Evolution of Hispanic Crime Fiction in Fernanda Melchor's *Hurricane Season* and *Paradais*

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Abstract: 
Exploiting Glen S. Close’s study (2008), this paper attempts to explicate the position Fernanda Melchor occupies on the Hispanic literary scene: how her novels *Hurricane Season* and *Paradais* fit in the packed ranks of Hispanic crime fiction, the novela negra; how they are beholden to their antecedents and the differences they have with said antecedents. Amply endowed with the grim workings of the novela negra, both novels are quite comparable with their contemporaries. In the long line of novela negra authors, Melchor is a rare female, delving into crime and showing it to the world through the eyes of a woman, highlighting the addictions, the violence, the corruption, the debauchery endemic in Mexican society and the misogyny underlying most of them. Locked in an incessant battle of survival, her characters are mirthless, helpless, and ruthless, breeding vicious and virulent violence against each other and themselves.

Keywords: Fernanda Melchor, *Hurricane Season*, novela negra, *Paradais*, Hispanic crime fiction.

Introduction
In Hispanic fiction, “the dissemination of detective formulas”, rather than “a direct or unilinear transfer” was “a complex process of irregular filtration through imports, translations, editions, pastiches, and imitations over the course of the twentieth century” (Close, 2018, p. 1). Depending
“to a significant extent on European reception and development of Poe’s innovation”, the production of Hispanic detective fiction, termed *novela Negra*, “derives initially from the narrative practices of the U.S. hard-boiled school founded in *Black Mask*” (p. 17). Expounding, Close states, “the earliest detective novels written in Spain were no more than transpositions of English detective fiction” (p. 5). Because of this preoccupation with English and American fiction, “Spanish America generally occupied a remote margin in the Spanish detective imaginary”, the writers more concerned with the United States and the United Kingdom as the setting of their works during the first half of the twentieth century (p. 10-11). Classifying the 1940s as “the golden age of the Spanish popular novel and the detective genre as one of its staples”, Close asserts that this was “the period of translation or simulation of translation”, accrediting the latter to “its derivative nature and scant literary interest” (p. 10).

“In its geographical distribution, in its communities of producers, and in its intertextual imaginary, the contemporary *novela negra*” continues to be “a fundamentally transatlantic and increasingly multinational enterprise […] whose industrial configuration reflects the renewed subordination of Spanish America in the current global economic order”. Set in “an era in which large-scale migration from the countryside and the uncontrolled growth of cities […] has threatened the very intelligibility of the urban environment” (p. 19) unleashing squalor, Spanish American crime fiction limns a dismal world in which penury and crime run rampant. Quoting Persephone Braham’s explanation of the characteristics of the relatively modern Hispanic detective novels, Close writes, “numerous story lines, narrative styles and periods crisscross each other throughout a single text” thus expressing “the chaos they see in their present, and in their future” (p. 49).

Heightening crime is both the cause and effect of “no confidence in the rule of law” in Mexico (p. 29), with “less than one in five crimes” reported, arrests “made in less than six percent of cases, and nine out of ten city residents” expressing “little or no confidence in their local police forces” (p. 49). Resultingly, “Spanish American crime fiction turns increasingly away from the detective subject and toward that of the criminal” (p. 19), thus breaking from the traditional ‘detective’ fiction and becoming ‘crime’ fiction in more senses than one.

Violence, concomitant to crime and poverty, is “a consistent presence” in Hispanic crime fiction, becoming “a constitutive part of the social tapestry […] a social code that enters the urban environment as a strategy of social relationships and as a component of subjectivity” (p. 52). Close
contends that “a number of other novels published in recent years offer strong parallels in their reimagining of urban violence as depoliticized, intimately subjectivized” (p. 52).

These traditions persist in Melchor’s *Hurricane Season* and *Paradaís* with varying degrees. In *Hurricane Season*, the witch is found murdered and the police launch an investigation. But the novel focuses not on the murder, but the various actors in the local drama and their variegated interactions with the witch, Melchor offering her readers a liberal and brutal view of Mexican society, the denizens of an indigent neighborhoods locked in a daily battle for survival against criminals, poverty, parasitic relatives, and each other. The criminals are revealed at the end, a violent rollercoaster ride headed only below.

*Paradaís*, not as vibrantly violent as *Hurricane Season* and featuring a relatively limited cast of characters, is the story of two teenagers, Fatboy and Polo, both possessed by a mania. Fatboy wants to sate his lust for the woman he is obsessed with, while Polo, employed by the husband of Fatboy’s desired, is disgusted with his life in Paradaís and seeks escape. Their impulses, morphing into manias, usher them into criminality, engendering brutal consequences for everyone involved.

Melchor, in both *Hurricane Season* and *Paradaís*, diverts from traditional and contemporary conventions of Hispanic crime fiction, while allowing holdovers to exist in her work, birthing M-rated potpourris for those with strong stomachs.

**Literature Review**

*Hurricane Season* was shortlisted for the International Booker Prize 2020. Reviewers were profuse in their praise for the novel, prominently for its raunchy realism, profane prose, and stylistic swashbuckling that enhanced immersion instead of sabotaging it. For reviewers, *Hurricane Season* is, in addition to being the story of the murder of a witch, a spell that bewitches its readers for far longer than the duration of the actual reading.

“A structurally inventive murder mystery set in a lawless Mexican village” is how Anthony Cummins of *The Guardian* (2020) begins to describe *Hurricane Season*. “Melchor’s long, snaking sentences make the book almost literally unputdownable”, he goes on, “shifting our grasp of key events by continually creeping up on them from new angles”. Ending his verdict on “fiction with the brakes off”, Cummins pronounces *Hurricane Season* “not a novel to be missed – if you can steel yourself”. Gabino Iglesias of *NPR* (2020) words the novel “strange, wild, and foul-mouthed”, continuing to applause the “mix of drugs, sex, mythology, small-town desperation, poverty, and
superstition” with characters carrying a “darkness within them” which is “as bad as the murder the town wants to solve”, the murder here that of the witch, which sets the story off. Iglesias’ review ends with the unequivocal declaration: “Hurricane Season is a dark celebration of language that pushes against the rules with its collection of unreliable narrators, its shifting realities, and its endless sentences”. According to Ian Thomson of The New Statesman (2020), Hurricane Season is a novel “rife with narco-style violence and other horrors ranging from child abuse and animal pornography to cannibalism”, possessing the power “to mesmerise”, fathoming “an underbelly of narco-crime and murder” in its “pages of expletive-heavy prose”.

“Hurricane Season is a novel that refuses the call to come together, to overcome, to heal. It insists on being heard”, says Lucas Iberico Lozada of The Nation (2020), Melchor highlighting “violence’s proximity to love as a way to show the horror that takes place behind closed doors, in societal and familial structures meant to represent warmth, happiness, love”. Hurricane Season, according to Amanda Dennis of The Los Angeles Review of Books (2020), “condemns violence — especially sexual violence — by depicting it unflinchingly”. Hurricane Season evinces in its readers a drive to read, a drive as demonic as its prose; “The pages race by, and the voices of the characters ring out as naturally as if they had taken over pen and page”. With its “unsparing depiction of violence” weaved into the “break-neck rhythm” of the prose, the novel “carves a wound, painful enough to startle us out of our complacency”.

Paradais, similar to Hurricane Season, made its way to the long list of the International Booker Prize 2022. Having taken a little edge off her blunt brutality and with her less snaky sentences, Melchor is not as impactful in Paradais as Hurricane Season, but that does not make Paradais an unworthy sequel.

Melchor’s books, in the words of Chris Power of The Guardian (2022), are “marinated in […] misogyny and violence”, creating an “unholy noise” which “is the work of someone who knows exactly which notes to hit”. Set “in a Mexico where people feel getting what they want means ripping it from someone else’s hands”, Paradais is a tale in which “Paradise is already lost; they just haven’t found the bodies yet”. According to Barry Pierce of Irish Times (2022), Melchor “hasn’t let up on the oppressive darkness and violence that pervades her work” in Paradais, having “more than proven herself to be one of the most unmissable voices in translation”. Amancai Biraben of AP News (2022) waxed eloquent in praise of Paradais, a novel through which “fantasies that distort reality slither”. In the middle of “the relations between characters who populate the
world’s parasitic tendencies”, along with “the cavernous fate” of the protagonists, “there is no redemption in this paradise lost.”

**Theoretic Framework**

In *Contemporary Hispanic Crime Fiction: A Transatlantic Discourse on Urban Violence*, author Glen S. Close analyzes Hispanic crime fiction, called the *novela negra* in Spanish, its evolution over the twentieth century and where it stands in the twenty-first century, featuring novels set in, among others, Mexico City, Bogota, and Barcelona. The works of Hispanic crime fiction share a number of similarities because of common inspirations, sites of production, and influence on and from each other. Melchor’s *Hurricane Season* and *Paradais* are analyzed in relation to these works, highlighting the similarities and, more importantly, the differences.

Set in “the metropolitan environment of not only infinite mystery and danger but also ubiquitous signs and endless interpretative possibilities” (p. 20), contemporary Hispanic crime fiction features “numerous story lines, narrative styles and periods” which “crisscross each other throughout a single text” thus reflecting “the chaos they see in their present, and in their future” (p. 49). The “dynamics of division, fragmentation, disintegration, and sprawl lie at the heart” (p. 22) of the *novela negra*. After decades of being little more than translations of Anglophone detective fiction, the *novela negra* has emerged in “its geographical distribution, in its communities of producers, and in its intertextual imaginary” as “a fundamentally transatlantic and increasingly multinational enterprise […] whose industrial configuration reflects the renewed subordination of Spanish America in the current global economic order” (p. 19).

Placed in “an era in which large-scale migration from the countryside and the uncontrolled growth of cities […] has threatened the very intelligibility of the urban environment” (p. 19), Hispanic crime fiction portrays cities as filthy dens of crime, arenas where gladiators battle for survival, their weapons, not swords and tridents, but their own wits and ruthlessness. Morality is as cumbersome as a shoe with a broken strap and even less desirable. Taking the example of Rafael Bernal’s *The Mongolian Conspiracy*, a novel set in Mexico City, Close writes: “Bernal sketches a literary map of Mexico City […] on the level of a rubbish heap, a cesspool of violence, drugs, blood, and crime” (p. 46). Paco Ignacio Taibo II, whom Close cites the most for his status as “the most prolific exponent of the *novela negra* in Mexico” (p. 45), follows Bernal’s lead “in practicing a narrative mapping that delves deeply into the farthest reaches of debased and miserable lives” (p. 46).
Traditional instances of the *novela negra* trace “the origin of plausibly realistic crimes back to the dwelling places of the commercial, professional and political elites” (p. 47), something prevalent in contemporary fiction as well. However, it is differed because of turning “increasingly away from the detective subject and toward that of the criminal” (p. 19). This tendency is due to “no confidence in the rule of law” in Mexico (p. 29); “less than one in five crimes are reported, arrests are made in less than six percent of cases, and nine out of ten city residents express little or no confidence in their local police forces” (p. 48). Taibo views “local agents of political and economic power and of police management as exploiters and oppressors” (p. 37). The characters are part of “the untold legions of desperate survivors”, characters who are “witnesses to and chroniclers of the countless varieties of private and official violence by which residents of the city are beset” (p. 36). Yet, the have-nots are finding themselves cast in the roles of criminals as ruthless as the have, not helpless victims. In Hispanic crime fiction, with the forward progress of time, evil “has no beginning and resides in no one place” (p. 51). It is ubiquitous, too recalcitrant to be “contained by convenient narrative distinctions between good and bad subjects” (p. 51).

In conclusion, the most outstanding characteristics common between pieces of the *novela negra* are the setting, which is as seedy, mysterious, and dangerous as it can get, the narrative focus shifting from the detective to the criminal, the elites mostly being the nucleus of crime, with the characters living in not-so-favorable circumstances the victims of those crimes, hounded by violence which is as constant and oppressive as stench in a charnel house.

**Melchor’s Fiction’s Similarities to Hispanic Crime Fiction**

**Variegated Narratives**

*Hurricane Season* is set in “the metropolitan environment of not only infinite mystery and danger but also ubiquitous signs and endless interpretative possibilities” (Close, 2008, p. 20). In *Hurricane Season*, Munra is of the view that Luismi’s friend, “the engineer who’d disappeared months ago” was “no longer answer[ing] his calls” because of Luismi’s fallout with the Witch (p. 89). Either the Witch had cast a curse on Luismi or the engineer had found someone else. Brando’s perspective clarifies things later on. The engineer is revealed to be Luismi’s lover (p. 188) and that’s how Brando knows him and vice versa. He made a move on Brando (p. 192), who broke “his glasses and his nose too” (p. 193). The other characters never learn this.

“The dichotomy of solitude and solidarity is a constant” (Close, 2008, p. 35) in the characters. Part of “the untold legions of desperate survivors”, Melchor’s characters have a
solidarity as “witnesses to and chroniclers of the countless varieties of private and official violence by which residents of the city are beset” (Close, p. 36). In spite of this solidarity, the characters are more against each other than for, ‘desperate survivors’ a most apt description. The characters’ interactions are laced with disdain, distrust, and outright hostility, especially towards the females. In Hurricane Season, Yesenia is viewed by Luismi’s companions as “a skeletal runt with a massive hooter” (p. 184). She thinks of Munra as a “lazy bum […] a drunk […] who did nothing but drive around in his van” (p. 55). Munra thinks Norma is a freeloader who simpers to enjoy the free food and dwelling. He believes “Norma sold [Luismi] out to the police and landed the poor kid in jail” (p. 66). However, the social worker and the nurses “hadn’t got a word out of Norma, not even after screaming at her, telling her not to be an idiot, asking repeatedly for her boyfriend’s name” (p. 102). When Norma is threatened by the social worker with being an accessory to the crime, trying to browbeat Norma into telling her Luismi’s name, Norma “clamped her mouth shut and shook her head and didn’t say a word” (p. 103). Norma is loyal to Luismi, even though she has no fear or obligation. In Paradais, Polo thinks of Fatboy as a “spoiled little rich kid” (p. 19) who would “risk throwing everything down the drain just to poke some skanky bitch and confess his undying love to her” (p. 87).

Melchor diverts from the traditional paradigm of focus on the detective, narrating the story through varying perspectives of characters driven to crime. Every character has their own reality, each perspective apprising only the reader with the wider picture, reflecting the fragmentation of Mexican society and the cutthroat struggle for survival.

**Escapist Addictions**

In Hurricane Season and Paradais, most characters are addicted to cigarettes, drugs or alcohol, if not two or all. For the characters, their addictions become a way of avoiding their reality: as Munra believes, in Hurricane Season, “with booze the good things in life got better and the bad shit a little easier to stomach and the same was more or less true of weed” (p. 65).

In Hurricane Season, Norma notices Chabela’s “two rows of perfect albeit yellowish teeth” (p. 110). Throughout the scene, Chabela continues to smoke, hence the reason of her yellow teeth. In Paradais, Milton, after turning into a murderer, becomes a chain smoker, “his teeth nicotine-yellow from the chain smoking, which he kept up even as he drove, as though he could only breathe if through those golden filters” (p. 76).

In Hurricane Season, the company Luismi keeps consists of “wasters who spent their lives
getting shitfaced on booze and drugs, mugging unsuspecting locals in Villa’s park” (p. 49). Munra remembers “those pills, which Luismi guzzle[s] like sweets” (p. 65), sending him into a deathlike stupor. In Paradais, Polo is an inveterate alcoholic: “once he got going he’d pretty much drink whatever was going, as long as it left his head buzzing and his body numb” (p. 20). After guzzling down his drink, Polo would “wait for the warm, cottony relief to envelop his entire body, cushioning him from the world’s sharp edges” (p. 22). For him, drinking is necessary, “even if he spent the best part of the next day with a pounding head and acid reflux” (p. 44).

Rampant Crime
What’s a crime novel if there is no crime in it? Hurricane Season has crime strewn through it, and not the mundane kind. A crime alluded to, but not shown is human trafficking, which quickly escalates. Girls abducted from the border are “put to work in the knocking shops like slaves and when they’re no longer ripe for the picking”, their kidnappers “slaughter them like lambs […] chop them up into pieces and sell their meat to the roadside food stands as if it were a prime cut” (p. 53). Norma almost meets the same fate when is told by the driver of a pickup, “a blond fellow in dark glasses and a cowboy hat” to “get into the pickup” (p. 120). Luismi reveals him to be “a narco” who “regularly abducted girls just to hurt them” (p. 121). This grizzly fate is alluded to again when Munra feasts on “dog-meat ‘lamb’ consommé” quite indifferent to its being “lamb, dog, or human” (p. 71). In Melchor’s Mexican society, cannibalism evinces blasé reactions, especially because it is directed against helpless females.

Comparatively, Paradais is much tamer, but houses its fair share of crime. The criminals are shown to be as resourceful, organized, and effective as official government institutions. According to “the headline story told of a series of coordinated attacks at five petrol stations in the Boca del Río region […] the criminals had been driving motorbikes and were armed” (p. 74). This is an instance of effectiveness birthed by organized coordination. An instance of resourcefulness is Milton, who “cruised around in that luxury pickup with three brand-new cellphones clipped to his belt and a wallet full of five hundred-peso notes” (p. 77). The crime, around which the story centers, though hinted at throughout the narrative, is corralled at the end, where there is armed robbery, attempted rape, and more than one murder. Blood flies, brains litter the walls; there is liberal use of knife and gun. Before the crime, Fatboy and Polo, the perpetrators, go to Walmart to gather supplies required in the execution of their plan. The employee at Walmart is indifferent
when they ask for “kidnapper tape”, telling them the name of what they are looking for and even helping them find it, as if it’s something that happens every day like beheading the enemy and torturing heathens in medieval times. Polo is worried that she will call the police on them as “it was so obvious what they wanted all that for” (p. 105). Nothing of the sort happens. In Mexico, where “less than one in five crimes are reported” (Close, 2008, p. 19), no one would report a crime about to happen.

**Vagaries of Vicious Violence**

In Spanish America, violence is “a consistent presence that becomes a constitutive part of the social tapestry […] a social code that enters the urban environment as a strategy of social relationships and as a component of subjectivity” (Close, 2008, p. 52). Close contends that “a number of other novels published in recent years offer strong parallels in their reimaging of urban violence as depoliticized, intimately subjectivized” (p. 52). That’s an apt description of *Hurricane Season* and *Paradais*, who fit the description to a tee. The violence is not just physical, but imaginary as well. It is the imaginary seed that bears fruit in the physical world. In *Hurricane Season*, Brando, disgusted with his mother’s religiosity, would take one of his mother’s many “cuddly toys, gut it and burn it with petrol in the backyard, always imagining they were flesh and blood animals, real rabbits and bear cubs and doe-eyed kittens, squealing in agony” (p. 162). Prior to the Witch’s murder, “the only two things he could think about” were “killing and running away” (p. 194). He thinks about killing his mother, whose “sole contribution to the world was the carbon dioxide she exhaled with each breath” (p. 198).

Brando deals violence and is dealt violence. The police “beat the shit out of Brando until he was spitting blood” (p. 155). The police chief, Rigorito, tells Brando: “talk or I’ll drown you like the rat you are; talk or I’ll cut off your dick and shove it up your ass” (p. 157). Later, Brando feels “his crushed insides and the lacerated skin on his ass from all the thrashings” (p. 159). By the end of the interrogation, “even his pummelled bladder had failed him” and “covered in piss, barely able to walk and with a metallic taste in his mouth”, he is thrown in a cell (p. 160), where he sits “hunched in the one position that stopped his swollen insides from spilling out of the almost certainly haemorrhaging cavity of his abdomen” (p. 156).

At the end, from the perspective of no particular character, the readers learn that “it won’t be long before they send in the marines to restore order in the region”, a region teeming with
“decapitated bodies, maimed bodies, rolled-up, bagged-up bodies dumped on the roadside or in hastily dug graves on the outskirts of town” (p. 220). What follows is an account of crimes violent or sexual or both in nature, happening mostly because of or against women, including a farmer killing his son because “the father had his eyes on the son’s wife” (p. 221), a woman “chopped to pieces”, an infant abandoned by its parents, a man slashed to death, his skin “coming away in flaps” (p. 223): a fitting ending to a gut-wrenching narrative.

**Skeevy Sex**

Guillermo Fadanelli’s *La otra cara de Rock Hudson* (Rock Hudson’s Other Face, 1997) offers strong parallels with Melchor, especially with regards to sex: “Fadanelli’s utterly cheerless depiction of an urban existence dominated by poverty and crime is animated only by brief bursts of hard-boiled violence […] and sex that is either cruel, incestuous, or commercial” (Close, 2008, p. 54). The sex in Melchor’s two novels is misogynistic and violently so. Rape, underage sex, incest, and bestiality are the different hues of sex coloring Melchor’s narratives. Women, from the perspective of men, are shown to have no morals and restraint regarding sex.

In *Hurricane Season*, Brando and his gang of lowlife friends have sex with a girl, “hammered and pretty out of it” (p. 173), the five guys other than Brando taking turns even when the girl loses consciousness (p. 174). The sex turns into a one-sided punching session after the unconscious girl urinates on Brando just when he was about to have his turn.

Pepe tells Norma, his thirteen-year-old stepdaughter, that “she was the one who seduced him, begging for it with her eyes”, and “always spying on him when he did his exercises or took off his clothes for the shower”, and that “ever since she was a little girl you could see she’d be a goer, a regular fuck machine” (p. 136). Clandestine pinching and caressing escalate into fellatio and eventually, intercourse. Sex becomes a daily occurrence for Norma, until the day she decides to leave home, pregnant with her stepfather’s child.

The violent sexual misogyny climaxes when Brando stumbles upon a video “that would mark a turning point in his sexual life, in the world of his fantasies”, featuring “a skinny little girl with short hair and a boyish face, completely naked” and “an enormous black dog, a Great Dane cross […] a slavering brute that chased the girl incessantly around the room” (p. 166). The video ends after “the dog jumped on top of her and pinned down her shoulders with those ridiculous yellow sock-clad paws, and the girl leaned in” to perform fellatio on the dog (p. 167). Brando is left to imagine the apparently imminent intercourse, unable “to wipe [it] from his mind over the
following months”, viewing himself as “an enormous black dog” whenever “one of the girls in class” bent down “to pick up a pencil from the floor” (p. 167). To quell his frustration, Brando sneaks out at nights to “places where the slippery shadows of stray dogs congregated to fornicate in hallowed silence, with their tongues dangling and their sexes swollen”, the bared fangs of the males “commanding respect for the hierarchy dictated by the panting desire of the bitch”. Brando wonders: “How did she ever choose?” (p. 168).

*Paradais* is literally the story of a boy, Fatboy, obsessed with satisfying his lust and going to murderous lengths to achieve that end. After seeing Señora Marián, Fatboy’s porn collection “suddenly seemed shit; grotesque, a sham” (p. 14). Fatboy’s lust is so compulsive, he is willing to kill and then hide the evidence: “we’ll chop them [Señora Marián and her husband and son] up into pieces so they [the police] think it was the narcos!” (p. 87). “Why would someone like that risk throwing everything down the drain just to poke some skanky bitch and confess his undying love to her?” (p. 87), Polo wonders, as “if a rotten swamp of a cunt justified all that effort, all that energy, the carnage that was to come, their lives devastated” (p. 107). Fatboy “didn’t need to make a future for himself because sooner or later his grandparents would buy him one, no expense spared” (p. 87). Still, his obsession, as obvious as the sun in a desert noon in June, is something one would have to be “thick as shit” to ignore.

Polo blames Zorayda, his cousin, “for throwing herself at him whenever they were alone, baiting him with her stupid little games, with her nasty ways” (p. 85), thinking how he is manipulated by “Zorayda’s great skill, her astounding facility to transform right before your eyes and project whichever image people wanted from her”, how “the crazy bitch who would do anything to fuck Polo” even when “he’d never asked for it, he’d never given her any ideas; he barely ever looked at her” (p. 48).

**Greedy and Gruesome: The Police of Veracruz**

In Mexico, “there is no confidence in the rule of law,” something repeatedly observed in *Hurricane Season*. “The impunity of the corrupt and powerful is a given” (Close, 2008, p. 29). Additionally: “Taibo sees local agents of political and economic power and of police management as exploiters and oppressors” (p. 37). This is true of Melchor’s fiction too. In comparison to *Hurricane Season*, however, Melchor holds back on the political commentary in *Paradais*, the police rarely making an appearance.

In *Hurricane Season*, the “seven uniformed police officers – who together constituted
Villagarbosa’s long arm of the law” (p. 35) are referred to as “those fuckers from the police department – those heartless motherfuckers, may they rot in hell, every last one of them” (p. 36). Melchor begins her polemic against the police from drugs: “As if the police didn’t know […] about how they make their drug money right there in the park” (p. 50). Her incision turns find depth further into the narrative when Luismi, advising Norma about the pickup, tells her that she should never “go asking the police for help, because those fuckers worked for the same boss, and at the end of the day they were basically the same thing” as the kidnappers (p. 121).

Melchor depicts police’s brutality in nightmarish detail when Brando is arrested and beaten by the police: “until he was spitting blood”, the police “wanted to know where the money was, what they’d done with the money, where they’d hidden it” (p. 155). To make Brando confess, the police “pulled down his piss-soaked shorts and tied his hands to a pipe hanging from the ceiling” (p. 158). They are careful “not to hit him in the face, so the reporters could come and take his photo the next day without everyone going around saying they’d beaten Brando’s confession out of him” (p. 159). At the end of the novel, Luismi is “a skinny, emaciated kid with curly hair matted with blood, his mouth bruised and bulbous and his eyes swollen shut” (p. 216), roughed up by “Rigorito’s pigs, who clearly didn’t give a fuck about the journalists or the photographers or human fucking rights” (p. 217).

**Melchor’s Fiction’s Differences to Hispanic Crime Fiction**

**Undetectable Environment**

Melchor, preoccupied with social agents, does not pay much attention to the setting of her works, stopping to look at the squalid scenery. The environment is, for the most part, described in short order. There are instances of evocative imagery, however. The setting of *Hurricane Season* is hardly ever pleasant, if at all. Munra describes the Witch’s house: “crap spread all over the place and the kitchen stinking of rotten food, and the opposite wall […] plastered in scratched-out porno images and spray paint” (p. 93). The Witch’s house is a microcosm of Veracruz, where the novel is set. Norma’s family lives in “a single room with no partition walls, a concrete block and cement box in the shadow of a five-storey building that robbed them of every last drop of the sun’s warmth” (p. 101). In spite of these, Melchor is far from other Hispanic crime fiction writers and the prominence the environment enjoys in their narratives.

**Criminal Survivors**

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Close observes that the traditional instances of the *novela negra* trace “the origin of plausibly realistic crimes back to the dwelling places of the commercial, professional and political elites” (2008, p. 47). Likewise, “[i]n Taibo’s political geography, criminal plots are hatched from within the sanctuaries of power (mansions, corporate offices, police stations)” (p. 41). *Hurricane Season* and *Paradais*, like certain contemporaries “center on the agents rather than the opponents of criminal violence” (p. 53) though, the people on the lowest rung of the social ladder, however, are not innocent bystanders but vicious criminals. The plotters of crime are low-lives with meager resources and ambition that may not be to control a business or territory or trounce a rival clan, but just improve their living standards, escape the daily dreariness that is their life, have a better chance of surviving.

Both Brando and Polo desire to leave their environment out of disgust. Brando, in *Hurricane Season*, is dogged about committing the crime because “he had to get out of there […] because he couldn’t think about anything else” (p. 201). He “was sick of being cooped up with his mother”, “sick of that town” (p. 202), “sick of drugs and booze […] his friends were all a bunch of poor cunts and his mother was a fool” (p. 194). In *Paradais*, Polo “slept on the baking, rock-hard floor with just a flimsy old mat under his tired bones” (p. 44). He agrees to commit the crime Fatboy invites him to because “[w]hat was so wrong with wanting to earn some real money, wanting to be free and to have a sense of worth, of purpose, the closest thing to a life goal Polo had ever felt?” (p. 78). Polo is willing to “get his hands dirty” with armed robbery and murder just so “he’d never have to set foot in his house or Progreso again” (p. 85), not demurring from “break[ing] his balls working for a while if it meant escaping the rattrap that had been his life” (p. 93). The reason behind Polo doing everything he did, the whole enchilada, was because “all [he] had ever wanted was to put off going home”. Being “sick to death of it all, that town, his job, his mother’s lectures and his cousin’s digs, sick of the life he led”, he went to lengths unimaginable to achieve his life goal: “to be free, free goddammit […] Free, whatever it took” (p. 118).

**Homosexuality**

“The male protagonists” of “Fadanelli and Villarreal seek to prove their nonconformism by violating sexual taboos […] almost invariably at the expense of women” while shunning “the only taboo whose transgression would threaten their identification as machos: that of homosexuality” (Close, 2008, p. 54). Contrastingly, both Luismi and Brando engage in homosexuality. Brando still
reinforces homosexuality as “a sordid attack on his manhood”, “the idea of kissing a fairy […] repugnant to him.” He thinks Luismi “a filthy fucking animal” because “he and the Witch smothered each other in kisses” (p. 183), because the Witch is actually a man (p. 94). However, while Luismi is passed out beside Brando, the latter makes his unconscious friend perform fellatio on him (p. 191) and later, fantasizes about how they would “finish what they started that night on Luismi’s bed” (p. 201). Luismi is in a relationship with an engineer (p. 188). He is also the Witch’s lover, much to Brando’s disgust. Melchor, with her male characters engaging in a taboo hitherto non-existent in Hispanic crime fiction, takes the power away from males, bashing notions of macho-ism.

Conclusion

Melchor borrows heavily from Hispanic crime fiction, her fiction affected by the evolution the novela negra has undergone over the decades. Multiple points-of-view, shift from the perspective of the detective to the criminal’s (criminals’), the evil endemic in the elite, the police as agents instead of suppressors of oppression, and the virulent violence the narrative is vibrant with; all these features make Melchor stand tall among the traditional male novela negra authors. The difference is one of feminism; more preoccupation with misogyny and violence against women, who are helpless in a patriarchal society overrun with crime. The focus moves away from the evil plans concocted in the air-conditioned drawing rooms of the elite, bringing to light that evil is ubiquitous, not concentrated at the top. Melchor’s concerns are less political and more social, the actions of her characters rooted in personal ambition instead of political. The characters act out of a drive of individual pleasure and satisfaction, not obeying the whims of a higher authority, thus proving that human beings are violent against each other not because they are ordered to, but just because they are, their evil entirely their own.
References


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