

**THE MYSTERIES OF HISTORY:
ADAPTATIONS AND RECONFIGURATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY CRIME FICTION ON BOTH SIDES
OF THE ATLANTIC**

by

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ABSTRACT

The Mysteries of History: *Adaptations and Reconfigurations of Contemporary Crime Fiction on Both Sides of the Atlantic*

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This dissertation examines the use of a specific literary genre in the attempt to represent individual perspectives of history in fictional narratives. Considering contemporary crime fiction from both Argentina and Italy, the study attempts to define notable adaptations and alterations within the form that have been forged by various authors to reflect their particular concerns, perspectives and subjectivities as they examine historical events and eras in their respective nations. In this examination, I define characteristics of a subgenre that I have designated as the “Historical Mystery Novel.” This subgenre of crime fiction designates literary texts that employ an investigative protocol and methodology to explore and critique complex notions about space and time, individual consciousness, memory, truth, identity and culture, particularly during times of political repression and social upheaval. The historical mystery novels discussed in the work include traditional, hybrid and inventive narratives written in the latter half of the 20th century and in the first decade of the 21st century by: Gianrico Carofiglio, Ricardo Feierstein, Dacia Maraini, Ricardo Piglia, Ernesto Sabato, Guillermo Saccomanno, Simone Sarasso, and Leonardo Sciascia. Adopting a comparatist stance, the texts from two national literary traditions are placed into conversation with each other and explicated to suggest meaningful analogies, similarities and divergences between the authors’ perspectives on societal progress and the value they ascribe to literature as a serious and apt method of historical inquiry. In the examination of the

historical mystery novel, the dissertation considers scholarship in the fields of historiography, genre, memory, cultural theory, and literary theory and criticism.

To Melissa Lunden and Lila Sharp

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INTRODUCTION

The Mysteries of History: *Adaptations and Reconfigurations of Contemporary Crime Fiction on Both Sides of the Atlantic*

It'll never be known how this has to be told, in the first person or in the second, using the third person plural or continually inventing modes that will serve for nothing [...] I know that the most difficult thing is going to be finding a way to tell it, and I'm not afraid of repeating myself. It's going to be difficult because nobody really knows who it is telling it, if I am I or what actually occurred or what I am seeing [...] or if simply, I'm telling a truth which is only my truth, and then is the truth only for my stomach, for this impulse to go running out and to finish up in some manner with this, whatever it is (Julio Cortázar *Blow Up* 115-117).

Over the course of the twentieth century, both the disciplines of historiography and literary studies have devoted substantial attention to the modes that historical eras and events are represented. In fictional narratives, the subject of history is approached foremost through an artistic vision, an aesthetic and imaginative process that distills and reconsiders facts and events, ideologically reconfiguring them according to an author's own viewpoint in order to render a subjective and nuanced vision of a particular time period. As an author introduces extratextual, historical realities into a work of fiction, these are frequently interpreted through the text's characters as they relate their personal experiences and impressions arising from particular social, cultural and political conditions that dictate and shape their everyday lives and subjectivity.

This representational process approaches historical data with a notably creative dimension, continually blurring together facts and fiction, conflating and rearranging them in an artistic vision that intends to problematize and distort strict divisions between what may be considered "real" and what is only imagined. In fictional narratives that attempt to represent

history in this manner, the imaginative dimension of the text continually serves to undermine and reconsider notions of objectivity and stable truths, and to instead depict specific time periods subjectively through a range of imagined, lived experiences during them.

By focusing on such unique perspectives of significant historical events, authors attempt to convey the private reflections and sentiments of their protagonists who in turn recount highly personal considerations about places, memory, and identity. Often their characters express profound uncertainties and qualms about themselves and their society, reflecting on their lives from within the nation they inhabit and surveying its pervasive cultural, social and political climate. As they do so, these protagonists and authors often tend to approach the events of their national history critically and with a notable degree of suspicion; puzzled by the events and times unfolding, they seek to understand the present conditions in society by reexamining them in light of personal observations and considerations.

These characters frequently appear dissatisfied or unconvinced about the veracity of the explanations that have been institutionalized as the nation's official history or purport to describe the impetuses and import of historical epochs. Such explanations do not necessarily reflect their own experiences and understandings of these events and times. Instead, the protagonists in these novels believe that various events and eras in their nation's history require reassessment and reexamination to reflect or convey their own experiences.

In writing narratives that consciously reflect upon a nation's history and significant events from it, authors assuredly introduce their own perspective to the events and times conveyed. As Hayden White suggests in his examination of historiography and fiction, the narration of history always reflects the writer's perspective and ideological approach to the events and times that are conveyed. Significantly White asserts that this is true for both the

historian and the writer of fiction. In his essay “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” White espies an entirely analogous approach in the construction of historiography and fictional narratives, and he emphasizes the “fictive nature” of historical narratives. White nonetheless notes that this is a contentious hypothesis, stating, “...in general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” (82, italicized in the original). In his subsequent examination of historiography and fiction, White draws attention to linguistic and narrative structures commonly employed by the writer, categorizing four major types of “emplotment,” or what he explains to be “the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures” (83). By choosing a specific plot structure, the historiographer, like the writer of fiction, intends to familiarize facts that may otherwise be unfamiliar to the reader to suggest the “meaning” of a story” (White, *Metahistory* 7). It is consequently through the narrative structure and the particular selection and arrangement of historical facts that multidimensional stories are elaborated from mere chronicles or unexplained facts.

This is an approach or practice that I, too, believe either consciously or unconsciously guides writers of fiction as they attempt to reassess, broaden and question previous accounts of historical events and epochs. When composing their narratives, authors pay considerable attention to the various forms that such historical narratives have assumed in the past, and their works not only reassess and reconsider any familiar or institutionalized explanations of history, but also the specific platforms that can facilitate artistic, historical representation.

The eight Argentine and Italian authors I will consider in this project have also devoted considerable attention to the suitability of particular literary genres to cogently narrate divergent notions of history, truth, and reality as they seek suitable literary forms to best convey the events of history through the subjective outlook of their protagonists. In their desire to express subjective truths and observations about places, memory and identity, these authors from different national contexts have focused on specific historical circumstances. Often, they seek to assail widely accepted or institutionalized accounts of supposed historical progress, and endeavor to introduce unconventional perspectives about seminal events and periods of history. As specific eras and events fall under their scrutiny, these authors have subjected them to a rigorous process of examination and analysis in their attempt to understand the forces both steering and subsequently narrating historical events. As they attempt to counter and broaden potentially limiting conceptions of history and its burden on the individual, they approach their subject with a detective-like methodology, intellect and tenacity. For many authors from both Argentina and Italy, it is precisely the investigative approach of a detective or inspector that best frames their own inquisitions into national histories.

While the *giallo*, or detective novel, has flourished in Italy over the last century, the earliest examples tended to rely on the conventions of previous or then-current British and American examples of the form. In such works, the inspector or detective set about to solve crimes that usually occurred in narrative spaces outside of Italy itself (*Trends* 3). These early *gialli* were often serialized stories, wherein the primary focus of detection was generally limited

to solving a crime through formulaic plots. While there are exceptions to this general trend¹, the genre was notably eschewed by most authors seeking to secure a literary reputation, but instead used to appeal to a wide and general public eager for entertainment and diversion.

In the emergence of the so-designated “New Italian Narrative” tradition in the 1980s, the crime fiction genre was reconsidered by many authors who sought to innovate the form and bring with it a certain degree of both literary prestige and social criticism. During this period, Italian crime fiction developed into a more specifically national form than the earliest *gialli* had been. Instead, the works became notable for the introduction of topical political and social issues and the particulars of recent Italian history (*Trends* 3). The popularity and accolade that the genre began to experience during this time has endured, and the social analysis and examination of societies in turmoil have remained a feature of the most recent and respectable examples.

Likewise, crime fiction in Argentina long followed and mirrored the early American and English tradition. With plots unfolding in cities and territories outside of Argentina, they rarely aimed to describe or encapsulate any aspects of the nation’s social or political fabric or to reflect any sort of endemic Argentine reality. Yet by the 1930s and 1940s, particularly through the works of Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares, writing under the pseudonym of Bustos Domecq, more innately Argentine models began to develop (“Dos opiniones” 306). Indeed Rodolfo Walsh, a prominent Argentine writer whose unfortunate fate will be touched upon in this study, noted in his introduction to the 1953 *Diez cuentos policiales argentinos* the eagerness of the Argentine public for “the possibility that Buenos Aires be the scenario of a detective adventure” (“Dos opiniones” 306, my translation). Innovating beyond the conventions of the

¹ Here I am specifically thinking about Carlo Emilio Gadda’s 1957 *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*, notably situated within Rome and an exploration of everyday life under Mussolini’s Fascist regime.

English and American models formerly being emulated, Walsh, Borges and many other writers began to create and situate their detective narratives within the nation and Buenos Aires itself. Characteristically, these examples largely continued to adhere to the classic, detective model originated by Edgar Allan Poe, “where the crime is discovered by an investigator thanks to his or her extraordinary analytical capacity” (“Dos opiniones” 306, my translation). By 1964, Argentine works selected by prominent translator and academic Donald Yates for inclusion in *Tiempo de puñales* already began to show significant adaptations, specifically reflecting Argentine social and political conditions. In such works, the disruptive crimes were often instigated or perpetrated not by common criminals, but frequently by anonymous organizations, or sometimes even linked to groups in power (“Dos opiniones” 306). In tandem with a developing Argentine tradition of the *relato policial*, the popularity of the genre generally continued to draw a wide public’s interest. By 1968, author Ricardo Piglia² helped to reinstitute the popularity of detective stories in Argentina by directing the *Tiempo Contemporáneo* publishing house’s *Serie Negra* [Black Series], reintroducing works to the public by classic masters of the hardboiled form (“Dos opiniones” 306). The popularity of the genre has not waned since then; rather, the reading public has been receptive to ever-evolving and interesting models that move beyond prior embodiments, incisively finding new modes to explore social and political factors and the intimate emotions and reflections of characters.

Situated within these respective literary traditions in which the broad crime fiction genre is well-established and continually in evolution, many contemporary authors have identified its

² Ricardo Piglia, whose novels and literary theory will be prominently discussed throughout this study, has continued to explore the possibilities of the Crime Fiction genre, with his most recent work *Blanco Nocturno* published in 2010. This novel also is situated in Argentina and recalls the turbulence of the early 1970s in the nation.

suitability to narrate subjective experiences, appraise their national histories and comment on the sociopolitical conditions operating in their present society. To apply White's terminology, these authors have chosen to "emplot" their fictional narratives as mysteries, and all of the texts I will consider pivot around episodes and eras of national significance that engage these authors.

Indeed, the election of the crime fiction genre is a calculated choice for these writers, as their narratives may have assumed various other forms as a way to introduce the same quandaries. Yet the conscientious choice to frame these events through crime fiction attests to a belief that it is an apposite forum to meticulously scrutinize historical events and eras, to rationally analyze the forces shaping them, and to ultimately interrogate their outcomes.

Additionally, these authors recognize that the crime fiction genre offers a familiar interpretative principle, one that structures the reader's understanding of the author's own perception of the events presented. Works conforming to this genre are foremost notable for the enjoyment they offer a reader, as the primary interest of the story consists in discovering the true order and meaning of different events that have been partly disclosed and partly concealed. The mysteries in crime fiction offer a participatory experience, for along with the protagonist, the reader inevitably becomes invested in the process of uncovering clues and attempting to resolve the mystery as well. The text accordingly becomes a type of game or riddle in which the protagonist, the author and the reader are all engaged in deciphering a plausible solution to a problem through the analysis and examination of a series of hints provided. Thus the genre's popularity in various national literary traditions over time, along with the innately hermeneutical mode of reading involved therein, may also enable the author to reach a broad and receptive audience, and to subsequently create a dialog about the events and eras that he or she approaches skeptically.

Configured as such, these narratives present various crimes including thefts, murders, abductions, and terrorist bombings. They often suggest collusion between government agencies, politicians and deliberate maneuvers to obstruct justice. Through such matters, these authors are able to suggest that various historical events and eras are enduring mysteries, cases that have not been satisfactorily resolved or explained, and consequently they demand further inspection and analysis. While I am generally availing myself of the term crime fiction here and elsewhere, the genre itself is very expansive, and may extensively encompass such subgenres as detective and spy novels, police procedurals, legal thrillers and mysteries. Indeed, such manifestations of crime fiction often assume a very literal approach to the events introduced, focusing specifically on the aberrant criminal act and the suspense of detection.

In the works I consider, the crime or offense is always prominent, yet criminal acts and misdeeds are only a starting point for much more protracted and consequential inquiries into other concerns imperative to the writer. Consequently, traditional examples from this genre and its subgenres do not necessarily attend to or encapsulate some of the particular differences or prominent divergences that arise in these authors' texts, nor do they always engage with the events of history as a primary consideration. I therefore intend to highlight and focus on variations within this general form to suggest how the authors I consider forge variations stemming from it.

Detective fiction, which I perceive to be a subcategory or variant of the crime fiction genre, often describes the general approach to the texts that I consider. Here, the mystery at hand is usually tangible and immediate. Faced with an event in which forensic skills may provide a resolution- a murder, a theft, a disappearance- the detective attempts to elucidate and solve the mystery through a rigorous, methodical approach. Often with the assistance of a

sidekick/interlocutor, the detective tirelessly gathers evidence, examines it from various angles and applies logic to his findings to create a narrative connecting these disparate elements into a cohesive whole. While the attempt to discover the “truth” and to solve the mystery may ultimately fructify, there is typically a series of errors, conundrums and false leads that interrupt the process and lead the investigator in unanticipated directions.

In traditional detective fiction, these interruptions often thwart the investigator during the process, and these digressions or false leads result in “dead ends.” These impasses often serve to create suspense in the narrative, and to simultaneously complicate a facile or obvious resolution to the mystery and delay its explanation. They do not enable the detective to solve the initial mystery, and ultimately appear as a distraction or a digression to the primary investigation. This is a notable point of contrast from the works I consider in this study, where the protagonists almost always profit from equivocation and errors. False leads are rarely an impediment to an investigation, but instead invite unexpected and seemingly unrelated examinations. These secondary pursuits take many forms in the works I analyze: a quest to examine individual consciousness and memory, an effort to address and reconsider notions of personal and national identity, to crucially reconsider pervasive political currents and social mores. Opposed to traditional detective fiction, in these contemporary works the seemingly ancillary quests always become the true substance of the novel’s action. The detective’s proverbial magnifying glass is accordingly refocused, eschewing the tangible, immediate and obvious inquiry in favor of more abstract and meaningful ones.

It is, however, the probative nature of crime fiction that structures all of the texts I examine, for in inspecting the events of history and the forces operating behind them, the genre readily operates as a pointed tool and a readymade platform for investigating complex enigmas.

This feature has been considered by many literary theorists, who perceive in the genre's variations a design innately suited to such explorations. Consequently, in his study *Tutti i colori del giallo: Il giallo italiano da De Marchi a Scerbanenco a Camilleri*, Luca Crovi asserts that the detective novel in Italy has been able to "thoroughly investigate the customs and ills of our country... [to serve as] a mask used to lay bare the tragedy of our contemporary world" (11). So, too, do H. Gustav Klaus and Stephen Knight note a similar feature of the genre in general. In *The Art of Murder: New Essays on Detective Fiction*, they posit that "crime fiction is a form that, by being so close to the populist grass roots, is in direct contact with social and political attitudes and so capable of revealing to a sufficiently acute analysis, the point where society and culture interrelate" (8). Such observations astutely recognize prior incisive uses of crime fiction for reflecting important issues about a particular society and the prominent social and political issues of a particular time.

While many theorists have remarked on the aptness of crime and detective fiction to investigate society, culture and history, the considerations of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges in his essays, short stories and interviews are also invaluable in my own analysis in this project. In his essay "The Detective Story," Borges cogently notes two prominent features of the genre that I consider significant in this study, stating:

In this chaotic era of ours, there is one thing that has humbly maintained the classic virtues: the detective story... I would say in defense of the detective novel that it needs no defense; though now read with a certain disdain, it is safeguarding order in an era of disorder. (499)

Here, Borges notes that the genre is one that often is expected to apologize for itself; indeed, as I will consider later on, it has frequently been asserted or implied that there is a predominant

“unliterary” dimension to all crime fiction. Arising precisely from its popularity, the genre has often been dismissed as facile, formulaic and disdainful by some discerning critics. Yet as in any other literary genre, there are copious uninteresting and unsophisticated examples to be found. As Jacques Barzun states in his introduction to *The Delights of Detection*, “one can distinguish the masterpieces from the dull imitations, whatever the genre, by the art with which the formula has been vivified” (16). The examples that I will focus on in this study stand out as particularly interesting and noteworthy exemplars of how the form can be applied astutely, originally and exceedingly well.

Importantly, Borges also notes a positive feature, remarking on the aptness of the form to investigate a problem, examine something in a state in disarray or chaos, and ultimately restore it to order and a degree of normalcy. In the works I consider it is society in general, but the nation specifically, that is shown to be in turmoil; the narratives center on attempts to apply reason, organization and logic as possible courses towards normalcy and wellbeing. Though generally apolitical and less concentrated on particular historical circumstances, Borges’ own forays into crime and detective fiction attest to an unambiguous belief that the genre is suitable for momentous metaphysical, intellectual and ontological inquisitions. His own experiments with the genre are admittedly indebted to American author Edgar Allan Poe and his inspector Auguste Dupin, whose ability to reason methodically and solve a crime are demonstrative of the unfaltering intellect that Borges considers characteristic of the genre (“Dos opiniones” 305). Indeed, Borges laments how subsequent iterations of crime fiction by American authors opt to forsake this intellectual pursuit and instead introduce gratuitous violence and adventure as the substance. He once remarked: “...it is a shame that the detective story, which began in North America and in an intellectual form- with a character like Dupin, who reasons and solves the

crime-, ends up with those malevolent characters who get into brawls where one hits the other with the butt of a gun, and he in turn throws the other to the floor and kicks him in the face” (“Dos opiniones” 305).

Consequently, Borges’s own examples generally privilege the intellectually guided quest that he admires in Poe’s design, eschewing the simple and superficial elements of plot and predictive action he disdains. Borges’s own detective stories constantly exercise the limits of intellect, insisting that familiar and usual ideological constructs can be reconsidered to introduce unexpected explanations and possibilities, and to move beyond simplistic plots turns and “action.” Borges’s fiction and essays on literary criticism have engendered and corroborated an appreciation of crime fiction’s suitability to open space for profoundly cerebral pursuits. As a profoundly important and revered writer, Borges’s positive considerations of the genre, as well as the importance he ascribes to precursors in forging a literary tradition, are imperative concerns that are continually present in the novels of the authors I will here consider.

Indeed, it requires only perusing the shelves of any library or bookstore in the United States to ascertain that mysteries, crime fiction and detective fiction are currently enjoying a massive resurgence in popularity, with prominent examples from various national traditions available in translation. As I focus on how this investigative protocol readily frames several contemporary authors in their prolonged intellectual inquisitions and offers a compelling structure for the protracted analysis of history, I rely on Borges in asserting that the current popularity and success of the genre has not arisen spontaneously. Instead, as Borges suggests of all literary genres, I contend that the latest and most popular examples from this genre are indebted to prominent precursors and predecessors who have adapted and innovated the form,

employing it in unexpectedly refreshing and intelligent ways as they consider and critique culture, society, nations, and ultimately history.

While my own analysis focuses only on works written by authors writing in Argentina and Italy, there are many other nations and canons that could have been examined through a similar comparatist approach aiming to explore analogies between the texts and to reconcile and synthesize some of the most significant differences among them. However, I have specifically chosen to consider authors from these two countries based on my own interest in the literary and cultural production of these two nations. I do not presume to produce an exhaustive examination, for such an endeavor would not be feasible considering the vastness and richness of these two literary traditions. Instead, I have elected to analyze and consider several examples of texts produced by authors writing within both nations over the last 40 years, a period I am considering as contemporary. As these authors engage with national histories unfolding both in the past and in the present, it is not my intention to force a one to one correspondence between the histories of the two nations. While I see similarities in their novels and their underlying intentions, I do not envision these various authors' projects as homogenous, identical or uniform. Thus, I intend to place the texts into conversation in order to show correlations between the pointed uses of the mystery form, and to highlight how it has provided a suitable medium for these authors to critically and systematically examine historical events and their lingering effects on different societies.

Certainly the particular circumstances of these authors' respective nations and their individual experiences differ vastly. Yet all of these authors approach historical events with suspicion, rejecting simple explanations and instead espying intricate conspiracies, deliberate political machinations, ruthless struggles for power or dominance at play, all with tragic

consequences on individual destinies. All suggest that historical events and their familiar narratives demand critical analysis, even if they may not yield any definitive or satisfactory explanation.

Notably, all of the narratives reflect and portray a similar political climate that has pervaded both Argentina and Italy. Both nations have been ruled by extremely conservative, reactionary or fascist regimes during the twentieth century, often representing the interests of a minor segment of society rather than the welfare of the masses. In both countries, there have been significant and targeted attempts to subdue or abolish the influence of liberal currents and thinkers, and to discredit initiatives by opposing institutions, political parties and actors that have also attempted to influence or assert power or direct the national policies in a different, frequently more liberal, direction.

Moreover, one cannot discredit the cultural connection between the two nations: Argentina, though a Spanish-speaking nation in Latin America thousands of miles away from Europe, is a nation composed of a massive European immigrant population. Historically, Italians were one of the largest and earliest groups of immigrants to arrive in Argentina, and have left indelible prints on the Argentinean linguistic, cultural and political landscape. Early Italian settlers arrived in Argentina, bringing radical, populist ideas and socialist notions of equality to a nation ruled by a small group of wealthy elites.

In both nations, efforts to squelch such ideas and to maintain a conservative regime representing limited interests have fomented extraordinary instances of violence and repression with lingering effects. Moreover, both have either experienced or are currently experiencing a changing demographic shift through a massive influx of immigrants, a reality that has not necessarily been embraced willingly by the state or the populace and still reverberates in the

lives of many citizens of both nations. Such concerns indeed permeate the substance of the texts from both countries, and both the Italian and the Argentinean works pivot around such key historical moments and events that have determined the fate of marginalized individuals, groups and the direction of the nation in general.

Positioned within their respective national context, all of these authors suggest that history is both that which has already occurred and that which is currently occurring, and these moments generate fascinating and resonating enigmas to be scrutinized and commented on. In the study that follows, I intend to show the way these various authors apply the crime fiction form with a similar ideological purpose: to fictionally depict subjective experiences as a meaningful way to address and to broaden perceived elisions in historical memory, to oppose institutionalized versions of national history, and to critically and scrupulously evaluate society. Likewise, I intend to devote attention to how he or she applies the form uniquely, adapting characteristic features from it to elucidate his or her own ideological framework, subjectivity and literary aesthetic.

Indeed, all the authors incorporate traditional features of crime fiction in their respective literary traditions to some aspects of their narratives. Similarly, every work commences with a mysterious, criminal event and a thorough investigation that initially purports to determine a decisive and satisfactory solution. Such events set the investigators into motion, and escalate the protagonist's pursuit, propelling the narrative towards unexpected and surprising denouements and conclusions. Yet it is in the particulars that the limits and features of the genre are reconsidered, adapted and ultimately reconfigured.

Thus, in some of the works the protagonists are, in fact, professional detectives and law enforcement agents. These tenacious, brusque and solitary men recall the hardboiled and noir

style of the American detective novels from the 1950s, as well as the detectives in the earliest Italian *gialli* and the Argentinean *relatos policiales*. These inspectors are entrusted with the task of investigating a criminal act in order to ostensibly provide a solution and apprehend the perpetrator. Yet in other works, the protagonists are not expert detectives or career investigators per se; rather, they are newspaper reporters, professors, writers, sociologists, and students, a series of self-aware individuals who recognize they are living through exceptional circumstances that require inquiry and attention. Their exceptional intellectual faculties and a personal investment in the situation's outcome compel them to reconstruct and deconstruct incidents and to dissect them from various angles. In doing so, they are commonly guided by the overwhelming suspicion that another solution must be sought, one that may better illuminate what may have really occurred and why. In all the works, the investigative pursuit demands unfaltering reason, intellect, patience and a markedly critical, suspicious and discerning nature. Like the authors themselves, the protagonists are extremely reluctant to accept facile resolutions, and are wary of all attempts to purvey them. The mysteries they investigate intend to restore or institute social justice, and aim to return uprooted and turbulent societies to some sort of homeostasis or state of health. This is an overarching feature that links all of the texts similarly.

Significantly, in some of the works to be considered here, the author has selected an actual historical event as the point of entrance into the society where the novel unfolds; both Argentinean Ricardo Feierstein and Italian Simone Sarasso begin their novels with terrorist bombings or murders that take the lives of innocent victims. Italian Dacia Maraini explores a history of misogyny and patriotism that silently claimed the life of an actual young woman in turn of the century Verona. In other works, the starting point is a fictitious event with metaphorical dimensions that require the reader to infer and pinpoint its particular historical

resonance and extratextual correlatives. Consequently Italian Leonardo Sciascia begins his narrative with assassinations of a series of high-level magistrates, while Amara Lakhous, an Algerian writing in Italian, focuses on the murder of a man within the familiar confines of an apartment building in Rome. Gianrico Carofiglio's *Involuntary Witness* presents the murder of an innocent child on a beach near Bari implicating an African immigrant, and Argentinians Ricardo Piglia and Guillermo Saccomanno both invoke disappearances of civilians during a dictatorship to initiate an investigation in their narratives. All of these novels focus on tragic events that occurred in the nation's recent past or are still occurring presently, and develop these intrigues to offer complex counternarratives that astutely address a seemingly inexcusable lack of progress in the nation and enduring legacies of misery that have shaped the lives of countless individuals.

Though all of these novels ostensibly can be grouped within the genre of crime fiction, they also attest to a hybridity that defies perfunctory attempts to relegate them exclusively to one particular genre. These authors reshape and adapt generic precursors to suit their artistic and historical vision, while liberally mixing notable features from other genres beyond the crime fiction form into their overall design. Thus Ricardo Piglia's novel *Artificial Respiration* incorporates the distinctive features of a Historical novel, wherein a distant era figures prominently into the narrative related in the present and relies on the past to typify and describe the present. His *The Absent City* recreates through imagination and fantastic elements the conditions of life under the terror of the Argentine military regime and its paramilitary repressive machine. In doing so, it often recalls a work of science fiction, with a futuristic, self-conscious machine narrating and bringing to life the memories of the dead in a city. Yet the work never clearly resolves the mystery, and like the populace it describes, the reader remains bewildered

about what has actually occurred. With an enduring sense of confusion, where rational explanations based from the realm of everyday life cannot explain the outcome or denouement of the narrative or explain the parameters of space and time, it may even be considered a paradigmatic example of fantastic literature.³

Ricardo Feierstein's two novels continually showcase invented documents, fictitious newspaper clippings, letters, photographs, poems and illustrative features usually found in graphic novels, but the polyphonic narrative style introducing numerous narrative voices and perspectives is perhaps the most prominent feature. This overlapping narrative style is also a salient feature of Amara Lakhous' dialogic novel *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, where each episode is narrated by a different character and responded to subsequently through the voice of the main protagonist. Leonardo Sciascia, perhaps the most conventional of all the authors in his adherence to the traditional detective form, has nonetheless insisted that his works are more complex: as metaphorical mysteries, they question the will to power, war and historical progression in human institutions through allegory.

³ In his *Introducción a la literatura fantástica*, theorist Tzvetan Todorov describes this vacillation and lingering incomprehension as constitutive features of literature of the Fantastic, stating: "In the world that we belong to, the one that we know... an event occurs that is impossible to explain according to the laws of this same familiar world. The individual who perceives the event must choose between one of two possible solutions: either it is an illusion of the senses, a product of the imagination, and the laws of the world continue to be what they are, or instead the event really occurred, it is an integral part of reality, and thus this reality is governed by laws that we are unaware of... The fantastic occupies the time of this uncertainty. As soon as one of the two answers is chosen, the realm of the fantastic is left behind in order to move into a neighboring genre: the uncanny or the marvellous. The fantastic is the vacillation that is experienced by an individual who knows none other than natural laws, faced with an apparently supernatural event." (24, my translation)

Italian Simone Sarasso's *Confine di stato* often adheres closely to the *noir* form while updating it for a new era and readership's sensibilities: consequently he incorporates comics, and relies on cinematic technical elements, including shot by shot analyses and stage direction. His work also employs "correspondence" from within a mental asylum to revisit contemporary Italian history and question the sanity of the nation's progression. Dacia Maraini, the sole female voice in this study, delves into the history of an actual woman and a real judicial trial that occurred in Italy. Yet in no way can her *racconto inchiesta*, or investigative story work be considered simply "non-fiction," for it is marked by fictionalization that transforms and filters all facts through a creative sieve that relies on her power of imagination.

Ultimately, the specific forms that these narratives adopt as they expand upon the usual parameters of crime fiction resist the confines of such definitive and simple taxonomy. Attempts to classify these works within the confines of any particular or broad genre thus could produce new labels and parameters, generating a taxonomy of original forms such as the "Epistolary Detective Novel," the "Science Fiction Fantastic Mystery," or even the "Graphic Spy Novel." As each author adapts or reconfigures the basic crime fiction design, he or she transmutes it as a way to express unique aesthetic sensibilities and to respond to particular ideological concerns.

Consequently I envision my project as an effort to articulate and characterize features that emerge through deviations from and adaptations of the general crime fiction form that give rise to a new subgenre. I will here designate this as the "Historical Mystery Novel," which I perceive to be wholly indebted to the familiar genres of crime fiction, mystery, and detective fiction. Nevertheless, such genres do not adequately bring into relief the vitally enigmatic historical dimension that differentiates these works from other examples of such genres. By introducing theories and explicating significant episodes from these different texts, I intend to demonstrate

various features of the novels that highlight the commonalities or differences in their structure and their similar ideological underpinnings, while concurrently drawing attention to the investigative protocol, suspense, and historical components that are always identifying and constitutive features of this subgenre.

Moreover, authors writing in this genre clearly seek to establish their writings as unique and erudite literary works worthy of admiration and emulation, moving beyond any criticism or preconceptions that such works of fiction are mechanical, formulaic or cliché and may only “satisfy a juvenile and unliterary taste” (Barzun 10). Thus the historical mystery novel appeals to the most discerning and cultivated of audiences as it consciously attempts to distinguish itself as a reflective and compelling genre able to include societal, political and cultural criticism. This arises by frequently including complex philosophical discussions and engaging with the literary works and ideas of respected and important authors, philosophers and intellectuals. As such, a common feature of many of these texts is both arcane and overt references to other writers, with the protagonists reflecting upon or even quoting Jorge Luis Borges, Macedonio Fernández, Roberto Arlt, Leopoldo Lugones, James Joyce, Blaise Pascal and Voltaire. In these historical mystery novels, literary criticism and theory is continually invoked as another familiar form of inquiry and detection with relevance to other spheres of knowledge.

Finally, in contrast to traditional crime fiction, the historical mystery novel insists on complicating the traditional formula of a crime, an investigation and a definitive resolution; when hard-gathered evidence is amassed and aligned, the protagonists often discover that the more complex historical enigmas are simply unsolvable. While antithetical to the clear solution often found in crime fiction, I nevertheless consider it as a prominent aspect of the historical

mystery novel, which the authors use for profound intellectual, ontological and metaphysical concerns that are still ripe for contemplation far beyond the pages of the novels themselves.

In four dense and thorough chapters, I will delve into these and other particular thematics and analyses devoted to specific inquiries and aspects of these texts, seeking to develop an organic connection between each chapter that will enable me to broaden my analysis of each work in its entirety. In Chapter 1, I will focus on the specific narrative strategies of texts that aim to depict the everyday lives of individuals during particular times of societal turbulence or political repression. Focusing on Ricardo Piglia's *The Absent City*, Ricardo Feierstein's *La logia del umbral*, and Leonardo Sciascia's *Equal Danger*, this chapter will revolve around Mikhail Bakhtin's examination of the "chronotope" as an organizing principle for representing real historical time and space within a fictional narrative. Moving beyond the historical period Bakhtin considers, I examine and categorize various spatial and temporal unities supporting these novels and propelling the storyline to suggest how everyday life is represented textually during exceptionally oppressive eras in nations.

Piglia's novel depicts a world where people desperately attempt to escape notice, where everyday life is continually reactive to repression and fear. As a newspaper reporter attempts to locate and save a narrating machine, the search moves through an active underground world, where characters operate within various milieus marked by secrecy, illicitness and stealth. All elements of plot are continually responsive to the specific temporal-spatial unity that Piglia establishes to describe a city that is occupied and drastically irregular from what it has once been for the characters.

Feierstein's novel responds to the 1992 terrorist bombing of the AMIA, the center of Jewish activity in Buenos Aires. His text employs different overlapping chronotopes to consider

and represent the position of marginalized groups in the history of Argentina, and aims to include their contributions and history within the national narrative. In exploring the saga of a single Jewish family, Feierstein's novel moves from province to province, toggling between the country's foundation and the present day, repeatedly focusing on moments of political or social upheaval and the emotional consequences these have on his protagonists. Though he primarily focuses on Jewish identity in Argentina, Feierstein meditates on the experiences of other groups in liminal positions also seeking changes in the national landscape.

Sciascia's novel examines a silent war dominating the face and space of an unspecified nation. As an inspector attempts to solve a series of murders, he unwittingly becomes a victim of a far-reaching and frightening conspiracy to seize power of the nation. Place and time are a prominent mystery itself in the text, for Sciascia presents them both as puzzles that seemingly have extratextual correlatives to be discovered. In all three novels, the authors establish through the presentation of different chronotopes a template for a normal world that is indexed against the alien world where the text unfolds.

In Chapter 2, I analyze three texts that are directly concerned with reexamining and reconstructing the past through the consideration of alternative versions of events that the authors suggest have not received ample attention. These texts specifically focus on the function of memory in the construction of historical narratives, and suggest the limits of historical memory. These narratives create and emphasize a nexus between private and collective memory, and propose the importance of counternarratives for broadening or critically examining institutionalized versions of the past. While this is a theme that informs all of the texts in this project, it is the very substance of Feierstein's *Mestizo*, Maraini's *Isolina*, and Sarasso's *Confine di stato*. In each of these works, the authors directly question the unfolding of momentous events

and their accepted explanations to instead create new and decidedly subjective memories of history. They insist upon reinterpreting the past through unique perspectives, aiming to oppose facile explanations and to address what these authors perceive as gaping elisions in historical narratives. The way they do so, however, varies significantly in each author's presentation and focus.

Whereas Feierstein's novel pivots around an individual's recent amnesia in the aftermath of a traumatic experience, the attempt to recover his own memory and to piece together details of a forgotten life leads him to reflect on various historical incidents that occurred during his own life in Buenos Aires that also reflect the experience of many others from his generation. Through the protagonist's deeply personal quest to reestablish his own memory, Feierstein focuses on the production of subjective memories themselves, while also considering the consequences of historical events and periods on a collective and national level.

Dacia Maraini's *Isolina* imaginatively reexamines a libel trial that took place in Verona in the early 20th century, exploring how and why the Italian justice system sacrificed the reputation of an innocent woman to that of a powerful soldier. Unearthing a history of discrimination, misogyny and narrow patriotism, her narrative continually intermingles facts with fiction, examines the past in light of the present, and appeals to the power of literature to reconstitute a missing life. Notably, Maraini's narrative resorts to documentation and textual accounts of a time no longer accessible through any other means, yet it is through her creativity and own subjectivity that a particularly nuanced rendering of the period emerges.

Sarasso's novel focuses on confusion and violence in Italy during the years immediately before and during the *Anni di piombo*. Sarasso's novel primarily seeks to discredit any tidy and definitive solutions to the 1969 Piazza di Fontana bombings in Milan and how it is remembered.

Accordingly, the narrative instead reexamines the forces that deliberately produced a series of national tragedies and conundrums. It is precisely through the novel's innovative literary style and format that Sarasso intends to awaken a new generation's interest in examining the country's perplexing and dubious history. In each of these works, the authors insist that unsophisticated, uncritical explanations to historical problems must not be accepted as unassailable or definitive, and their counternarratives deliberately challenge and supplement historical memory through personal, subjective and generally overlooked accounts of the past.

In Chapter 3, I consider the imperative role of the witness in the historical mystery novel to demonstrate how conceptions of personal and national identity are wholly interrelated, and also determined or codified within a society. In Guillermo Saccomanno's *77*, the very act of witnessing disappearances during the Argentine dictatorship and later accounting for his actions during the period constricts a literature professor to confront his self-perception and beliefs and to appraise his identity as a gay man living in a repressive and violent nation. Suspended between desperate attempts to guard his private life and to protect another individual, he inadvertently finds himself involved in a revolutionary struggle deeply implicating him in political circumstances that he otherwise wishes to regard as impertinent to his own life.

In Gianrico Carofiglio's *Involuntary Witness*, an attorney is appointed to defend an immigrant accused of murder. Facing a society and justice system that has essentially predetermined his guilt because of his foreignness, attorney Guido Guerrieri audaciously resolves to protect and humanize his client. Ultimately, he must reveal the inconsistencies of a primary witness's testimony to ensure a fair trial. Through the course of the hearing, Carofiglio exposes some of the prevalent and current attitudes about immigrants residing in Italy, including

his own biases, as he ascertains that the nation's future as a democratic nation depends entirely on the proper safeguarding of its highest institutions and systems.

Similarly, in Amara Lakhous' *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, a murder in a residential building in Rome pastiches together several testimonies concerning the flight of the primary suspect. It is in the polyphonic, layered narrative accounts that a broader picture emerges of current Italy, exposing pervasive and dangerous attitudes, legal initiatives and prejudices against immigrants living in current day Italy. Notions of Italianity and the parameters historically used to determine conceptions of national belonging are the crux of the examination. In all three novels, the role of a witness is never limited to solving any particular crime. Instead, the witness is configured as a gauge for approaching slippery and conflicting notions of identity, as a complex figure for indexing and explicating societal attitudes and norms, and for suggesting approaches to move past such dominant and narrow parameters in the future.

In Chapter 4, there is a two-fold emphasis that I envision to be closely related. I first directly consider literary allusions, intertextual references and the substantial role that literary criticism occupies in the works of Saccomanno, Sciascia and Piglia. In these historical mystery novels, literary criticism is presented as another field of inquiry and exacting investigation in the manner of a sleuth or a detective. I also consider the extent to which such engagements with the works of notable and respected authors shape these writers' own historical vision, aesthetic style and intellectual concerns. Moreover, I analyze how the inclusion of such discussions enables these authors to establish and qualify their own place within a larger literary tradition, and the effect that these discussions has on the reader's comprehension of the work as a whole. Through the consideration of other authors and works, these authors demonstrate aspects of their own intellectual and professional formation, as well as the value they ascribe to literature as a serious

field of inquiry. Additionally, this chapter aims to show how such references and literary criticism can orient and propel the process of decryption propounded by these texts. The authors include instances of literary theory and criticism to provide indirect hints or inferences for the reader to consider. As the protagonists root out clues and assign meaning to them in their investigation of particular mysteries, the reader is reciprocally involved in this process of deduction and synthesis, and the analysis of literary traditions is constantly invoked as a mode to propose questions about power, intellectual development and national progress.

Ultimately, I intend for this project to demonstrate the relevance and usefulness of these detailed discussions and motifs to suggest how a specific literary genre can reflect individual experience, encapsulate evolving concepts of history, and represent the contemporary world that is the context for these novels. I envision my own role in this process as that of both a detective and a literary critic, a pursuit guided by a methodology that employs investigation and analysis in hopes to elucidate clues, to uncover theories and to discover deeper resonances in these text beyond the superficial or apparent meanings.

As these novels initially propound, the process of investigation is seemingly geared towards deciphering and offering definitive solutions or answers to an immediately obvious question or problem. Yet ultimately, such considerations become mired in other issues and investigations, often losing one trail in order to pursue another, and repeatedly discovering elements not initially contemplated or expected to be unearthed. Likewise, as I considered these narratives and writers, a series of unexpected leads repeatedly compelled me to notice unanticipated aspects of these texts that did not immediately stand out in relief upon first, second and even third readings. As such, I have attempted to develop various theories, hypotheses, and to formulate questions and draw inferences about these texts; still, I ultimately remain aware that

there are multiple differing interpretations that could be presented, dissimilar approaches that could be valid and useful, and numerous other dimensions of these works that remain to be explored.

Foremost, while my own investigation focuses on Argentina and Italy exclusively, I am certain that there are many other canons and national literatures that have similar examples of what I am defining as historical mystery novels. These could be explored to pose similar arguments, or as a way to suggest notable differences in form, content and ideologies. Indeed, I believe that the popularity of this genre and the pointed uses to which it has been employed by Argentine and Italian authors could be generalized to find its correlatives in literature outside of this specifically Western context. I also suspect that a compelling analysis could also be applied to crime fiction from other Latin American and European nations that have experienced similar sociopolitical and historical conditions that would invite comparisons, and could reveal notable resemblances or dissimilarities about extenuating societal factors and the way these have been incorporated into the substance of other works fiction with a prominent historical dimension.

My focus on Argentina and Italy is informed by my own interest in these nations' rich literary tradition, a perceived similarity in their recent sociopolitical and cultural realities, and the influence that these eight prominent writers from both nations may wield on subsequent generations of authors. Still, I believe that the features of the historical mystery novel that I am attempting to outline here may serve to provide additional avenues for subsequent and detailed analysis. As the reader progresses through my dissertation, I anticipate that such connections to other texts and national contexts will arise in the process, for the specific authors, narratives and historical periods that I consider here assuredly have correlatives beyond the scope of this

examination. It is my aspiration that these, too, may benefit from analogous considerations and insights such as those that will be expounded in this study.

CHAPTER ONE

A Chronotopic Approach to the Historical Mystery Novel

In his essay “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” Mikhail Bakhtin surveys the development of the European novel from Antiquity through the nineteenth century. His historical approach to artistic representation, concentrated on literary production and variations in forms over time, aims to demonstrate that genre and generic distinctions have been significantly determined by formal topoi representing inseparable spatial and temporal configurations. This unity between time and space serves as an organizing principle for the entire literary work, thereby enabling, propelling and advancing all possibilities for action, or more specifically, of plot. Bakhtin suggests that the introduction of the chronotope- the spatial and temporal configuration- aims to depict a certain degree of realism within an artistic work. Yet he immediately asserts that such an endeavor is bound to meet with obstacles and impasses by foremost noting:

The process of assimilating real historical time and space in literature has a complicated and erratic history, as does the articulation of actual historical persons in such a time and space. We will give the name *chronotope* (literally, “time space”) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time. (Bakhtin 84)

Bakhtin thus concedes that to represent real historical events and real places in art is a problematical endeavor that has evolved throughout time; indeed one such complication derives

from evolving conceptions of mimesis and in attempts of portraying “realism,” such as those historical, extratextual conditions defining societies and the lives of real people.

At the crux of Bakhtin’s essay there are various concerns that will immediately resonate throughout my own consideration of historical mystery novels; primarily, I intend to examine the different modes authors use in their own attempt depict historically determined spaces through a series of chronotopic motifs that function as “the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel” (Bakhtin 250). For in these particular configurations of time and space, the narratives attempt to reveal a degree of realism and to represent specific historical periods and the era’s formative effects in a particular place.

Because Bakhtin asserts that “...it can be said without qualification that to them [the chronotopes] belongs the meaning that shapes narrative” (Bakhtin 250), his reflections can serve as a starting point to consider to what purpose the symbiotic relationship existing between space and time operates in literature. Indeed, the chronotope fulfills two significant functions: primarily, it is the method by which a text represents history. Secondly, it unites different images of time and space in the text, out of which any representation of history must be constructed. Bakhtin suggests this is so in his assertion that as a text presents the reader with a text occupying a “localized” or “certain specific place in space” (Bakhtin 252), the reader’s construal and interpretation of it occurs through time (Bakhtin 252). Consequently, the chronotope that is presented in any narrative functions as an ideological guide for interpreting the text.

While Bakhtin privileges time as the “more important” dimension of the chronotope, his assessment is somewhat contradictory in his contention that the two elements are wholly inseparable, and likewise in his acknowledgement that neither principle can be considered in

absence of the other. His analysis does suggest various genres in which chronotopic figures privilege time over space, yet it is always the intersection between the two in a narrative that constitute the chronotope itself.

It is with the intention to examine how three contemporary authors represent historical time and space in their novels that I wish to apply the concept and the figure of the chronotope to my own analysis in the present chapter. In examining Ricardo Piglia's *The Absent City*, Ricardo Feierstein's *La logia del umbral*, and Leonardo Sciascia's *Equal Danger*, I propose to expand upon Bakhtin's remarks and investigation, looking beyond the timeframe that he considers for examining the interconnectedness of time and space in mystery novels from the late 20th century. In doing so, I hope to explain how the concept of the chronotope can be used to characterize a literary genre that does not receive significant attention within Bakhtin's own analysis.

While this abstracts Bakhtin's own analysis from his specific object of study to some extent, it is with his original intention to distinguish "important generic variations on the novel in the early stages of its development" (Bakhtin 243) that I see a similar project and purpose. Considering the crime fiction/mystery genre to which he offers no remarks, I believe an analysis of the similar chronotopes existing in these works may allow for characterizing the distinguishing feature of this genre and the later development of the novel. Additionally, such an undertaking can be substantiated by Bakhtin's own admission that his study does not "... pretend to completeness or precision in our theoretical formulations and definitions. Here and abroad, serious work on the study of space and time in art and literature has only just begun. Such work will in its further development eventually supplement, and perhaps substantially correct, the characteristics of novelistic chronotopes offered by us here" (Bakhtin 85).

To be clear, I do not haughtily presume to correct Bakhtin's observations, though I do hope to consider how his theory can be usefully applied to contemporary literary forms, and can also be extended beyond the strict geographical confines of Europe. While Bakhtin's methodology and observations focus specifically on European literature, his considerations seem applicable beyond any Western context, and may be fruitful for considering any novelistic traditions. I, however, will consider works written by authors from two nations, Italy and Argentina. While Italy's geographical location alone allows for consideration of European novels, Bakhtin's own examination does not consider works beyond the early Renaissance. His analysis of Italian forms is limited to Dante and Boccaccio, and thus there is an elision allowing for consideration of contemporary works written in Italian.

Argentina, conversely, may not readily be introduced into a discussion of European literature if geography alone is the qualifying criteria. Yet, composed in a major European language, I also believe that the novels I will discuss here follow in a line of Argentine literature that is continuously indebted to and well aware of European traditions. Marked by a national history that decimated indigenous people, language and cultures, Argentina frequently aspired to European sensibilities and models in its own approach to cultural, economic and political progress.¹

These authors attempt to demonstrate concepts of "real historical time" operating in their novels, and thus the spaces and eras that intersect in the texts constitute characteristic chronotopes frequently introducing historical factors such as attitudes about politics, class, religion and race. The chronotopes allow for concrete representation of place and time, serving

¹ In Chapter 4 of this thesis, a more thorough and insightful analysis of Argentina's intellectual and cultural history will follow, considering the ways in which aspirations towards European modernity have affected the nation's own development, autonomy and politics over its history.

as “a force giving body to the entire novel” (Bakhtin 250). Consequently, in the chronotope, all the abstract elements of the narrative are revealed and materialize, particularly issues of sociopolitical and moral import. This is crucial in approaching the texts that will be the subject of the present chapter, for the historical dimension describing the sociopolitical reality is never incidental, but instead is at the very core of the narrative. As these works narrate a range of experiences in spaces responding to politically-charged eras, Bakhtin’s considerations on the chronotope may be applied as a lens to approach each author’s unique assimilation of historical time and place in these novels.

It should be reiterated that for each of the authors considered here, space and time are not mere backdrops or prescriptive Aristotelian unities that must be considered, but instead a primary consideration. While it is an oversimplification to read any of these texts reductively – that is, as purely factual accounts of political and social realities- they are nonetheless meaningful works of fiction that intend to provide an image of different historical circumstances and people from an artistic perspective. This is a defining characteristic of these contemporary historical mystery novels.

Bakhtin’s own methodology relies on the exposition and analysis of specific episodes and passages of novels to describe what he describes as “major” chronotopes that have operated during different periods for different genres. He identifies several specific ones, most notably what he terms “adventure time,” “idyllic time,” “an alien world,” “on the road,” and “everyday life.” He suggests that many originated in Antiquity and were reconsidered or adapted to later forms; thus “everyday life” later intersects with “parlors and salons,” and even the “provincial town” in the works of Stendhal and Flaubert.

While identifying such major chronotopes, Bakhtin also states that there can be essentially limitless, infinite chronotopes to be defined and applied. He also notes that there can be “any number of minor chronotopes” present in a work (Bakhtin 252), and posits that any motif may have a unique chronotope of its own. This allows for the introduction of several temporal-spatial figures to appear in a single work without any detriment to the primary or major overarching configuration that scaffolds the narrative. Indeed, chronotopes are characterized by their ability to intersect and overlap, for they are “...mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships” (Bakhtin 252).

As I aim to consider the way that different authors organize the symbiosis between time and space in historical mystery novels, I will profit from Bakhtin’s suggestion that several chronotopes are present in these works. Yet it is first appropriate to designate what “major” or universal chronotope I consider to be structuring the action and interactions in these texts. Foremost, there is a fusion of two motifs that Bakhtin discusses in his consideration of unified time and space: “everyday life” in an “alien world.” The alien world in these contemporary novels stands in contrast to the traditional one that Bakhtin describes as characteristic of the ancient Greek romances.

Bakhtin describes the alien world of Greek romance novels as one where “everything is foreign, including the heroes’ homeland” (Bakhtin 101). In the Greek romance, this chronotope was developed through the interactions of the protagonist with a place that is somewhat off-kilter, starkly unfamiliar and continually surprising to him. Bakhtin states of this world: “There is no implied native, ordinary, familiar world against whose background the otherness and foreignness of what is foreign might be clearly projected” (Bakhtin 101). Yet he nonetheless

asserts that there must be at least some “minimal degree of some presumed native, ordinary, normal world” (Bakhtin 101). In the texts I will subsequently analyze there is, however, frequently the contrasting vision of a “normal” world, and the protagonists recognize that they do not exist within it. The world these protagonists will encounter is constantly indexed against another template or schema for how they believe their environment should, could or may have once existed. The environments and spaces they move through are “utterly and exclusively other, since the native world from which the author came and from which he is now watching is nowhere to be found in it” (Bakhtin 101).

Thus, as these characters live their everyday lives, they are ever conscious that they are confined within a thoroughly alien world that continually stands in opposition to their understanding and experiences of what they can consider to be “normal” or familiar. Here, I wish to make an explicit analogy between the depicted alien world and the operating concept of “nation” that is present in these novels. For, in these works, everyday life unfolds in an alien world that is the country where these protagonists are located. The government, its administrative and bureaucratic structures, and the entire social context where they live is seen as compromised, somehow absent or misplaced, constantly foreign and incomprehensible to these individuals. As they survey their own daily interactions and possibilities, they are continually reminded that they are somewhere “other,” that their once familiar home, street, city, or country is now entirely uncanny and amiss.

Consequently, the streets, cities and nations described in these narratives are depicted as tenuous spaces that signify entirely different things to different characters. Geographical locations that once served as stable points are continually depicted as changing, alterable, elusive, unstable and incorporeal. The practical delimitations once offered by maps cannot

describe the spaces of these alien sites. Moreover, quotidian life unfolds in these locales defying the routine, logic, values or customs that seemingly have applied during other eras, or any schema of how it should otherwise proceed.

Amidst this major, overarching chronotope of *everyday life in an alien world*, there are indeed other ones that overlap and serve to reinforce conceptions of abnormal time and space. Thus, in Ricardo Piglia's *The Absent City*, *everyday life in an alien world* is further complicated by the minor though prominent chronotope of an "occupied city." Ricardo Piglia employs this chronotope to depict a legendary world capital that is as a perilous maze where the populace scurries about amidst incessant and pervasive control by the state. The Buenos Aires existing on maps may locate monuments, buildings, streets, and subway stations, but it is this minor chronotope that enables Piglia to express the reality of life during a dictatorship that lurks below the surface. Bound to this time period, Piglia's novel unfurls in a series of clandestine and guarded spaces that are responsive to and products of this time. Thus surreptitious meetings, covert organizations, popular resistance movements and stealthy modes of living are highlighted as "normal" everyday life in this otherwise completely abnormal epoch of real historical time. Encounters become literally subterranean, unfolding hurriedly in subway stations and basements, or within the walls of dingy and decrepit hotel rooms and shops; the space of the city becomes through this chronotope one of entrapment and suffocation.

Likewise, Ricardo Feierstein attempts to depict spaces within Argentina that are unfamiliar to the vast majority of the nation's own citizens. The familiar chronotope of "on the road," that Bakhtin identifies for its ability to generate and facilitate meetings of different and otherwise unrelated individuals from different social strata and circumstances is wholly operative in this novel. Much of the novel takes place in transit, on a voyage on horseback through the

Entre Rios and Santa Fe provinces back to Buenos Aires as characters attempt to trace time and extract vestiges of their family history through particular places. It is this time and space of movement, of being *on the road*, that enables them to survey what is normal and abnormal about their existence in Buenos Aires and to relate in picaresque fashion the interiority of their own experiences in light of those they encounter. The motif of being on the road allows them to survey the sociohistorical heterogeneity of their own country, and highlights what is the implied normal world they seek but do not find in their everyday experiences in the capital.

Significantly, Bakhtin also identifies another chronotope, that of the *threshold*, which is also entirely present in Feierstein's novel and intersects with all other chronotopes to further define the space and time of the novel's action. It is at a significant moment of crisis in a life, in this case while being on the road, that enables his protagonists to seek the location of a secret "brotherhood" that in fact does not occupy a physical space at all and endures over time only in the psyche of its members. Similar to Piglia, Feierstein represents both metaphorical and literal underground spaces while focusing on iconic areas of Buenos Aires and less frequented zones of the city. Yet it is through personal and everyday life unfolding in these locations that Feierstein attempts to put into relief a Jewish family's foreignness in this world, or rather this environment's alien nature for them, which is seemingly so normal to many others.

Finally, in *Equal Danger*, Sicilian author Leonardo Sciascia portrays the complex workings of a powerful and far-reaching underworld that is decidedly an alien world to his morally upright protagonist. While Sciascia often situates his novels in his native Sicily, the metaphorical heart of Mafia culture, in this novel he moves the action into a frequently recognizable but never completely identifiable place during an indeterminate period of time. Depicting the ruthless exercise of power on the political landscape of an unnamed nation, his

novel continually thwarts and complicates notions of geography and time, but ultimately resorts to chronotopic figures like *time of war* to demonstrate how quests for power supersede all borders and time. In this work, space and time are themselves a great mystery to be deciphered amidst several other mysteries to be disentangled by the reader.

Consequently, I intend to analyze these novels to show how works of crime fiction can be “charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history”(Bakhtin 84). Each text revolves around a crime or an enigma that instigates an ongoing investigation sustaining and shaping the entire narrative. Yet in no instance can the investigation be abstracted from the specific chronotopic motifs that generate the “atmosphere” of the texts, for it is the presence and of these chronotopes that precisely defines genre and generic distinctions, which in turn serve as guidelines for interpreting what the author intends to convey about a place and how readers are induced to synthesize such historical facts.

The Chronotope of Everyday Life in an Occupied City: The Absent City of Buenos Aires

Ricardo Piglia’s *The Absent City*, published in 1992 and translated into English in 2000, retrospectively depicts the city of Buenos Aires during Argentina’s euphemistically named “National Reorganization Process.” Written during the dubious period of transition from totalitarianism back to democracy, Piglia’s novel reproduces the uncertainty and alien nature of daily life for the city’s inhabitants during the terror inflicted by the authoritarian regime; the characters quiver with confusion about events from the recent past, as dangers still loom in an unsteady present and tentative future. The trauma that transpires during the period seems so implausibly foreign that people begin to doubt if what they are witnessing and experiencing is even real. As they attempt to process their experiences and to understand them, memory is deliberately assaulted and subjected to institutional control.

Through the chronotopic motif of *everyday life in an alien world* that structures the entrance into and the development of the novel, *The Absent City* underscores the importance of reconsidering and opposing official versions of the nation's history that are continuously being imposed on the populace. Consequently, the novel's protagonists attempt to relate alternative and personal accounts of civilian life during the period that address the horrific past, in an effort to reclaim and reconstruct the country's destroyed morale, and to thwart future eras of tyranny. These accounts vividly recount the trauma deliberately inflicted upon the metropolis of Buenos Aires during the dictatorship and determined the character of the city at the time.

In this temporal configuration, the Argentinean capital is depicted as a ghost town of sorts, devoid of human kindness and normal interactions. The streets of the city are vacant, instead replaced by an elaborate matrix of secret networks wholly infusing the metropolis with an atmosphere of paranoia and anxiety. As such, the city metaphorically disappears, and intimately personal sagas alternatively populate, remap and reconstruct the "absent" city of Buenos Aires, revealing a site utterly compromised during the oppression of the military dictatorship.

Set amidst this temporal matrix, the space of *The Absent City* is marked by the inhabitants' general defenselessness and fear in the face of repression, and Piglia vividly depicts an age of unprecedented violence and authoritarianism that affects all moments of quotidian existence and routine. While Piglia does not inscribe specific dates into the substance of the novel or often make overt references to the military junta, the chronotope of an occupied city minutely recreates this atmosphere of tension, secrecy, surveillance and a palpable desperation for escape that dictates every possible movement and action for the citizens of the city. This

enables the reader to infer analogies between the incessant instances of despotism in the novel with the extratextual, real historical time of March of 1976 through December of 1983.

The environment certainly mirrors the reactionary military regime's crusade to illegally capture and detain thousands upon thousands of individuals, rampantly branding them as anti-patriotic "subversives" in a purported effort to stabilize the country from the aggression of leftist revolutionaries. As this campaign of terror besieged the nation, countless innocent individuals were jailed and tortured; this included some violent militants, yet the regime also targeted countless innocuous individuals who may have represented any form of political or ideological opposition, such as unionists, professors and intellectuals, students, and other random civilians. In this occupied city, armed soldiers, police officers and plain-clothed thugs randomly arrive at people's homes to interrogate them, harassing them as they set about to intimidate and terrorize them into submission.

The novel realistically represents the arbitrariness of the offensive that keeps the entire populace perennially on guard, retreating further and further into itself and withdrawing as much as possible. In such a world as represented in *The Absent City*, "a man can *only* function as an isolated and private individual, deprived of any organic connection with his country, his city, his own social group, his clan, even his own family. He does not feel himself to be a part of the social whole. He is a solitary man, lost in an alien world" (Bakhtin 108).

Bakhtin notes this motif of isolation and privacy is the "essential feature of the human image" (108) in Greek romances, epics centering on war and variants of the European "novel of ordeal." Bakhtin states of the genres:

Characteristically it is not private life that is subjected to and interpreted in light of social and political events, but rather the other way around—social and

political events gain meaning in the novel only thanks to their connection with private life. And such events are illuminated in the novel only insofar as they relate to private fates; their essence as purely social and political events remains outside the novel. (Bakhtin 109)

Yet private life in these preceding genres is fundamentally different and opposite of the depiction in contemporary historical mystery novels, and particularly in Piglia's text. Instead in these narratives, private life is shown to be entirely determined by social and political events, continually shaped and dictated by public occurrences and conditions which continuously shape all dimensions of the life of the individual. The individual is thus a product of such social and political events, constituted through them, and their essence never remains outside of the novel but instead inescapably within it.

As such, the novel's characters isolate themselves within hermetic and private worlds because they witness friends, colleagues, acquaintances and family members disappearing without a trace. Moreover, rumors circulate throughout the city concerning covert detention centers located there and elsewhere throughout the country, a fact that is reflected within the narrative but concurrently exists outside of the novel too. While exact figures still vary widely, it is generally held that 30,000 civilians vanished during the dictatorship.² Though the Argentine State acknowledged an awareness of the phenomenon, it also denied any involvement in it, and

² The human rights violations and the investigation into the abuses of the military dictatorship are detailed in a 1984 *Nunca Más* report by the Conadep commission [Commission on the Disappearance of Persons]. It notes that of the tens of thousands of disappeared individuals, approximately 9,000 reports were accumulated after the dictatorship fell. Still, the number is often estimated to be considerably higher. See *Nunca Más* at Desaparecidos.org.

the government's official position maintained that these people had simply "disappeared."³ Like the characters in Piglia's novel, most Argentines were aware that such incidences were not isolated, and even speak of the *desaparecidos* could alone jeopardize one's safety. Citizens were thus constricted to remain silent, to avoid notice and to behave publicly as if the circumstances surrounding them were ordinary or even copacetic.

The Absent City minutely depicts these surreal circumstances occurring in the nation at large, but specifically focuses on their crippling and alienating effect on the metropolis of Buenos Aires. Though exact locations are continually referenced in the pages of the narrative, including specific streets, subway stations and neighborhoods, the subjective hells of those living within them is often the primary focus. Piglia's novel delineates a city where all vestiges of normalcy have been abandoned and the characters index this against a city they know to exist differently; this is a location that no maps or grids can penetrate or demarcate, for the real geography of the city is contextualized by the horrors of life there during this time.

The protagonists are circumscribed by fear at all times, and their activities in this occupied city respond to this chronotope; they move about stealthily within this city, constantly evading detection from government entities and agents, clandestinely inhabiting and absconding to decrepit hotels, forgotten shops and fetid stalls recessed within the cavernous subway system. Piglia shows that below the surface, both literally and figuratively, a whole other city exists that acts in conscious resistance against the forces governing the Buenos Aires situated above:

The cellars of the Mercado del Plata connected to the underground streets that crossed beneath Av. Nueve de Julio and the subway passages of Carlos Pellegrini

³ This is the standard term for the state-related forced disappearances that occurred during the 1976-83 dictatorship in Argentina, and in other nations, notably Chile, Brazil and Uruguay, where such a phenomenon was common. In Spanish and Portuguese, the term is "desaparecido."

Station, where all the subway lines of the city converged. That was a point of escape, a nucleus for refugees and rebels, hippies, gauchos, spies, all sorts of ex's, smugglers, anarchists. They must surely have already seen them in the alleyway and were now watching them on the closed-circuit screens. (Piglia 66)

Clearly referencing points in the downtown neighborhood of San Nicolás in “El Centro,” the location truly materializes as the text reveals what cannot be described on any map; this is an ostensible “point of escape” for those electing a subterranean existence out of the bounds of the law.

This passage foremost indicates the desperate attempt to elude detection, but also crushes the fallacy of possible imperceptibility in this location; outlaws are not truly outside of the law, but instead ever within the state's reach. Though these renegades believe they have found a refuge, this clandestine world of dissidents is also under the ubiquitous and constant surveillance that shadows the movements of the rest of the populace above ground. The state's oppressive presence reaches virtually everywhere, and there is seemingly no escape from it; the fear this instills in the citizenry becomes almost palpable for the reader as it is shown to be more and more pervasive.

Amidst this environment of perpetual angst, Piglia underscores the desperate attempt to maintain a facade of normalcy amidst abnormality, a subterfuge that the city's inhabitants embrace to mitigate the true horrors unfolding in the midst. The protagonist Junior, a journalist working for the daily paper *El Mundo*, moves amongst these spaces daily as he searches for a purported machine that is disseminating stories throughout the city. He succinctly summarizes the contradiction he perceives, commenting upon a notable incongruence between the populace's perceptions and its actions, noting:

There was a strange disparity of consciousness in what was occurring. Everything was normal and yet the danger could be felt in the air, a low alarming murmur, as if the city were about to be bombarded. Everyday life goes on in the middle of the horror, that is what keeps many people sane. The signs of death and terror can be perceived, but there is no clear evidence of behavior being altered. The buses stop at the street corners, the stores are open, couples get married and celebrate, nothing serious can possibly be happening. (Piglia 73)

Junior's observation suggests that while their very city is under siege, a vast segment of the population assumes an obligatory aloofness in the face of horror and crisis, though they are aware of the profoundly peculiar circumstances existing. Indeed, for some citizens the routine practices of daily life Junior describes serve as a subterfuge to remain sane, unaffected or unharmed. Yet for others, daily life constitutes the actual substance of trauma and disruption, and not all *porteños*⁴ can countenance such a public charade of normalcy.

Piglia's text accordingly focuses on the actions of individuals who protest or decry the situation and refuse to feign indifference or resign themselves willingly to occupation and repression. Despite the perils of doing so, some inhabitants voice scathingly blunt and unsanctioned opinions about the national situation and the political reality confronting them. One character unequivocally stresses the madness of the current regime, noting the fanatical nature of its attempt to control:

The president is crazy and his ministers are all psychopaths. The Argentine State is telepathic, its intelligence services can read minds from a distance. It can infiltrate the thoughts of the bases. But telepathic faculties have a serious

⁴ *Porteño* is the name given to residents of the port city of Buenos Aires.

drawback. They are unable to select and filter, they receive all kinds of information [...] Faced with an excess of facts, they expand the radius of repression. (Piglia 55)

Whereas the authorities in this city have perfected their capacity to oversee people's movements, actions, correspondence, relationships, as well as to censor forms of cultural production and the media, the ensuing attempt to control private thoughts is here conceived as maniacal and completely perverse. Though it is a seemingly unfeasible pursuit, it nevertheless suggests that the government aims to control every single aspect of civilian life. It thirsts to extend its dictatorial authority beyond the domitable realm of the physical into the private realm of psychic consciousness as it attempts to impose a uniform, innocuous version of reality.

In this milieu, the mind itself has clearly been slated as a battleground for institutional control. *The Absent City* portrays individuals who do little to combat this domination but instead focus their energies on survival, a Sisyphean pursuit itself for many. Others resist by verbalizing disgust and outrage, and others even find the courage to mobilize against the domination. These citizens view the state as inimical, and untiringly act in direct and pointed opposition to it. They devise tactics to covertly resist its mandates, operating clandestinely to rebel against its unreasonable and repressive policies and to limit its dominion over their lives.

Consequently, a vast network of such individuals skulks below the surface of the city, continually forming alliances and exchanging "clandestine" information to resist submission and to contradict imposed versions of truth and memory. Though mutinous, these individuals are not resistant to capture, torture and experimentation, and they also subsist with the constant fear that their memories will undergo "reprogramming" within one of the many "clinics" frequently conjured throughout the narrative. Located throughout Buenos Aires, these secret clinics perform

inhumane experiments and inflict bizarre methods of torture on civilians in order to eradicate opposition and to infuse them with uniform and insipid accounts of the past. Those captured are brutalized and forced to inform on and denounce other “subversives.”

While the word “clinic” suggests a place that provides advice or assistance, these horrific clinics administer bizarre and monstrous torture techniques that evoke the surreal outlandishness of science fiction narratives. Yet it is imperative to note that this aspect of the narrative is not fantastic or fictitious. It instead recalls some of the 364 major detention centers in the country, and particularly those located in Buenos Aires during the *Proceso*, including Automotores Orletti, Olimpo, Club Atlético and the infamous ESMA.⁵ These clinics have proliferated throughout the city, and the inhabitants are becoming increasingly aware of their existence. The narrator relates an episode in which the true function and malevolent nature of the clinics is revealed with no uncertainty:

[She] began to tell [Junior] about the Clinic. She had just spent two months there, she said, in the jail, in the colony. She was rehabilitated [...] He imagined the woman stuck in someone else’s memory, forced to live as if she were another woman. These kinds of stories were circulating throughout the city. (Piglia 71)

In this light, it is significant that Piglia minutely describes an environment where detection must be avoided at all costs, and the text replicates a space and time where all movements and ideas unfold surreptitiously. The emphasis on furtive actions, concealed spaces and secrecy is evident in the frequent use of the word “clandestine” throughout the pages of the

⁵ The *Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada* [Naval Mechanics School], or simply ESMA, is the most notorious and well known of the country's detention centers. Estimates suggest that 4,000 people were imprisoned in ESMA over the course of its history and that 90% of them were killed. See María Seoane, *Argentina: El siglo de progreso y la oscuridad (1900-2003)*, p. 159.

novel. The adjective “clandestine” forms a verbal matrix to conjure physical spaces as well as stealthy behaviors and associations or relationships. Consequently, the text abounds with “clandestine” labs in the provinces outside of Buenos Aires, clandestine houses, clandestine movements, clandestine hospitals, clandestine stores, clandestine information, clandestine suburban garages, and even clandestine inventors of worlds.

This lexical feature of the text constructs an atmosphere of paranoia that has overtaken the physical space, while other statements sprinkled throughout the work serve to reinforce this oppression. Consequently, the reporter Junior announces: “They are always watching, even if there is no point to it” (Piglia 20), and “That’s why there’s so much control, Junior thought, they’re trying to erase what’s recorded in the streets” (Piglia 57).

As memory and private experiences become yet another site subject to institutional control, individuals become increasingly more resourceful in their efforts to escape notice and to articulate their subjective versions of reality. This desperate need is juxtaposed against a place and time where such actions assuredly have dreadful consequences. As physical spaces are overtaken in the novel, the intimate workings of individual cognition must not succumb to similar occupation at any cost. For in this alien world of oppression, the mind nonetheless endures as the unique site of memory and a singular link to the past.

Knowing the nation’s past, especially its most atrocious and barbaric moments, is an imperative concern in *The Absent City*. It is only by acknowledging history and not attempting to erase its traces that the nation will not be doomed to continually repeating its patterns. *The Absent City* continually emphasizes this idea, and one character attempting to find meaning in the ruination and repression succinctly states so: “We had to live through this catastrophe in order to learn the value of life and how to respect democracy”(Piglia 76).

Amidst this omnipotent state's efforts to capture and forcibly recondition its subjects to recant their alternate and lived experiences of history, they valiantly strive to divulge their personal experiences and to keep their memories alive, for in the words of Junior, "To narrate is to give life" (Piglia 51). The journalist's words resonate clearly in a conquered city where people continue to vanish permanently, and all that remains of thousands of individuals are stories about them told through the words of others.

The premise that narrative creates spaces, replicates time and engenders life is present throughout Piglia's novel in other references as well. Macedonio Fernández, a noted twentieth-century Argentinean author, appears as a character in the text. While Piglia's works generally have a notable intertextual dimension which will be discussed in Chapter 4, in this novel, Fernández is instead presented as a scientist. Specifically, he is an inventor who dedicates his life to collecting stories, who invokes the resourceful Scheherazade's use of stories to stave off death in *1,001 Nights*. Whereas the author Macedonio Fernández wrote a lifelong novel which he worked on for forty-five years, Macedonio the inventor instead creates a futuristic machine designed to preserve the memory of Elena, his deceased wife.

This machine is Fernández's only bridge to a woman who is forever gone. Encapsulating salient episodes of her own memory, the safety of this object takes on primary importance throughout the narrative; it is at once housed within a museum where it narrates Elena's life experiences. It is later moved elsewhere, and it is incessantly sought after by officials who wish to destroy and silence it. Though the machine once served as an ersatz or virtual incarnation of a wife to Fernández, it later is enlisted as a potent weapon in this controlled, despotic environment and to normalize what has been made foreign and strange:

The State intelligence is essentially a technical mechanism designed to alter the criteria of reality. We have to resist. We are trying to build a microscopic replica, a female defense machine, against the experiences and the experiments and the lies of the State. (Piglia 117)

Christened Elena as though it were Fernández's wife itself, the machine's power to narrate is thus summoned as an armament against the state's lies, torture and abuses in this world. Whereas Elena was initially created to relate tales exclusively deriving from her own life, her "memory" and her account of reality becomes conditioned by episodes from the lives of others once she is situated within a museum. "It is [...] reading me," Junior deduces (Piglia 53), commenting on the machine's incredible capacity to generate and spin its own narratives based on others' experiences.

Elena's tales begin to reflect the lives of others, not merely her own, and she begins to disclose the experiences of countless victims who have been subjected to the terrors assaulting the city. Her narratives concerning the silenced and disappeared individuals in this alien nation begin to surface and repopulate the city, relating their experiences in their absence. They even bear titles that attest to their function and their breadth, including "The story of a man who does not have words to name the horror" (Piglia 20).

As Elena's tales begin to circulate throughout the compromised city, they incorporate all levels of experience, not just her own. Elena's anecdotes pivot around disappearances, abductions, the actual sites of torture, the clinics, and hidden mass graves containing the bodies of the *desaparecidos*. As a mere artifact, Elena was at first harmless and an intriguing novelty. However, as Junior states, "she was filtering through real facts [...] That is why they were going to take her out of circulation" (Piglia 72). These narratives precisely expose what the authorities

have labored to cover up, suppress, obliterate and ultimately omit from the narration of history. Circulating rampantly throughout a Buenos Aires that has been minutely controlled otherwise, Elena's facts aim to subvert the pervasive totalitarian order as they challenge the official, sanctioned versions of reality.

Significantly, the machine's episodic tales frequently confound space and time, destroying any temporal sequence that forcibly anchors or correlates them exclusively to the present era of the city. The tales thus conflate episodes from the past, the present and the future, rendering it virtually impossible to pinpoint an exact chronology of events, or to determine whether they have actually even occurred or are mere analogies or absolute fictions. The machine's presence configures new possibilities for understanding the space and time of the city: "Reality was [now] defined by the possible (and not by what was). The true-false opposition had to be substituted by the possible-impossible opposition" (Piglia 83).

Despite all attempts to find Elena in the city and eliminate the machine, the voice becomes unstoppable; she cannot be decommissioned, for she exists only to resist oppression, extermination and the obliterating effects of time intended by the Argentine state. She becomes "the endless voice that kept memory alive" (Piglia 41) when individuals, eras and the past are already long gone. Consequently as the novel concludes, Elena has been narrowly rescued from the state's intended destruction and the novel's setting moves outside of the city of Buenos Aires onto the deserted banks of a river. Completely unconnected to anyone or anything else, Elena is literally isolated on a remote island on the Tigre Delta north of the city. She remains relatively unharmed after the relentless pursuit. Notably, her narratives about the fates of individuals reflect the social and political circumstances outside of the novel as they become the substance of

private lives revealed. She is insistent that she will never cease to tell these stories for those who are gone and what has happened to them in this place:

Endless, I create memories, but nothing else, I am full of stories, I cannot stop, I pull events out of live memories, the light of the real quivers weakly [...] I will go on, sometimes I have to drag myself, but I will go on [...] I will, yes. (Piglia 139)

Elena's final message resonates of resistance, and her words conclude the novel with a resounding affirmation that while spaces may be temporarily compromised, individual experiences and memory must not be conquered. Nevertheless *The Absent City* also ends on a note of ambiguity, if not overt pessimism: there is the haunting suggestion that the only way to resist or survive is to be rescued and removed from the site of the conflict and control. Like many Argentines during the dictatorship, Elena's survival is contingent upon being hidden and sequestered from immediate danger, out of reach and thus undetectable. Narrating stories that nobody hears, she is now exiled, alone, and in a sense vanished; propped up on the banks of the delta, she too has disappeared from the city that was once her home.⁶

⁶ The final scene of *The Absent City* finds Elena ends up on the banks of the Tigre Delta, promising to continue to speak, to overcome and resist silence. Her fate likely has very sinister reverberations for the Argentine nation and populace, as there are countless reports of the *desaparecidos* eventually washing up on the banks of the rivers both within and outside of the city. Elena's vow to keep speaking and to overcome silence is an act of empowerment and perseverance; it is also particularly cogent if one infers there a direct allusion to the clandestine detention center named El Silencio [The Silence] located on an island in the Tigre Delta. According to journalist Horacio Verbitsky, in 1979, the Inter-American Human Rights Commission visited Argentina and inspected the ESMA detention center and found no prisoners there. The disappeared citizens once imprisoned at the ESMA were transferred to El Silencio and continued to be tortured with the complicity of the Catholic Church. For more on the history of El Silencio, see Horacio Verbitsky, "Breaking the Silence: the Catholic Church in Argentina and the 'Dirty War.'" *Open Democracy*, 27 July 2005. Web. 9 September 2011.

The Chronotope of Threshold: On the Road in *La logia del Umbral*

While Piglia's *The Absent City* attempts to retrace the atmosphere of a city where culture, ideas, movement and liberty have been under siege, Argentinean author Ricardo Feierstein also depicts different facets of the city of Buenos Aires. In his *La logia del umbral*, published in 1994, Feierstein seeks to underscore a perceived elision in cultural awareness and bring it to the fore. Organized with the major chronotope of movement *on the road*, the novel attempts to show that Buenos Aires, and Argentina as a whole, has frequently unperceived and underappreciated diversity that is a prominent and defining characteristic of the nation. This chronotope blends well with that of *everyday life in an alien world*, for it is an apt way to converge the "spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people- representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities" (Bakhtin 243) and to enable intense emotions to come to the fore of the narrative.

Feierstein's novel suggests that many Argentines view their homeland as monoculturally Catholic and Latino, and are seemingly unaware of the contributions of other minority groups, particularly Jews, in the nation's history. In contrast, the protagonists in Feierstein's work are aware of vibrant pluralism lurking below the surface of Buenos Aires. Living amidst a thriving immigrant pocket of the city and inheriting a rather deemphasized history of violence and prejudice has given his characters an entirely different conception of the city and nation. *La logia del umbral* reveals that the perception of Buenos Aires, and the entire country by extension, entirely depends on the subjectivity of those who attempt to describe it.

The title *La logia del umbral* is difficult to precisely render in English, though it loosely translates as "The Brotherhood of the Threshold." This arcane title acquires meaning only when considering the degree to which the protagonists perceive themselves as members of a minority,

a small clan or brotherhood, that always looms on the verge of inclusion that they desperately long to find. Interestingly, Bakhtin's study also identifies a chronotope of *threshold*, which he states is highly charged with emotion and value (Bakhtin 248). Indeed, he stresses its compatibility with the chronotope of *encounter* or *on the road*, for the *threshold* chronotope is connected with "the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life... it is always metaphorical and symbolic, sometimes openly but more often implicitly" (Bakhtin 248).

This metaphorical and symbolic threshold describes well the temporal and spatial relationship that circumscribes the actions of his protagonists, and conveys well the highly emotional moments of crisis that they experience. As in many of Feierstein's other essays and novels, *La logia del umbral* is a prolonged consideration of the marginal position that his Jewish characters occupy in Argentina, corresponding to a similar perception for many Argentine Jews during the nineteen nineties, and particularly to those who arrived in the country between the two world wars and through the 1940s. As the Schvels reflect on their perceived peripheral and frayed connection with their nation, the novel concurrently attempts to recount their instrumentality in the country's development while simultaneously exploring their contributions, successes and trials. To contextualize this further, the novel was written in reaction to tragedy, shortly after the terrorist attack against the AMIA [*Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina*] community center building, the most prominent and well-known center of Jewish cultural activity in Buenos Aires and the most important Jewish building in Latin America.⁷ When a

⁷ The attack on the AMIA is to date the most devastating terrorist attack to have occurred in Argentina. When a terrorist drove a car loaded full of explosives into the building, the ensuing investigation demonstrated a complex plan involving both local complicity through individuals who assisted in logistics to execute the bombing as well as international actors orchestrating the

massive car bomb exploded there on July 18, 1994, it killed at least 85 people dead and wounded countless others, and obliterated the seven-story building in the historically Jewish Once neighborhood (Aizenburg 109).

As Edna Aizenburg has suggested in her article “Argentine Space, Jewish Memory: Memorials to the Blown Apart and Disappeared in Buenos Aires,” in the absence of a physical memorial to the attack⁸, Feierstein’s 1994 novel serves as a type of textual monument to the suffering, destruction and aggression that has afflicted the Jewish population of Argentina. Still, I believe that Feierstein’s novel also laments the extent to which this tragedy was an abomination and travesty against all of humanity; while the attack undoubtedly targeted the city’s Jewish community, by proximity it targeted individuals and families from many different ethnicities and religions, thus curtailing the lives of the Italians, the Lebanese, the Spanish, and many other nationalities amalgamated into the Argentine collective.

In any case, *La logia del umbral* unequivocally posits that this attack was not an isolated or random act of aggression; rather, it was a large-scale terrorist attack that followed within a longstanding and ongoing history of meditated violence against a visible yet detested minority

event from afar. The Argentinean Intelligence Service’s investigation concluded that Iranian officials, including the Iranian Intelligence Minister at the time, were responsible for its execution. Meanwhile, Iranian Intelligence charged that Hezbollah planned the attack, which was ultimately carried out by Hezbollah’s operational unit abroad. In addition, the initial investigation was fraught with irregularities, including the mishandling of payments to informants, former president Carlos Menem is currently being investigated for his handling of the investigation. See “The AMIA/DAIA Bombing: Terror in Argentina.” *Adl.org*, 18 July 2011. Web. 15 October 2010.

⁸ The AMIA building was later rebuilt in 1999, five years after the appearance of Feierstein’s *La logia del umbral*. The new building includes two walls with the victim’s names appearing as a physical memorial to remember and honor their lives.

group in a city that has long been touted as a global cultural capital.⁹ It is therefore significant that *La logia del umbral* begins by invoking the exact site and the very day of the AMIA attack as it traces the evolution of several generations of a Jewish Argentine family, the Schvels.

Descending from a long line of European progenitors who always found themselves on the threshold of societal integration, the novel's Schvel family was continuously stigmatized by the dominant groups in the societies they inhabited in Central and Eastern Europe. Though Argentina is often professed to be a nation built upon a recent immigrant influx and a *mélange* of different values and customs, the Schvels have instead encountered noticeable resistance against their attempts at assimilation. Given their recent history of persecution in Europe, they are especially distressed to find themselves attacked and derided for being seditious or unconstructive to the nation's progress. Feierstein palimpsestically layers together the narratives of several generations of this particular family to detail how this history of marginalization has permeated scores of lives. Each account is related by a different family member, yet all supplement and often complement their respective versions of everyday life over the course of a century.

The voices and perspectives differ vastly, reflecting the progressions of time and continually evolving sensibilities; the earlier accounts describe the agrarian lives of craftsmen and peasants, those who are grounded in the routines of the old world and the realities of their struggles in Europe. Thus *La logia del umbral* frequently focuses on earlier moments of the

⁹ In his book of essays titled *Contraexilio y Mestizaje: Ser judío en la Argentina*, Feierstein states: "I perceive that the [AMIA] bomb continues to cause victims. With a delayed effect, the explosion has continued to unravel the once proud Jewish community of the country" (10). Feierstein consequently addresses the event as a way to examine how a demoralizing incident continues to deflate a community and serves to undermine the strength of society in general. In the above quote, the phrase "has continued to unravel" reverberates loudly, for Feierstein asserts that the process of unraveling had already begun before the tragedy of the AMIA.

family's daily existence and the Schvel's monumental decision to immigrate to Argentina. Pogroms and other regular incidents of anti-Semitism provide a backdrop to their tales, detailing their desperation and the impetus to abandon their established customs and familiar homeland to pursue some semblance of safety and inclusion. The decision to depart is grounded in hope and optimism for a better future in a land of "milk and honey"(Feierstein 21), and they willingly accept the unknown challenges that await them. While the repression they experienced in Europe left them far too jaded to expect a utopian society, the elder Schvels at least yearned to be free from daily intolerance and rampant acts of violence. Despite any apprehensions, they are committed to assimilate new and foreign traditions thousands of miles away in a completely foreign continent.

Although Argentina is divorced from their past injustices or history, the burgeoning nation that greets them immediately shatters their dream for peace and safety. The first Schvel immigrants are instantaneously confronted with uncannily familiar brutality and treachery in this foreign world, as one of the first settlers is assaulted by a *gaucho*. Mauricio "Argentino," the first Schvel to arrive in Argentina, is murdered as he valiantly defends a fellow female settler from being kidnapped. The dismay, fear and familiar panic that instantaneously assaults the Jewish settlers is palpable, for it is an inhumane act of unforeseen and unreasonable aggression that recalls attacks from the past. Certainly the episode definitively establishes that, transplanted across the world, this new geographical reality will not provide the family with shelter or hope for the future either, and will prove to be continually strange and shocking. The episode lucidly foreshadows the oppression and brutality that awaits the family and their future ancestors in Argentina.

Accordingly, the accounts of the contemporary family long-transplanted in Argentina reveal immense technological and vocational advances, different political imperatives and circumstances which temper their existences, but the negative perception and mistreatment against them always persists in Argentina. Progressing through the twentieth century, each character recounts generationally-specific acts of targeted anti-Semitism and terrorism which hallmark their experience as Argentines. Mirroring the past European experience, these acts of brutality unfold in both private and public spheres: the Schvels are invariably assaulted in their homes, in schools, on the streets and at work. While the violence is often perpetrated by ignorant civilians, Feierstein suggests that these events often reflect or are sanctioned by national directives and policies; as the century progresses, the affronts are both condoned and perpetrated by the police, the military and the government, which are frequently one and the same entity. Far from ensuring the well-being of its citizenry, the state is often portrayed as the greatest source of terror and intolerance, and the role of the government in the persecution against Jews in Argentina is repeatedly underscored in the novel.

While the Schvel family has escaped the *Shoah*, or the Holocaust, they nonetheless live within the shadows of far-reaching Nazi ideologies that have persecuted their European relatives and have also permeated the political and social landscape of Argentina. Consequently, *La logia del umbral* minutely depicts alarming affinities with Nazi tactics orienting the official policies for anti-Jewish discrimination in Argentina during and following the Second World War era. Mario Schvel, an elderly family member, relates these contradictions:

In this country, we Jews, found God and the devil at the same time. The most pluralistic and generous place in the world, where we able to integrate ourselves through working the land and with the *gaucho's* customs, almost to the point of

being confused with them. And at the same time, the place with the most Nazis in all of the Americas, set up in key places, within [state] security and the justice system, prepared to exterminate us if Hitler had triumphed in Europe. And many of them are still active. (Feierstein 140-141, my translation)

Mario Schvel recognizes that they have fortunately avoided the Holocaust and its camps, but the fear of extermination and persecution nonetheless looms frighteningly near. Moreover, to reiterate the institutional scope of anti-Jewish discrimination, many pages of *La logia del umbral* are comprised of actual photographs and copies of state-issued documents, including the passports of Jewish citizens. These visual elements serve to individualize the faces and identities of otherwise intangible and forgotten victims of discrimination, but specifically they are included to illustrate the insidiously invasive tactics formerly employed in Argentina to identify and monitor its Jewish population.

While the Argentine Jews did not have to wear yellow stars on their clothing like their European counterparts, several pages of photographs of passports reveal pixilated, embossed stars of David cryptically encoded along with identification numbers within the documents of Jewish individuals. Mario explains their significance for readily identifying these citizens before government officials and bureaus:

...the Argentinean police marked you as a Jew when they carried out the processing procedure.... [t]his sign is the equivalent of the red “J” that the Nazis put in the passports of European Jews...Today it is known that the German consulate in our country found willing reception of Hitler’s ideas among broad sectors of the Argentinean oligarchy... It wouldn’t be strange to assume that, just like in Germany of that time, they attempted to identify and track the Jewish

population of the country for their later siege and elimination, just like what occurred in Europe...During the '40s, important functionaries in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Police and in Immigration were decidedly Nazis and impeded the entry of surviving Jews from Europe devastated by the war. This continued throughout almost the entire Peronist period, up until the beginning of the '50s. (Feierstein 134, my translation)

Though Mario states that this tactic ended in the '50s, the subsequent accounts of more recent eras still demonstrate that anti-Semitism and repression remains at the forefront of other historical periods. Extraordinary episodes are consequently related suggesting the extent to which Jews were subjected to torture during the last dictatorship, as well as the frequency with which they encountered unfounded accusations of Jewish conspiracies. One such episode relates the forced break-in and interrogation by unidentified agents, presumably police, of Solomón Schvel, a Jewish activist who is antagonized, beaten and almost disappeared. During a particularly vicious attack, they invade his home and accuse him of being part of a global Jewish conspiracy to take over the country.

The interrogation and synchronized torture tactics described in the novel are similar to those reported during the early years of the military junta; they are entirely unconstitutional, irrational and pitiless. Yet they also reflect an individual's private and personal recollection of historical time that again intends to describe the social and political reality in place outside of the novel itself that is characteristic of the contemporary historical mystery novel. Thus, at a secret detention center, Solomón Schvel witnesses other victims being shocked, sodomized with foreign objects, beaten and starved. The torture methods he observes are horrifyingly alien and unreal, and completely contrast the expected security that a state is supposed to ensure its

populace. Moreover, the strangeness of the event is further emphasized during his interrogation through a hateful and exceptional anti-Jewish rhetoric. While blasting a melody by Richard Wagner, the interrogators shout:

Let's not waste time, Russian.¹⁰ We know all about you. Jews are part of a global synarchy, and its local branch wanted to conquer Patagonia and separate them from the country, in order to establish a Jewish State. But they would not achieve this: they, the patriotic Argentines, would kill everybody necessary before consenting to a mutilation of the sacred territory. (Feierstein 52, my translation)

During this particularly brutal beating, the interrogators principally attack Solomón for being a Jew, though they unexplainably spare his life upon the condition that he act as a secret informer to the state concerning these purported Jewish intrigues. While fictionalized, this episode nonetheless corroborates a well-documented phenomenon during the military dictatorship: while the entire nation was subjected to the terrors of the abusers, Jews were especially targeted during this time as “subversives” threatening the nation’s stability and prosperity.¹¹

This and many other instances of anti-Jewish violence against individuals are presented in the text, occurring over the course of a century throughout rural areas, provincial towns and in the nation’s capital. However, to illustrate that trauma was not merely inflicted on random

¹⁰ “*Ruso*” is a term used disparagingly in Argentina that has been used to describe Jews, stemming from the frequent Russian provenance of the Jewish population.

¹¹ Other sources corroborate this experience, and particularly Jacobo Timerman’s autobiography *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*. Timerman, a prominent survivor of the dictatorship’s tortures, likens the whole time to a Jewish witch hunt. For more information on the persecution of Jews during the 1976-1983 Argentine dictatorship, see Kaufman, Edy. “Jewish Victims of Repression in Argentina under Military Rule (1976–1983).” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*. Oxford Journals: 1989 4(4): 479-499.

individuals and permeates the daily life of its citizenry, Feierstein invokes *La Semana Trágica* of 1919 as an overt act of anti-Semitism and extraordinary violence that afflicts a large group of people.¹² While *La Semana Trágica* does not figure as a central episode of the narrative, it is recalled for its import as the “first pogrom” in Argentina. Indeed, the notion of “first” implies there will be other ones, and it foregrounds later and far-reaching acts of terrorism that Feierstein will describe, particularly the bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, and of course, the bombing of the AMIA itself. In addition, the mention of *La Semana Trágica* here appears saliently in the history of anti-Semitism in Argentina, yet this is particularly noteworthy since many accounts of the event diminish the implications on the Jewish community or fail to describe it as an orchestrated, act of anti-Jewish violence.¹³

From generation to generation, the Schvel’s minority status shapes their *weltanschauung* and understanding of being an Argentine. Each narrator is ever-conscious of the interconnectivity of his or her harsh experiences of repression, and the narrative thus focuses on the ways that different family members attempt to contend with these realities. In the case of Solomón, his victimization propels him to flee to Israel as a safe haven, where he becomes an active and militant Zionist, never again to reside in Argentina. The youngest generation conversely resolves to stay in place, band together and to assert their involvement to anyone who

¹² The “Tragic Week” refers to a series of brutal events that took place in Buenos Aires in January of 1919. The events began when a strike was organized at the Vasena Metallurgy Workshops which violently repressed by the police, leaving four workers were killed. The workers’ mobilization and the repression continued for days, leaving an official count of 40 dead and many more wounded. The so-called Liga Patriótica Argentina [Argentine Patriotic League] formed of wealthy Catholic youth trained by the military decided at this time to suppress the protestors, and to kill “anarchists, Russians, Jews and enemies of the Nation.” For more on the anti-Semitic ideologies provoking the *Semana Trágica*, see Elortiba.org.

¹³ As an example of the discrepancy in scope and detail, see the accounts of this same event on the website of the National Association of Hispanic and Latino studies available at: <https://nacla.org/node/57s78>.

is either unaware, deliberately refuses to acknowledge, or even endeavors to diminish their contributions to Argentina's history and culture.

It is this resolve to remain in Argentina and attempt to change public perception of Jews that initiates the chronotopic voyage on the road, and that which sustains the action of the novel. The attempt to locate and penetrate the *logia del umbral*, the mysterious and elusive organization for those on the threshold frequently alluded to in the fragmentary tales of their elders, becomes the mystery to be uncovered. The youngest Schvels are determined to decipher the enigma of the association, and embark on a trip through different provinces of the nation to discover its whereabouts and information related to it. The voyage is symbolically undertaken on horseback, connecting the experience of these modern city-dwellers with their earliest immigrant ancestors in the nation. The journey brings them into frequent contact with different individuals from different social strata, religions, economic backgrounds and lived experiences.

Meandering through the provinces of Argentina, however, never leads them to find the material location of the brotherhood of the threshold. Only later do they discover that this threshold is not an actual place or an association; rather, it is their space of their own experiences, a name afforded to a schema by earlier generations who envisaged a "place" to mobilize collectively against oppression. The brotherhood cannot be located materially, for it exists only as a mental configuration. Yet like their ancestors, the youngest Schvels recognize it as a framework that can enable them to take stake of their marginal position, to calibrate their everyday life in the nation, and to seek a more promising future within it.

Indeed, the young Schvels perceive the strength in uniting behind the idea of an association that provides cohesion and inclusion, and to imagine themselves as part of a unified front rather than solitary outcasts. To them, it represents: "... that which brings together the

marginal individuals, the ‘outsiders in Camus’ sense, those who are different from the majority of the country, and at the same time, just as much citizens as them. It all begins with the different religion, but it doesn’t stop there” (Feierstein 140, my translation). The *logia* thus provides the Schvels with a context to organize themselves, to take stake of their past experiences, and optimistically to educate others as they attempt to make their presence appreciated.

This effort is undergirded by the hope that Argentina can become a more hospitable country in the future, as the Schvel family is aware that their vision of a pluralistic culture plays against pervasive myths of a “native” Argentine identity or essence. As Myriam Schvel states:

We Jews are a minority here. A very small minority, we don’t even make up one percent of the population. But we are one of many minorities... Minorities can be more numerous than a majority: but the “majority” defines a model to which one must conform, for example the Hispanic-Catholic, urban, adult, masculine identity. The “national being” for the *fachos* [reactionary fascists], is that. And in turn we “minorities” do not have *a model* but instead we are in a process of formation, a future. Our particularities will fit more or less into the model, but it will never depend on it...Because this is a country of immigrants, of mixture, and that is what allows for the possibility of cultural *mestizaje* and the pluralism of ideas, points of views, flavors, fashions and customs. And it is against this that the other Argentina goes against, the Argentina of obscurantism and a dubious past of a purity that includes indigenous genocide. (Feierstein 186, my translation)

This “Argentina of obscurantism” continually is the referent against which the Schvels gauge their everyday interactions, that which contrasts and stands in opposition to their “implied native, ordinary, familiar world” (Bakhtin 101). These limiting perceptions of the nation are

continually shocking and unreal, and the youngest generation contrasts them with their own unique and positive experiences. Indeed, the Schvels have a different vision that scaffolds their perception of their surroundings, not an “Argentina of obscurantism” but instead an “Argentina so desired and lived and loved to the point of desperation” (Feierstein 129, my translation).

Thus, in a vivid and rather lengthy description of a lesser-known Buenos Aires neighborhood alive with differences, Feierstein presents a foil to the unambiguously xenophobic, alien environment that dominates the rest of the narrative. The microcosm of Villa Pueyrredón, the neighborhood where the family resided in the past, is an unchallengeable part of their heritage. It is a pluralistic society in miniature, a place of cultural exchanges, mixing and coexistence, and an ideal model for the nation at large:

Describe your street and you’ll paint a picture of the world (or one of the “possible Argentinas”). Across Mosconi Avenue was the pharmacy owned by Nestor, the Jew who didn’t speak Yiddish. Next, the hosiery store that belonged to the Galician Álvarez... the shoe store of Don David, a Russian Jew... Next came Cortazza’s butcher shop; an Italian... Next door lived the mechanic Carmelo, from a Neapolitan family... Also living on that narrow street was a family of gypsies ... Beyond the bar...came my house. Continuing the tour...Poncho, the used car salesman—of Italian background and a great tango dancer, who had completely acquired a Buenos Aires manner... “the Arab zone,” where I spent the greater part of my childhood with my best friends: the children of two Christian-Lebanese families who manufactured handkerchiefs ... The last to arrive was the Japanese... who never learned the new language; his daughters, in contrast, rapidly adapted Argentine names and, like us, they were accustomed to taking

mate with breakfast and to speaking Lunfardo, that happy and affectionate slang of the residents of Buenos Aires.... And so, we grew up with *mate* and *verenikes*, *asado* and gefilte fish, *locro* and *latkes*...A tasty, nutritious mixture, full of life and hope. Because this neighborhood was our “*kibbutz de deseo*,” our kibbutz of hope. The place of safe, warm childhood, multicultural and pluralistic. (Feierstein 123-129, my translation)

This is the implied, native world that renders the present world unfamiliar and it is this neighborhood of possibilities that the Schvel family wishes to find again. With this referent in their consciousness, the youngest Schvels recognize their *mestizaje*¹⁴ is an asset, not a deficit. It is in this familiar world where they recognize that different upbringings can be perceived as a similarity, and as a commonality rather than a source of division in a nation formed through its massive immigration patterns. Reinstating this reality becomes an important undertaking, which they attempt to do through the aegis of the *logia*.

Consequently, in a symbolic act to underscore the participation and contributions of this family, the youngest family member, Mario Moisés Schvel, acts as an envoy for the present, past and future generations in an attempt to leave a tangible trace of their struggle and their participation within the nation and its capital. Riding on horseback and donning anachronistic *gaucho* attire to represent the family’s past¹⁵, Mario Moisés approaches the Plaza de Mayo in

¹⁴ This aspect will be covered in more detail in Chapter 2 in a detailed discussion of Feierstein’s novel *Mestizo*, where hybrid identities are a central topos of the text.

¹⁵ Some of the earliest Jewish immigrants to Argentina came to populate the pampas and assimilated the manners and habits of the gauchos they lived amidst. Feierstein’s Schvel family describes this lifestyle as a significant part of their Argentine experience and history, noting “The archetype of our community in this country is the Jewish gaucho” (163, my translation). I perceive that Feierstein here is paying a subtle tribute to his predecessor Alberto Gerchunoff for his groundbreaking depiction of Jewish Argentines in his 1910 *Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas*.

Buenos Aires, long considered as the cultural and political heart of the city. His is the long-awaited and final leg of the journey on the road through the nation which has commenced months before, a sort of relay traversing the vast areas of the country en route to the capital in an effort to retrace and re-envision the family's history by visiting significant places in their family's chronology.

Mario has been entrusted with an ornate wooden box containing items and relics emblematic of their Argentine experience: its contents are both nostalgic and tangible. Inside there is earth from Moisesville, the first field toiled by the first generation of immigrants, a *mezuzah* made of bone, and a paper containing two texts with Hebrew blessings. Mario feels the anticipation of a "historic moment" (Feierstein 12), for he plans to deposit the chest and its mysterious contents "in the hole that, prepared by the authorities...waits under the May Pyramid, in the nation's central plaza, along with the metallic capsule that then-president Juan Perón buried there in 1950, to be opened in the year 2000" (Feierstein 12). Located at this threshold, he is laden with emotion, as he reflects on the significance of the endeavor:

The culmination of a long journey. Getting closer- after five generations and a long century of advances and regressions- provokes an intense emotion. The idea of the wandering Jew who walks and walks, without ever "arriving" at a possible destination, could have found ...a point of "entry" in this land that seemed to flow with milk and honey, in those figures of gauchos that your proud ancestors had built with their own lives. Place of detention or final journey, what was essential was to arrive somewhere. (Feierstein 12)

Finally, in referencing the Buenos Aires time capsule, Feierstein incorporates a rather cryptic event and another hidden facet of the city into the details of his fiction. Unknown to

many Argentines, a time capsule containing a letter to the future youth of Argentina was, in fact, deposited in a chest and buried a meter below the surface of the Plaza de Mayo on August 12, 1948, by Juan Perón's administration.¹⁶ The letter was destined to the youth of the year 2000, and eulogized the Peronist doctrine as a policy that "defended the dispossessed and Liberty itself." Feierstein only includes scarce details about the May Pyramid time capsule, yet the reference suggests that he was likely aware of the actual history of the time capsule at the time he wrote his novel; by 1994, the chest containing the original letter had long been disinterred and subsequently destroyed when the Peronist government was dismantled in 1955 after the military uprising and take over by the so-called Liberating Revolution.¹⁷

In light of this fact, it is compelling to suppose that Feierstein deliberately included the event to both reference historical events almost entirely external to the novel, and to hint at the irony of leaving a message of hope for the future generations through a message that was deliberately destroyed in a coup. In any event, it was destined to be forgotten by society in general,¹⁸ an extra-textual historical reality that accords well with the futility of the Schvels' efforts in the novel. For ultimately, they never even have the opportunity to deposit their contribution at the site. It is at the culmination of the journey, at the moment of threshold, when

¹⁶ For further information on the Buenos Aires time capsule and its history, see María Ruiz, "La cápsula del tiempo." *El Comercio*. 12 August 2006. Web. 19 September 2011.

¹⁷ The bombing of the Plaza de Mayo in the "Liberating Revolution" killed hundreds of civilians present and soon forced Perón to go into exile in Spain, leaving the country enmeshed in an ongoing period of instability and coups and dictatorships in the three decades following.

¹⁸ While the contents of the message were recovered and reproduced, the Buenos Aires authorities only later created a commemorative plaque near the original site on August 12, 2000. The grand opening of the capsule that Perón—and by extension the Schvels—envisioned was in no way momentous or even memorable. Years after the narrative ends, on August 12, 2006, the letter to the future youth of Argentina was read with absolutely no fanfare at all to a small audience of perhaps thirty individuals.

Mario Moisés approaches the pyramid and is abruptly thrown from his horse, derailed from his purpose, and severely injured. This is the final moment of crisis, essential to the chronotope of the *threshold*, wrought with emotion and terror. The cataclysmic bomb has exploded at the AMIA, destroying the coffer, obliterating the Schvel's hopes for making their contribution, and assailing the foundations of the Jewish community and the stability of the city in general.

The Schvels desperately wanted to make a contribution to the future, and dreamed of a welcoming and pluralistic nation that valued all citizens despite their origins or differences. Yet the Schvel's efforts prove entirely futile overall; they never get to deposit their coffer in the time capsule, and their symbolic act of empowerment is obliterated by a factual act of unthinkable and orchestrated violence.

Feierstein may or may not have known the contents of Peron's letter as he wrote *La logia del umbral*. Yet read in light of the travesties of justice and lack of progress in the nation since its composition, the letter ultimately reflects the tragic irony of hope for the future that sustains Feierstein's novel:

Argentine youth of the year 2000 will wish to turn their eyes towards the past and demand a reckoning of events from history in order to judge the use that the [Argentine] governments from all eras have made of the sacred deposit that was placed in their hands by previous generations, and also if their acts and doctrines were adequate for managing the well-being of its people and to attain peace among nations...we loyally confess that neither the leaders of the people nor the governed masses have known how to achieve the road to individual and collective happiness...Over the course of centuries, we have progressed immensely in terms of material and scientific achievements, and if each day we make progress in the

limitation of pain, it is only in the physical aspect, because morally, the road covered has been small...The world has failed. But this failure, is it so absolute that not even a minimal glimmer of hope remains? Possibly we can maintain optimism with the illusion that the progress of mankind towards well-being is so slow that we do not perceive it, but from every evolution there remains a particle usable for the best development of mankind. The advance is invisible and it is hidden by its own vices to which I alluded before, but it does not cease to exist in spite of this. May God grant that this judgment be favorable and that upon reading this message...we- brothers of 2000- can look towards the Great Argentina that we dream of, which we live for, fight for and suffer for! (“Message,” my translation)¹⁹

Written in response to a catastrophic and intentional terrorist act, it is as if *La logia del umbral* consciously responds to Perón’s unfulfilled promises for the future as iterated in this letter. Ultimately, hope appears shattered as the Jewish population appears destined to suffer from injustice, and society as a whole seems far from progressing towards enlightenment or harmonious coexistence. *La logia del umbral* accordingly reverberates with deep pessimism and dejection, for this is the real face of society, the alien world, that Feierstein lamentably portrays as representative of his Argentina.

The Chronotope of War: Cultural, Social, and Political Conflict in *Equal Danger*

¹⁹ Access to Juan Domingo Perón’s “Message to the Youth of 2000” is available through Julián Gallo, “Un mensaje de Perón para 2006.” *La Nación*. 9 August 2006. Web. 22 September 2011.

While Piglia and Feierstein explore hidden facets of Buenos Aires and Argentina, Sicilian author Leonardo Sciascia also investigates a complex reality lurking below the surface of a nation. Sciascia's novels often expose the expansive grip of an underworld power structure, as the Mafia and its nefarious influence is a prevailing motif in Sciascia's detective fiction. Published in 1971 and translated into English in 1973, Sciascia's *Equal Danger* is similarly a detective tale that explores crimes that may initially be random acts of violence without apparent ideological motivations or advance preparation. Yet as the narrative progresses, Sciascia quickly exposes the degree to which they are politically motivated, and the protagonist unwittingly finds himself in the midst of intrigues infiltrating the ranks of governments and official administrative bodies aiming to control the cultural, social and political fabric of society. The immediate assassination of a high-level magistrate signals that this novel will move past the intrigue of his other detective novels which generally explore the demise of mere civilians thwarting the interest of a powerful, local Mafia boss.

Equal Danger consequently pivots around the machinations of extremely conservative forces that administer "justice" and those systems they control as they conspire to take hold of the entire nation. Whereas many of Sciascia's novels are concretely situated in Sicily and move from there to afford a broader picture of the Italian Republic, *Equal Danger* moves beyond the endemic corruption of his native island and far past the Italian Peninsula itself. Instead, the novel depicts corruption and internecine conflict as a universal phenomenon operating in the political landscape of nations, and the idea of place or geography quickly assumes an allegorical or symbolic importance in the text. *Equal Danger* in this respect diverges greatly from most of Sciascia's writings, for the narrative unfolds not in the familiar seaside and mountainous towns

of Sicily itself, but instead in a “non-place” that remains nebulous throughout the entire narrative.

Sciascia deliberately avoids naming the land where the action of the novel unfolds, but instead describes a location that seems familiar, plausible, and perhaps even locatable if one seeks to pinpoint the elusive country on a map. Thus from its very first page *Equal Danger* presents a double enigma, or a “problem within a problem” (Sciascia 42): as the astute and sagacious Inspector Rogas attempts to solve the mystery of who is murdering a series of judges and the ostensible motive, the reader, like an experienced detective, feels compelled to discern correlatives between the space and time of the novel and actual countries, terrains and historical periods in the world outside of the text.

Merely reading the work as a parable with no concrete referent in the world seems counterintuitive or misguided when one considers the absolute importance that concrete geographical spaces occupy in Sciascia’s *Il giorno della civetta*, *A ciascuno il suo*, *Sicilian Uncles* or the short stories of *Wine Dark Sea*. Moreover Sciascia, considered to be a master of the detective form, capitalizes on this expectation by an astute reader to adroitly develop the mystery. Thus, the text abounds with countless hints and clues, as well as frequent false leads, that induce the reader to actively try to pinpoint the unnamed country somewhere on the actual globe during an actual period of time.

Accordingly, Sciascia’s novel is situated in an unnamed place and unfixed time, deliberately left open to the reader’s imagination. Indeed, by not assigning these specific referents, the work takes on a broader meaning or context. The chronotope of *everyday life in an alien world* interconnected with the chronotope of *time of war* provides a spatial-temporal unity that is at once half-real, half-metaphorical, allowing Sciascia’s observations to apply to other

times and places beyond his native Sicily. Yet it is perhaps in an effort to highlight the plausibility and realness of the historical space and time of the novel that Sciascia's *Equal Danger* is ripe with referential clues about the nebulous location from the onset of the narrative.

As the narrative progresses, these hints increase continually, and the ensuing trail of clues begs investigation about when and where such incidents actually take place. It is almost as though Sciascia challenges the reader to draw analogies and synthesize such information to concretely situate the novel. Foremost the reader is often induced to assume that the narrative takes place in a Spanish-speaking nation. This hypothesis is supported by the nature of the names given to the individuals such as the main inspector, the assassinated magistrates, as well as the towns and villages where they exist. All of these elements have a distinctly Spanish lilt, and frequently are semantically relevant as well: the desperate search is initiated by Inspector Rogas, whose name in Spanish accordingly implies he is one who implores, asks or begs [*rogar*]. He attempts to discover who has murdered Magistrate Varga, a judge whose name in Spanish, like his behavior in private, denotes a downward slope or decline. The murder of Magistrate Azar appears to be an act of fate, as the name itself immediately evokes the Spanish for chance or fate. The head of the International Revolutionary Party is Amar, who perhaps like his surname implies, is loved and esteemed by this nation's voting public.

In addition, there are places introduced, such as Algo (something), as well as many other names that while not necessarily denoting a particular meaning still have a Spanish sound that often induce the reader to situate the action within Latin America or perhaps Spain. In general, these are not quintessentially Italian names or places, and while they could be so given Sicily's Bourbon history, these particulars quickly serve to disassociate the setting from the unquestionably Sicilian milieu which figure prominently in most of Sciascia's writings.

Yet beyond any mere names for places and individuals, Sciascia also introduces several evocative historical elements that could serve to ground the narrative in a precise place or time. Interestingly these clues generally serve as false leads and distractions; in the most Borgesian of manners²⁰, these references uniformly prove to be apocryphal and fictitious data without extratextual correlatives or referents. Such is the case with the recurring reference to General Carco, a dignitary who appears in effigy as a statue in a town square. The repeated mention of this military figure encourages the reader to suppose that he has exerted a significant historical influence on the town or nation. Specifically, his name is invoked as Inspector Rogas pursues a possible lead in his investigation. As he approaches a wayward resident of the town, the suspect is “...in the square, seated in the sun at the foot of a monument to a General Carco who, a hundred years earlier, had freed the region from one tyranny only to impose another one on it” (Sciascia 13-14).

Certainly, Sciascia has here imbued this mythical general with a very resonant historical reference and importance. Considering Sciascia’s own investment in and critical view of the turbulent history of his native island, the mention of Carco’s rule ending “one tyranny only to impose another one” may be a very cogent reference to the political and historical reality of Sicily, which for centuries was ruled and oppressed by foreign powers. Still, the allusion to short-lived liberation movements abruptly followed by ensuing tyrannical rule could well correlate to the early independence phase of most countries in Latin America, where colonial

²⁰ Borges’s fiction is often notable for his invention of false but highly detailed and plausible worlds, individuals and eras. Prominent and paradigmatic examples include “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” and “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote.” In describing these events and places, Borges creates fictitious histories and references in an encyclopedic fashion, and treats them as though they are real and have concrete correlatives outside of the work itself. This prominent aspect of Borges’s poetics will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

Spanish rule collapsed only to find new nations entrapped in a cycle of continual vicious autocracies. As such, General Carco could well be envisioned as a despotic post-colonial leader in Latin American as well.

There are other references to General Carco abounding elsewhere throughout the text, including in the eponymous General Carco Cultural Club (Sciascia 33), ironically misaligned with his supposed penchant for cultural destruction as manifested in his incineration of the Palatine Library, as well as the removal of one of his notes from the historical archives (Sciascia 43). While Sciascia has here attributed historical events and actions to an individual who never seems to have existed outside of the text, his influence on the novel's imagined country is indelible; the calculated introduction of this pseudo-historical figure breathes a dimension of realism into the nation conjured in the narrative. So, too, does the specific mention of the Palatine Library, and particularly the reference to historical revision, lost documentation and archival elisions and subsequent attempts to erase or alter perceptions of history. These are only some of seemingly significant historical facts introduced that prove to be invented or false that constitute a "labyrinth of counterfeit clues" (Sciascia 11). None of these particular references fructify, for they are merely fictional inventions used to create historical atmosphere into the novel. Yet they are significant in that they nudge the reader to question and interrogate the "facts" introduced.

While these types of hints propel the reader to isolate the site of the action, they are nonetheless the most obvious or superficial of clues for the reader's detection and analysis and invite a correlation to an extratextual historical reality. Most convincingly, Sciascia provides a political context that compels the reader to deduce what nation or world region and what real historical period is evoked. Indeed, the ailing, corrupt justice system that Sciascia proceeds to

expose has countless correlatives outside of the work itself. Additionally the highly seditious maneuverings of the highest-ranking government officials contradict and rebuff the concept of justice, instead exposing appalling corruption known to many places in modern history. Sciascia details the depth of this corruption gradually, slowly uncovering its intricacies, expansive reach, and likely impetus.

Consequently, the first assassination that initiates Rogas' investigation immediately signals that the preservation of particular interests takes precedence over all other pursuits, including apprehending the actual culprit. As the case develops and simultaneously becomes a matter of public concern and conjecture, authorities working in the upper echelons of national security reveal an unfaltering commitment to maintain the semblance of competence and infallibility. Their attempts to manipulate and spin appearances directly draw Rogas into the scheme, as he is enlisted to smother a public perception of incompetence in national security:

Whether to restore to public opinion a faith in the efficiency in the police that, as it happens, public opinion had never nourished, or to make the public accept the unsolvability of the mystery, the Minister for National Security decided to assign Inspector Rogas to the case: the shrewdest investigator at the disposal of the police, according to the newspapers. (Sciascia 4)

Rogas is extolled for his astuteness and the methodology he may apply to the investigation. Yet more importantly, he is assigned to the case to dispel public misgivings about the competence of the police force itself. Rogas, in effect, has calculatingly been recruited as a pawn in some larger design, and it is evident that his impressive acumen for solving crime will not necessarily serve towards that end.

Inspector Rogas, however, is at once discerning and suspicious of his superiors' intentions, and he reveals tremendous misgivings about both the case and his involvement in the affair. He quickly recognizes that his directives are misaligned with his own ethics as a representative of the law. Like the reader, he quickly detects foul play as he embarks upon his investigation of the murdered magistrate, perceiving glaring instances of inconsistencies and shady efforts to cover up inconsistent facts.

Concretely Rogas infers that the first victim, Magistrate Varga, may have been involved in deviant deeds and behaviors. While his actual conduct is only alluded to vaguely, it is evident that the magistrate had a questionable character. Rogas intuits that this could have led to his demise, but he is instantly derailed from pursuing a viable tip that could ultimately result in a just resolution:

Malicious conjectures were privately expressed and also whispered by the police, on the one hand, by friends on the other; but to prevent their publicly exploding, the conjectures were promptly defused by a top-level decision reached at a meeting among the highest authorities in the district which branded any suspicion about that pregnant hour as an attack on the memory of a life that henceforth would be reflected in the mirror of all virtues. (Sciascia 2)

The High Commissioner of the Police and the President of the Supreme Court appear to have interceded in the investigation to refute such proofs and to cover up any damning evidence. Consequently, Rogas is exhorted to dismiss potentially incriminating information about the judge and to guard it from public disclosure, for "any shadow which might blemish the [magistrate's] limpid reputation... should be evaluated by Rogas in light of the discredit that would unjustly fall upon the entire judiciary" (Sciascia 4).

This unequivocal order to abandon this lead is, however, only the first of many directives that Rogas will be constricted to follow as he investigates the string of murders. In fact, the inspector continually receives unseemly directives originating from authorities greater than himself and he quickly deduces that that his investigation is steered by interests moving beyond his superiors and the agencies for which he works. These higher echelons are clearly unconcerned about the accurate resolution of the murders, leading Rogas to suspect not only individuals of corruption, but rather entire divisions of this nation's government. Still, like the reader, the inspector remains unaware of the reach of the conspiracy that lurks, though it is clear that something is awry and he intends to unearth the ulterior motives complicating his investigation.

As more and more judges are subsequently murdered during the course of the inquiry, they, too, demonstrate signs of corruptibility, incongruous motives or actions that Rogas understands to be ill-befitting to their positions as the wardens of justice and model citizenry. At least two other judges are ostensibly guilty or at least suspect of financial corruption and undue benefits. Rogas intends to investigate in what way their behavior has any bearing on their murders. Yet again Rogas is thwarted and redirected, for shortly:

...there arrived from the capital an authoritative exhortation not to forage for gossip; Rogas should keep on the trail...of that crazy lunatic who for no reason whatever was going about murdering judges. The crazy lunatic thesis had by now come into favor at the very top levels. So far, and Rogas was astonished at this, the affair had not been tossed into the political arena, not even by those papers that were always ready to attribute every senseless or monstrous crime to one of

the many revolutionary groups that swarmed throughout the country. (Sciascia 8-9)

Here, Rogas is redirected away from the appropriate investigation, and is instead told where to focus his efforts. “Top levels” have resolved that these murders should be pursued as the deeds of a deranged individual, a supposed lunatic who haphazardly targets judges as his victims. While no evidence has thus far supported this hypothesis, Rogas later determines that all of these magistrates have greatly erred in their judgment at some point and condemned innocent individuals to unmerited prison terms. He therefore questions several men who were erroneously sentenced by these magistrates, and quickly narrows in on a clear and viable lead in the case. Rogas deduces that Cres, a man embittered by the misadministration of justice, is the most likely culprit for murdering the magistrates. The suspect has a practical motive fueling his criminal acts and reasonable incentives for wanting revenge against members of the judiciary; these same judges in different courts of instance falsely convicted him of murder and sentenced him to years in prison. Cres’ intense resentment in this scenario appears to have culminated in a personal vendetta deliberately assaulting well-considered targets.

Rogas’ well-considered theory contradicts the insistence from the capital that such acts are the capricious work of a madman, and he appears to have found the person responsible for the murders. Yet the inspector is once again forced to reject the lead he finds in Cres, and is urged to shift the course of the investigation once more. The theory of the random individual he was formerly constricted to pursue is now contradicted, and the crime is instead to be politicized against a particular segment of society. In direct opposition to the last order, he is instructed to “to get that Cres out of his head” (Sciascia 46) and to initiate an operative against supposedly guilty revolutionary subversives. This maneuver shiftily liberates the most likely culprit, as it

concurrently initiates a dirty war against all socialist and leftist activists now deemed detrimental to the nation's well-being.

Thus a witch hunt ensues shortly after the murder of District Attorney Perro in the capital, which purportedly occurs in the presence of three witnesses. Yet the narrator quickly draws attention to the dubiousness of the whole incident, noting: "None of the three had actually seen the crime committed, but... all three had seen two people running away" (Sciascia 46). These witnesses, who are portrayed as unreliable if not entirely fabricated, report that the murderers "...were men of a certain type" (Sciascia 46). Such a vague depiction is immediately embraced and twisted by the media to suggest that the culprits were members of terrorist groups, and the news is disseminated widely to both assuage the public's fear of a random madman and to deflect the nation's attention towards a more commonly despised target.

Indeed, reporters, commentators and officials appear predisposed to accept this new pursuit, wondering in unison: "How was it possible that, in a country agitated by insurrectional cadres that preached violence as both means and end, the police had opted for the thesis of the solitary criminal, the mad revenger?" (Sciascia 46). Yet when the original plan orchestrated by Rogas' superiors is publicly scrutinized, he is forced to bear the brunt of the fallout in the face of public criticism as he is admonished "to set to work instead with his colleague in the Political Section, if he wished to redeem himself and redeem the police force from evident error" (Sciascia 46). Meanwhile, the ploy to blame individuals or groups from political factions already perceived as contrary to public order deflects all attention away from the authorities' improprieties or incompetence. It also leaves Cres with "boundless freedom and immunity" (Sciascia 45).

This is a pivotal episode in the text, for Rogas sees only anomalies arising in his investigation, continually contradicting his perceived mission as an officer of the law. In this alien world, the forces regulating the sociopolitical and everyday life in society are indexed against an entirely different, anticipated schema. The foreignness of this location quickly stands out in relief, as Rogas recognizes that the usual, familiar parameters guiding his profession and his pursuits are no longer in existence. Rogas here accepts that the misgivings that have plagued him from the onset of the investigation are not coincidences or the product of his imagination. His professional interest diminishes entirely as he suddenly understands his case will be stymied in any instance. Consequently, his duties as an inspector hereinafter are subordinated to an overwhelming need to personally understand why such machinations are dictating the course of the investigation.

As the charged political climate comes to the fore, so too do the most meaningful contexts for situating the novel in a concrete place and era, or to reflect what Bakhtin calls “real historical time.” Sciascia’s *Equal Danger* describes a government that eagerly attributes high-profile crimes onto leftist political groups and a desensitized though frightened public that is predisposed to accept this explanation without further reflection. With the sensationalized threat of political extremists groups and urban guerillas attempting to influence the political landscape through acts of aggression, the novel reflects the chaos that erupted throughout areas of Europe and the Americas the late ‘60s and early ‘70s. This is certainly a prominent detail that appears in all three mystery novels considered in this chapter, and suggests commonalities in the social and political fabric of the authors’ far distant continents and nations.

By evoking the nefarious presence of “insurrectional cadres” (Sciascia 46) pitting civil society against the state, Sciascia’s narrative recalls the tension between leftist and rightist

Peronist factions in Argentina, the fear of leftist and right-wing terrorist groups in Italy, and an active battle for power and influence unfolding daily amidst an ensuing public fear of instability and revolution.²¹ In both Argentina and Italy of the late 1960s and early 1970s, well-reported crimes such as the kidnappings and murders of powerful businessmen and politicians were a dramatic way to draw attention to the different political factions and their agendas. While urban insurgents at times frequently posed a real threat to society, they were also implicated as a motive to substantiate vicious police forces and the instituting of even more conservative policies that did not merely intend to subdue or annihilate these groups alone.

Political activism during this era, often in its most innocuous manifestations, was frequently lambasted as insurrectional and aimed at uprooting the foundations of society in both nations during this time. Indeed, the nation existing in *Equal Danger* employs the tactic of publicly ascribing crimes to fringe groups. Yet the novel connects this tactic to workings of a conservative regime aiming to foster an atmosphere of public fear and complacency that effectively distracts the populace from various complex maneuverings to strengthen cultural and political hegemony. In contrast to the public alarmism generated, the threat of revolutionaries and their actual influence appears greatly exaggerated by the country's law enforcement and overzealous media, leaving Rogas cynically "struck by the fact that the police were so mesmerized by the word 'cadre' that they pronounced it as if it were within quotes" (Sciaccia 48).

²¹ Like well-known revolutionary groups in Argentina such as the Montoneros or Ejército Revolucionario Popular (ERP), or even the Red Brigades in Italy, their criminal acts of violence targeted high-level officials, politicians and entrepreneurs. Yet, as Martin Andersen frequently reiterates in his *Dossier Secreto*, the actual influence and danger for civilian life presented by these groups may well have been exaggerated and highlighted to legitimate extreme ruthlessness and repressive measures enacted by government agencies and officials.

Rogas is subsequently directed to trail an editor whose leftist newspaper promotes “violent social rebirth,” and the members of his coterie blatantly declare their rejection of “a bourgeois state.”²² While they preach revolution and articulate their desire to change the social order, these individuals apparently do not resort to terrorism to disseminate their message or ideals. In contrast to the murderous militant groups conjured up by the authorities and garnering attention in the media, these activists appear far less effectual or organized. Instead they are depicted as a rather incompetent group of intellectuals and pseudo-intellectuals, reduced to expressing their opposition and revolutionary hopes through laughable, mediocre writings and solipsistic doggerel. Notably, Rogas finds the prominent revolutionary group to be far more concerned with internecine controversies stemming from petty and personal squabbles that overshadow any real revolutionary struggles. These so-called agitators are narcissistic, self-important, verbose but ultimately futile; they are a foil to the spoon-fed image of the feared leftist oppositional groups regularly enacting violent deeds within the nation.

Against this sensationalized backdrop of revolutionary uprising, Sciascia depicts a despotic, oligarchic state that legitimizes its power precisely through this perceived threat and extends its repression to the realm of ordinary, daily life. The entire populace’s actions are thus

²² As an interesting parallel, Argentine journalist Martín Caparrós, now well-cited in the nation’s press, retrospectively describes the goals of his and other similar leftist groups in the youth movement in an article titled “El peor acuerdo” printed on July 28, 2008 in *Crítica Digital*. There, he states: “Marxist subversion—rather more or less Marxist, of which I was also a part—no doubt wanted to assault the power in Argentina to radically change the social order. We didn’t want a capitalist and democratic country: we wanted a socialist society, without a market economy, without inequalities, without exploiters or the exploited, and without much specificity about the political form that that would take— but without a doubt, would not be the “bourgeois democracy” that we condemned every chance that we could.” (my translation) It is a rhetoric, particularly in the explicit mention of the “bourgeois democracy” and the goal to radically change the social order, that almost seems to have issued directly from the very mouths of the revolutionaries in *Equal Danger*.

closely monitored by a repressive state intelligence apparatus, and the text abounds with references to a tyrannical, warlike police force and a general distrust of state institutions. Rogas himself often comments on a conspicuous uneasiness he perceives as a representative of the nation's law enforcement, noting that "[t]he prescribed structure of the police had been, until only a few years before, purely repressive" (Sciascia 30). Moreover, this is a nation where surveillance is a given, and where innocence, as is guilt, is prejudged (Sciascia 33). The brutality of the police is cited as Rogas notes that the accused would "[go] so far as to confess, thereby crossing over the police domain to the more secure, more reliable terrain of the judicial realm where even confessions required proof and proof was almost always lacking" (Sciascia 31).

While the fear of the police is supposedly buffered by the solidity of the judicial realm, Sciascia demonstrates this to be the most alarming fallacy of all in this alien world. The judicial realm is not only as unsafe or unreliable as interacting with the ubiquitous police force; it is minutely shown to be a far more erratic and unstable institution. This nation's judiciary is continually portrayed not as a guardian of ideals to protect the rights of citizens, but instead as a deeply flawed, corrupted power structure – a machine that will adopt any means necessary to maintain the semblance of righteousness and to protect those that control it as they determine the laws governing the nation. Sciascia thus lingers on the arbitrary rulings of this "machinery of justice" (Sciascia 37), showing it to be an unstoppable, self-authorizing system that wages an insidiously silent war against the populace rather than protecting the rights and safety of the individual.

This is another recurrent motif in *Equal Danger*, for in this unidentified country individuals are insignificant, expendable pawns in a grand design that readily sacrifices them for its own welfare. Rogas has already ascertained that many individuals have been deeply aggrieved

by this system, for his investigation has demonstrated the fallibility and corruptibility of the judges determining the fates of others. Still, he comes face to face with an unflinching rhetoric by one of the highest officials of the nation purporting that those who mete out justice make “no errors of judgment” (Sciascia 85).

This arrogant and unsettling admission with all of its Orwellian implications issues directly from the Supreme Court President, Riches, during an extremely frank discussion with Rogas. Riches leaves no doubt about an absolute division between judicial authority and its subjects, and while the arbiters of justice have frequently proven to be arbitrary, mistaken and unfair, he disallows any remorse or culpability for the effects of their errors on the lives of those they have judged. Indeed, Riches proclaims “Judicial error does not exist” (Sciascia 85) and asserts that those in a privileged position to legislate and judge must never entertain public opinion or doubt; “lay opinions” in this nation mean nothing and “whether an accused man may or may not have committed the crime has never had any importance for judges” (Sciascia 91).

Riches flagrantly defends his right to power, asserting that the idea of “justice” is an illusion, a premise that is shocking to Rogas and contrary to his comprehension of how a nation functions and appears antithetical to his role as an officer of the law. To him, it is uncanny that the fate of the individual in such a system is necessarily sacrificed to the machinations of a select powerful few. Additionally, Riches dismantles Rogas’ own context for his work as a police officer- that of protecting the rights of individual citizens- as he asserts “Your profession... has become absurd. It presupposes the existence of the individual, and the individual does not exist” (Sciascia 89).

While this repressive environment fortified by a deeply corrupted justice system may be analogous to Argentina or other Latin American nations in the latter half of the 20th century,

there are assuredly political correlatives that connect the novel's represented world specifically with Sciascia's native Italy during this time period. Indeed, Italy in the late 60s onward experienced social and political turbulence, with infamous militant and violent organizations committing atrocious acts of terror.²³ Yet the repression used to combat such violent groups also extended to less dangerous elements, such as students in support of workers' rights. The sensationalized fear of crime during this period buttressed rather reactionary control measures, including authorization for the police to detain people for 48 hours without charges in a purported attempt to prevent crimes.²⁴ The entire atmosphere of the novel recalls the Strategy of Tension, where the fear of terror, blamed on leftists groups while perpetrated by right-wing elements, served to authorize an authoritarian political regime.

Other political events define the era and place of *Equal Danger* correlate the represented world of the novel with the extratextual, historical time of Sciascia's Italy. Specifically, in a meeting with a high level government official -simply referred to as "the Minister"- Rogas and the Chief of the Political Section are made privy to a complex plan to merge two ideologically opposed political parties into one, in order to gain popular support and legitimacy. The Minister tells them:

You know what the political situation is – the, so to speak, structured political situation. Once can sum it up in two words: it has suddenly dawned on my party,

²³ A prominent example in Italy is the infamous Red Brigades. Over the course of the 70s, this militant organization did, in fact, kidnap and murder hundreds of judges, industrialists and politicians, even later targeting and murdering the former Prime Minister Aldo Moro in a drawn out attempt to force government officials to release imprisoned members from its own group.

²⁴ See "The World: Nearer the Historic Compromise." *Time*. 11 July 1977. Web. 8 November 2010.

which has been misgoverning for thirty years, that it would misgovern better in collaboration with the International Revolutionary Party. [...] the vision of Mr. Amar [the I.R.P.'s Secretary-General]...ordering out the troops to fire on striking workers, or on farmers asking for water or students asking not to study... beguiles me too. But... Mr. Amar is no fool. (Sciascia 71)

While the Minister does not actually name his own political party, he notes that the strategy to fuse with the International Revolutionary Party constitutes an effort to diffuse tensions, removing him personally from the crossfire of despised rule and unpopular decisions. It concurrently intends to secure and consolidate power for his own party.

The merging of an ailing and fading conservative party with a popular liberal party to consolidate its power clearly recalls the Historic Compromise, wherein the long-dominant *Democrazia Cristiana* momentarily gave the Italian Communist Party a presence in government for the first time since the Second World War. In *Equal Danger*, the Minister concedes how this alliance between the two political parties would provide a supposed government of national solidarity, but would ultimately strengthen his own party's precarious hold on power. Meanwhile, the International Revolutionary Party would acquiesce to participate in a coalition government in order to have a formal voice in a progressive government policy that it otherwise had not electorally attained previously.²⁵

The Minister, too, notes how the International Revolutionary Party leader, Amar, could serve to bolster his own party, stating: "I'd hand over my post to Mr. Amar willingly. But, you see, this country hasn't reached the point yet of despising Mr. Amar's party as much as it

²⁵ See Roberto D'Alimonte, "Party Behavior in a Polarized System: The Italian Communist Party and the Historic Compromise." *Policy, Office or Votes?: How Political Parties in Western Europe Make Hard Decisions*.

despises mine. And in our system, contempt is what puts the seal of approval on power” (Sciascia 71). The Minister in no uncertain terms intimates that his party will use the popular appeal of the IRP to legitimize its own plans and that likewise, he does not anticipate any significant change in the party’s agenda, let alone the prospect of a revolution, in creating this union.

As Rogas’ contact with party members and officials increases, his search for the assassin becomes futile and irrelevant. It is his personal quest to dissect their maneuvers that impels his daily existence, with his official duties becoming only a charade. Now conscious that he lives in a nation that is waging cultural and social warfare against its populace, he nevertheless does not know that his inquest will still lead him to monumental political schemes and acts of collusion of the gravest sort. But in foraging for more information, Rogas discovers a covert meeting occurring amongst the highest ranks of the military, secret intelligence, and government officials. Most irregularly, the meeting is taking place at the Supreme Court President’s private residence.

Rogas’s intellect, his integrity and his relentless drive to unearth the truth about the murdered judges has led him far beyond his initial inquest, and directly to a wide scale and cooperative effort by the different military forces and the judiciary to seize power of the nation:

Within the initial problem of a series of crimes that he, because of his duty, because of his profession, felt called upon to solve, whose author he must try to bring to court if not to justice, another problem had arisen, supremely criminal in kind—a crime contemplated in respect to fundamental principles of State, but one that would have to be solved outside the confines of his duty, in conflict with his duty. Practically, it was a matter of defending the State against those who represented it, who held it captive. (Sciascia 81)

It is only now that Rogas recognizes he has penetrated a problem much graver than he could have ever anticipated, far larger and more horrifying than any crime against mere individuals. Indeed, this irregular meeting of the highest ranking individuals from the various divisions attests to their collusion, lies, planting of false leads and mistaken trails are clear evidence of elaborate plotting to deliver control of the country in the hands of a particular group. While all these actions are never distilled into the simple word that they represent, Rogas has assuredly happened upon the planning of a coup d'état.²⁶

With the normal, appropriate avenues for pursuing justice corrupted and compromised, Rogas desperately attempts to reveal the plot to Amar, whose intercession he believes may help to expose the corruption publicly and nationally, and prevent it from ever taking place. Yet Rogas' discovery has initiated a reversal in fortune, and his quest to learn the truth has shifted his role from pursuer to the pursued. He is plummeted directly in the center of the intrigue, and to his shock and disbelief finds himself tailed by intelligence agents detailing his every move and action. Rogas has already probed too deep, and just as he was originally enlisted as pawn to quell public interest and conjecture, he soon becomes a final scapegoat to again avert attention from the forces manipulating the direction of a nation.

²⁶ Sciascia here is seemingly invoking an attempted plan for a coup d'état on December 8, 1970, that was called off before it occurred. The far-reaching right-wing conspiracy was apparently orchestrated by the extreme neo-Fascist Prince Junio Valerio Borghese, though to this date there is still frequent denial that the plan existed. General Vito Miceli, then head of the SID, the Italian Secret Service, responded to the printed accusation in the leftist newspaper *Paese Sera*, claiming such a notion was ridiculous and entirely fabricated, and though it was later revealed that both he and the Army Chief of Staff had known about it well in advance and had offered to lend support ideologically and with necessary weaponry. Though trials were held and participants were charged with armed insurrection against the state, by 1984, all accused of participating in the plan were acquitted on appeal. See Tobias Jones, *The Dark Heart of Italy* (2003).

Murdered by a mercenary commissioned by those military leaders, Rogas is discovered dead in a museum along with Amar; typically, the press is fed details that conveniently frame the assassination of the leftist leader on him. With Rogas and Amar conveniently removed, there is no need for a violent coup, which can be shelved as a future contingency plan. Yet a silent coup has already occurred, and control of the nation has been assumed by the newly revamped conservative political party; its itinerary and agenda will be controlled carefully by invisible actors who will continue to formulate the nation's laws, ideologies and direction to their own advantage while instilling the farce of societal protection and order. With this complex turn of events and the definitive elimination of Rogas for "reasons of State" (Sciascia 117), Sciascia thwarts a simple resolution to the original investigation. The novel concludes with the revelation of an extremely sinister and far-reaching plot, a nation suspended in the clutches of extremely dangerous and immoral individuals, and the initial mystery of the assassinations dissolves into thin air as much more dismal and nebulous intrigues unfold.

Although these correlatives advocate situating this narrative within a particular historical time and location, it is ultimately pointless for the reader to insist on determining an unequivocal location and era. All assumptions about the actual location arise by way of analogy and are deliberately left open to conjecture. Thus while location is central in *Equal Danger*, Sciascia's text develops chronotopes as metaphors for reflecting on nations and power itself, on the nefarious reaches of people, governments and systems wielding and solidifying control and domination. The widespread corruption, the propaganda, the scare tactics, cover ups and far-reaching repression depicted in *Equal Danger* could plausibly occur anywhere and at any time, as Sciascia disturbingly cautions. For if elsewhere in the text the reader is invited to analytically create analogies and infer connections, it is in the final "Note" of the novel that Sciascia

explicitly reveals the metaphorical intentions of his work. Here, Sciascia as the author tangentially located outside of the chronotopes represented in his text (Bakhtin 254) directs how one may interpret the location and time functioning inside the narrative:

[...] I sketched the story of a man who goes about killing judges, and of a police officer who, at a certain point, becomes the man's alter ego. An amusing pastime... the story began to unroll in an entirely imaginary country; a country where ideas no longer circulate, where principles...are made a daily mockery, where ideologies are reduced to policies in name only, in a party-politics game in which only power for the sake of power counts. I repeat: an imaginary country. One can think of it as being Italy; once can also think of it as being Sicily.... The incidents, the details- all can be Sicilian, Italian, but the substance... must be that of a fable about power anywhere in the world, about power that, in the impenetrable form of a concatenation that we can roughly term *Mafioso*, works steadily greater degradation.(Sciascia 118-119)

Thus Sciascia's own observations about his novel's setting and location complicate any such reductive or constrictive reading of *Equal Danger*; indeed, it is decidedly not about any single place or era itself but instead about a quest for control which moves beyond the borders of Sicily, Italy, Europe, Latin America or elsewhere. Sciascia reflects on the infinite complexity and menace of power, which never originates or remains at any central point as it seeks to legitimize itself.²⁷

²⁷ Sciascia's novel demonstrates that power relations and struggles do not necessarily emanate from a single, central point, but instead emerge from multiple points which affect all social, political, and cultural conditions. Sciascia's exploration of the strategic attempts to wield power in *Equal Danger* also recalls French Social Theorist Michel Foucault's complex analysis of

In each of these contemporary mystery novels, the narrative develops through chronotopic motifs that attempt to textually represent significant moments of real historical time in spaces responding to political and social realities of such periods. While each author recalls unique details with his own aesthetic that render the works exceptional and dissimilar, each is actively engaged in representing his own particular vision of a problematic national situation- an alien world that can be indexed against a contrasting model of normalcy and familiarity.

Moreover, all of the narratives discussed in this chapter highlight a distinctive feature of these contemporary mystery novels: the subjective narration of private and everyday life are shaped by historical, sociopolitical circumstances which exact indelible effects on individual experiences. Yet these subjective experiences suggest that what is imagined or real in these worlds, what is visible or hidden in these vivid milieus, is always relative to the person who is imagining, creating and interpreting the environment. Thus, there are multiple perspectives of what is outwardly the same geographic location or time, effectively destabilizing the notion that there is ever one definitive city, one static nation, or definitive narratives that can uniformly describe the events of history.

power and authority in *The History of Sexuality*: “One must suppose ... that the manifold relationships of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups, and institutions, are the basis for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole. These then form a general line of force that traverses the local oppositions and links them together; to be sure, they also bring about redistributions, realignments, homogenizations, serial arrangements, and convergences of the force relations. Major dominations are the hegemonic effects that are sustained by all these confrontations.” (94)

CHAPTER TWO

Writing Against Oblivion

While Chapter 1 considers the formative role of temporally-determined locations and spaces in narratives, a crucial aspect of the discussion considers geographic sites as the repositories of both individual and collective memory. In the present chapter, I intend to analyze three texts that profoundly delve into the interconnectivity between collective and individual memory, as well as the role of personal memory in opposing and deauthorizing official representations of the past. The texts invoked here specifically consider the codification of and limits to historical memory as they concurrently offer subjective and highly fictionalized recollections of the past.

By presenting accounts that have generally been dismissed or overlooked in the narration of the past, these counter narratives play against official memory to both broaden and critically examine received versions of historical events. These writers subscribe to the underlying principle that memory can never be unilaterally ascribed either to a single individual or to any group; instead there is always an exchange between the subjective memories of an individual and the collective memory of the social group to which he or she belongs (“Fiction” 9). While broadly this is a premise that informs all of the texts in my project, it is a foremost concern in Ricardo Feierstein’s *Mestizo*, Dacia Maraini’s *Isolina* and Simone Sarasso’s *Confine di stato*. In each of these narratives, the authors intensely reflect on the function of memory, conceiving of it as a bridge to the past and as a supplement or corrective to “objective” and institutionalized narratives about history. For these writers, literature is a powerful site of memory and an arena for ruminations on its ability to recount both personal and universal experiences.

As François-Xavier Lavenne, Virginie Renard, and François Tollet assert in “Fiction, Between Inner Life and Collective Memory: A Methodological Reflection”

... memory lies at the heart both of inner life and of human experience in general...However, from a strictly mnemonic point of view, literature provides more than a means of reflecting on memory: it is also the site of the rebirth and construction of individual and collective memories, which can then serve as a foundation for the writing of fictional works. Creative writing has a meiotic function and is as such a powerful tool capable of rescuing memories from oblivion and bringing them back to life, thus reconciling the past with the present.

(1)

These three authors indeed see their *métier* as a means to render awareness about the past and to rescue and reconstruct memories from oblivion and the ravages of time. Their projects, however, move beyond mere creativity and personal expression, for their attempts to reconcile the past with the present quite evidently entail important and meaningful societal and political questions that reverberate outside of their works. Each writer suggests it is shortsighted to accept conventional portrayals or accepted explanations of history and the unfolding of events, and each author stresses the importance of appraising and reconsidering which events and perspectives have been privileged in the rendering of accounts of history. Consequently, their works attempt to recount and scrutinize momentous historical events and to introduce observations and perspectives that they feel have been elided in the discourse of history.

Each author insists upon the crucial role that memory plays in producing and validating interpretations of history, and my own examination of these texts is that of a historicist, for it is thoroughly undergirded by the notion that “fictional narrative is inextricably bound to the social,

historical and cultural context in which it is created” (“Fiction” 3). Indeed, these authors dissect readings of history as they explore their own memories as the vaults of unique experiences that shape individual subjectivity; as such, their worldview is the scaffolding for their divergently personal perspectives of historical events.

These writers’ subjectivity is broadly defined either by a sense of belonging to or lack of inclusion within particular social groups, and these writers take issue with what are considered to be universally shared experiences and constructions of the past. Their texts underscore the compelling idea presented by Lavenne, Renard, and Tollet that a “...writer belongs to a social group, shares a collective memory with it, and often deals in his fictional works with a past pregnant with meaning and that still impinges on the present” (“Fiction” 3).

Moreover, these works exemplify the premise that the text an author produces is more than a mere artistic artifact or static creation that exists *in vacuo*, but instead a dialog between the reader and the writer that connects the realm of the inner life with that of collective memory (“Fiction” 3). As Lavenne, Renard, and Tollet assert, the text becomes “a vital point of exchange and communication, an attempt to lay bear the interiority of the writer upon a recipient or interpreter who proceeds to find shared meaning in the creation...The narrative act and the work of reading therefore help to constitute this intermediary level that connects the realm of the inner life with that of collective memory” (“Fiction” 3).

Each author considered in this chapter has constructed a narrative that attempts to convey particular and perhaps contentious perspectives about history, for these accounts are grounded in their own subjectivity and reflect their ideas about the reliability of memory and its limits. While each author’s work is assuredly a creative endeavor, there is an evident interest in both the social and political implications of their perspectives, and these texts differ significantly

in their scope and approach based on different but meaningful factors including the author's age, gender, religion, ethnicity and political orientation.

Consequently, Ricardo Feierstein's novel *Mestizo* pivots around an individual's recent amnesia in the aftermath of a traumatic experience, and the attempt to recover his own identity and piece together a personal history. Like Feierstein himself, the novel's protagonist is a Jewish Argentinean from a family of relatively recent immigrants to the nation, many of them escaping the terrors of the Nazi regimes operating throughout Europe. The violence and the repression described in Argentina in the 1970s and onwards is thus particularly shocking and familiar to the characters in the novel. Against this backdrop, Feierstein's protagonist is determined to assess and understand his *mestizo* identity as he proceeds to examine the content of his memory (or lack thereof) vis a vis momentous incidents that occurred during his life in Buenos Aires.

Dacia Maraini's narrative instead considers her native Italy as a starting point for a global and far reaching analysis of the plight of women wronged by society and by history. Plagued by a sense of injustice and loss, *Isolina* resurrects the memory of an innocent woman murdered, defamed and then deliberately forgotten by a patriarchal legal system and society. While examining and remembering the short life of an otherwise forgotten young woman killed almost a century prior, Maraini actively writes to dispel myths of objectivity in both the unfolding and narration of history.

Finally, Simone Sarasso's novel *Confine di stato* focuses on the years immediately before and during the *anni di piombo* in Italy, a time well before his own birth, but assuredly a confusing era of political and cultural turbulence that has left indelible outcomes on the political landscape of Italy inherited by subsequent generations. Written during the reactionary era of Berlusconi's Italy, Sarasso's novel appeals to a younger generation with updated sensibilities and

notions about the role of media and literature, beseeching them to probe their country's tumultuous past. While *Confine di stato* primarily seeks to discredit definitive solutions to the 1969 Piazza di Fontana bombings in Milan, the investigation unfolds as a reconsideration of the conservative domestic and international forces involved in producing this national tragedy indirectly but deliberately. The innovative format and conventions of his novel are the crux of my discussion, as I perceive a double function therein: the novel concurrently strives to enlist the current generation's interest in reexamining the country's perplexing and dubious history and concurrently implores them to doubt and reconsider the received versions of events that have already become commonplace and conventional.

In my consideration of *La logia del umbral* in Chapter 1, I contend that author Ricardo Feierstein recurrently engages with the problem of asserting Jewish, and by affiliation, minority identity in Argentina. This is a prevalent motif in several of Feierstein's novels, as the protagonists scrutinize their unique upbringing in a setting where others fail to perceive it as normal, and they endlessly attempt to reconcile their own formative experiences within a national or collective context. They yearn to be accepted as "regular" Argentineans, yet they unfailingly refuse to compromise or negate their individual histories to do so. Consequently Feierstein's preoccupation with *mestizaje*¹ identity and memory moves to the forefront in his 1994 novel *Mestizo*.

¹ In its usual context, the term *mestizaje* refers to miscegenation and is commonly employed to describe the multiracial element or populace of Latin American nations. However, the term *mestizaje* as employed by Feierstein involves different nuances, in that it does not necessarily describe the intermixing of Europeans and Amerindians, but rather signals the liminal position that non-majority ethnic groups (such as Jews) occupy in Argentine society. When I had the chance to interview Ricardo Feierstein in his Buenos Aires home in May of 2008, he stated that the *mestizaje* which is a prominent element in both his fictional and nonfiction works is no

The narrative follows David Schnaiderman, a sociologist in his forties, as he embarks on the elusive challenge of piecing together fragments from his past with his present life.

Schnaiderman's disquieting investigation leads him through the ethnic neighborhoods of Buenos Aires and through the most confounding moments of his own life as he attempts to understand his hybridity and to situate his atypical experience as a Jew of Eastern European heritage within an overwhelmingly Latino-Catholic nation. David's scrutiny of his own life quickly evolves into a greater quest, as he seeks to forge a Judeo-Hispanic identity by exploring both his own and his peers' memory of their troublesome upbringing in a nation that has historically proven to be inhospitable to their ethnicity and religion.

David's investigation and self-discovery in this context are thus a crucial facet of *Mestizo*, and accordingly Feierstein emplotted his novel by selecting a genre that facilitates this exploration. *Mestizo* assumes the most salient conventions of a mystery or a detective novel, which readily facilitates David's deeply personal ontological quest. Like most mysteries, the initial quest or problem at hand is quite tangible. David Schnaiderman is the sole observer to the slaying of an Arab woman in the streets of Buenos Aires, and he is legally obligated to provide a report of the brutal murder. The police require David's assistance to apprehend the assassin, but he cannot recall the violent event whatsoever by his own accord.

Witnessing the traumatic episode has induced profound short and long-term amnesia, and the novel focuses on David's attempt to recover his own memory and to emerge from his present state of confusion about the past. While the mystery of the murder always lurks within the narrative, the hunt for the murderer frequently becomes incidental to David's attempt to recover

longer the same preoccupation it was for his, and presumably for David Schnaiderman's, generation.

his memory and to then reconstruct his identity. David's post-traumatic shock disassociates him from the defining moments of his life; he cannot recollect his name, age or profession.

Furthermore, he does not remember his personal history, his triumphs or failures. He states:

Do you understand me? I am still nobody. When another person looks at me, on a police summons, in line with those looking for work, I *am nobody*. In Buenos Aires, words and smiles don't count: only the facts. I can't verify my name, what I have done in my life, what stitches of guilt and innocence embroider the story of my life. (Feierstein 8)

While the amnesia topos is excessively familiar and thus quite predictable in many novels, Feierstein nonetheless exploits it with innovation and complexity in *Mestizo*. David Schnaiderman's loss of memory does not simply occur and later resolve itself through a *deus ex machina* type of blow to the head that restores his faculties of recollection. Rather, Feierstein deliberately imbues the concept of amnesia with a more subtle, metaphorical dimension.

David's lament "*I am nobody*" accordingly hints at his deeply fraught connection with society in general, a perception that extends beyond his immediate memory loss and describes a continual feeling of cultural erasure and nothingness. He also recognizes his complete detachment from the experiences of his forbearers whose history he has inherited but has nonetheless forgotten during his two generations of existence. He knows little about their trials, their experiences, or even their achievements. Thus, David feels he has no place in society; he is perennially lost amidst his surroundings without any anchors to moor him to a past or present. He articulates this emptiness clearly, outlining the link he sees between history, identity and memory:

I don't have a history. I don't remember anything. I'm tied to reality by this one old family photo that seems to be close and disturbing. But I can't reconstruct an identity from something of which I, more than anyone, am doubtful. Without familiar pictures, papers stamped with India ink and worn by my fingers, bits of parchment that show years of work and study, I myself don't know who I am. And I need to know who I am. Overcome the resistance of memory. You can find me again. I am lost. (Feierstein 8)

David's amnesia is apparently so comprehensive and fundamental that he has no option but to pursue any and all leads that may render a glimpse into his past, and he toils to synthesize meaning from these inconclusive clues in hopes of reassembling his fragmented identity. It is not incidental that severe trauma and a pressing legal obligation are the catalyst that propels David to confront his past, for Feierstein suggests this has been a lifelong and enduring quandary that has otherwise been suppressed and consciously avoided.

As David begins to recreate his personal history, he can only begin to understand his own experiences by examining these clues within the context of his family and his nation's history. Feierstein suggests that David's own identity is entirely conditioned by and is part of these larger narratives. Accordingly, Feierstein's *Mestizo* introduces and critiques significant events from Argentina's history as it reflects on the particular repercussions for Argentina's Jewish community. By confronting his present state of confusion, loss and emptiness, David rapidly discovers he shares connections with his ancestors that transcend the specific circumstances of space and time.

Matching David's own confusion, the interrupted, polyphonic narrative style of *Mestizo* is familiar to that of *La logia del umbral*. It effectively introduces fragmented and sometimes

puzzling accounts related by different narrators representing various generations of the Schnaiderman family. As a series of individual memories, each narrator relates a different event or episode; these coalesce into a family's collective memory which recalls experiences of marginalization, persecution and intolerance.

Consequently, a subplot unfolds in the work, wherein different branches of the Schnaiderman family are continually victimized. One learns that pogroms and other acts of anti-Semitic violence in Europe are hallmarks of their experience and memory, and they have always been constricted to either defend themselves avidly or be obliterated by blind ignorance and hatred in a violent and intolerant nation. Like the Schvel family of *La logia del umbral*, the Schnaidermans once envisioned Argentina as a promised land for these individuals, a possible haven from relentless persecution and a land of renewed opportunities. Yet the different narratives all reiterate the extent to which the family has not escaped their plight; thousands of miles away from their former homeland, the same oppression and persecution frequently looms closely. While the abuse adopts new rhetoric and rationalizations, "dirty" Jews are still mistreated, distrusted and excluded in David's era as well.²

David's examination of this history of violence, oppression, and segregation against his forbearers weighs heavily on him. He, too, acknowledges that it has been an ever present facet of his own experience. Even though he is a native speaker of the Spanish language, familiar with the customs and habits of Buenos Aires and the country itself—in a word, assimilated—he perceives himself to be neither accepted nor respected by his society. As David slowly recalls

² In several episodes recounting David's youth, he and other adolescents are physically attacked in their neighborhood, and are verbally assaulted with epithets. The most frequent, but not the only ones, are "Kike," "Yid," "stinking Jews," "dirty Jews" and "stinking Kikes." They are also called "communists" and "little Russians" and threatened to either be beaten or shout "We are stinking Jews. Long live Hitler, long live Perón."

these memories, he feels compelled to assert his *mestizo* subjectivity into the cultural history of Argentina and to recognize oppression as an ugly but indelible aspect of his heritage and identity.

This recognition is the crux of a forceful interpolated episode of the novel titled “Adventures of a Name,” in which David applies for a government job. In an exchange between David Schnaiderman and a clerk, David’s Semitic last name becomes a point of difference and a signal for exclusion from greater Argentinean society. As David states his own last name, the clerk, Hector García, retorts, “It would be better [...] if you write it yourself. I find it difficult to copy *foreign* names”(Feierstein 121). For David, this remark is emblematic of his experience of exclusion, as it is the “eternal story, experienced since elementary school” (Feierstein 121).

Clearly a point of extreme contention, frustration and defense, Schnaiderman asserts that, born in Buenos Aires to a second-generation Argentine mother, he is as Argentine as anyone else. Still the clerk insists:

You don’t understand me. To be Argentine is... I don’t know, the language, to be Latino. That’s it. Latino. (Feierstein 123)

It is at this moment that David, confronted with the small mindedness of the clerk, releases a lifetime’s worth of repressed resentment as he simultaneously defends his own inclusive definition of Argentineity. He retorts in composed anger:

... I don’t understand you. Your prejudices define everything that is different as *foreign*. I want you to explain to me why the name “Schnaiderman” would be foreign and yours, García, would be *Argentine*. All last names here are either “mestizos” or “foreign,” if you wish, because those who came to conquer these lands destroyed without mercy those who were native to the place... There will be, at the most, a question of numerical antiquity—names that possess two or three or

five more generations—which, as we know after the last few years, doesn't mean much: those who sold out the country during the military dictatorship, are, for the most part, irreproachable surnames that date from the Spanish conquest, and that stand to sing the Hymn...In your view, the "Argentine" is not a sum of the diversity, the inevitable pluralism and mixing of a country of immigrants, but only that which is the same as you are. The "others" are the "foreigners." (Feierstein 123)

David's diatribe escalates as the befuddled clerk feebly attempts to substantiate his deeply ingrained prejudice and chauvinism. He finally reveals a fundamental prejudice, a perceived religious divide, which he claims separates them from one another:

We, the Catholics, are the majority here. And we constitute one of the pillars of this society, as the declarations of the Church and the Armed Forces state. This country was born Catholic. And we have simple surnames, Spanish and Italian. On the other hand, you the 'Moishes'--- and I beg your pardon, I mean no offense, have some awful names that can't be pronounced or written. At least here in Argentina. Do you understand? (Feierstein 124)

Indeed, this specific exchange with this particular clerk reverberates well beyond the immediate for David. While claiming to "mean no offense," the clerk reifies a pervasive ignorance that David has frequently and repeatedly experienced in his personal history as an Argentine Jew. However, it is only now during the course of his personal quest for memory that David is compelled to cogently articulate his frustration and defend his very existence. He knows that he has effectively forfeited the position, yet the exchange has nonetheless been entirely cathartic. David has insisted that the clerk articulate his own biases, while concurrently

demanding to be seen on equal and inclusive terms. At this point, David submits the employment application with resolve:

Here it is. Argentine surname, as good as anyone's. I don't feel like a second-class citizen nor do I allow anyone to treat me so.... You are beginning to find yourself...To not keep quiet. (Feierstein 125)

This act of assertion is a crucial moment of self-discovery and the constitution of subjectivity for David Schnaiderman; it ultimately demonstrates that he does not want to compromise his unique background or experience in a futile attempt to be accepted by ignorant members of society. Nonetheless, David recognizes that the unenlightened compatriots who view him as abnormal are, in fact, the majority and he is the outsider: "You are the Jew, the minority, the marginal one for many" (Feierstein 125). Stigmatized for his mixed identity and heritage, David recognizes that others fail to see in him one of the many faces of a possible Argentineity, and will use his origins as an excuse to delegitimize his life experience. Though David ultimately yearns to experience a sense of inclusion, he is aware that the Argentina he knows will also have to grow and rediscover itself before this can ever happen.

It is significant that during David's exchange with the petty clerk, David declares that the nation itself has been "sold out" during the military dictatorship. Indeed, the tyrannical rule of the military junta in Argentina from 1976-1983 is frequently recalled as the backdrop of the novel, as are various encounters with the police, guerrilla groups and other political factions.³

³ Throughout the novel, David Schnaiderman encounters enemies as well as friends who are aligned with various political causes or groups. While most are either leftist or right-wing Peronist factions active before the "National Reorganization Process" (Montoneros, ERP [People's Revolutionary Army], the AAA [Argentine Anticommunist Alliance]), there are also *fuerzas de choque* (organized Jewish self-defense groups) and Zionist Youth Movements, as well as various student groups. Feierstein shows that the Argentine political scene was frayed both

David's search for his past specifically occurs between February of 1983, shortly after the crushing defeat during the Falklands War weakened the firm grip of the military, and it continues until just before the free elections of Raúl Alfonsín in October of 1983.⁴

This historical context is not haphazardly interjected by Feierstein, as he applies it to reinforce that personal and political histories are ineffably intertwined. David's search to rescue his fragmented identity necessarily requires tackling the nation's own unstable identity as well. Feierstein suggests that not just the individual, but instead the entire nation as a collective entity must embark on a reflective process to begin recovery from trauma and shock. On the cusp of a new era of democracy and opportunity, profound anxiety about the possibility for progress, social equality, and inclusion still abounds. Feierstein intimates that like David, the country seems to lack a blueprint for the future.

It is during this moment of national ambiguity that David unexpectedly experiences prospects for inclusion and an ensuing sense of elation. David undergoes a definitive psychic metamorphosis from pariah to insider in the presence of his teenage son, Eduardo, while attending a soccer match between the competing San Lorenzo and Tigre teams from Buenos Aires. This pivotal event unfolds through a visual narrative that replicates the energy and emotion of a soccer match. Through a four-page graphic segment of the novel, Feierstein successfully captures the visual dimension of the event, focusing on the palpable energy and excitement of the crowd and the stadium.

before and during the reign of the military dictatorship from 1976 onwards, and that daily life for most was always highly politicized. Amidst the Falklands War, frequent civilian disappearances, police brutality and public massacres (such as the Ezeiza massacre in 1973), the novel clearly depicts endless chaos and terror stemming from the Argentine State.

⁴ For more information on Argentina's difficult transition back to a democracy, see Martin Edwin Andersen, *Dossier Secreto: Argentina's Desaparecidos and the Myth of the "Dirty War,"* pp 304-305.

Here, like David, the reader is struck by a momentary and unexpected shift in perception, and stops to consider the work from a completely different angle. The images depict athletic club banners, vendors milling through aisles, frenetic and overzealous fans shouting in joy and in anger at the referees, and a series of plays between the teams. These illustrations include short captions and speech bubbles, and both David and Eduardo are enthralled at the fast-paced action of the game. As San Lorenzo fans, both father and son are keenly aware that there are infinitely more fans supporting their team than the opposing Tigre squad. They are immediately overwhelmed by a sense of unity and amazement, particularly as San Lorenzo's victory becomes a moment of triumph which includes them as well.

This is a memory that is being formed as the event itself unfolds, unlike anything David has ever experienced before, and he is struck by the momentousness, the uniqueness, of the occasion:

Images overcome David: Jew, intellectual, sociologist, immigrant in Israel, unemployed, social bastard wherever he might remember, always condemned to be a minority. Now, for once...To be one of those who win, of the majority, of those who decide. For the first time. (Feierstein 314)

As a mere fan of the winning team, David perceives himself as included, which in turn causes him to reflect on just how deeply alienated he has always felt. David's self-description here as a "social bastard" is particularly poignant, as it succinctly describes his continual feeling of rejection and seclusion. Yet this frightening sense of isolation connects David with his immigrant ancestors, who have always been viewed as outsiders in every milieu.

Similarly, it hovers closely above future generations, for his teenage son Eduardo expresses a similar ecstasy in being part of a collective. He, too, describes the rareness of the event, stating:

It's something very strange...To be part of San Lorenzo, here and now...To be in the majority, Dad. It's the first time that's happened to me...The 'others' must always feel that way, members of the majority. (Feierstein 313-314)

The soccer match is a vital episode of *Mestizo*, as it affords two generations of the Schnaiderman family a glimpse of inclusion and becomes a welcome memory amidst a series of rather dreadful ones. Moreover, the game heralds potential for change, progress and participation, and foreshadows a new era of possibilities for the entire nation.

As the narrative progresses, Feierstein deftly extends the personal elation that David and Eduardo experience during San Lorenzo's victory to a public and collective dimension. The action seamlessly segues from the stadium to a massive march in Buenos Aires. While the venue is entirely different, the same sense of euphoria and victory courses through the crowd. This mass, however, has congregated to celebrate the demise of the oppressive dictatorship and the impending restoration of democracy and free elections in the nation. David, his son, and his wife find themselves amidst a crowd of hundreds of thousands of other *porteños*, representing various political backgrounds, religious ideologies and socio-economic circumstances and personal histories.

Yet during this gathering, all differences fade and become momentarily irrelevant, for everyone has united to mutually condemn tyranny. The reader recognizes during this celebration precisely that the fragmented pieces of David's identity have stably coalesced, and his confusion has completely abated, at least momentarily. The Schnaiderman family mutually rejoices as they

share a palpable sense of inclusion within the majority, together embracing enormous and desperate hopes for a promising future for all of Argentina.

Eduardo, unlike his father, has long perceived his younger generation as one confronting historical possibilities; yet David also sees “historical opportunity” (Feierstein 306) as imminent. Together with the intermixed crowd, they discern hints of a democratic future that includes mutual respect and appreciation among the population, and welcomes the contributions of all segments of society. David reflects:

For an instant, and possibly for all times, we are brothers, although we may never see each other again... We need unity, life and not death. We, all the people, all together, we defend ourselves from the tyrannies of urgency... we are the multitude that frightens those who would make a coup, single and multiple identity simultaneously. With this, “we” orders cannot be given, since the speaker himself is included in the work and characterizes it as “collective,” of all.

(Feierstein 331-333)

Feierstein hereby suggests that a society plagued with social, religious and racial conflict exacts its toll not only on the individuals immediately affected, but on the commonwealth itself. It is not coincidental that David’s final synthesis and ordering of his own memory and identity coincides with a critical change in the administration of his homeland. Feierstein here reveals his own belief in a symbiotic relationship between the health and well-being of the individual and the development and stability of a nation.

Mestizo concludes with overpowering and palpable optimism for both individual and collective progress. It clamors for an Argentina that willingly incorporates the participation and contributions of the individual in order to enhance the national collective. It demands that

mestizaje, diversity and difference, no longer preclude the possibility of inclusion, but instead be perceived as a nation's greatest asset.

While Feierstein insists that this has not been David's memory of his past, and that this vision is not yet a reality in Argentina, David still espies infinite possibilities for change in the future. Yet like David's own quest for meaning, self-awareness and wholeness, this pursuit will require candid and agonizing introspection about the inequities of the present and the past by the nation as a unit.

Here, Feierstein shows collective memory to be the context in which individual memory is structured and shows the degree to which they are mutually constitutive. For in this final and moving scene, David Schnaiderman's personal experiences and memory in *Mestizo* are nimbly blended with the memories and history of a much larger group of people. Feierstein artfully demonstrates the power of a literary work to actively bridge the interior, psychic existence of an individual with the communal memories of an entire population.

Whereas Feierstein's *Mestizo* affords a look at the past through the fraught life of a marginalized individual, the narrative invokes memory as a cornerstone of an auspicious future. Dacia Maraini's investigative narrative *Isolina* also reflects on the life of a marginalized person, yet there is considerably less optimism in this exploration. Drawing attention to the abuses suffered by one Italian woman, *Isolina* aims to expose that women have been a historically disenfranchised group not just in Italy, but throughout the world. It also exemplifies how such a reality persists even in the present. Similar to Sciascia's exposé in *Equal Danger*, Mariani intends to demonstrate the ways that large governmental entities and organizations have sustained power and authorized their legitimacy often at the expense of the individual. Yet her examination expressly assays patriarchal institutions and misogynistic attitudes operating within

them, filtered through her own experiences and sensibilities as a modern and empowered woman of the present.

Like Feierstein, Maraini also perceives literature as a powerful means of preserving memories of the past and to recreate an “eternal world in which time has no hold” (“Fiction” 9). However Maraini’s narrative deviates from Feierstein’s considerably, in that the protagonist of the narrative does not have the ability to relate or ponder her experience at any point and arrive at her own stances about it. Unlike David Schnaiderman, Isolina Canuti never has the occasion to speak for herself and disclose her tribulations and feelings about her position; in her absence, Maraini’s investigative narrative comes to function as an otherwise missing historical record, or as an “almost eternal site of memory that preserves the memory of the past, passed down from generation to generation to readers who have not themselves experienced the events” (“Fiction” 8).

It is this drive to reenact the past and to metaphorically revive the dead that sustains Maraini’s project in *Isolina*. Written in 1985, Maraini’s text systematically sets out to revisit a series of events from almost a century prior in order to breathe life back into the virtually forgotten and long-deceased 19 year old woman and to resurrect her memory from oblivion. As a fictionalized version of actual events, *Isolina* repeatedly exemplifies a certainty that “art is the only place where the past can be resurrected...Unlike history, literature can, thanks to fictional conventions, resurrect the dead and revive the voices from the past” (“Fiction” 9).

In *Isolina*, Maraini thus exhumes the past by researching the nebulous events leading to Isolina Canuti’s death, evidently at the hands of several Alpini regiment officers in a sequestered area of a restaurant reserved exclusively for military personnel. Apparently impregnated by one of them, the Lieutenant Carlo Trivulzio, Isolina’s pregnancy is both an inconvenience and a

disgrace to him, and he urges her to abort the child. She refuses to do so, and after an evening of drinking, he and the other officers attempt to induce an abortion themselves using a fork. This atrocious act fails, and Isolina dies. She is subsequently dissected into pieces and her body is then disposed of in the Adige River, presumably never to be seen or heard from again. The scheme is thwarted when two women find her remains in the river while washing laundry and when the corpse's head is later recovered weeks later by boys playing downstream.

Through clues and eyewitness accounts, it quickly becomes evident that the body is that of the missing young woman from a poor family, though it is initially unclear who the culprits are and the exact sequence of events that preceded her demise. While Lieutenant Trivulzio is once the primary suspect, he is later exonerated and goes free. This is the point where Maraini commences her own investigation, exposing this event as a shocking and deliberate travesty of justice, one that induces her to examine in detail the trials that led to such a verdict of innocence.

As Joann Cannon contends in her study "In Search of Isolina," Maraini's *Isolina* is a "racconto inchiesta [investigative story]" (46), a term which Leonardo Sciascia once applied to Manzoni's *Storia della colonna infame* and which he used to describe his own *Morte dell'Inquisitore*. Cannon groups Maraini's narrative along with Sciascia's and Manzoni's as a paradigmatic example of a "new genre," one that is very similar to the detective form (Cannon 45). Indeed, Maraini's *Isolina* assumes the form of a protracted investigation by minutely assembling and analyzing evidence to arrive at reasoned conclusions, and the narrative centers on the clues she discovers along with the process of ratiocination in which she pieces them together to first recreate and later solve a lasting mystery.

Maraini's narrator in *Isolina* is undoubtedly interested in examining the circumstances of the crime as well as the period immediately before it within the brief life of the young Veronese

woman. Yet even more than the crime itself, Maraini is committed to focusing on what she presents as an apparent miscarriage of justice and the largely farcical attempts to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Maraini's text consequently pivots not around the initial murder trial where Trivulzio was first exonerated, but instead on a second, long-forgotten libel trial from the beginning of the 20th century raised by Lieutenant Carlo Trivulzio against Mario Todeschini, the socialist parliamentary deputy and editor of the *Verona del Popolo* newspaper. This second trial was urged by Todeschini himself, who publicly admonished and goaded Trivulzio into accounting for new facts that emerged after his exoneration, and clearly aimed at reopening the examination into the death of Isolina Canuti.

It is through the framework of this very trial and its complex social and political reverberations that Maraini reflects on this particular instance of senseless and brutal violence against a woman. Indeed, as more and more evidence is brought to light against Trivulzio during this trial, the attempt to posthumously discredit Isolina Canuti's worth as a person unfolds from many sides. A series of unsympathetic and likely paid witnesses assault her character and her reputation, and Trivulzio and the military's lawyers repeatedly call Isolina's morals into question in order to depict her as a "loose" woman trying to capitalize on the prestige and position of the officer.

Maraini expertly shows that the trial and the whole affair was perceived as an inconvenience to the glorious future and reputation of Lieutenant Trivulzio, who like his military cohorts, perceived the event as an indiscretion that would need to quickly be swept aside. Maraini, however, insists that at the heart of the matter was not the defense of the reputation of a lieutenant who wished to maintain his reputation intact and unblemished. It was instead an

instance of unmitigated and calculated brutality that was overshadowed with judiciary smoke and mirrors, and the whole trial overlooked what to Maraini remains glaringly obvious and undeniable: there was a real victim who paid dearly and eternally. Maraini endeavors to restore a remembrance of the victim, a woman whose life, future and unborn baby were selfishly sacrificed to ensure that the reputation of a high-ranking and rising officer.

In her essay “Feminist Historiography and Dacia Maraini’s *Isolina: Una donna tagliata a pezzi*,” Rodica Diaconescu Blumenfeld labels Maraini as a “feminist historian,” and aptly asserts that this underscores Maraini’s attempt to “reconstitute the texture of life lost in the male accounts of history” (Blumenfeld 181). Blumenfeld notes how Maraini demonstrates that “the silencing of Isolina was progressive: from the failed attempt to expunge the proof of the illicit affair (the child), to the achieved annihilation of Isolina’s life, to the disposal of her body, to the wrecking of her name and the subsequent erasure of her memory. So is Maraini’s endeavor of rediscovery” (Blumenfeld 181).

Appropriately, Maraini's primary concern in her *inchiesta* is to recover the memory of this young woman and rescue her fate from oblivion, instead depicting Isolina in a respectful manner that official history itself failed to do. The narrator frequently mentions that in her process of recreating and re-examining the entire affair, virtually no physical depictions of Isolina survived her life. Maraini frequently laments the troubling absence of physical representations of Isolina, expressing alarm that like her body itself, all vestiges of her were disfigured. The narrator therefore objects:

There are no portraits of Isolina. What do we know about her? “Scorpion, little cow, monkey” Trivulzio called her. “Anaemic, scrofulous” said the doctor. “A short, hunchbacked, ugly thing” said the neighbours. (Maraini 26)

Maraini thus envisions this absence of accurate details as a singular opportunity, arguably an obligation, to provide the missing image of Isolina, a chance to fill a void and concurrently neutralize these uncivil and unflattering depictions. In contrast with such descriptions, Maraini here offers the first of many verbal representations that humanize Isolina, considering her most endearing qualities, embellishing them and presenting them in a positive light. Maraini nonetheless works with very scarce material as she gives her form. Maraini besieges the reader:

Let us imagine her...with her long scarlet skirt, her light step taking her quickly towards the midwife's house with a bundle in her arms...We know that she adored mustard....We know that she wanted to keep the baby despite the fact that she was poor...we can guess that Isolina was in love with Trivulzio.... Altogether an exuberant character then, joyful and restless. (Mariani 26-27)

Maraini knows only minute details –mere trivialities- about the woman, such that an otherwise irrelevant detail as an affinity for a condiment becomes significant, yet Maraini uses even this miscellaneous information to present a positive aspect of this otherwise disparaged woman. Meanwhile, Maraini goes so far as to ascertain and disclose the content of Isolina's most private thoughts, stating, "She dreamed, like all poor people, about expensive and beautiful things" (Maraini 28). Maraini counters the unflattering representations of Isolina by invoking her skill as a writer and rallying the power of fiction to resurrect her most commendable, exciting, and admirable characteristics.

While Maraini attempts to present a kinder picture of Isolina, she is ever conscious that she is writing to overcome a huge and deliberate void. She repeatedly notes the elision of any legal records belonging to Isolina, stating: "There is no trace of Isolina, however. As far as the community registers go, she never existed... [people] are not interested in knowing anything

about her” (Maraini 48). In contrast with this absence of records or images, Maraini highlights a particularly cruel irony. The face of the woman she believes most deserving an effigy or a tribute is forgotten, yet the “...artist at the Todeschini trial... gradually sketched portraits of the witnesses...Except for Isolina, of whom we do not even have a family portrait, [he] caught on paper the faces...of all those who took part in the trial” (Maraini 78).

While there are no visual remembrances and no tangible depictions of Isolina, Maraini also notes that only a few years after the conclusion of the libel trial, most everyone in Verona had already forgotten about the woman. It is as if not only her image, but her very existence had essentially disappeared forever into the recesses of time, as Maraini assures the reader that Isolina’s own descendants and acquaintances had deliberately suppressed their curiosity about her, wiping her memory clean from their past and their future. She objects: “There is no trace of Isolina ... It was forbidden in the family to talk about her. No one was even to know that [there were] relatives of that poor little thing” (Maraini 48-49).

Maraini is committed to rendering Isolina’s death less insignificant, to disallow her to be forever sacrificed by a system that instead protected a powerful, influential man who Maraini clearly believes is a murderer gone free. For after minutely reconstructing the entire case through newspaper articles in the absence of other testimonials, Maraini once again points out the injustice done to the true victim: “No one remembered Isolina,” the narrator states. “The only newspaper that mentioned her was *La Libertà* in Padua, which wrote: ‘All this unfortunately has not helped the main objective, which was to shed light on the murder of Isolina Canuti’” (Maraini 142).

Maraini’s text painstakingly brings this “main objective” back into focus, revealing that convicting the murderers was never the principal objective in the case anyhow. Instead Maraini

details a trial that had a very clear political undercurrent and agenda from its debut. Maraini proceeds to trace the disparaging accusations lobbied against the socialist editor to show how Todeschini's imploration for Trivulzio to account for his involvement in the case was portrayed as an assault against a sacred national institution. She details how virtually every newspaper in Italy depicted Todeschini's motives as a groundless and unpatriotic attempt to slander and defame the entire Italian Alpini regime. Maraini likewise shows how the protection of Lieutenant Carlo Trivulzio as a member of the military completely overshadowed any attempt to bring light to the murder case from the very start of the investigations.

The text thus shows Trivulzio occasionally backed into a corner by the skillful Todeschini attorneys, while the media conversely and uniformly applauds his honor and presents him as a respectable military figure, a solid patriot to be honored as Italy itself. Maraini counters by proving that any such becoming representation of the lieutenant relied on the denigration of Isolina's own character, stating "... but what, finally, did the life of a girl from a poor, obscure family count for, when opposed to the honour of the army? And it was that which finally triumphed, with all the strength of an ideology that gives expression to a country's ideal" (Maraini 152).

While Maraini perceives the need to produce her own portrait of Isolina in the absence thereof, one can hardly maintain that Maraini's depiction of Isolina is objective; indeed, her account at times comes across as rather one-sided and incontrovertibly sympathetic towards the victim. Still, Maraini consciously concedes that all prior accounts of these events lacked objectivity, or at best suffered from "false objectivities" (Blumenfeld 178). Maraini consequently allows her own sympathies to weave themselves into the essence of the events she retells, and

Isolina frequently becomes an unlikely heroine as Trivulzio is portrayed as the unfeeling and sociopathic villain.

While Joann Cannon maintains that Maraini acts as a detective in her reconstruction of the events (Cannon 47), it is important to note that a detective's task is to neutrally investigate, discover, arrange and connect evidence. It therefore may be more compelling to view Maraini as an attorney of sorts, for Maraini appears to be more of an advocate for Isolina than a mere investigator or chronicler of her circumstances; she becomes the self-appointed champion *in absentia* to defend Isolina's memory and to offer her a chance at redemption following a trial that publicly defamed and then forgot her. Her narrative as such becomes the venue for a third trial in Isolina's defense, and in her attempt to build a case for Isolina, Maraini needs to be compelling and persuasive with her audience.

Maraini could have chosen other ways to depict Isolina by emphasizing and focusing on different periods in her life, and eliding those which she allows to inform her narrative. Similarly she may also have approached or assailed Trivulzio differently. Yet Maraini is relentless in her attack against Trivulzio, and while not always hostile towards him, she is constantly unsympathetic. Maraini judges Trivulzio harshly and presents facts that induce the reader to do so as well. She mentions how he becomes a more reclusive and reserved figure after the trial who eventually died of stomach cancer, a death she insinuates is appropriate as "a symbolic reminder of Isolina's suffering" (Maraini 71).

Consequently, Maraini completely overlooks the ways in which the trial may have negatively redounded on Trivulzio later in his life, including any obstacles it presented in his own career. She mentions he became reclusive and that he withdrew from public life to some degree, but she always portrays him as the victor. Maraini reserves no sympathy nor introduces

any facts towards Trivulzio's credit whatsoever, as she calibrates he has already received ample sympathy in his privileged status as a man and as member of the army. The narrative therefore leaves the reader with the impression that Trivulzio was generally unaffected by the trial, but a more balanced account, or one approaching Isolina's memory through a different angle, may have shown other instances proving contrary.

Maraini might have at least entertained the most remote possibility that Trivulzio was not as he and his defense maintained, and was legally ruled, guilty of murdering Isolina. There are endless other ways that Maraini could have portrayed both her heroine and her scoundrel, yet as Maraini seeks to resurrect Isolina's memory, her intention is clearly not to be neutral or objective. Maraini has chosen to protect Isolina, and she concomitantly uses the opportunity to champion for the poor and the neglected in general as she attempts to humanize and defend the girl she believes became a mere object during the trial. Maraini thus paints a resoundingly sympathetic picture of Isolina, one which rescues a disparaged girl from countless accusations and the stigmatized and shameful status of a "slut," a "temptress," a "hunchback" and a "scorpion." Maraini transforms her back into an innocent young person, a whimsical and hopeful woman who perhaps all women can relate to, and certainly no man can dismiss and judge quite as easily.

By opposing simplistic depictions of Isolina's behavior as "scandalous" (Maraini 28) and by suggesting that such behavior does not justify murder in any event, Maraini repeatedly underscores the extent to which women are relegated to certain roles in society, and the ways they are held to certain behavioral expectations precisely because of their gender. By advocating for Isolina, Maraini and the narrator are investing in Isolina's tragic story and serving as a voice for an individual who did not have the ability to support or petition for her own cause or rights.

Maraini wants to defend and honor Isolina as a unique individual; yet Maraini also presents Isolina's murder as emblematic of the plight against women in general, and she writes to oppose current and still commonly disseminated notions that victimized women are somehow the authors of their own victimization.

During the trial, there are many nuanced descriptions and reports implying this is the case with Isolina, but Maraini makes this explicit and flatly states: "You can read between the lines that they were saying Isolina got what she asked for. If her loose behaviour caused her tragic end, then so much the worse for her" (Maraini 152). This is a particularly imperative point in Maraini's narrative, for the narrator shows the ways in which the trial in 1901 continually focuses on transparent attempts to condemn the victim's motives and behavior: "If she put up with violence it means she wanted it!" (Maraini 18).

This and other statements bandied about during the trial propagated the preposterous notion that Isolina was somehow the willing instigator of her own murder. Such rhetoric is used against a woman almost a hundred years prior, but Maraini insists that Isolina is not merely some remote and static figure without any correlatives or analogues in the present, or in the future. Undoubtedly Maraini wishes to remind the reader that there are, of course and lamentably, still women everywhere who are abused and mistreated and who have nobody to advocate for them. To not consider the history of this particular girl and the travesty of justice that Maraini perceives is then paramount to condoning others to blame and judge victims, to further injure those who are wronged, and foremost to deny women like Isolina, whose social and economic status have not allowed them to speak for themselves, to be heard whatsoever.

Maraini continually emphasizes that young women like Isolina Canuti are especially vulnerable, and that they stand in contradistinction to young women from the wealthier classes of

society who are often protected and sheltered against abuse or infamy. She shows the divide that was pervasive in Italy between rich and poor, noble and plebeian (Maraini 59), or more simply between women from “good families” and means and women like Isolina, who came from modest or even regrettable situations. She depicts such circumstances from turn of the century Verona vividly:

The officers led a frantically gay life, dragging along with them for entertainment girls they considered of little importance who, if they became pregnant, would not demand marriage. The young women from good families were kept well locked-up in their palaces, and when they did emerge for some ball ... would always be accompanied by aunts, mothers, grandmothers and cousins who never let them out of sight. (Maraini 61)

Likewise, Maraini corroborates how a woman like Isolina was, in fact, almost easy prey “in a city in which the military were more numerous than civilians”(Maraini 59), noting:

For girls who had more freedom because they were poorer, the temptations were such that they were almost irresistible. How could you say no to the poised, extravagant courting of so many officers who hid their brutality beneath impeccable manners and glittering uniforms....to have dinner by candlelight in a well-known restaurant...to kiss in a dark hallway as carriages rolled by outside... what could be more seductive for a restless girl greedy for life. (Maraini 61)

Clearly Maraini defends these girls against the choices she feels they are somewhat constricted to make given their circumstances. Left to their own devices, these young women are presented as moths to the flame, dazzled by the promise of better and exciting lives that Maraini suggests anyone would envy or want. Indeed, Maraini attempts to draw the reader's sympathy

and empathy for Isolina and those women like her. To make this point even more emphatically, she literally persuades the reader to stand in for these women with the imploring and engaging appeal to the second person “you,” stating: “Everywhere you went you were met by dozens of dashing officers.... How could you resist the urge to throw yourself headlong into the parties, to play, to fall in love, to let yourself go?” (Maraini 61).

Aside from the brief mention of the women with protectors, Maraini does not offer an account of the mores of the rich or those with respectable families. She merely suggests that breeding and status is consequential in the society she describes, much as it continues to be most everywhere in the world currently. The most outstanding aspect of Maraini’s discussion in this respect is her patent belief that not everyone has the fortune to be protected under the aegis of an advantaged social or economic position, or a privileged gender.

Maraini shows how such distinctions operated in Isolina’s Verona, stigmatizing those who even attempted to defend a poor and uncouth woman like her. For even those who attempted to defend Isolina would likely become the objects of a smear campaign with lasting consequences. Maraini highlights: “The fact is that anyone who came to Isolina's defence was seen immediately as being ‘a bad lot’ and we know now how much a woman's reputation counted. The most striking proof of this is the fact that Trivulzio was able to save himself thanks to Isolina's bad name” (Maraini 149). Indeed, Maraini shows that inequity was a determining factor in Isolina’s fate, and illustrates the extent to which those in more advantageous circumstances were sheltered from harm that she was unable to avoid.

It is interesting to note that Maraini, the daughter of an aristocratic family, is the woman who places herself in a position to come to Isolina’s defense. While Maraini, too, experienced a

fair degree of hardship in her own life⁵, her own background bears less on her portrayal of Isolina than her own sensibilities as a woman that inform her approach as the author of this text. Maraini's official website likewise reasserts her textually-evident commitment to remain active in "feminist causes and as a commentator on politics and society."⁶ In addition to *Isolina*, she has also written other works in which crime against women is a particularly important concern, most notably her 1995 detective novel *Voci*, which questions why so many women fall prey to homicide.⁷ Thus the narrative's focus on the many attempts to blemish Isolina's reputation and make her almost worthless in the eyes of society -to gauge her murder as somehow insignificant and trivial- is countered by Maraini's conviction that this woman's life is indeed worthy of tribute, and certainly deserves better than to forever fade into oblivion after being unjustly and viciously defamed publicly. Literature in Maraini's hand is "...thus one of the numerous possible supports for memory and helps to expand it in time and space" ("Fiction" 7).

While *Isolina* is neither a historical novel nor a work of crime fiction precisely, it is a forerunner to the detective novel *Voci*, and the substance of *Isolina* takes its cues from the detective genre. Indeed, Maraini approaches her analysis of Isolina's murder and the ensuing trials like a detective in pursuit of a mystery to be solved. As Joann Cannon asserts, *Isolina* is constructed with some of the most outstanding elements of the detective form at the fore. *Isolina*

⁵As the biographical information provided on the official Dacia Maraini website notes, Maraini's family was an established Sicilian family, the Alliata di Salaparuta. Her mother was a respected painter and her father was a celebrated ethnographer. Eager to escape Fascist rule in Italy, her father received and accepted a scholarship to study in Japan. During World War II, her family refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Japanese military government and was interned in a concentration camp. The family's return to Sicily in 1947 found them quickly impoverished, and Maraini's parents separated, leaving her alone with her mother and siblings until she was an adult. For more information on Maraini's life, see Daciamaraini.it.

⁶ See Daciamaraini.it.

⁷ See Daciamaraini.it.

is notably "...composed of two stories, the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. The story of the author's investigation into the Isolina case is as pivotal as the story of the murder itself. Maraini becomes a central character, a real-life detective who must solve a 'cold' case of an unsolved murder" (Cannon 44).

Cannon's remarks are useful for considering Maraini's approach in resurrecting Isolina, for though it may be argued that Maraini appears to have no question about the identity of the murderer before she even approaches the investigation, she seems dedicated to meticulously dissecting the various ways that justice for Isolina has been averted. Maraini always appears conscious of her narrator's role as historical detective, for the narrator consciously allows her own impressions of the trial to be guided or interpreted through the constructs of the literary genre itself. She even states: "At this point the situation begins to sound like something out of a detective novel" (Maraini 103).

Additionally, the narrator frequently alludes to her own role as an investigator, and comments on her attempt to elucidate the most slippery aspects of the past that she is researching: "Digging up the past is difficult... It is like entering the world of the dead, who suddenly become intransigent, gossipy and greedy. They want you to remember them according to the ideas they had about themselves. They drag you here, there and everywhere without a pause to rest from their nagging requests" (Maraini 63).

As she attempts to recover a lost era and individual, Maraini's research is unquestionably methodical, well-founded and organized; she bases the facts she presents on accounts extracted directly from the pages of archives, most prominently from excerpts from newspaper articles written during the era of the trial. Maraini, in fact, frames the entire trial through various quotes

taken from these news sources and allows them to reconstruct a great portion of the story she recounts.

Yet the somewhat antiquated journalistic language, often overly wrought and stilted, is countered by Maraini's own descriptive prose introducing an inarguably creative and imaginative element that nuances her factual account. This reveals not only Maraini's acumen as an investigator but also her personal esthetic as an author. She renders her accounts uniquely and in opposition to the sober language of history books, employing similes, metaphors and imagery that highlight the fictional element of her text. These "...fictional techniques ...make the narration more attractive than mere facts" ("Fiction" 7), frequently leading the reader out of the archives and into an imaginary realm that is not necessarily grounded in real or historical experience.

Maraini deliberately reminds the reader that facts and archives stall at some point: she highlights how the archival evidence she introduces, including the transcripts from trials and newspaper clippings, suffer from significant elisions and gaps and do not constitute the tale she wishes to write. Maraini's attempt to fill these lacunae is an interesting point where facts become embellished and modified into the substance of fiction, and while her narrative takes its subject matter from the annals of history, the mere act of representing a historical event requires a fair margin of imagination and invention to render the account engaging and "alive." This understanding allows Maraini to blur the rigid confines of a genre she has selected to frame her account, and enables Maraini to distill the facts she recounts creatively.

Accordingly, the narrator submits her case with an ongoing commentary, akin to a cinematic "director's cut." Throughout the narrative, she explains her own perception of what has occurred and how the reader may best interpret these events. Consequently, she outright

condemns certain individuals as she appeals to the reader's sense of morality which she concurrently shapes by evoking her own sympathy or antipathy for the different personages as the case may be. As an example, when discussing the conflicting testimonies of two landlords who owned the restaurant where the murder occurred, the narrator decidedly expresses disgust towards both of them.

Though the narrator herself never saw either, she expresses tacit disgust for their physical traits, infusing them with a sense of greed and repugnance. She states, "They summoned...the two landlords...Both were fat, with round faces, just as you would expect in a landlord" (Maraini 118). This added gloss is not essential to the landlords' testimony, and while this may be the narrator's own impression from the portraits sketched during the trial, it is in no way relevant to the facts. Nonetheless, it strikes the reader and subtly influences a negative perception of these two individuals who ultimately did nothing to condemn a guilty Trivulzio or to build a case for the victim. This is but one instance in the text where the narrator's perspective is not based on factual information but instead on a subjective impression and fictionalization.

There are more prominent and indeed more interesting episodes for analysis where the line between fact and fiction is conflated or becomes less clear in *Isolina*. An extraordinary instance of this act of narrative conflation arises with Maraini's introduction of the well-known Sleeping Beauty fairy tale within her narrative. While searching for the place where Trivulzio purported to have spent the hours while the murder occurred, the narrator describes the Spagna Gunpowder Magazine:

...it makes you think of the Sleeping Beauty. A door opens. Two feet shod in suede come forward... two beautiful legs encased in ochre-coloured stockings advance... The gloved hand holds the hilt of a silver sword... A young man

advances confidently... The prince crosses the deserted corridors... and there, at the back of a dark still room, in a bluish light lies Sleeping Beauty.... Moved, the prince stops and looks at Sleeping Beauty in her moth-eaten dress, he bends and with a light and delicate movement rests his blood-red lips on her dead ones... In such a way Lieutenant Trivulzio kissed his lover and brought her back to life for us. But the moment he woke her he was terrified by what he had done. And how with real fear he watches her get up. Where will Sleeping Beauty go? To the tribunal, to the church, to the newspapers? What will she say about him? Beauty is so quiet and reassuring when it is dead! (Maraini 62-63)

Here, Maraini has appealed to fictional elements to frame and describe the particulars concerning Trivulzio's supposed whereabouts during the murder, the same ones he actually used to buttress his alibi during the murder trial. Maraini cleverly reconfigures a fairytale that the reader likely knows and has come to associate with a romantic fantasy about longevity, revival and love. Yet the description is unexpected and unsettling for it momentarily removes the reader from the brutal reality of what happens to Isolina and instead leads the reader towards the tale's anticipated, idealized outcome.

Indeed, within the context of the fairy tale, Isolina's station as a poor, motherless girl should magically improve by becoming involved with the handsome, powerful and self-assured lieutenant. Yet the interlude here only serves to upset the usual or expected outcome, and the myth is completely overturned for dramatic effect: Isolina's life does not blossom when she meets her "prince." She does not find a savior and a protector in the handsome and powerful man as she awakens from a metaphorical death or dark place. Instead she enters alive and is snuffed

into eternal slumber at his hands in his ultimate act of self-preservation and cruelty. It is a surprising episode in the text that jolts the reader by distorting the expected outcome of the fairy tale, and Maraini seems to have anticipated its ability to shock and disturb her audience.

Ultimately, Maraini's narrative does recover the memory of Isolina Canuti, resuscitating her memory from a void and instead preserving a sympathetic and humane image of her.

Obviously Maraini cannot alter the course of history itself, nor can she literally avenge Isolina Canuti's murder. Still, Maraini invests in literature's power to address a lost history and to redress the injustice and ignominy she believes Isolina's honor and memory suffered to the advantage of Lieutenant Carlo Trivulzio. With *Isolina*, Maraini demonstrates that literature can compellingly reexamine seemingly closed cases and present alternative deliberations and new verdicts, for "some fictional works do not only function as the sepulchre of the past, they also defeat death and make the past present" ("Fiction" 9).

If Maraini's *Isolina* focuses on a relatively unknown woman's life, she nonetheless attempts to portray the patriarchal climate that operated during Isolina Canuti's lifetime and to demonstrate how the injustices she suffered are socially conditioned, and likewise similar to those of countless other women throughout history. Focusing specifically on the Italian press and judiciary, Maraini exposes biases operating within, and concatenates and narratizes a series of facts to show how these institutions have wronged individuals who will never be able to vindicate themselves or recount their own version of events. This project is similar to that of her compatriot, Simone Sarasso, who also examines Italian institutions and aims to redress elisions in accounts of the country's past. A significant difference, however, is the shift in focus in Sarasso's work. Rather than considering the life of one unfortunate individual, Sarasso instead depicts historic events of a larger scale with greater political resonance that affected many

Italians over several decades. This is particularly effective due to the experimental style he forges.

Published in 2006, seventy-seven years after the Milanese Mondadori publishing house launched a line of books in yellow covers to promote tales of mystery and intrigue,⁸ Sarasso's *Confine di stato* certainly follows in a long tradition of Italian crime fiction and detective novels that have caught the interest and attention of a vast and receptive audience both in his native Italy and abroad. Sarasso astutely capitalizes on the popularity of the "*giallo*," or the detective novel, to examine tragic events in the nation's history that occurred decades before his own birth. Replicating the pleasurable participatory and hermeneutic experience ensured by the mystery genre, Sarasso's fictional works have generated immense popularity, interest and accolade recently. Like other traditional *gialli*, Sarasso's narrative unfolds rapidly and the process of uncovering clues and attempting to resolve the mystery at hand becomes the active work of both the protagonist and reader.

It is in light of the genre's popularity and the innately interpretive mode of reading involved therein that many Italian writers before Sarasso have identified it as a readymade platform to present their ideas to a broad and eager audience. Sarasso thus follows in the wake of eminent Italian authors such as Carlo Emilio Gadda, Antonio Tabucchi, Andrea Camilleri, and of course Leonardo Sciascia and Dacia Maraini, who employ and reconfigure the characteristic and expected features of the detective form to generate awareness about social and political crises in

⁸ For more on the history of the *giallo*, see Deborah Amberson, "A Singular Detective: Methodological and Aesthetic Proliferation of Justice in Carlo Emilio Gadda's *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*," *MLN*, Volume 123, Number 1, January 2008 (Italian Issue), pp. 22-39.

Italy. All of these authors have written mysteries that have initiated vital dialogs about events and predicaments that may otherwise have only been broached with trepidation otherwise.

In exploring the most troubling quandaries of Italian history and society, Sarasso, like his precursors, elects to eschew the tangible and immediate inquiries of the conventional *giallo* -a murder, a theft, or a disappearance- in favor of more abstract and charged pursuits. By refocusing the detective's magnifying glass, he also capitalizes on the probative nature of detective literature, frequently using it as a pointed tool to systematically investigate and critique some of the most enigmatic events of recent Italian history, as well as the nefarious forces operating behind them and their lingering effects in the present. Sarasso concurrently inserts himself into a tradition of predecessors whose adaptations and transformations of the mystery genre attest to the value he ascribes to literature as a serious field of inquiry, and secures his own literary renown through his modern and contemporary style,.

It bears mentioning that Sarasso's popularity and success comes at a time when the mystery genre is again the vogue in Italy, engaging eager audiences that are receptive to the literary form. Indeed, there are other interesting and fresh embodiments of such works at the fore of the media garnering critical attention and acclaim. From Giancarlo De Cataldo's acclaimed 2002 novel *Romanzo Criminale*, to Carlo Lucarelli's Inspector De Luca series and his popular RAI television series *Blu Notte*, to the controversial investigative reporting of Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra*, mysteries and crime fiction continue to captivate the Italian public's interest as they evolve beyond traditional platforms, embodiments and audiences.

Though rather varied, these modern exemplars are nonetheless linked by an overarching problematic concern that is assuredly at the root of Sarasso's own *Confine di stato*: each delves intensely into past and recent historical political events in Italy in order to suggest that

institutionalized explanations of them are inadequate or unsatisfactory. These works insist that past events, often considered as definitively-resolved cases, still deserve interest and reconsideration in the present.

Indeed, Sarasso recognizes the aptness of this literary genre to embark on a protracted inquisition into history, and he often uses the genre in a manner similar to predecessors like Sciascia and Maraini to frame his considerations about an unsavory and violent Italian past and the effects wielded on the present. Specifically, *Confine di stato* relies heavily on the allure of the mystery genre and its innately compelling structure precisely to pique the interest of a young demographic of readers. Yet Sarasso writes with an awareness that modern embodiments of the genre are currently embraced and invite innovation and experimentation. As such, Sarasso's rearrangements of the genre attest to an inventive and refreshingly contemporary literary style that quickly distinguishes him as a unique voice in a long line of Italian literature. Meanwhile, such reconfigurations of crime fiction set a precedent for successive stylistic and formal innovations within popular literature.

If it is true that "...memory, and especially collective memory, needs material supports to endure, such as monuments, movies, music, but also books and especially novels that allude to or recount historical events" ("Fiction" 7), Sarasso has apparently anticipated the need to combine these different media together to render a different textual model. As a fresh and youthful voice in Italian literature, Simone Sarasso has received considerable attention for his recent works, though his career as a writer is still budding. He only began writing noir fiction for television, film and comics in 2004 (*Liquida Magazine*), but his interest in these different outlets are ever present in his full-length novels as well. Unabashedly indebted to the conventions of visual and

popular media, *Confine di stato* stands out as a particularly noteworthy example of an updated and contemporary embodiment of the historical mystery novel.

Following in the tradition of a conventional *giallo*, the narrative originates through a murder and a successive investigation. Yet it quickly loses its conspicuous detective filament to instead focus on intricate conspiracies operating within the highest ranks of Italy's government. Pivoting around national enigmas that still lurk in the nation's consciousness, *Confine di stato* presents an alternate and rather unsettling narrative of seminal events in modern Italian history by concentrating foremost on the pervasive terrorism of the *anni di piombo* in Italy.⁹ Primarily, Sarasso cross-examines the usual accounts of the 1969 Piazza di Fontana bombings in Milan to reexamine how this national tragedy occurred and, more cogently, to assess to what extent it was orchestrated by conservative elements in the nation's political landscape and the influence of American intelligence agents.

Recalling the events leading up to the attacks through unexpected modes, the narrative intends to instill a memory of the country's perplexing and dubious history in the wake of World War II continuing through the present day, elucidating connections between the Mussolini's

⁹ In his article "Italian cinema and the 'anni di piombo,'" Alan O'Leary asserts that the years between approximately 1969 through 1983 in Italy were characterized by intense and frequent episodes of terrorism and political violence. This period designated "the years of lead" were marked by frequent societal disruption and conflict. While relatively brief, O'Leary contends that this extremely chaotic period of Italian history has been particularly compelling in the production of Italian art and film, and "continues to exercise the national imagination and that of Italian film-makers to a remarkable degree. Indeed, Italian cinema has played a prominent role in articulating the ongoing impact of the *anni di piombo* and in defining the ways in which Italians remember and work through the events of the long 1970s" (244). O'Leary's remarks can cogently be applied to Sarasso's project in *Confine di stato*, for Sarasso also attempts to show the impact of these years and the way that they are remembered by the Italian public. Moreover, it is of particular relevance that Sarasso endeavors to convey the turbulence and confusion by specifically reverting to various conventions usually confined to cinema throughout his literary text.

restrictive Fascist regime and neo-Fascist politics operating long afterwards. While Sarasso's novel is directed at a young audience that is likely familiar with these events, it is also one that is endeared to the mixed media he presents. He draws on their interest in television, film, illustrations and popular culture to suggest that these affairs from the past must not be relegated to historical oblivion or dismissed with the passing of time.

The plotline of *Confine di stato* toggles back and forth over the last five decades to narrate an intricate and extensive right-wing conspiracy to seize power of the nation. To shape his story arc, Sarasso has incorporated and liberally fictionalized certain dimensions of four momentous events in Italian history and eventually connects the series of disparate events together. Some of these directly invoke an actual historical *donnée*, while others are thinly-veneered allegories which the reader must decipher and identify as meaningful analogies.

The novel thus commences with the actual Piazza Fontana bombings that occurred on December 12, 1969, in Milan, a reference which is cited unequivocally: the place, the time, the date and the information provided about the bombings unambiguously correspond to extratextual realities. Other episodes, conversely, are presented somewhat obliquely: the narrative consequently dives into the controversial but already distant 1953 Wilma Montesi affair, as detective Giorgio Valenti initially investigates the mysterious drowning of the fictional Ester

Conti in Ostia.¹⁰ Likewise a private plane later crashes, “mysteriously” killing an American journalist and the fictitious Fabio Riviera, the public administrator who actively seeks to dismantle the oil oligopoly of the “seven sisters” and to negotiate oil concessions that do not benefit these corporations. Indeed, this fictionalizes the fate of AGIP commissary Enrico Mattei in 1962.¹¹ Finally, a prominent publisher and left-wing activist simply called “L’editore” (“the Editor”) is killed during an explosion in a clandestine operative placing him in combat with American and Italian neo-Fascist agents. An invested and astute reader here recognizes the figure of Giangiacomo Feltrinelli in the attempt to locate extratextual correlatives corresponding to the incidents providing material for the novel’s plotlines.¹²

¹⁰ Like Ester Conti in Sarasso’s novel, the body of a young woman, Wilma Montesi, was found on the beach of Ostia outside of Rome in February 1953. Initially her death was ruled to be an accidental drowning. However, months later, subsequent accusations were printed in the monthly magazine *Attualità*, wherein neo-Fascist Editor Silvano Muto asserted that Montesi had been present at orgies thrown by Ugo Montagna di San Bartolomeo, one of Rome’s noblemen purportedly running a narcotics ring. Wilma Montesi’s death was stated to be the result of an overdose of opium, and those present at the orgy had disposed of her body on the beach after her death. Another young woman, Anna Maria Moneta Caglio, confirmed Muto’s charges when brought to court, stating that she had been present at such parties and had reason to suspect that the son of the Foreign Minister from Italian Chamber of Deputies Premier Scelba’s Cabinet may have been directly responsible for the death of Wilma Montesi. The scandal suggested deep-rooted corruption and cover-ups between recently appointed Premier Scelba, the national police chief, and various cabinet members. Moreover, Scelba was forced to recognize the corruption, dismiss prominent cabinet members and address depravity in the most elite circles of society. For more on the Montesi Affair, see “Italy: The Montesi Affair.” *Time Magazine*, March 22, 1954. Web. 18 August 2011.

¹¹ For more on the history of both AGIP and Enrico Mattei, see Eni.com.

¹² Mirroring the death of “L’editore” in *Confine di stato*, Publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli’s body was found dead on March 15, 1972, near a power station to which explosives had been attached. Material later surfaced incriminating Feltrinelli of having organized a left-wing resistance cells against a right-wing coup. However, all charges against individuals suspected of involvement in the conspiracy were dropped in 1973. See Alex Peter Schmid, A. J. Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literature*, 592.

While the substance of the novel transforms these facts into fiction through name changes, embellishments of details and the introduction of invented documentation, Sarasso subtitles *Confine di stato* as “an Insane Sketch.” This designation takes on a double meaning throughout the work: after abandoning the detective filament a quarter of the way into the text, the novel proceeds to unfold through the actions of Andrea Sterling, a formerly institutionalized patient in a mental institution moving amongst clandestine segments of society. Significant portions of the text thoroughly document and follow his institutionalization over the course of several years. Upon his subsequent release from an asylum, Sterling is seen operating within the ranks of the nation’s government, mingling with members of the politically dominant *Democrazia Cristiana*, and he is occasionally brought into direct contact with the highest ranks of the Cosa Nostra.

Sterling is oblivious to the actual influence or agenda of the nefarious rings he represents, yet he willingly executes the work of a hired bravo on their behalf. Sarasso suggests Sterling’s lack of conscience, a blind hatred of socialists and communists, and his unquenchable thirst for blood is clearly the hallmark of a sociopath. The reader inevitably draws a parallel between the insane individual’s actions and the maniacal will to power of the neo-Fascists that he unreflectively supports in their quest to subvert the influence of the political left from the national terrain. Sarasso’s “insane sketch” thus takes aim at an enduring legacy of corruption and outrageous political machinations, all which have resulted in instances of extreme violence against individuals and institutions, and have been an impediment to progress and stability in resource- and culturally-rich Italy.

Beyond the weighty substance of the novel, the style of *Confine di stato* is of particular concern in this discussion of distinctive manifestations of the mystery genre. *Confine di stato*

incorporates some of the most salient features of the *noir* or hardboiled form, but it does not sustain them as the narrative progresses. Whereas Sarasso initially introduces a detective honing in on the investigation of Ester Conti's drowning, the investigator's presence is fleeting. Like Montesi's death itself, the event is quickly overshadowed by the conspiracy and cover-ups associated with it. As such, the novel quickly becomes a political thriller involving espionage not typical in a traditional *giallo*.

As the plot evolves, situating *Confine di stato* within the parameters of a singular genre becomes problematic, and the novel continually resists such confines and defies a definitive taxonomy. Incorporating elements of cinema, graphic novels, comics and invented documentation, Sarasso's novel operates at the interstices of genre as it awakens troubling memories of some of the country's most disturbing realities. Sarasso robustly intermingles various media into his literary form, attesting to a stylistic hybridity that fashions something completely unorthodox from the familiar and conventional.

Most notably, *Confine di stato* is constructed on two distinct narrative levels which intersect and render it stylistically unique: the literal, and the visual. The reliance on visual narrative as another *modus operandi* is apparent throughout the text, and immediately structures the reader's entrance into the work. Indeed, the very cover of *Confine di stato* quickly prefigures the extent to which an unconventionally cinematic and optical dimension lurks within this text. Replicating elements associated with the conventions of *cinema noir*, the cover depicts a well-dressed man donning a fedora hat. Silhouetted in black and white, enveloped in shadows, it is a particularly nuanced aesthetic, immediately harkening back to the now-antiquated style of private detectives, gangsters, or other ruffians in Hollywood films during the 1940s and 1950s. Moreover, the cover presents the author, illustrators, the publishing house, and a cast of the

work's characters through a billing of opening credits; the "Insane Sketch" is not merely written, but rather "written and directed by Simone Sarasso" (my underline).

Applied to a literary work, such cinematic conventions are decontextualized and thus unforeseen, but the reliance on the conventions of film displayed on the book cover further permeates the text itself. The bombing of Piazza Fontana that foregrounds the novel is conveyed textually by invoking the visual and technical elements of cinematic direction:

La camera è a volo d'uccello sulla città [...] La camera è ad altezza uomo [...]
Ruota di 180 ° [...] Allarga sulla facciata del palazzo. Zooma sull'insegna:
'Rinascente.'" ("The camera gives a bird's eye view of the city [...] The camera
is at eye level [...] It rotates 180° [...] It moves in on the building's facade. Zoom
to the sign: 'Rinascente.'") (Sarasso 17, my translation)

This detailed shot-by-shot analysis initiates the narrative, indicating both the novel's symbiotic reliance on the conventions of film as well as a presumed familiarity with cinematic direction and screenplays on the reader's behalf. Meanwhile, this technique depersonalizes and objectifies the scene being staged. In a view ascribed to no character or personage involved, the reader is situated directly within Piazza Fontana without any sentimentality or emotions. It is an impartial and detached introduction to the disturbing world which will immediately unfold in the pages of the text (Blackmailmag).

This same technique reappears throughout various episodes of the work, but Sarasso "directs" this novel with other visual components as well. In addition to the cinematic dimension, *Confine di stato* also incorporates highly-stylized graphics and illustrations within the novel which visually supplement or retell the essence of the plot. Consequently, there is a "titoli di testa" or opening credits segment, and a "trailer" which frame the main story arc. In these visual

sequences, the reader is presented with black and white drawings, reminiscent of comics or the signature features of a graphic narrative. The sequences present various characters and events that either will later be or have already been introduced throughout the novel.

Additionally, one memorable scene in the novel unfolds between Mago, a Cosa Nostra boss, and the psychopathic Andrea Sterling, in which a parable of American ruthlessness, greed and power is presented as a comic strip involving Superman and a young boy. Yet even the usual features of such graphic narratives are juxtaposed here: the customary visual medium of comic strips is translated into text and narrated only through language, completely forsaking any illustrations or story bubbles to convey the episode.

Superman and other such references to popular culture, as well as the inclusion of sketches, comics and other similar pixelated graphics, are further indications that Sarasso may be appealing to a young and contemporary audience, one that is less concerned or potentially unacquainted with the temporally remote events within their national history. Moreover, in contrast to previous generations, this audience may not necessarily be as attracted to literature as entertainment and diversion, but instead drawn to the intimacies of television and film.

The somewhat recognizable form and style of the narrative may thus serve to further captivate this younger audience and foment their interest in literature. This is a compelling hypothesis, given the unconventional method of advertising the book prior to its publication; a cinematic book trailer diffused via the internet announced the work's 2007 "release," suggesting that visual media might better attract Sarasso's intended audience as he himself sought to move beyond traditional literary forms.

However, the insertion of graphics and visual images in the novel performs another crucial function: it deliberately fractures the narrative and thwarts a linear development in the

plot. Using such methods, *Confine di stato* frequently interrupts narrative progression by creating intermittent breaks between story sequences through the unexpected appearance of other media. This is particularly evident in the recourse to “documentation” as a way to create a different perspective on the events introduced.

Such documentation includes interpersonal and institutional correspondence describing the conditions in a mental facility, fictitious newspaper clippings reporting events in an authentically official manner, lengthy reports from supposed police investigations, and transcripts of televised news reports describing attacks and other calamities. While there is a caveat at the onset of the novel stating that all pieces of documentation are invented, Sarasso has explicitly stated in interviews that his own research for the novel was almost entirely based on archival documentation.

Yet by interspersing these various invented “documents” amidst episodes in the novel, Sarasso breathes life into what he has deemed the static and dispassionate “language of bureaucracy” that guided his research into historic events (Blackmailmag). By altering and providing these documents with a subjective narrative, Sarasso has embellished the facts he uncovered and rendered them into engrossing fiction. They are now imbued with a context and supply the reader with an interpretative principle for digesting the information contained therein.

In tandem with the formal language of these invented documents, *Confine di stato* unfolds through decidedly colloquial and nonliterary language. Trafficking in references from popular culture in Italy and abroad, vulgarities, Italian vernacular and slang from both the present and eras past, Sarasso’s prose sharply contrasts with the often erudite works of other Italian mystery writers including Sciascia, Maraini and Tabucchi. His work, unlike the works of many other Italian mystery writers, is decidedly devoid of literary allusions, metaphysical concerns or

philosophical meditations.¹³ Nonetheless, the text is complex as it employs a range of dialects and registers to a crucial purpose.

Language in *Confine di stato* vividly depicts distinct classes and social strata in Italy, and it evokes particular historical periods as well. The various linguistic ranges and the speech of his characters often create the pervasive atmosphere of the novel. From the brusque and vibrant *Romanesco* of the urban dwellers, the *parolacce* of the Mafiosi and drug lords, the pretentious and highly affected style of the police reports, to the clinical and institutional language of doctors and politicians, Sarasso conveys language as a unique schematization and understanding of the world. Furthermore, the ability to employ one code over another quickly positions characters within or outside of communities. As Sarasso himself states with regards to this aspect of the novel, “language [is used] to stigmatize characters [and to] render them as bidimensional as much as possible” (Blackmailmag).

Sarasso thus manipulates different linguistic registers to establish a clear and simple dichotomy between the “good” and “bad” characters appearing in the story. Sarasso concedes that it is an “unreal” language, one which exists only in cinema (Blackmailmag). Yet in this “insane sketch,” the polarized use of language also enables the reader to quickly identify and classify the sort of character presented within a narrative that deliberately and constantly flutters from one protagonist to another. While this shift from one character to another provides narrative

¹³ An extended discussion of this fascinating intertextual dimension present in other examples of crime fiction will be thoroughly discussed in a later chapter titled “To Borges and Back: The Reader as Detective and the Detective as Critic.”

valence, it also has a profoundly destabilizing effect on the reader (Blackmailmag). Yet it is only one more way ingenious way that Sarasso has elected to propel forth his narrative.¹⁴

Ultimately, any absence of reference points caused by the narrative shift and intentional breaks in its progression are unified when the polarized languages, invented documents, visual narrative, and distinct episodic divisions are viewed holistically (Blackmailmag). The reader continually attempts to synthesize them, and recognizes that the pastiche of divergent and fragmented components blends into a cohesive and wholly original narrative. In the process, Italy's past unfolds leading the reader through the epoch immediately following the end of World War Two and out of Fascism, into the age of devoted anti-communist machinations and the clutches of neo-Fascist ideologies and political maneuvering that characterized the 1960s and 1970s. The novel continually alerts the reader that the terror and chaos of war always looms near, even when no war is officially being waged on the Italian terrain.

Recalling the fear and uncertainty of terrorism during the *anni di piombo*, the powerful grip of organized crime and the pervasive corruption of the state is perhaps unpalatable and difficult to digest in a populace that is already well-aware of these realities. Yet Sarasso uses different media and an unconventional form that aims to overcome obstacles to reflecting on a traumatic past. Indeed, *Confine di stato* does so precisely by transposing these events and

¹⁴ The use of dialect and culturally nuanced language is a groundbreaking aspect of Carlo Emilio Gadda's revolutionary 1957 novel *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*. Gadda's novel relates the murder of a wealthy, upper-class woman living in a fashionable apartment in Via Merulana in Rome during the years of Fascism. The novel centers on Detective Ingravallo's investigation of the crime, but is much more of a sustained examination of Mussolini's rule, political events during Fascism, social mores and divisions of class in Italy during the 1920s. While Sarasso's *Confine di stato* does not quaff from Gadda's work or in any way attempt to replicate the original and groundbreaking style, it is likely that Sarasso knew that the linguistic registers and unique depictions of language in the text have remained one of the most highly praised and easily associated features of Gadda's masterfully complex and extremely influential and praised detective novel.

rendering them more creatively through fictional and often unlikely characters, narrators and inventive storylines (“Fiction” 8). The novel’s resistance to a strictly codified style allows for imagination and embellishment as it recounts the events and characters that are familiar and probable, yet it maintains a clear division between factual truths and invention to “imagine what will otherwise never be known or said and [to] explore the uncertainties of the past” (“Fiction” 8).

As Simone Sarasso simultaneously innovates and reconfigures crime fiction to reflect his unique aesthetic sensibilities, his novel effectively tackles the most elusive and troubling mysteries from Italy’s recent past. *Confine di stato* renders these events current and present, expands the scope of readership with its imaginative form, and ultimately resuscitates an interest in the past for a new generation of Italian readers.

The three works of fiction considered in this chapter illustrate how authors can similarly depict and choose to remember unrelated historical events stemming from disparate geographic locations and eras. Their fictional narratives reflect their own preoccupations, experiences and their association or detachment from spheres of society; certainly, these factors define the differences in the tales they present. Yet the particulars of their works are similarly molded by their subjective ideas about what details deserve mention or consideration, amplification or understatement, and how they are remembered and recounted that ultimately connects their projects with one another.

Moreover, all three authors have employed literature to similar means in the consideration of the function of memory in their representations of the past. These writers all envision a connection between their individual perceptions and personal recollections and the constructs of historical or collective memory. While their narratives derive from real events and

facts, they attest to the influence of imagination in creating and codifying memory; these works proudly highlight their fictional dimension and defiantly oppose the notion of a pure or “objective” account of history.

Each author acknowledges the imperative role that imagination and creativity plays in the configuration of memory, and by extension, history. Likewise, each suggests that memories are not accurate or unfaltering representations of events or facts; they are reconfigurations and interpretations of the past and only a facsimile of what may have actually occurred at any given time. Each has invested in the creative possibilities of fiction to generate or preserve memories that can endure beyond the constrictions of time and space. This is an essential consideration for Feierstein, Maraini and Sarasso; for each writes with an awareness that they are reconsidering the past with an irreconcilable distance and in light of their specific inquiries and quandaries deriving from their present. Each author remembers the past in light of the present, as they textually endeavor to approximate the two dialectically.

CHAPTER THREE

J'accuse: Witnesses and Conceptions of Identity in the Historical Mystery Novel

In his article "The Detective as Reader: Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction," Peter Hühn argues:

Most classical detective novels start out with a community in a state of stable order. Soon a crime (usually a murder) occurs, which the police are unable to clear up. The insoluble crime acts as a destabilizing even, because the systems of norms and rules regulating life in the community has proved powerless in one crucial instance and is therefore discredited... the inability to discover and tell the story of the crime, thus threatens the validity of the established order. (452)

While this claim may hold true for classical detective novels, the three contemporary historical mystery novels to be discussed in the present chapter immediately stand in stark contrast to the classical detective novel wherein societies are notable for their stable order. Indeed, the instability of society and shifting systems of norms and rules are the most prominent and problematic components of the narratives considered here. Each author suggests that any established order or rules regulating community life have either been completely subverted or are perceived to be in crisis; this reality is depicted as far more destabilizing than any particular crime or single event alone.

In these works, inspectors, police officers and detectives are not necessarily demonstrated to have the acumen, or the impetus, to solve the crimes accurately. Indeed, in some instances, these very individuals have perpetrated the crimes and murders being related. In others, they do not intend to find the most accurate solution but instead wish to conduct an inquiry and create a

narrative for the crime that will convincingly implicate a convenient, though not necessarily guilty, party. In these novels, law enforcement personnel are frequently demonstrated to be incongruent and unreliable sources of objective information. As such, the narratives devote attention to pivotal eyewitnesses in an attempt to reconstruct and investigate criminal events. Witnesses in these narratives hold a privileged position; in contrast to law enforcement officials, they are called upon to provide seemingly indispensable and supposedly impartial testimonies that offer a gloss for the events being reconstructed. They are considered as crucial in identifying those who may be involved in or responsible for crimes committed. However, in each novel, the reliability and neutrality of witnesses also moves to the fore, for they, too, are shown to have frequent errors in judgment and subjective perspectives that always determine their testimonies and efforts to state the truth. In each work, there is always uncertainty, misconceptions and even falsehood in what a witness reports to know or have observed.

The historical mystery novels of Gianrico Carofiglio, Amara Lakhous and Guillermo Saccomanno reinforce that there is always a comingling of truth and fiction in an eyewitness testimony, whether consciously offered or inadvertently. Testimonies in these works notably appear as instances of autobiographical narrative, and as Philippe Lejeune asserts in his 1975 text *The Autobiographical Pact*, there is an implicit pact and inherent expectation that such accounts intend to impart a truth to an audience. It is this premise operating within autobiography and witness testimony that legitimates the act of representation, for both suppose an understanding that the speaker does not attempt to misrepresent the truth.

When considering the testimony of a witness, this is indeed a complex and troublesome notion, for the attempt to convey a personal and intimate perspective of an event or time moves far beyond a mere rendering of facts. It instead aims to translate the contents of a private memory

or experience to the exterior world. In the instance of witness testimony, the speaker is upheld as the conveyer of practical and objective evidence. Yet as Jacques Derrida asserts in *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, testimony itself is never entirely stable or accurate; assembled and reconstructed through language that always attests to “discontinuity,” testimony reinforces a chasm between the act of representation and the event or moment it is recalling (31). Thus, if considered in this framework of a belated speech act or temporally-disconnected performance aiming to describe an elusive referent, a witness’s testimony is understood to be a mere interpretation of an event, a personal memory schematized for others uniquely through personal uses of language.

Ultimately, a witness’s testimony is similar to Hayden White’s assertions about historiography itself: it is not exempt from controversies over questions of veracity and ideological motivations, and a “fictive” dimension undergirds and makes such a testimony possible. All three authors highlight this aspect of testimony in their novels, wherein experience and representation always introduce a nebulous space between truth and fiction, and a rigid distinction between facts and interpretation cannot be sustained unproblematically.

This contradiction emerges clearly in the novels, as they highlight the subjective perspectives and ideologies motivating various witness accounts that purportedly aim to establish accurate and convincing details about events. Moreover, these accounts intend to identify individuals and implicate their roles in particular events. Yet identifying a culprit or a victim is demonstrated to be intricate, moving beyond the mere ability to recognize someone, but also aiming to decisively state who or what he or she actually is. As such, the notion of identity also becomes central and highly problematized in these texts; in no instance is identity shown to be a given or stable concept free from interpretation or debate. Identity instead is demonstrated to be

both constituted and understood through many different social, political and historical lenses, and is constantly shifting or in question. Most often, it is gauged through subjective and limiting parameters determined by others.

Like the other texts considered in my study, the historical dimension is an equally prominent aspect of these three narratives centering on the figure of the witness. Of the three novels considered, two are written in Italian and both address current questions of immigration and national identity amidst demographic shifts in Italy. Both Gianrico Carofiglio's *Involuntary Witness* and Amara Lakhous' *Clash of Civilization over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* invoke testimony and witnesses as a mode to explore racism, discrimination and changing conceptions about national character in the current wave of unparalleled immigration in Italy. Both authors emphasize that it remains to be seen how this period will be viewed retrospectively, for the evolving parameters of Italianity in the face of immigration, like those arising from Italian Unification, may never be entirely reconciled.

In *77* by Argentinean Guillermo Saccomanno, disappearances amidst civilian complicity during the last military dictatorship propel the narrative, and while this work does not address racism directly, it nevertheless unfurls through the account of an individual who is marginalized in society due to his background, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Indeed, like the two Italian texts, *77* pivots around the problematic constitution of identity as a witness is compelled to examine his own history as a survivor of national tragedy and terror.

The Rights of the Accused and the Role of the Italian Judiciary in Gianrico Carofiglio's *Involuntary Witness*

The 2002 novel *Involuntary Witness* by Italian judge and author Gianrico Carofiglio invites an insightful consideration of the privileged role of the witness as well as the rights of the

accused. In doing so, *Involuntary Witness* keenly dissects the racist attitudes at play in current Italian society to expose hostile anti-immigrant attitudes infiltrating the nation's official institutions, and specifically, its legal system. The radical shift in Italy's migration pattern resonates throughout the text, as discrimination and prejudice is shown to imperil the fairness and balance of the Italian judiciary. Whereas historically a massive emigration movement sent millions of Italians to all corners of the world, the Italy of the novel is experiencing a substantial influx of foreigners pouring into the nation. While an estimated four to five million immigrants currently reside in Italy, or approximately seven percent of the entire population (Poggioli), this change has occurred swiftly, and the novel portrays the opposition that has surfaced through xenophobic reactions and attitudes operating in the minds of many citizens. Immigration is demonstrated to be rapidly changing the fabric of a largely Catholic and traditional society, which has not necessarily been embraced as an evolution in the nation's history or as the inevitable consequence of an increasingly diasporic and globalized world.

Neither Carofiglio nor Lakhous' novels introduce specific initiatives in detail, though both texts indicate there are astonishingly xenophobic and intolerant measures attempting to limit the rights of immigrants in contemporary Italy. Some initiatives have attempted to make illegal immigration punishable by up to four years imprisonment, requiring doctors to denounce patients who are in Italy illegally to the police, and establishing separate classrooms for Italian and immigrant children (Poggioli). These proposals apparently have the support of many Italian citizens. Still, they are even more alarming because they are officially sanctioned by different municipal governments and political parties, including those that influence and decide on national policies for the entire country as part of Italy's current center-right government. As a case in point, the current government's Minister for Institutional Reforms, Umberto Bossi, is also

the long-time secretary of the prominent and notoriously anti-immigration political party, the Northern League, which has spearheaded many of these particular efforts.¹ The Northern League draws its support, and certainly due criticism as well, for its unyielding stance towards immigration. Yet its intolerant stance towards immigration is undergirded by a fundamentally alarmist fear of immigrants as a threat to the nation's stability and security.²

These facts suggest that Italy is currently not an overly hospitable society to its immigrant population, and Carofiglio's novel explores the reaches of such pervasive bigotry and anti-immigrant hostility. *Involuntary Witness* depicts the plight of Abdou Thiam, a 31 year-old Senegalese peddler living in the southern Italian city of Bari. The immigrant stands accused of barbarically murdering a boy and disposing of his body in a well. While he is legally entitled to a trial and representation by an attorney, an antagonistic society appears disposed to condemn him to life imprisonment well before the case is even brought to court. Even before the trial, the *carabinieri* and public prosecutor's office have maintained that he is the definitive culprit, and his first state-appointed attorney demonstrates utter disinterest and detachment from the case from the onset.

Faced with these inauspicious circumstances, Thiam's Egyptian girlfriend thus appeals to the attorney Guido Guerrieri in desperation. *Avvocato* Guerrieri represents a last possible avenue, for he has a reputation for representing an array of objectionable clients, including known drug dealers and crime bosses in Bari and the surrounding provinces. As the first-person narrator of

¹ Several other prominent positions of power in the nation are held by party members, including the Italian Minister of the Interior, Roberto Maroni, and the presidents of two Italian provinces.

² Jean-Leonard Touadi, a native of the Republic of the Congo and the first black member of the Italian parliament, has asserted that "insensitive language" has incremented Italians' fear of immigrants. He asserts that migrants in Italy are perceived as criminals or as potential criminals and are central to an overwhelming sense of Italians' insecurity in Italy. See Poggioli, Sylvia. "Immigrants Forced to Margins of Italian Society."

the entire story, Guerrieri's narrative frequently focuses on his own insights and emotions during the case.

Initially, Guerrieri discloses a history of indifference concerning the innocence or guilt of his clients; he approaches his career perfunctorily and with disinterest, never intimating any sense of a socially meaningful vocation, mission or commitment. With Thiam, however, Guerrieri immediately takes an unprecedented interest in both the client and in the suit. Guerrieri's investment in this particular case is seemingly incongruent considering his general apathy towards his clients and their cases; in this instance, he also perceives the suit as a lost cause from the start that is not even financially lucrative.

While he never articulates any such notion overtly, Guerrieri seems to empathize with Thiam's desperation, dejection and helplessness. Having recently endured a debilitating nervous breakdown following an unsolicited separation from his wife, the attorney's own life has been tumultuous for months. Thiam's case opportunely comes to Guerrieri at the brink of intense personal uncertainty, during a moment of continual introspection and possible transformation, and accordingly the trial represents an opportunity to emerge from an emotional abyss, and to compensate for crippling insecurities. Girded only by intuition, Guerrieri nonetheless has a genuine perception that his client is innocent and is facing a system that he cannot navigate alone. Guerrieri thus feels compelled to defend Abdou Thiam, and with unprecedented zeal he determines to represent the defendant against all reasonable expectations of acquittal.

Indeed, Guerrieri is piercingly aware of the weight of impressions in his society and the obstacles that his African client will encounter during the trial. These are reflected through his own prejudices when meeting his client, as he describes his preliminary impressions and scrutinizes their soundness or objective basis. Initially Guerrieri is surprised by the poise and

beauty of the Egyptian woman, Abajaje, who appeals to him on behalf of the accused. He considers her with distance and with wonder as she addresses him, observing “[t]hat face of a Nubian princess contracted with the effort of fighting back tears” (Carofiglio 37). The attorney notes that she is beautiful, aristocratic, austere and imposing, embodying qualities that contrast his stereotypical perception of an African.³ He notes his own surprise as she simultaneously conforms to and counters his preconceptions of an immigrant, stating:

With foreign clients I was always in doubt as to whether to use *tu* or *lei*. From the way this woman said “Thank you, *Avvocato*” I knew I could address her as *lei* without any fear of not being understood. When I asked her what the problem was she handed me some stapled sheets...Drugs, was my immediate thought. Her man was a pusher... We all of us go by stereotypes. Anyone who denies it is a liar. The first stereotype had suggested the following sequence: African, precautionary detention, drugs. It is usually for this reason that Africans get arrested. But straight away the second stereotype came into play. The woman had an aristocratic look and didn’t seem like a drug-pusher’s moll. (Carofiglio 32-33)

As Guerrieri here acknowledges, stereotypes and racist impressions have preconfigured his meeting with Abajaje. Yet he meaningfully recognizes that that these same prejudices exist elsewhere in his current society and will determine others’ approaches to both this woman and the defendant.

³ It is relevant that the attorney’s impressions of this particular African woman, while largely positive, are nonetheless exoticized and approached through a filter that V.Y. Mudimbe describes as “alterity” or otherness in his *The Invention of Africa*. Abajaje is seen approached as a real person, but instead as a figure or image. Brought into the presence of this Egyptian woman, the attorney suggests to possible templates for understanding her: either high royalty, a Nubian queen of yore, or pure vulgarity, a prostitute clinging to a drug dealer. This binary perception also guides Guerrieri when he meets the actual defendant, Abdou Thiam.

When the attorney first encounters Abdou Thiam, he is again confronted with a *mélange* of expected stereotypes and surprising contrasts to his own preconceptions. Indeed, Guerrieri is struck by the fact that, like Abajaje, Thiam is exceptionally attractive. He remarks that Thiam is “a strikingly handsome man, with the face of a film star and liquid eyes”(Carofiglio 40). It is a frank description that the Italian narrator admits without any reticence, yet it foremost suggests an approach that considers Thiam as distant, strange, and exotic⁴; like a movie star, the attorney envisions him as inaccessible and unapproachable.

While Thiam’s exterior appearance surprises Guerrieri, the attorney is likewise struck by Thiam’s fluid command of Italian; while he remarks that it does not equal Abajaje’s, he gauges it as indicative of his intelligence and ability to adapt to his environment. As Guerrieri prepares Thiam for his trial, he likewise notes Thiam’s keen comprehension and ability to follow his explicit instructions, and so marvels that he “didn’t need things said twice” (Carofiglio 201). This alacrity and intelligence offset his preconceived notion of an immigrant, and Guerrieri is repeatedly surprised by other facets of Thiam’s multidimensionality. Here, Carofiglio creates a character that challenges typical expectations of a poor *émigré*. In Italy Thiam’s profession is reduced to hawking illegal, counterfeit items to tourists on the beach. However, in his native Senegal he had been a school teacher. While this is a perhaps surprising facet of the immigrant who ostensibly seems as unskilled or uneducated in his current work, it is merely one contradiction he presents to the stereotypical image that others ascribe to an immigrant. More

⁴ In “The Re-invention of Africa: Edward Said, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Beyond,” Ali A. Mazrui suggests that exoticism is a lens through which Westerners have historically conceived of the otherness of Africa and the “Orient.” The attorney’s own perceptions of his client and the defendant frequently traffic in notions of otherness, including what Mazrui lists as “exotic, intellectually retarded, emotionally sensual, governmentally despotic, culturally passive, and politically penetrable” (69).

surprisingly, Guerrieri learns that Thiam has a residency permit in his possession. Though he lives on the margins of this society, he is not an illegal alien living clandestinely within the country, but an individual living rightfully in the nation. Thiam thus emerges quickly as a complex individual and not a mere, static stereotype; the African embodies contradictions that shatter the narrator's own assumptions about an immigrant.

Guerrieri's own impressions and expectations when meeting his clients are meaningful in Carofiglio's depiction of pervasive attitudes operating in today's Italy. Most cogently, they demonstrate that even a sympathetic individual has xenophobic principles underlying his perception of immigrants. While Guerrieri recognizes these, the highly-educated attorney nevertheless fails to acknowledge that his own ideas about the African distill an entire continent into a single embodiment, effectively razing considerable differences in the various countries' diverse histories, cultures, languages, and religions. Indeed, in a nation where Islam is often viewed as suspect, it is astonishing, and perhaps providential, that Thiam's probable religious background never enters the discussion whatsoever for Guerrieri or during the trial.⁵

If Guerrieri has a reductively generic idea of Africa and Africans, it stands to reason that less educated citizens certainly can be expected to hold similar views. Not surprisingly, there is literally no mention whatsoever by the narrator, and evidently in society's purview, that Italy endeavored to profit from and colonize different African nations within the lifetime of many of those still alive today. Thus Italy's own recent political history and the consequences this could

⁵ Figures from the U.S. State Department website state 95% of Senegalese citizens are Muslim. It is indeed interesting in view of the general distrust towards Islam in Italy, no mention is ever made in the novel about the religion of the immigrants, but instead only to their skin color and their provenance.

have yielded on its current demographic are completely elided in the text and never surface for overt consideration.

Notably present in *Involuntary Witness* is *Avvocato* Guerrieri's own willingness to confront his perceptions and beliefs. This greatly contrasts with the society he describes, where the operative perception of immigrants, and particularly Africans, is one of scorn, dismissal and hatred. When initially discussing the case with the public prosecutor, Cervellati, Guerrieri attempts to introduce his client using the honorific "signor," stating "Mr. Prosecutor, I have been appointed by Signor Thiam, whom you will certainly remember..." (Carofiglio 50). Yet the powerful and educated public prosecutor abruptly interrupts him, reconfiguring the dynamic between African and himself, stating "You mean the nigger who killed the boy in Monopoli" (Carofiglio 50). In a mere instant, Cervellati reduces Thiam to a position he sees as inferior to them both through his vitriolic use of language. Throughout his narrative, Guerrieri notes that both the most educated and the most vulgar strata of society rampantly use this epithet to refer to Africans. Carofiglio here presents the widespread use of such derogatory language as symptomatic of profound and operative racism that permeates individual perceptions and treatment of immigrants, perhaps even unconsciously.

Yet minor instances such as these enable Guerrieri to astutely recognize that racism assumes other more repressive forms in society, and particularly that it has tinged all the evidence assembled against his client by the prosecution. As Guerrieri undertakes to defend Thiam, he quickly ascertains that Cervellati has no directly incriminating evidence against Thiam, but instead has amassed considerable decontextualized circumstantial evidence and conjectures that are being authoritatively exhibited as incontrovertible facts. It is not through

proof that the public prosecutor has mounted a solid case against Thiam implicating him as the only suspect, but only on the basis on these biased, distorted facts and testimonies.

Guerrieri relies on this suspicion in preparing his defense for Thiam, for he has literally no tangible evidence to assemble otherwise; due to the itinerant lives of other Africans, nobody can attest to Thiam's whereabouts on the day of the murder a year after it has occurred, and there is ostensibly no witness in Thiam's defense. Even his girlfriend, Abajaje, has left him behind and returned home hurriedly since employing Guerrieri. Thus, the only prospect for acquittal is to unflinchingly assault the prosecution's case for its flaws and to attempt to change the mindset of those who will judge the case. Still, the public prosecutor unequivocally discourages Guerrieri from attempting to exonerate Thiam, exhorting Guerrieri to opt for a shortened trial that will not qualify for an acquittal but instead bargain for a shortened sentence. Such a request is clearly antithetical to the rights of the accused, though it is prescribed as the expected and only course the lawyer may follow.

Consequently, when Guerrieri audaciously does request a full trial, he is instantly met with undisguised aggression by the prosecutor and other members of the judiciary who proceed to attack him repeatedly throughout the trial. Guerrieri's decision to rigorously defend Thiam is thus portrayed as divisive, anti-patriotic, and makes him a pariah among his colleagues and superiors. Guerrieri knows that both he and his client will meet with redoubled antagonism and derision as he attempts to demonstrate that there is reasonable doubt about the accuracy and objectivity of the evidence. Moreover, he is aware that Thiam's freedom hinges on his ability to expose the evidence as skewed, and to dispel the inherent fable of objectivity that underlies the proceedings. This involves keenly examining the evidence from different angles, creating a different narrative for the events, and foremost approaching the opposing witnesses in ways that

will evince their bias. More challenging for Guerrieri will be influencing the jury to reconsider their notions, which based on the society Carofiglio depicts will also embrace similar or identical beliefs about the immigrant defendant.

The most significant element of evidence in the case is the eyewitness testimony from the owner of a bar located on the beach where the murdered child had last been seen playing. This onlooker, Antonio Renna, is utterly loathsome to Guerrieri from the start, for he intuits that the witness views all immigrants indistinctly and with deep-seated resentment. Guerrieri describes him with thinly-veiled disgust, applying yet another pre-existing filter in his assessment, that of a furtive boor, stating: “[Renna] crossed the courtroom looking at [Guerrieri] with a cocksure air. He had the look of a peasant. A stumpy figure, checkered shirt with a 70s-style collar, swarthy complexion and crafty eyes. Not at all an engaging craftiness either, rather suggesting *first chance I get, I’ll cheat you*” (Carofiglio 180). Guerrieri detests Renna’s inflated confidence and contempt for him as a lawyer, but in him he also sees a familiar type in Italian society; that of a “peasant,” a rustic, uneducated man of a perceived lower social rank. Nevertheless, Guerrieri understands he must cast aside his own impressions and instead expose his unreliability as a witness as impersonally as possible.

Thus when Guerrieri examines the witness, he wisely masks any personal antipathy in his questioning, for he knows that assaulting his character or merely branding him as a racist will not sway the judges or the jury in considering the validity of his testimony. Instead, Guerrieri attempts to assail Renna’s credibility as a witness precisely by demonstrating his own limitations as a source of truthful or objective information and thereby discrediting the weight of his testimony. Guerrieri cunningly emphasizes an aspect he perceives in Renna’s outlook towards

immigrants in general, and wisely capitalizes on his hatred to showcase Renna's inability to accurately and objectively recall the witnessed event.

Guerrieri instead focuses on his testimony as a public, juridical performance rather than a testament to his accuracy or knowledge. Recalling again Jacques Derrida's observations in *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, Guerrieri aims to demonstrate that Renna's credibility and privileged position as a witness hinges entirely on the fact that he is conveying an experience that is exclusively private and personal, one that nobody else can represent at this moment (43). Guerrieri thus attempts to illustrate the fallacy of testimony as fact and reality, but instead the act of making a claim through a codified and expected sort of performance that seemingly authorizes his legitimacy as a witness.

Renna readily assists Guerrieri in this process, for he is unabashedly biased and never even considers censoring or disguising his bigotry; as he testifies, he is asked to name the nationalities of his bar patrons, to which he replies abruptly, "I don't know. They're all niggers" (Carofiglio 181). Guerrieri recognizes that he must capitalize on this innately racist perspective to undermine the consequence of Renna's subjective observations and testimony in the trial. Consequently, Guerrieri resorts to a rather unexpected tactic based on a somewhat providential intuition that may enable him to demonstrate that Renna is an unintentionally disreputable witness in the case. As such, he presents Renna with a series of ten photographs with images of black immigrants and simply asks him if he recognizes anyone. As suspected, Renna replies negatively, to which Guerrieri states, "...you remembered Signor Thiam perfectly well, did you not? ...If you saw him, in person or in a photograph, you would recognize him, wouldn't you?" (Carofiglio 183). Renna never vacillates and instead answers affirmatively, allowing Guerrieri to unveil the *pièce de resistance* in his own defensive arsenal. He reveals: "You know, Signor

Renna, I put that last question to you because, of the ten photographs you looked at, two show the face of Signor Thiam, the defendant” (Carofiglio 183). Renna never reconsiders his original statement, but instead becomes more virulent, stating: “Why they’re all the same, these niggers. How can I tell, after a year...?”(Carofiglio 184).

If, as Nora Strejilevich asserts in “Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth,” coherence between what actually occurred and what is related is understood to be both a legal and an ethical responsibility of the witness (707), the key witness Renna incontrovertibly demonstrates that he is incapable of accurately portraying the events he claims to have seen. Indeed, the witness begrudges the immigrants who frequent his bar, and uniformly considers them a nuisance. Thiam is merely one of many he resents. His testimony becomes less of a testament to the event he supposedly witnessed, but instead a demonstration of his subjectivity and individual sensibilities.

Faced with a challenge to his authority as a reliable, objective witness, Renna can no longer maintain the semblance of composure during the questioning; he vents his annoyance and misgivings about immigrants and the police, thus destabilizing his own solidity as an impartial witness far more than Guerrieri ever could have done by merely attacking his character. Renna’s inability to sustain a coherent account between what he claims to have seen and what he describes considerably weakens the credence of his testimony. It also entirely erodes the prosecution’s case since his statement was the primary and most damning evidence against Thiam. Once reviled for his defense of Thiam by the entire judiciary, Guerrieri experiences a reversal as he is suddenly extolled in the newspapers for his acuity, and his confidence and surety too increases.

With this success, Guerrieri proceeds with renewed confidence in his defense and undertakes to conclude his argument by convincing the jury and judges of the precariously subjective schema that undergirds a witness's testimony; moreover, he suggests how such a schema also guided inspectors as they gathered and interpreted evidence. Guerrieri proceeds to uncover gaps in the evidence, including the omission of relevant or mitigating information, inconsistencies in the reports taken by investigators (including extremely stilted and artificial official language in statements purportedly provided to the letter by coarse witnesses or suspects), and ultimately reveals various ways that facts were skewed in favor of a particular outcome or theory. Guerrieri adroitly explains that the prosecution, the witnesses, the family of the victims, and society at large wanted to find the perpetrator quickly and definitively. Yet the quest to return order to a destabilized community "unintentionally" created a schema which allowed Abdou Thiam to be inserted as the likely culprit.

Guerrieri concludes by presenting a persuasive theory which again harkens back to Derrida's conception of the witness: that of an "involuntary, false witness," or quite simply one who did not intentionally lie, but nonetheless failed to tell the truth. Guerrieri instead introduces a "... possibility which the public prosecutor did not take into consideration, but which you [the jury] must take into very close consideration. That of a witness who gives a certain version of the facts in the erroneous conviction that it is true"(Carofiglio 247). As such, by demonstrating that a testimony is undistinguishable from a personal, biased perspective of information, Renna's once influential account suddenly loses its authority and the case against Thiam becomes more assailable.

Nevertheless, the pending outcome of the trial remains uncertain and suspenseful, for the obstacles to justice in this society hinge on more than a dismantling of a witness's credibility.

From the onset, the attorney reiterates the statistical impossibility of acquittal as the unlikely odds are continually mentioned. Moreover, knowing the disposition against the defendant by those judging the case, Thiam's guilt appears as a *fait accompli*. Carofiglio allows the tension to crescendo in the narrative as Guerrieri continually observes and frets about minute details within the courtroom; he constantly reads the judges' and jury's body language, observes their faces, imagines the content of their murmurs and surmises *a priori* what this portends for Thiam.

Moreover, Guerrieri invariably presents his own efforts as somewhat underprepared and unreflective considering the gravity of the outcome on a real individual's life. While his arguments are analytical and rational, Guerrieri ultimately is guided only by his faith in the righteousness of his position. His belief that Thiam is innocent is merely an intuition, and dismantling the prosecution's case can only posit reasonable doubt about guilt, not provide hard evidence of innocence. Consequently, the reader also teeters between optimism and pessimism, emotionally and ethically invested in Thiam's exoneration, but realistically expecting this fantasy to be shattered. Indeed, to believe that Guerrieri's argument is sufficient to overcome adversity, annihilate the sway of racism and save Thiam from a perpetual jail sentence seems impossibly naïve. Still, the indisputability and logic of Guerrieri's argument provides more than a glimmer of hope and promise.

Accordingly, when a verdict of innocence is ultimately pronounced, it is astonishing. Guerrieri describes Thiam's elation, stating: "His eyes were moist, his jaw set, the corners of his mouth trembling. My own face was not very different, I think" (Carofiglio 266). Guerrieri's words here are both literal and symbolic. Indeed, the "alterity" or "otherness" that has always been present in the attorney's approach to the immigrant seems to evaporate. With vastly

different consequences on their lives, both had recently been abandoned by their companions, became alienated from their peers and society and became desperate and suicidal.

While Guerrieri does not state so unequivocally, he seems to finally recognize the very humanness of Thiam through the familiarity of his suffering. During the trial, they have separately and individually endured the most hopeless and darkest hours of their lives; yet each has relied on the other to embrace unlikely hope and promise future for the future. Guido's investment in Abdou Thiam has brought him some relief from his own situation, and enabled him to reassess his own competence and values. Consequently, for Guerrieri the victory is a culmination in the process of reassembling a fragmented identity and becoming holistic again. The trial has enabled him to find strength and to redress errors from his past, including reconciling with his ex-wife. Meanwhile Thiam stands at the threshold of an uncertain future that, at least for the moment, guarantees his liberty.

With this conclusion, the lingering question remains concerning Thiam's actual innocence or guilt. Whether or not Thiam represents a threat to the nation's security is a matter that quickly becomes less prominent or even relevant in *Involuntary Witness*. While it is reassuring that his trial presents hope that a national mindset is evolving, Carofiglio instead emphasizes an important point from his standpoint as a judge. In guaranteeing the accused a right to a fair trial, that is, by allowing the judiciary process to unfold as it is legally designed to do, justice has indeed been served. Carofiglio suggests that as Italy's population changes, entrenched prejudices must be subverted and addressed in order to ensure the fairness and objectivity of the nations' most important institutions. The narrative, however, cogently resonates with doubts about whether the Italy outside the pages of the novel can rise to the challenge.

Racism, Italian Style

Like Carofiglio's novel, Amara Lakhous' *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, written in 2006 and published in English in 2008, also considers recent immigration to Italy and troubling conceptions of identity amidst rapid demographic change. In the face of a murder of an Italian citizen evidently at the hands of a foreigner, questions about national character are framed by racist and alarmist attitudes conveyed through witnesses. As the investigation of a murdered Italian man nicknamed "the Gladiator" perpetrated in a residential building in Rome advances, several residents of the building offer their own account of the mysterious disappearance and apparent flight of the primary suspect, Amedeo. It is, in fact, because of the murder that the residents of the building are provided the chance to voice their opinions, and each offers an account zealously. Meaningfully, these testimonies explore questions about the current state of the nation following the 1989 fall of the old party system that had ruled the country since the end of fascism and lingering issues of national identity that have plagued the nation since the country's unification in 1860 (Patriarca 3).

The residents of Piazza Vittorio are a motley and colorful group of individuals, representing a wide range of age groups, education levels, social and economic status and backgrounds, as well as different ethnic, regional or national identities. While several Italians from all over the country offer their testimony and opinions about Amedeo and life in Piazza Vittorio, the accounts of an Iranian, a Peruvian, a Dutchman, an Algerian and a Bangladeshi also figure prominently. All of these individuals dwell within the same *palazzo*, where the use of the elevator has continuously generated conflicts, pitting all of the residents against each other and even becoming an index for evaluating each other's character and values. The problematic

elevator polarizes the residents, serving as a concrete problem that predicated their interactions, for without it, the occupants rarely would choose to interrelate with one another.

While the introduction of these various characters from different areas of the nation and from foreign countries propels the narrative, they also are meaningful in that they all attempt to define notions of the Italian national character and national identity. This reflects what Silvana Patriarca in her 2010 study *Italian Vices* describes as a discourse that arose historically as an effort at nation-building and Italian nationalism aiming to create a modern nation. Notably, she indicates “a long intellectual and political history [of the Italian discourse of national character] to which both Italians and non-Italians have contributed over the centuries” (Patriarca 7).

Consequently, these various Italian and non-Italian perspectives of national character operate on a micro level in Lakhous’ novel, in which Amedeo stands in universally for all Italians. Indeed, each person is convinced that he or she knows the suspect extremely well, for Amedeo has invariably endeared himself to almost the entire building with his grace and most admirable characteristics. Amedeo has demonstrated kindness, consideration and civility to each witness on countless occasions over the course of years, and it is suggested that prior to the murder, Amedeo was the only individual who listened to the residents of the building and allowed them to vent their most personal feelings, thoughts and qualms. In effect, Amedeo represents the most positive image of Italians, the paradigm of *brava gente*, or good and humane people (Patriarca 189). Amedeo mindfully listens when others instead silence or dismiss one another, and as such, most everyone in the novel perceives Amedeo as a paradigm of decency, tolerance and philanthropic love and concern for his fellow man. Amedeo is the nucleus of the building, representing to the residents a “beautiful harbor from which we depart and to which we always return” (Lakhous 23). Indeed, one resident speaks for virtually everyone when he states:

“The truth is that Amedeo is the only one in this city who loves me” (Lakhous 23).

Consequently, Amedeo is beloved to almost everyone in the building, for he is kind and concerned about the occupants’ well-being and comfort, and they all imagine a special connection with him.

Beyond his kindness, Amedeo is viewed as a paradigm of the erudite and cultured Italian citizen: he speaks Italian perfectly, as they all marvel repeatedly, for he is more eloquent than most Italians they know. Moreover, he knows the geography and history of Rome as well as, if not better than, any native Roman or scholar. Although Amedeo elusively reveals he is from the “south,” a nebulously delimited area of the country that is repeatedly disparaged in the novel, he is nonetheless considered an exemplary Italian in the minds of all the residents, and everyone is steadfast that his temperament and his actions are entirely incompatible with those of a murderer.

Upon his disappearance and presumed flight after the murder of the coarse and pugnacious Gladiator, the residents are astonished to learn that Amedeo is, in fact, not Italian but an immigrant. None of the interviewees can accept this fact as plausible based on their experiences with him, for Amedeo’s foreign origin thus seems completely incompatible with the paradigmatic Italian that they envision him to be. Foremost, he defies everyone’s, including the other immigrants’, rigid conceptions and expectations of a foreigner. The building’s Dutch resident best articulates the contradiction they all perceive in Amedeo’s foreignness, as he marvels “Is it logical that the person who represents magnificent Italy is a foreigner?” (Lakhous 87).

This observation is a crucial aspect of the novel that recurs throughout the interviews with the residents. Rome is recognized as a different model for Italian cities; everyone seemingly hails from somewhere else, as one resident alleges “We’re all foreigners in this city!” (Lakhous

16). Still, the indefinable question of what constitutes Italianity and who is Italian and why they may be considered so recurs throughout the pages of the novel. “But then who is Italian?” pointedly asks one resident when he learns of Amedeo’s background, “Only someone who was born in Italy, has an Italian passport and identity card, knows the language, has an Italian name, and lives in Italy? As you see, the question is very complicated” (Lakhous 15). The parameters that define national identity are thus questioned constantly, ranging from notions about birth place, documentation and legal status, family origin and history, and knowledge and mastery of the Italian language. At no point is a clear definition offered, for exclusion rather than inclusion is the index that the residents of Piazza Vittorio use to measure nationality and belonging.

While the residents assess their views on Italianity and impose its limits, this is a fundamental premise of the novel that clearly resonates for the author himself. Lakhous won the prestigious *Premio Flaiano per la narrativa* prize in 2006 and the Premio Racalmare – Leonardo Sciascia⁶ for this short though very incisive novel. It is recognized as a remarkable work of contemporary Italian literature, yet it was not written by an Italian native, which has generated considerable attention and interest. A self-described “Italian writer born in Algeria” (Bonanni, my translation), Lakhous has successfully inserted himself into a rather rigid canon of native born Italian writers. Yet the accolade afforded the novel has been exceptional particularly because it is the “first time that a writer born outside of the national territory writes a text that can for all purposes be considered Italian” (Bonanni, my translation). Indeed, for one whose native language is not Italian, Lakhous has mastered the language and its nuances so brilliantly, employing snippets of dialect and slang, and has depicted the face of modern Rome and Italy so well through the work. Lakhous nevertheless admits “I did not expect to become part of Italian

⁶ See Amaralakhous.com.

literature. Also because I [had lived] in Italy for ten years and I realized that here there is a very fixed idea about immigration... that is, to consider the immigrant as a guest and not as a potential future citizen” (Bonanni, my translation). This statement prominently informs the novel’s substance as well, for rigid conceptions about Italian identity and the immigrant’s current and future place in Italy are always the focus of each testimony presented.

Consequently, every account pivots around realities of current Italy, including experiences and knowledge about immigration and immigrants, and with the enigmatically charming Amedeo. Each resident’s account is presented with the ironic title “The Truth According to...,” suggesting that there are multiple versions of truth or reality that vary immensely according to the outlook of the individual describing or relating their facts. Indeed, for all of the witnesses being interviewed, the solipsistic account they offer is the undisputable truth, though the veracity or factual accuracy of their opinions are constantly fallacious and contradictory. Importantly, what each individual *knows* to be the truth cannot be objectified and perceptions of reality are based on unique interactions, circumstances and experiences which color and determine all notions of what is true and false. As each resident of Piazza Vittorio presents discrepant and varying reports about the same person, the same events and the same surroundings, the idea of a static, Platonic archetype of truth is therefore presented as a complete fallacy in the novel. Still, the residents fail to see or allow other perspectives to influence what they believe, and they often oversimplify points that deserve further consideration and analysis.

At just over 130 pages, the pithy novel is nonetheless dense with commentary and criticism as it examines these subjective versions of truth as reflective of social and political realities in current Italy. The novel’s unique structure stands very much in contrast to Carofiglio’s treatment of similar issues, for it layers together different histories and different

accounts through a variety of voices. The substance of each interview supplements and responds to the perspectives introduced elsewhere, fusing these together to present a broad and cohesive image of a fundamentally divided nation. Indeed, the residents of Piazza Vittorio are unaware that other perspectives contrast and gauge the validity of their complaints and testimonies, but with nobody interrupting or contradicting them, they freely expound their beliefs and express opinions about ridiculous cause and tribulations without reticence or self-consciousness. Each individual is so invested in his or her account that they fail to see the absurdity of their judgments, and their beliefs instead seem grave, substantial and entirely unassailable.

At the end of each testimony- or perhaps more appropriately, each rant- Amedeo's account clarifies what he perceives to have really happened as he reconsiders the substance of the previous account. At one point Amedeo states, "It's really pointless to know the truth" (Lakhous 44), again implying there is no definitive version of any subjectively defined reality. Still, his intermittent accounts tease out the inconsistencies and erroneous statements of each account in a dialogic, almost Socratic, manner. As Amedeo's own questions about the soundness of the residents' tenets unfold, he rationally highlights inconsistencies or faulty logic evident in each testimony. The reader recognizes Amedeo as a voice of reason, and readily accepts Amedeo's version as the accurate, balanced account, trusting in his perspicacity over all the other residents. With his intelligence, his education and his insight, Amedeo is able to filter their comments, their perceptions and conclusions with a necessary detachment that also enables him to recognize what is legitimate about their opinions. Amedeo is rarely authoritative in his judgments, and he is respectful of the residents' unique circumstances which have led them to their conclusions. This tolerance endears the reader to Amedeo, and his insightfulness, charisma

and poise also ingratiate the reader to Amedeo as quickly and resoundingly as these qualities have for the residents of Piazza Vittorio.

The various versions of the truth presented in *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* encompass deep-seated societal, political and historical problems in tandem with completely idiosyncratic pet peeves that disturb the residents. While the residents' absurd grievances are the most pressing aspect of each account, they nonetheless hinge upon broader realities that bear further reflection and consideration. By interspersing momentous social and political problems with inane shortsighted perceptions of them, *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* parodies and takes aim at reactions to immigration occurring currently in Italy and presents the accompanying issues of national character and identity as an ongoing, historical debate.

The novel's witty style is unmistakably reminiscent of the *Commedia all'italiana*, or Italian Comedy film genre popular in the 1950s-1970s. Presenting and concurrently problematizing images of the "typical Italian" (Patriarca 215), the novel's development of serious issues through humor shows its indebtedness to this popular and beloved variety of Italian film that exaggerates both the negative and positive aspects of an elusive national character. While the *commedia all'italiana* style is perceptible in the novel's comical treatment of the solemn subject matter of a murder and social disintegration and historical division, pointed commentary about the merits of this cinematic form is also invoked within the substance of the text. Overt discussions about the merits of the genre, how it operates and to what purpose are considered. Indeed, the value of the *commedia all'italiana* for tackling problematic social and political issues is extolled by Amedeo himself in his conversations with the aspiring Dutch filmmaker, Johan Van Marten. Van Marten believes that the building, its residents and its

controversial elevator are worthy of cinematic portrayal; he aspires to create a film in his preferred Italian neo-realist style. Amedeo however insists that rather than realism, "...Italian-style comedy represents the highest level of Italian creativity because it emphasizes paradoxes, combines tragedy and comedy, humor and serious criticism" (Lakhous 85). Amedeo further extols *commedia all'italiana*, noting "I strongly defended Italian comedy, which often takes on serious and sad subjects in a comic manner. I love Pietro Germi's film *Divorce Italian Style*, I'm never bored, no matter how often I see it. It's the story of a man who devises a plan to kill his wife so he can marry a young woman. It's said that this film prepared the way for the referendum on divorce in Italy in 1974" (Lakhous 89).

Van Marten's neo-realist film with the proposed title "Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio" never materializes, though Lakhous' novel emerges as a literary rendition of the film that Van Marten proposes encapsulating the droll style Amedeo advocates.⁷ Like Amedeo, Lakhous apparently believes that art has the ability to render meaningful social and political change in a society; Amedeo's statement about Germi's film attest to a clear conviction that a creative endeavor can be influential in its ability to generate discourse and to initiate dialogue that can pointedly address socially relevant issues and raise consciousness. Amedeo recognizes that the appeal of Germi's film rests on its palatable and enjoyable form⁸, though that does not preclude it from being intellectual, meaningful and even didactic. The film is clearly more than mere entertainment for Amedeo, for while he mentions he is never bored, the merit of the film as he sees it lies in the ability to tackle problems and instigate change.

⁷ The indebtedness to *Commedia all'italiana* is even more obviously present in Lakhous' most recent novel *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi*, with the title immediately invoking and parodying Pietro Germi's 1961 black comedy *Divorce, Italian Style*.

Amedeo thus reveals to Van Marten a formula for meaningful and instructive art, which seemingly mirrors Lakhous' own endeavor with *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*. The combination of entertainment and amusement (“I’m never bored, no matter how often I see it”) applied to a serious subject with underlying reverberations (“It’s the story of a man who devises a plan to kill his wife so he can marry a young woman”) institutes social change (“this film prepared the way for the referendum on divorce in Italy in 1974”). Certainly Lakhous replicates this formula in his novel, with a mind towards drawing attention to and managing the problematic issues of immigration and identity in Italy.

In addition to an overt discussion about film, the novel itself begins with several epigraphs about the difficult search for truth, further indicating that this is a primary dimension of the novel’s substance. By introducing the theme through excerpts from other works of venerated literature, including works by Italian Leonardo Sciascia, Egyptian Amal Donkol, and Algerian Tahar Djaout, Lakhous frames the novel with an awareness of the aptness of literature to globally address difficult questions about human experience, knowledge and history. However, the prominence of film and literature in the novel also contrasts the negative depiction of television that is also a recurring motif throughout the accounts. There is evident tension between what Lakhous perceives as instructive and influential art and what is merely entertainment and unreflective media.

Indeed, frequent discussions about the influence of television abound in the work, for television is a primary source for the residents to establish their worldview and knowledge about society. Amedeo often reflects on the central role television occupies for the residents and for much of society, but he often forms his opinions by analyzing and dissecting the ideas he reads in books and in newspapers. He even frames one of his many reflections on the presence of

television in society, by citing a respected Viennese intellectual: “This morning I read an article by the philosopher Karl Popper on the influence of television in our daily lives. Popper maintains that TV has become a member of the family, and that its voice is the most listened to in the whole family” (Lakhous 73).

Popper’s ideas about media are significant to Amedeo, and accordingly they resonate throughout the text. Indeed, the building’s Peruvian domestic worker, Maria Cristina Gonzalez, describes her obsession with television as she admits “I can’t do without television” (Lakhous 69). The Peruvian’s own “truth” revolves around her incessant care for the intimate needs of an infirm elderly woman in the building. Neither the old woman nor her family feel any affection or bond to the immigrant who they rely on so thoroughly; conversely, they treat her like an intruder in their family. Consequently for Maria Cristina, the Mexican and Brazilian *telenovelas* broadcast on television quell her loneliness, and the characters from the soap operas have indeed become her ersatz family in the absence of other bonds in Italy. Maria Cristina exemplifies this significant, familial relationship with the television, which provides her only company, revealing: “I don’t consider myself a spectator but an actress who plays an important role in the serial” (Lakhous 70).

This imagined involvement contrasts greatly with the immigrant’s imposed role as a spectator in the life of her employer and her family, where she might otherwise be viewed as an integral member of their family. However, their coldness instead leaves her feeling like an outsider and an indentured servant or serf, and Maria Cristina consequently relies on the TV for her emotional life and comfort. Still, even she recognizes the unreliability of the apparatus for garnering accurate information and knowledge as she states: “You hear so many lies about immigrants on TV” (Lakhous 69). While Maria Cristina sees characters from the television as

her adoptive family and members of her community, she still rejects the “factual” information it proffers.

In contrast, most of the residents have formed their opinions about immigration, as well as the current state of Italian economics and politics through second-hand reports they watch from questionable news sources. They do not research or inquire beyond what they hear and see there. Reasonably uninformed, they nevertheless believe they are experts and have balanced perspectives and opinions which they buttress through sources from the seemingly infallible and authoritative television. Everyone in the building unanimously describes Maria Cristina as “stupid,” yet she alone articulates a distinction between any emotional fulfillment and supposedly irrefutable knowledge that may be gained through it.

While truth and its problematic aspects are framed by such discussions in the work, it is repeatedly the baroque exaggeration and hyperbole of the subjective truths related that concurrently draw attention to problems and constitute the humorous component of *Clash of Civilizations*. If not presented with deliberate irony, it would otherwise be difficult to characterize the novel as amusing due to the somber realities it addresses. Further explication of some of the accounts can here serve to elucidate the polarity of the inane complaints and the resoundingly real, historical issues currently being confronted in Italy.

The very first testimony that introduces the novel is the so-called “Truth According to Parviz Mansoor Samadi,” an Iranian refugee from Shiraz. Parviz begins his report with a preposterous diatribe about the Italians’ love for pizza, which he deems to be disgusting and unhealthy. He fervently objects:

The law should punish people who feel free to disturb the peace of good citizens going to work in the morning and home at night [by eating pizza]. The damage caused by people

eating pizza in the metro is a lot worse than the damage caused by cigarettes. I hope that the proper authorities do not underestimate this sensitive issue and will proceed immediately to put up signs like “Pizza Eating Prohibited,” next to the ones that are so prominent at the metro entrances saying “No Smoking!” (Lakhous 13)

This unreasonable rant begins the novel, immediately making light of the limits imposed upon personal freedoms and the scope of the law to intervene. Parviz’s intense disgust for pizza is amusing to the reader precisely because it is so subjective and trivial, yet he implies that legislation should be enacted to prevent its consumption in public. There is no irony in his own request, for while absurd, Parviz parallels his own distaste for pizza with the aversion and hatred of immigrants that he sees as prominent around him. Parviz envisions a personal dislike of pizza to be no less subjective than the dislike of foreigners, and suggests appealing to the same authorities to stop it.

While he initially censures the Italian diet, Parviz soon progresses to alarming issues occurring in the nation, mentioning some of the most salient issues in its present discourse. When informed that Amedeo is a foreigner, he states “...it’s not important whether Amedeo is Italian or not” (Lakhous 14). For Parviz, Amedeo’s origin is irrelevant and does not mitigate his own relationship with him; when Amedeo was his only confidant and friend, his background was inconsequential. Likewise, as a presumed fugitive, Amedeo’s origin is also of no consequence. Though he is unable to believe that Amedeo is capable of murder, the Iranian intuits that Amedeo’s status as an immigrant may be damning and used to buttress the accusation against him by the authorities.

Parviz does apparently recognize, in spite of his question, that Amedeo’s national identity is a significant concern in this society and Parviz detects recognizes something alarming and

defamatory in the revelation, knowing it may serve to uphold Amedeo's supposed guiltiness. Moreover, he connects the revelation to the anti-immigrant discourse unfolding publicly and constantly. Paradoxically, he defends Amedeo by exemplifying the misinformation and half-knowledge that people gain through TV, stating: "Even today I am amazed when I hear speeches by certain Italian politicians on the news and on television programs. Take, for example, Roberto Bossosso. You don't know who Roberto Bossosso is? He's the leader of the Forza Nord party, which considers all Muslim immigrants enemies" (Lakhous 15). Parviz has mistaken Umberto Bossi's name for something approximate though entirely incorrect, and he conflates the name of the Forza Italia party with that of Lega Nord. Parviz's erroneous naming of Bossi and the party suggests that he does not profoundly know about the initiatives of the Northern League, and his understanding of its agenda is also an oversimplification. His own knowledge of the party's different platforms may be based only on the alarmist, separatist discourse it has also engendered, though the Iranian's account indeed attests to the Northern League's prominence in political discourse and its controversial stance on national unity since the early 1990s (Patriarca 3).

Parviz's knowledge about the status of the immigrant is certainly less informed by news reports and party platforms than it is based on his first-hand experiences. Parviz proceeds to lament the repeated obstacles he encounters in attempting to renew his residency permits, and admits to have suffered a nervous breakdown when his petition for political asylum is rejected by the High Commissioner for Refugees. When claims arise that he is lying about his refugee status, he literally sews his mouth shut with a needle and thread in a frenzied state, resolving that nobody listens to him anyhow.

Parviz's status in Italy is one of a displaced person, for he fled Iran in fear of his life, abruptly leaving behind his family and livelihood after the Iranian Revolutionary Guard found anti-government leaflets from the People's Mujahideen at his restaurant. Consequently, Parviz stresses that Italy is not his elected and permanent home, and insists upon a difference between his situation and that of an immigrant: "I am a refugee, not an immigrant. This is an important fact," he maintains (Lakhous 22). While Parviz's legal and administrative hassles in Italy are a stressful reality, he also experiences unmasked prejudice and hatred from individuals as well. When he encounters the loathsome Gladiator in the building, the thug shouts in his face "Italy for Italians! Italy for Italians!" (Lakhous 23). But for the urgency of his safety, Parviz would be in Iran, and he indeed hopes to return home to Shiraz as soon as he can, happily leaving Italy to the Italians as he has been more than once instructed.

Parviz's negative account of his Italian experience is both corroborated and countered in Amedeo's first responsive "wail." Amedeo offsets some of the more flawed perceptions Parviz has arrived at, significantly dismantling Parviz's facile assessment that he is discriminated against by employers only because he is foreign. While Parviz solidly maintains that his employers hate him precisely because he is an immigrant, Amedeo determines that Parviz is continually fired by his employers for other reasonable motives not based in racism. Instead, Amedeo notes that there is a crippling language barrier that hinders effective communication and leads to errors at work, and Parviz also has noxious habits that interfere with his productivity. Amedeo thus laments, "Poor Parviz, he's convinced that the reason he's always getting fired is his hatred of pizza and not his poor Italian and the fact that he drinks during working hours" (Lakhous 27). Nevertheless, Amedeo recognizes that the fact that the Iranian is discriminated against frequently and has encountered bureaucratic errors and administrative inefficiency

repeatedly. Amedeo therefore corroborates Parviz's refugee status, confirming that his presence in Italy is not necessarily a choice but an urgent and legitimate matter of safety.

Parviz Mansoor Samadi's account is followed by the testimony of an Italian citizen, revolving not only around the status of the immigrant, but also bringing to the fore some of the internal and historical problems of Italy itself. In "The Truth According to Benedetta Esposito," the report reveals misconceptions about politics in Italy, economic hardships and pointedly elucidates that Italian identity is a problematic affair in a nation plagued by historical division between regions and cities, particularly those of the north and the south of the country. Like Parviz, yet in no way cognizant of any similarity in their respective situations, Benedetta perceives the need to defend both her origin and her right to be in Rome. She begins with a declaration of her origin and an unyielding defense of it, stating: "I'm from Naples, I'll shout it out. I'm not ashamed" (Lakhous 32). Benedetta's truth suggests she has encountered frequent abuse and criticism about her native city, for in Rome, she is perceived as "other," a foreigner in her own right. She is invariably called "*la napoletana*" by the residents rather than by her given name, which continually accentuates her difference from the Romans. Indeed, Benedetta's city is often dismissed as a hub of crime, laziness and chaos is continually disparaged by others in the novel.⁹ While Benedetta is perceived as different and treated so by the other Italians in Piazza Vittorio, Amedeo even cites extraordinary instances where the entire city Naples is the butt of a national joke. He recalls an anecdote he once heard about a soccer match in Rome between the Roma-Naples teams, where a stadium banner proclaimed "Welcome, Naples fans, welcome to

⁹ While Benedetta begins with defense of Naples and her own Neapolitan pride, this is contrasted in the novel by the account of the Roman bartender, Sandro, whose account pivots around his love of the Roma soccer team and his hatred of all things from Naples. He states earnestly, "I'm not a racist, but I can't bear Neapolitans.... I'm not embarrassed to say 'I wouldn't trust a Neapolitan, even if he was San Gennaro!'" (Lakhous 93)

Italy!” (Lakhous 100). The banner attests to a pervasive ridiculing of the Neapolitans and their place within the national collective, and underscores the city’s “main figuration of all of the country’s unresolved issues” (Patriarca 236).

Benedetta is derided for her origin, but her presence in Rome is predicated by economic opportunities she could not find in Naples. Her job as the building’s concierge, though in no way lucrative, has at least provided her sustenance for decades that she could not secure in her native city. She indicates repeatedly that the fear of poverty is a constant and imminent concern to her entire family. Still, despite the economic hardships she and her own children have faced, as well as the distrust and the prejudice lobbied against her as a Neapolitan, Benedetta does not liken her own situation to that of immigrants from other countries. She is unable to envision a connection between the circumstances that brought her permanently to Rome, the intolerance she has experienced, and the obvious internal division within Italy itself. Sadly, she is quick to blame the immigrant for the downfalls and predicaments of Italy rather than reflecting upon the internal division that manifests itself within her own sphere.

Benedetta thus fumes how immigrants are accountable for the crime in Italy, accusing them of theft, rape and most aptly in this situation, of murder. She pronounces, “I’m sure the murderer of Lorenzo Manfredini [the Gladiator] is one of the immigrants...“living with them [immigrants] is impossible” (Lakhous 38). The Neapolitan readily subscribes to the belief that immigrants are the source of the nation’s diseases and crimes, but also asserts that they usurp jobs and are the source of the country’s unemployment and lagging economy, noting “If there’s no work for the people of this country, how is it that we welcome all these desperate types... the immigrant workers should be thrown out and our sons should take their places” (Lakhous 36). Benedetta does not recognize the irony that she, too, is considered a foreigner and has a job that a

Roman could very well be fulfilling. Her assertion, however, reflects her own dismay over her son's perennial joblessness, and in the immigrant there is a convenient scapegoat as a way to allocate political blame and responsibility during acute political and economic crisis (Patriarca 11).

As Benedetta cites immigration as the source of the country's greatest problems, she also introduces a history of corruption and political upheaval in Italy completely unrelated to the current wave of immigration. Benedetta exclaims: "The problem is, this is Italy: we reward the incompetent and despise the good! Look what happened to poor Giulio Andreotti: after serving the state for decades, he was accused of being in the Mafia!... I don't trust informers who accuse upstanding people like Andreotti just to muddy the waters" (Lakhous 32, 44). While the trial unfolds to yet again deliberate on the former prime minister's involvement with and support from members of the crime organization¹⁰, this reality seems impossible to her, and she assesses the trials against "poor" Andreotti as mere infamy. Benedetta does not recognize the depth of historical vice within the Italian state, even in the wake of the 1990s "Clean Hands" investigation that exposed corruption in a large segment of the elite in power (Patriarca 4). She cannot perceive how decades of misadministration, cronyism or dishonesty could have led to some of the very issues she lambasts. Instead she exasperatedly laments that Italian politics are complicated, while concurrently indicating that her own votes are based on the suggestions of

¹⁰ Former Prime Minister and prominent member of the now-dissolved Christian Democracy party, Giulio Andreotti was on trial for his alleged ordering the murder of a journalist who investigated his alleged involvement with the Mafia. For almost 10 years, he went through a series of trials, was found guilty twice, but was ultimately exonerated by the supreme court on August 31, 2003. See Fine, Gary Alan, Véronique Champion-Vincent, and Chip Heath. *Rumor Mills: the Social Impact of Rumor and Legend* (New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction, 2005).

her son, an uneducated, unemployed man who currently supports Forza Italia because he believes Silvio Berlusconi will make him rich.

It is not surprising that Andreotti's known interactions with members of the Mafia astonish Benedetta, for she is not analytical and reflective about her own political inclinations or choices. Inclined to vote for Forza Italia because her son suggests so, she does not even know about the associations and ally Berlusconi has with the Northern League party. Yet she nonetheless decries its controversial separatist proposal, stating: "Lately we've been hearing about that Northern League that's doing its best to divide the country in two and found a new state, Padania. What country are we living in? ... Madonna, help us!" (Lakhous 40). The proposed official division of the Italian state disturbs Benedetta even though her own experience in Rome is one of marginalization and difference. The Neapolitan does not perceive rampant provincialism or recognize the ideological divisions of Italy that predate the separatist proposal currently at the fore.

To counteract these less humorous quandaries and to show Benedetta's ignorance in a more amusing light, it is delightfully comic that Benedetta swears by her keen ability to detect foreigners and to discern them not just from Italians, but from one another based on their nationalities. Thus she continually mistakes the Dutchman for a Swede, the Iranian as an Albanian, the Bangladeshi as a Pakistani, and the Peruvian as a Filipina. When disabused by these immigrants, she also accuses them of lying, though they do not have any reason to do so. Moreover, Benedetta's supposed acuity to discern foreigners has left Amedeo under the proverbial radar, for she cannot conceive this to be possible. She states, "If Signor Amedeo is a foreigner, then who's a real Italian?" (Lakhous 34). With no irony intended, she then concludes "I'm not even sure about myself" (Lakhous 34). Indeed, this underscores Lakhous' entire

examination of national identity as a problem that moves beyond questions of immigration and harkens back to historical notions of a Southern, “internal Other” existing within the Italian peninsula for well over a century (Patriarca 8).

Amedeo’s subsequent wail responds directly to Benedetta’s account, dissecting her convoluted ideas and rather summarily concluding how the reader should interpret Benedetta. Amedeo flatly announces, “This old lady has a disarming naiveté” (Lakhous 43). Indeed, Amedeo sees her rants as a prominent aspect of her personality, and dismisses her penchant to find fault as part of her fiery disposition in general. He continues: “Benedetta usually complains about everything: the tenants in the building, the government, the businesses in Piazza Vittorio, how bad the health service is, the high price of medicine, taxes, rain, the immigrants” (Lakhous 44). Nonetheless, he recognizes that her greatest concern, that which most underlies her own approach to the world, is related to tangible and legitimate economic hardships. He admits, “But today she talked to me about her son, Gennaro, who’s unemployed” (Lakhous 44). The word “but” is a qualifier in this instance, for it implies that while Benedetta’s other complaints are trivial or can be easily dismissed, financial hardship and a history of poverty justifiably filters her outlook on reality at all times.

Whereas Benedetta’s account never considers Italy in contrast to other nations nor does it directly address questions of the nation’s progress, other accounts in the novel scrutinize Italy’s modernity and advancement with regard to other European nations, and attempt to reify the division between the country’s north and south. This is the case with “The Truth According to Elisabetta Fabiani,” wherein the older Roman begins her statement by criticizing Italy’s supposed barbarism compared to Switzerland. Elisabetta seriously entertains one of the many ridiculous accusations made by Benedetta, believing that the Chinese immigrants in the

neighborhood of Piazza Vittorio have eaten her dog. Elisabetta even consults her attorney for legal recourses against the entire Chinese populace, for distraught about the disappearance of her dog, she is quick to implicate immigrants in its disappearance. When her attorney does not provide an immediate answer, she takes the initiative to contact human rights groups like Amnesty International and is outraged by the organization's dismissive and entirely appropriate reply "We defend men, not animals" (Lakhous 56). Elisabetta construes Amnesty International's response as an index of Italy's stagnation, objecting "I say this country is not civilized...When will Italy become a civilized country like Switzerland?" (Lakhous 56). Elisabetta Fabiani's negative evaluations of Italy involve an explicit comparison with another more "civilized" nation, and serve in her mind to reify defects she perceives in the Italian national character. Yet Lakhous underscores the preposterousness of her views and the extent to which such comparisons are rallied to support ridiculous positions. She posits that in Italy, people want to "take away their [dogs'] natural and legitimate rights" (Lakhous 57), and thus inveighs against the country as primitive compared it to supposedly organized and modern northern neighbor, where she nonsensically asserts that people and organizations are concerned about the supposed rights of dogs as though they are juridical subjects. Likewise, she preposterously declares that the Italian state should become involved in Valentino's disappearance, audaciously suggesting that the nation cut off diplomatic relations with China, and domestically jail Chinese restaurant owners for their supposed consumption of dogs.

As Elisabetta lobbies for the rights of her own animal, she simultaneously contends that human beings should be interned, if not forcibly displaced from the country. In the process of anthropomorphizing dogs, she simultaneously dehumanizes human beings people. If Elisabetta is at all egalitarian about anything, it is in her suggestion that all immigrants, and gypsies too, are a

pernicious presence in Italy infringing on the rights of the native-born citizens. She asserts “...the rights of the native-born come first, and dogs are children of this country” (Lakhous 59). Elisabetta does not view immigrants as sentient people with any claims or needs, and she even privileges Valentino’s “rights” to those of the disenfranchised and abused living within her own building. Indeed, the dog does appear to enjoy more love, comfort, protection and freedom than most of the immigrants of Piazza Vittorio.

As Elisabetta extols the qualities, intelligence and loyalty of dogs, she does not recognize these qualities in the immigrants whatsoever, and disallows any possible cultural contribution immigrants offer to the country. Moreover, she does not recognize the obvious contributions that immigrants provide as a source of cheap labor, even though in her own residence and community all the immigrants work tirelessly. A Peruvian immigrant even cares for Elisabetta’s elderly neighbor while living almost imprisoned by her delicate needs and strict schedule.¹¹ Still, Elisabetta shortsightedly believes

The truth is that we don’t need immigrants. I heard a politician say on TV that the Italian economy is at risk of collapsing if they stop coming. That is a lie spread by the Communists and the priests from Caritas. We can easily give up immigrants...We don’t need immigrants. It’s *absurd* that we teach them Italian, give them jobs and places to live, and they pay us back by selling drugs in public parks and raping our daughters. It’s really too much! (Lakhous 60)

¹¹ In contrast, in “The Truth According to Maria Cristina Gonzalez,” the Peruvian often questions her own humanity, and states “I envy little Valentino. I’ve often dreamed of being in his placed. Am I a human being? Sometimes I doubt my humanity” (Lakhous 59). She is a necessary laborer who cares for an ailing and elderly Italian whose family apparently does not have the time or desire to do so themselves. While Fabiani accuses immigrants of being rapists, the Peruvian immigrant is instead the victim repeatedly raped by the Gladiator, an Italian.

Elisabetta's adamant and ignorant views about immigrants ultimately are not based on facts, or even on her own experiences with them. Rather they are hysterical views, founded on what she hears other people say, and she dismisses any evidence to the contrary as malicious propaganda. Her comments are outlandishly ignorant, and Amedeo's ensuing wail responds to the idiocy of Elisabetta's concerns censoriously. He flatly dismisses Elisabetta as close-minded and inane, recognizing that she cannot hold a rational and constructive discussion about anything. As such, he abruptly curbs their conversations when she expounds her racist views about gypsies and immigrants in general. He thus concludes: "Our neighbor Elisabetta Fabiani is addicted to two things: dogs and thrillers. It's pointless to talk to her about anything in which there is no mention of a dog or of Hitchcock or Agatha Christie, Colombo or Derrick, Montalbano or Poirot" (Lakhous 62). Elisabetta's worldview is one of obsession, and Amedeo reveals it is narrowly informed by TV mysteries and popular detective novels, combined with her strange bond with her dog.

Additionally, as she informs him that a building rule forbidding dogs to use the elevator is akin to segregation in the US, Elisabetta has revealed to Amedeo her limited context for understanding what constitutes human rights, racism and discrimination. She erroneously oversimplifies the historical problem of segregation and institutionalized racism in the United States stating: "racism began in the United States when blacks were forbidden to sit on buses next to whites" (Lakhous 63). Clearly for Elisabetta, racism is not a domestic problem, although she encapsulates some of the most alarming discourse of racist ideology and policy in Italy. Instead, it is a distant and historical phenomenon relegated to the US. As such, Elisabetta is one of the few residents of the building with whom Amedeo will even attempt to engage in pointed discussions, limiting their interactions to perfunctory pleasantries and swift exchanges.

In response to Elisabetta's assertion denying the need for immigrants, and also considering the substance of other accounts, Amedeo reevaluates the need for immigrants in Italy based merely on numbers. He consequently cites an article he read in the *Corriere della sera* with the compelling title "Is the Italian a Dinosaur?" (Lakhous 72). The article analyzes the startling decrease in the Italian population compared to other nations of the world, contending that the population is ancient, and doomed towards extinction based on its present course. In the article, the author asserts that the solution lies in the increasing presence of immigrants to make up for the dwindling birthrate in the country. In contrast to Elisabetta's suggestion of jailing and expelling Chinese immigrants, Amedeo only half-jokingly proposes that an agreement should be contracted with the Chinese authorities to import human beings as a way to counterbalance Italy's dwindling growth rate.

In general, the Italians' accounts suggest to Amedeo "a lack of historical memory" (Lakhous 93), and he coherently recognizes that Italians were historically in the same precarious position as today's immigrants who find themselves disseminated throughout the world as laborers subject to discrimination. He posits "The life of Italian immigrants in the past closely resembles the life of the immigrants arriving in Italy today. Throughout history, immigrants have always been the same. All that changes is their language, their religion, and the color of their skin" (Lakhous 73). While the Italians in Piazza Vittorio only note the differences in their own situation and that of current immigrants, these are not the individuals who left their nation and went abroad in search of prosperity, safety and opportunity. In contrast, Amedeo's own situation as an immigrant allows him to make this comparison readily and intelligently.

This is a relevant point for introducing "The Truth According to Antonio Marini," the account of a Milanese history professor encapsulating many of the contradictions so readily

dismantled by Amedeo elsewhere. Marini has dedicated his life to the study of history, yet he truly fails to have any notion of the historical memory that Amedeo mentions. Marini is well-educated and more articulate than the other residents, yet he is no more enlightened about Italian history than the ignorant Neapolitan Benedetta as he discusses the Southern Question¹² and problematic issues of Italian identity from a Northerner's perspective. Indeed, the professor envisions a true division between the north of Italy and its south, which for him effectively constitute two different nations and two different histories, neither with a common or promising future.

Professor Marini initiates his own account with a diatribe about the laziness of the Romans and all southern Italians, while firmly claiming his superiority as a northerner. He cantankerously protests:

This morning I waited half an hour for the 70 bus... Finally three buses arrived, one after the other. The drivers got out, paying no attention to the people waiting, went over to the café across from the bus stop, and sat down at a table outside to drink coffee, smoke cigarettes, and chat. We waited another half hour to leave. Where in the world are we? In Mogadishu or Addis Ababa? In Rome or Bombay? In the developed world or the Third world?... These things don't happen in the north. I'm from Milan and I'm not used to this chaos. For me there is no difference between Rome and the cities of the south, Naples, Palermo, Bari and

¹² The Southern Question reductively denotes an ongoing discourse about the divisive and problematic relationship between Italy's north and south that became prominent during and after the Risorgimento. Largely, the nation's negative traits are imbued to traits historically attributed to the country's south, with great exaggeration of its defects. As Professor Marini's account suggests, Italy's South is often a convenient and historical scapegoat for the nation's most grave problems.

Siracusa. Rome is a city of the south; it has nothing to do with cities like Milan, Turin, and Florence. The people of Rome are lazy, that's the obvious truth.

(Lakhous 74-75)

The professor uses a mundane example from his daily routine to describe the problems he perceives as endemic to Rome, and generalizes the incident as characteristic of southern indolence, which stands in stark distinction to the purportedly industrious, productive and orderly north. Though no lines are actually drawn between the regions, Marini includes the nation's capital within the supposedly apathetic south, indicating that Rome suffers from idleness and its inhabitants are paralyzed by the meridional warmth and lack of concern for the future. The professor narrowly contends:

...the people of the north work, produce, pay their taxes whereas the people of the south capitalize on their diligence and revenue to establish criminal organizations like the Mafia, the Camorra, the 'ndrangheta, and the gangs of kidnapers in Sardinia. That's the bitter truth...The tragedy is that the north is an economic giant and a political dwarf. To me, there is no difference between immigrants and people from the south. (Lakhous 76)

It is compelling that the professor makes no distinction between the supposed laziness of the south of Italy and that of immigrants, who again and again in the novel are depicted as industrious and dedicated to tireless work. For Marini, immigrants will never form part of Italian society, for he views the unification of Italy as "an irreparable historical mistake" (Lakhous 76), and does not even see the usefulness of "a single language, a common history, a common future" (Lakhous 80) for those living under the same government. Failing to see the nation as a cohesive unit already, how can the professor gauge those with completely different histories, languages,

religions and ethnicities ever conform to his narrow paradigm for modernity and efficiency, or to be integrated into such narrow parameters?

Ironically, Marini does not envision himself as the guest or immigrant within what he describes as foreign territory. His schema for Italy's progress and future is the industrial, northern city of Milan, and though he has remained in Rome for a lifetime, he nevertheless claims to regret the choice. Marini consequently likens the capital to an economic parasite, capitalizing on the hard work and economic prowess of the North. What he fails to note entirely is that, in Milan, he was unable to find work at all, and going south to Rome represented his only chance for a solid economic future. Despite the apparent contradiction inherent in his statement, he complains about his situation in Rome, assessing "The decision to leave Milan and come to Rome wasn't a wise one. I gave in to pressure from my father: 'Antonio, go to Rome, don't lose the chance to work when you have it, son! Work is precious'" (Lakhous 74).

Amedeo's wail pivots around two fundamental assertions from the professor's account. He briefly addresses the question of the supposed laziness of the South in comparison to the North. In response to the professor's comments on the northern industrious and southern languor, he initiates a discussion of Gianni Amelio's film *The Way We Laughed*. He notes:

...it tells the story of Italian emigrants who left the cities and towns of the south after the war and moved to the north to work for their daily bread in the hope of a better future. The workers of the south deserve the credit for the industrial rebirth of the north and the flowering of the Fiat factories. I don't understand why Antonio Marini accuses the people of the south of laziness and lack of faith in tomorrow. (Lakhous 81)

Professor Marini, notably a vehement opponent of environmentalism and future sustainability, still lives in the distant past, envisions the country as a series of battling city-states from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, where power and production was a matter of locality and powerful ruling oligarchies. Indeed, it is important that the questions of Italian unity again resurface vis a vis the polemical discussions of secession by the Northern League. Coming from a nation that was once colonized by a powerful nation and only recently fought a struggle for independence, Amedeo recognizes in Marini's comments both danger and a lack of understanding about Italy's past, when its many regions were administrated and governed like the colonies of other powerful empires and nations. Moreover, with his own nation having recently suffered through a brutal and bloody civil war, Amedeo notes that this was a "betrayal among brothers" (Lakhous 81), whose internecine division and dissension arose in the aftermath of independence from an oppressive colonizing force. Indeed, listening to Marini's rants about the "barbarism" of the south¹³, Amedeo wonders how, in the face of internal and historical division and a perceived lack of unity or a future will Italy ever accept the idea of integration for immigrants at all (Lakhous 83).

As each individual's "Truth" is immediately evaluated through Amedeo's own wails, the transcribed tape recordings are created from the confines of his bathroom, where Amedeo secretly processes and analyzes his own life by dissecting the complaints of the residents around him. The novel therefore does not contain a "Truth According to Amedeo/Ahmed Salmi"

¹³ Professor Marini frequently employs the adjective "barbarian" to describe the south of Italy and refers to immigrants as the "new barbarians" (Lakhous 82). In *Italian Vices*, Silvana Patriarca also notes the "...Italian nation was originally constituted in a complex dialectic with the Other, the foreigner, and indeed with more than one Other: along with the foreigner as enemy and 'barbarian' against which the Italians distinguished themselves, there was also... the internal Other, the south, or even the southernness of Italy that worked (and still works) as a symbol of all that is 'non-modern' in the country" (243, my emphasis).

but instead introduces his own wails as the substance of his truth. While Amedeo appears balanced to all the other residents, his own past and precarious existence in Italy weighs heavily on him, and he processes his troubling reflections by sobbing nightly in the bathroom. Amedeo's wife, Stefania, believes he spends hours confined in the toilet due to intense stomach troubles, and does not know that Amedeo bewails his own past with regard to the troubles he sees around him in the present.

This is one of the many guarded truths that Amedeo masks from Stefania, for he will not discuss any aspect of his past with her, and she knows nothing of his identity or history except that he is an immigrant. Stefania has agreed to this elision as a necessary condition for their future together, for Amedeo insists that their future will not be based on his past anyhow. Indeed, he articulates a fervent desire to break from his entire past and to liberate himself from "...the chains of identity which lead us to ruin" (Lakhous 110).

It is only through the "Truth According to Abdallah Ben Kadour," another Algerian immigrant in the building, that Amedeo's own origins, trials and past are most clearly revealed. The reasons why Amedeo has left Algeria and has readily embraced Italy as his home emerge, and the reader learns that amidst a civil war, Ahmed Salmi experienced tragedy and unimaginable sorrow when his fiancé was murdered the hands of terrorists. Ahmed Salmi's past is the substance of his saddest memories and his worst nightmares, and while he can never forget his history in Algeria, it is clear that Amedeo envisions his presence and future in Italy to be predicated on a new history yet to unfold, one which adapts to new trials, bonds and aspirations.

Abdallah thus notes "The truth is different, it's not what you thought up to now" (Lakhous 115) when discussing Amedeo's history. Still, the novel concludes with yet another reiteration that truth is never clear or one sided, just as the police inspector Bettarini suggests two

possible solutions to the murder noting that “the truth is like a coin: it has two faces. The first always completes the second” (Lakhous 124). Indeed, Bettarini’s statement is apt as he provides the “first face of the truth” about the Gladiator’s murder.

This explanation is assuredly the one most easily arrived at in the face of Amedeo’s alleged flight as Bettarini announces: “For me the investigation is over. The murderer is Ahmed Salmi, whom everyone calls Amedeo. His sudden disappearance proves his involvement in the killing of young Lorenzo Manfredini” (Lakhous 125). Bettarini concludes that despite all Amedeo’s apparent decency and philanthropic concerns for his fellow residents, his presumed flight after the crime and the fact that he has quarreled recently with the Gladiator in view of others makes him the unambiguous culprit. Indeed, most of the residents seem inclined to believe that the crime was perpetrated by a foreigner, not an Italian, and while he is the least detectable of foreigners, the truth is that Amedeo nonetheless is one.

The second face of the truth is less expected, and assuredly more surprising. Bettarini instead states “No, the investigation is not over, and... Amedeo is not the murderer” (Lakhous 127). In this explanation, Bettarini reveals that Amedeo is not a fugitive, but instead was struck by a car. His disappearance is not a flight, but instead an extended stay in a hospital in an unconscious state. Elisabetta Fabiani, who for all purposes has been dismissed as crazy but harmless, here emerges as the murderer. In this account, the inspector reveals that a Chinese immigrant did not eat the dog, nor did a gypsy abscond with it; instead, the Gladiator, an Italian citizen, abducted the animal for his illegal dog fighting ring where Valentino was killed. In this scenario, all immigrants are exonerated of guilt; the bigot Gladiator is both the person running an illegal enterprise and a rapist. Likewise, Elisabetta, the Italian who states that immigrants are

rapists and murders, in fact, killed the Gladiator to avenge her dog's death, using the substance of the many police procedurals and serial mystery TV shows as a blueprint for the murder.

The irresolution and lack of a decisive pronouncement between the first and second faces of the truth leave the reader to decide which version is the "truth" and the real solution to the mystery. The first scenario is perhaps the explanation that all the residents ultimately anticipated hearing, either because of their unabashed distrust of immigrants or because they expected an immigrant would be implicated irrespective of culpability or innocence. The second scenario seems somewhat far-fetched and less feasible; an older, weaker and feeble-minded woman is able to overpower and stab a strong young man to death in the name of her animal based on "knowledge" gained on TV. Still, this explanation exonerates Amedeo, who has repeatedly endeared himself to the reader and most of the residents with his concern and compassion and kindness, and whose character does not seem compatible with that of a murderer. It is a brilliant conclusion to Lakhous' novel, for Amedeo's innocence or guilt must be determined based on subjective feelings, intuitions and conclusions. Thus, the truth to be arrived at is in either instance equivocal, always allowing the possibility that the conclusion may be misjudged or wrong. Moreover, the problematic issues surrounding and attempting to define national character and national identity remain open and unresolved, just as they do in the society existing outside of the novel itself.

Saccomanno's 77: The Guilt of the Survivor

Stemming from current debates in Italy, Gianrico Carofiglio's and Amara Lakhous' novels introduce witnesses who are not necessarily thoughtful about their preconceptions. These witnesses are never shown to vacillate in their convictions or to question their responsibility in determining the fate of another person. In both novels, the witnesses are adamant that they are

infallible in their convictions, and even when proven wrong, they often refuse to admit the possibility. These witnesses are often unreflective and lack the introspection that induces them to consider their opinions and where they stem from. In any case, their prejudice and established opinions are so narrow that they cannot even attempt to reflect on their own motivations in rendering a testimony.

This conception of a witness is entirely incompatible with the conception of a witness in Argentinean Guillermo Saccomanno's novel *77*. Instead, Saccomanno's text delves into the burden Professor Gómez, a literature professor at a distinguished high school, encounters by presenting a testimony of events he was once involved in both peripherally and directly. This is the central construct of Saccomanno's *77*, which unpacks the conscience of an introspective witness, as well as the profound uncertainty he must address about himself when becoming involved in the circumstances he observes and later speaking about them. In the process, Saccomanno's text exemplifies a thorny nexus between intense social conflict and enduring personal dilemmas.

Awarded the 2008 Premio Hammett prize for the best crime novel written in Spanish, Saccomanno's *77* has been honored as an outstanding fictional work that surveys the past. Accordingly, Saccomanno contends that "the function of literature is to arouse questions" (Lerman, my translation), and notes that *77* is "testimonial" literature which must be "understood as the fictionalization that one makes of his or her own history" (Lerman, my translation).

While Saccomanno's work is unquestionably fiction, it nevertheless conflates its imagined scenarios with true events from the historical period he considers. Like the other authors considered in this project, Saccomanno contends that fiction is an apt platform for investigation, and likens his writing process to a journalistic investigation: "Fiction has the

advantage of using a hypothesis to go beyond journalism. That doesn't mean that I don't practice journalism, because I believe that journalism is also literature, plus we are living in times of hybrids, of fusion between literary genres” (Roberts). Clearly Saccomanno believes that any rigid distinction between historical accounts and literature is misleading, for both rely on social conditions to enable narrativization. He therefore contends: “One would like to speak about literature, just literature. As if literature had some autonomy with regard to history. But... it is impossible to speak of literature and not of politics...the literary event cannot be detached from the social fabric”(Lerman, my translation).

For a novel that has received such accolade and recognition domestically, it has to date had the misfortune of a rather limited circulation due to strict policies from publishing houses, and the work has not been translated into English or other languages. Moreover, the work is relatively unknown outside of Saccomanno’s native Argentina and has not yet been distributed throughout the rest of Latin America. Saccomanno laments this to be “a policy that we writers in Latin America suffer, the novel isn't even published in neighboring countries, so what happens is that we have to circulate the books through friends in Mexico or Venezuela...I've won a prize for a phantom novel”(Roberts).

Sacomanno’s designation of the work as a “phantom” novel is an appropriate description of the work particularly when considering the substance of 77. Broadly, the novel considers the specters or phantoms of those who disappeared during the atrocities committed by the military regime during the 1976-1983 National Reorganization Process. It also considers “ghosts,” seers and clairvoyants amongst the many supernatural and metaphysical beliefs that people desperately latched onto as a way to maintain faith or hope for the present in the absence of other pillars.

As Argentines currently reconsider their recent past and collectively seek to recover from the traumatic aftermath of torture and political repression, there is a national effort to both speak frankly about what occurred during the 1976-1983 dictatorship. Efforts to transcend and recover from such atrocities have emerged through a national dialogue, memorials and national days of remembrance, as well as recent legal trials to hold the oppressors accountable for their actions. As Nora Strejilevich notes in *“Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth,”* witness testimony also serves as another powerful mode to work through trauma and historical loss, for they are particularly invested in a society’s emotional recovery in their “effort of defying attempts to disappear the past and absolve those responsible for systematic torture and murder, but they are even more crucial in their ‘obsession to tell the one macro-narrative of human existence under very contemporary conditions of absolute terror’” (710).

The sorrow and horrors of the recent past is assuredly still present in the minds of those whose families and friends were forcibly disappeared in Argentina, and this is an extremely present motif in *77*. There is a recurring emphasis and considerable repetition of the notion that there is no definitive closure to a disappearance, as Professor Gómez succinctly states “One can get used to the idea of a departure or a death of a loved one, but not to his or her disappearance” (Saccomanno 167). A disappearance thus goes against the natural order of the world, whereas a death, painful as it may be to accept, does not. Indeed, Saccomanno’s narrative continually asserts that the disappeared remain perennially absent and lost; while they are gone physically, they still loom closely in the minds of those living in the present.

As Hühn’s remarks suggest, in the classical detective novel police are seen as beacons of justice, but in *77* they instead are often responsible for the crimes and chaos unfolding in Buenos Aires. The novel considers the culpability of police for the assaults, scare tactics and

disappearances during the last Argentinean dictatorship by pivoting around the first horrifying months of the repression, during the most rampant and continual period of disappearances. While this background is at the forefront of the novel's action, Saccomanno's own remarks about the purported substance of his text are a cogent approach to analyzing the novel and the most critical issues he wished to address in writing it. He notes that the work primarily concentrates on the theme of civilian complicity in Argentina that enabled the military junta to perpetuate terrors throughout the country: "What I wanted to deal with was civilian complicity, because the military dictatorship came about with the complicity of business and labor groups, and political parties - let's not forget it came just before elections were to be held. There is a lot of documentation in Argentina, a lot of testimony, a lot of biography, a lot of work has been done on the dictatorship, but not on civilian complicity"(Roberts).

77 thus revolves around a witness testimony that may can serve as a "means for social and cultural resistance, which is necessary for the ethical recovery of a community" (Strejilevich 710). Society's ethics during the dictatorship are indeed at issue in Saccomanno's novel, as it investigates to what extent the violence and oppression of the military dictatorship was sanctioned by the populace. The narrative ponders instances of deafening silence, a remarkable lack of protest and intervention akin to apathy, and a seemingly convenient disinterest that people demonstrate as others suffer. Though Saccomanno shows that activism and resistance is a perilous stance to assume during totalitarian order, 77 nonetheless suggests that people ultimately made calculated decisions about the ways they chose to act in the face of unreal circumstances and terror. 77 thus reflects on acts of not only self-preservation, but also economic interests, alliances, and political inclinations that were decisive factors in people's conduct and sympathies.

This may not be the most apparent theme in the work upon first consideration, for the novel ostensibly focuses not on complicity but instead on the crippling fear that grips and renders the population inert during the darkest days of the “terror” at the onset of the military dictatorship. Revisiting the fall of 1977 from which the novel takes its title, the atmosphere is accordingly set by describing a pervasive darkness, quite literally, that envelops Buenos Aires as atrocities first begin to occur and civilians come under siege from repressive and overzealous police and military forces. The weather is invoked repeatedly, in which winter’s oppressive gloom arrives unseasonably early and takes hold fiercely. Gómez recalls an anomalously notable period of constant rain and drizzle, as the city is overtaken by gray skies and a darkness that arrives with the mornings and lasts throughout the nights with no interruption. Buenos Aires is nuanced by the gray bleakness, the blustering winds, and an unshakable cold, which Gómez describes both poetically and hauntingly, associating it with the horrifying tenuousness of existence itself during the period. He recollects:

I remember the light from those days. When I go through my papers and I find in a newspaper, a magazine, photos from that period, the city in those images is always impregnated by a winter light. They may tell me that it is just my impression, but no. There is a gray, the gray of the drizzle and the cold turning silhouettes dim, as if they were about to disappear into an ever imminent night. (Saccomanno 221)¹⁴

Even the diffused winter light reflects the ominousness of the times, as if nature itself is in collaboration with the darkest forces of humanity to conspire against the inhabitants of the city, attempting to sweep away their very existence. This reflects the palpable fear and distrust

¹⁴ I have translated this and all other quotes cited from Guillermo Saccomanno’s 77.

that the city and nation is experiencing at the moment, with the imminence of disappearance and brutality unfolding before the entire populace. The consciousness that virtually everyone is vulnerable in this environment is reflected not in the climate alone, for the novel also begins by depicting unthinkable and unsubstantiated violence occurring on the streets. Omnipresent green Ford Falcons circulate vigilantly throughout the city and its environs, forcibly impeding vehicular and pedestrian traffic, with trios of menacing *militares* leaning out the vehicles with rifles aimed at passers-by. Nights are most ominous with their lull in regular activities and the masses of people absent, yet youth, the elderly, pregnant women, families and the infirm are assaulted by the police and soldiers even in the busiest moments of the day. Meanwhile, most everyone witnesses in dismay as others are kidnapped, yet nobody intervenes or seemingly reacts. Instead, people feign ignorance, turn away from the skirmishes they observe and the victims' futile attempts to flee. While mortified by what they see, people are gripped by an understandable and reasonable fear of being involved or targeted themselves.

Thus as injustice and shocking crimes abound publicly, an overriding fear impedes the vast majority of people from acting, decrying or protesting, or even admitting the gravity of what they are seeing. In this despotic environment, Gómez is struck by his observation that people, including himself, instead seek subterfuge in the pretense of normalcy, by grasping at routines and normal actions of their everyday life. Much like the absent city described in Piglia's *Absent City*, this extraordinarily alien and terrifying environment strikes Gómez for its contradiction and its uncanniness. He muses:

There were the elderly, men, women, youth, girls, kids. They came and went, they had their occupations, they did their things as usual, and *usual* seemed to have significance for them. The operations, the kidnappings, the green Falcons had

become invisible. Although somebody would be taken other people did not change their usual schedules, they worked, they carried out regular transactions, they paid taxes, they fell in love, they got married... and continued with their lives. (Saccomanno 104)

Gómez's description deftly depicts a world of necessary and desperate survivalism, where people find the semblance of comfort and safety by clinging to usual routines in the face of the most abnormal events. Carrying on with routines as if nothing exceptional is occurring almost appears to be the only alternative available; people have been quickly conditioned to accept the repression as normal, perhaps merited by those victimized by it, and not to involve themselves in matters that do not immediately concern them. Gómez describes the immobilization that has been instilled everywhere: "This feeling, terror... was what the repressive machinery had inoculated into the entire country, even in those who, like myself, were always walking at the limits without daring to cross them. The imminence of punishment" (Saccomanno 98). With the fear of danger looming, deflecting attention is essential for preservation, and Saccomanno portrays this as a compelling reason why civilians initially accept what is occurring and why they desperately avoid personal involvement in matters that do not seemingly concern them firsthand.

As such, Gómez initially envisions himself as detached from the frightening situations he views. He remains passive as he quietly watches with dismay as tragedy unfolds before him and feigns ignorance initially. He has no desire to become embroiled in the turbulence he witnesses. Foremost, Gómez at first does not perceive any pressing need to become involved. The political

nature of the events occurring seem *ajeno*¹⁵ to him, for as a professor of literature, he observes the world at a distance and a step-removed from its actions, and is instead immersed in their description and narration.

Indeed, Gómez initially appears more interested in Oscar Wilde's essays on imprisonment, the Romantic poetry of Byron (Saccomanno 115) and literary criticism and analysis than he is from the politically-charged world he lives in and the problems of his own society. As an elegant, graying 56 year-old man, he believes he is "old, not noticeable or offensive" (Saccomanno 157), and ostensibly less suspicious than others around him. Amidst a society of committed left militants and conservative *fachos*¹⁶, others perceive the professor as neutral, a mere "intellectual, incapable of action" (Saccomanno 123), and he, too, apparently perceives himself as such.

Yet in the extremely politicized society he lives in, Gómez perceives an incongruity between his dedication to literary pursuits as a "secondhand experience" (Saccomanno 176) and a lack of participation in the immediate political events unfolding around him. Indeed, Gómez observes this to be true not only for himself, but considers how literature during this period often does not represent a means of opposition or raising consciousness. Gómez asserts that he enjoys reading the literature reviews of the daily *La Nación* only in order to note how so much "literature by the left ends up being taken down by the right" (Saccomanno 71).

¹⁵ The Spanish word *ajeno* is used to describe Gómez's perception frequently throughout 77. While not easily translated into English, it denotes the idea of "foreign" or "outside," "not belonging," or even "otherness." The nuances of the word are relevant here, for Gómez's own existence is marked by a sense of not fitting in and not being present in the world he inhabits. This also describes his perception of national events during his former life in Patagonia, where he was once conditioned to view his country, politics, the world he is in as somehow distant, far, intangible and not part of his own purview.

¹⁶ *Facho* in Argentina denotes an authoritarian figure, a Fascist, a term applied to the oppressors but broadly used currently to describe reactionary and close-minded individuals.

Moreover, Gómez laments a failure during this time for the most prominent authors and literary figures to effectually pose questions to or challenge the regime. Thus, he lambasts the deplorable obsequiousness and deference that even the most celebrated members of the SADE [sociedad argentina de escritores/the Argentine Writer's Society], a respected and prominent institution, show to the oppressive regime. Gómez reproaches the most influential individuals for their failure to use their eminence to speak against the oppression they, too, are clearly aware of. As his models, his potential heroes and those he can relate to most of all do not decry injustice, he censures the complicity and inaction of these writers during this era, stating:

In this concentration camp country, the SADE brought together the mediocre gorillas who supported military coups and persecution of workers... I remember how during the coup, the president of the SADE, Horacio Ratti, along with Jorge Luis Borges, Ernesto Sabato and the priest Castellani accepted an invitation to lunch with the dictator Videla. The only one who dared during the luncheon to mention Haroldo Conti¹⁷ amongst the many disappeared writers... was the priest Castellani. Upon leaving the luncheon, the press awaited them. Borges and Sabato, I remember, went on to praise the dictator. A gentleman, he had seemed to them...meanwhile Victoria Ocampo haughtily joined the Argentine Academy of Letters with a supposed feminist discourse that ignored the mothers who were asking about their [disappeared] children in front of the Casa Rosada. Who is free

¹⁷ During the first months of the military dictatorship, the respected and well-known author Haroldo Conti was placed on a list of “subversives” and was closely monitored and intimidated. He was disappeared in May of 1976 and still remains so currently. Other writers and publishers disappeared too during the regime, including Rodolfo Walsh, Hector Oesterheld, Roberto Jorge Santoro, as well as many others.

of blame, I ask myself. Accomplices are to blame. So are witnesses and survivors.
(Saccomanno 72)

Gómez here indicates that these individuals are not exonerated from their complicity, and even considers them as accomplices in their meditated silence. To contrast to these ineffectual intellectuals, those whose respected positions and personal audience with Jorge Rafael Videla may have been able to address the terror but chose not to, Gómez also mentions one of the novel's recurring references to the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. As the terror unfolds and children disappear, these grieving mothers bravely commence their now historic protests and acts of resistance against the regime. Imperiled and terrified, they nonetheless congregate on Thursdays to march quietly around the Piramide de Mayo in front of the Casa Rosada, wearing white kerchiefs as a silent but visible protest. These women generate interest and attention, but they are not prevented from doing so by the military, and more and more women continue to join as they protest the disappearance of their own children. These otherwise innocuous mothers are the only visible protestors that Gómez reports in his narrative.

It is significant that Gómez sees the contradiction between the inaction of the privileged and respected prominent writers and the protests of the regular, ordinary *madres*, for as the young and the old, the celebrated and the unknown continue to disappear, the entire nation seems similarly suspended between participation and quiescence. Yet these two examples represent Gómez's own possible recourses for action, protest, and opposition. While his age and his generally apolitical stance may ostensibly allow him to disassociate himself from involvement, Gómez here recognizes that these are opportune excuses he falls back upon to remain inert.

Furthermore, while he is generally one of the least probable victims in the minds of others, Gómez nonetheless is subject to frequent encounters with the police. He is harassed in the

streets and while driving on the road, and though he is left mostly unscathed thus far, he is still deeply shaken. While almost suffocated by his own fear to go out, Gómez is still compelled by a self-described “mania” to ambulate in search of furtive sexual adventures almost nightly as he attempts escape the loneliness of his solitary existence. As he leads the seemingly stagnant boring life of the older bachelor, Gómez actually has an actively “deviant” life by night, and he always anticipates the impending moment when he will not be so fortunately unharmed. He therefore notes the tenuous fallacy of safety, stating: “One grasped at the belief *it won’t happen to me*. We all thought this. Until it happened to us” (Saccomanno 98).

Amidst this despotism, Gómez repeatedly hears whispered advice from colleagues and acquaintances to flee the country or to withdraw to the recesses of his native Patagonia. His possibility to “*rajarse*,” or take off, is mentioned frequently and Gómez is in a unique position in this regard. Unlike others, the professor has the means and opportunity to escape persecution; nobody is preventing him from doing so, he has the financial stability, and he has furtive connections he may call upon to facilitate his flight. Moreover, following the recent death of his mother, Gómez does not have any kin or relations to moor him to the country sentimentally or for his assistance.

Most compellingly, however, Gómez has never been integrated fully into his surroundings, and has always been on the margins of society. As a *cabecita negra*¹⁸, a aficionado of English literature in a Hispanic society with a rich canon of its own, and as a middle-aged gay

¹⁸ This term with racist and classist hues indicates that the professor is dark skinned, not a white Argentine. He too identifies that this has stigmatized and made him different in the eyes of society his entire life, and different individuals frequently comment on the fact that he is dark-skinned, noting: “I was condemned to be a *cabecita negra* until my death. And it was better for me to accept this destiny, not as a fatality but rather as a history, origin, a condition of class” (Saccomanno 216).

man living in a culture where his sexual encounters secretively occur in sordid *telos*¹⁹ with young hustlers, Gómez's identity is at odds with the nation perhaps even in the most stable periods.

Amidst such confusion about his involvement and his identity, Gómez constantly toggles between inaction and fear, yet he still elects to stay in Buenos Aires. This may be Gómez's first decisive moment, his preliminary act of involvement and resistance itself, but even Gómez anticipates the question his choice raises: "It may be asked why, if I was aware of what was happening around me, I didn't get out. That terror paralyzed me may be one explanation. But also, that I was surviving while guiltily awaiting punishment seems more reasonable to me" (Saccomanno 15). This is also Gómez's first admission of deep guilt and regret he feels for his behavior during the time.

While remaining in Argentina is a conscientious choice to resist, there is a definite suggestion that Gómez cannot escape anyhow; he seems to acknowledge that no matter where he goes, he will somehow be alone with his own contradictions and fears. He thus chooses to stay, to "survive and persist," when all else and everyone else advises him to go far from the danger. It is a more concrete event, the shockingly violent abduction of a student, Esteban Echagüe, in his own classroom during a lecture that radicalizes his position and finally breaks his illusion of being *ajeno* to the events occurring amidst him. Gómez has desisted for as long as possible before this event, but it is then that he feels he can no longer merely witness injustice without being compelled to act. Gómez finally finds himself constrained to compromise his own safety when he sees Esteban Echagüe taken, and he begins advising other students about their surest

¹⁹ Gómez roams throughout the streets at night in search of rent boys, where discreet encounters occur in hotels rented by the hour and not generally used for accommodating and lodging visitors.

course of action, including exile and escape. He concurrently dares to forage for information about Esteban's whereabouts in clandestine detention centers.

Synchronized with the disappearance of the young student, Gómez is also contacted by the militant son of a long-deceased friend. The young *montonero* Martin approaches Gómez to seek information about his mother, Delia, a woman he barely remembers that was killed during the bombings of Plaza de Mayo during the "Liberating Revolution" in 1955. Martin approaches the professor while fleeing pursuit by the police for being a "subversive," and Martin's inquiries about his mother are generally unwelcome by Gómez who does not wish to associate with the young militant. Regardless, his own involvement in events escalates when Martin brings his pregnant girlfriend, Diana, to Gómez's apartment for safekeeping and protection. As so many others are doing, Gómez could easily denounce these young subversives to the authorities and quickly exonerate himself from their activities. Yet Gómez does not turn away Diana, and daringly acquiesces to shelter the young woman within his home.

In a building where his immediate neighbor has been forcefully disappeared in the night and where the superintendant vigilantly monitors and reports suspicious activities, Gómez accepts his role of protector despite the danger it entails. It is not out of a sense of obligation or sympathy for Martin that he chooses to shelter Diana. Rather, her presence poignantly recalls to Gómez the fate of Delia, who while pregnant was killed along with her secret lesbian lover when they finally decided to flee Argentina together for Uruguay to live out the relationship they had hidden for so long. Ironically, Delia's own husband, Martin's father, was one of the conservative soldier pilots who launched the bomb that murdered his pregnant wife in the process of overthrowing Peron's regime.

Indeed, Diana's presence unearths a history of grief and injustice from the past in Gómez and inhibits him from refusing his help. Additionally, in Martin and Diana's perilous situation, Gómez perceives the cyclicity of the nation's history, with its repeated coups and frequent military rule. Diana and Martin are tangible reminders to the professor of just how similar the situations are, as conflicting political ideologies engender violence and murder. Yet the inclusion of the events from September 1955 in the substance of 77 are not coincidental, however, for Saccomanno introduces them precisely to illuminate the connection he sees between the two eras. He notes in an interview, "For me, the violence begins in '55 with the bombardment, which is the first antecedent that we have for the situation of the disappeared in the Argentine Republic" (Lerman, my translation).

Thus, the unshakably disturbing disappearance of his student and the appearance of the young, pregnant militant finally enable Gómez to realize that he is now directly and inescapably involved as well. Gómez suddenly finds his own desire for self-preservation to be less meaningful than the possibilities for the future that he sees in Diana's unborn child, and as he shelters the mother and unborn child, he is urged by a "paternal" interest in her well-being and survival, and accepts his role as protector eagerly. He soon finds himself actively catering to Diana's needs and comfort, bringing her nutritious food, *mate*, treats and amenities that she yearns for as she nervously moves from room to room holding her swollen belly and incessantly clinging to her knapsack containing a grenade, a pistol and a cyanide pill. While his "normal life" once left him relatively less suspect than others, the professor now decisively admits his "normal life is now different" (Sacomanno 133).

The transition from passive observer to active participant in the political situation around him arises with extreme deliberation and tentativeness. This same reluctance extends to Gómez's

role as a witness as he retrospectively provides a testimony of all of these events. Gómez vacillates about his need to discuss his involvement in all that has occurred, for his inclination is to guard his story privately. Gómez knows that offering his account requires more than merely reporting events or offering a straightforward opinion about the past; it implies examining the parameters of his “normal life” and arriving at a frank admission of how abnormal it is in the eyes of others, and even to himself. Retelling his involvement requires him to reconsider his own motives and scruples, and foremost to reflect further upon his troublesome identity. He is clearly aware that his actions in the past will likely incur the judgment of others, for he himself is judgmental about his choices. Professor Gómez is thus both an involuntary and a voluntary witness, for he is not eager to offer a testimony and legally does not have to, yet his conscience forces him to do so. Consequently, Gómez envisions his testimony to be a personal confession.

This confession aims to gain closure on the past, as well as to mourn those *desaparecidos* who changed his own life, and remain ever present in his mind. Gómez recognizes that he was only peripherally involved in their lives and struggles for a brief period, yet he reflects on how they affected him deeply, and their absence still weighs heavily in his conscience. Gómez pointedly asks himself: “Why do I care about them if they are not of my blood?” (Saccomanno 214). The question is almost rhetorical, for the reader has inferred the degree to which these individuals, regardless of kinship, brought meaning to his own existence, enabled him to look beyond himself and his own preservation, and fulfilled the familial relationships that otherwise eluded him his entire life. Indeed, he cannot make peace with the losses, including Diana’s final, nebulous disappearance, and he mourns: “And, as occurred with so, so many, perhaps it never would be known what happened to her” (Saccomanno 255).

For Gómez, his confession implicates him as a party to his account, for he is not a mere observer. Foremost, there is an admission of his own guilt for having decided not to involve himself when he might have chosen to. Gómez declares his failure to act at times as shameful, yet he also confesses for the actions he witnessed, and those events and deeds he did participate in at other times. Admitting these facts leads Gómez to scrutinize what prompted both his action and his stasis, but they clearly reveal irreconcilable contradictions and hypocrisy in his own behavior during the epoch. Ultimately, Professor Gómez is penitent for having been stymied by profound cowardice as well as intermittent apathy.

Still, it is crucial to reflect here on what specifically Gómez is trying to absolve himself of, and to whom his confession is directed. As Peter Brooks asserts in his *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law & Literature*, “confession—written or spoken—has come to seem the necessary, though risky, act through which one lays bare one’s most intimate self, to know oneself and to make oneself known” (9). Gómez’s testimony is highlighted by contrition, and his confession acts as “a crucial mode of self-examination...one that bears special witness to personal truth” (Brooks 9). Certainly Gómez is a self-aware individual; as a professor of literature, he is not able to subvert a constant need to analyze and dissect ideas, his environment and his perceptions, including those about himself. It is therefore through deep consideration that he arrives at an unequivocal and penitent admission that what he has done during the past was worthy of judgment and censure, stating:

Mi historia puede ser, en más de un aspecto, la de una agachada. Alguno dirá que también es coraje confesar una agachada, pero mayor sería no hablerla cometido.

[My story may be, in more than one aspect, one of treachery. Some will say that it is also courageous to confess treachery, but it would be better not to have

committed it. If now, perhaps more grounded in the confession than in the story, I adopt this tone of bravery, it still does not absolve me.] (Saccomanno 13)

Gómez's admission is not redemptive for rather than to confess, he insists it would have been "better not to have committed it" in the first place. But what is this treachery Gómez intends to reveal? Just as Gómez appears multi-faceted, straddling different worlds and hiding his truest nature from others, the language of this text itself abounds in hidden meanings and double entendres. Gómez's account is described as his "historia"- both his story and his *history*, a distinction that is not clearly made in the Spanish language as readily as it is in English. It is one of several instances where such uncertainty is an intrinsic and meaningful facet of the text, for this carefully chosen word is laden with ambiguity. This choice of diction is also likely intentional, for the word "cuento" could have been used with less ambivalence to denote his account or story.

Additionally, Gómez's confession of an *agachada* here is another such instance of vagueness. Indeed, it carries the most universal sense in Spanish of a "trick" or some sort of "treachery." Yet there is an indeed more crass and yet entirely relevant meaning to the word that is decidedly apt in this confession: an *agachada*, literally being bent over, in Argentinean parlance is suggestive of a sexually passive position. Gómez's story/history, his *agachada*, details a sexual liaison maintained during the fall of 1977, and it is reprehensible to him for multiple reasons. Indeed, it is a revelation of his self-described "fondness for the love that cannot be named" (Saccomanno 59) in a fairly intolerant and decidedly macho society, and also a disclosure of his promiscuity. Yet beyond any shame or reticence about his homosexuality, the *agachada* that he confesses here is deplorable even to himself due to his entanglement with an individual who Gómez ideologically detests.

Gómez is concurrently disgusted by and attracted to an unseemly lover, Walter. A vilely cruel and abusive policeman, Walter is literally the embodiment of the enemy, for he perpetrates the brutality and injustice that Gómez himself cannot sanction. Yet Gómez's concupiscence binds him to Walter despite the repulsion he feels for everything that the policeman and his very body stand for. He thus confesses the shameful hold the relationship exerted over him during those times, as well as the morass of contradictions and doubts that surface because of it. While Gómez's sympathies lie with the victims, he literally lies down with the oppressor.

Professor Gómez attempts to reconcile his sexual attraction with his fear, disgust and hatred of the policeman, and remains involved in their secret affair for the information he believes he can garner to the advantage of others. Through the insider information Walter may offer, Gómez tries to discover the location of the missing student and other *desaparecidos*. Yet Gómez retrospectively admits that even this premise may have been a convenient lie or half-truth, for he acknowledges: "I had a good alibi to calm my soul: to verify the fate of Esteban" (Saccomanno 110).

While this relationship represents a new nadir for Gómez due to the obvious contradictions in his sympathies, Gómez foremost recognizes the immediate danger this affair presents to Diana; he continually fears having to explain the presence of Walter to the young *montoneros* and vice versa, placing him precariously between two conflicting worlds that he constantly worries will reveal themselves inopportunistically. Moreover, the professor recognizes that he has put himself in jeopardy, for harboring a militant makes him a complicit sympathizer with the declared national enemy. Even his intimate relationship with the police officer will not shield him from these deeds should he be discovered. Gómez reiterates that as a witness he is inescapably committed at this point, noting: "Un testigo también está involucrado. Palabra de la

época si la hay: comprometido. [A witness is also involved. The word from the era if there ever was one: compromised/committed]” (Saccomanno 208).

Here, too, there is an interesting double meaning in the language of the text. Gómez employs the word “comprometido,” a Spanish adjective that is necessarily rendered as two distinct English words: both committed and compromised. The distinction rendered in the English language is obvious, yet not quite so readily in Spanish, which assuredly is intentional. As a witness, Gómez’s own safety is unquestionably compromised, yet he concurrently finds himself committed to a form of resistance and with deep compassion for Diana’s situation in a way that he once could not have imagined. Nevertheless, he is never at ease with his involvement, and he continues to question his commitment stating “I kept asking myself what was better, if having saved myself up until now from being shot down or continuing with my role of witness, listening, reading, gathering” (Saccomanno 187).

Gómez ultimately confesses tremendous guilt about his conduct during this period, yet this shame extends beyond his actions. It encompasses his sentiments as well, and he proves to be remorseful for his thoughts and emotions during the time. This extends to the immense and justifiable relief he feels when the intimidating and abusive Walter is opportunely killed in a gun battle with militants like Diana and Martin. As he reads the news in the paper, Gómez is assaulted by conflicting emotions and confusion he feels upon learning that Walter has died, noting: “It was an awkward joy. It seemed like happiness. But it wasn’t happiness because I was ashamed to feel what I was feeling. I was rejoicing over a death... the nature of this happiness was aberrant” (Saccomanno 258).

Gómez is afflicted by shame, uncertainty and culpability for his relationships and associations in 1977, and seems apologetic for his very existence as he ultimately confesses a

lasting pain that he feels for those who disappeared. As Diana's absence lingers, there is no closure for Gómez about her fate, and he remains preoccupied for decades afterwards, perennially unable to reconcile how the disappearance of a seemingly peripheral individual could affect him so deeply. When reflecting on Diana's fate, Gómez realizes that his own feelings of loss are almost second hand, and he can only imagine the depth of pain for those who truly knew and were bonded to their disappeared kin. He again admits the turmoil this causes him, for as he remains unscathed, he concedes "...guilt would not leave me alone. The guilt of the survivor" (Saccomanno 187). Indeed, having survived the repression and lived to tell about it is a source of anguish for Gómez, as he considers how he was spared while so many others were not. Gómez experiences unshakable anxiety and malaise just by having lived through the trauma of 1977. Yet Gómez seemingly recognizes that while his testimony can never compensate for the traumatic losses suffered during the period, it may at least serve to offset his guilt and internal turmoil by translating his experience in the "privileged position as a tourist in a concentration camp" (Saccomanno 15) to the outside world.

As Gómez admits how this period of history continues to disturb him long after the events have ended and danger is no longer a consideration, he attests to a detachment and a desperate drive to forget that surfaced immediately after the dictatorship fell. The professor is thus struck by the alacrity with which everyone attempts to move beyond the horrors, and to relegate it to the past. He states: "In 83 when the trials against the commanding forces began...as the testimonies unfolded, as the victims, men and women, young and old, moved forward with their statements, while the weeks passed, the sessions were losing an audience. In the end only few journalists attended. The terror ended up being boring" (Saccomanno 264). While the novel describes how interest and curiosity about the past abated quickly in the reversion to civilian

rule, 77 fails to mention that these supposedly “boring” trials were ultimately in vain, for after the dictatorship, President Carlos Menem afforded the military amnesty for the acts committed during the period anyhow.²⁰

Still, the novel concludes as Gómez asserts, “One cannot get away from history” (Saccomanno 269). This is a particularly interesting affirmation in 77, and an apt statement to conclude my analysis of all three texts. While in Saccomanno’s novel, there is no prospect for legal retribution or assessing the outcome of the history they are living through, the victims’ families instead hope and pray and even resort to black magic and occult sciences to seek revenge on the perpetrators of the horrors. As such, one character even resorts to obsessively cutting out photos of commanding General Jorge Rafael Videla from newspapers. As she symbolically pokes holes in his eyes with pins and slides them under the door of her disappeared child’s locked bedroom, she never wavers in her belief that “Videla is going to pay for this. Sooner or later” (Saccomanno 77). Legal proceedings to decisively punish the acts of the dictators and perpetrators of the terror then so seemed an inconceivable fantasy, yet today have become a reality.

Since the publication of 77, the crimes and human rights abuses that unfold during the work have indeed been addressed and legal processes have even condemned the perpetrators to imprisonment. The novel predates the historic Atlético-Banco-Olimpo (A-B-O) trials which concluded in late December 2010, in which the dictators, Jorge Rafael Videla and Reynaldo Bignone, as well as other prominent officers of the dictatorship were sentenced to life

²⁰ For more information on the presidency of Carlos Menem, see Bethell, Leslie. *The Cambridge History of Latin America*. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

imprisonment for war crimes and crimes against humanity within Argentina.²¹ Additionally, the tireless efforts of the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* -now *Abuelas*- have successfully created a dialog in Argentina²², even leading to finding some of children of the disappeared either abducted or born in captivity, and prosecuting those responsible for disappearances and kidnapping.

Much like the individuals in *77* who cannot envision the seemingly long-distant future when justice may actually be sought through legal means and the horrors they are experiencing will be redressed, Saccomanno did not yet know what would be the outcome of the situation he describes. Yet the instability and most alarming issues that are addressed in the work are currently the subject of meaningful discourse and determined efforts to enact justice. The pain and difficulties of the histories described are not diminished or avenged because of the trials, but the importance of such concerns have been acknowledged and social and political changes have been enacted to attempt to move beyond the past and break its cycle in the future.

Like Saccomanno's *77*, the novels by Lakhous and Carofiglio have added to an ever-increasing body of literature that is actively mounting a prominent and more pervasive discourse that attempts to address issues of inequality, discrimination and prejudice with a vision of equality, sustainability and stability in a society in flux and undergoing evolution. These authors are witnesses to some of their society's most pressing and urgent quandaries, and in their works, often laden with pessimistic scenarios and frequent disillusion, I generally perceive optimism

²¹ For documentation on the A-B-O trials, see the Argentine Center for Legal Information available at Cij.gov.ar.

²² There is a wealth of media, film and literature recently that revolve around the rediscovery of identity by the children of the disappeared as well as the fate of those who suffered the tortures of detention. In films such as *Historia Oficial* (1985 Luis Puenzo) and *Cautiva* (Gaston Biraben 2004) children discover they have been adopted by the accomplices of the very individuals who disappeared and presumably murdered their parents.

that they may be a catalyst for instigating progressive social and political awareness and changes. These are credible testimonies about troublesome and continually germane questions about human rights, race and identity, yet they insist upon resistance and finding resolutions. As they mutually condemn injustice, brutality and discrimination, these novels bespeak to the need to debate the soundness of pervasive assumptions about identity and the future, and ultimately testify to the possibility of not submitting to history as mere inert and passive subjects.

CHAPTER FOUR

To Borges and Back: The Reader as Detective and the Detective as Critic

In the preceding chapters of this project, I have endeavored to examine different approaches to the historical mystery novel that invite thoughtful explorations and notions about historically determined spaces, a nexus between collective and individual memory, conflicting conceptions of identity, and investigations of the grand narratives of history. In the present chapter, I intend to consider narratives in which the investigation of a crime or a mystery intentionally draws keen attention to the intricacies of reading and writing, as well as the function that literature can exert on society. In such texts, the process of reading is itself distilled into an act of detection, often probing into other significant works of literature and philosophical ideas.

Moreover, in these novels the investigators, protagonists and detectives themselves approach reading as an investigation of its own sort, demonstrating that literary criticism and textual analysis applies the same modalities of the detective or inspector towards another field of inquiry. These characters frequently observe their own societies and their tribulations through an awareness of what has been written, and they often consider the aptness of literature to frame their own theoretical questions and their process of analyzing their environment.

As such, several characters frequently apply such knowledge and acumen not only to social, political and historical quandaries, but also to arrive at judgments about the merits and faults of literary works and other forms of cultural production. The deliberate and painstaking analysis of the detective is thus extended to the skills of a literary critic as they initiate investigations of literature and literary figures and their influence on one another.

Though some of the novels to be discussed here have already been examined in other contexts, they still can readily serve as springboards for meaningful inquiries about captivating episodes when literary criticism and theories are invoked. To elucidate this aspect, I intend to examine characters who see their role of detective, investigator or witness as that of a critic, and to highlight instances when they subject their observations and conclusions to a rigorous process of analysis. I will consider specific instances when their ideas are developed and assayed through discussions about literature and ideas arising within literary works. Moreover, I wish to discuss pointed debates that arise about the merits of the mystery and crime genre in general, including various theories about how the genre operates, who it appeals to, and how and why a distinction is created between erudite and scholarly literature and mere popular entertainment. This will invite a reflection on how intertextuality is an important element of writing and reading, and considers the possible reasons for frequent and overt references to other literary works and the inclusion of ideas by prominent and distinguished authors that surface in the narratives.

To initiate this discussion, it is appropriate to consider how the ways in which a detective and a literary critic can be likened to one another, for the connection may not be obvious or readily evident considering the different fields and purposes to which the investigative process is applied. This may offer insights about what is sought after in the process of examining literature, and how conclusions are reached, and at what point these hypotheses stall or remain unanswered or open themselves to further interpretation.

In Guillermo Saccomanno's *77*, Professor Gómez spends countless hours trying to determine the fate of a disappeared militant he sheltered briefly in his home during the 1976-83 Argentinean military dictatorship. With Diana's physical absence, all that remains of the young woman are various letters that she hid amidst Gómez's belongings, apparently to safeguard them

in hopes of retrieving them at some point in the future. Detailing a love affair with another militant woman, Gómez believes he may be able to discern Diana's untold history if he can organize and piece together the letters in a meaningful order and extract clues about their relationship from their written exchange. The task involves considerable speculation and inference, and is further complicated by the fact that some of the letters are literally shredded apart and interspersed amongst each other, conflating dates, events, and alone lacking any narrative or principle for cohesion.

Consumed by these letters and a compulsive need to thread them into a cohesive and chronological narrative, Gómez spends weeks trying to piece them together and extract meaning from them, to assemble a narrative that will enable him to learn more about Diana than what she alone ever revealed. As he does so, Gómez cogently likens his current mission to that of his *métier* as a literature professor, revealing a similar purpose in both endeavors. He states:

I wondered what kind of investigator I was while putting these letters back together with scotch tape. If what consumed me was literary criticism, I had to accept that every critic is a detective. The critic always starts with a suspicion.

And he doesn't stop until he has proved it. (Saccomanno 182, my translation)

Professor Gómez's statement approximates and likens the role of a literary critic to that of a detective with no uncertainty. As a critic explores and asks questions of a text, there is a "suspicion," or rather a theory that he or she expects to develop through a detailed examination of clues. Faced only with a text, the critic perceives therein a problem of some sort that invites an explanation or a supposition. Yet to generate the explanation requires keen and meticulous analysis, a profound and close reading involving both deductive and inductive reasoning, inference, and curiosity in order to conjecture a plausible explanation. This is indeed the same

impetus that drives a detective or an investigator; a suspicion or a hint seems consequential and is therefore dismantled, reconfigured and then provided with a narrative in order to make sense of it and to relate it back to a plausible hypothesis.

Gómez asserts that the critic's aspiration, like the detective's, is to uncover definitive and resounding proof that any suspected theory is correct and holds true. This is an interesting point for further consideration, for this conception suggests that the detective and the critic are not merely expert investigators, but also arbiters to a great extent. Acting as authorities, they are persuasive in their pronouncements, and their judgments may be perceived as final, conclusive and no longer subject to debate. Yet in his role as sleuth and critic, Gómez himself never knows decisively what happens to Diana, and his dissection of her epistles merely enables him to theorize, that is, to conjecture about her actual outcome. His hypotheses, while reasonable and intelligent, are never confirmed and still allow several other possibilities. Moreover, Gómez has expectations as to what his analysis may demonstrate, and his position as a critic does not preclude him from having biases, shortsightedness and oversights in his assumptions. While he may be an expert in his field of inquiry and may be skilled at extracting theories from texts, he is not infallible in his judgments. This is an important notion when considering the authority of a critic and the detective that surfaces in these texts; indeed, it may be more apt to consider both as guides, not as absolute and flawless authorities in their fields of inquiry and knowledge.

In his essay "Literary Critic: The Detective Not the Judge," Raymond J. Wilson emphasizes the critic's role as a detective and not a judge. He notes that even in a systematic reading, there are "blind spots" that can impede the expert critic from observing important aspects of a text. Indeed, there are moments when, like the detective, a critic's own expertise and expectations propound particular interpretations within their field of investigation and foil other

astute interpretations from discovery. He notes: “The experienced critic knows so well what to look for that he assumes he has found it when he has not...Expectations from hundreds of similar cases have made him so certain of what to look for that he has failed to realize a slight discrepancy between what he was looking for and what he has found” (Wilson 2).

Wilson also states that like the shrewd detective, a literary critic does not always “...find the evidence because their expectations blind them to the significance of facts not fulfilling these expectations” (Wilson 2). In other words, Wilson’s position asserts that critics bring their own expectations, sensibilities and preconceived notions to their object of study, which can deter them from perceiving other meaningful interpretations and ideas about a text. He therefore suggests stepping back from the role of expert just enough to be receptive to other possible insights:

The literary critic should be both a good detective and a naïve observer in finding out what is going on in a literary work and passing on that knowledge to those wishing to use it in furthering their reading pleasure. Rather than formulating value judgments about a piece of literature, critics must use their experiences to illuminate important literary clues for the benefit of the reading public. But they must also remain free enough from expectations to be able to detect clues from a fresh viewpoint. (Wilson 1)

Ultimately, Wilson’s article is relevant in its assertion that the task of a literary critic is not to pronounce decisive judgments about what is occurring in a text and to thereby limit its interpretation to only one schema. Yet he also insists that a critic should not attempt to gauge the merit of a literary work, as he notes “A vast amount of criticism... assumes that the critic’s job is to decide what is good and what is bad literature... the critic is supposed to find out what is

going on in a work and make that knowledge available to anyone who wants to use it to further his enjoyment” (Wilson 12).

Wilson’s belief that judgment should be withheld about a literary work’s merit undermines the very premise of criticism. Moreover, as my project attempts to demonstrate and as is frequently shown in the substance of these novels, enjoyment is not the ultimate and exclusive index of a literary work’s merit. Certainly these authors have all written texts that attempt to do more than merely entertain a novice reader. Yet, Wilson does recognize the value of gratification that reading can provide, which supports why crime fiction and mysteries have been and are currently so popular. It is often due to the delight that readers find in the process of participating in the investigation, in the discerning of clues and anticipating of solutions, that has enabled many of these writers to engage a wide public and to draw attention to considerations they believe are most important and require dialog and further discussion.

Nonetheless, many authors strive to establish that their writing should not be dismissed or undermined because they are palatable to the public due to their form. Instead, they attempt to show how their works can be considered scholarly, erudite and serious while also belonging to a genre that is often mistakenly deemed simple, “popular,” and unreflective. Indeed, the awareness that these works will be subjected to such criticism and judgment itself is present in many of the works. It is perhaps for this reason that many of the authors attempt in similar ways to demonstrate that they belong to a tradition of respected and esteemed works with recognized and enduring acclaim.

An example of the type of criticism that Wilson opposes, specifically myopic judgments against the crime fiction genre, in fact surfaces in a detailed instance of literary criticism within a work by an author whose very presence is evoked in Saccomanno’s 77. A protracted discussion

of the faults and favors of the detective genre arises through Ernesto Sabato's 1948 novel *El túnel*. The inclusion of Sabato's work is here significant, for the Argentinean author, as well as Jorge Luis Borges, is invoked and censured by Professor Gómez for his obsequiousness to Argentinean dictator Jorge Rafael Videla. In Saccomanno's text, Gómez criticizes both Borges's and Sabato's actions at the start of the dictatorship. Saccomanno, however, neglects to acknowledge Sabato's prominent role in the Conadep [National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons] following the dictatorship and his instrumentality in creating the "Nunca Más" [Never Again] report that detailed the human rights atrocities of the regime and helped to identify the State's secret detention centers during the *Proceso*. Sabato's death in May 2011 recently reawakened attention to the author's instrumentality in examining Argentina's past and the role of Conadep in providing new standards for human rights violations accountability.¹ While Sabato's prominence as a writer and intellectual in Argentina is overshadowed in 77 by Professor Gómez's censure, he never speaks about the substance or oeuvre of either author. Certainly both are extremely pertinent when considering the influence of their work and their remarks about crime and detective fiction.

Sabato's *El túnel* is similar in its core to other works of fiction discussed in this project; indeed the substance of the novel involves the conscious reflection of a murderer, his psychological state before and after his crime, and his painful recollection of the mania and mental instability that leads him to kill an innocent paramour. While the narrative unfolds around

¹ For more on the Conadep as well as Sabato's prominent involvement in the commission, see Sikkink, K. (2008) From Pariah State to Global Protagonist: Argentina and the Struggle for International Human Rights. *Latin American Politics and Society*.

a horrific crime, it is dissimilar to the other works considered in this project for it does not focus on the investigation of the offense, nor does it attempt to recreate the murder through an independent investigator or witnesses. Rather, the novel commences when the crime has already occurred, when the murderer is already jailed and has received due punishment for his criminal actions.

As the tortured and unstable artist Juan Pablo Castel reconsiders his crime, his loneliness and the depths of his depravity, the work does not involve the anticipated double story line of the crime and the subsequent investigation of the crime that is common in most works of crime fiction. Consequently, Sabato's *El túnel* might not be introduced into this discussion because of these significant differences. Still, in the aftermath of a brutal crime, the novel introduces calculated observations about society, politics, and art in general, which does allow for its consideration with the other novels discussed. Most significantly, Sabato's novel introduces pointed and relevant discussions about literature as well, and specifically presents a dynamic discussion about the merits and faults of the detective genre that is extremely apt as an instance of literary criticism.

Indeed, prior to committing the murder, Castel expounds his own theories about art, aesthetics and society's reception and construal of his paintings. While he generally disallows the critic's opinion to influence his production and he vigorously negates the value that others assign to the art he creates, he is conscious that he lives in a society where others actively evaluate and gauge the cultural production of artists and writers. Unwilling to engage in any such discussion himself, he is nonetheless present to many conversations about art and literature, including a heated debate that arises between two antagonistic cousins at a *hacienda* outside of Buenos Aires.

Castel's dislike of vocational critics is well-considered, and it filters his perception of the musings of the two cousins. As laymen engaging in a discussion about literature, he finds their discussion to be even more irritating and essentially dismisses them as pompous and irritating individuals. While he is indifferent to the opinions they express, he is still trifled by the seriousness with which the two cousins, Hunter and Mimi, discuss literature and authors. Yet their conversation elucidates that Hunter and Mimi are active and avid readers, and their discussion progresses from a discussion of 19th century Russian literature to riveting questions about the merits, as well as the flaws, that can be ascribed to crime fiction and detective novels. Their respective opinions suggest that it is a rather contentious genre, displaying evidently pervasive notions of what constitutes estimable and "high" literature as opposed to mere popular entertainment lacking in aesthetics, innovation and social relevance. Indeed, their reflections evoke concerns relevant to many authors who write crime fiction precisely because they view it as a serious mode of inquiry and analysis, and who attempt to distinguish their works as intellectual and critical texts rather than mere popular entertainment lacking attention to style, craft, social change and political consciousness.

Castel introduces the exchange, stating "Now they were talking about detective novels," just after Mimi notes she has just finished reading and adored *El séptimo círculo*.² When asked if he has read it, Hunter quickly dismisses the work, and authoritatively asserts his opinion about

² In *Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations*, the author discusses with Rita Guibert his appreciation of the detective genre and notes that both he and Bioy Casares had to persuade reluctant publishers to publish a series of detective stories. He relates how publishers initially deemed the genre as unsuitable to an Argentine audience, and saw it more of interest to Anglo readers in the United States and United Kingdom. Nevertheless, both he and Casares ultimately edited the series *El séptimo círculo*, published by Emecé, which quickly became widespread and presented over two hundred titles under its auspices. (Borges and Burgin, 65)

the entire genre, noting “What for? All detective novels are the same. One a year is enough. But one a week to me seems to demonstrate little imagination in the reader” (Sabato 118, my translation).

Mimi argues otherwise, expressing her contrary opinion indignantly:

Don't say such foolish things... They are the only type of novel that I can read now. I'll tell you what I love about them. Everything is so complicated and the really marvelous detectives who know everything: art from the Ming dynasty, graphology, Einstein's theory, baseball, archaeology, chiromancy, political economy, statistics about the raising of rabbits in India. And then they are so infallible that it's pleasing... I'm sure that you must have a theory about the detective novel. (Sabato 119, my translation)

Hunter responds with absolutely no hesitation:

Yes... My theory is as follows. The detective novel represents in the twentieth century what the books of chivalry were in the age of Cervantes. What's more: I think that something like *Don Quixote* could be created: a satire about the detective novel. Imagine an individual who has spent his life reading detective novels and has gone mad enough to believe that the world functions like a novel by Nicholas Blake or Ellery Queen. Imagine that the poor guy finally ends up trying to discover crimes and to proceed in his real life the way a detective proceeds in one of those novels. I think that it could be something funny, tragic, symbolic, satirical and beautiful. (Sabato 121, my translation)

Hunter's response may indicate that he has long meditated on this subject. Yet it is also possible that Hunter is merely repeating an existing critique he has either heard about or read

elsewhere concerning the popularity of the detective genre and its many exemplars. In either instance, it is relevant that Hunter structures his own critique of the detective novel through an awareness of the debate about books of chivalry that informed Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's influential and brilliant *Don Quixote*. The alarmist tirade against popular literature of the age is, in fact, the purported catalyst for Cervantes' entire work, who in the *Prologue* to Book One of *Don Quixote* asserts that his entire work aims "...at no more than destroying the authority and influence which books of chivalry have in the world and among the common people" (Cervantes 30). Before introducing the eponymous protagonist, Cervantes states clearly that he will add an opinion to this interchange about the genre's negative influence upon its readers. Cervantes then introduces Don Quixote as an individual whose love for books of chivalry has led to a lack of reason and a tenuous hold on reality, for in reading these books "...his brain dried up and he lost his wits. He filled his mind with all that he read in them, with enchantments, quarrels, battles, challenges, wounds, wooings, loves, torments and other impossible nonsense; and so deeply did he steep his imagination in the belief that all the fanciful stuff he read was true, that to his mind no history in the world was more authentic" (Cervantes 30).

Whereas Cervantes intimates that the influence of this literary genre purportedly interfered with the commoner's ability to discern historical fact from pure fiction, it is clear through the substance of the text that Cervantes does not truly believe that books of chivalry caused a conflation of the real with the unreal that is supposedly a point of contention and a catalyst for his own satire. Significantly, *Don Quixote* does not intend to destroy the influence of the genre, but instead to parody and satirize the whole ongoing controversy about the genre. Indeed, Cervantes' work is much more of an examination of the social, economic and historical realities of Spain in the 17th century than it is about any corpus of literature.

Hunter, too, seems to understand the parodic intention of Cervantes, and his statement derives from his knowledge that books of chivalry in Cervantes' age were considered to be pernicious to the uncultivated mind. It is compelling that Hunter invokes Cervantes to frame his own critical stance about the popularity of detective fiction in his own age, citing the same purported dangers that propelled the controversies about chivalric romances. Yet in his assessment, Hunter indeed censures detective fiction similarly as being fodder to further delude the ignorant, implying that simple entertainment can be detrimental to those who do not discern and do not have the acumen to readily dissect what they are shown or presented.

Though he does not provide any specific instances of when detective fiction corrupted the minds of the ignorant, Hunter invokes the debate during Cervantes' era to apply it to his current society. By lambasting the inability of the public to dissect and analyze what it is presented, Hunter raises a concern that has reverberated over time throughout different societies, evidently during his own epoch. Indeed, this same apprehension arises prominently in Amara Lakhous' *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, wherein Lakhous takes aim at television and popular mystery novels in contemporary Italian society. In particular, Elisabetta Fabiani's enthusiasm for televised mystery programs and trendy mystery novels are implicated as her framework and referent for the world, and while such entertainment is never definitively stated to have caused Elisabetta to lose her sanity, her love for such entertainment seemingly influenced her tenuous conception of reality. Echoing Hunter's apprehension, Lakhous mirrors the notion that popular entertainment may have provided the susceptible woman's blueprint for her plan and possible murder of the Gladiator.

Unlike Lakhous's Amedeo, Sabato's Hunter does not gauge meaningful works of art and entertainment as those having lasting political or social resonances or to have a didactic element

whatsoever. Rather, he faults detective novels and mysteries mainly for a lack of originality and innovation, proven by his simplistic assertion that all crime novels are formulaic and can be substituted for one another. Hunter's comments indicate that he sees a formula replicated in the detective genre; he does not seem to recognize, as Mimi apparently does, that certain features, elements of plot, setting, and topoi are necessary guidelines that define the genre.

As such, Hunter describes the detective novel he claims he would write if he were so inclined, apparently as a counter to other instances of unreflective and imitative amusement and as a paragon of originality. He states:

One time I thought of a great idea of a detective novel...A man has a mother, wife and a child. One night the mother is mysteriously killed. The policeman's investigations do not turn up any results. Shortly later they kill the wife; the same thing. Finally they kill the child. The man is crazed... Despaired, he decides to investigate the crime himself. With the usual inductive, deductive, analytical, synthetic methods, etc., from those geniuses from the detective novel, he arrives at the conclusion that the assassin will have to commit a fourth assassination, on such a day, such a time and in such a place. His conclusion is that the assassin will have to kill him now. On the calculated day and time, the man goes to the place where the fourth murder must be committed and waits for the assassin. But the murderer does not arrive. He reviews his deductions: he must have calculated the wrong place; no, the place is right; he must have calculated the time wrong; no, the time is right. The conclusion is horrific: *the assassin must already be there*. In other words: *he is the murderer*, who has committed the crimes in an

unconscious state. The *detective* and the murderer are the same person. (Sabato 121, my translation)

To this proposed tale, Mimi dismissively replies “...too original for my taste” (Sabato 121, my translation). This is an amusing response, and Sabato likely introduces it with irony: the story that Hunter advocates is not entirely original at all, for it is quickly reminiscent of Jorge Luis Borges’s 1942 *Death and the Compass*. Specifically, Hunter’s emphasis on a carefully calculated time, place and day, along with the deduction that the murders must follow a numerological pattern- precisely the repetition of threes and fours- readily recalls Borges’s own detective Lönnrot as he arrives at Triste le Roi in anticipation of apprehending a murderer based on his numerical calculations and logical deductions. Like Hunter’s proposed detective, Lönnrot is mistaken and astonished to find himself compromised, for the murderer is already present when he arrives.

It is pertinent that in Borges’s tale, Lönnrot becomes the victim and incorrectly deduces what must occur, for it is a direct result of his steadfast and unyielding convictions and expectations that Lönnrot has erred and deduced one vital element incorrectly, mistaking the geometrical pattern that would dictate where and when the next killing should occur. Likewise, this again recalls the point that Wilson makes in his essay; the expert detective, like the critic, may fail to notice or observe something crucial precisely because of his self-assurance and pre-existing expectations.

Sabato, who clearly is aware of the literary tradition to which he himself belongs, and is also aware of the writings of his peers, highlights this aspect of Hunter as well. While Hunter flaunts an awareness of literature, of its debates, and the historical questions surrounding it, his opinions about detective fiction are preconceived, decisive, and extremely narrow. He is certain

about exactly what he expects to find in the genre, and therefore pronounces an authoritative and definitive judgment that all instances are imitative and therefore lack literary value. Meanwhile, he conceives of his own example as a paradigm of originality, suggesting that it would be better than those that in fact do exist, for he would involve what he believes to be an unexpected and shocking conclusion.

Hunter, it must be noted again, has not written any story; moreover the core of his idea loosely emulates an existing model that is far more complex in its ideological underpinnings and its execution. His idea recalls a Borgesian metaphysical mystery, yet it is nonetheless more facile for Hunter's "innovation" relies almost exclusively on the presence of a double- a clear parallel already subtly though assuredly present in *Death and the Compass* through Detective Lönnrot and his nemesis and double, Scharlach. Hunter's idea entirely lacks the complexity or subtleties of Borges's tale, failing to engage with alternate notions of time and space. It does not involve ancient cabalistic thought or explore views about philosophy, geometry, and numerology. Even Mimi states that these are the most interesting tropes in the detective fiction she reads, but most notably, Hunter's idea does not even offer a perplexingly fantastic solution that astonishes or confounds the scaffolding of man's reasoning about the world.

Additionally, as Hunter pronounces judgment on *El séptimo círculo* without having read it himself, he seemingly does not know that *El séptimo círculo* was also compiled and edited by Borges and his close collaborator, Adolfo Bioy Casares, both esteemed and prolific authors who have seen the virtues and innovation of detective fiction for deep reflection and questioning accepted notions of time, space and reality and the epistemological bases that scaffold human reasoning and the plausibility of the world.

Hunter's remarks about the detective novel in any instance suggest a limited understanding about genre, tradition and a trajectory that links literary production with precursors and prior models. While he evidently envisions a Borgesian model as original and thus better, he fails to see that authors write with an awareness of other works and expand upon and innovate based on existing conventions. Indeed, even Borges's own masterful experiments with fiction, including his transformations of the detective genre, attest to a profound awareness of the interconnectedness and interrelationship between all literature, writers, thinkers and ideas. Moreover, Borges has suggested that texts are never static objects limited to single interpretations, nor are they bound to any society or time for they are actively "created" by the reader in a subjective and every changing process of construal and interpretation.³

As Julia A. Kushigian cogently points out in her essay "The Detective Story Genre in Poe and Borges," Borges's writings themselves insist that no author ever writes in a vacuum, and that originality is a moot and limiting concept when one appreciates that all writers are indebted to their predecessors. She therefore asserts:

...writers of the detective story adhere to strict limitations imposed upon them by its originator [Poe], although Borges may bend the limitations slightly... A detective story must be developed in such a manner that there are many tempting and possible solutions placed before the reader which are eventually proven false, and a highly improbable solution revealed at the conclusion which is proven correct. It is the uncertainty of these elements in the structure or in the

³ This is precisely the premise of Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," in which Cervantes' *Don Quixote* is credited as a text created by the fictitious French author whose reading and verbatim rewriting of the text in the 20th century dictates and redefines the novel's meaning and can be considered as his own work.

development of the action that heightens the “secret plot” of the narrative.
(Kushigian 28)

Consequently, Kushigian reinforces that genres provide parameters, and those authors who follow the genre write within an established framework while innovating or personalizing it. As such, the lack of originality that Hunter faults in mystery stories appear instead to be valuable guidelines and signposts for authors and readers, and imitation and emulation of other examples is not a deficit, but an expected phenomenon.

It is to highlight this point that Kushigian notes Borges is himself deeply beholden to Edgar Allan Poe in his own creation of *Death and the Compass*, paralleling how this story reflects and engages with several aspects of Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*, particularly in the many possible solutions that are introduced by the Prefect. She also asserts that Poe’s manifestations of the detective genre border on the fantastic, a genre that both Borges and his friend Bioy Casares appreciated for the possibility to “employ fictions not to evade reality but to express a deeper and more complex view of reality...to offer metaphors of reality through which the author wishes to transcend the superficial or pedestrian observations of realism” (qtd. in Kushigian 5).

The unquestionable and well-recognized emulation and influence of Poe (and many other authors, philosophers and traditions) on Borges’s own experiments thus does not belie a lack of invention, originality or commonplaces in his writing. Instead, it underlies Borges own belief that “writers create their precursors” (Kushigian 27), and implies that new writers inevitably will be compared and contrasted with all previous writers, for they belong to a tradition that predates and will continue long after them. Borges is himself adamant that this emulation and imitation ought not to be perceived as a failure to be original, nor should it suggest that the “...writer of the new generation is an improved version of the precursor by virtue of his place in history and

the influence of all writers who have gone before him” (Kushigian 28). Moreover, Borges’s very use of the word precursor “is explicit about avoiding the negative connotation of one who has failed in his endeavor but who has paved the way for others” (Kushigian 28).

Thus if Hunter’s greatest criticism against the entire mystery genre is an alleged lack of originality, it is significant that he fails to see that his own ideas are wholly unoriginal. Moreover he is unable to perceive how novelty may nonetheless arise within familiar and traditional forms, and likewise fails to acknowledge there may be scholarly and ponderous elements present in some of the very texts he condemns for being unsophisticated. Hunter’s foray into literary criticism cogently draws attention to the pitfalls of supposed experts and arbiters as they approach their field of inquiry.

It is likely in expectation of such negative criticism, censure and dismissal of their works that the writers considered in this study strive to demonstrate their awareness and their appreciation of their predecessors as they write. Certainly these authors envisage their novels as sharp commentaries that probe essential social and political issues, and therefore need to distinguish them from simple, unsophisticated examples of the genre that lack serious and consequential ideological underpinnings. As such, these authors frequently introduce scholarly elements into their texts, thereby obliging the reader to reflect on the complexities within and to draw connections between the work at hand and other complex and demanding works by venerated thinkers.

One such instance of this endeavor is the unambiguously present dimension of interconnectivity and intertextuality that has been alluded to in the preceding analysis, in which a character from Sabato’s *El túnel* references a volume of detective fiction curated by Adolfo Bioy Casares and Jorge Luis Borges. It is also germane that Borges along with Sabato are invoked in

the work of Saccomanno, albeit to condemn their actions as prominent figures during a time of national strife and tyranny. Significantly, Borges also appears prominently in many works by Leonardo Sciascia, and Borges also appears prominently in the fiction of Ricardo Piglia.

Ultimately, in the process of recreating their antecedents, several of the authors invoke these very precursors to acknowledge their indebtedness to other writers and texts in the formation of their own creative process, education and musings.

Such recognition is made evident preliminarily through the presentation of epigraphs that initiate many of the novels. Because epigraphs introduce so many texts, perhaps the significance of their inclusion is overlooked or fails to invite deep consideration of their incidence. Yet in many of these historical mystery novels, it is clear that the authors conceive of the epigraph as a vital part of their text, and have carefully incorporated them for their ability to serve as initial clues and delicate hints for apprehending the substance of the works and for directing the reader towards themes that may be secondary to the action or are treated with more subtlety. These epigraphs are taken from works by authors known by literate readers, and they suggest an awareness or admiration of other authors and texts that may guide a reading of their own works. They thus do not appear as mere instances of pedantry, but rather thematize the substance or essence of the works in which they are incorporated.

As noted in Chapter 3, Amara Lakhous introduces his *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* through three brief epigraphs that immediately problematize notions of truth, the past and the global south, centralizing some of the key motifs and issues that surface in his novel. As the search for truth and a concurrent examination of Italian history and the south are continually discussed throughout the narrative, the epigraphs suggest that these concerns extend beyond Lakhous' present and his own consideration of them. Two of the works alluded to

are by Arabic language writers, Amal Donkol and Tahar Djaout, and Lakhous additionally includes an epigraph from Leonardo Sciascia's *The Day of the Owl*. It is particularly appropriate that Sciascia's epigraph is positioned between, or surrounded by, those of the two Arabic writers. While the quote from Sciascia suggests the Italian author's writing has been a significant inspiration for Lakhous as he composed his own text in Italian, Lakhous nonetheless demonstrates a profound awareness and appreciation of Arabic literature. His epigraphs not only launch momentous motifs coursing throughout his text, but also suggest that his own place within the Italian canon is shaped by his knowledge about and participation within another literary tradition and canon.

Likewise, Leonardo Sciascia's *Equal Danger* begins with three epigraphs that introduce the tension of the novel by placing two Enlightenment philosophers, Michel de Montaigne and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, at odds with each other. Significantly, the epigraphs preface the binary between an admirable, just society and a place where mankind must live in continual and justifiable fear of its institutions. The novel's first epigraph from Montaigne advises that "One must do as the animals do, who erase every footprint in front of their lair." Foremost, the epigraph allows Sciascia to suggest that man must live with a measured degree of caution, distrust and pessimism about his society. Montaigne's words advocate self-preservation through diligent efforts to avoid notice and to leave no evidence of one's existence in society. This epigraph highlights that safety and self-preservation is a foremost concern superseding all others, and likewise implies that mankind has not progressed beyond other animals in its conduct or institutions. To trust otherwise, it implies, is contrary to instinct, and will lead to one's demise.

In response to such an admonition, Sciascia places Rousseau's epigraph below, in clear opposition to the previous one: "O Montaigne! You who pride yourself on your candor and

truthfulness, be sincere and truthful, if a philosopher can be so, and tell me whether there exists on earth a country where it is a crime to keep one's given word and to be clement and generous, where the good man is despised and the wicked man honored." The epigraph by Rousseau directly assails Montaigne's pessimistic stance in the first epigraph, instead suggesting that human beings are not merely instinctual animals but ethical and magnanimous beings with institutions buttressed by order, intelligence, and reason. Rousseau's words suggest that man has moved past other animals with a capacity for reason that can advance society, and significantly that honor and righteousness are innately embraced pillars in any state.

The third brief epigraph, "O Rousseau!" is ascribed to an anonymous writer, perhaps Sciascia himself, and once again frames Rousseau's epigraph. While the interjection may be read as praise for Rousseau's idealism and to uphold his view as honorable and virtuous, the substance of the novel instead advocates reading it as a lament for Rousseau's idealism, optimism and naiveté given the nefarious and corrupt state that Sciascia will depict in *Equal Danger*.

In his study *Leonardo Sciascia's French Authors*, Ian Morrison suggests that Sciascia is indeed aligned with Montaigne's view presented through the epigraph commencing Sciascia's text. Morrison notes that the novel's protagonist, Inspector Rogas, subscribes to Rousseau's view of an inherently moral and decent society that has progressed through man's intellect and capacity for reason. He states: "The first epigraph advises a degree of caution that is appropriate in this dangerous land.... However, Rogas himself disregards such advice... as a man of principle, Rogas rejects the prudent option. The decision costs him his life, and his fate underlines yet again the perils of his unnamed country" (135).

Morrison also asserts that this tension between the ideas of Montaigne and Rousseau embody the entire spirit of the novel and summarize some of the most notable motifs. He states: “In so contradicting the epigraph from [Montaigne’s] *Émile*, the narrative implies rejection of Rousseau’s optimism and approval of Montaigne’s pessimistic relativism.... This first endorsement of Montaigne also indicates that other echoes of the essayist in the text deserve close attention... this is particularly true of two connected themes... freedom and withdrawal from the world” (Morrison 135).

Certainly these epigraphs introduce the nature of the work to follow, while also framing Sciascia’s mystery novel with his profound knowledge of the works of these two prominent Enlightenment thinkers. These introductory ideas from philosophers and their texts underlie the importance Sciascia ascribes to them in his own examination of society and the state. Yet the concerns introduced in the epigraphs are only a hint of what will follow, as such preliminary discussions of justice, reason and the nature of state institutions will undergo a process of distillation and intense dilation throughout the narrative and further inform the substance of the novel. Indeed, in *Equal Danger*, some of the most significant discussions about epistemological foundations for understanding and approaching the order of society, its institutions and fundamental beliefs of humankind are expressed through the ideas and words of other prominent philosophers and writers.

Consequently, as Rogas initiates his investigation into the murders of the various magistrates, he often filters hints, suspects and information he receives through the musings of philosophers who have commented on related quandaries. Sciascia thus creates a police inspector who is uncommonly well-rounded and well-read, and his ability to analyze ideas and apply

meticulous reasoning to his perceptions renders him an intellectual equal with the most powerful and educated individuals he encounters.

As an example, this occurs when Rogas' investigation brings him into discussion with the various writers associated with the leftist magazine *Permanent Revolution*. Rogas' task is to arrest the presumed author of an unsigned article deemed seditious to the security of the state; yet rather than attending uniquely to this assignment at hand, he willingly enters into an intellectual discussion and debate with another writer, Nocio, about the actual prospect of a revolution occurring in their society. Their exchange pivots around ideas of probability, and liberty, and free will, and is approached through the ideas of another 17th century philosopher, Blaise Pascal. The likelihood of a revolution occurring in the unnamed nation is cogently expressed by the editor through Pascal's "necessity of the wager"; clearly, it is a premise that both the writer and Rogas are wholly familiar with, and they can thus generalize and apply its tenets to an examination of the current state of their society.

Rather than contemplating a belief in God, however, Nocio extends the substance of Pascal's wager to the viability of societal upheaval and change in their own age. He asserts:

If I believe in God, in eternal life, in the immortality of the soul – even if these things don't exist – what price must I pay? Nothing. But if I don't believe, and if these things do exist, the price to be paid is everlasting death... Today the possibility of making the wager has shifted from metaphysics to history. Now the 'beyond' is the revolution. I would risk losing everything were I to bet against the revolution. But if I bet on it, I lose nothing if it doesn't take place; I win everything if it does. (Sciascia 57)

Rogas then asserts that he is committed to be on the losing side of the wager, for he maintains: “I don’t want to risk winning. And I’ve a soft spot for losing, for losers. I can tell you, too, that I’m discovering in myself a kind of affection for the revolution—precisely because it is already defeated.” He ultimately asserts that the “country cannot pay for its mistakes,” for there is nothing to pay with anyhow (Sciascia 57). Rogas’ position shocks Nocio, for Nocio perhaps believes the inspector will be incapable of apprehending the reference and engaging in such a discussion; instead, it is evident in the exchange that the police inspector enjoys the intellectual tête à tête, as he counters each point with discernment and the articulation of his own well-considered beliefs about the state they live in.

Likewise, when Rogas meets Riches, the President of the Supreme Court, the ensuing discussion of justice and judicial error unfolds through another Enlightenment thinker. The President substantiates his supposed infallibility by stating “Everything began with Jean Calas... Have you ever read it?” (Sciascia 87). Rogas immediately recognizes the reference from “*An Essay on Tolerance, Upon the Occasion of the Death of Jean Calas*,” indicating his familiarity with Voltaire’s essay and his ideas about social reform, justice and pointed critiques of the French institutions of his day. Riches is surprised by Rogas’ familiarity with the essay, and notes the incongruity he perceives in Rogas’ scholarship sarcastically: “Ah, you have read it... Our police permit themselves unimaginable luxuries” (Sciascia 87).

Riches proceeds to dispute a “weak point in Voltaire’s tract, the point where I take off to set things right again, occurs on the very first page, when he proposes the difference between death in war and death at the hands... of justice. This difference does not exist; justice sits in a perennial state of danger, in a perennial state of war” (Sciascia 88). The President consequently argues that the justice system relies on his claim that the individual does not exist, that “dishonor

and crime must be restored to the corpus of the multitude” (Sciascia 89). Ultimately, he suggests that any individual punished, regardless of guilt or innocence, reinforces the machinery of justice and the principle of fear and retribution that keeps society working. In Riches’ argument, individuals are examples to all of humanity, becoming faceless, numberless and indistinguishable.

This troubles Rogas who responds to the President’s dissertation with an unlikely assertion, countering “Number can never be indefinite” (Sciascia 89). Taken aback, Riches responds, “How’s that? What did you say?” (Sciascia 89). Yet instead, Rogas internally digresses, and begins to filter the entire discussion about Voltaire, justice, and the conflating of billions of men for one through an idea that he has examined at length through a work by Borges. Here, Sciascia’s inspector reasons as though he were Borges himself, reflecting on Riches argument through the Argentinean’s essay that he reconstitutes silently and precisely:

Argumentum ornithologicum. I close my eyes and see a flock of birds. The vision lasts a second or perhaps less. I don’t know how many birds I saw. Were they a definite or indefinite number? This problem involves the question of the existence of God. If God exists, the number is definite, because how many birds I saw is known to God. If God does not exist, the number is indefinite, because nobody was able to take count. In this case, I saw fewer than ten birds (let’s say) and more than one; but I did not see nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, or two. I saw a number somewhere between ten and one, but not nine, eight, seven, six, five, etc. That number, as a whole number, is inconceivable; *ergo*, God exists. When the brief page had reconstituted itself in his memory, he turned from it to give his attention once more to what the President was saying, but with the sense that that

flock of birds, which for a second or maybe less had flown before Borges's closed eyes, might be more real, not to say definite, than the man who was talking to him and than everything else around him. (Sciascia 89-90)

Borges's essay is recalled by Rogas to deconstruct the magistrate's argument, and particularly to reassess the premise that one man's existence can be lumped into a numberless mass. Indeed, Sciascia here portrays Rogas as literate and analytical, rational and scrupulous in his dissection of complex arguments for the flaws he notes in them. The highly educated policeman appears repeatedly enlightened, and his capacity for analysis and magnanimity align him with Rousseau's belief that intellect and reason should lead to fairness and justice in his society's institutions. Yet in his country, his principles place him in a dangerous position, trapped "... in a labyrinth and [he] must find the thread in order to get out. One thread lay within reach: the one that would lead them out by their simple forgetting... [the] formula that two thousand years of their country's history made prophetic and fatal" (Sciascia 102). It is indeed apt that Borges's presence is again subtly conjured in the undisguised allusion to the labyrinth. For the labyrinth, the most Borgesian of symbols, is invoked to describe the unnamed nation's history as a web hallmarked by lassitude and oblivion, where it is perhaps possible to find a way out, though a series of wrong turns and impasses present themselves at every point.

In addition to the inclusion of the various French Enlightenment writers and Borges throughout the novel, there are also other instances when Sciascia makes deliberate and specific allusions to Italian authors and their works, including those of Alessandro Manzoni, Francesco Petrarca and Gabriele D'Annunzio, though these fellow Italians do not serve as readily as the French thinkers to propel theories about justice at the crux of the novel. In any case, this notable intertextual dimension of *Equal Danger* suggests the extensive and influence of such writers in

society, as well as their impact on individual knowledge. For not only Inspector Rogas, but virtually all individuals he encounters, are keenly aware of literature, authors and philosophers as they structure their inquiries through the words or philosophies of other writers. These complex allusions indeed complicate any simple reading of the novel, presupposing an audience that either is aware of these references, or at least has the ability to research and investigate the references to extract meaning from them and to understand how Sciascia sees them as significant in his own examination of society and the state.

Much in the way that Sciascia introduces philosophers, authors, important treatises and texts in *Equal Danger* to add layers of meaning to the novel beyond the surface, this occurs as well in works of other writers of mysteries. Particularly in the case of Ricardo Piglia, such allusions are often included more indirectly and in a much more arcane style. Piglia's inclusion of such references can be compared to the subtle way that Detective Lönnrot appears in Borges's *Death of the Compass*; the detective's name itself is significant, provided that the reader is able to see a connection and decipher the possible reasons why Borges has given his detective the name of a prominent Finnish intellectual interested in the process of reconstructing a lost narrative.⁴

Rather than specifically recalling the texts or the particular musings of any author, Piglia often inserts the presence of a significant figure into his novels more insidiously, without

⁴ In *Borges: realidades y simulacros*, critic Daniel Balderston asserts that Borges's use of the name Lönnrot in *Death and the Compass* is a precise and deliberate inclusion, for it conjures the Finnish philosopher Elias Lönnrot. Balderston proceeds to explain how Lönnrot, a disciple of Herder, was the most important Finnish intellectual in the period following Sweden's cession of Finland to Russia in 1809. Balderston cites Hillis Miller's assertion that Lönnrot believed he could accurately reconstruct Finland's lost national epic poem, the *Kalevala*, "on the basis of dispersed fragments collected in different parts of Finland. This effort of reconstruction was something like collecting letters that were geographically dispersed in order to spell out the secret name of God [in *Death and the Compass*]." (97-98)

necessarily explicating the importance of the reference. Like Borges, Piglia anticipates that his reader will make connections and seek analogies to drive a subjective construal of the work. This technique is reflected in Piglia's introduction of literary figures and prominent intellectuals appearing throughout *The Absent City* and *Artificial Respiration*. In both novels centering on missing individuals in a tyrannical state, the presence of authors, philosophers and other scholars is apparent throughout, but often appear as hidden and abstracted references that require detection and perspicacity to understand why these allusions are present and how their occurrence in the novel can serve as a guide to read and interpret it.

Consequently, in *The Absent City*, the inventor who creates the memory and narrative machine, Elena, is named Macedonio Fernández, a reference that is charged with implications throughout the text. Through the introduction of a significant character named Macedonio Fernández, Piglia thus pays homage to a prominent Argentinean writer from the former half of the twentieth century, an author considered to be a pivotal figure in Argentina's avant-garde movements, and moreover one who was admired by Borges for his ingenuity (*Absent City* 7). In the introduction to the English version of the work, translator and scholar Sergio Waisman again remarks on the importance of Borges to Piglia not only here, but also by detailing how Piglia's inclusion of Fernandez is itself an experimental inversion of a narrative formula readily ascribed to Borges. For, rather than creating imaginary writers like Herbert Quainn and Pierre Menard to whom invented texts are ascribed, Piglia engages with Borges's ideas and writings as he "conversely, takes a real writer from history and attributes to him fictional works and actions. It is the inverse... of one aspect of Borges's poetics" (*Absent City* 7). Thus such inversions between the real and the fictional in Argentine literature, as well as the active conflation of genres blurring fiction with literary criticism, can readily be traced back to Borges. Waisman

significantly notes that Piglia employs this “to interpret reality (including history, politics and culture) through literature” (*Absent City* 7).

As Piglia includes and experiments with such references, Waisman posits that Piglia uses these specifically to “(re)draw literary genealogies and raise issues associates with accepted canons” (*Absent City* 5). Piglia, too, is actively creating his precursors as he concurrently probes at the country’s history and stakes his place within its literary tradition, recognizing that “an important aspect of a nation’s identity is its literary inheritance and how this heritage is perceived – and constructed—in the present” (*Absent City* 5).

Macedonio Fernández is part of Piglia’s literary inheritance, whose most notable project was a novel he continued to write over the course of forty-five years and never completed. His *El Museo de la Novela de la Eterna* (Museum of the Novel of the Eternal One) was only published posthumously in 1967, but it is apt that the Fernández of *The Absent City* is an inventor who creates a machine that intends to eternally recreate stories and will never complete her perpetual task. Indeed, in her final moments of the narrative Elena echoes Fernández’s process, stating “Endless, I create memories, but nothing else, I am full of stories, I cannot stop” (*Absent City* 139). Additionally, the motif of the museum is prevalent throughout the novel, for museums are key and nuanced spaces, and even the machine itself is housed in a museum in the center of Buenos Aires. In *The Absent City*, though, Piglia represents museums not as receptacles for memory and experience but instead as hermetic places that are separate from the real world existing outside, a static sphere that separates the living from the dead. It is for this reason that when the narrative machine becomes a threat to the totalitarian order in place, state intelligence unsuccessfully tries to shunt her away “to the Museum, to invent a Museum for her... to see if

they could negate her, convert her into what is known as a museum piece, a dead world” (*Absent City* 119).

Despite these analogous associations, the inventor Macedonio Fernández in Piglia’s novel is not intended to be construed as the author who wrote in the first half of the twentieth century but instead as a fictional character. Nevertheless, Waisman cautions “...it would be misleading to imagine that the use of Macedonio’s name in *The Absent City* is arbitrary. In fact, there is a move in the novel to place Macedonio’s anarchic ideas as an aesthetic and political response to the totalizing narratives of the State, which seeks to order and control the individual, to determine meaning and one’s place in society from outside the self” (*Absent City* 7).

Macedonio Fernández’s presence in the novel is therefore intended to recall some of his own ideas and to reinforce other motifs that Piglia wishes to elucidate in his work. But there are assuredly instances in *The Absent City* when Macedonio Fernández’s presence reflects the actual writer’s own history and place in the Argentine literary canon and social order. As such, the fictional Macedonio Fernández, the inventor, is at one point said to have been antagonized by the famous Argentinean poet Leopoldo Lugones, who also is invoked in the novel. Piglia even creates a scenario in which Lugones’ own son, a police chief, acts on orders from his father for Macedonio Fernández to be “followed and watched by the police for all those years, purely out of literary jealousy, envious of the respect that Macedonio’s sober attitude elicited among the younger generation, who scorned Lugones for exemplifying the writer who always allows himself to be used by government and those in power” (*Absent City* 133).

With Lugones often appearing as a political figure, Waisman contends, “The novel’s critique of Lugones does not necessarily relate to the value of his work, but rather to the fact that Lugones willingly allowed himself to become part of the mechanism of the State. He became the

figure of the patriotic writer whom the State uses to limit freedoms” (*Absent City* 7). While Piglia’s inclusion of Lugones in his narrative could be seen to parallel Saccomanno’s discussion of Borges and Sabato as prominent figures in society, there is indeed instances of critique in the novel that approach Lugones entirely in terms of his writing and not just as a political figure or proponent of the state. Waisman also alludes to the fact that Lugones own literary production constrained other authors and their expression, noting: “At an aesthetic level, Lugones can also be seen as the figure of the canonical writer used to exclude the entry of more revolutionary or anarchistic thinkers, such as Macedonio Fernández” (*Absent City* 7). Indeed, Piglia does reveal deep antipathy towards Lugones in his novel, taking aim at his writing and at his reactionary political position by invoking elements of his personal life and his ultimate suicide.

According to Alberto Acereda and Rigoberto Guevara in their study *Modernism, Ruben Darío, and the Poetics of Despair* Lugones:

...ended up partially adapting to the imposed social system. This way, Lugones slowly became more traditional to the point of bordering fascism at the end of his life, when he participated in a military conspiracy in favor of general Uriburu in 1930. Lugones’ suicide in 1938... was not, however, the product of being a social inept, but rather of a failed romance and a progressive illness. (58)

However, in the pages of the novel, Piglia narrates the despair that led Lugones to kill himself differently, not legitimizing pains due to illness and unrequited love. Instead, Piglia holds him accountable for scandal and the anticipation of overwhelming public shame that would ultimately blemish his image in the eyes of his cohorts, suggesting exactly that he was a “social inept.” Thus Piglia has his Macedonio Fernández relate another version of his death: “Yet Lugones committed suicide, when the chief of the police, Macedonio used to say, ordered him to

leave his clandestine lover and threatened him with making the affair a public scandal, which would destroy his reputation of being a moral Argentine citizen and a representative of the extreme right of Argentina” (*Absent City* 133).

By having his Macedonio Fernández advance a different and more salacious version of Lugones’ demise, Piglia employs the same facts introduced by Acereda and Guevara, but provides a far more nuanced and negative view of the poet. This stands in contrast to Acereda and Guevara’s neutral description, which does not consider any ramifications his extremely conservative position may have had on society, writers and citizens. Moreover, Acereda and Guevara describe Lugones’ death without any judgment, and almost with empathy and in his defense. Piglia conversely provides a narrative that ultimately faults the poet’s excessively nationalistic and conservative moral stance as contrary to his own disreputable actions. Without exposing the details of the affair, Piglia suggests hypocritical and immoral behavior in the poet speak louder than his words, and proposes that Lugones knew he would deservedly be shunned for his contradictory views and actions. Piglia’s gloss about the poet’s suicide is not surprising, however, considering how Lugones’ represented an extremely reactionary regime that attempted to control freedoms similar to the totalitarian state that is the context for *The Absent City*.

In addition to these overt instances of criticism and commentary posited through Macedonio Fernández in the text, Waisman points out that the writer Macedonio Fernández was particularly interested in the importance of language in creating meaning and in human conceptions of time and space. Certainly these considerations drive Piglia’s narrative, for the entire novel focuses on a state attempting to control not only the populace’s actions and thoughts, but also its ability to express experiences through language and to speak subjective truths (*Absent City* 6). Moreover, the effort to reconstitute the “absent” city of Buenos Aires unfolds entirely

through narrative that attempts to depict a geographical location through subjective experiences that unfold within its confines.

Thus, the character of Macedonio Fernández is introduced into Piglia's novel to ingeniously highlight some of the writer's most striking views, and to hint at how these theories subtly operate in *The Absent City*. Yet Fernández is merely one figure to prominently appear in the novel. Notably, the latter half of the novel repeatedly invokes James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, as the action moves to an island in the Tigre Delta where the reporter, Junior, searches for clues about where Elena is ultimately located. As Sergio Waisman declares in his article "De la ciudad futura a la ciudad ausente: la textualización de Buenos Aires," this island is an imaginary, utopian intersection between Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and Macedonio Fernández's ideas, "where language and aesthetics are operations that allow for questioning borders (political, geographical, linguistic)" (Waisman, "*De la ciudad futura*," my translation). In the novel, Piglia also describes how Joyce's novel functions as a model for the world and for all knowledge, for "the only written source available on the island is *Finnegans Wake*, which everyone considers a sacred text, because they can always read it, regardless of the stage of language in which they find themselves.... It reproduces the permutations of language on a microscopic scale. It is like a miniature model of the world... the book is like a map, and history is transformed depending on the course chosen" (*Absent City* 110-111).

Piglia's introduction of Joyce's text is meaningful for his project in *The Absent City*, as it also reflects the novel's design and architecture. As Waisman also sees this parallel, hypothesizing that in Joyce:

...we have the novel as city, the city as novel, composed of journeys that draw a textual map that readers can follow as they read...What Joyce does with language

in *Finnegans Wake* – cross one tongue with another, blur and distort linguistic and grammatical distinctions, to end up with a language that seems to contain all languages – is similar to what Piglia does with narrative lines in *The Absent City*. Stories cross and intersect, narratives are intertwined and they are conflated, juxtaposing several story lines. The machine that is sought after throughout the work does this, and creates interruption as a central point of the narrative. (*Absent City* 8)

In his essay “El ultimo lector [The Last Reader],” Piglia once again corroborates how such points of contact between Joyce’s can be seen to inform his own writing, as he asserts, “*Finnegans Wake* is a laboratory that submits reading to the most extreme test. As one approaches it, those blurry lines become letters and the letters coincide with each other and get mixed together, words are transmuted, they change, the text is a river, a multiple torrent, always in expansion. We read remnants, loose pieces, fragments, the unity of meaning is illusory” (19-20, my translation). In its fragmented and interrupted reconstruction of Buenos Aires, *The Absent City* reflects this narrative climate found in Joyce’s work: it amalgamates words into narratives and storylines and deliberately fractures them, forcing the reader to wade through a text that is exactly a series of fragments and loose pieces in order to synthesize their significance into a holistic narrative.

While Joyce and Fernández are both present in the novel for the contents of their writing and their respective experiments with narrative and language, their presence is also meaningful to Piglia for their dissidence against the aesthetic and political status quo in their countries and traditions (*Absent City* 8). Indeed, Piglia admires a common “hermeticism as a poetics” (*Absent City* 143) that he espies in the approach of both authors, and notes his unmasked appreciation of

“the artist who does not seek to be understood by his contemporaries, but rather to present them with an enigma” (*Absent City* 143). In stark contrast to his reproach of Lugones, Piglia ultimately appreciates both Joyce and Fernández precisely because they are authors “who refuse to compromise with society” (*Absent City* 143).

Piglia’s evident admiration of writers who refuse to compromise with society also appears prominently in *Artificial Respiration*, a novel which critiques Argentina’s political history while concurrently examining its notable and prolific literary tradition. *Artificial Respiration*, however, moves beyond *The Absent City* in its consideration of literature and its defining role in society. This is achieved particularly through its consideration of prominent writers who have attempted to define the country’s literary canon, and the purposes to which various writers have employed literature. *Artificial Respiration* thus meditates at length about how literature has been placed at the service of nationalism and patriotism throughout the country’s evolution, as well as the limits that have been imposed on expression and style. Indeed, in the process of constructing a national tradition that aims towards modernity and reflects the circumstances of the present, Piglia implies that newer writers must deconstruct some of the tenets established by their predecessors to forge an aesthetic in keeping with their own vision and experience of the present.

Just as he does in *The Absent City*, Piglia introduces several prominent intellectuals and authors in *Artificial Respiration* to entertain their theories about literature, history and politics. Here again, some of these figures appear as themselves in the novel. Still, others are ideologically-charged fictional characters that recall historical individuals who strongly influenced Argentina’s political, cultural and historical trajectory. In *Artificial Respiration*, however, such characters are introduced under different circumstances than they are in *The*

Absent City. Rather than merely reinforcing his own ideas or adding to them as they often do in *The Absent City*, Piglia's introduction of these personages enable Piglia to reflect and comment on his nation's present state indirectly, allowing him to covertly voice opinions that otherwise may not have been tolerated or expressed at all.

Written in 1980, *Artificial Respiration* was composed during an extremely restrictive period of cultural production during the Argentine military dictatorship. As noted in the discussion of the SADE in 77 in Chapter 3, at that time, authors and intellectuals were frequently considered suspect of subversion and were subject to censorship, if not more severe penalties if their works and ideas gained unwanted attention from the regime. In the wake of disappearances of prominent authors and journalists⁵, authors writing within Argentina recognized the need for "finding new forms of expression" (Massmann 97, my translation) in order to tell their stories and to present their ideas about the current state of the nation. Piglia's novel indeed is a scathing commentary of the current state of the nation, continually reflecting on the repression of individuals and ideas during the era, though much of the criticism and reflections contained in the novel is heavily encoded and appear as cryptic references that require decoding by the reader.

In addition to the novel's double storyline which covertly invites comparisons between the present and former tyrannical regimes in Argentina and elsewhere, referential discourse sustains the novel and enables Piglia to express his observations without them being ascribed to him directly as the author. As critic Stefanie Massmann notes in her essay "La ficción acosada por la realidad: narrar la historia en *Respiración artificial* de Ricardo Piglia," there is a deliberate

⁵ While Haroldo Conti is directly mentioned in Saccomanno's 77 amongst the prominent writers to be disappeared during the 1976-1983 dictatorship, the list of lesser known authors and journalists who were forcibly disappeared easily amounts to at least 50 according to El Ortiba, a journal dedicated to Argentine writing, Lunfardo, news and humor. See ElOrtiba.org.

schema that appears frequently in the novel that reproduces indirect discourse never directly imputable to the narrator, and by extension, to Piglia.

The most controversial observations are consequently uttered through a series of vague phrases such as “somebody says” or “someone writes,” enabling the narrator to appear as if he is merely reproducing snippets of texts with often vague sources (Massmann 98, my translation). It is through this formula that *Artificial Respiration* emerges as an assessment of then-current Argentina, never speaking against the ruling junta or critiquing its actions directly. In addition, characters in the novel rarely relate firsthand observations, but instead examine society by theorizing through well-known tracts of philosophy and literature. This seemingly deflects their remarks away from the current era, for they frequently appear to be discussing events in world history that are not confined to Argentina’s present or past. Still, when reading between the lines, it is apparent that such ruminations are conjured to delicately invite comparison between instances of historical injustice and those occurring momentarily in Argentina.

The storyline of the novel involves a history professor, Marcelo Maggi, who in a detective-like fashion attempts to textually reconstruct the history of his distant relative, Enrique Ossorio, an invented figure who served as a secretary to the former dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas. From his exile in New York in the mid 1800s, Ossorio composes his autobiography as he simultaneously plans to write a “novel of the future” entitled *1979*, in which the protagonist receives letters from Argentina of 1979, imagining what the nation would be like then. These letters are scrutinized by a censor, Arocena, who attempts to find hidden meaning within them, but is never able to determine the code that will do so. Arocena’s dedication to censorship is clearly an instance where the society Ossorio envisions as the present of his futuristic novel reflects the horrific present of the National Reorganization Process from which Maggi writes.

Professor Maggi desperately wants to comment upon and preserve Ossorio's correspondence for posterity, as he sees in it a connection between the past and the present that bears further examination. Maggi notes the asylum he seeks by looking away from the present, stating: "History is the only refuge I can find from a nightmare from which I would like to wake up" (*Artificial Respiration* 17). He also recognizes his project will likely be thwarted, and foreshadows his expected outcome in the face of the nation's present. He laments:

Given the new circumstances in which this country finds itself, I am feeling rather uncertain about my immediate future. Various complications are in store for me and I anticipate a number of changes of address... It's a question for me (above all) of guaranteeing that these documents are preserved, not only because they will be useful (to anyone who knows how to read them properly), casting a light on the past of our unfortunate republic, but also in order to understand some things that are happening in our time and not very far from here. (*Artificial Respiration* 70)

With more than 100 years elapsed between Maggi's Argentina and Ossorio's Argentina, the professor's scrutiny into the past elucidates shocking similarities between the epochs. Considerably, Maggi and Ossorio both write their correspondence during dictatorships, both are constantly aware that their voices may be silenced, and both ultimately are forced to reflect upon their situation from afar as they attempt to save their lives. These similarities between the characters' situations suggest that in over a century, Argentina has not progressed considerably.

Emilio Renzi, Maggi's nephew, is a novelist and theorist who becomes involved in the preservation of Ossorio's writings when he receives the letter from his uncle asking him to help continue the historical project. Renzi is summoned to the distant city of Concordia to meet his

uncle at a bar in order to accept Enrique Ossorio's letters for safekeeping. Maggi, however, never appears, and while there is never any explanation as to why, it is inferred that he has been captured and disappeared during the National Reorganization Process. As Renzi waits expectantly at the bar, he meets some of his uncle's acquaintances, and a series of complex conversations unfold during the night addressing history, politics and literature.

While the conversations that unfold may be seen as superfluous or distracting digressions if one expects "action" and plot advancement through events, the theories proposed by the men at the bar instead become the substance of the latter half of the novel and the source of the novel's most pointed criticism and analysis. At this point, the narrative technique drastically shifts, forsaking the epistolary format that constitutes the first half of the novel. From this point forward, the episode at the bar is narrated through the voice of a World War II exile displaced in Argentina sent on behalf of Maggi.

Vladimir Tardewski, a "Polish intellectual who had studied philosophy in Cambridge with Wittgenstein and who ended up in Concordia" (*Artificial Respiration* 111), deduces with no uncertainty that Maggi will not arrive at the appointment. As he proceeds to speak with Renzi about his friendship with Maggi, Tardewski immediately introduces himself by noting Maggi's commentary on the Pole's presence in Argentina. According to Maggi, Tardewski would

...bring to a close the long line of Europeans acclimated to this country. I was the last of a line that began...with Pedro de Angelis and reached as far as my compatriot Witold Gombrowicz. Those Europeans, the Professor [Maggi] said, had managed to create the greatest inferiority complex that any national culture has ever suffered since the occupation of Spain by the Moors. (*Artificial Respiration* 110)

Through this provocative introduction, Tardewski initiates what will quickly become an extended and intense conversation about the cultural and intellectual climate of Argentina throughout the last two centuries. It is also the first presentation in *Artificial Respiration* of an individual who appears as a fictional character with clear historical correlatives.

In her article “La presencia de Witold Gombrowicz en la obra de Ricardo Piglia,” Malva Filer appraises the central role that the personage of Tardewski occupies in Piglia’s text. While Tardewski is a fictional character in the novel, Filer concludes that both his ideas and his biographical information enable the reader to “identify him with Gombrowicz” (Filer 496, my translation) who as noted in the quotation above, is also invoked directly in the text. This explicit reference to the author signals that Piglia is attentive to the Polish writer’s works and ideas, and Filer corroborates that the “figure and the ideas of Gombrowicz occupy an important place in Ricardo Piglia’s work. This can be seen through the personage of Tardewski in *Artificial Respiration*, where the Polish writer appears anachronistically, in 1979” (Filer 495, my translation).

Filer’s article proceeds to contextualize some of the points of contact between Piglia and Witold Gombrowicz that can be extracted, noting that Gombrowicz spent the 24 years in exile in Argentina from 1939 to 1963, during “some of the most decisive years in the evolution of Argentinean literature” (Filer 495, my translation). Assuredly, the Polish intellectual’s presence in the novel enables Piglia to articulate unconventional attitudes about Argentinean literature, as well as to express a theory about the history of cultural production of Argentina. As Filer notes, Piglia repeatedly conflates the words of his fictional character with the attitudes of Gombrowicz in order to “...express a critique, sometimes scathing, of the intellectual climate of Buenos Aires in the 1940s. With his lack of willingness to adapt to the milieu and to behave diplomatically,

Tardewski destroys the possibilities of entering the intellectual and academic circles of Buenos Aires” (Filer 497, my translation).

This indeed is the case with Tardewski, whose own rejection of Argentina’s elite intelligentsia and his refusal to conform to its parameters has admittedly left him “a bit removed” from such circles (*Artificial Respiration* 107). Significantly, Tardewski asserts that he elected to be rebuffed, by choosing to contradict and challenge pervasive ideas about philosophy and culture. He notes his candor stood in opposition to expected and customary decorum: “...instead of being respectful I let myself get carried away more and more in the direction of frankness, an unpardonable crime among academics. I began to express with ever greater clarity what I really thought. I, the Pole, well treated by these gentlemen, let myself be dragged along by the blunt expression of my own thoughts” (*Artificial Respiration* 172).

Tardewski concedes here that, like Gombrowicz, his alienation from academic circles is conditioned by a flat refusal to conform to their ideas and agree with their positions regarding the significant intellectual models they collectively embrace. As a philosopher, Tardewski vocally expresses his criticism of the venerated models in Argentina at the time, particularly the “contradictory” Ortega y Gasset, and Count Keyserling, both intellectuals that prominent Argentine intellectual Victoria Ocampo admired publicly.⁶ Tardewski’s rebuffing of these figures is also a rejection of their Argentine disciples, in this particular instance Ocampo. Significantly, Filer’s article here reinforces the connection between Tardewski and Gombrowicz, who himself stated that “he was the only foreign writer who did not pay tribute to Victoria

⁶ In her *Knives and Angels: Women Writers in Latin America*, Susan Bassnett describes Ocampo’s “compulsive hero-worshipping” of intellectuals that was so consuming it tended to “blind her to the true nature of the writer’s intellectual or even physical inclinations” (13).

Ocampo, because he was convinced that his opinions, his behavior and this works would be too shocking for her” (qtd. in Filer 497, my translation).

It bears mentioning that Tardewski’s comments in *Artificial Respiration* derive not just from Gombrowicz’s attitudes and conduct, but also from his own written observations. Filer consequently cites some of the Polish author’s most salient points from his *Diario Argentino*, in which Gombrowicz establishes parallels between the cultural situation of Argentina and Poland, inflammatorily accusing them both of being “secondary European cultures” (qtd. in Filer 497, my translation). This statement from *Diario Argentino* resonates undoubtedly within *Artificial Respiration*, for Tardewski takes aim at a predominant pattern he notes in Argentina’s intellectual history; both he and Maggi draw attention to a pervasive type of mentorship and synthesis they see operating between European intellectuals and Argentinean thinkers, naming pairs like DeAngelis-Echeverría in the Rosas era, Paul Groussac-Miguel Cané in the 1880s, Soussens-Lugones at the turn of the century, and Gombrowicz-Borges in the 1940s.

Tardewski relates how in such couplings he observes a disturbing pattern of inequitable idolatry on behalf of the Argentines, stating “the European intellectual was always, especially during the nineteenth century, the exemplary model, what the others would have wanted to be. At the same time many of these European intellectuals were no more than false copies, Platonic shadows of other models” (*Artificial Respiration* 117). Indeed, this is a piercing critique of Argentina’s own cultural and intellectual development, for Tardewski, like Gombrowicz, accuses the nation’s most notable and esteemed intellectuals to be somehow incapable of independent or original thought. Instead, as these Argentine scholars forge intellectual and cultural paradigms, they continually look elsewhere, extolling “modern” nations in Europe as they articulate their

own ideas about culture and knowledge domestically. These secondhand models, he suggests, become the incontrovertible models for Argentine creativity and production.

In this critique, Tardewski specifically takes aim at French-born author Paul Groussac⁷ for being precisely one of “those European intellectuals who, integrated into Argentine culture, exercised a particular function in it” (*Artificial Respiration* 124). Even as a European himself, Tardewski is critical about and rejects a general tendency for Eurocentrism to dominate Argentina’s intellectual climate, wherein European intellectuals living in Argentina are seen to “fulfill that role as arbiter, judge, and true cultural dictator” (*Artificial Respiration* 124).

In Tardewski’s discussion of Argentina’s intellectual creativity or lack thereof, there is a clear verdict that the nation has been encumbered by a lack of autonomous thought and an inability to reflect upon its own cultural climate as it formulates models for its own civilization and its literature. Such incisive discussions between Tardewski and Renzi thus mirror the criticism of Gombrowicz in *Diario Argentino* as he attacks Argentinean intellectuals for “not having forged a relationship with world culture more in keeping with its reality” (qtd. in Filer 497, my translation).

Gombrowicz’s criticism is also lobbied against other prominent Argentine literary figures as well, and his opinions notably extend to Borges, who he nevertheless admired as a writer of fiction (Filer 497, my translation). Gombrowicz asserts that Borges is “an intellectual, an artist, belonging to the International Spirit without any *defined or intense relationship with his own*

⁷As a writer, the national educational inspector and the director of the National Library in Buenos Aires during the late 19th and early 20th century, Groussac held a significant position within the Argentinean cultural landscape. As Cristina Guiñazú notes in her article “Ironía y parodia en “La pesquisa” de Paul Groussac,” his approach to the Argentine cultural situation of this era differed from his colleagues and was guided by “a very personal ideology, not free of ambiguities.”

land. And this, although he occasionally addresses his metaphysics (which very well could have been born on the moon) with the gaucho tradition and the regional tradition – *in the end his way of approaching what is American was precisely European*” (qtd. in Filer 497, my emphasis and translation). Thus Gombrowicz critiques what he considers as an operative “display of book knowledge, the aspiration to a European maturity and the excess of correction by those intellectuals he found in the Buenos Aires environment” (Filer 498, my translation). As Filer notes, such ideas resonated with and garnered the admiration of many young and aspiring Argentinean writers.

Gombrowicz’s anti-iconoclastic ideas about literature, knowledge and production thus seep into the Tardewski’s conversations and lead to a particularly lengthy but thought-provoking episode of literary theory and criticism that occupies a major portion of Piglia’s novel. Indeed, the notion of what constitutes a national literary tradition and why this is important becomes highly problematic in the text, indicating Piglia’s own attention to the question. Yet this preoccupation resonates for Piglia beyond *Artificial Respiration* as well. In an interview, Piglia has addressed the matter directly, expressing his thoughts and reservations and how such issues arise in his own writings and particularly in his own use of various literary genres for pointed purposes. He reflects:

Can one speak of an Argentinean novel? What characteristics would it have. That was partly the point of departure for me. Because I believe that genres are formed by following lines and tendencies from national literature. Genres do not work in the same way in just any context. National literature is what defines the transactions and exchanges, introduces deformations, mutilations... National

literature is the context that decides upon appropriations and uses. Is there a national way to use fiction? (“Sobre Borges,” my translation)

This same quandary that preoccupies Piglia leads back to a discussion of Borges in *Artificial Respiration*, who “always miniaturizes the big lines of Argentine literature” (“Sobre Borges,” my translation). Indeed, it is by evoking views of Borges as the exemplary Argentine author and placing them in contraposition to author Roberto Arlt that the most pointed analysis about Argentinean literature surfaces in *Artificial Respiration*. To elucidate a compelling theory, Tardewski’s own ideas about literature unfold dialogically as they are directly contrasted by those of Renzi, who himself seeks to contextualize Borges’s place in Argentine literature. Specifically, Renzi argues that Borges does not best represent or even belong to the century he writes from, and moreover that he is not the nation’s most outstanding author, a position that most scholars of Argentine literature would not readily endorse. Instead, he asserts “Borges is a nineteenth-century writer. The best Argentinean writer of the nineteenth century...his fiction can only be understood as a conscious attempt to complete nineteenth-century Argentine literature” (*Artificial Respiration* 127-128).

Renzi accordingly defines the predominant features he sees in nineteenth-century literature, asserting “To conclude and to integrate are the two basic traits that define literary writing in the nineteenth century” (*Artificial Respiration* 128). In Renzi’s estimation, Borges’s texts are the nexus of these two attributes, and he proceeds to explain why they may be considered as such. He states, “[Borges’s texts are] chains of forged, apocryphal, false, distorted quotations; an exasperating and parodic display of secondhand culture, constantly invaded by pathetic pedantry: that’s what Borges makes fun of. He- I mean Borges – exaggerates and carries to extremes, almost parodic extremes in fact, the line of cosmopolitan and fraudulent erudition

that defines –even dominates- the greater part of the Argentine literature of the nineteenth century” (*Artificial Respiration* 129).

Yet in Borges, Renzi espies another current operating that he defines as “populist nationalism.” This tendency, he states, emerges through “Borges’s attempt to synthesize in his work another current, a current opposed to Eurocentrism, which is built upon the gauchesque tradition, taking as its model [José Hernández’s] *Martín Fierro*.⁸ Borges proposes to bring to a close a tradition that in a way defines Argentine literature in the nineteenth century” (*Artificial Respiration* 128).

In the same interview cited previously Piglia admits that Renzi’s statement is “a poetics of provocation,” meant to incite discussion and analysis and to reflect on this very issue of what constitutes a national literary tradition (“Sobre Borges,” my translation). Nevertheless, Piglia concurs with Renzi’s hypothesis that Borges completes the 19th century, noting “Borges’s work is a sort of very subtle dialogue with the central lines of Argentinean literature from the 19th century and I believe that he must be read in that context” (“Sobre Borges,” my translation). Whereas Tardewski at one point states “Nobody knows how to read, because to read is to associate” (*Artificial Respiration* 203), *Artificial Respiration* conversely suggests exactly the opposite. As Piglia himself has written on his view of the literary critic as a detective elsewhere, this comment is a prominent point that resonates throughout the text; indeed, the novel presupposes the idea that readers and writers do, in fact, know how to associate and make

⁸ Hernández’s poem is the paradigm of the *gauchesque* tradition, and celebrates the *gaucho*’s prominent place in Argentina’s history as a figure that contributed to Argentina’s independence from the Spanish crown in the 1800s. Centering on the life of a *gaucho*, the poem recalls the rural Argentine pampas through the linguistic register of the gaucho. It is taught in schools as a type of national epic and is generally called upon as pillar of Argentine national identity.

connections, and that they read to determine analogs and comparisons through their analysis. Renzi's considerations thus respond directly to Tardewski's verdict, for he does associate, and he analyzes and probes literature seeking to extract theories. Indeed, he even propounds exactly how he believes one must do so when he notes how to read Borges:

Borges should be read, if you want to understand what he's about, from within the system of nineteenth-century Argentine literature, the fundamental lines of which—with its conflicts, dilemmas and contradictions – he comes to complete, to bring to an end. So that Borges is anachronistic, bringing things to an end, looking back at the nineteenth century. The one who opens things up, who initiates it, is Roberto Arlt. Arlt begins over again: he is the only truly modern writer than Argentine literature has produced in the twentieth century. (*Artificial Respiration* 130)

As such, Renzi comes to praise Roberto Arlt, a contemporary of Borges from the beginning of the 20th century, precisely for his innovation and his deviation from the literary currents of his time. Renzi applauds Arlt's efforts to not emulate the literature from his own era and that of his predecessors, and his annihilation of its familiar voices, registers and themes. Rather than seeing his works as part of a tradition in which literature serves as the guardian of the national language⁹, Arlt's nuanced use of language breaks from the literary prescriptions of his day. Specifically, Renzi admires Arlt because he eschews such a "specific function" of literature, one that Renzi states is a conservative reaction against changing demographics and

⁹ This mission to maintain and authorize a proper use of the Castilian language in Argentina was advocated throughout the 19th century by such proponents as Andrés Bello and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento who emphatically wrote about and attempted to model a purity of language to serve as the cornerstone of culture in the nation and to fight against purported barbarism.

cultural miscegenation. He describes the literary tradition that Arlt writes against as ideologically motivated by:

...the impact of immigration. In this case it is a matter of the impact of immigration on language. For the dominant classes, immigration was to destroy many things... it destroys our national identity, our traditional values. In the sphere related to literature what they said was that immigration destroys and corrupts the national language. At that moment literature changes functions in Argentina; it comes to have... a *specific* function.... Literature, they said everywhere and at every occasion imaginable, now has a sacred mission to perform: to preserve and defend the national language... This comes to be the ideological function of literature at this point: to show what the model should be, the *proper usage* of the national language. (*Artificial Respiration* 133)

Arlt contrarily defies in his writing a “proper usage” of language, and instead works to contrast such a notion. His novels incorporate and mix together “low” and “high” registers, vernacular, and even employs the Italianized Lunfardo of the Buenos Aires working class. Renzi thus determines that “[Arlt] works with what *remains*, what is sedimented in language, with leftovers, fragments, amalgams, that is to say, he works with what really is the national language” (*Artificial Respiration* 134).

Here, Renzi entirely echoes Piglia's admiration of those writers who repudiate society's prescribed expectations. Renzi's accolade is based on Arlt's opposition to such limiting parameters, as he describes Arlt's prose as contrary to “... what they taught us should be understood as good writing, namely to write tidy precise prose... Arlt's style...is the repressed

side of Argentine literature” (*Artificial Respiration* 132). In his assessment, Renzi introduces an essential concept that undergirds his theory, that of style. Renzi thus expounds:

Arlt is absolutely modern... the idea of style appears in Argentine literature ... only when literature achieves autonomy and becomes independent of politics. The appearance of the idea of style is a key event: henceforth literature was to be judged according to specific values, of values... that were specifically literary and not, as happened in the nineteenth century, according to the political and social values expressed in the work. (*Artificial Respiration* 133)

It is through the creation of a new aesthetic- a style divorced of any expected social or political function- that Renzi deems Roberto Arlt to be the first “modern” writer in Argentina. He notes the transgressive aspect of Arlt’s poetics and the deliberate subversion of tradition that this implies:

He wrote badly. But in the moral sense of the word. His is *bad* writing, perverse writing. His is a criminal style. He does what one is not supposed to do, what’s wrong; he wrecks everything that for fifty years had been understood to be good writing in this pallid republic. (*Artificial Respiration* 132)

Roberto Arlt thus is extolled as a pioneer, a precursor to later be reconciled, precisely because he liberates writing from and breaks with conservative ideological and social functions of literature.

In an interview in the 1980s, after Piglia had already composed *Artificial Respiration*, he states his belief that “to cross Arlt with Borges is one of the great utopias of Argentine literature...Arlt and Borges are the two great Argentine writers and, in some way, all the genealogies, intrigues, and family resemblances of contemporary Argentine literature start with them” (qtd. in Bosteels, 4).

Such a statement clearly suggests that Piglia does not advocate an entire rejection of the “traditional” lines of Argentinean literature whatsoever. Instead, he envisions it as an inheritance that must be reconsidered and modernized to move beyond the conservative functions assigned to it in the past. Moreover, it is obvious through the examination of both *The Absent City* and *Artificial Respiration* that Piglia does not truly advance that literature must be emptied of social or political functions or eschew any ideological underpinnings. Both novels, though remarkable for their unique style and narrative approach, indeed sustain complex social, political and historical commentary that cannot be understated or ignored.

While Renzi suggests Borges is not modern and his poetics do not conform to a vision of the present or the future, Piglia instead recognizes and appreciates his indelible influence on the nation’s literary tradition. Consequently, any admiration for Arlt does not, as it may superficially seem in *Artificial Respiration*, advocate subverting or preferring one writer to the other. Indeed, Piglia here appears mindful of them both as precursors, amongst many others, who have not failed in their tasks, but who have forged paths for future writers to retrace and redefine according to their own vision and aesthetic style.

If Gombrowicz supposedly said upon his final departure from Argentina “Jóvenes, ¡matad a Borges! [Youth, kill Borges!]" (qtd. in Laraway 27), Piglia’s Tardewski at no point advocates such an utter rejection of Borges or wishes to erase his influence on subsequent writers. Much as Laraway suggests of Gombrowicz and his view of Borges’s influence, Piglia seems to recognize in what ways “subsequent generations of writers would need to reconcile themselves to Borges before they could find their own voices” (Laraway 27).

As Malva Filer eloquently asserts of *Artificial Respiration*, Piglia and his characters attempt to find their voices and to reflect on such matters from within “a country captured by

invaders that the country itself has engendered” (Filer 500, my translation). It is within this repressive milieu that an examination of a literary tradition must elucidate ways to approach other aspects of a nation’s progress and history and how it has arrived at its present circumstances. As Piglia amalgamates and intertwines discussions of history and literature together, analogies must be drawn between those “cultural dictators” imposing ideological and social functions encumbering language and literature and the political dictators exerting a lack of freedom, repression and stagnation in his present era. Piglia explicitly shows that cultural repression and political repression are handmaidens to one another, both arising from a conservative, antiquated approach to society that cannot sustain progress and instead attempts to replicate patterns and clings to subjective values from the past ordained by an elite and self-serving minority.

Like Professor Maggi, Piglia understands that looking towards the past can be constructive for understanding how it shapes the present, and how it will determine the future. Yet it can only be advantageous if it is analyzed without illusions about the difficulties of doing so or the unsavory truths that may be revealed, and an acceptance that these are an inescapable legacy that must be reconciled rather than merely disregarded. Piglia’s reflections on literature imply that Argentina will have to reconcile itself to many aspects of its past if there is to be any true progress in the future. Yet the understanding that literature must be ideologically reexamined and reconfigured to progress into a new era, to reflect its ever changing realities and to concomitantly foment intellectual advancement, also suggests a course for positive change in Argentina’s political history in the future as well.

While Ricardo Piglia delves into literature and literary tradition as a way to approach Argentina’s social and political history, his characters apply the detective’s skills and acumen to

their object of study in order to articulate theories that can be generalized beyond the confines of this nation specifically. In their consideration of the social, political and historical conditions that have led the nation to its current state, Renzi and Tardewski recognize similar patterns have occurred elsewhere engendering equally frightening results. They also are cognizant that they will recur again and again if lessons cannot be extracted from them. Tardewski's considerations of Argentina reinforce this awareness, for they are constantly mitigated by cogent observations and analogies that arise from his troublesome experiences in his native Poland during Nazi occupation. As an exile, he is always somewhat of an outsider that allows him to recognize parallels in both nations and to approach them with a degree of objectivity. Specifically, his indictments about Argentina arise from what he considers as a failure to progress beyond antiquated patterns and values, characterized by stagnation in intellectual production and a failure to think autonomously characterized by some of the most prominent and influential thinkers he assesses. Echoing Witold Gombrowicz's remarks, Tardewski claims this stagnation has resulted from an inability to emulate appropriate models in keeping with a particular society's needs, resources and exigencies and being able to calibrate them accordingly. Still, he does not feel enough a part of society to determine what these should be. It is instead Renzi who offers such recommendations, recognizing through the figure of Roberto Arlt a willing acceptance of change rather than a desperate attempt to repeat and emulate the past.

Likewise, Sciascia's characters appeal to philosophical musings presented in literature to probe the current condition of mankind's progress gauged through its political and social institutions. Foremost in this examination is a consideration of the place of the individual within the state and the limits to liberty and safety that are imposed upon a citizen. Yet by deliberately failing to name the nation in *Equal Danger*, Sciascia aims to universalize such concerns beyond

his native Italy, and to demonstrate how such questions can be generalized and applied beyond any specific borders or time periods. Sciascia's novel also advocates progress, for the troublesome and reprehensible past represented through the metaphor of the labyrinth requires another thread beyond forgetfulness if mankind is to evolve in its knowledge and respective institutions.

In the works of Sciascia, Lakhous, Piglia, and Saccomanno, murders and disappearances are essential plot elements that appear prominently in the novels. Yet these events are only catalysts to initiate investigations moving far beyond any specific crime in order to initiate critical and sustained discussions about historical quandaries. These authors strive to investigate more pervasive and universal problems by incisively employing a genre typified by attention to investigation, detail, analysis, and synthesis. Undoubtedly, these authors recognize that the genre is fashionable, and countless titles exist that do not aim to ask such questions or seek answers. They accordingly compose their novels with conscious attention to scholarship and efforts to distinguish them from facile models and to subvert the preconceptions that may be lobbied against their work. Indeed, in each text considered, the authors demonstrate that their novels cannot be dismissed as uncomplicated or shallow merely because of the format they have elected to use. It is thus through the pointed introduction of various authors, philosophers and literary texts from different national traditions and centuries that the authors of these mystery novels passionately address their specific preoccupations and considerations. Moreover, as they approach the particular events and arguments that plague their own society, they continually demonstrate that they are aware how such investigations and issues can be generalized to other societies and time periods beyond their age and themselves. As such, they are adding another

critical perspective to and participating in a continuously evolving conversation, nuanced and distinguishable by their own personal vision and distinctive style.

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