

Murder in the Country Club: Trouble in Neoliberal Paradise in *Retrato de familia con muerta* by Raúl Argemí

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“La conducta de los seres humanos se vuelve ilimitada cuando se pierden las bases éticas.” Mempo Giardinelli, “Mi libro refleja la corrupción absoluta del menemismo.”

On October 27, 2002 María Marta García Belsunce met her death in the bathroom of her home in Carmel Country Club, one of the exclusive gated communities known as “countries” in the outskirts of Buenos Aires. María Marta’s family members and doctor said that she had suffered a domestic accident, held a wake, and interred her. But five weeks later a district attorney called for an autopsy: it revealed that she had five bullets in her head. Writer Raúl Argemí, appalled by the brazen conspiracy to cover up her murder, penned a novel inspired by the actual crime: *Retrato de familia con muerta*. A searing criticism of a corrupt society, it clearly fits Genaro Pérez’s definition of the *novela negra* as a subgenre “[que] utiliza el vehículo del crimen para hacer hincapié en un problema moral determinado que el autor denuncia” (15).¹ The novel, with its focus on the crime and its grotesque cover-up, highlights the ironic contrast between the tranquil, “paradisiacal” lifestyle that the “country” purportedly offers its privileged residents, and the violent and shameless behavior to which they resort to preserve their status.

More specifically, *Retrato de familia con muerta* corresponds to the literary modality termed “policial palimpsésstico” by Osvaldo Di Paolo. Di Paolo uses this designation to describe narratives and television series inspired by real life events. In his

¹ For a fuller description of the *novela negra*, I cite the definition put forth by Glen S. Close: “The *novela negra* [...] is distinguished from the classical clue-puzzle type detective novel by its relative disinterest in procedures of rational deduction, its relatively greater attention to real social conflicts, and its disenchanting view of law and the social contract. In Spanish [...] the term *novela negra* encompasses hard-boiled crime fiction whether centering on a private detective protagonist, like Taibo’s *neopoliciaico*, or on characters who perpetrate rather than investigate crimes” (60). In an interview, Argemí says that in his opinion the *novela negra* is not a genre but rather a point of view, citing the example of Horace McCoy’s *They Kill Horses, Don’t They?* to illustrate his point (“Escribes de donde puedes”).

insightful study of the *policial palimpsestico* in Argentina, Di Paolo sustains that in the interstice between the journalistic note and the literary text “se desarrolla el proceso creativo del autor [...] en el cual se modifican los hechos incorporando problemas económicos y sociopolíticos de corrupción y violencia, factores históricos determinantes y problemas de género social para producir una literatura de denuncia social” (20-21). This is precisely the process that occurs in Argemí’s novel.

Retrato shares socio-political concerns with a group of Argentine *novelas negras* that critique the effects of the neoliberal economy and globalization in Argentina. Indeed, this concern is not limited to Argentine letters. In his study of Central American crime fiction, Misha Kokotovic coins the term “neoliberal noir” to refer to the fact that “Since about 1990 most of the continent has experienced something of a boom in narratives that use elements of detective or crime fiction to criticize the effects of the neoliberal, free market capitalism imposed on Latin American societies over the past two decades.” Recent book-length studies of Hispanic crime fiction, including those of Osvaldo Di Paolo, Glen S. Close, Persephone Braham, and William J. Nichols, all discuss how certain works serve to critique conditions brought about by neoliberal economic policies.

Among the Latin American countries that pursued economic globalization and adopted neoliberal economic policies in the 1990’s, Argentina was considered the star pupil. During the presidency of Carlos Menem, Argentina adhered to policies of neoliberal market reform including measures of fiscal discipline, freedom of movement for capital, deregulation, privatization, and reduction of the government role as a provider of social services. There were immediate positive effects—the galloping inflation was arrested and the economy began to grow. However, the Argentine economy proved to be highly vulnerable to international swings, and social costs were high, leading to unprecedented levels of unemployment and critical poverty (Norden 125, Sheinen 209). In her 2002 essay, “Violencia en las ciudades. Una reflexión sobre el caso argentino,” Beatriz Sarlo discusses the heightened sensation of insecurity in the city along with the breakdown in social relations, attributing this deterioration to the recent economic transformation that resulted in a more marked division between rich and poor in the city (207).²

Thus, the model resulted in an intensification and crystallization of already existing differentiation between social classes—a new dynamic of polarization between the “winners” who benefited from the neoliberal plan, and the “new poor” who were excluded from the model. According to Argentine sociologist Maristella Svampa, this

² For a discussion of Sarlo’s article and the perception of violence in Buenos Aires, see Close, pp. 126-127.

rapidly expanding social gap constituted one of the most distinctive and disturbing aspects of Argentina in the 90s (*La brecha* 12). The social fabric was rearranged according to new myths and values such as personal success and individualism. A rise in crime and violence in the cities created a sense of insecurity which fed a middle class flight out of the city and a boom in gated communities and country clubs. Svampa considers this new residential style, featuring privatized security and social segregation, emblematic of neoliberal changes in Argentina (*Los que ganaron* 183).

Argentine *novelas negras* dealing with these issues range from those about the marginalized classes to those that portray the newly rich. For example, *Puerto Apache* by Juan Martini as well as *Santería* by Leonardo Oyola represent the violent and precarious life of the inhabitants in a squatter settlement a stone's throw from the elegant Puerto Madero,³ while Carlos Balmaceda's biting allegoric *Manual del caníbal* depicts a famed restaurant where politicians, businessmen, and beautiful models accompanied by tanned millionaires dine on exquisitely prepared plates of human flesh. In *El décimo infierno* by Mempo Giardinelli, a businessman and his lover go on a frenzied killing spree. Giardinelli, in a reference to the rakish and corrupt president Menem, calls it "una novela menemista" insofar as it expresses "una corrupción absoluta de valores" (Giardinelli, "Mi libro," n. pag.). Two of Claudia Piñeiro's novels—*Las viudas de los jueves* and *Betibú*—offer ironic portraits of crime and hypocrisy in the "countries." *Betibú*, published in 2011, refers to the Belsunce case, although it is not the crime around which the plot develops.

Retrato de familia con muerta, as it spins a fictional version of a real crime, examines pressing social problems plaguing contemporary Argentina. It critiques the effects of the neoliberal economic reform—the polarization of social classes coupled with a growing sense of insecurity—that fed the boom in popularity of the gated communities known as countries. In particular, it indicts the shameless behavior of the nouveau riche who made money through illicit dealings. While continuing to reap benefits from their alliance with the former dictatorship, they are winners in the new social order. Argemí is particularly concerned by the sense of impunity and lack of basic human decency of those involved in the García Belsunce murder and cover-up. This essay will examine how Argemí's fictional recreation of a true crime serves to critique recent social transformations that brought about the weakening of traditional values and institutions.

³ For an analysis of the neoliberal urban environment as depicted in *Puerto Apache*, see Close, pp. 134-137, and the article by Jacovkis.

Revisiting the scene of the actual crime, it is no surprise that Argemí was inspired by it to create his novel. When the story broke on December 12, 2002, the headlines were sensational: “Dijeron que murió en un accidente doméstico, pero la mataron a tiros” announced *Clarín*, one of Argentina’s leading dailies. The victim, María Marta García Belsunce, came from a prominent family and was a sociologist who worked with a foundation for missing children. And, of course, an element of added interest was the fact that the murder took place in an exclusive and highly guarded gated community. Her husband claimed that he had been watching a River-Boca soccer match at his brother-in-law’s house and returned home to find his wife with her head submerged in the bathtub full of water. Surely she had tripped and hit her head on the tub faucets, family members insisted. Two doctors agreed that she had fractured her skull with loss of brain matter. A wake was held in the home and María Marta was interred the day after her death, on October 28. However, in early December, upon request of the district attorney, the body was removed from the crypt and autopsied. María Marta had been shot six times with a 32 caliber revolver—five bullets were in her head, the sixth grazed it (“Dijeron que murió en un accidente doméstico”). An investigation of the house revealed that the victim had been attacked on the first floor and killed in the upstairs bathroom. Blood stains throughout the house had been cleaned. Since security had not been breached, the perpetrator had to have been someone who lived in the country or had access to it (“Cronología de la investigación”).

The investigation into the crime and cover-up has been an ongoing media event. Reportedly one of the most intricate cases in the history of Argentine law, it has been bogged down in challenges and appeals, and the judges have been accused of complicity with the defendants (Barbano, Oct. 27, 2004 and Nov. 17, 2004). María Marta’s husband, Carlos Carrascosa, who initiated the hypothesis of an accidental death, was arrested in March 2003 for homicide and put under house arrest. After a tortuous series of appeals and other legal maneuvers, finally in June 2009 he was sentenced to life imprisonment for homicide.

Relatives, friends, employees, and first responders were all implicated in the crime or cover-up. Family members included the brother-in-law of the victim, who obtained a false death certificate, and a brother and step-brother, who were accused of tampering with the evidence. Two doctors—one who endorsed the theory of accidental death, overlooking the five bullet holes in the victim’s skull, and another who signed the death certificate—were charged, along with nine employees of the funeral home. Also named were the victim’s masseuse who cleaned up the blood, a

neighbor who instructed the community president to bribe the police to keep them from entering, and a female friend who prevented an autopsy.⁴

Sentences for “encubrimiento” were finally handed down in September 2011, eight years and eleven months after the murder had been committed. Ultimately, only five individuals were found guilty and given prison sentences ranging from four and one-half to six years for cover-up.⁵ But this was not the end of the case. Two months later, in November 2011, the five individuals found guilty of participation in the cover-up were freed on bail and their lawyers initiated appeals for their sentences to be reverted (“Caso Belsunce: los condenados por encubrimiento apelaron”).⁶

The motive of the crime remains an enigma. A theory reported by the media in 2007 is based on the family’s alleged involvement in a drug trafficking ring. A district attorney received an anonymous note connecting the crime to an argument about drug money laundering for the Juárez Cartel, suggesting that they investigate “si hay un pacto familiar de silencio por temor al cartel” (Sassone y Messi). The money

⁴ The names and alleged roles of those accused of involvement in the cover-up—the individuals who will inspire the characters in Argemí’s novel—are as follows:

- Guillermo Bártoli, the brother-in-law of the victim. Among the first to arrive at the house, he obtained a falsified death certificate saying she died of a non-traumatic heart attack and made the arrangements with the funeral home.
- Horacio García Belsunce, brother of the victim, and a lawyer and journalist. He called the police three times to ask them not to come to investigate. He threw the sixth bullet, which bounced off the victim’s head, in the toilet; this action that has been a key element in the accusation of a cover-up on the part of the family.
- John Hurtig, stepbrother of the victim. He found the sixth bullet and participated in the decision to throw it into the toilet. He lifted the cadaver from the bathroom floor and carried it to the bed. Despite his doubts about what had happened to her, he did not call the police.
- Juan Gauvry Gordon, the first medic to arrive on the scene and examine the body. Accused of endorsing the theory of accidental death and overlooking the five bullet holes in the victim’s skull, he insisted that the family had tricked him into thinking it was an accident.
- Sergio Binello, a neighbor. He called the president of the country club to tell him to prevent the police from entering. “Si hay que poner plata para coimearla, ponela” he is attributed to have said (“Quién es quién”).
- Beatriz Michelini, the victim’s masseuse. She had the bad fortune to have an appointment to give the victim a massage on the afternoon of her death. The first non-family member to arrive on the scene, she gave mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to the victim and followed her employers’ orders to clean up the blood.
- Nora Taylor, a friend of the victim. She is said to have prevented an autopsy and tried to accuse a neighbor of the crime.
- Juan Carlos March, the doctor who signed the death certificate

⁵ Those receiving sentences were Guillermo Bártoli, Horacio García Belsunce, John Hurtig, Juan Gauvry Gordon, and Sergio Binello. Beatriz Michelini, the masseuse, was absolved for lack of evidence and because she tried to revive the victim (Caruso).

⁶ As of February 2013 their status has not changed—the guilty verdict still stands, the five remain in liberty and need to appear before the Tribunal Oral de lo Común (TOC) 1 in San Isidro every month (Messi). Carlos Carrascosa, vociferously claiming his innocence, has put forth a series of appeals, all of which have been denied (“Rechazaron dos pedidos de Carrascosa” and Amaya, Sept. 10, 2012).

laundering hypothesis was later dropped by investigators due to lack of evidence, but another plausible motive has not been offered (Kollmann and “Carrascosa pide una insólita audiencia”). The media has commented on the family’s insistence on their innocence: “en esta compleja trama familiar, la palabra inocencia está en boca de cada uno de los protagonistas. En los casi nueve años que pasaron, ninguno de ellos acusó a otro. Todos sostienen que el asesino de María Marta sigue suelto, que se los culpa injustamente” (Amaya, May 24, 2011). Thus, this crime, which has captivated the Argentine public for over ten years, seems to be no closer to a solution in early 2013 than it was in 2002.

It should be noted that while it deals with a real crime, Argemí’s novel does not belong to the “true crime” genre—rather than using the documentation to which he had access to reconstruct the crime, he spun a fiction based on the essential elements of the actual event. We should also point out that the novel was written in 2006 when Carrascosa was still at liberty and any convictions for María Marta’s murder seemed uncertain. Argemí’s plot seeks to explore what he considered the fundamental unanswered questions of the case: “¿Por qué su marido, su hermano y todos sus amigos se complotaron para ocultar su asesinato? ¿Por qué todos, absolutamente todos, se comportaron como culpables? ¿A quién estaban protegiendo? ¿Quién era la muerta para merecerse el odio de los ‘inocentes?’” (102). At the same time, the text fills in the blanks to resolve enigmas surrounding the true crime, specifically the motive and the murderer.

Argemí creates multiple narrators to tell the tale of crime and cover-up in the “country.” Juan Manuel Galván, a circuit judge, is the first and main narrator and carries out the role of detective. He is described as a misfit of sorts—we learn of his loveless marriage as well as a birth defect that causes intermittent paralysis of his left limbs and affects his speech. In this sense, he conforms to the classic portrayal of the detective figure as a socially marginal or malcontent outsider. Juan Manuel blames his “chispa de rebeldía, de inconformidad” (7) for his obsession with the dead woman and his desire to discover the how and why of her brutal murder and the subsequent sloppy cover-up.

Needing to access classified information about the case, the judge gets in touch with a childhood friend, Jorge Gustavo Ritter Pueyrredón, an ex-military man who uses his connections to provide Juan Manuel with records from police archives. Ritter becomes the second narrator—he makes his own observations regarding Juan Manuel’s investigation; he will read Juan Manuel’s speculative recreation of events and then delete his files.

At the end of the novel, Argemí provides an “Aclaración necesaria,” in which he explains its genesis: “El origen de esta novela fue un caso real, sucedido en Argentina, que me llamó la atención por la brutalidad y la falta de pudor con que se quiso encubrir un asesinato. [...] Un par de años después, un ‘pajarito’ me envió gran cantidad de información de primera mano” (201). In an interview, he elaborates on his reaction to the crime:

Estaba de visita en Argentina cuando esto [el crimen real que inspiraba la novela] saltó a la luz, y lo evidente era la impunidad y la cara de piedra de los que estaban implicados. Destilaban seguridad de que no les pasaría nada. Un par de años después pude acceder a información de primera, judicial, y todo lo que hicieron con ese cadáver me dio vuelta el estómago. Comparado con el asesinato simple y puro, eso era un circo inmundo. Así mi prioridad, mi interés se centró en la puesta en escena, en el juego macabro del encubrimiento.
(Stallard n. pag.)⁷

Thus Argemí, like his “detective-narrator”, was outraged by the case, especially by the behavior of the defendants, and obtained confidential information upon which his fictional recreation was based. In this sense, Juan Manuel serves as an alter ego for the author, a construct to express Argemí’s consternation with the crime as well as the society which spawned it. It is Juan Manuel’s commentary about the case’s actors and setting, as well as his ultimate failure to bring about justice, that will deliver the social critique.

The third narrative voice, or better put, set of voices, is a Greek chorus: the Euménides or Furies who serve as advocates for the dead woman. In the same interview, Argemí commented that he created this chorus to provide a female perspective on the event and the victim: “De pronto necesité otra voz, otro registro que contara con distinta profundidad, que opinara, y apareció el coro de Euménides. Feroces, intransigentes, esas diosas (mujeres) me dieron el punto de rabia que necesitaba la historia, y que ninguno [sic] otro personaje me podía dar” (Stallard, n. pag.). Along with the Euménides comes a heightened sensitivity to gender issues. This female chorus enables the author to recapture female subjectivity that would otherwise be effectively suppressed by stereotypical male control of a female victim.

Juan Manuel introduces us to the cast of characters—the victim and those involved in the cover-up, whom he ironically calls “Los inocentes.” While the narrators are

⁷ Born in La Plata, Argentina, in 1946, Argemí has lived in Barcelona since 2000, thus the reference to the fact that he was visiting Argentina when the crime was brought to light.

purely fictional, the “inocentes” are based on real life individuals and renamed. They are: “Arturo Oso Ferrasanes, el marido de la muerta. Abel Lito Pérez García, el hermano. Susana Lucrecia Susy Hornos, la masajista de la muerta. Graciela Chiquita de Cooningan, la amiga. Ernesto Bonanova, amigo del Oso” (15). “Todas las manos en la misma mierda” (15), comments Juan Manuel—all are linked by their complicity and collective guilt. First responders and others who stumble onto the scene will also become accomplices to the cover-up—for instance, the family doctor and the undertaker. And we meet the dead woman: “Y la muerta, la mayor de los Pérez García. [...] La muerta [...] tirada en el suelo, a medias en el baño” (15). The narrator never mentions a first name and always refers to her only as “la muerta,” including when he references her activities prior to her death. This becomes a source of dark humor, for instance when he comments “los mismos chicos [...] vieron pasar a la muerta en su bicicleta” (99).

As mentioned above, while the reason for María Marta’s murder remains an enigma, Argemí’s fictional recreation provides a motive: an argument over laundered drug money. It is possible that—based on the documents that he obtained—Argemí concluded that this was the most feasible explanation for the crime. In any event, it serves to develop the critique of a corrupt, newly rich social class. Thus, illicit money and lots of it triggers the crime and fuels the cover-up. The centrality of the material motive and the complex relationship between money and the law in *Retrato* and other “neoliberal noir” novels makes them clear inheritors of hard-boiled novels such as Dashiell Hammet’s *Red Harvest*, which Piglia calls “novelas capitalistas” (70). In this case, the “dinero negro” is supplied by international drug trafficking, thanks to the globalized market’s facilitation of geographic movement of private capital. We are told that the Tijuana Cartel is laundering money in Argentina and that one of the neighbors, El Inglés Coonigan, husband of “Chiquita,” has recruited his friends, including la muerta and her brother and husband, to open accounts to move Mexican money. “[T]odos viven del agua revuelta de las finanzas” (54), remarks the judge/narrator, Juan Manuel. “[Había] Mucho dinero para quien podía poner la cara y justificar algunas sumas importantes. [...] El dinero de los mexicanos era inagotable” (132-133). As Piglia comments in relation to the “policia norteamericano” (using the term to refer to hard-boiled fiction): “el crimen, el delito, está siempre sostenido por el dinero... la cadena es siempre económica” (69-70).

When an account disappears, the soon-to-be muerta is suspected, and the trouble begins. Juan Manuel provides a clue to la muerta’s “fatal flaw”—apparently she isn’t a “player”: “Abel Lito Pérez García siempre lo supo, su hermana los iba a meter en

problemas,” referring to her “veta idiota [...] a veces moralista” (16). It is noteworthy, and indicative of his corrupted value system, that in the brother’s thinking “moralista” is equated to “idiota.” We learn that the dead woman had founded a charity for poor children and Juan Manuel speculates that she diverted funds to this charity: “Tal vez [...] decidió quedarse con dinero del Cartel de Tijuana, para que su proyecto tuviera oxígeno. Tal vez era cierto que estaba un poco loca” (131). Here, “craziness” in Juan Manuel’s mind refers to the fact that she is not mindful of the consequences of stealing money belonging to the drug cartel. “El que roba a un ladrón...[...] tiene cien años de perdón” he envisions *la muerta* telling herself (69). Juan Manuel imagines how the murder could have occurred. Trying to make her understand that she can’t mess with these guys or they will all get killed, her husband, Oso Ferrasanés, fires a gun in her direction, accidentally grazing her head. She becomes furious and threatens to go to the police, so he is forced to continue shooting to finish her off.

Despite the fact that *la muerta* has numerous bullet-entry holes in her head and is lying in a huge pool of blood, the accomplices brashly maintain that she tripped in the bathroom and hit her head on the tub. Dirty money provides the means of the ensuing crude cover-up. Susy the masseuse, “[quien] [c]omplace a las señoras aburridas de Los Reyunos [the fictional name of the “country” where the crime took place] y otros sitios similares” (17) is the first outsider to arrive on the scene. Oso buys her silence at the same time that he threatens her: “Acá se juega más plata de la que te imaginás. Y los dueños de la plata no joden, ¿me entendés? Vos elegís: o mucha plata o te hacen matar” (17). After Susy insists on payment in cash, Oso calls an associate to get ahold of more money because “Hay que untar a mucha gente” (18). Two other key conspirators who are bribed are the so-called “médico ciego,” who later claimed that he didn’t notice anything was awry because he was blinded by his concern for the family’s pain (36), and the funeral director. Juan Manuel seethes with disgust for the “blind doctor,” deciding that the most apt word to describe him is “*cretino*”: “Me gusta la palabra ‘cretino’, señala tanto al idiota congénito como al hijo de puta que actúa con un desconocimiento tal de las normas de la decencia que parece ignorarlas de nacimiento” (37). The lack of “decencia” becomes a basic criterion for Juan Manuel’s censure of those involved in the cover-up. While the funeral director realizes “eso no es una muerte natural” (148), Juan Manuel describes his cooperation in the following terms, underlining the material motivation: “estoy seguro, cuando el funebrero entra en escenarios como Los Reyunos, un sitio donde el poder del dinero cambia hasta el color del aire, ve menos que nunca” (150). The corrupted values are echoed by Chiquita—a friend of *la muerta* turned conspirator—who represents the epitome of unmitigated greed:

“Chiquita...[n]o está dispuesta a perder nada de lo que ha conseguido. Nada. Y menos por los errores de una idiota muerta” (16).

The preparation of the cadaver brings to a head gender issues related to the fact that the victim is a woman and the staging of her death is being carried out largely by men. The section entitled “Ella: la vejación” depicts the men removing the bloody clothing from the corpse with a scissors. The description emphasizes the men’s clumsy manipulation of the scissors and their discomfort with the entire operation, especially when the removal of the jogging outfit she was wearing reveals her pink underwear and they have to confront her subjectivity in the form of her coquettish sexuality. Reinforcing the stereotypical male perspective, the female victim is blamed for putting the men in this situation: “De odiar la cosa, ese sucio pedazo de carne sobre la cama, que los obliga a verse como carniceros; a ellos, los inocentes, los que nunca quisieron matar a nadie” (187). The comparison of the woman to dead meat effectively dehumanizes her. *El Inglés Coonigan*, upon viewing the results of their work, makes a crude attempt at locker-room humor: “—La pusieron en pelotas. No se los puede dejar solos a ustedes, son terribles—dice” (194). His ill-timed joke is met with silence, another indication of their awkwardness in the presence of the unclothed female corpse. *Chiquita Coonigan*, who is called upon to apply make-up to the dead woman, has a moment of tenderness when she identifies with and sympathizes with her friend: “Chiquita Coonigan ve la ropa rota, el ingenuo color de rosa, y siente aún más pena. Se siente manoseada por esa piara de cerdos. Como manosearon a la muerta. [...] Chiquita se inclina sobre la muerta, tan indefensa, tan vulnerable, como si hubiera sido violada” (194-195). Thus, the re-victimization of the dead woman through the insensitive treatment of her body is perceived by her female friend as a rape. By calling attention to the abusive and insensitive treatment of the corpse and the men’s discomfort with her sexuality, Argemí constructs a space of resistance to the male control of the female victim.

The crime is eventually brought to light by two professionals whom Juan Manuel suspects are decent individuals. “Y de golpe apareció un Serpico,” (57) he tells us, using the name of the New York City whistle-blowing policeman to describe the D.A. who, despite the fact that he is a friend of the victim’s brother, goes against the family’s wishes and calls for an investigation. The other individual who tells the truth is the paramedic, whose declaration before the judge points to a homicide rather than an accident. He states that there is clear evidence of a violent death: “Que la mujer fue asesinada” (142). The actions of these two individuals in denouncing the crime and cover-up serve as examples of ethical behavior, which is

juxtaposed to the behavior of the “indecent” or shameless people that Argemí is indicting.

The setting in the exclusive gated community is a determining factor in the course of events. The emphasis on the “country’s” bucolic nature and open air sports installations which promise a healthy lifestyle stands in stark contrast to the heinous crime and ugly cover-up. Juan Manuel’s introduction to los Reyunos, entitled “Vivir al sol (Bucólicos paisajes),” highlights its illusion of tranquility and innocence:

[H]ay mucho, mucho verde. Verde y silencio. Lo último es una regla de oro. Para eso los chalés están suficientemente separados unos de otros por unos cuantos metros y por barreras de arbustos altos [...] que protegen la intimidad, al tiempo que mantienen la ilusión de que no hay nada que ocultar.
(12)

His description also underscores the community’s elaborate security system: “alambrada, alta, con puestos de vigilancia [...] como los castillos medievales, un solo pórtico de entrada. Como los castillos: barrera y guardia armada” (13). Ironically, while they are protected from danger from without, the murderer is among them, in the heart of the family.

The setting also plays a key role in the initial success of the flimsy cover-up: “El sitio donde se produjo el asesinato puede intimidar a cualquiera, incluyendo a la policía y a los jueces,” notes the narrator. “Los Reyunos es un ‘barrio cerrado’ y los barrios cerrados, los ‘country’ o como quieran llamarse, son geografías donde se puede jugar con reglas propias” (32). Once the cover-up is revealed, however, the tables are turned as this setting turns into a liability for the perpetrators—the fortification makes it unfeasible to blame the crime on an outsider, drastically limiting the pool of suspects.

The venue of the crime gives Juan Manuel occasion to make one of the several generic winks in his telling of the story. In reference to the servants cleaning up all the blood spilled by la muerta, he comments, “En conjunto harían un maravilloso puñado de culpables, si la vida fuera una novela de Agatha Christie. Pero la vida y Agatha Christie nunca tuvieron mucho que ver. Un montón de años de trabajo en el poder judicial me lo han demostrado hasta el aburrimiento” (169). The genteel upper class “country” scenario with its restricted pool of suspects brings to mind the classic works of the grand dame of the Golden Age of the detective novel. But Juan Manuel’s comment highlights the unreality of the Golden Age puzzle-type plots in

which the case is always solved after the detective successfully assembles the puzzle pieces and punishment is vetted out for the guilty parties, serving justice and reestablishing order. Argemí also incorporates a nod to the originator of the detective story in “Aclaración necesaria” where he refers to the crime as “Algo que sucedió entre vallas de seguridad, como si fuera un homenaje a los misterios de ‘cuarto cerrado’, que tanto gustaban a Edgar Allen Poe” (201). While, as Argemí points out, the crime’s setting can be compared to the closed room motif of Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” one might observe that the novel also has resonance with “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” insofar as it follows the essence of an actual case. Finally, we recall that the honest D.A. who ordered an autopsy is called “un Serpico,” referencing police procedurals.

These nods to classic detective stories and the police procedural serve to draw attention to *Retrato*’s intractable dissimilarity with them and its status as a *novela negra*, dramatizing social problems but offering no justice or solution. Juan Manuel, a pathetic detective, ends by admitting his failure, “No me queda nada, ni siquiera la arrogancia. Lo único que he conseguido es algo así como un retrato de familia en torno a un muerto” (198). His reference to the family portrait around a dead person, reiterating the novel’s ironic title, drives home a central message. A family portrait conjures up an image of cozy family unity, but this family generates treachery instead of protection when it destroys one of its members and blocks justice. And Juan Manuel’s sidekick, Ritter, deletes all of his files with the commentary: “[Juan Manuel] [t]endrá que aceptar que la vida es esta cosa gris, una cuestión de conveniencia” (200), thus voicing a truly postmodern outlook on life and crime.

As discussed above, *Retrato* can be considered a “neoliberal noir” novel due to its critique of conditions brought about by the economic and structural changes during the 1990s. The country club setting makes patent both the material and cultural conflicts: the widened gap between rich and poor that has crystallized the polarization of social classes, and the sensation of increased violence and insecurity.⁸ Juan Manuel’s commentary connects the boom in popularity of the gated communities to recent economic policies:

La transformación económica de Argentina [...] cerró fuentes de trabajo, y empobreció vertiginosamente a la clase media [...]. Muy pocos se hicieron ricos, y el resto a lamer el plato vacío. Entonces se multiplicaron los robos y el fantasma de la inseguridad se hizo dueño del imaginario colectivo. [...] Los

⁸ See Sarlo’s article for a discussion of the perception of insecurity in Buenos Aires in the 1990s.

country son un hijo de ese casamiento entre el miedo, el dinero fácil y la corrupción de todas clases. (129)

The counterpart to the countries are the *villas miserias* which have a complementary relationship with them, providing labor, services, and goods for the dwellers of the gated communities. Juan Manuel describes the resentment that *villeros* feel toward the inhabitants of the country: “Los otros viven fuera de las alambradas, y es fácil saber que se alimentan del country y del rencor” (130). While the privileged lifestyle of the inhabitants of Los Reyunos depends on the *villeros*, they live in fear of them: “El miedo constante de que los de ‘afuera’, los de la Villa, un día aprovechen cualquier motivo para tomar por asalto el country” (130). According to the narrator, the social divide is extreme—the workers waiting to enter cast looks of hatred at the privileged country-dwellers as they exit: “¿Sabés cómo miran a los que salen en coche? Para tu suerte la lucha de clases se fue al carajo, si no, ahí tenías una revolución con mucha guillotina” (157). Ironically, the violence in this case will not come from the feared “other,” but from the rotten bosom of the community.

An underlying cause of social decay is the legacy of Argentina’s brutal dictatorship, which disseminated a mentality of abuse of authority and impunity. Additionally, it is considered the point of origin of neoliberal economic policies in Argentina. Both la muerta’s brother and her husband are connected to the former dictatorship and continue to benefit from their collaboration with the repression. Their shady past provides a network of ties with corruptible individuals in law enforcement as well as alliances with individuals involved in fast money schemes: “se dice que [Lito, the dead woman’s brother] estuvo íntimamente relacionado con los grupos de tareas de la dictadura de Videla, o con los servicios, los amigos que le dieron puerta a ganar dinero con mucha mugre” (20).⁹ Thus, the brother’s illicit riches have their origins in his role in the sinister death squads.

In sum, Argemí’s fictional retelling of this incident of crime and cover-up in the “country” serves to denounce problems faced by contemporary Argentine society. In the creative interstice between the journalistic accounts of the enigmatic Belsunce case and the literary work, Argemí has fixed on a motive and fleshed out the actions of those involved in the crime.¹⁰ Most importantly, his main narrator, Juan Manuel, has provided a running critique of what he perceives as the causes of social decay

⁹ In this context, “servicios” refers to the “servicios de seguridad” of the military regime, which carried out acts of State terrorism.

¹⁰ I am indebted to Di Paolo’s study for his identification of the “creative interstice” as well as his analysis of its function in the *policial palimpsestico*.

and corruption of values, circumstances that laid the ground for the crime and cover-up. Along with neoliberal economic transformations have come structural changes such as the widened gap between rich and poor, new global crime networks, and an increased sensation of insecurity. What seems to concern Argemí most of all is the weakening of the social fabric, resulting in a breakdown in traditional values: a crisis in the family and a loss of basic human decency. Argemí's novel dramatically depicts Sarlo's observation: "La crisis de legitimidad de toda autoridad, que afecta a las escuelas y las familias, incide de modo particularmente intenso allí donde el tejido social ya se ha debilitado" (210). This same concern is stated by Giardinelli in reference to the cycle of violence unleashed by the characters in *El décimo infierno*: "La conducta de los seres humanos se vuelve ilimitada cuando se pierden las bases éticas" ("Mi libro refleja," n.p.). While not a "true crime" novel in a strict sense, *Retrato* possesses what Laura Browder identifies as a trait of the subgenre insofar as it can be considered "a form of social history" (123). Similar to Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, which laid bare the unspoken fears between the members of a community (Browder 121), *Retrato de familia con muerta* reveals the disintegration of ties of family, friendship, and community when they are overpowered by an eagerness to grab fistful after fistful of dirty money.

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