

# Noir as Politics: Spanish Language Hardboiled Detective Fiction and the Discontents of the Left

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Through a markedly realist aesthetic based largely in the subgenre of the “hardboiled” detective novel and the iconic “film noir” movement of the 1940s (both essentially products of the Depression-era U.S.), Spanish-speaking writers were able to confront the ideologies of their governments, as well as the current state of social affairs and politics in various countries that were undergoing periods of massive political and economic upheaval as they began to enter into a much more globalized world economy during the late 20th Century. These political structures included dictatorship, institutionalized revolution, or democratic transition. What was it, though, that drew so many authors from very diverse countries to this trope? Answering that question may also shed light on its appropriation in other parts of the world as well.

**Noir** or **novela negra** [black novel] stories enabled their authors to arrive at a more genuine rendering of their national situations. In part this is because detective narrative permits a fictional uncovering of the true state of sociopolitical relations, power structures, and contemporary injustice in Latin America that pushes against the official policies of forgetfulness and media-dictated culture. It also allows the questioning of truth in a more general sense, showing in its later, self-reflexive iterations the inability of the deductive method (on which classical detective fiction is based) to explain the world.

In doing so, it indicts liberalism (and neoliberalism by proxy) along with developmentalist visions of history. Even modernity as a whole and its attendant metanarratives are undermined by some of the most recent variants, such as the work of Roberto Bolaño, which traverses Chile, Mexico, and Spain, but in this article I will focus only on those authors who closely follow the original model. The hardboiled, or “private investigator” figure would be adapted first in Mexico, and then in many other countries, as the entire region began the process of assessing the fallout from the totalitarian regimes of the second half of the 20th Century, whether in Socialist Cuba, Mexico, Spain, or the Southern Cone.

Arguably the most influential offshoot of the larger crime fiction genre, “hardboiled” detective fiction has inspired countless novels and films the world over, and has proven itself to be an extraordinarily flexible form, well-suited to reflecting developments that transcend both history and place. Theories abound about why it would eventually enjoy such success, with the more prominent ones pointing toward its realist aesthetic, urban settings, and strong sense of disenchantment with the tenets of liberal society—as well as New Deal efforts to reform them (McCann 16-18). They also indicate a larger societal hunger for justice and a desire for reform, however tainted by cynicism these might be.

The appropriation of the hardboiled subgenre in diverse Hispanic countries is in some ways perplexing. To be sure, the writers like Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar in Argentina had self-consciously utilized the “classical” detective trope to great effect (e.g. Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie). What was it, though, about the lonely private eye in his fedora and trench coat walking down a dark, rainy North American street that resonated so much with writers in countries as different as Spain, Mexico, Argentina, Cuba, and Chile? Even if the causes for its adoption are not always clear, there are enough commonalities to begin to draw some conclusions. A pattern that has

repeated itself all over the Spanish-speaking world is that societies that endure economic trauma, dictatorships or authoritarian regimes, or other massive social changes tend to produce a disproportionately high amount of detective fiction as they enter a more critical and self-evaluative period—often as lofty political promises of a new and better society flounder.

Marxist theorist Ernest Mandel, in his 1985 *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Novel*, links the development of the hardboiled subgenre to the evolution of crime itself, as well as a growing public consciousness of the flourishing organized crime that took hold during prohibition in the 1920s, coupled with the wild popularity of “pulp” fiction during the same period (33-34). Because the criminal enterprise had turned into a fully professional venture, its infiltration of legitimate political, social, and economic systems was nearly omnipresent. This spawned a new sort of detective that worked outside the normal (compromised) conduits of law enforcement and legality. I would add one more element to this, which is that hardboiled fiction reveals disillusionment with the failures of great social promises made after a significant national trauma: in the case of the U.S., the Great Depression. As I will discuss below, Persephone Braham makes a similar assessment about the dynamic in Spain and Latin America. John Scaggs, on the other hand, offers a very different explanation for the development of the genre, rooting it in American popular culture. He essentially argues that hardboiled fiction is a transposition of the traditional Western frontiersman-hero on an urban scene. The private investigator, particularly as conceptualized by the novelists such as Chandler and Hammett, is typically a rough-and-tumble outsider, somewhat crude around the edges. He (the P.I. is almost always male) is often, at heart, a romantic idealist, searching for truth and justice by any—and often the wrong—means (58).

Scaggs discusses at length the plasticity of the subgenre, as well as its inherent contradictions—mostly rooted in the P.I.’s mercenary ethos and tendency to resort to illegal and often violent tactics—both of which have allowed its long and varied development through the creation of dramatic tension with the reader’s notion of what constitutes correct or good behavior. Of particular interest is his observation that, just as often as they find the truth, hardboiled detectives are hired to bury it. He follows Paul Skenazy in observing a certain “haunting” aspect of the past that continues to erupt in the present (66-67). I would argue that this temporal disjunction further contests developmentalist (thus modern) notions of history, and is particularly relevant in the context of Hispanic letters, as it reflects Hispanic societies’ incomplete and tempestuous relationship with the Enlightenment and, therefore, modernity itself. As has been discussed at length elsewhere, this is a product of the earlier colonization of Latin America as well as the unequivocally anti-reformation ideology of the colonizers.

Argentina, Cuba, Mexico, and Spain are the clearest and most prolific examples of this phenomenon, and have been written about extensively—for instance, by Josefina Ludmer on Argentina, Persephone Braham on Mexico and Cuba, and José F. Colmeiro and Joan Ramon Resina on Spain. Braham and Colmeiro tend to focus on the advent of the hardboiled subgenre as a response to a “culture of disenchantment,” whereas Colmeiro and Ludmer study the surge in national crime fiction within the larger developments of 20th century literature in Spain and Argentina, respectively. In work specifically on Chile, there are only a few books written on the subject in Spanish or English. However, a small number of authors (such as Ramón Díaz Eterovic, Mirian Pino, and Guillermo García-Corales) have been working actively on theorizing the field since at least 2000. Most of this work appears in essays, collections, and conference proceedings, with the notable exception of García-Corales and Pino’s 2002 book, *Poder y crimen en la narrativa chilena contemporánea: Las novelas de Heredia* [Power and Crime in Contemporary Chilean Narrative: The Heredia Novels]. The later portion of the present article will address this relatively little-known manifestation.

Once appropriated, the hardboiled mode was commonly referred to as **la novela negra** (the noir novel) or **el neopolicíaco** (the new detective novel). In her 2004 *Crimes Against the State, Crimes Against Persons: Detective Fiction in Cuba and Mexico*, Persephone Braham focuses mainly on the cases of Cuba and Mexico, but does make frequent reference to the Spanish appropriations of the subgenre. During roughly the same 25-year period (1968-1993), all three countries—along with the Southern Cone—would go through massive changes as they became integrated into an increasingly more globalized socioeconomic paradigm at the same time that domestic politics showed significant degrees of stress or upheaval.

Braham sees the **neopolicíaco** as a manifestation of the disillusionment felt by the Left, for different reasons, in all of the aforementioned countries, because of the relative failure of revolutionary or reformist projects and rhetoric. The three main failures she points out are the 1968 massacre of student activists in Mexico City leading up to the Olympics; the economic chaos, social insecurity, and drug culture that emerged in Spain after the death of Franco; and the essential failure of the Cuban Revolution and “special period” that followed the breakup of the USSR, Cuba’s main trading partner and geopolitical guarantor. The hardboiled subgenre represents a way of

describing these realities while maintaining a certain degree of distancing from bourgeois or petit-bourgeois society and values.

Commenting on the Hispanic world's adoption of a genre with an Anglo-American penchant for containing the irrational (counter-Enlightenment/counter-bourgeoisie), Braham notes that, "In contrast, Spanish and Latin American reality is at least nominally governed by an antirationalist tradition in both the juridical and intellectual spheres" (5). She says:

...the detective novel has come to serve as a locus for the reenactment of the Latin American dilemma surrounding modernity, which from the moment of Independence, as [Carlos] Alonso asserts, "constituted both the bedrock of Spanish American cultural discourse and the potential source of its most radical disempowerment." (5-6)

That is to say that Spain, as the most significant cultural and political progenitor of much of Latin America, was itself in a disempowered position in relation to the rest of Europe (and by extension the United States). Spanish-speaking Latin America, as the former colonial subject of Spain, was doubly disadvantaged, and therefore even less likely to be able to integrate fully into modernity. The former Spanish colonies had to deal not only with the colonial legacy, but also with their relatively weak and dependent position within the hemisphere.

The development of detective fiction in all three countries was distinctive, and was affected by three separate historical processes. For the genre in Mexico, Spain, and Cuba, the first critical event was the massacre in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas [Plaza of Tlatelolco] in Mexico City (1968). In this tragedy, government troops fired on and killed unarmed students and housewives (200-300 by most counts, but possibly many more). Exact numbers of arrests are not available, and many people were disappeared and their bodies burned. This blatant violation of human rights destroyed any vestiges of hope that the populist ideals of the Mexican Revolution were still represented by the PRI (Institutionalized Revolutionary Party). Shortly thereafter, in 1969, Rafael Bernal published *El complot mongol* [The Mongolian Plot], which foreshadowed a boom from the 1980s on in Mexican hardboiled detective fiction. Bernal's detective, Filiberto, is in essence a police hit man, and he is trying to foil a supposed plot to kill a visiting U.S. President.

Although Filiberto has few redeeming characteristics, and would prefer to keep it that way, despite himself he reveals certain impulses toward doing good. Moreover, he also demonstrates through his actions the crass brutality of the Mexican security forces, which are continually answering to International forces. This indicts both Mexico's relative lack of sovereignty and the truly undemocratic nature of the government that has come out of the Mexican Revolution (PRI). Rough, but not without a sense of humor, he compulsively spews forth interjections of "¡Pinche pasado!" ["Fucking past!"] and "¡Pinche leyes!" ["Fucking laws!"]. (7, 11) A former national army soldier, Filiberto further complicates the idealism of the Revolution by the fact that he "is not disillusioned only about the failure of revolutionary hopes for equality and justice. His nostalgia is more for the life of the soldier, where rape, pillage, and murder didn't need to hide themselves behind a bureaucratic mask" (Braham 69).

Even more famous in the Spanish-speaking world than Bernal's detective, however, is the long-running Belascoarán Shayne series, written by Mexican author Paco Ignacio Taibo II. It began with *Días de combate* [Days of Combat] in 1976, and continued through the most recent installment, 2005's *Muertos Incómodos* [The Uncomfortable Dead], which was co-written long-distance with Subcomandante Marcos (the leader of the Zapatista rebels). This ongoing novelistic cycle is comparable in length and international influence to that of Catalan writer Manuel Vázquez Montalbán. The detective, Hector Belascoarán Shayne, is a former engineer turned radical activist who definitely does not approach his mysteries rationally.

At times, he terrorizes people during investigation, occasionally for self-gratification when he thinks that the criminal deserves it. A tremendously self-reflexive, contentious character whose eye patch underlines his identity as an eccentric or pirate, he is also given to interacting with the media...and in the process comments on his own status as a character in a literary work, as he "[inserts] his cases into radio talk shows and other media" (Braham 91). Also, Belascoarán Shayne continually makes reference to other detectives in literature and film, noting himself that neither his techniques nor Mexico itself lend themselves to rational methods, as the entire political system and law enforcement apparatus are completely devoid of reliability and propriety.

Both Taibo and Bernal perform work within the genre that can be characterized as postmodern. Through displacing and adapting the original genre of hardboiled fiction, placing it in late 20th Century Mexico City, they make it something different—something new and unique to their own circumstances. Although definitions of postmodernity abound, Braham provides a particularly good one that applies to all three national contexts she discusses, as well as Chile's:

Postmodernism is a slippery and contentious term in any context: in general historical and sociological terms, it

describes a reaction to modernity conceived as a worldview rooted in rationalism, empiricism, industrial development, and political and economic liberalism (including both Capitalist and Marxist philosophies). Postmodernist devices in literature include parody, pastiche, references to popular culture, intertextuality, and a treatment of subjectivity as both desirable and suspect, depending on the position of the subject with respect to the modern episteme. (14)

In post-Franco Spain (1975-) the most celebrated hardboiled writer has been the previously mentioned Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, with his protagonist Pepe Carvalho. Like many other Spanish-speaking detectives, Carvalho is an avid reader, and despite his rough edges, he is well-educated. As a representative of the new Spain, he is disillusioned after the transition from dictatorship to constitutional monarchy failed to meet his expectations, but he is determined to press on. A man of eclectic tastes, he occupies a mountainside home in an upper-middle class section of Barcelona and eats gourmet food out of the pot, while sipping his wine from a crystal goblet. He enjoys the company of a prostitute, but also prizes his time alone, and reproaches himself for spending so much time with her. Perhaps the most eccentric aspect of Carvalho's behavior, though, is his proclivity for burning books from his enormous library, as he does in the 1975 *Tatuaje* [Tattoo], the second of the fourteen-book Carvalho series. A good example from this novel is when the detective burns a copy of *España como problema* [The Problem of Spain] for its offensive suggestion that the postdictatorial problems of Spain could be reduced to just one (22). Through similar episodes Vázquez Montalbán comments implicitly on more academic, or "high-brow" exchanges concerning the state of affairs in contemporary Spain, as well as making a running tongue-in-cheek commentary about the act of writing itself, all while managing to entertain and occasionally shock his readers.

Arising in an isolated socialist context, Cuban detective fiction has a very different trajectory. In some ways it resembles much of the cultural production seen in democratic transitions in that it represents a progressive disillusionment with the ideology and promises of the Revolution. It begins supporting official doctrine, such as in Luis Rogelio Noguera's *Y si muero mañana* [What if I Die Tomorrow?] (1976). When the U.S. refused to ally with Castro's Cuba, they had turned to the Soviet Union for strategic economical and political support. Then, with the fall of the Soviet Union and the extreme deprivation of the "special period," beginning in 1991, Cuban detective fiction began to question the viability of the Cuban Revolution in a post-socialist world and its legitimacy as an authoritarian state. The best-known author in this genre is Leonardo Padura Fuentes, whose 1997 *Máscaras* (Masks) questions the ideology of the Revolution, but goes further in interrogating its underlying sexual dogma and homophobia. As Braham explains, Padura himself considers his work to be postmodern, "in that it uses intertextuality [...] incorporates elements from popular culture [...] focuses on all aspects desirable and undesirable of Cuban society; and subordinates the rationalist elements of the mystery to social criticism and novelistic art" (Braham 56).

In Chile detective fiction did not make a serious appearance until 1987, but the events of the 1973 coup weighed heavily on Latin American letters, as they marked the beginning of a new, more murderous scale of repression. There were a few pieces of classical detective fiction written in *Pacifico* [Pacific] magazine before the Coup, but by and large, the genre of crime fiction did not resonate with either Chilean authors or the reading public before its emergence in the mid-1980s, when the first embers of postdictatorial reckoning had begun to flicker. Before the Coup in 1973, the Boom had dominated the literary scene, and in the years immediately following the Coup, national production of literature was drastically cut. During the mid-1980s, the military government was still firmly entrenched, but it was gradually losing its iron grip on the country. In this climate, literature was permitted, but by no means encouraged.

During its first decade the Pinochet dictatorship, with U.S. support, succeeded in implementing profound changes in the Chilean economy, replacing the mechanisms of state-sponsored development with those of Neoliberal free market structures. These changes implied massive privatizations (most notably of the pension system), and were extremely lucrative for the wealthy, while undermining the power of the middle class. The effects on the working class, in turn, were harsh and far-reaching.

Crime fiction in the postdictatorial context, then, allows for the questioning of hegemonic narratives concerning the "success story" of Neoliberalism, by showing glimpses of those who were left in the dust of the BMWs and Mercedes of the dictatorship and the corporate conglomerates. Abuse of power, in private and public contexts, along with lopsided law enforcement, combined to exacerbate the stark socioeconomic inequality that worsened during the first years of the transition. Many Chilean artists responded to these changes by choosing to represent those who had been forgotten during the economic reorganization. By describing their situations and realities, the authors were able to speak for those who would contest the hegemonic, mass media-based culture of the market.

The adoption of the hardboiled detective as main character thus served as a weapon of resistance to fascism and an antidote to neoliberalism. The detective represents a possibility for private justice when the state has either turned its back on the average citizen, or has been actively complicit in repression. It is also able to penetrate the conciliatory

rhetoric and elided conflict of the transitional government and corporate media. Even in literature not featuring a private eye, detective tropes and narratives are often used by characters to reclaim genuine, durable personal and national truths, as well as a sense of agency.

Just as U.S. hardboiled private eyes often found, it is very easy for a postdictatorial detective to assume the role of oppressor, albeit on a small scale. Revenge is shown to beget violations of human rights, and a climate of violence that engenders more aggression and even sadism. This, in turn highlights the impossibility of true justice being realized. Not only is the violation of human rights, through torture or cold-blooded murder, shown to be indefensible, but the inadequacy of any punishment to right the wrongs is revealed. On this subject, Ariel Dorfman, author of *La muerte y la doncella (Death and the Maiden)*, writes, “Pensaba que, por lo menos en el caso de Chile, era posible que la única reparación real para muchas víctimas fuera, al final de cuentas, nada más que la verdad desnuda y terrible” [I thought that, at least in the case of Chile, it was possible that the only real reparation available to many victims was, in the end, nothing more than the terrible, naked truth.] (Dorfman 86). In the postdictatorial context, then, faith in the state and in the courts was shown to be severely shaken, and these newly constituted political bodies were seen (at least until 1998) as being wholly contingent on the military’s willingness to them to continue in power.

I will examine these contradictions first in the detective fiction “boom” of the late-1980s and 1990s, with particular attention to the works of Ramón Díaz Eterovic’s Heredia, which is viewed by many authors and critics to be foundational in the Chilean context. To discuss the Chilean variant of the hardboiled novel, it is essential to understand the conditions under which the appropriation was made. In the fifth chapter of *Delightful Murder*, entitled “The Ideology of the Detective Story,” Mandel notes that “Corruption, violence, and crime were evident not only in the periphery of American society, but in its very centre. [. . .] From the outset then, the American crime story presented crime as far more completely integrated into society as a whole than the British did” (46).

The shift from seeing crime and inequality as something outside society to having infiltrated the highest ranks of social institutions is what made the hardboiled novel (and consequently the **neopoliciaco**) an art form that is born out of what is referred to by many critics as a “culture of disenchantment.” In the case of the Latin American **neopoliciaco**, however, it also represents a reaction against the Boom’s tendency to elide political realities in favor of a temporally displaced mythology. As Persephone Braham explains, “The **neopoliciaco** represents a reaction against the mythologizing aestheticism of the Latin American boom of the 1960s and 1970s. Coarse, realistic, and chaotic, it is marked by the same pessimistic idealism as the first hard-boiled fiction” (12). In the case of Chile, the ruthless destruction of Salvador Allende’s presidency and of the **Unidad Popular** [Popular Unity] government represented a severe blow to the hopes of the Latin American left, and gave way to fascism and calculated, coordinated, institutional crime.

To differentiate this from the U.S. political culture that Mandel refers to, the crimes perpetrated in Chile (and Argentina during the same time period) were part of a carefully planned effort to remold society and the economy from top to bottom. It was not a case of individual abuses of otherwise venerable institutions. The role of the detective in the postdictatorial context is to determine the truth that lies behind government rhetoric. Since the police, the **Carabineros**, are a branch of the Chilean army, they cannot be counted on as a source of impartial truth, or to sympathize with those who have been brutally repressed. This makes detection a distinctly non-governmental enterprise in Chile; it, therefore, depends on popular support and serves the community in moving towards the restoration of what was lost during the dictatorship.

Ramón Díaz Eterovic, author of the Heredia series, sees detective fiction itself as having a similar purpose during the transition: “la configuración de la memoria histórica del país y la descripción de la atmósfera social de la dictadura y sus años siguientes” [“the creation of the country’s historical memory and the description of the social atmosphere of the dictatorship and the years that followed it”] (García-Corales 2005: 88). The emphasis in these novels, in other words, is less on the resolution of crimes than on a collective effort to restore a lost past which has been forcefully and artificially extirpated. It also resists the present aesthetic paradigms (as strong as their pull might be), based on the psychology of the market, which imposes a constant, forced obsolescence on all aspects of life, flattening affect and relying on the empty repetition of patterns of communication.

Díaz Eterovic’s Heredia truly fits into these criteria. He has a penchant for spending hours in the infamous, labyrinthine Bío-bío market in Santiago, which is filled with all sorts of stolen and discarded goods for sale—thus bypassing and undermining the capitalist marketplace. Most importantly, however, this market represents a collecting point for the detritus of contemporary life in the capital. His desire to immerse himself in this environment is just as telling—if not more so—than instances in which he notices the frequent destruction of old buildings in the

downtown area that he frequents (Díaz Eterovic 2001: 99). Díaz Eterovic's character also shows the influence of other well-known Spanish-language detectives, such as the aforementioned Belascoarán Shayne and Cavalho. All are well-read outcasts who are able to observe the goings-on of cities and societies in general from a peripheral standpoint that affords them some measure of objectivity.

Like Paco Ignacio Taibo vis-à-vis Belascoarán Shayne, recent statements by Díaz Eterovic show that he continues to consider Heredia a viable, if aging and increasingly anachronistic, character. In the novels, Heredia is constantly aware that the role of the private eye in Chilean society is a precarious one. *La ciudad está triste* [The City Is Sad] (1987) tells the story of the detective's search for a disappeared female medical student. Heredia eventually discovers that she was involved with and killed by some powerful figures from the Santiago criminal underground, but in doing so he also manages to exact a certain amount of revenge upon them. One of the main issues broached by the book is the solitary, at times desperate efforts by private citizens to seek truth and justice on their own. The investigative police are of no help in this, since finding missing persons in dictatorial Chile is not at all a high priority for them. They only become concerned when it is apparent that people are dying for non-political reasons.

As a detective figure, Heredia fits perfectly into the hardboiled mold and ethos. He is an ill-tempered loner who is very critical of the dictatorship's security apparatus and tends toward the unhealthily romantic. He has a friend working as a police detective who occasionally helps him out with cases and tries to temper the private eye's zeal for justice. Heredia complicates his status as a "good" character because he is just as likely to use force to extract information from a source as any other method, introducing the moral ambiguity and irony of the detective committing injustices in the pursuit of justice. He also recognizes the failure of reason and deduction as methods of detection.

It is worth noting that, in the first Heredia novel, the human rights violations and crimes of the state are referred to very obliquely. For example, under his name the sign on his office door reads "investigaciones legales" ("legal investigations"). Heredia muses, "sin saber hasta esa fecha qué demonios quería decir con eso. De seguro provenía de los años en que dejé de estudiar leyes, porque comprendí que la justicia se movía por otra parte, amparada por la complicidad del dinero y el silencio" [I still didn't know what the hell I meant by that. It must have been from the years that I stopped studying law, because I realized that justice was found somewhere else, protected by the complicity of money and silence](Díaz Eterovic 1987: 10). This type of general social indictment is typical of works written under the dictatorship, in which direct links were normally not made between the state and criminality. After the dictatorship ended, however, this changed, even for Heredia. Díaz Eterovic has said that he chose the hardboiled subgenre in order to reflect the experience of a city "bajo vigilancia" (under surveillance), but there is little evidence that he intended this self-reflexive mode to apply to his own writing as well (Díaz Eterovic 2002: 48).

In the third novel in the series, *Nadie sabe más que los muertos* (No One Knows More than the Dead) (1993), Heredia takes on the burden of locating *detenidos/desparecidos* [detained/disappeared people]. This direct confrontation of the dictatorship's crimes shows the profound difference that the formal end of the dictatorship in 1990 had on the subject matter that authors could utilize. This applies to both the direct relationship between the political environment and cultural production, and the way that the Heredia series acts, Díaz Eterovic says, as a historiography of Chile during the political transition (García-Corales 2005: 92).

The Heredia series was a first step in a much wider postdictatorial appropriation of the crime fiction aesthetic. Throughout the end of the dictatorship and the complicated first decade of the transition, it was repeatedly appropriated and changed in order to reflect and criticize the state of the country. In some cases the private detective figure was supplanted by someone of a more credible profession, such as a journalist or a police investigator. Eventually, the basic paradigm and assumptions of the hardboiled novel were subverted and questioned in what some would call "anti-detective" novels, most memorably by writer Roberto Bolaño, who did for the Latin American hardboiled detective what Jorge Luis Borges had done for the classical detective in stories like "The Garden of Forking Paths" and "Death and the Compass." In Bolaño's novels there is no guarantee that the perpetrator will be discovered, or that the crime will be avenged. In fact, sometimes the crime pursues its investigator, destroying any sense of rationality, just as much for the reader as for a given character. Justice is far from simple, and even our most cherished institutions and metanarratives—truth and a stable sense of morality—are no longer safe.

The critical ethical relativism that marks Bolaño's novels is a hallmark of fiction produced throughout the Spanish-speaking world following the first wave of novels that sprang out of the events of the late 1960s to mid-1970s. Just as national innocence was lost in the U.S. because of scandals that showed the highest institutions to be corrupt and lacking in moral authority, Spanish-speaking countries confronted compromised democratic transitions,

ineffective truth commissions, and stagnant supreme courts, and meaningful justice seemed all but impossible. Victims had to be satisfied many times with simply exposing the truth, but this was both insufficient and impossible to discover. Variants of the crime fiction genre have continued to be a relevant way to confront these countries' problems, even as the specific manifestations have changed, the underlying issues of injustice, inequality, criminal complicity, and social tension remain.

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