

Introduction

ARGENTINA NOIR

En este lío en el que estamos, tengo la sensación de que hoy es mejor no hacer periodismo, y ponerse a escribir ficción.

—Claudia Piñeiro, quoted in Aguirre,
“Los temas están en el aire y uno los baja”

CRIME FICTION IS A WORLDWIDE PHENOMENON THAT IS EXPLODING IN POPULARITY. Acclaimed crime novels hail from the frigid climes of Scandinavia to Shanghai’s dark alleys, from Cape Town to Hamburg. French and Italian novelists continue their countries’ well-established traditions of detective and crime fiction, and Latin America and Spain have many first-rate practitioners of the genre. Crime fiction has proven to be infinitely adaptable to diverse cultural milieu as authors use this global genre for local expression. Praising its vivid and persuasive engagement with social reality, Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen describes crime fiction as a mode of writing that is “well suited for capturing societies undergoing dramatic change, for representing and responding directly to an age of social conflicts, risks and inequalities,” in particular the crises and conflicts of the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries (7). Whether these works depict systemic violence and corruption or discrete crimes viewed as symptoms of deeper and wider social processes (Stougaard-Nielsen 5), what varies from society to society is the explanation for the genesis of crime. Reporter Alexandra Alter, in her assessment of the international crime fiction publishing industry, notes that crime writers around the globe blend “classic suspense story telling techniques with regional themes and literary styles” (2). For example, Japanese novels depict exceedingly polite interrogation techniques; South African crime fiction often includes nods to the lingering effects of apartheid; in Italian novels, Albanian, Serbian, and Asian immigrants replace home-grown mafiosos as crime lords; and Latin American

crime fiction frequently centers on drug trafficking and police corruption. Accompanying its expanded output and readership, crime fiction is enjoying a renewed critical interest. At a recent convention of the Modern Language Association, six sessions included one or more presentations dedicated to crime fiction, with papers discussing works and authors from Germany, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, the United States, Asia (specifically Japan and Korea), and Africa (Kenya and Nigeria). Repeated topics in these presentations included crime fiction's hybridization and globalization, its critique of neoliberalism, and the presence of female detectives.

Argentina's literary scene is an important participant in the worldwide surge in the production of works of crime fiction, many of which are regarded as serious literary endeavors, as opposed to a form of mass entertainment. While crime and detective fiction in Argentina have traditionally enjoyed a steady following and a certain academic prestige, recent decades have seen a significant uptick in the publication and consumption of crime novels, or *novelas negras*. Numerous Argentine writers have spoken to the vital role of this genre within their national cultural patrimony as well as its burgeoning popularity. Sergio Olguín has declared crime fiction to be the genre that best represents Argentine literature, and Pablo De Santis has gone as far as to say, "Crime fiction has totally invaded literature. . . . The idea of telling a story that connects to another hidden story is something that is in our narrative unconscious."¹ Olguín stresses crime fiction's crucial function in representing political and social reality in Argentina: "Today it is almost impossible to think about the political novel: the only way to think about politics is through crime fiction, because crime and politics have been closely linked in recent years. Crime fiction is also the social novel. . . . Political and social themes have been absorbed by crime fiction, and in turn have transformed it: it is the easiest vehicle to bring these aspects into literature without falling into pamphletism or a didactic register." Thus among Argentine writers, crime fiction is the "go-to genre" for political and social critique.

Argentina Noir proposes to serve as a guide to Argentine crime fiction, with a focus on works published in the new millennium. While this introductory chapter traces the history of the genre and provides an overview of the contemporary scene, chapters 1 through 5 concentrate on selected works published since the year 2000. Each chapter centers on a major theme in contemporary Argentine crime fiction, presenting a close and original reading of two or three representative novels preceded by sociopolitical

background information to clarify the issues that the works engage. The organizing principles of this book are formal, thematic, and sociohistorical, and I incorporate literary theory selectively to elucidate how these texts present particular subject matter and dialogue with literary traditions. At the beginning of this chapter I cite Alter's observation that drug trafficking and police corruption are repeated themes in Latin American crime fiction, and the Argentine case is no exception. Indeed, the Argentine *novela negra's* critique of organized crime—specifically drug and human trafficking—enabled by institutional corruption is the first topic I address, in chapter 1. The subsequent chapter deals with the local iteration of a regional concern: it features novels that employ investigative journalists as detectives to ferret out corruption during the presidency of Carlos Menem in Argentina. In chapter 3, I focus on a problem that plagues countries around the world but has been unique to Argentina within a Latin American context: fundamentalist terror attacks that are an outgrowth of the Middle Eastern conflict. The final chapters—4 and 5—return to Argentine versions of regional and global concerns: the exacerbation of class difference, brought about, in large part, by the wholesale adoption of market-based economic policy. My analysis of these texts also explores how they adapt major motifs and figures in Hispanic crime fiction, including city mapping, the absence of a detective, the failure of justice, gender relations, the female detective, the allure of consumer culture, national identity, and the role of the media. Furthermore, I analyze the configuration and the significance of literary tendencies and techniques such as generic hybridity, intertextuality, and metafictional strategies.

While there exists a large body of criticism dealing with Hispanic crime fiction, this book is the first to present an overview of the production of Argentine crime fiction with a focus on works with a sociopolitical orientation and, in particular, works produced since 2000. Its reading of selected novels addresses how these works expose and denounce some fundamental issues that Argentine society faces or has faced in recent decades, and its incorporation of sociological studies provides empirically based background information that helps us understand the situations that the novels engage. My goal in writing this book is to provide an authoritative, historically rich guide to this body of literature, its conventions, and the social ills it works to redress.

A repeated argument of this book is that crime fiction is employed by many Argentine authors to critique changes brought about by the adoption

of neoliberal policies, a widespread use of the genre acknowledged by numerous critics.² This theme is especially relevant to Argentine literature and cultural criticism due to Argentina's heavy-handed adoption of neoliberal policies. Argentina was considered the star pupil among the Latin American countries that pursued economic globalization and adopted market-oriented economic policies in the 1990s. While this process was initiated in the 1970s under the military dictatorship, the implementation reached a frenetic pace in the last decade of the twentieth century due to President Carlos Menem's ardent embrace of policies advocated by the Washington Consensus.³ His presidency, which lasted from 1989 to 1999, ushered in a drastic transformation of Argentina's economic structure. The old model of state intervention and protectionism had left a legacy of "chronic 'stagflation' (stagnant production and persistent inflation)," and the debt crisis of 1982 resulted in the so-called lost decade of the 1980s, during which hyperinflation climbed to mind-boggling levels and per capita income sank (Lewis xii). A key aspect of Menem's neoliberal economic program called for the privatization of utilities and nationalized industries, and the hasty and haphazard way in which this was carried out made it possible for government officials to enrich themselves via influence-peddling and kickbacks. Wealth became increasingly concentrated among those who benefited from the structural changes, while import deregulation eroded domestic industry and, along with privatization, led to unprecedented levels of unemployment and poverty. At the same time, austerity policies compromised public security and dismantled the safety net of state welfare programs. In order to restore economic stability, Menem's economic minister, Domingo Cavallo, implemented convertibility, pegging the Argentine peso to the US dollar. While this measure succeeded in halting hyperinflation, it resulted in a lack of policy flexibility, preventing Argentina from devaluing the peso to balance the budget once the wave of financial crises hit emerging-market countries in 1997–98 (Reid 132). The fiscal strategy of the Menem administration produced an initial burst of prosperity, but the manner in which it was implemented, along with other factors, eventually led to the economic, political, and social crisis of 2001.

The arrival to power in 2003 of the left-wing populist Néstor Kirchner drastically changed the course of Argentine economic policies, shifting from neoliberal to neo-Keynesian solutions. Kirchner's plans focused on the rebuilding of Argentina's industrial base, the establishment of public works and services, and the renegotiation of the operation of privatized public

services. While the economy experienced a period of significant growth between 2003 and 2009, 30 percent of Argentines still lived under the poverty line. Succeeding her husband for a two-term mandate from 2007 to 2015, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's policies did not substantially alter economic trends, nor have they improved Argentina's social inequalities.

Decades of failed economic policies, along with pervasive political corruption, have had a lasting effect on Argentine society. The fear of crime has driven the affluent to gated communities while impoverished Argentines and immigrants live in ever-proliferating *villas misera* (shantytowns). Sociologists speak of the "Latin Americanization" of Argentina—a crisis in the self-image of a society that had prided itself as being different from the rest of Latin America—and declare that Argentina can no longer claim to be a middle-class society. The notion of Buenos Aires as the "Paris of South America" has come to be the stuff of nostalgia or illusion. The perpetrators of high-profile crimes during the 1990s—most notably the bombing of the Israeli embassy and a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires—were never brought to justice and authorities were suspected of mishandling the investigations. The Argentine populace lost confidence in its political class as well as the forces of law and order.

The economic and social insecurity of the 1990s and beyond coincided with the rise in the popularity and production of *novelas negras* in Argentina. This "boomlet" has been consecrated by newly minted festivals celebrating the *novela negra*: the Festival Azabache, Buenos Aires Negra! (BAN!), and Córdoba Mata. To what can we attribute the flourishing of the *novela negra* in Argentina? Critics often seek connections between sociological phenomena and literary trends—a case in point is Jonathan Auerbach's study of film noir, which ventures the hypothesis that there could be no American film noir without the FBI (24). An explanation proffered for the recent surge of the crime novel in Argentina is that it is well suited to registering the social malaise brought about by changes linked to neoliberalism and globalization. Could there be a contemporary Argentine *novela negra* without the heavy-handed and irresponsible implementation of market-driven economic policies accompanied by widespread political corruption? Certainly, the reply is yes, but the conditions generated by the repressive dictatorship of 1976–83 and by failed economic policies and corruption have helped define its parameters and contribute to its popularity and its status as the favored genre for many writers. "Since about 1990," observes critic Misha Kokotovic, "most of the [Latin American] continent has experienced something of a

boom in narratives that use elements of detective or crime fiction to criticize the effects of neoliberal, free market capitalism imposed on Latin American societies over the past two decades” (15). He refers to this literary phenomenon as “neoliberal noir,” a term that characterizes many of the novels featured in this study. An important tendency in cultural studies is to understand literature as a response to larger social and political processes, and this book will look at how crime novels—at the same time that they captivate and thrill us—tell a tale of Argentine society against a backdrop of social change, dysfunctional economics, and endemic corruption.

The subsequent chapters of this book will examine selected Argentine crime novels, all published since the turn of the century, to explore how they engage and critique determined aspects of Argentine society. Hayden White’s essay “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” informs my reading of the “historical” content of some of the novels that are based on or inspired by real events. He argues that histories make stories out of chronicles by an operation he calls “emplotment”: the encodation of facts “as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures,” such as romances, comedies, or tragedies (83–84). By means of their emplotment, White contends, “the historical narrative does not *reproduce* the events it describes; it tells us in what direction to think about the events and charges our thought about the events with different emotional valences” (91). Following White’s line of thought, we can observe that authors who use elements of the crime fiction genre to “emplot” actual events, or simply to portray contemporary society, are shaping our disposition toward these events or toward the society they depict. Seeing society through the lens of crime, with officialdom as the main criminal or in cahoots with the criminals, communicates a pointed criticism, conveying a scenario of widespread and intractable corruption and social disorder.

FROM THE WHODUNIT TO THE *NOVELA NEGRA*: THE POETICS OF CRIME FICTION

In large part, Argentine detective and crime fiction shares a common history with the rest of Hispanic letters. In the Hispanic world, detective literature originated as an imitation or parody of the classic British-style mystery—also called whodunit, enigma, puzzle-based, analytic, and ratiocinative—practiced by Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie and popularized in Argentina by Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares. In recent decades, however, cultivation of the genre has undergone a transition toward

the *novela negra*, which derives from the North American hard-boiled subgenre initiated in the 1920s (known as *novela dura* in Spanish) with Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler as its foremost practitioners. No longer an intellectual game, hard-boiled crime fiction instead emphasizes social critique, depicting a world in crisis and casting a critical eye on the sources of corruption and economic exploitation. The subgenre flourished in the US in the atmosphere spawned by Prohibition and the stock market crash of 1929, as the country struggled with issues such as the rise of organized crime and wars between mafias, strikes and violent strike-breaking, unemployment, and traffic of firearms and drugs. Reflecting a pessimistic view of society, this subgenre offers no resolution to the criminality it depicts. Stylistic characteristics include dizzying action, suspense and intrigue, irony and tough dialogue, and corrosive social criticism. There is also a basic difference in the temporal structure of the classic British mystery and hard-boiled fiction. A characteristic of the whodunit, as Tzvetan Todorov points out, is its duality. All detective fiction, states Todorov, contains two stories—the story of the crime and the story of its investigation—that are consecutive, the first ending before the second begins. He distinguishes this from the “*série noire*” or thriller, which fuses the two stories, suppressing the first and vitalizing the second. While in the whodunit, the detective and his partner are immunized from the danger, in the thriller the detective’s health and even his life are at risk (139–41). This sleuth is invariably a professional detective who maintains his personal sense of ethics while dealing with ruthless corporations, greedy families, and corrupt government officials. A stock character is the *femme fatale*—seen as an indication of male insecurity due to changing sex roles in the postwar period (Rzepka 185). Ricardo Piglia, whose contribution to the genre I will discuss in the next section of this chapter, notes that a basic difference between the enigma-based and hard-boiled crime fiction is a materialist approach to reality. In the latter, the representatives of the law are motivated by self-interest, the detective is a professional who receives a salary as opposed to an amateur motivated by curiosity, and the causal chain of the crime is always economic (*Crítica y ficción* 69). Unlike the whodunit, the hard-boiled subgenre survived World War II and authors have found it suitable “for gender, ethnic, and cultural appropriation” (Scaggs 30).⁴

While there is not universal agreement about what constitutes a “*novela negra*,” I use the term here to refer to what Glen S. Close calls “the predominant understanding of the *novela negra* as a broad generic category

encompassing both detective-centered and criminal-centered subgenres” (*Contemporary Hispanic Crime Fiction* 62).⁵ Considered a variant or development of detective fiction (called *ficción policial*, *policíaca*, or *policíaca* in Spanish), the term “novela negra” comes from the French *roman noir*, and the closest English-language equivalent is “crime fiction.”⁶ A succinct and apt definition of the *novela negra* is rendered by Mexican writer Paco Ignacio Taibo II: “A *novela negra* is one that has a criminal act at its heart and that generates an investigation. What happens is that a good crime novel investigates something more than who killed or who committed the crime, it investigates the society in which the events occur. It begins by telling about a crime, and ends by telling how that society is” (Saldo). Additionally, Genaro J. Pérez points out an aspect I find highly relevant to this book: the *novela negra* “utilizes the vehicle of crime to emphasize a particular moral problem that the author denounces” (15). A central tenet of this book is that the *género negro* has become a favored genre to address social and political reality, reflecting on or critiquing systems of power. In the Latin American variety, there is a focus on situations where the state is involved in criminality, corruption is rampant, and wrongdoers escape with impunity.

José F. Colmeiro provides a cogent discussion of the change in ideology between the classic formula of detective fiction and the *novela negra*. In the classic version, the final solution leads to a restoration of justice. The criminal is discovered and punished, implicitly defending the established social order; the happy ending is thus based on an unambiguous solution to the crime and an optimistic social vision. The ideological charge implies maintenance of the status quo and an unquestioned trust in the law and the bourgeois order. The *novela negra* inverts these ethical and aesthetic principles as it questions the established order, portraying an unjust and immoral society based on the domination of the powerful over the weak and the rich over the poor through exploitation and violence. There is no happy ending in its vision of pessimism and hopelessness, as the true social dimension of crime and the impossibility of regeneration is revealed, with complicit and unethical politicians, business magnates, and agents of order (Colmeiro 61–63). This describes the Argentine *novela negra*—it rarely offers a clean solution to the crime; to the contrary, the criminal behavior will persist, conveying the authors’ pessimistic vision of society. The articulation of an ethical problem is a takeaway message of these novels.

While traditional detective fiction is highly formulaic, its basic structure and conventions lend themselves to endless and sometimes playful

variations, conveying a radically different message from the original formula. As Persephone Braham points out, “Latin American detective writers naturally test generic boundaries as they try to write stories that reflect their reality, and many use detective formulas simply as a point of departure for other kinds of literary experimentation” (xiv). In *Juegos de seducción y traición* (Games of seduction and betrayal), Ana María Amar Sánchez examines “high” literature that incorporates popular models (21). She explains how popular literary forms seduce the reader with their reproduction of formulas: the reader experiences pleasure upon rediscovering the anticipated, and is consoled with repetition, the return to the same (30). When certain texts employ these codes and transform them in a key point, they betray the reader’s expectations. This space, between the reader’s seduction and betrayal, opens to the possibility of a political reading (33, 36). Amar Sánchez notes that the detective genre has modified the canonical components of the genre—crime, truth, and justice—as it carries out a progressive politicization of crime (47).

The Argentine *novelas negras* I analyze in this book reproduce and transform formulas of the classic and hard-boiled genre, often including features of film noir and thrillers and making cordial nods to their hard-boiled forerunners and film noir icons. I will consider how the novels repeat and modify patterns as they reflect and critique the values and anxieties of contemporary Argentine society.

Josefina Ludmer’s *Corpus Delicti* demonstrates how crime can be a tool to articulate culture. She points out that crime serves as a “conceptual instrument [that] is not abstract, but rather visible, representable, quantifiable, personalizable, subjectivizable” (4). Since crimes change over time, their variation serves to differentiate cultural moments or historical periods (5). What is more, crimes are a story; they are literary. A crime generates a constellation of cultural scenarios, conjuring up the following questions: What is the crime, who are the criminals, and who are the victims? Where does the crime take place and what is the relationship between the scene of the crime and the nature of the crime? What is the motive of the crime—is it power, passion, money, or a combination of these drivers? Is there an investigation of the crime, and if so, who are the investigators, what are their motives, and what is their relationship with the state and with the criminals? Are the criminals brought to justice, and if not, why not? What are the roles of gender and social class in relation to the crime and its investigation? What paths do the criminals and the investigators trace? These questions

point to crime fiction's exceptional capacity to produce an incisive portrait of society, and working through the answers traces a reading informed by cultural studies.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE GENRE IN ARGENTINA

It is not within the scope, nor is it the purpose, of this book to provide a detailed history of detective/crime fiction in Argentina. Such an endeavor is another book in itself, and excellent accounts have been published by Jorge Lafforgue and Jorge Rivera, Glen S. Close, and Román Setton. For these reasons, I will limit this discussion to a synopsis of the high points in the development of the genre in Argentina with a focus on its innovation of the classical style as well as its socially orientated vein. I will also provide an overview of the current state of the *novela negra* in Argentina and its practitioners.

Both the classical enigma formula and the hard-boiled variety of the genre have been cultivated in Argentina. As Close points out, despite the fact that Argentina has the longest tradition of detective writing in the Hispanic world with the publication of two detective novels by Luis V. Varela in 1887 (*La huella del crimen* and *Clemencia*), the hard-boiled subgenre, or *novela negra*, was slow to take root there. While there was considerable interest in translations and imitations of foreign "autores duros" beginning in the 1940s, the *novela negra* did not become the dominant tendency in Argentina until the 1970s (Close, *Contemporary Hispanic Crime Fiction* 93–96). The development of the genre was gradual and problematic due to its lack of prestige as well as the fact that Argentine reality did not adapt to the conventions of the classical genre. For this reason, we see a reformulation and problematization of the norms of the genre in Argentine literature (Lafforgue and Rivera 96). As José Pablo Feinmann explains it, "Argentine detective fiction, in its best manifestations, has worked in the *edges* of the genre, not *within* the genre. . . . Not writing *within* the genre is not submitting to its rules. . . . It remains for us as the infinite possibility of experimentation" ("Estado policial" 152). Additionally, few Argentine writers committed themselves exclusively to the genre, a fact that still holds true today. Perhaps evidence of its appeal to Argentine writers is the fact that those who cultivate other narrative forms often try their hand at a *novela negra*.

Key figures in the development and innovation of detective fiction are Jorge Luis Borges and Rodolfo Walsh. Borges and Bioy Casares founded

the series *El Séptimo Círculo*, which published translations of the classic Anglo-American enigma novel as well as River Plate writers but eschewed hard-boiled fiction—“a sadistic or bloody form of the novel of adventure,” according to Borges (Lafforgue and Rivera 126)—and berated its detectives for being not intellectuals but simply criminals who are on the side of the law. Together Borges and Bioy Casares wrote *Seis problemas para don Isidro Parodi* (1942), in which an amateur detective solves cases from his prison cell. This parodic text problematizes the viability of a national appropriation of the genre. The parody creates ironic distance from classical texts, which is a constant recourse in Argentine detective fiction. Borges’s short stories “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” and “La muerte y la brújula,” published in the mid-1940s, mark a high point in detective fiction. Both stories, prime examples of metadetective fiction, illustrate the failure of reason and justice as the detective is caught by his own obsession with ratiocination. Piglia calls “La muerte y la brújula” the *Ulysses* of the detective story, the moment when “the form reaches its culminating point and disintegrates” (*Crítica y ficción* 68).

Walsh is credited with the fusion of the detective genre with investigative journalism. He began working with the enigma formula in Borges’s footsteps, publishing in 1953 the collection *Diez cuentos policiales argentinos*, which Lafforgue and Rivera consider a fundamental text: “the ‘officialization’ of the genre from within its own dynamics” (142). Walsh also wrote acclaimed detective stories, the most well known of which is “Cuento para tahúres,” in the classical enigma style. Beginning in 1962 until his death at the hands of the military dictatorship in 1977, Walsh expressed a growing political commitment. His *Operación masacre* (1957), the account of the illegal detention and execution of Peronist militants in the aftermath of the 1955 anti-Peronist military coup, created a model for investigative journalism by using techniques of the detective genre to reconstruct and expose a true crime. In this case, since the police and judges were working to cover up the clandestine executions, the investigator’s struggle consisted of uncovering and disseminating the truth about criminal activity of the state, thus initiating a key tendency in Latin American crime fiction. While Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, published in 1966, is considered a pioneering work of true crime, Walsh’s text anticipated it by nearly a decade. Along with Borges, Walsh is a major referent for contemporary crime fiction writers, in particular those who are also journalists or who place an investigative reporter in the detective function to uncover institutional corruption.

Returning to the chronological overview, 1973 is the year signaled by Close that the *novela negra* came into its own as “a new dominant” in Argentine crime fiction with the publication of novels by Manuel Puig, Osvaldo Soriano, Juan Carlos Martelli, and Juan Carlos Martini (*Contemporary Hispanic Crime Fiction* 96). Many of these novels portrayed menacing social violence as young authors realized the *novela negra* could include social thematics and portray a society in crisis. Puig’s *Buenos Aires Affair: Novela policial* uses the subtitle to signal its turn to popular culture. While far from conventional crime or detective fiction, the novel depicts a climate of escalating political tension (Close, *Contemporary Hispanic Crime Fiction* 99). *Triste, solitario y final* by Soriano pays homage to Raymond Chandler’s detective, Philip Marlowe, and can be considered a parody of North American hard-boiled fiction. Martelli’s *Los tigres de la memoria* represents a degraded society in crisis with a corrupt and criminal system, anticipating the terror that will take hold of Argentina. Martini’s first detective novel, *El agua en los pulmones*, also parodying North American models, deals with a hired investigator who is tricked by his employer and finds himself involved in a series of murders. Two noteworthy crime novels were published in 1975: *Noches sin lunas ni soles* by Rubén Tizziani and *Ni un dólar partido por la mitad* by Sergio Sinay. These novels incorporate typical hard-boiled motifs such as ambition, corruption, sex, and violence, and have in common indirect social criticism and a sense of frustration and impotence in the face of injustice and impunity.

The installation of an authoritarian dictatorship in Argentina in 1976 altered all aspects of national culture, bringing about a break in literary production. Writers who did publish often used allegory and metaphor to evade the censors as they indirectly depicted the criminality of the state. José Pablo Feinmann’s *Últimos días de la víctima* (1979), a compelling novel from this period, portrays a hired hit man stalking a target. Its evocation of a terrorized society is, according to Close, “one of the most enduring fables of a society in which violence had replaced politics as the dominant language of power” (*Contemporary Hispanic Crime Fiction* 114). Speaking to the power of evading censorship, Feinmann declares, “The novel was not at all innocent for those times, but the military did not notice, that is why I am here” (Frieria, “Yo no rechazo escribir”).

The most prominent example of writing *en clave* during this period is *Respiración artificial* (1980) by Ricardo Piglia. The novel opens in 1976 with an interchange of letters between Marcelo Maggi, a history professor with leftist sympathies, and his nephew, Emilio Renzi. When Maggi mysteriously

disappears, the narration turns to an investigation, and the epistolary novel becomes a detective novel (Maristany 68). Maggi had been researching the life of a controversial nineteenth-century Argentine intellectual, which may have shed too much light on the abuses of the current police state.

Since Argentina's return to democracy in 1983, many writers have used the *novela negra* to denounce atrocities of the period and advocate in defense of human rights. Fiction dealing with the military regime depicts the criminality of the state as military personnel kidnapped, tortured, and murdered citizens whom they perceived as enemies of their reactionary and paranoiac conception of the nation. David William Foster notes that many of these novels about the dictatorship reveal a hidden reality (22), and this can be exposed by detective work. To this end, Philip Swanson remarks, in his discussion of the postmodern detective in Latin American literature, that the motive of the investigation "alludes to the need to bring to light the truth and to reveal the hidden realities of societies traumatized by corrupt and deceitful systems" ("Don Quijote" 267).

Novels set in the period often project a climate of fear and paranoia. *Luna caliente* (1983) by Mempo Giardinelli has as protagonist a young lawyer named Ramiro who has returned from his studies in France to Argentina during the dictatorship. Believing that he has suffocated a young "Lolita" and that her father will seek revenge, Ramiro kills the father. Once the police catch up with Ramiro, they offer to let him off lightly for his crimes if he collaborates in their fight against "subversives." The novel envelops the reader in an atmosphere of paranoia as we accompany Ramiro's frantic flight from the authorities—he has to flee not because of his "common" crimes but because he refuses to collaborate with state crimes.⁷ Another haunting and paranoiac novel is *77* (2008) by Guillermo Saccomanno, which deals with the terror experienced by an average citizen who carries out a humanitarian act: a schoolteacher who risks his life by giving shelter to a hunted militant. *Arena en los zapatos* (1989) by Juan Sasturain and *Un crimen argentino* (2002) by Reynaldo Sietecase employ common crime as a metaphor for state crime.

Other writers situate their plots in the postdictatorial period, addressing the problematic of memory as the protagonists struggle to understand events that occurred during the time of repression. Many of these novels use the thriller as an approach to a troubled past with powerful secrets. A prime example is *El secreto de sus ojos* by Eduardo Sacheri, which deals with the recovery of memory to make sense of the present. Set in 1999, it follows the efforts of a retired judicial investigator to reconstruct a case that still

haunts him: the 1974 rape and murder of a young woman. The murderer received a life sentence but was set free because he was useful to the military regime. For the investigator, 1974 also marked the beginning of a frustrated love affair. With its return to the past, the novel engages the politics of memory as both unresolved situations challenge the characters to decide between moving on and forgetting or repairing the past. *La pesquisa* (1994) by Juan José Saer uses innuendo to critique the dictatorship. While the initial plotline of *La pesquisa* involves the investigation of gruesome serial murders in Paris, we discover that this story is being narrated in Argentina by an individual whose twin brother mysteriously disappeared at the time of the Proceso.⁸ Gail González suggests that uncovering, examining, and analyzing the memory of the period of the dictatorship form the nucleus of Saer's text (258).⁹

Some postdictatorial crime novels that reflect on the period focus on individuals who were neither victimizers nor victims but who, through their passivity, compliance, or cowardice, were complicit with the dictatorship. Prominent examples of this register are *Lo que nosotras sabíamos* (2009) by María Inés Krimer, *El secreto y las voces* (2002) by Carlos Gamerro, and *Una misma noche* (2012) by Leopoldo Brizuela. All three feature protagonists who struggle to re-create events that transpired during the dictatorship in an attempt to understand obscure and ominous occurrences. In *El secreto y las voces*, the son of a disappeared man conceals his identity to investigate his father's fate and in the process exposes the complicity of a village with the execution of an innocent man. In *Una misma noche*, on the other hand, the protagonist recalls his own cowardice in face of the persecution of a neighbor. *Lo que nosotras sabíamos* offers a unique perspective through the voices of frivolous and self-serving housewives whose version of events tends to legitimize the dictatorship.¹⁰ In these novels, seemingly innocent incidents take on a new, much more sinister, meaning as the years pass and individuals reflect on their significance.

Incorporating winks and homages to North American hard-boiled classics, *La capital del olvido* (2004) by Horacio Vázquez-Rial moves between the present and the past, and between Spain and Argentina, depicting yet another form of complicity: willful forgetfulness on the part of both victimizers and victims when economic gain comes into play. A victim of imprisonment and torture during the dictatorship who has given herself a new identity in Spain returns to Argentina to seek her son, who was born in captivity, and take revenge on her captors. There she discovers private

enterprises that exploited personal tragedy, selling the children of “the disappeared” for profit, a network of which her own protector and rescuer formed part. *Sucesos argentinos* (1995) by Vicente Battista also treats corruption of values from a transatlantic perspective. An Argentine exiled in Spain during the dictatorship is sent back to his homeland by a Spanish company in order to serve as straw man to obtain a bid for the construction of a highway. Lured by easy money, he gets tangled in the shady deal.

Both *Papel picado* (2003) by Rolo Diez and *Qué solos se quedan los muertos* (1983) by Mempo Giardinelli use the *género negro* to reflect on the situation of Argentine exiles in Mexico during the Proceso. The exiles find themselves in danger, in Diez’s novel because they meet up with an old enemy, and in Giardinelli’s because the protagonist becomes involved in protecting an old friend from a violent network of drug traffickers. Elsa Drucaroff’s action-packed novel *El último caso de Rodolfo Walsh* (2010) is based on an actual event—the death of Walsh’s daughter Vicki when she and four fellow Montoneros were confronted by a group of 150 soldiers. Was Vicki killed in combat or taken prisoner and murdered in captivity? Drucaroff imagines the investigation that Walsh could have carried out to discover the truth behind her death.

Works published since 2005 that deal with the “Dirty War” include novels and *testimonios* written by children of militants: for example, *La casa operativa* (2006) by Cristina Feijóo, *La casa de los conejos* (2008) by Laura Alcoba, and *A veinte años, Luz* (2008) by Elsa Osorio. In her recent novel, *Doble fondo* (2018), Osorio once again deals with memories and repercussions of the dictatorship. While not all of these are *novelas negras* per se, they include generic elements to tell their tale, such as suspense and an investigation of the past. Other *novelas negras* set in the period of the dictatorship are *Penúltimo nombre de guerra* (2004) and *Siempre la misma música* (2006) by Raúl Argemí, *Nadie ama a un policía* (2007) by Guillermo Orsi, *La aguja en el pajar* (2006) by Ernesto Mallo, *Dos veces Junio* (2005) and *Ciencias morales* (2007) by Martín Kohan, and *Hay unos tipos abajo* (2008) by Antonio Dal Masetto.

Two major Argentine authors, theorists, and promoters of the *novela negra* are the late Ricardo Piglia and Mempo Giardinelli. Piglia played a key role in the promotion, dissemination, theorization, and innovation of the genre. In 1969 he founded the collection Serie Negra, which published hard-boiled stories and contributed to the expansion and variety of reading circuits (Lafforgue and Rivera 88), and edited an anthology titled *Cuentos de*

la serie negra, which included US writers such as Chandler and Hammett. In his introduction to the Serie Negra, reprinted in *Crítica y ficción*, Piglia set forth basic observations regarding the hard-boiled genre. Especially resonant is his remark about the role of money in the logic of the genre.

There is a way of narrating in the *serie negra* that is linked to a handling of reality that I would call materialistic. . . . The crime, the misdeed, is always sustained by money: murder, robbery, fraud, extortion, kidnapping, the chain is always economic. . . . The only enigma that these novels propose—and never solve—is that of capitalist relations: the money that legislates morality and upholds the law is the only “reason” of these stories where everything is paid. In this sense, I would say that they are capitalist novels in the most literal sense of the word. (69–70)

While Piglia claimed, “I do not write crime novels”¹¹ (Kohan), many of his plots include some form of investigation by a person who takes on the role of detective, usually Piglia’s alter ego, Emilio Renzi. Joanna Page describes Piglia’s narrative projects as “a kind of practical experiment that performs the themes discussed on a more explicit level elsewhere” (28). Piglia has spoken to his use of the genre to explore other issues: “If I have done something with the genre, it has been to work with the model of investigation outside the scheme of crime: to use the form of the investigation in relation to objects that were not necessarily criminal in a direct sense” (*Crítica y ficción* 197).

Some of the themes Piglia develops in his novels are the cross between the critic and the detective; the constant presence of an enigmatic code to be deciphered; the politics of storytelling; and the complex relationship between crime, capitalist society, and the media. Another crucial concept set forth in his theoretical and fictional writing is “paranoiac fiction”; as he explains, “Literature has increasingly taken over the development of a vision of the threat of endangered everyday life” (“La ficción paranoica”). Renzi muses in Piglia’s *Blanco nocturno* (2010), “We need to invent a new crime fiction genre, paranoid fiction. Everyone is suspicious, everyone feels pursued” (284). In his study of this novel, Juan Caballero links Piglia’s notion of contemporary paranoid crime fiction to “the invisible and almost unthinkable totalities of neoliberal economic power” (120). Piglia further connects this paranoia to the notion of conspiracy: “the subject does not perceive a private crime but rather he confronts a massive assembly of enemies” (Figueiras). Moving beyond the realm of crime fiction, Piglia associates this concept

with the individual's view of society, perceived "in the form of a scheme designed to destroy him, or in other words: the conspiracy, the paranoia are linked to the perception that an individual designs around social relations" (Figueiras). This outlook based on conspiracy theory replaces the notion of tragic destiny.

While detection and crime can be identified in all of Piglia's works, key texts in this regard are "La loca y el relato del crimen" (1975), *Respiración artificial* (discussed earlier in this section), and *Plata quemada* (1997), made into a successful movie in 2000. More recent novels involving crime and paranoid fiction are the aforementioned *Blanco nocturno* and *El camino de Ida* (2013). In "La loca y el relato del crimen," a pimp named Almada kills a prostitute, and the only witness is "la loca," a psychotic gypsy woman named Angélica Echevarne. Emilio Renzi, the repeated character in Piglia's fiction who takes on the detective function, is able to solve the crime by deciphering what appears to be the incoherent babbling of the "loca," but her discourse actually communicates in code the facts of the crime. However, Almada is being protected by higher-ups and the only form in which the truth is published will be Renzi's story; thus literature voices what the official history silences (Girona Fibla 529). Piglia's concept of literature as the conveyer of repressed truths will be repeated in subsequent *novelas negras*, for instance *Betibú* by Claudia Piñeiro.

Blanco nocturno, a novel exhibiting a complexity comparable to that of *Respiración artificial*, combines two stories: the tragic tale of Tony Durán, a Puerto Rican who is murdered shortly after arriving in the Argentine countryside with a suitcase containing \$100,000, and the saga of the powerful Belladonna family, whose patriarch founded an automobile factory in the pampa. Emilio Renzi, who is the interlocutor for both tales, serves as the connective element. Caballero proposes that the novel be read as a prehistory of neoliberalism in Argentina, citing the "massive international movements of capital, clearly the root of all the 'crimes' being investigated" (126). In *El camino de Ida*, Renzi is a visiting professor at a prestigious university on the East Coast of the United States. Ida Brown, a brilliant literature professor with whom he had a brief affair, turns up dead and Renzi becomes involved in the case. Was her death accidental or a case of terrorism? When an FBI agent bearing a conspiracy theory turns up to investigate, paranoia ensues.

I have broken the chronological order of my discussion of Piglia's contributions to the *novela negra*, saving *Plata quemada* for the end due to

its multiple implications for the present book. This novel is based on an actual incident: the 1965 robbery of five million Argentine pesos from a transport vehicle in Buenos Aires and the subsequent flight of the robbers to Montevideo, where they holed up in an apartment and resisted for more than fifteen hours the siege of three hundred armed policemen. A crowd gathered on the street, the media arrived, and the incident was broadcasted. Finally, surrounded by the police and with no possible escape, the robbers set fire to the bills and, before everyone's eyes, threw the burning money out the window. While *Plata quemada* pretends to be a nonfictional version of an actual event—a documentary thriller—this register is broken in several ways, as the novel delivers a commentary on social ills at the same time that it models Piglia's use of fiction to explore theoretical issues related to writing. Numerous excellent critical readings have explicated how *Plata quemada* delivers its social and theoretical messages.¹² In my discussion, I will focus on three issues I find particularly compelling: the tension between the "true" story and its fictionalized version, the double story or secret story that conveys the social critique, and the possibility of storytelling.

While the epilogue states that "this novel tells a true story," the text problematizes the boundary between truth and fiction, or between truth and its interpretative reconstruction (Clayton 45). As Edgardo H. Berg remarks, "It could be said that the most troublesome aspect of the story that *Plata quemada* tells is its fictionalization" (44). The factual register of the story is undermined via the multiple and sometimes conflicting or incompatible voices or registers that tell the story—the reporters, the police, the public, psychiatric reports, the media, the robbers themselves—and the intervention of a fictional character in the role of crime reporter: Emilio Renzi, Piglia's transparent double. Renzi's fictionalized version of events lends the story mythological overtones when he compares the outlaws to heroes of a Greek tragedy and brings in the ideological charge, implicitly posing questions such as "who is the real delinquent?"

Several critics have pointed out that Piglia's texts contain double stories; in *Plata quemada* the ostensible story is that of the pursuit and capture of a band of criminals, while the inner story transmits a critique of capitalist society and its corrupted values. Page contends that Piglia sees the hard-boiled genre as a possibility for left-wing, politically committed writing, explaining, "What is under investigation [in *Plata quemada*] is not the motive or the identity of the criminal but the complex relations between criminality, capitalist society, and the mass media" (29). The authorities seek to conceal their complicity with the crime, thus the story breaks down the binary between

the criminals and the representatives of the law. There is also an implicit critique of the mass media, which sensationalizes crime and violence for public consumption. The scene in which the desperate criminals set fire to the bills delivers a fierce critique of the value system of capitalist society. The public becomes furious with them for burning the money, expressing moral indignation and accusing them of being “cretinos,” “malvados,” and “bestias” (cretins, evil people, beasts) (172–73), and the reporter calls the ashes of the bills “una pila funeraria de los valores de la sociedad” (a funerary pile of society’s values) (174). Michelle Clayton points to the irony that “this indignation, this sudden moral sense, is aroused not by proliferating murder, but by the destruction of money,” thus exposing “the warped moral fabric” of a society that values money over human life (51). In the end, the secret story is society’s inner workings.

All in all, Piglia’s novel is about the possibility and the power of storytelling. Julio Premat points out that the epilogue, in which the author describes his discovery of a preexisting story that he deemed to be “una historia narrable,” dramatizes the possibility of fiction (128, 134). Finally, *Plata quemada* is a preeminent model of what I intend to examine in this book: the convergence of crime, storytelling, and popular culture to deliver a powerful critique of the modern state as well as the impact of capitalism and neoliberal values on society and the individual.

The works of Mempo Giardinelli, another prominent Argentine writer and critic, frequently explore ethical questions and cast a critical perspective on culture and social consciousness. Giardinelli has played an important role in the dissemination and reception of the *novela negra* and is outspoken and influential in describing its predominant role in the portrayal of Latin American reality, calling it a good medium “to understand first and then to interrogate the world in which we live” (Kohut 173). His book *El género negro: Ensayo sobre la novela policial* (first published in 1984 and revised in 1996) is a fundamental reference for the antecedents and the development of the genre in North America, Europe, and Latin America. He discusses the genre’s hybrid nature, identifying its borrowings from diverse literary traditions: the gothic and horror, adventure, and the North American cowboy or Wild West literature.

Giardinelli’s extensive literary production includes four *novelas negras*. Earlier in this section I discussed the two that are set in the period of the dictatorship, *Luna caliente* and *Qué solos se quedan los muertos*. Giardinelli calls his novellette *El décimo inferno* (1999) “una novela menemista” (a Menemist novel). A violent tale about lovers who go on a wild killing spree,

it reflects what the author considers the dissoluteness of the period. His subsequent novelette, *Cuestiones interiores* (2003), opens with a man who kills a stranger for no apparent reason. Trying to seek an explanation for his behavior, the text becomes a vision of an anguished and tortured conscience, the product of a history of social and family violence. Similar to *El décimo infierno*, it can be read as a parable for the country at a time of crisis.

AN OVERVIEW OF CURRENT PRACTITIONERS IN ARGENTINA

The contemporary scene of Argentine *novela negra* writers is rich and varied. Many of these writers convene at the aforementioned festivals celebrating the *novela negra*: the Festival Azabache, inaugurated in 2011 in Mar del Plata by Carlos Balmaceda and taken over by Javier Chiabrando in 2013; Buenos Aires Negra! (BAN!), organized by Ernesto Mallo and held at the Centro Cultural San Martín in Buenos Aires, beginning in 2012; and Córdoba Mata, launched in 2014 by writer Fernando López. Since, to my knowledge, there exists no published overview of Argentina's current practitioners of the *novela negra*, the following pages attempt to provide such a synopsis.

While I discussed several women writers in the previous section, it is important to recognize as an assemblage the sizeable and diverse group of *autoras* who work in the genre. "The presence of women writers in Argentine crime fiction clearly took off in the 21st century," declares Argentine writer and journalist Horacio Convertini (Gigena). Undisputedly, the most prominent is Claudia Piñeiro, whose fiction achieved best-seller status with *Las viudas de los jueves* (2005). This and two other Piñeiro novels, *Tuya* (2005) and *Betibú* (2011), have been made into successful films. Piñeiro's work will be discussed in chapter 4.

Another accomplished writer who has made a mark in the field of the *novela negra* is María Inés Krimer, whose novels have garnered several awards, including the Premio Emecé, the Premio del Fondo Nacional de las Artes, and the Premio Internacional de Novela Letra Sur. Krimer masterfully develops her plots in meticulous detail, revealing keen insight into human behavior and a particular interest, as she notes, in issues that directly affect women's lives ("Sangre y cirugías"). In addition to *Lo que nosotras sabíamos* (discussed in the previous section), she has published several other *novelas negras* that explore women's experience. *La inauguración* (2011) treats the problem of human trafficking and has a rural setting with the conflict