Fabricio Tocco. *Latin American Detectives Against Power: Individualism, the State, and Failure in Crime Fiction*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022. 235 pp. ISBN: 978-1-7936-5164-8.

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Fabricio Tocco's *Latin American Detectives Against Power: Individualism, the State, and Failure in Crime Fiction* (2022) highlights the importance of Latin American modern detective fiction to achieve a better understanding of the region's history and politics. This book exposes literary studies to current debates on political theory, history, and gender. Tocco traces a literary history of the figure of the detective from Europe to Latin America, or more specifically the Southern Cone, but he also shows the specificity of the region's detective. That is, if detective fiction is a genre that canonically opposes the individual

(the detective) against the world (the people, the state, the criminals, and the police), for Tocco, Southern Cone detective fiction overcomes this opposition through a "poetics of failure," the cancelation of the putative promise of social order by contractual politics. Tocco sheds light on the way the Southern Cone exposes the exhaustion of many key concepts of the modern European episteme: no sovereign, no "people," and no heroic detective. However, this raises the question: How do we continue reading these narratives? According to *Latin American Detectives Against Power,* we should think in terms of community and the impersonal multitude.

Organized in six chapters, *Latin American Detectives Against Power* departs from a detailed survey of some of the canonical figures of detective fiction. In the first chapter, focusing on the Anglo-American tradition, Tocco underscores how the rivalry between the sleuth, the criminals, and the police is but a stage on which solving a crime is not the most important thing, but "doing so in the face of the state" (12) is. Hence, the individual (the detective) and its rivalry against the world is a by-product of state domination. In these terms, detectives like Edgar Allan Poe's Monsieur Dupin or Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes are moved by the need to prove how their sharp minds outsmart the state. What is at stake in the early moments of the genre, Tocco suggests, is not depicting justice, but the struggle for stating who is "the one responsible for making that justice" (13). Sovereignty is the name of the game that detectives, police, and criminals play in early Anglo-American detective fiction. This, of course, is tied to the way the figure of the state is not necessarily challenged by the genius detective but on how both the state and the sleuth are accomplices.

While in the Anglo-American canon the detective is immune to the state's force at the convenience of both, in the second chapter, Tocco traces how the Latin American tradition subverts this pact. Indeed, if the immune Sherlock Holmes solved crimes to have a laugh at the police, Tocco begins to unmask

this attribute. Reading from Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares's *Seis problemas para Don Isidro Parodi* (1942), Tocco argues that parody in early Argentinean detective fiction opens up the possibility for showing how the state is "the main source of crime itself," and by consequence, the Latin American sleuth suffers from a "systemic failure" (52). Precisely, in an ambitious chapter that focuses on the work of three canonical Argentinian authors, Jorge Luis Borges, Rodolfo Walsh, and Ricardo Piglia, Tocco signals how from an immune and genius individual the detective becomes a failed intellectual. These authors are paving the way for a poetics of failure "in which neither individuals nor benevolent state officers can restore social justice" (62). These poetics should be understood as a productive deconstruction of the association between the pen and the sword, that has shaped Latin America in many ways. And more, Tocco invites us to think that the whirlwind of events that mark Argentina throughout the twentieth century, from being the first democracy of Latin America, to becoming a country where constituent power ejected five presidents in two weeks, is tied to a general unmasking of the state's fetishization over the constituent power. If the canonical Anglo-American detective fiction centered on the Hobbesian fiction of the sovereign, the Argentinian detective fiction tradition depicts a hollow state, a state symbolically disabled. To this mute-deafness of the state, Tocco stresses, the Argentinian detective fiction says: "there is no such thing as a benevolent state" (100).

Tocco now moves to other geographic regions (Chile, Brazil, and the Mexico/US border) and authors (Roberto Bolaño and Rubem Fonseca) where the crumbling pieces of the post-sovereign order are also visible. The third and fourth chapter subtly communicate between each other. The state muteness is explored in Bolaño's *Estrella distante* (1996). Tocco reads, in this novel, the transition from dictatorship to democracy in Chile through the figure of Carlos Wieder, a.k.a. Alberto Ruiz-Tagle, an organic avantgarde poet and assassin during the dictatorship. While Wieder is killed after the transition to democracy,

in a private party, his death does not bring restitution for his crimes. The poet, a quiet individual himself, not only represents the state's symbolic muteness and force through his poems, but also shows that the canonical opposition between individual and world is over. In this character, Tocco sees how "the individualistic hero merges into a *mundus* that is also ambivalent, polysemic and susceptible of symbiotic paralysis" (117). This means that the individual is no longer immune, that its mythic features have vanished into the murky waters of constituted power. With all this in mind, Tocco underscores one of the biggest problems of the Southern Cone transitions to democracy: their "silent pact of transition" (120). If the individual, like Sherlock Holmes, made a pact with the constituted power by exposing their lack of dexterity and laughing at them, in Bolaño we learn that silence is the new rule for assuring a contractual order. And more, by the way Wieder transforms verbosity (of his victims) into silence, Tocco suggests, "Bolaño's novel builds a world in which [verbosity] is now subjugated by the silent literacy of the murderer (post)dictatorial state" (121) represented by Wieder. While the individual fades in *Estrella distante*, in Rubem Fonseca's *Agosto* (1990), a detective fiction that reconstructs the last bits of Getúlio Vargas's regime in August 1954, the world crumbles apart. If the dissolution of the almighty detective was already a point of no return, through Tocco's reading of *Agosto* in the fourth chapter we witness how "the Brazilian state [becomes] a suicidal state, a state whose members go against each other... a sort of *mundus contra mundus*" (148). If the task of the state was to create individuals, it all crumbles in *Agosto*. Tocco sees in Mattos, the main character of the novel, an embodiment of the self-destruction of the state. Since Mattos suffers from an ulcer that never is cured, this ailment tells us about a flow coming out of him, something burning inside that is slowly killing him, like the state itself.

What happens when the opposition between individual and the world is torn apart? Tocco formulates a provocative answer in the last two chapters.

Through a reading of Bolaño's "La parte de los crímenes," the central section of the author's posthumous *2666* (2004), Tocco deploys and develops the category the impersonal multitude. In Bolaño's Santa Teresa, a fictional border town in northern Mexico where women are systematically killed and the crimes are unpunished, just like in real life Ciudad Juarez, the notions of symbolic muteness and blindness, personalization and depersonalization, community and multitude go all "a step further in an exacerbation of poetics of failure" (153). That step further rightly shows how in "La parte de los crímenes" it does not make sense to speak again about the conflict between individual against the world. In fact, the crimes depicted by Bolaño are rather pointing to an impersonal force, and Tocco astutely notes how this force is everywhere throughout "La parte de los crímenes." Hence, the constant use of impersonal sentences in the text points toward an "inversion of the oppressive impersonality of the law, the market, and of the state into an impersonal emancipatory form of collective justice" (192). What Tocco underscores here is the aporia of the way the crimes are both committed and presented in the narrative. If they are written in the impersonal voice of Spanish (using the *se* pronoun), the crimes are an aporia anyone could be committing, and at the same time no one is. Since the crimes entangle two multitudes, one of the killed bodies and another impersonal, what emerges from these ruins is a community yet to come: an impersonal multitude. Rightly so, Tocco concludes that the community cannot be aligned to the people (the constituted subjectivity that responds to the sovereign), but that the impersonal multitude offers a chance for a terrain where the monsters of sovereignty have finally vaporized. We live in a world where "the incarnation of the traditional masculine sovereign" vanishes, and this offers "the emergence of an impersonal multitude, one that aims to be emancipated from class and gender oppressive mechanisms" (200). Tocco advocates for a radical skepticism towards the individual, towards the state.

Latin American Detectives Against Power is an interesting and important

contribution to the field of Southern Cone Studies. While the study of Southern Cone literature is inhabited by constant renewals of individuality and subjectivity, Tocco reminds us that all of that is gone. Along with Tocco we should say: "long live the Community!" (198). And two more mottos: No more of the same individuality! Long live the poetics of failure! But what happens after the clamor of these mottos has passed? Would we become impersonal, and it won't matter who said what, or whose words were whose? But weren't we always impersonal? To put it differently, why is the clamor of the impersonal multitude, that Tocco describes, only available to us after the dictatorship period in the Southern Cone? Where was the impersonal multitude before? Were there other types of multitudes? Precisely, if the impersonal multitude only emerges after the collapse of the individual and the state, then, in Tocco it is the state who produces the impersonal multitude. And more, how does this impersonal multitude relate to other multitudes? That is, what, if any, is the relationship between Tocco's take on this concept and others? At times it seems that Tocco misses important leads that could strength his case. Or perhaps this is on purpose because if the "private eye has often read everything there is to be read well before his adversaries" (39), then Tocco refuses to become a sleuth himself. But does he?

Along these lines, the biggest challenge that Tocco faces is that he dismantles the figures of the individual and the state but does not destroy the logic that sustains both. That is in *Latin American Detectives* there is a teleology that safely displaces and replaces the logic of the subject for the logic of the impersonal multitude. Hence, one wonders if Tocco's multitude is not but another new subjectivity; an impersonal multitude, yes, but still an agent of individuality looking for a state-form. Perhaps against Tocco's arguments, but not entirely in disagreement, the impersonal multitude has always been there. But then again, why weren't we able to hear the multitude's clamor in Poe or Conan Doyle? That is, why is Tocco not showing us where to find the

multitude in canonical detective fiction? Indeed, Tocco notes that the one telling the story of Monsieur Dupin is an anonymous narrator, a nobody (12), but this anonymity is never compared to impersonality. And by extension, the impersonal multitude seems to evade or hide from Tocco's own arguments as early as the first chapter. But perhaps, this is on purpose, since Tocco's main contribution is to consider the potential of detective fiction, to take the mystery that unfolds as we read the pages of a detective story seriously, to become a detective oneself, a detective that cannot solve all mysteries, but knows how to write about them.