

¿Y crees que no es lo mismo fregártelos a preguntas y más preguntas?:
The Mexican Neopoliciaico as Ethical Project

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What distinguishes the Mexican neopoliciaico as a form of crime fiction? William John Nichols notes that the term “is used interchangeably with novela negra” in his *Transatlantic Mysteries* (177). However, it “distinguishes the emergence of the genre, asserts Taibo, as internal, deriving from the need to narrate the everyday reality of Mexico City and to create a reflection on Mexican reality, rather than an external importation of a ‘concepto de novela negra Chandler-Hammettiano’ arbitrarily imposed” (177). In this regard, the term neopoliciaico is used to mark a distinction, primarily regarding its influence and context, from the hard-boiled mode. Although the term was coined by Paco Ignacio Taibo II as Nichols well notes, it has been applied by scholars to earlier works. Persephone Braham, writing in *Crimes Against the State, Crimes Against Persons* uses the term to characterize Rafael Bernal’s *El complot mongol*, published in 1969, seven years before Taibo II’s *Días de combate*. The term is not specifically coterminous with the concept of hard-boiled fiction, as Bernal’s novel is not specifically part of the hard-boiled mode. As a spy thriller, it is part of a separate and, at least in the context of English-language crime fiction, later development of crime fiction, a point to which I shall return shortly. The non-specificity with which scholars, perhaps unwittingly, have used the term, poses a separate question: given that the usage of neopoliciaico has made the term less applied to a formal distinction among works of crime fiction than it is something applied to the ideological or material content of works, what then is the distinguishing characteristic of neopoliciaico crime fiction? An examination of works that are formally part of the hard-boiled or subsequent developments in Mexican crime fiction points to a concern for an ethics of action based largely on responses to the endemic corruption that has left social institutions incapable of responding to crime. Although I speak primarily of crime fiction written in Mexico, my answer suggests that it applies elsewhere, though it is outside the scope of this essay to suggest that my answer be anything but provisional.

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Sean McCann describes the transition from the classical mode of crime fiction to the hard-boiled mode as an ideological transformation tied to the conception of civil society and the detective's ability, or lack thereof, to suture a society damaged by criminal activity. In *Gumshoe America*, he writes:

Traditionally, the classic detective story celebrated the victory of public knowledge and civic solidarity over the dangers of private desire. It registered that victory formally by bringing the arcane knowledge and peculiar abilities of the detective to bear on the challenge to the social order represented by the villain, suggesting thereby that there was no specialized learning that could not prove socially useful just as there was no strife or dissension that could not be absorbed by a healthy civil society. Hard-boiled crime fiction transformed that story by radicalizing its tensions. In the novels of Cain, Hammett, Chandler, and their peers, civil society can no longer contain private desire, public knowledge rarely trumps specialized experience, and the idea of a common culture seems both profoundly appealing and ultimately unbelievable (4).

Braham as well as Fernando Fabio Sánchez in *Artful Assassins* and Gabriel García Muñoz in *El enigma y la conspiración* consider the ways in which crime fiction addresses issues of national concern. Sánchez in particular looks at the ways in which novels like Rodolfo Usigli's *Ensayo de un crimen*, Taibo II's Belascoarán Shayne novels, and Carlos Fuentes's *La cabeza de la hidra* respond to debates over the Mexican character. At stake is not so much the inclusion of historical events or issues or the nature of the Mexican character but the conception of the world that the characters in the works inhabit. These and other scholars agree that the habitus of the neopoliciaco is a fallen world that is irredeemable. Crimes may be solved, but the detectives are perhaps, despite their best intentions, far more like the criminals they battle than they want to admit. The Mexican neopoliciaco, while presenting the detective as an ethical counterpart to its villains, recognizes their limitations and questions the extent to which they are able to maintain a position as an ethical actor.

Though my focus is on the ideological content of the works, some consideration of formal concerns that comprise crime fiction are in order. The possibility of crime fiction in Mexico was roundly rejected by Carlos Monsiváis in his 1973 essay, "Ustedes que jamás han sido asesinados." There he argues that the genre is irrelevant as he writes:

¿A quién le importa quién mató a Roger Akroyd si los criminales de Vietnam gobiernan férreamente a los Estados Unidos, si en el nombre del socialismo se invade a Checoslovaquia o si nadie sabe (oficialmente) quién fue el responsable de la matanza de Tlatelolco o quién ordenó el

asalto de los Halcones el 10 de junio? La Historia, gran apoyo de la literatura policial en otro tiempo, ahora la ha nulificado incluso en el orden de los entretenimientos (10).

The escapism he sees as present in works of crime fiction apply primarily to works of the classic mode, a model implicitly rejected in neopoliciaco works. Mexican neopoliciaco texts, several of which appeared within only a few years of his essay, as did Fuentes's own contribution, Taibo II's first novels, and Ibargüengoitia's *Las muertas*, generally address contemporary social issues even if their solutions are, from today's view at least, occasionally outlandish.

In formal terms, crime fiction generally passed, in the United States and Great Britain in particular, from the classical to the hard-boiled mode and from there to the police procedural and crime thriller, and its transition was marked by an interest in a greater sense of realism. The hard-boiled mode found this realism in the way it treated crime, as John Scaggs writes in *Crime Fiction*: "Hard-boiled fiction translated the romanticism of the Western into a modern urban setting, and this movement from the Western frontier to a hostile urban environment was accompanied by an abrupt shift from the artificial gentility of the classical detective story to the creation of a fictional world of social corruption and 'real' crime" (57). While Monsiváis argues that Mexican works were part of the escapist tradition of the classical mode, Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz has argued that Mexican works, even in the classical mode, have displayed a high degree of realism. He writes in his essay, "La narrativa policiaca en México: entre la nota roja y la invención literaria (1889-1969)": "Como primera hermana del periodismo de nota roja, la narrativa policiaca se impuso la tarea de ofrecernos un espejo de nuestra vida comunitaria en sus aspectos más sórdidos, menos pretenciosos" (20). Despite a strong connection to sensationalist journalism like the *nota roja*, publications devoted to news and especially pictures of crime stories, realism has been present from the origins of crime fiction. His claim suggests that the distinction between earlier (or different) crime fiction and the neopoliciaco is less tied to a question of realism than it is to something else. Given that Usigli's *Ensayo de un crimen* is a crime thriller and derived in some way from the lessons of the hard-boiled mode, how is the neopoliciaco distinct from Usigli's crime thriller or even earlier works that presented a high degree of realism?

I argue that the distinction is based on the way in which a given text addresses the endemic corruption present in Mexican society. While Usigli's novel recognizes that corruption (in this regard, Sánchez's discussion of it with Martín Luis Guzmán's *La sombra del caudillo* is particularly apt), it affirms it and never truly denounces it. Roberto de la Cruz winds up in a psychiatric

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hospital and not prison because others are corrupt or uninterested in the fate that he deserves as a murderer. The works of the neopoliciaco, however, expose and denounce corruption. It is a trend notable in works of different forms of crime fiction, from Vicente Leñero's *Los albañiles*, a police thriller, to Bernal's *El complot mongol*, already noted as a spy thriller, itself part of the crime thriller mode, to Taibo II's first two Belascoarán Shayne novels, *Días de combate* and *Cosa fácil*, most closely associated with the hard-boiled mode. These works show a shared commitment for an ethics of action based on responding to different forms of corruption, in turn tied to the truth even if the truth itself is in crisis, a point addressed below. McCann's notion of hard-boiled crime fiction being united by the "idea of a common culture" is replaced here by the fight against corruption that they know they cannot win. Their victories are, as a result of this commitment and their habitus, hollow, perhaps best exemplified by Belascoarán Shayne's discovery in *Cosa fácil* that Emiliano Zapata is alive, but also by his subsequent realization that it is best that this truth not be revealed.

Leñero's Munguía in *Los albañiles* confronts the crisis of truth that both Braham and Nichols see as something that the neopoliciaco faces². Nichols contextualizes this crisis in terms of corruption, one aimed at rewriting history:

The power structure — comprised (sic) of big business, police, military, government, and even drug traffickers — manipulates and suppresses "truth" in favor of their own interests. The search for truth in Mexico and Spain corresponds to a crisis in historical truth as well as the victimization of the underclass. The past, then, is threatened by repressive tactics of "official" historiography, cooptation of the past by the established order, and the pervasion of cultural amnesia among the population (119).

This crisis of truth was less evident in 1964 when *Los albañiles* was published, but the novel addresses the questions of truth and history as noted by scholars. For example, early readings of *Los albañiles* have emphasized the role of the truth, or at least the search for it, and its consequences. For example, Humberto Robles notes that the failure of Munguía to find don Jesús's killer means that the "búsqueda de la verdad absoluta" is "fútil" (579). This allegorical reading takes the search for the killer — notwithstanding Robles's opinion that a crime has not been committed in the novel — and understands that search as one for "la verdad absoluta." Yet the novel is not about the truth or the search for it, as later work on

² Braham posits "the crisis of truth that afflicts Mexico at the turn of the millennium" as a concern for detective fiction influenced by Taibo II (4).

the novel would shift the focus away from the question of truth that Robles raises in his article. The question of truth is relegated to concerns about its production, as Josefina Ludmer observes in her work about the novel, or to concerns regarding efficiency, as Danny Anderson argues in his work. Ludmer's approach emphasizes the production of truth as she writes in "Vicente Leñero: *Los albañiles*. Actor y lector," noting the most telling sign of inequality: "Ante un detective desfila un grupo de hombres sospechosos todos de asesinato; ese 'hombre de la corbata a rayas' carece de identidad, es el que escucha la historia de cada uno de los sospechosos, la persona a quien se dirige el discurso" (196). As a representative of the state³, he has a privileged position over the different classes of those at the construction site as even Nene, the engineer who has the job solely because his father owns the construction company, must produce his story as well. The production of truth renders other social inequities irrelevant as, regardless of social status, all must produce their version of the circumstances despite neither asking for nor wanting Munguía present; they are not interested in finding out who killed don Jesús nor do they wish him to be back among the living. But Munguía's presence, required by the circumstances, is tempered to some extent by his ethics of investigating the case as he refuses to force a confession by torturing a suspect, something that several, if not all, of his colleagues would do. Complicating matters for both the workers and the police is that the press demands answers: it wants both the guilty party to be caught and that the party be

3 In his famous *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, Louis Althusser notes that the police are part of the state apparatus:

The state is thus, above all, what the Marxist classics have called the state apparatus. This term covers not only the specialized apparatus (in the narrow sense) whose existence and necessity follows, as we have seen, from the requirements of legal practice — that is, the police, courts and prisons — but also the army, which, apart from its 'national defence' role (the proletariat has paid for this experience with its blood), intervenes directly as the auxiliary repressive force of last resort when the police (and its specialized corps: the riot police, and others) are 'overwhelmed by events' (70).

This does not mean that Munguía and other police officers, from his fellow detectives in *Los albañiles* to Bernal's Filiberto García accept this role. Rather, my point here is simply that the suspects in the murder of don Jesús see Munguía as an extension of the state given his authority as described below. For a Marxist reading of crime fiction see Ernest Mandel's *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984). Space does not permit a discussion of the political implications of my reading of crime fiction. Suffice to say, it does not follow Mandel's or even one that a reading of Althusser might suggest.

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caught without torture, as they have criticized the police department for its reputed methods previously. By promoting these conclusions, they aim to see that the proper person(s) is (are) caught and that, as a result, the innocent may rest knowing that the guilty party – and only the guilty party – has been removed from the streets. For Munguía, the quest for truth is one that pits him against the endemic corruption of the police force.

Danny Anderson notes these concerns in his book, *Vicente Leñero: The Novelist as Critic*. Not only does he shift the focus from Robles's argument seeing the novel as a "búsqueda de la verdad absoluta" (579) but also addresses Ludmer's concern over the production of truth. Munguía, Anderson argues, confronts the situation of the postmodern individual caught between competing systems: one ethical, regarding his investigative methodology, and another socio-political and bureaucratic, calling for efficiency. Anderson well notes that Munguía's investigation does not take place in a vacuum. Indeed, it takes place in society and he faces the exigencies of efficiency while trying to solve the case – both in terms of identifying the killer (as opposed to choosing a killer from among the suspects) and of solving the case as quickly as possible. Munguía's task is more than find the killer as quickly as possible as his activity serves ends that encompass more than the ends of an instrumental reason calling for efficiency. His role is symbolic and he must solve the crime so that the social order may be restored – if only for a single moment that involves a short newspaper piece acknowledging the fact before newspaper readers read about another brutal killing in the city. Munguía's otherwise rational solution to the problem of private desire requires him to provide a solution that has consequences outside the sphere of logic. This unintended consequence – at least from Munguía's point of view – also applies in a similar vein to his position of authority with respect to the suspects. More than being the person who will resolve the case for the benefit of society at large, Munguía embodies the state that suddenly appears at a moment's notice⁴. Munguía, despite his apparent intentions to respect the liberal tradition's promise of individual rights, appears at the crime scene as an executor of violence: not only does he exert a psychological violence on the suspects, as

4 See for example Michael Hardt's arguments regarding what he identifies as "the withering of civil society" in ("The Withering of Civil Society," *Social Text* 14 no. 4 (1995): 27-44). He argues that the state has assumed the role of the serpent described by Gilles Deleuze in his "Postscript on Societies of Control." As the disciplinary societies of the nineteenth century have faded and left societies in which the state may appear at any given moment, much like the undulations of a snake that slithers through space and may strike anyone at any given time.

noted by his fellow detectives, he enjoys the power described by Foucault of the juridic-discursive function: he is the only one at the crime scene who may formally accuse someone of the crime and he is the only one who may exonerate suspects from guilt, despite not having possession of the truth itself. He is merely a figurehead who formulates the proper declaration of truth regarding the case based on evidence that he himself gathers (evidence that, in theory, is later corroborated by the legal system).

His methods thus take center stage and they are not without reproach. For one, as Ludmer notes, the suspects must tell him their story. This violence is psychological, to be sure, but is hardly innocent as one of Munguía's fellow detectives tells him as they argue. Pérez Gómez, having suggested that they "[s]on como animales" (244), defends his attitude and violent methods:

— ¡¿Y crees que no es lo mismo fregártelos a preguntas y más preguntas?! No me vengas ahora a decir que porque no los tocas ya eres un santo. ¡Cómo dejaste al plomero! Qué necesidad tenías de tenérmelo tantas horas dale y dale con lo mismo: qué hizo el lunes; cuénteme qué hizo el lunes en la mañana, qué hizo el lunes en la tarde, qué hizo el lunes en la noche. Ahora otra vez: todo el día. Cómo se llama, en dónde vive, en qué trabaja... El pobre ya no sabía ni su nombre. ¿Eso cómo se llama? ¿No es todavía peor? (244, ellipsis in original)

Munguía's methods may be free of physical torment, but they also serve a function between his attempt to carry out his investigations following modern methods that are free of ethical concerns regarding torture. Even as Pérez Gómez questions the extent to which Munguía's methods are truly free of violence, he acknowledges the pragmatic issue regarding the press, telling Munguía that "[c]on veinte tipos como tú ningún mugre periodista se iba a atrever a volver a escribir sus mamadas" (244). As the police face pressure on an increasing crime rate to solve cases, the press questions them when their methods are problematic. Munguía's approach, although it has failed to unmask the killer in this case in the time he has worked on it, has been exemplary of the behavior that the press would like to see in the police force. It is an ethical choice that Munguía carries out despite the consequences that include his removal from the case or even his dismissal from the police force. His convictions regarding his methods further add to the detectives's lack of satisfaction regarding the case: while he has protected several potentially innocent suspects from torture with his own method that challenges them psychologically, he has also both protected at least one likely guilty party and failed to find justice for the murdered night watchman.

His choice stands out, not only in the novel among his colleagues on the force but also compared to the police in Mexico who are, as Nelson Arteaga Botello and Adrián López Rivera

note in *Policía y corrupción*, corrupt. They find the following reasons for which one becomes a police officer: “acumular capital para establecer un negocio; recuperar una pérdida, ya sea casa, ahorros, terrenos, etcétera; tener un empleo en el que se obtiene, según ellos, dinero fácil; y en muy pocos casos, por vocación” (33). Despite noting here that some do it “por vocación,” they do not give any examples in the book of anyone having chosen to be an officer for this reason. Later they affirm the corruption, writing that “[a] la pregunta colectiva: ¿por qué quieres ser policía?, la respuesta generalizada es: para ganar dinero” (46). Even if they may be reluctant to take part in this generalized corruption that has attracted many others to the profession, they quickly come into contact with the history of that corruption as once one begins to work as an officer “se le exige una cierta cantidad de dinero por parte de sus superiores” (52) and, reluctantly or willingly, they take part in the corrupt business of being a police officer. As such, Munguía stands out as he prefers to leave a case unsolved rather than force a confession out of someone who may be innocent. His ethical stance defines the role of the neopoliciaico detective, even if he is rather anomalous as an honest cop — though he is not alone, as police officers in Sergio Ramírez’s police procedural, *El cielo no llora por mí*, Leonardo Padura Fuentes’s series of novels with Mario Conde as protagonist, and Rubem Fonseca’s *Bufo & Spallanzani* are also honest. Munguía’s honesty is an expression of the utopian vision that the neopoliciaico articulates.

This utopian vision has an unlikely bearer in the form of Filiberto García in Bernal’s *El complot mongol*. He knows that his days are numbered as his skill set — a man sent in to do the dirty work because his superiors “quieren tener las manos limpietas” (13) — is being replaced by technocrats, as he tells himself, imagining what his superiors and other politicians would say to him: “Nosotros estamos edificando México y los viejos para el hoyo. Usted para esto no sirve. Usted sólo sirve para hacer muertos, muertos pinchos, de segunda. [...] Usted es de la pelea pasada. A balazos no se arregla nada” (11). His role attests to systematic corruption as it allows his supervisors to carry out the dirty work that is part of their manner of doing politics as usual. The rule of law, then, only appears to dominate in the fulfillment of official directives and appearances. His position is odd, as Fernando Fabio Sánchez notes in *Artful Assassins*: “Nevertheless, García does not appear in the novel as a roadblock to progress,” as the official pronouncements of the country’s politicians and his supervisors suggest, “but as an individual who possesses a ‘privileged vision’” (94). His “privileged vision” is knowing that the official discourse regarding Mexico’s claims to a rule of law are a farce given his role as *pistolero*. He, quite plainly, knows the truth.

He is unaware of all that he knows as he fails to suspect that certain supervisors are using him as a patsy to uncover rumors of an attempt by Communist China to assassinate the American president during an official state visit. His previous familiarity with the Chinese neighborhood makes him seem like a logical choice for the assignment, and he furthermore lacks an interest in international politics, as Braham observes that García displays a “lack of ideological loyalty” through his failure to side either “with the Russians [or] the Americans” (70). Given his ties to the Revolution as someone who lived it and who sees no need for the educated bureaucratic class that has assumed power in state institutions, he seems to be likely to agree with the agents of the plot. Indeed, scholars have argued that the Revolution is present in the novel through García. For example, Sánchez writes that “Bernal’s Filiberto García represents the presence of the Revolution in mid-twentieth-century Mexico. He is a subject who has survived a convulsive era, the face of a transcendent event from the past that still resonates in the present” (93). His commentary is essentially an expansion upon Braham’s own view that the novel’s “vital subject” — one that applies to the genre as a whole in Mexico in her view — is “the failed Mexican Revolution” (72). The nature of the Mexican Revolution is, purportedly, the rule of law that exists as a facade covering the violence that he incarnates. The revolution is thus something that García both detests — as a project aimed to modernizing the country, it is leaving him aside — and that he ultimately affirms, though perhaps only for personal reasons. He thus embodies the contradiction present in postrevolutionary Mexico: he is the law that exists because of the violence upon which it was founded, an example of the mythic violence on which the law is based in Derrida’s “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority.’⁵” The novel restates this relationship through García, making his role the embodiment of the violent past that persists, consistent with Octavio Paz’s reading of the massacre in *Posdata*, itself a reflection on the Mexican character and, as the title indicates, a sequel of sorts to his essay, *El laberinto de la soledad*. Despite the novel’s evident embrace of this view of Mexican history, it instead veers away from questions of the Mexican national character and focuses more concretely on the institutions that have resulted, a view affirmed by Sánchez when he writes, “the novel takes up the issue of Mexico’s postrevolutionary national institutions, which

5 For an examination of Paz’s *Posdata* through the lens of Derrida’s “Force of Law,” see Diana Sorensen’s *A Turbulent Decade Remembered: Scenes from the Latin American Sixties* (Stanford: Stanford UP: 2007).

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were supposed to result in a state grounded in the rule of law rather than a regime legitimized by armed force” (92). Yet García knows this to be a farce.

How does García, a man whose function was at odds with the law, ultimately come to uphold it and thus embrace an ethics of action that finds villains punished? Braham clearly and correctly situates his job as against the law: “Bernal underlines both the ferocity of the Mexican police and their ineptitude. Because he is a policeman, García’s work, even if it is of a criminal nature, is protected by the law” (70). His actions are consistent with the less scrupulous colleagues of Munguía, as he is used to kill people when his superiors “quieren tener las manos muy limpietas” (13). Braham finds his path to redemption a parallel to what remained of good in Artemio Cruz — through the love of a woman. The interest in Fuentes’s novel, one that embraces the conception of the Mexican character developed under the *filosofía de lo mexicano*, ignores the critique of the social institutions that exists in *El complot mongol*. As she notes, García loses his lover “not in the crossfire of the Revolution [as was the case for Artemio Cruz] but in the equally senseless postrevolutionary ‘spy’ game” (71). He is certainly motivated for action by her death, as Gerardo García Muñoz writes in his book, *El enigma y la conspiración*: “La venganza privada del pistolero resulta en un acto de heroísmo sin ninguna gloria pública” (198). But his “venganza privada” is one that fights corruption. Like Munguía, García’s actions place him squarely against the corrupt actions of his superiors, an outcome that is perhaps surprising given his past.

Yet if the resolution is indeed tied to his quest for vengeance, the shift from a rational calculation — one founded in his job assignment — to an emotional one — he wants to see certain people punished due to the emotional pain that he has felt as the conspiracy has left dead the woman he loved—undergirds his motives for action. As Robert Solomon has noted in “Sympathy and Vengeance: The Role of the Emotions in Justice,” the distinction between justice and vengeance exists because philosophers have sought to separate a rational response from an emotional one. However, Solomon posits that this distinction is something of a false dilemma as “it is the ideal of rational justice that is dangerous. It encourages passivity, mere judgment and not motivation or action. It leaves us uninvolved in the world, as if justice is merely to be hoped for and not a personal virtue to be cultivated and exercised” (292). García’s decision to act on his emotions makes him an active participant in society, one who does not wait for the bureaucratic legal system — one that he knows all too well given his duties, one that he knows is corrupt and that will not provide a resolution that consistent with what most would find to be right — to process the case but someone

who instead seeks out a solution. His resolution, resulting in the killings of his superior and a politician, winds up supporting the spirit of the law in finding those who seek to upend the rule of rule guilty and punishing them. His administration of justice is problematic, without a doubt, as the state has the monopoly over the use of violence. He is a representative of the state and has killed on orders, though orders that were, even he acknowledges, illegal. Having gained the truth of the matter before him – the rumors of a Chinese intervention were a false flag and an attempt to ensure that the plot that was to be carried out by his superior and the politician to return power to the military in a state dominated by technocratic interests – he acts on it and, surprisingly acts against the same people who have enabled his career, motivated in large part by the death of the woman he loved.

Taibo II's Belascoarán Shayne also acts out of revenge, like García, and given the way that scholars have characterized Taibo II's Belascoarán Shayne, wherein he appears as an heir to Filiberto García's unthinking pistolero, tied furthermore to the city he inhabits, it is perhaps surprising to see him as someone also assuming a role fighting corruption. Despite the commitment that Taibo II's Héctor Belascoarán Shayne shows to Marxism and leftist political principles, scholars note that his detective work is tied to the workings of the unforgiving landscape of the Mexico City megalopolis and his rejection of rational detection for less unconventional methods, at least in terms of the detectives of the classical mode. *Algunas nubes*, the fourth novel published of the series⁶ presents the following description of his methods:

Héctor que no creía en el raciocinio, ni siquiera se llevó a la conferencia un cuaderno de notas. Sólo escuchaba, esperando una cosa, saber por dónde empezar, en qué calle, en qué esquina iniciar el recorrido por el que iba a meterse en la vida de otra gente, o en la muerte de otra gente, o en los fantasmas de otra gente. Viérase como se viera, todo era un problema de calles, de avenidas y parques, de caminar, de picotear. Héctor sólo conocía un método detectivesco. Meterse en la historia ajena, meterse físicamente, hasta que la historia ajena se hacía propia (24-5).

Referencing this passage in his *Contemporary Hispanic Crime Fiction*, Glen Close describes “[h]is methods” as being “exactly those of the U.S. hard-boiled private eye” (33). Persephone

⁶ Though *Algunas nubes* was the fourth novel published, its events were prior to those of *No habrá final feliz*, the novel in which he dies. Subsequent editions, such as the compendium titled *No habrá final feliz: La serie completa de Héctor Belascoarán Shayne* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), often list *Algunas nubes* as the third and *No habrá final feliz* as the fourth.

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Braham argues that his body, less than his mind, is his primary weapon in *Crimes Against the State*: “Since order is the instrument of tyranny and subjugation, the Mexican detective hero rejects ratiocination, legal process, and the scientific method as means to truth, offering his physical body as both a catalyst and stage for the battle between good and evil” (66). While Belascoarán works primarily with his intuition and body, he is a different actor in the games that are afoot, perhaps primarily because he has only learned that he is involved in one or more games and that he must choose what role to play.

His decision to become a detective was not rational. He left behind a comfortable middle-class existence as an engineer for General Electric and his wife, with whom he had seen the film, *They Might Be Giants*, the same day that the *nota roja* published its first story on the Strangler, a serial killer who attacked women alone at night in Mexico City. His brother informs him about the game(s) that he is now playing:

Estás jugando un juego en el borde del sistema, y no pienses que es otra cosa. Siento que esperas que el otro juego también en el borde. Y que de una manera un tanto mágica has creado un asesino idealizado como tú. Fuera de las reglas del juego. Ten cuidado, no te vayas a encontrar a alguno de los artífices del juego.

[...] Y si lo encuentras, y si él está loco y mata por necesidades más allá de ti, de mí, de nosotros, mátaló. No lo entregues a la policía, que ellos están en otro juego (43).

He has been introduced to a new game and, his brother realizes, “las reglas se hunden” (43). Although his brother speaks more of how he understood Héctor and his sister in the context of their family, his evaluation applies as well to Héctor in his new role as a detective operating in Mexico City. Belascoarán Shayne must navigate the rules of a game he has barely started to play – and must worry about the police and any number of criminals not connected to the police or government. Yet Belascoarán Shayne bases his actions on fighting the wrongs of the world that he inhabits. He believes that his actions are opposed to the endemic corruption that surrounds him.

The Strangler argues against precisely this view, posting that they are equals and that they have merely assumed antagonistic roles in these games. “Yo inventé al estrangulador, usted inventó al gran detective que acabaría con el estrangulador. Era un gran juego para permitir que esos tristes perros de la policía lo estropearan” (230). Furthermore, the Strangler argues that his actions pale in comparison to the real problem:

Bien, he asesinado once veces y he causado heridas menores. En ese mismo intervalo de tiempo, el Estado ha masacrado a cientos de campesinos, han muerto en accidentes decenas

de mexicanos, han muerto en reyertas cientos de ellos, han muerto de hambre o frío decenas más, de enfermedades curables otros centenares, incluso se han suicidado algunas decenas... ¿Dónde está el estrangulador (221-2).

The real problem, Belascoarán Shayne acknowledges, is “el sistema” (222). The Strangler insists that they are complements, suggesting that the detective “sólo encontr[ó] un espejo más perfecto y acabado de su propia imagen” (222) and even that the detective and he “so[n] lo mismo” (223). The detective, however, sees things differently. While they may both be participants in the game – a game in which Belascoarán Shayne has given himself the right or privilege to kill his adversary – he tells the Strangler: “Usted es otra cara de la muerte en la India, otra cara de los asesinatos de campesinos o de las muertes por enfermedades perfectamente curables. No es la aventura el común denominador de este encuentro. Es el lugar en que cada versión de la aventura se encuentra” (223). Belascoarán Shayne has assumed a stand with his role in the game. He may begrudgingly accept that it is a game, but it is one in which he strives to make the game better for everyone. He is, as Jorge Hernández Martín writes in “Paco Ignacio Taibo II: Post-Colonialism and the Detective Story in Mexico, “an antidote[] to the role of the official police force in society” (173). He may be, as *Cosa fácil* notes, “[e]l único que desentonaba moralmente en el paisaje nacional” (197). It is a position supported by his ethical stance, based by his insistence on learning the truth.

Unlike the corrupt police officers like Filiberto García or those with whom Munguía works, Belascoarán Shayne is interested in the truth of the events before him. This commitment to the truth is found in part in his interest in the past that has been noted by scholars, as both Braham and William John Nichols have observed. For Braham, Belascoarán Shayne’s detective project is tied to the recognition of the lower classes as “an alternative, virtual *patria*” that contrast with official institutions and that “the poor, the hopeless, and the marginalized gather in mutual solidarity and solace” (81). Nichols writes that Belascoarán Shayne “serves as a lone hero that vindicates the utopian vision of the past, specifically the ideals of the 1968 student movement” (119). Nichols furthermore ties this project to a “crisis in historical truth” – as does Braham (4) – that is in turn linked to “the victimization of the underclass” (119). The truth is linked to history most explicitly in *Cosa fácil*, in which one of his three cases is to investigate the veracity of an urban legend that posited that Zapata survived his assassination in Chinameca in 1919 by sending a body double. Belascoarán Shayne’s interest in the truth propels him toward a meeting with the general, now an old man living in a cave. Though he realizes that the old man is indeed

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Zapata, as he questions Zapata's statement that "Zapata está muerto" with "¿Está seguro mi general?" (222).

His commitment to the truth has him uncovering the identity of the Strangler, protecting an adolescent girl who has come across compromising photos of her mother, an actress, and realizing that the executives at a firm who hired him to investigate the murder of their colleague who was gay was about their illicit operations and using it as leverage against their striking factory workers than it was about finding out who killed him. Even worse, however, regarding the "crisis of truth" is that, as Braham writes, "the revelation of truth does not necessarily alter the fact of injustice" (92). Indeed, despite the resolution of the photos and the homicide, Belascoarán Shayne finds himself with a permanent limp and only one eye after injuries that he has sustained. But even worse is his realization of what little he has accomplished:

Porque sabía que después de todo quizá Paniagua seguiría encarcelado en medio de un buen escándalo de prensa, y que saldría dos años después cuando la nube se hubiera hecho polvareda. Y Burgos volvería al oficio porque siempre habría políticos que querrían nalga de actriz y actrices que caminarían la carretera de la cama continua. Y el escándalo de las fotos sería resuelto con lana de por medio; y al fin y al cabo él lo único que había hecho era enriquecer a un nuevo intermediario. Rodríguez Cuesta se repondría de la mandíbula rota y seguiría contrabandeando. [...] Y la huelga había sido rota, y Zapata seguía muerto en Chinameca (220).

The problem that Belascoarán Shayne faces with respect to the truth is not so much that it is in crisis but that the truth is one more commodity, a concern that harks back to the dilemma faced by Munguía in *Los albañiles*. This is ultimately also a response to Monsiváis's complaint about the genre. With Belascoarán Shayne, the futility of the detective's gesture is internalized and an object of reflection. Although he knows that Zapata is alive, he agrees that he should not reveal the truth because, as Zapata tells him, "[l]as mismas carabinas asomarían ahora... Los mismos darían la orden. El pueblo lloró entonces, para qué quiere que lllore dos veces" (222, ellipsis in original). The crisis that the truth faces is that it is not sufficient to influence events; he is powerless, just as Monsiváis sees the crime fiction generally. Just as Munguía's methods, honest and reasonably just, are subject to the call for efficiency, Belascoarán Shayne's findings are caught up in ethical concerns that are removed from the truth itself.

His own actions are mired in an ethical quandary as, in Braham's words, "Belascoarán unites randomized violent action with a radically utopian ethical agenda" (83). García Muñoz, for his part, echoes the detective's words when he notes that "[l]as víctimas inmoladas, mujeres pertenecientes a distintas clases

sociales, avivan en Belascoarán Shayne el deseo de vengar sus muertes para obtener justicia" (208). As Belascoarán Shayne tells the Strangler, "[I]e debo la venganza a doce muchachas muertas por un juego de salón en manos de un monstruo" (223). Although he cannot reach other, more powerful actors, he focuses his actions in *Días* on the one person who is within his reach, the Strangler who is "parte del sistema" and perhaps just one of the many "cara[s] de la muerte en la India" (223). His vengeance, parallel to that carried out in lynchings throughout the country and Latin America, does leave him wondering if he does the right thing. In *Cosa fácil* he ponders: "Pero a fin de cuentas ¿no era suya la misma impunidad que la de los otros? ¿No había podido tirar cartuchos de dinamita, balear pistoleros, volar camionetas sin que pasara nada?" (219-220). The ethical questions are not easily answered. On one hand, he has entered a game in which he plays by rules established by villains, some visible like the Strangler, others less so like the "sistema" itself. He is, more than he would like to admit, not that different from the strangler as he later recognizes in *Cosa fácil*. He carries out actions that would put him in prison were he somehow unable to fall between the cracks of an inefficient legal system. On the other hand, he has become involved in the world, but he is aware that he cannot change the system and that his actions are ultimately futile despite his best intentions.

The neopoliciaico, rather than answer these questions, embraces them as a paradox of sorts that its actors must address. The neopoliciaico in this way has anticipated the questions that lynchings of alleged criminals would later pose. While studies of lynchings have debated the extent to which they are a sign of the strength of the communities in which they take place, they take for granted ethical questions that their participants suggest: given a state that has failed to take action to punish alleged criminals, why cannot they act, especially as the state has also failed to protect them⁷. This is not to condone lynchings but to see them as an attempt of being involved in the world. Neopoliciaico detectives act alone or in small groups and never in a way that would be construed a lynching, given the connotations of the

⁷ "Notable studies on lynchings in Latin America include: Jim Handy's article, "Chicken Thieves, Witches, and Judges: Vigilante Justice and Customary Law in Guatemala." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 36 (2004): 533-61; Angelina Snodgrass Godoy's book, *Popular Injustice: Violence, Community, and Law in Latin America* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006); Antonio Fuentes Díaz's book, *Linchamientos: fragmentación y respuesta en el México neoliberal* (Puebla: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2006); and Carlos Vilas's article, "(In)justicia por mano propia: Linchamientos en el México contemporáneo." *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* (2001): 131-160. As my focus here has been on the ethics of the actions of the detectives and their decision to be detectives, the political issues raised by lynchings and studies of them must wait for another occasion."

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latter as something that is carried out by a large group acting with a large degree with spontaneity. The early works of the neopoliciaico in Mexico set the stage for discussing these ethical issues. They leave them largely unanswered, both as a course of action and as regards what politics, if any, they articulate.

As an ethical project, the neopoliciaico begins with Leñero's *Albañiles* which sees ethics as a problem for the detective. Munguía's actions, however, are removed from the question of vengeance. The ethics of his investigation, regardless, continues in the neopoliciaico has both Filiberto García and Héctor Belascoarán Shayne must address the questions of ethics in their actions. While García does not reflect on his actions, he still acts in a way that supports the law, or what the law should be. Belascoarán acts in the same way. Their actions are ethically suspect, given the impunity that they enjoy, but they do act in the spirit of the law. Later neopoliciaico works would address these issues as well. The actions of the detectives are constantly scrutinized by the detectives themselves, but they continue to act, implicitly defending an ethical project, often in name of the truth itself, as is the case with the Nicaraguan Manuel Martínez in his novel about a journalist investing narcotrafficking in *Pasada de cuentas*, or an important self-reflection when the detective misses his target, as is the case in Héctor Manjarrez's *Rainey, el asesino*. This concern for an ethics of action distinguishes the work of neopoliciaico crime fiction from even works that deviated from the classic mode of crime fiction like Usigli's *Ensayo de un crimen*. Though Roberto de la Cruz is finally punished for his actions, he is instead sent to a psychiatric ward from which, the officer who arrested him tell him: "De aquí puede [usted] salir en poco tiempo, relativamente. La gente lo compadece, lo ayudarán después a rehacer su vida" (218). His lack of proper punishment for his crime is indicative of the corruption that the novel narrates and, perhaps unwittingly, undergirds. However, neopoliciaico works find themselves clearly against the endemic corruption that characterizes their habitus; even Filiberto García acts in accordance with the struggle, even if his motives for doing so are ambiguously tied to the project of fighting corruption. As such, he is an outlier among the vast majority of actors in the neopoliciaico universe who act to end the corrupting that they know they cannot defeat.



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