she’d gotten most of the blood off it. (68-9)

In other words, Dallas is somehow marked by the darkness of the streets and the lowlives she meets on a routine basis: drug dealers, con artists, flashers, petty thieves, street hookers, and murderers.

It is through this professional topos that Robb further develops Dallas’s working class identity; her construction of New York City as backdrop to Dallas’s work in several novels, including *Naked in Death*, is particularly worth comment in the context of the crime wave narrative with which this article began. Specifically, Robb cements the plebeian nature of Dallas’s existence by setting up her work life in a New York that is ostensibly of the future (2058) but often reflects the late 1980s and early 1990s (the decades of the crime wave), when articles like the one by Hamill mentioned above lamented a devolving New York, the apple that had rotted to the core. In other words, Dallas’s New York is often grungy and raving, evoking the dangerous city described in the 1990 *Time* article “Decline of New York.” In it, Joelle Attinger wrote,

Last year 1,905 people were murdered in New York, more than twice as many as in Los Angeles. In the first five months of this year, 888 homicides were committed, setting a pace that will result in a new record if it goes unchecked. [...] This summer, in one eight-day period, four children were killed by stray gunshots as they played on the sidewalks, toddled in their grandmother’s kitchens or slept soundly in their own beds. Six others have been wounded since late June.

Robb evokes this 1990 city in three ways: through an off-stage shooting incident Dallas was involved in, the serial killer case she is handling, and in descriptions of New York's neighborhoods.

*Naked in Death* begins with a recounting of a domestic violence altercation in which Dallas has killed a man who had battered his wife, then locked himself in with their daughter and murdered her while high on drugs. She describes how

[h]e'd used the kitchen knife to slice her to pieces [...] There was so much blood. She was so small, but there was so much blood. On the floor, on the wall, all over him. I could see it was still dripping off the knife. Her face was turned toward me. Her little face, with big blue eyes. Like a doll's [...] There was blood dripping off the knife, and splattered all over him, and he kept coming. So I looked in his eyes, right in his eyes. And I killed him. (106-08)

The incident closely resembles a real one that made headlines in 1990, when a Queens man (a recent immigrant from the Midwest) lost his temper with his six-day old son, "chopped up the infant and threw him to [his] German shepherd[.] When the cops arrived, there was [nothing] left of the [child] except the blood [on the] floor" (Hamill 61).

Apart from this gory tale of an innocent's murder, Dallas's primary case in *Naked in Death* involves violence against prostitutes committed in a manner that harks back to the murderous environment of late 80s run-down New York as reported in the *Time* article and other sources, and conjures up the specter of working class crime. In fact, Robb's descriptions of the shooting deaths of the prostitutes so strongly evoke the 1990 news coverage of New York by people like Attinger and Hamill that a reader familiar with that coverage could be excused for thinking that this case is actually set in that crime wave, almost always portrayed in contemporary media reports as an inexplicable pathology. It seems likely that Robb is borrowing from journalists like Attinger—declaimer of the city's moribund state in the 80s—in portraying Dallas's professional life as marked by the fallout of such madness. She is faced with a serial killer of licensed prostitutes, many of whom are shot to death with guns that have been banned since 2023, guns commonly used by "urban gangs and drug dealers" in the previous century (145). At one point, a character even describes the serial killings as "twentieth-century weapons, twentieth-century crimes, with twentieth-century motives" (85). The case thus calls to her mind a grimmer New York, one that lasted into the novel's fictional turn of the millennium until the advent of a socio-political crisis termed the "Urban Wars" led to a gun ban (49). Dallas even states that before guns were banned "there were over ten thousand deaths and injuries from guns in the borough of Manhattan alone" in the year 2016 (279).

But even as the mention of the historic gun-ban is meant to suggest a break from New York's violent criminal past in the novel's fictional universe, a past that is being temporarily resurrected in 2058 by these old-fashioned murders, Robb's descriptions of the city further suggest that that

past is not quite history. In other words, though the crime that Dallas encounters in this novel is supposed to be an aberrant throwback in a New York that has become more civilized, much of the 2058 New York that Dallas encounters during her work hours resembles the representations of early 1990s New York, too: cacophonous and dirty. Attinger, for instance, said that over the 1980s, when New York seemed to be booming economically, another side of it was undergoing decay, leading to the eventual chaos of 1990:

Since 1980, cutbacks in federal aid have cost New York billions, with funds for subsidized housing alone dropping \$16 billion. Despite a series of state and local levies that now place New Yorkers among the most heavily taxed citizens in the nation, the city has never recovered from those setbacks.

Most brutally hit have been basic social services [...] Even the basic rudiments of civil behavior seemed to evaporate along with the glitter of the boom times. [...] The streets have become public rest rooms for both people and animals, even though failure to clean up after a pet dog carries fines of up to \$100. What was once the bustle of a hyperkinetic city has become a demented frenzy.

Compare this to the description of a stretch of Broadway Avenue that Dallas calls Prostitutes Walk, where two of the murdered prostitutes lived:

Broadway was noisy and crowded, a party where rowdy guests never left. Street, pedestrian, and sky traffic were miserable, choking the air with bodies and vehicles... Even at this hour there was steam rising from the stationary and portable food stands that offered everything from rice noodles to soydogs for the teeming crowds... Eve double-parked and, skirting a man who smelled worse than his bottle of brew, stepped onto the sidewalk... She was propositioned twice before she reached the door. (Naked in Death 3-4)

As with Attinger's New York, Robb's bears the signs of moral and physical decay. Yet the area is only a bit run-down, and homicide is not quite a routine happening for the neighborhood, so the murder Dallas is there to investigate appears to be the harbinger of the spread of a criminal impulse normally limited to historically dangerous sections—precisely as Attinger proclaimed was happening in late 1980s New York: “[D]eadly violence, once mostly confined to crime-ridden ghetto neighborhoods that the police wrote off as free-fire zones, is now lashing out randomly at anyone, anytime, even in areas once considered relatively safe.”

We see one such “crime-ridden ghetto” (from where violence can allegedly start “lashing out randomly” to “relatively safe” zones) in *Naked in Death* when Dallas ends up in the much seedier section of Prostitutes Walk because of another murder:



A few months of working this neighborhood, and a cop stopped needing to puke at the sight of a corpse. Chemi-heads, the street LCs [Licensed Companions], and just plain bad asses liked to wale [sic] on each other along these nasty blocks as much for entertainment as for business profits. From the smell that had greeted her outside, someone had died out there recently, or the recycle trucks hadn't been through in the last week. (81)

It is a New York on the verge of a breakdown caused by the decline of civic services—stinky, irrational, predatory, one similar to what Attinger described for *Time* in 1990:

[C]rime, fueled by the drug epidemic, has jumped 25%. Since 1987, the number of street sweepers has been slashed from 1,400 to 300, trash collections in midtown Manhattan have been reduced by a third, and what used to be daily rounds in the outer boroughs have been reduced to twice a week. Epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis and syphilis have pushed the health-care system to the breaking point. As many New Yorkers are waiting for public housing as there are existing units, leading occupants to double or triple up in a frantic bid for shelter.

In *Naked in Death*, the second prostitute who is killed isn't living in public housing but her internal monolog before the murderer arrives tells us that she has little money to spare and lives in the seedy area of Prostitutes Walk in a tiny apartment because she has no other options as a new immigrant to New York. Repeatedly, then, the novel creates a *mise-en-scène* of crime-wave New York, with its attendant social and economic depredation.

### 3. Corporate Capital New York

Though Dallas is completely mired in the run down New York (evocative of the 1980s) when *Naked in Death* begins and continues to be so through the series, her move toward couplehood opens the window to a world of bourgeois privilege that exists *simultaneously* in the same city. In this, Robb chooses a different path to portraying New York compared to the one-sided news coverage of the 1980s, which downplayed the presence of the wealthy elite in favor of portraying the city as overrun by barbarians (see endnote [2] again). The places and people Dallas encounters because of her lover (and later, husband), Roarke, represent a very different New York than of her usual acquaintance. When she first visits Roarke in *Naked in Death*, here is how his mansion at 222 Central Park West is described:

Its four stories towered over the frosted trees of Central Park. It was one of the old buildings, close to two hundred years old, built of actual stone... There was lots of glass, and lights burning gold behind the windows. There was also a security gate, behind which evergreen shrubs and elegant trees were artistically arranged. Even more impressive than the magnificence of architecture and



landscaping was the quiet. She heard no city noises here. No traffic snarls, no pedestrian chaos. Even the sky overhead was subtly different than the one she was accustomed to farther downtown. Here, you could actually see stars rather than the glint and gleam of transports. (67-8)

Roarke epitomizes a successful corporate capitalist, and in his orbit, she inhabits a different New York from the one in crisis described earlier. This New York is wealthy, high-tech, well ensconced in the twenty-first century, removed from the dirtier city. When she visits his Midtown headquarters, it's markedly different from the grime of Prostitutes Walk:

Slick, shiny, sleek, the building itself spread one hundred fifty stories into the Manhattan sky. It was an ebony lance, glossy as wet stone, ringed by transport tubes and diamond-bright skyways.

No tacky Glida-Grills on this corner...No street hawkers with their hot pocket PCs dodging security on their colorful air boards. Out-of-doors vending was off limits on this bite of Fifth. The zoning made things quieter, if a little less adventuresome. Inside, the main lobby took up a full city block, boasting three tony restaurants, a high-priced boutique, a handful of specialty shops, and a small theater that played art films.

The white floor tiles were a full yard square and gleamed like the moon. Clear glass elevators zipped busily up and down, people glides zigzagged left and right, while disembodied voices guided visitors to various points of interest or, if there was business to be conducted, the proper office. (86-7)

As the description shows, Dallas's New York contains twin worlds simultaneously, that of the lethal Prostitutes Walk and of glossy corporate consumerism. While this has been true of the real New York as well, such descriptions of sanitized prosperity were scant in the media before 1993; they began to appear everywhere *after* 1994. But Robb opts to ignore that 1993/1994 divide. She takes the mid- to late 90s rapturous media descriptions of the city and its alleged miraculous resurrection and places them smack alongside the bloody murders that suggest pre-1993 New York. In this, she creates a far different narrative than people like Hamill, who in 1990 bemoaned the New York of the crime wave era as an "American Calcutta" (and dismissed any other aspect of it with a brief "[t]he rich, of course, live well-defended lives") and Vince Beiser, who in 1995's "Why the Big Apple Feels Safer," described it at length as shiny and safe:

In Manhattan, police are also getting a hand from so-called business-improvement districts (BIDs), groups that collect fees from firms in a specific area to provide extra sanitation, lighting and security services. Since they began in 1988, BIDs have multiplied to cover much of midtown and downtown Manhattan. The extra lighting and hundreds of security guards have had a clear impact in formerly crime-plagued areas such as Times Square and Grand Central Station. (3)

As I stated earlier, Giuliani, who had been elected mayor in 1993, took credit for this post-May 1994 shine, attributing it to the “zero tolerance” policy he had adopted along with his police commissioner, Bratton (formerly the Chief of New York Transit Police) (Vitale 101). Their cleaned-up city, they insisted, was vastly different from the horrific one of the 80s and early 90s due to the tactics they adopted. Articles like “New York New York” (1997) waxed eloquent on the rise of this Disneyfied New York:

Graffiti have all but vanished from subways; streets are visibly cleaner, and Times Square, once the city’s defining eyesore, is now a corporate playground. This month, MTV began shooting its daily news show from a glass box on the square--unthinkable even five years ago, when prostitutes, drug dealers, and windblown trash would have made a depressing backdrop [...] After years of doldrums, the city’s overall economy has come roaring back to life. The bull market may be benefiting 100 million Americans, but the center of it is Wall Street, and the Street is booming, attracting companies and people from all over the world. [...] Similarly, Deutsche Bank, Germany’s biggest financial institution, has gone on a hiring spree in New York and now occupies a huge new tower in midtown Manhattan.

This narrative disregards the reality that *Naked in Death* acknowledges: spaces for privileged groups that had occupied the top of the economic ladder existed before and after the crime crash (while the poor, especially people of color, struggled in many neighborhoods pre- and post-1993). While it suited the Mayor and the NYPD to claim that a once-fallen city had now become a safe zone for natives and tourists of every stripe, the city’s structure had always included economic inequalities, with obscenely wealthy living alongside poverty-line residents (Bagli). As noted by Karmen and admitted even by Attinger, 1980s New York was not entirely an apocalyptic wasteland; there was plenty of wealth even as many areas of New York were in crisis:

High finance and a booming real estate market transported New York to a paroxysm of unbridled capitalism, with all its attendant glitz and excess. At the height of the bull market, 60,000 new jobs were being created annually, luring droves of hyperambitious baby boomers to the canyons of Wall Street and midtown Manhattan. Nicknamed “the Erector set,” a stable of real estate developers transformed the cityscape, throwing up 50 million sq. ft. of glistening office monoliths within Manhattan alone. New fortunes upended the city’s social lineage, shoving Rockefeller and Astor aside for Trump, Steinberg and Kravis. The new barons redefined wealth beyond Jay Gatsby’s wildest dreams, ensconcing themselves in palatial aeries groaning with old masters and nouveau exorbitance. (Attinger)

Both the “huge new tower in midtown Manhattan” that Marks and Egan declare a sign of the new and improved 1990s New York and the “glistening office monoliths” and “[n]ew fortunes” of “barons” living in “palatial aeries” of Attinger’s 1980s New York exist in the city in which Dallas

encounters Roarke as a suspect in the serial killing of prostitutes. In other words, Robb brings the two New Yorks (of Have-Lots and Have-Nots) to a head in the same time period even if the media and Mayor had made them seem like two distinct historical phases in the life of New York City; for Dallas, it is not time but space that separates the two, with Roarke's world distanced from places like Prostitutes Walk by a car-ride and high-tech security.

In sum, just as the actual city in the 1980s saw a combination of Have-Lots and Have-Nots, with those at the bottom of the economic ladder perpetrating and suffering from the worst crimes while the wealthiest lived well (though there were criminals from that class, too—more on that later), *Naked in Death* contains both worlds, something the media reports in the late 80s and early 90s often ignored. So unlike 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, a fact that Robb underlines by having Dallas's feet planted in both worlds personally and professionally.

Starting with *Naked in Death* and continuing in the novels that follow, Dallas's work takes her back and forth between these New Yorks. She works in downtown Manhattan and all over the city, including Queens, and ends up living in Roarke's Upper West side mansion (though she expresses more bafflement at the glossier city and its upper class when she encounters them than she does toward the dirty city of honest criminals). Even more interestingly, Robb uses her to suggest that the two worlds are not all that different in terms of criminal potential, flouting the barbarized-to-Disneyfied narrative in this additional way as well. Dallas discovers that the first victim in *Naked in Death* was murdered by her grandfather, a right-wing old-money Republican Senator who had sexually abused her and her aunt; additionally, the serial killer of the other prostitutes turns out to be his aide. The senator's crimes are framed against the backdrop of his hypocritical crusade to police private morality and repeal the ban on guns, and his seemingly gentlemanly aide is shown to be a power hungry sociopath with a homicidal contempt for women. While it is possible that Robb chose these characters as murderers under the influence of the extensive airtime Karmen says the 80s- early 90s media often gave to cases in which privileged people killed someone, the murder investigation's conclusion emphasizes that New York contains many cities, and the poor, squalid one does not equate with crime (as articles like Hamill's had suggested) nor the rich, sanitized one with rectitude (Karmen 58-59). [3] These cities are contemporaneous rather than chronological (unlike what the “spiritual renewal” narrators argue about the crime crash), and their synchronic existence points out the structural inequalities that New York contained. Affluence is not absent in Robb's New York as it was in media coverage of the city during the crime wave—it is at the heart of its persistent problems and Dallas never overlooks that in her cases.

This is not to suggest that Dallas is a speaker for a specific class position. She functions to remind us that New York's dual nature continues to exist under the adoption of neoliberal philosophy. While compassionate and tolerant of petty criminals (unlike Giuliani, Bratton, and his successor, Howard Safir, with their "zero tolerance" and "broken window" theories), she is also independent and data-driven, calling to mind Bratton and Giuliani's adoption of a set of statistics-focused business management strategies that are now termed "COMPSTAT". [4] Bowling explains COMPSTAT culture as follows:

[R]egular 7am meetings at headquarters in which computer generated maps of crime and police activity are displayed on huge screens to an audience of up to 200 people including police brass, district and US attorneys, parole, schools, Port Authority police and the media (Bratton 1998: 232; Gorta 1998). In these meetings (likened by a police cartoonist to being in front of a firing squad), the Chiefs grill precinct commanders in detail about the 'hot spots'—what's going on, and what they are doing about it. At the same time resources and responsibility were decentralized to precinct level with more direct accountability to headquarters (see also Silverman 1996; Allen and Wright 1997). (543)

Karmen further notes that COMPSTAT numbers became the department's equivalent of a corporation's fixation on profit and loss statistics and methods meant to rapidly raise the former and minimize the latter through data-management and exchange. Dallas embodies this model to a great extent, reporting to her commanding officer periodically during a key case, coordinating the deployment of multiple subordinates to various duties, and holding regular meetings to share information and update strategies during every investigation. Giuliani and Bratton's corporate style of managing work and getting results is thus a visible element of her professional life over the course of the series. While Dallas is known to be a dogged, meticulous cop even before she meets Roarke, a corporate wunderkind, she can be seen to increasingly adopt a COMPSTAT-style model of policing after meeting him, partly as a result of his sophisticated off-grid computer network that allows her access to information and partly due to his own management style. In other words, she accepts Roarke's vast resources and business acumen to both crunch data for effective decision-making and to apprehend suspects. She also begins mobilizing larger tactical teams with every novel, adding to her crime-solving unit in a manner that mimics COMPSTAT's (corporate-culture based) strategy of making separate bureaus cooperate, share data, and aggressively identify, predict, and prevent criminal activity.

Dallas also reflects the "brand" that the mayor and Bratton created for the NYPD in keeping with the above philosophy. Her traits and work style contain echoes of Giuliani and Bratton's 1994 rhetoric that they were a new administration and police force, an ass-kicking hardworking bunch cleaning up the mess that their predecessors and bleeding heart liberals had made of the city (Karmen 87-92). Karmen describes that NYPD culture as follows:

A new philosophy replaced the former bureaucratic mindset: manage the NYPD like a corporation. Set crime reduction goals at headquarters. Hold local precincts responsible for meeting performance standards. Imbue commanding officers with an entrepreneurial spirit and encourage them to take initiatives and to reject the old organizational culture in which supervisors responded with caution and resisted change. (94)

This “new” NYPD brand of a goal oriented and efficient police force is visible in how Robb portrays Dallas. She is incorruptible and does not put up with anything coming between her and her investigation, even if it is her chief of police—who is discovered to be corrupt by the end of the first novel and ousted. [5]

While these elements show the adoption of a corporate-inflected management style on the rise at that time, the series maintains Dallas’s commitment to a suspicion of the wealthy world, both the one where people have inherited money and power and the one where corporate capitalism has created new moguls. In fact, before deducing the actual killers in *Naked in Death*, Dallas suspects Roarke of being the murderer because of his mysterious past, a conviction strengthened by seeing his collection of banned weapons, hearing his libertarian views on government, and suspecting that his wealth might make him inclined to commit crimes without fear of reprisals. His class position as bourgeoisie par excellence and her low opinion of it is pretty evident (Kamble 53-54). She is equally skeptical of class hierarchies when the senator insists that even though his granddaughter was a prostitute, she could not have possibly associated with the other murdered hookers; on hearing this, she thinks to herself in disbelief, “[s]o, prostitutes had class systems” (114). When she arrests him for rape and murder, she does it on the Senate floor where his patrician privilege is on display and when his aide attacks her in her home, she pummels him as if he is the embodiment of the deadbeat father who raped her and the father who chopped up the child in the incident at the beginning of the novel—the city is home to all manner of criminals, none mapping neatly onto a class position or group nor confined to an era. Dallas does not disallow the possibility of a wealthy perpetrator even as she begins to inhabit the rarified circles of upper class New York and takes on some of its business management practices.

The series suggests that crime and wealth are twin inhabitants, not stages in the city’s evolution; barbarized New York has also always been Disneyfied, but it’s an on-going fairy tale with a perilous happy ending. As in *Naked in Death*, Dallas continues to traverse New York’s twin cities in later cases in the series, and she serves to solidify the impression that there were (and are) two sides to New York, with criminals inhabiting both. Dallas’s work and personal life serves to challenge Giuliani and Bratton’s story of NYC even though she is cop trying to clean up the city. If Giuliani and Bratton created the “spiritual renewal” myth of New York, one reiterated by news media who wanted to tell a tale of improvement without questioning the narrative’s truthfulness,

Robb's depiction of New York counters the linear chronology of a fallen city redeemed by a corporate religion.

## Endnotes

[1] There is no disputing that there was a crime crash. Crime rates, including murders, rose in the 80s, peaked in 1990, declined slightly until 1993, and then plummeted (Karmen 98).

[2] Levitt argues for other, unrelated reasons that might have caused the drop in crime, such as a larger police force, a drop in the crack epidemic, mass incarceration, and the impact of *Roe v. Wade* legalizing abortion. Andrew Karmen, in his review of the media coverage of the crime wave and the 90s crime crash, cites Attinger's article as one of many hysterical pronouncements of the city's demise and critiques this trend of making the entire city seem to be engulfed in violence and downplaying its wealth. Karmen locates the date for the start of the crash and also casts a doubtful eye on post crime-crash articles, such as "New York New York" in *U.S. News and World Report*, that trumpeted the city's resurrection after 1994, downplayed any sign of the persistence of violence, and praised New York's boom (12-13). This cleaner, positively Biblical, story of decline and resurrection is somewhat distant from the truth, Karmen finds—New York experienced violence and crime both before and after the crash, and it also had immense prosperity at both times. It was just the case that before the crash, media coverage gave a limited, even erroneous, impression of the nature of the crimes and made it seem as if New York was a completely fallen city; these reports did not pay much attention to the presence of an extremely elite and cushioned population that enjoyed the city's benefits. Karmen has argued that the 1980s impression of violent crime in New York was erroneous, with most sensational media reports characterizing murders as perpetrated by serial killers and violent offenders when the reality was that robberies, domestic disputes, the drug trade and petty spats led to young underprivileged men of color being victimized by others like them (35). Similarly, after the crash, effusive rejoicing left little room for coverage about persistent social problems (especially race and class-based) that relate to crime, to police brutality, and to how new gentrification was being achieved at the cost of the marginalized (Karmen 11-13). It is not that news reports ignored all signs of continuing troubles. Marks and Egan point out in "New York New York" that "In spite of all the positive changes, the city's comeback has a long way to go. As suggested by the case of Abner Louima, allegedly beaten and sodomized with a wooden stick by police, even the reduction in crime may have its pitfalls. Giuliani points out that police brutality did not start under his administration. But the now notorious line "It's Giuliani time," allegedly uttered by one of the police officers as he was beating Louima, has been used by opponents of the administration."

[3] Hamill talks of the criminal behaviors of panhandlers, "roaming gangs of teenagers," "armies of New York drug addicts," "regiments of the homeless," and other dangerous "derelicts" (62-65).

[4] "Zero tolerance" and "Broken Windows" philosophies advocate crackdowns on any activity that the police see as a gateway to larger offences, with the logic being that curbing petty offences prevents escalation toward worse crimes (Karmen 114).

[5] Bowling and others have noted that the NYPD was deeply mired in dysfunction in the 1980s, including corruption at various levels of the organization (538). *Naked in Death* appears to pointedly treat that as a tradition to which Eve does not belong.



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## Difficult to Digest: Rubem Fonseca's "*Intestino Grosso*" ["Large Intestine"] as a Scatological Theory of Crime Fiction

### Abstract

Brazilian writer Rubem Fonseca's crime fiction has oft been examined through the lens of its blunt force, obscene and vulgar language, and harsh representations of violence. This aesthetic is characterized as self-reflective, meta-textual, brutalist, naturalist, indigestible, and even humorous at times. Yet, all of the arguments converge on one essential point, namely to attest to the historical and political significance of Fonseca's writing as a critique of the military dictatorship in Brazil. Fonseca parodies the threat he, himself, poses, which, although real, is insignificant when compared to the overwhelming oppression of poverty within neoliberal capitalism, state-sponsored violence, and censorship that threatens to silence him forever. In this article Nicole Sparling Barco argues that, in order to fully understand the affect/effect of the bandit-poet's aesthetic, a comparison must also be drawn from "O Cobrador" to the fictional work that is often considered to be Fonseca's political and poetic manifesto, namely "*Intestino Grosso*" ["Large Intestine"] (1975). This strange title has strong metaphorical and explanatory power that organizes what the author calls Fonseca's scatological theory of crime fiction, suggesting a reclamation, on the part of Fonseca, of "useless waste material."

**Keywords:** Rubem Fonseca, theory of crime fiction, *Intestino Grosso*

Brazilian writer Rubem Fonseca's crime fiction has oft been examined through the lens of its blunt force, obscene and vulgar language, and harsh representations of violence. In fact, many critics have made convincing arguments about the complexity of Fonseca's aesthetic, which reflects a banal reality, but is also critical of violence and its representation. These critics characterize Fonseca's aesthetic as self-reflective, meta-textual, brutalist, naturalist, indigestible, and even humorous at times. Yet, all of their arguments converge on one essential point, namely to attest to the historical and political significance of Fonseca's writing as a critique of the military dictatorship in Brazil. [1] Fonseca's aesthetic of "indecent" or "obscenity" manages to both expose state-sponsored violence and the government's efforts to cover it up through propaganda and censorship, and, simultaneously, to intervene in these processes in powerful and innovative ways. By making his brutal representations of crime "obscene," he poses a conundrum for the military dictatorship. On one hand, in order to "protect" citizens from exposure to Fonseca's "indecent" violent representations, they could censor him; thus, they reveal their hypocrisy in policing "decency" as they violate its very principles in actuality. On the other hand, they could allow Fonseca to publish and, indirectly, support the "obscenity" in his writing, and, consequently, open themselves up to critique by their own adherents or by those who recognize Fonseca's critique. In both scenarios, the reader is shocked out of complacency and the hypocrisy of the military regime becomes subject to indictment, whether by its devotees or by its adversaries.

One of the more illustrative examples of this writing technique is Fonseca's crime story, "O Cobrador" ["The Taker"] [2] (1979), which situates its audience as a voyeur in a dark, gritty urban realism that privileges the deranged psyche of the criminal and his sadistic pleasure in performing criminal acts. We gain access to the stream of consciousness of the criminal, "O Cobrador," who feels that his society "owes" him, and commits heinous and horrific random acts of violence against those who have been privileged through the capitalist urban economy in order to collect from his "debtors." His crimes include maiming a dentist, gunning down a man in a Mercedes, killing a pregnant woman and her unborn fetus, beheading a rich man, raping a housewife, and executing an executive. While his actions cannot be attributed to any specific psychological trauma (other than his abject poverty) or any particular psychological condition or diagnosis (beyond perhaps sociopathy), the only logic appearing to govern his violent acts is a golden rule, as it were, not to harm those who are more "miserable" than he is, namely those with bad/missing teeth. [3] What seems, at first, to constitute a form of vigilante justice motivated by the bandit's interpretation of social justice, later in the story is transformed through romance into a more systematized large-scale effort governed by the "logic" of terrorism. Indeed, one could argue that "O Cobrador," himself, acts as both criminal and detective, who searches for the precise nature of the crime against him (and the collective he claims to represent, namely "those with bad/missing teeth") and attempts to discover an overarching motive that would connect his otherwise

indiscriminate acts of violence.

The sensibility of the reader is verbally assaulted by this raw, uncensored narrative, with its blunt force and brutal language, which casts doubt on the literary nature of a text with such a troubling aesthetic and content. How do we read and understand a work of fiction that, on the surface, exploits the pain of others and glorifies violence by situating the reader as a voyeur, who, by continuing to read, engages in sadistic pleasure or who cannot put the text down out of fascination, shock, or utter disgust? And yet, an analysis of the metafictional qualities of Fonseca's crime story reveals how Fonseca forces the reader to take on the role of detective, who must simultaneously investigate the mind and motives of the criminal *and* the writer. In "O Cobrador," the criminal *and* the writer materialize in the recurring figure of the "bandit-poet," who is also, by extension, Fonseca, himself; indeed, "O Cobrador" interjects political diatribes masqueraded as poetry into the narrative and commits politically motivated crimes in order to literalize his version of poetic justice.

My research builds on that of Luciana Paiva Coronel, who describes the manner in which the recurring figure of the "bandit-poet" emerges in Fonseca's work: "Sem deixar de dar voz ao artista que se aproxima simbolicamente do bandido, o autor complementa a marginalidade simbólica daquele com a marginalidade aparentemente mais real do próprio bandido, construindo por meio de ambas a identidade marginal de sua produção ficcional, marcada por uma violência implacável [...]" ["Without giving the artist a voice that imitates that of the bandit, the author complements the bandit's symbolic marginality with a marginality seemingly more real than that of the bandit, himself, constructing through both the marginal identity of his own fictional production, marked by relentless violence"] ("A representação da violência," 189). Here, the bandit-poet occupies a doubly marginal position—"O Cobrador" concretizes his poetic vision through actual violence and assaults the reader with the violence of his prose. For Antonio Rediver Guizzo, the particularity of Fonsequian prose, "além de simbolizar o aspecto transgressor da arte e realçar a orientação agressiva do discurso – o narrador é o bandido, o protagonista da violência –, mescla, sem hierarquia e de forma justificada, a cultura popular com a cultura erudita." ["besides symbolizing the transgressive aspect of art and intensifying the aggressive orientation of discourse—the narrator and the bandit, the protagonist of violence—, mixes, without hierarchy and in a form that is warranted, popular culture with erudite culture" (Guizzo 33). In a metafictional move, Fonseca, himself, also satirizes the bandit-poet's vulgar aesthetic and the assumption that it emerges from his innate criminality as opposed to his socioeconomic marginality. As such, Fonseca parodies the threat he, himself, poses, which, although real, is insignificant when compared to the overwhelming oppression of poverty within neoliberal capitalism, state-sponsored violence, and censorship that threatens to silence him forever.

Indeed, I would argue that, in order to fully understand the affect/effect of the bandit-poet's aesthetic, we must also compare "O Cobrador" to the fictional work that is often considered to be Fonseca's political and poetic manifesto [4], namely "Intestino Grosso" ["Large Intestine"] (1975). This strange title has strong metaphorical and explanatory power that organizes what I call Fonseca's scatological theory of crime fiction. In biological terms, the large intestine functions to store waste material and process previously undigested material, absorbing vitamins and restoring the fluid balance of the body, eventually passing useless waste material from the body. The bodily function of the large intestine, as organizing metaphor, suggests a reclaiming, on the part of Fonseca, of "useless waste material." This abject material contained and produced by the large intestine represents, therefore: 1) linguistically, the obscene, vulgar material that is often systematically purged on the level of language; 2) geopolitically, those people who are devalued, cast out, rendered invisible, and considered disposable within a neoliberal capitalist framework, or, to gloss Fonseca, "miserable people without teeth"; and, finally, 3) judicially, in terms of those identified as criminals, guerrillas, and terrorists during a declared state of exception and extra-judicially, in terms of those opponents of the military dictatorship who were tortured, imprisoned, and executed or disappeared. Fonseca's theory of crime fiction, as articulated in "Intestino Grosso," re-incorporates or "desexcomuniga" [un-excommunicates] such scatological material, thus staging an affront to sensibility, launching an attack on elevated definitions of human nature, and forcing us, as readers, to confront a heinous reality, brought to light only by examining that which society expels, conceals, abandons, and eliminates. As such, Fonseca's "Intestino Grosso" solidifies the connection between language, matter, and people in his aesthetic project, but, at the same time, reminds us of what can/will not be uttered and those who are rendered "disposable people," either through their poverty or their politics.

The question remains as to whether Fonseca and his fictional author are, to put it crudely, "full of shit" or whether a scatological approach to his writing can reveal something about the often shocking, profane, vulgar, and ruthless violence of his prose. As Christopher J. Ballantyne has so aptly stated, "By now it should become evident that the ostensible anti-metaphorical prescriptions articulated in 'Intestino Grosso' are themselves a metaphor for the literary endeavor upon which Rubem Fonseca has embarked" (Ballantyne 16). This observation brings us to the question of whether there is, moreover, anything of "value" in such "useless waste material from the body"? And if the large intestine can, indeed, be an organic metaphor for the language of crime, the urban landscape (Rio de Janeiro) [5], and crime fiction itself, then what is the nature of the "useless waste material," how is it eliminated, and what should be our ethical relation to it? This line of questioning informs, what I am calling Fonseca's "scatological theory of crime fiction," in that it is "characterized by a preoccupation with obscenity" (OED). Since "scatology," in its very definition, links together "[t]hat branch of science which deals with diagnosis by means of the fæces [sic]"

and “filthy literature,” so to does Fonseca align the role of the scientist, who searches for evidence in human waste to determine the health of the physical body, with his own readers, who analyze his “filthy literature” in order to uncover the truth about the body politic.

According to Pere Camellas, in “Rubem Fonseca and Noir Literature,” Fonseca’s “Intestino Grosso” could be described as “uma suposta entrevista a um escritor que já foi interpretada como auto-entrevista do próprio Fonseca” [a supposed interview with a fictional writer that has been interpreted as a self-interview by Fonseca] (67-68). When the fictional writer is asked by the narrator why he chose writing, in particular, as a profession, he writes: “Gente como nos ou vira santo ou maluco, ou revolucionário ou bandido. Como não havia verdade no Êxtase nem no Poder, fiquei entre escritor e bandido” [“People like us either become a saint or go crazy, turn into a revolutionary or a bandit. Since there was no truth in Ecstasy or in Power, I ended up somewhere between writer and bandit”] (136; 461). The parallelism in this passage suggests that, given the elimination of sainthood and revolutionary, perhaps the writer, himself, is also part “maluco” [“crazy”] and part “bandido” [“bandit”]. In Roberto da Matta’s *Carnivals, Rogues, and Heroes: An Interpretation of the Brazilian Dilemma*, he defines various figures that occupy the positions of heroes within the Brazilian national context: “we can say that the avenger, the social bandit, and the renouncer can be taken as crucial Brazilian heroes and studied as part of the same continuum” (266). For Da Matta,

[T]hose who remain imprisoned in the past and to *vingança* (vengeance) as their basic social code and form of relationship tend to become bandits—or, ‘social bandits’ to use Eric Hobsbawm’s expression—and enter the *cangaço* (the backwoods) or the urban criminal underworld. Indeed, social bandits usually have a personal history marked by vengeance; and, as general or collective avengers, they tend to be given legitimacy by the people of the region where they operate, whom they come to represent in some way (see Hobsbawm 1969). Social bandits, then, have a biography marked by the same destiny as the Count of Monte Cristo: first he suffers injustice at the hands of his enemies, who are generally powerful landowners or wealthy businessmen; later he enters a liminal and highly dangerous zone. There he earns his power and develops his social resources, which are generally associated with the supernatural realm. There the paradox of cruelty and spontaneous generosity toward human beings in general and the poor in particular becomes part of the definition of his social personality. Finally, he takes his vengeance on the rich in a general way by stealing from them and giving to the poor, reverting the normal flow of goods and money. It is in this promotion of justice with his own hands and resources that one finds the legitimacy and popularity of these characters. (216)

In both instances (“Intestino Grosso” and “O Cobrador”), Fonseca’s bandit-poets reaffirm that there is something of value in “miserable people without teeth” who are often rendered “useless waste material” by the state. As such, his bandit-poets avenge marginalized peoples



not by redistributing wealth, but rather by “wasting” the lives of those who benefit from the state’s economic policies and military protection.

In “‘O Cobrador’ and the Crisis of Violence: The Brazilian City at a Crossroads,” Chris T. Schulenberg confirms this notion that redistributive justice occurs in the text on the level of human life: “Again death will compensate the Cobrador for the food, cars, and clothes that he does not have the funds to obtain” (34), so that “O Cobrador” collects lives to accommodate for the loss of people who live on the margins. The action is, thus, reciprocal—“O Cobrador” feels injustice for “the miserable people without teeth,” who are considered “waste material” by the body politic, and, in turn, targets the wealthy elite, who are, in his mind, “disposable people.” The bandit-poet’s upper-class victims and, by extension, his audience, who, at a minimum, is literate, are horrified and remain, perhaps, willfully ignorant of their own indirect participation in the suffering of “others,” and are shocked by the violent response of “O Cobrador,” who refuses to accept any monetary incentives in order to spare them their lives or the truth. As such, “O Cobrador” refuses to participate in the economy that dehumanizes him, which is therefore converted into an economy where one devalued, dehumanized “life” is exchanged for a privileged, entitled “life.” As Schulenberg suggests, “Nevertheless, the personal meditations of this narrator also reveal a curiously positive social face for the poet’s murderous efforts” (34). Whether or not we find “O Cobrador” to be a deranged individual, he, himself is convinced of the valiance of his efforts and the justice that it represents.

By demanding to be paid “por palavra,” the bandit-poet from “Intestino Grosso,” on the other hand, exploits the system that marginalizes him, by making others pay, literally and metaphorically, for what he calls his “pornographic” fiction. The only words that he offers without compensation, “palavras de graça” [“free words”] are “Adote um árvore e mate uma criança” [“Adopt a tree and kill a kid”] (135; 460), words that refer to the canonical literature already in circulation that he critiques, namely novels that contemplate nature and beauty in an abstract form, and refuse to face a raw reality, and fairytales populated with depraved individuals, who perform heinous acts, such as the murder of children, in order to teach a “moral” lesson. Meant to shock and invoke curiosity, his “palavras de graça” not only entice the editor to pay him “por palavra,” but also force the reader to contemplate his/her own aesthetic values, to the point of questioning whether or not this fictional interview, itself, is worth reading. Provocatively, the bandit-poet claims, “Sempre achei que uma boa história tem que terminar com alguém morto. Estou matando gente até hoje” [“I always thought that a good story had to end with somebody dying. I am still killing people”] (135; 461). His own form of redistributive justice occurs in the way that he makes visible “miserable people without teeth” and mocks the “load of crap” that has been fed to his people. This “load of crap” is exemplified by literature so far from their own reality in space and time as in 1) *Cartas da Duquesa de San Severino* [*Letters from the Duchess of San Severino*], or, as the



bandit-poet describes it, “um romance que tem flores, beleza, nobreza e dinheiro” [“a novel with flowers, beauty, nobility, and money”], and 2) fairytales such as *Joãozinho e Maria* (i.e., Hansel and Gretel), which he describes as “uma historia indecente, desonesta, vergonhosa, obscena, despidorada, suja e sordida” [“an indecent, dishonest, embarrassing, obscene, immodest, dirty, and sordid story”] (136, 138; 462, 463). Underlying both of these stories is a fascination with both consumption and consummation, as exemplified in the word “comer,” which literally means “to eat” in Portuguese and, which, in Brazilian slang, can also mean “to have sex” (see Lowe 144). In both accounts, either starving people populate the texts or sexual consummation is thwarted. In the instance of the Duchess, the Duchess’s teeth, which, although seemingly “brancos, perfeitos” [“white, perfect”], are actually false and the bandit-poet remarks on “à dificuldade que ela tem de comer um pêsego” [“the difficulty she has in eating a peach,”] (137; 462) meaning that she cannot consume or ingest properly in the first place. This last point is a clear reference to T.S. Eliot’s poetic persona J. Alfred Prufrock and, via this comparison, a sexual metaphor for the Duchess’s undesirability and, as such, her inability to consummate a romantic relationship. In its place, she ends the novel alone, tending to orchids instead of children. As for “Hansel and Gretel,” their poverty and the lack of available food, not their teeth, prevent them from eating—so that, there is nothing to digest in the first place. Their parents, and the evil witch who lures them into captivity, will sacrifice Hansel and Gretel to ensure their own survival, the former through neglect and abandonment and the latter through sheer cannibalism. Sexual acts do not appear in this story, other than as a foregone conclusion, and, for the starving people, nourishment and survival can only be garnered by trickery, murder, and theft. In both of these examples, Fonseca’s “free words” are proven to already be in circulation: “Adopt a tree and kill a kid”; and yet, the horror that they evoke forces us to reckon with the values of our aesthetic inheritance. [6]

All in all, Fonseca’s aesthetic critique of these two exemplary texts that represent his definition of the canon of literary and oral tradition, ridicules the censors who would allow stories of people who cannot or choose not to consume in a period of abundance and people living in poverty with nothing to eat, but would consider his own works pornographic because they highlight where those categories intersect: “Sou [escritor pornográfico], os meus livros estão cheios de miseráveis sem dentes” [“I am [a pornographic writer], my books are full of miserable people without teeth”] (136; 461). If we were to formulate this as a Venn diagram, Fonseca’s argument shows how the intersection of the two categories within the canon is hidden or elided by the overrepresentation of the symmetric difference. “The miserable people without teeth” occupy the space of the intersection, namely those who cannot eat and have nothing to ingest; thus, these starving/starved figures can never be consumers and, instead, they are made vulnerable to being consumed by the body politic, in the sense of being expended or wasted. [7]

In a metafictional move, “Intestino Grosso” (the short story) references *Intestino Grosso*, which is the name of the “fictional” novel that the “fictional” author writes, which has been concealed under the fake title of *O Anão que era Negro, Padre, Corcunda e Míope* [*The Dwarf Who Was Black, a Priest, Hunchback and Nearsighted*], in which he argues that “para entender a natureza humana, é preciso que todos os artistas desexcomunguem o corpo, investiguem, da maneira que só nós sabemos fazer, ao contrário dos cientistas, as ainda secretas e obscuras relações entre o corpo e a mente, esmiúcem o funcionamento do animal em todas as suas interações” [“in order to understand human nature, it is necessary that all artists excommunicate [sic] the body and investigate—in the way that only we know how to do, contrary to the method of scientists—the still secret and obscure relations between body and mind, minutely observe the functioning of the animal in all his interactions”] (141-142; 465). [8] In religious terms, to excommunicate means to exclude from membership/communion in the body of the (Catholic) church, but here Fonseca’s use of the prefix “des” signals a reversal; indeed, to “un-excommunicate” would mean a reintegration of the sacred and profane into the body (and the body politic) itself and a reconfiguration of the nature of man to reflect the essential animality of humanity, by penetrating the gritty realism and psychological censure of our urges and impulses.

Indeed, he promotes the representation of the pornographic as a necessary catharsis, contradicting the assumption that we could somehow be sullied by reading obscene literature or that we could learn pathological (“morbid” or “antisocial”) behaviors from it:

O erro me parece ser a pressuposição de que as inibições sejam necessárias ao equilíbrio individual. Parece-me mais verdadeiro o oposto—as inibições sem possibilidade de desopressão podem causar sérios males à saúde dos indivíduos. Uma sábia organização social deveria impedir que fossem reprimidos esses comunicativos caminhos de alívio vicário e de redução de tensão. As alternativas para a pornografia são a doença mental, a violência, a Bomba. (139)

[The mistake seems to me to be the presumption that inhibitions are necessary to individual balance. The opposite seems truer to me—[inhibitions?] without the possibility of release can cause serious damage to the individual’s health. A wise social organization should prevent the repression of these communication channels that provide vicarious relief and the reduction of tension. The alternatives to pornography are mental illness, violence, the Bomb.] (464)

The bandit-poet reflects on the nature of pornography: “Mas basicamente a pornografia que ainda existe hoje é resultado de um latente preconceito antibiológico da nossa cultura” [“But basically the pornography which still exists today is the result of a latent antibiological prejudice in our society”] (140; 464). Accordingly, he laments the loss of connection that we have with the body, in which direct vulgar language has been replaced by euphemism and metaphor [9]:

Mas quando os defensores da decência acusam alguma coisa de pornográfica é porque ela descreve ou representa funções sexuais ou funções excretoras, com ou sem o uso de nomes vulgares comumente referidos como palavrões. O ser humano, alguém já disse, ainda é afetado por tudo aquilo que o relembra inequivocamente de sua natureza animal. (138)

[But when the defenders of decency accuse something of being pornographic it is because it describes or represents sexual or excretory functions, with or without the use of words commonly referred to as 'swear words.' The human being, someone has already said, is still affected by everything which reminds him unequivocally of his animal nature.] (463)

Indeed, the bandit-poet also acknowledges the power of language as resistance: “o uso de palavras proibidas é uma forma de contestação anti-repressiva” [“the use of prohibited words is a form of antirepressive response” (140; 464). However, it is not only obscene, vulgar language, but also shocking ideas meant to astonish those who uphold standards of decency that can challenge hegemonic ideologies and practices. When the bandit-poet revises his shocking original proclamation, “[a]dopt a tree and kill a kid,” to the no-less-shocking version, “adote um animal selvagem e mate um homem” [“adopt a savage animal and kill a man”] (142; 466), he challenges us, as readers, to question social values—is human life devalued such that these proclamations actually represent a raw, uncensored reality? Is our environment in such peril that it will not survive our capacity to consume it? Could a more posthuman approach allow us to recognize the animal aspects of ourselves and the interconnectedness between ourselves and our environment? The true threat to human decency here is not in the bandit-poet’s pronouncement, but rather in the experience of living under dictatorship itself.

Also telling is the fact that the “fictional” author of “Intestino Grosso” concludes by proposing a “New Religion,” which he names “Mystic Cannibalism,” with gestures toward Oswald de Andrade’s “Manifesto Antropófago” [“Cannibalist Manifesto”] of the *Semana de Arte Moderno* [Modern Art Week] and to Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal”: “Vai chegar o dia em que a melhor herança que os pais podem deixar para os filhos será o próprio corpo, para os filhos comerem. [...] Está havendo um terrível desperdício de proteínas. Swift e outros já disseram coisa parecida, mas estavam fazendo sátira. O que eu proponho é uma Nova Religião, Superantropocêntrica, O Canibalismo Místico” [“The day will come when the greatest inheritance that parents can leave their children will be their own body, for their children to eat. [...] A terrible waste of protein is going on. Swift and others already said something similar, but they were making satire. What I propose is a New Religion, Superanthropocentric, Mystic Cannibalism”] (142-143; 466). On the one hand, Swift proposes the cannibalism of the youth as a satiric solution to overpopulation, poverty, and starvation, and, in effect, asks the Irish to sacrifice the future of their people for the sake of momentary satiation; to violate their own religious, moral, and ethical

codes; and to reduce themselves to “barbaric” practices in order to survive. Oswald de Andrade, on the other hand, reclaims cannibalism as an indigenous practice and as a metaphor for a modernist aesthetic particular to Brazil, in which the artist devours cultural elements that he/she encounters and discerns what is worth incorporating and what should be eliminated as waste. In contradistinction, what Fonseca imagines is a dystopic future in which cannibalism becomes the only option because there is literally nothing left to consume. His reference to “[a] terrible waste of protein” is equivocal—at the same time that Fonseca proposes that children subsist on the bodies of their parents, he is critiquing the wasting of human lives (as in the “miserable people without teeth” and those who oppose the military dictatorship) and a culture in which consumption has become the ultimate human act. As Elizabeth Lowe remarks, “Anthropophagic imagery, in its function of manifesting the city as organism, is further developed in Fonseca’s narratives from the image of the tooth to that of the wound. Just as the underdog is toothless, so it is he who is ‘bled’ by society” (Lowe 144). Literally reviling, metaphorically rich, and satirically satisfying, the proposed consumption of one’s predecessors for the benefit of one’s own future subsistence represents a world in which the new generation devours the old traditions and ideologies, finds a bit of nourishment, survives abject poverty, and eliminates what has no longer has “use” value. In a way, this counterrevolutionary movement has the potential to reverse the patterns established under dictatorship, in which new ideas and political challenges were silenced through the torture, disappearing, and murder of those who voiced them.

When asked if he would feast on his own parents, the bandit-poet sardonically turns the various forms of food preparation, but, ultimately concludes that: “É uma questão de gosto” [“It’s a matter of taste”] (143; 466). And yet, the question remains: How can Fonseca’s toothless characters possibly participate in such a cannibalizing act? Can the bandit-poet be anything other than a starving artist or presume to create art with nothing but the vulgar material that surrounds him/her? Grounded in the dogmatic and fostered by the faith of its adherents, Mystic Cannibalism aligns language, body, and urban landscape and advocates for a pornographic aesthetic. The bandit-poet divides pornography into four distinct categories: 1) “Pornografia da Vida” [“Pornography of Life”] (142; 465); 2) “A Morte Pornográfica” [“Pornographic Death”] (142; 466); 3) “Pornografia de Gorer” [“Pornography of Gorer”] (142; 466); and 4) “Pornografia Terrorista” [“Terrorist Pornography”] (141; 465). Whereas “Intestino Grosso” engages directly, in its very title and organizing metaphor, with the “Pornography of Life,” namely, “ligada aos órgãos de excreção e de reprodução, à vida, às funções que caracterizam a resistência à morte---alimentação e amor, e seus exercícios e resultados: excremento, cópula, esperma, gravidez, parto, crescimento” [“linked to the organs of excretion and reproduction, to life, to the functions that characterize resistance to death—feeding and love, and its exercises and results: excrement, copulation, sperm, pregnancy, labor, growth”] (142; 465), it references, metaphorically, Pornographic Death

and the Pornography of Gorer, which deal with “a morte como um processo natural, resultante da decadência física” [“death as a natural process, resulting from physical decay”] and “[a] outra morte—dos crimes, das catástrofes, dos conflitos, a morte violenta” [“[t]he other death—by crime, catastrophe, conflict, violent death”] (142; 465-466). The kind of pornography, however, that informs the bandit-poet’s Mystic Cannibalism and “O Cobrador’s” Christmas Manifesto is Terrorist Pornography; on the subject, the former writes: “Exemplos destacados desse gênero são os livros do Marquês de Sade e de William Burroughs, que causam surpresa, pasmo e horror nas almas simples, livros onde não existem árvores, flores, pássaros, montanhas, rios, animais—somente a natureza humana” [“Distinguished examples of this genre are the books by Marquis de Sade and William Burroughs, which cause surprise, revulsion and horror in simple souls, books where there are no trees, flowers, birds, mountains, rivers, animals—only human nature”] (141; 465). Terrorist Pornography, as described in “Intestino Grosso,” terrifies us with the discovery of an otherness within us, the darker side of humanity, and the truth that we do not want to admit, namely, the horrors of which human beings have been and could be capable. In scatological terms, Terrorist Pornography is precisely the thing that requires our analysis; in other words, only by examining that which is censored, discarded, or trashed in the name of art (and preserving its decency), can we understand the nature of and the values embedded within art itself.

Within “Intestino Grosso,” Fonseca anticipates the critique of his own work as pornographic via the interviewer’s commentary on *Intestino Grosso*, the “fictional” novel referenced within the short story of the same name: “Mas outras também já disseram que o livro não passa de um pirão de vulgaridades gratuitas, erotismo cru e ações grosseiras, desnecessárias e fúteis, temperado por uma mente suja” [“But others have also said that the book does not go beyond a mishmash of gratuitous vulgarities, crude eroticism, and gross actions, unnecessary and futile, tempered by a dirty mind”] (140-141; 465). Indeed, such a description could easily encapsulate a preliminary reading of “O Cobrador.” This oversimplified reading of Fonseca’s work is complicated by the observable shift in “O Cobrador’s” rationale for committing murder and the scale of his operations—no longer the Pornography of Gorer, the story of “O Cobrador” shifts to Terrorist Pornography:

Leio para Ana o que escrevi, nosso manifesto de Natal, para os jornais, Nada de sair matando a esmo, sem objetivo definido, Eu não sabia o que queria, não buscava um resultado prático, meu ódio estava sendo desperdiçado. Eu estava certo nos meus impulsos, meu erro era não saber quem era o inimigo e por que era inimigo. Agora eu sei, Ana me ensinou. E ou meu exemplo deve ser seguido por outros, muitos outros, só assim mudaremos o mundo. É o síntese do nosso manifesto.” (182)

[I read Anna what I sent to the newspapers, our Christmas manifesto. No more killing at random, without a definite objective. I didn’t know what I wanted, didn’t seek out a practical result, my hatred was being wasted.

I was right in my impulses, my error was not knowing who the enemy was and why he was the enemy. Now I know; Anna taught me. And my example must be followed by others, many others. That's the only way we will change the world. That's the gist of our manifesto.] (25)

Their manifesto serves to publicly justify their governing logic, thus systematizing their violent acts, unifying their intentions, and consolidating their hatred, by putting them all to more “efficient” use. Here, “O Cobrador” laments that his violent impulses led him to “waste” his “hatred,” as opposed the more obvious wasted lives and mutilated bodies that populate the text. These seemingly random attacks on the individuals that cross “O Cobrador’s” path and offend him with their privilege are later substituted with a more clearly articulated ideological stance and a larger-scale terrorist mission once “O Cobrador” solidifies his relationship with Ana, a sexual partner in crime who provides him with unconditional acceptance.

Tenho uma missão. Sempre tive uma missão e não sabia. Agora sei. Ana me ajudou a ver. Sei que se todo fodido fizesse como eu o mundo seria melhor e mais justo. Ana me ensinou a usar explosivos e acho que já estou preparado para essa mudança de escala. Matar um por um é coisa mística e diso eu me libertei. No Baile de Natal mataremos convencionalmente os que pudermos. Será o meu último gesto romântico inconseqüente. (181)

[I have a mission. I always had a mission and didn't know it. Now I do. Anna helped me to see it. I know that if everyone who's fucked over did like me, the world would be better and more just. Anna taught me how to use explosives, and I think I'm now prepared for that change in scale. Killing one at a time is a mystical kind of thing, and I'm free of it. At the Christmas dance we'll kill as many as we can conventionally. It will be my final romantic, inconsequential gesture] (25-26)

Contrary to the expectation that “O Cobrador,” who is an outlaw and outcast, could somehow be redeemed or reformed by romance, he is instead made more fervent, self-aware, purposeful, justified, and grandiose in his commitment to violence. We are also faced with the very real possibility that “O Cobrador,” himself, represents the abject poverty and criminality that the capitalist economy and urban civilization views as “useless waste material.” Fonseca’s work challenges us to read scatologically. Once we do, the notion that the large intestine rids the body of “useless waste material,” an analysis of which allows us to understand the health of the body, can be readily applied to pornographic fiction, which has a cathartic function, in allowing fiction and fantasy to displace actual sordid acts, and also a revelatory function, in regards to the nature of the body politic by the “useless waste material” that it rejects. Only by reading “O Cobrador” through “Intestino Grosso” is the complexity and magnitude of Fonseca’s scatological theory of crime fiction revealed.



## Endnotes

[1] Unless noted otherwise, translations are mine. Luciana Paiva Coronel refers to this aesthetic as “o brutalismo” or brutalism, which she argues is “uma forma simbólica complexa, multifacetada e nada gratuita, capaz de expressar literariamente e mesmo de enfrentar criticamente a prática violenta consolidada no país naquele período histórico [ditadura militar]” [a complex symbolic form, multifaceted and nothing gratuitous, capable of expressing literarily and at the same time confronting critically the violent practice integrated in the country in that historical period [military dictatorship]] (“A Representação da violência na ficção de Rubem Fonseca dos anos 70: O brutalismo em questão,” 183). In another article, “Literatura em combate: A ficção de Rubem Fonseca dos anos 70,” Coronel refers to Fonseca’s work as “uma literatura excessivamente auto-referenciada e indigesta” [an excessively self-referential and indigestible literature] (9). Marcelo Frizon, while exploring the intersections of violence and comedy in Fonseca’s fiction, writes “Diferente do que alguns críticos argumentam, como rechaçado pelo próprio autor no trecho da entrevista reproduzido acima, sua literatura trabalha não com um realismo ou hiper-realismo, mas com um naturalismo à moda de Aluísio de Azevedo. As personagens, nas narrativas de Rubem Fonseca, possuem um ímpeto violento, uma agressividade exacerbada típicos [sic] dos excluídos nas grandes cidades” [Different from what some critics argue, as it is rejected by the author himself in the selection of the interview reproduced above, his literature functions not in terms of realism or hyperrealism, instead it invokes naturalism in the style of Aluísio de Azevedo. The characters, in the narratives of Rubem Fonseca, possess a violent impetus, an aggravated aggressivity typical of those excluded in large cities] (9). According to Elizabeth Lowe “The dialectical opposition of reality and imagination is fundamental to the role of the artist in founding the city. By creating a fissure between text and context, he is able to denounce urban reality with his mythical vision. This fissure is central to Rubem Fonseca’s work. It has been observed that while his short stories capture the ‘reality’ of Rio de Janeiro with great linguistic and psychological accuracy, they also answer more to the image the city makes of itself than what it really is” (176). Antonio Rediver Guizzo describes Fonseca’s aesthetic as “Concisa, contundente, perturbadora—a literatura de Rubem Fonseca caracteriza-se pela afronta direta ao leitor, além de desnudar, nos menores detalhes, as novas formas de violência que acometem a sociedade contemporânea” [Concise, convincing, disturbing—the literature of Rubem Fonseca is characterized by a direct affront to the reader, besides exposing, in the minutest details, the new forms of violence that attack contemporary society] (29). Pere Comellas, in “Rubem Fonseca e o policial *noir*,” claims that Fonseca’s work has as its political aim to “épater les bourgeois” [shock the bourgeoisie] (53) and “[n]o mundo sem ligações de Fonseca não é possível uma ordem restaurada. Não há esperança de justiça. Pelo contrário, as personagens agem convictas de que se alguma coisa não tem lugar no mundo é justiça. Quando muito, procura-se vingança, e em geral é uma vingança insatisfatória” [[i]n Fonseca’s disconnected world it is not possible to restore order. There is no hope of justice. On the contrary, the characters act convinced that if there is one thing without a place in this world, it is justice. At best, revenge is sought, and in general it is unfulfilling] (55).

[2] The official English translation of “O Cobrador” as “The Taker” does not completely capture the nuances of the term in Portuguese, which is closer to the idea of a tax or debt collector.

[3] Bad/missing teeth are used as literal and metaphorical descriptions of people that are marginalized by their poverty or criminal behavior, and those who are forgotten or ignored by society. In “O Cobrador,” such examples include the woman whom he “mercy fucks”; his old, decrepit neighbor Dona Clotilde; a suicidal girl who lives in the marble building; and a black man with two-three teeth. Camellas refers to this group of people without teeth as “os despossuídos” [“the dispossessed”] (56).

[4] On the topic of manifestos, Elizabeth Lowe writes in *The City in Brazilian Literature* that the literary response to the crisis of dictatorship was “a wave of literary manifestos, either built into the literary text, prefacing it, or developed in independent articles, interviews, and round-table discussions” (107-108). Furthermore, Lowe characterizes “Rubem Fonseca’s story manifesto ‘Intestino Grosso’” as “one of the most important documents of contemporary Brazilian literature. The author [Fonseca] steadfastly refuses to give interviews, insisting that everything he has to say is in his books. Yet in ‘Intestino Grosso’ he offers the consolation prize of a simulated interview on which the hand of his cynicism and wit lies very heavy. Fonseca touches on many subjects of fundamental interest to the counterculture writer. His first objection is to the ‘culture of development.’ Not only literature, but all of Brazilian culture, has been infected by the psychology of development. He uses a discussion on pornography, in ironic rebuttal to the censors who have accused him of being a pornographic writer, as a metaphor of the corruption of Brazilian thought and society” (110). According to Christopher J. Ballantyne, “Fonseca has frequently been judged as pornographic, immoral, or



insensitive” (12), a categorization that he reclaims with pride as he confronts the censors.

[5] In fact, Ballantyne also links the large intestine metaphorically with the cityscape: “The *intestino grosso*—that scatological yet eminently visceral emblem for Fonseca’s mythology of authorial origin—which begs deciphering is none other than the metropolis itself: its discordant textures and infinite motion bowels from which the writer’s word is borne” (4).

[6] Ballantyne understands Fonseca’s critique here as an “implicit rejection of ‘literature’ [that] constitutes an act of rebellion aimed primarily at a fraudulent authority which derives a normative model for writing from a prescribed canon that is spatially, temporally, and aesthetically incommensurate with the world he inhabits” (3). I would certainly agree that Fonseca critiques those literary traditions that are far from Brazilian urban life, but also, at the same time, reveals the sordid system that produces and discards “miserable people without teeth.”

[7] On another metaphorical level, “the miserable people without teeth” are unable to consummate; they represent those who are sexually impotent, unattractive, and undesirable, and, as such, their bad/missing teeth become an outward sign of their abject poverty, marginality, and, in some cases, disposability.

[8] The translation of “desexcomunguem” should be “un-excommunicate.”

[9] Ballantyne provides an elegant explanation of the function of metaphor in Fonseca’s work: “The metaphor thus becomes a euphemism; its purpose is not to name what cannot be named, but to name, through an established system of enciphering, that which should not be named. The genesis of the metaphor thus situates itself in the precise intersection between social norms, which prescribe the limits between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ behaviors, and verbal norms, which distinguish ‘good’ words from ‘bad’ ones. The space where the prohibited extra-linguistic event coincides with the proscribed verbal event constitutes the dangerous terrain whose circumvention the metaphor makes possible. Premised upon this dual repression, the metaphor defines itself as a socially sanctioned figural code; its purpose, to isolate and thus neutralize the threat of contagion that breeds beyond the limits of ‘decency’” (14). Furthermore, he concludes that, “[c]onsequently, Fonseca, rather than defiguralizing the figure through his stress on its literal component, achieves precisely the opposite effect, he remetaphorizes the cliché” (Ballantyne 15-16).

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