

Preface

The subject of crime fiction has been widely analysed in both US and Latin American contexts. Attention has been drawn to the ways in which issues such as race, class, gender, and genre have been manipulated in order to shed new light on a range of diverse cultural contexts. However, despite the multiplicity of works which abound in the field of contemporary US and Latin American crime fiction studies, as yet there has been relatively little scholarship focusing on Cuban-American crime fiction. The primary work in the field of Latino/a crime fiction studies has tended to concentrate on Chicano/a authors. This study therefore aims to fill a critical gap by taking as its central focus the cultural and literary relationship between Cuba and the United States as represented in a range of contemporary crime writers living on and off the island.

The choice to include analyses of the crime fiction of the Cuban Leonardo Padura Fuentes, alongside the Cuban exile José Latour and the Cuban Americans Alex Abella and Carolina Garcia-Aguilera was motivated by a desire to create new connections between works written both within and outside Cuba during the period of the 1990s and the early twenty-first century. The writers chosen for this study would not normally be studied together as a cohesive group. Leonardo Padura Fuentes has lived all his life in Cuba, while José Latour was born in Cuba and then emigrated to Spain and Canada in his later adult life. Carolina Garcia-Aguilera and Alex Abella were both born in Cuba but they emigrated to the US as children. Although Leonardo Padura Fuentes has received a certain amount of critical attention in recent years, the other writers under discussion have not been so widely analysed.

This study can be situated within the context of debates regarding generic labelling and globalization. The increased internationalization of the book market has meant that the novels of Leonardo Padura Fuentes have been translated into several languages and distributed to various countries

around the world. Many of Carolina Garcia-Aguilera's novels are available in both Spanish and English versions. The globalization of the literary market place has also led to an increased generic hybridity which makes both the works and identities of these writers hard to pin down. All of these authors draw on both Cuban and US literary and cultural traditions. The boundaries between the terms Cuban, Cuban exile, and Cuban American become increasingly difficult to define as cultural and linguistic barriers are challenged by the output and reception of their work. This is exemplified particularly in the case of José Latour whose first language is Spanish, but who writes in English about the cultural relationship between the US and Cuba, despite not currently residing in either country. The themes of his fiction link to both Cuban and Cuban-American contexts yet he does not really fit fully into either categorization.

This contemporary trend of cultural and generic fluidity has led Persephone Braham to invoke the term "postnational" in order to define the direction in which contemporary crime fiction is going:

Migration, expanded means of communication, and the growing interest in the phenomena of boundaries and crossings, including Latino/a detective fiction, transnationality and narratives about the Mexico-United States border, have already begun to blur the boundaries between Mexican and North American, Spanish and Cuban detective fiction. (106)

The use of the term postnational draws attention to the limitations of generic labelling and the international dimension of much contemporary crime fiction. The term could also be applied to a critical study such as this one. Rather than taking a selection of writers who would all typically be classified as belonging to one particular group such as Cuban, Cuban American, or Cuban exile, I have chosen to focus on a range of authors who encompass all these categories. I explore how their generically hybrid works illuminate issues concerning genre, gender, ethnicity, migration, and the individual's relationship with the state. Thus, despite the differences in the respective cultural backgrounds and output of these writers, they do share certain thematic concerns which provide a sense of cohesiveness to the overall study.

Although the application of the term postnational points to the aesthetic and cultural changes brought about by the impact of globalization in the twenty-first century there is a danger that such a blanket term could undermine the cultural specificity of these writers' works. What makes their fiction distinctive is not only the way in which they push back generic and cultural boundaries but also the precision of their individual insights into certain contexts. Padura Fuentes provides a detailed dramatization of issues relating to censorship and masculinity in the Havana of 1989 onwards, while Abella explores the conflicts and contradictions inherent in trying to forge a Cuban-American sense of identity in 1990s Los Angeles. All of the writers to varying degrees offer some direct comparisons between the social and cultural problems experienced by Cubans who have left Havana to go to the US, or Cuban Americans or Cuban exiles who have returned to Cuba after having lived in the US. The device of shuttling backwards and forwards between the locations of Miami and Havana is particularly prominent in the novels of Garcia-Aguilera and Latour; it underscores problems of cultural assimilation into the US, nostalgia for the homeland of Cuba, and also the sense of not quite belonging in either context. The works of these writers therefore combine a vivid depiction of certain locations and characters with an openness to international influences. While the terms Cuban, Cuban American, and Cuban exile are not redundant, it is useful to consider the limitations inherent in a too absolute fixing of generic and cultural labels.

The increased popularity of contemporary Latino/a crime fiction should be understood within the context not only of publishers' marketing strategies but also of reader reception. The latter point is picked up by Eva Erdmann who argues that the global community of crime fiction readers has become a kind of "community of conspirators" instrumental in driving the direction in which contemporary crime fiction has developed (16). As Erdmann states: "The interculturality of current crime fiction is based on the need of the inhabitants of a global village for similarly global, ethnographic and anthropological general knowledge" (25). The appeal to the European or US readers of contemporary Cuban or Mexican crime fiction therefore lies not only in the vicarious entry into an exotic world which offers an escape from everyday life, but also in the fact that readers

find in these texts issues concerning gender, violence, and ethnicity which resonate with their own cultural contexts.

The exploration of certain cultural and political issues deriving from Cuban and US contexts and the interaction between these cultures are reflected to the reader through the generic experimentation in which these writers engage. All the writers under discussion have been influenced to some extent by the US hard-boiled version of crime fiction which came to prominence in the 1930s and 1940s through key works written by writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. The individualist Private Investigator, an urban setting in which crime is endemic, and a mistrust of social and political structures to deliver justice are elements which can be found in the work of the contemporary writers in this study. However, it is also possible to discern in these writers other cultural influences which include the legacy of the socialist or revolutionary form of Cuban crime fiction prominent in the 1970s and 1980s, the impact of the Afro-Cuban religion of Santería, and the Latin American trend of magical realism.

In the chapters which follow I investigate how the diverse generic sources from which these writers draw their inspiration enable them to create innovative works which reveal tensions between different literary and cultural traditions deriving from both Cuba and the US. My analysis reveals how aesthetic experimentation is linked to cultural and political concerns. The depiction of the detective, criminality, and urban space in the work of these writers provides a way of exploring wide ranging issues concerning individualism, gender, migration, ethnicity, and artistic creativity. The opening up of an intercultural dialogue helps to illuminate the fluid relationship between US and Cuban cultures.