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Transatlantic Mysteries: Crime, Culture and Capital in the "Noir Novels" of Paco Ignacio Taibo II and Manuel Vázquez Montalbán. William J. Nichols. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press. 2011. 203 pp.

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The fundamental objective of *Transatlantic Mysteries* by William J. Nichols is to analyze how the detective fiction of Paco Ignacio Taibo II and Manuel Vázquez Montalbán serves to “deconstruct and dismantle the discursive mechanisms behind the neoliberal narrative of globalization” (11). As such, Nichols joins the burgeoning group of critics who are reading Hispanic crime fiction as socio-political commentary, and more specifically, as a critique of the impact of neoliberal structural changes. For example, Misha Kokotovic coined the term “neoliberal noir” in his article about Central American crime fiction, and in their seminal studies of detective/crime fiction, both Persephone Braham and Glen S. Close addressed the centrality of the critique of modernization to these plots.

In his book, Nichols breaks further ground with his detailed comparative analysis of how detective fiction serves as a springboard for both Taibo and Vázquez Montalbán to explore the social effects of neoliberalism in their respective countries: Mexico and Spain. Importantly, Nichols points out and explores the seeming contradiction of using a market-friendly genre that appeals to the masses to critique the effects of multinational capitalism and consumerism. In this regard, he considers how these writers question the role of the intellectual in our globalized and commodified society at the same time that they seek to recapture the political relevance of literature.

The choice of these two authors for the subject of a comparative scrutiny makes sense. Both are well-known and prolific novelists who have penned a detective series protagonized by a repeating detective figure—Taibo has nine novels featuring Héctor Belascoarán Shayne and Vázquez Montalbán’s Pepe Carvalho appears in twenty-two novels—and both have detective and non-detective novels outside of the series. Both use their fiction to reflect on the recent past and the present day situation of their nation. Most significantly, both were committed leftists in earlier days who over the years have sought to reconcile contemporary reality with their political leanings.

Nichols’s study shows how the fiction of Taibo and Vázquez Montalbán takes root in and has evolved from North American hard-boiled fiction with its dark vision of a society tainted by government corruption and organized crime. A reaction to the deleterious effects of the rise of free-market capitalism in the 1920s, North American noir sets the stage for the subjects of Nichols’s book, as it does for numerous Hispanic writers who assess the results of the implementation of neoliberal policies in their own countries.

The book is organized thematically—after an introductory section, each of five chapters takes up a different theme, discussing it in reference to Taibo and Vázquez Montalbán. Throughout his examination of the production of these writers, Nichols makes use of a wide variety of theoretical perspectives to provide conceptual support for his analysis.

Chapter 1, entitled “Social Crisis, Modernization, and the Emergence of the ‘Novela Negra’ in Mexico and Spain,” provides the relevant socio-historical background for the development of noir detective fiction in Spain and Mexico, tracing their uneven, and at times contradictory and violent, transitions to modernity over the course of the twentieth century.

Entitled “Reading and (Re) Writing Culture: Subversion of Models, Models of Subversion,” chapter 2 discusses how the detective novels of Taibo and Vázquez Montalbán play off North American hard-boiled models at the same time that they adapt and violate these models to fit their own reality. The use of this parodic strategy, posits Nichols, functions to expose the ideology behind consumer capitalism. Taibo’s hero is ironically self-aware of how his hard-boiled predecessors would behave in certain situations, but speaks to the impossibility of emulating them due to the conditions of Mexican reality. For instance, while Taibo’s detective in *Cosa fácil* awaits the intersection of diverse plot threads, as would occur in the novels of Ross MacDonald, he “realizes that such structure requires an order and logic that Mexican society’s violent rhythms resist” (54). Belascoarán Shayne’s investigations ultimately reveal, Nichols tells us, “the true criminal in Mexico to be a political system that...perpetuates corruption, substitutes order and logic with chaos and violence, and fabricates truths that benefit the dominant classes, corporate interests, and

foreign investors" (60).

Turning to the cultural critique in the fiction of Vázquez Montalbán, Nichols details how his work presents a social chronicle of Spain's transition to democracy after the death of Franco in 1975 as well as "a deconstruction of the signifying processes that mold consciousness" (76). The Carvalho series, Nichols points out, takes its cue from the North American model insofar as the investigator's search for truth ultimately leads to an indictment of all sectors of society. At the same, Nichols asserts, through Carvalho's cynical, self-reflective attitude as well as a metafictional narrative structure, Vázquez Montalbán undermines the ideological discourse of both the bourgeoisie and progressive sectors and subverts generic conventions to expose their artificiality. In the final pages of this chapter, Nichols looks at how Vázquez Montalbán dismantles cultural codes through Carvalho's interest in gourmet cuisine and cooking, viewing it as an artifice that masks our essential savagery.

Chapter 3, "'Poisonville' Reincarnated: Modernization, Metropolis, and Spaces of Self-Representation," begins by evoking the nightmarish city in which Dashiell Hammett's novel *Red Harvest* is set. Personville, pronounced ironically as "Poisonville," is the archetype of an evil, chaotic city, as depicted in the nihilistic vision of U.S. hard-boiled detective fiction. The chapter then proceeds to consider how the dystopic view of Mexico City, Barcelona, and Madrid in the novels of Taibo and Vázquez Montalbán expresses urban violence as a "capital" crime perpetrated by the government and big business. This is particularly true in the case of Vázquez Montalbán's portrayal of Barcelona, where unchecked development is seen to be carried out at the cost of an exploited underclass. Nichols analyzes how specific novels of each author serve to reveal the inner workings of the power system and also offer a means of resistance and self-representation.

In Chapter 4, "Memories of Underdevelopment: Resurrecting Revolution," Nichols discusses how the novels of both writers serve to resurrect the past of their respective countries in order to counteract official and cultural amnesia and reconcile past repression with the ideals of the capitalist democratic present. Taibo's novels, Nichols points out, revive the ideals of the 1960s student movement in Mexico to reclaim a past appropriated by the institutional power structure. Similarly, Vázquez Montalbán writes to vindicate a past suppressed by the myths propagated by the Franco regime and bulldozed by Spain's modernization projects.

The final chapter, "Crimes against Culture: Anti-Imperialism in Taibo and Vázquez Montalbán," looks at texts that reveal how multinational corporations and intelligence organizations manipulate mass media to conceal their intentions. The section on Taibo analyses two novels in which the detective attempts to uncover conspiracies, one involving U.S. oil interests and the other the CIA. The fundamental role of the detective is to discover the truth, Nichols reminds us, and he proceeds to show how this task is complicated when Taibo's detectives must work to decipher a language that has been manipulated to protect the workings of U.S. power interests on Hispanic soil. Turning to the production of Vázquez Montalbán, Nichols studies novels which expose how multinational corporations commodify culture in Spain, resulting in a crisis in identity. Through his fiction, Vázquez Montalbán demonstrates the ways in which market propaganda molds and distorts our perception of reality. Attempting to investigate cases in a post-Franco Barcelona transformed by the "plastic surgery" of capitalist marketing, Carvalho is disoriented and bewildered by a web of simulacra and falsifications.

In sum, Nichols's study presents a broad picture of how the works of these authors function to question social reality. Introductory statements by the author such as "Taibo and Vázquez Montalbán seek a means to revitalize the failed utopian leftist project of the late 1960s" (11) may lead the reader to expect that Nichols will reveal the novelists' elaboration of a concrete project or alternative. However, in his conclusion, Nichols notes that while the novels serve to denounce victimization and expose misleading ideology, they offer no final solution.

This book makes a major contribution to the study of crime fiction insofar as it is the first to bring together these Mexican and Spanish writers and compare how their novels treat important aspects of contemporary culture and politics. Nichols does a good job of explaining both the literary and socio-political context of their production: he analyzes how their works derive from and parody their hard-boiled roots, and he firmly grounds his study in the specific circumstances of Spain and Mexico's past and present. Finally, he presents a strong argument for the political relevance of detective fiction, demonstrating that the "género negro" is an ideal medium to expose the abuses of hegemonic power structures.

Even good books are not free of flaws, and this study is not exempt from a sprinkling of typographical errors and the occasional awkward construction or translation error. For instance, "Miente como si no" (155) is translated as "He lies as if it wouldn't" (156), but would be better rendered "He lies as if he were not (lying)." An example of a sentence that calls for editing is "Vázquez Montalbán refers to Carvalho, ironically, as a disguise that shields the novelist while simultaneously contemplating the cultural devices that frame and fabricate reality while hiding his voyeuristic inspection of reality with the veneer of fiction" (78). Also, when Nichols discusses the intentionality behind the work of these authors—for instance when he writes "Both Taibo and Vázquez Montalbán view detective

fiction as a political tool that exposes society's problems" and "both authors consciously adopt a vehicle that possesses mass appeal" (22) — it would useful to bolster these assertions with statements to this effect made by the writers in interviews or essays.

All in all, *Transatlantic Mysteries* is important reading for students and critics of Hispanic crime fiction. It builds on and updates preceding critical work in the field and is very timely in view of the current scourge of organized crime in Mexico and the fiscal crisis in Spain.