◆ # Chapter 1

## Swindling in Times of Crisis: Argentine Crime Fictions of the Millennium in Print and on Screen

*Carolina Miranda*

In *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster*, Majid Yar describes apocalypse as "an event, act or occurrence (accidental or otherwise) that brings about the end of the world" (2). While Yar refers to narratives set in various types of catastrophes, which can be apocalyptic in tone, tenor, or content, he highlights that the one thing they have in common is that they depict life "in a world where the familiar coordinates of social, cultural, political and moral organisation are gone" (2). The world as we know it has ended. For John Wallis and James Aston, specific historical junctures "such as the legacy of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, have . . . been adopted as a lens through which to understand" the popularity of such narratives set at times of crisis.

This essay explores three pieces of Argentine crime fiction anchored in the 2001 crisis: *Nueve reinas* (Nine Queens, 2000), a multi-award-winning film written and directed by Fabián Bielinsky; *Las viudas de los jueves* (Thursday Night Widows, 2005), Claudia Piñeiros's internationally acclaimed novel; and *La noche de la Usina* (The Night of the Heroic Losers, 2016), Eduardo Sacheri's novel, which won the Alfaguara Novel Prize.[1] Set against the backdrop of the financial crash, which culminated in 2001, they echo the socio-historical contexts both explicitly and implicitly. They also constitute a good example of how narratives adapt different models of crime fiction for local socio-historical circumstances. Bielinsky's film can be considered a hard-boiled narrative: "Urban blight, corrupt political machines . . . and influence peddling [are] part of the background in which crime" of a new, public kind is considered endemic (Porter 96). Piñeiro's tale sits closer to the whodunit: set in a semi-rural gated community, it functions as a locked-room, typical of the classic puzzle-novel novel, in which the end brings some kind of restoration of peace (Knight 78). Sacheri's novel is a hybrid, aligning with the subgenre of cape narratives, which also functions in many respects as a whodunit. Its

**Crisis Unleashed: Crime, Turmoil, and Protest in Hispanic Literature and Visual Culture**
*Hispanic Issues On Line* 29 (2022)

setting is rural and the novel recreates the crime-to-solution pattern, albeit with a twist.

These cases also present another important aspect of Argentine crime fiction in the new millennium: how local narratives anchor themselves against national geographic, historical, and social backdrops. Its characters are "well rooted in local culture" and operate "in unmistakably domestic locales" (Miranda, "Terra Nullius No More" 83). By focusing on the local, and articulating the specificities of the crisis in Argentina, these narratives constitute a fine example of the various representations of matters related to crime, justice, law, and punishment, spanning well into the first decade of the new millennium. As such, they present what Yar considers an important aspect of post-apocalyptic depictions: they reflect multiple viewpoints, "beliefs and judgements about crime" (4). In doing so, they align with what Argentine writer and critic Juan Sasturain considers key in contemporary Argentine and Latin American crime fiction, the fact that "no podemos hacer coincidir la ley con la justicia" (Sasturain) (we can't make the law match justice). Furthermore, these narratives introduce alternative models portraying "cynicism and disillusionment . . . no tidy ending[s]" and a "lack of closure," a trend Martella and Collins claim has typified "detective and crime fiction published in Spanish-speaking countries in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries" (3–4). Realistic in tone, *Nueve reinas*, *Las viudas de los jueves*, and *La noche de la Usina* thus underscore the long-lasting effects the 2001 debacle had, both in society and in the production of popular culture in print and on screen. That is, they underscore a trend in Argentine crime fiction: the search for an alternative justice in the absence of an institutional one (Ludmer 15).

The period of 19–20 December 2001 should be read as a social and hegemonic crisis, characterized by the subversion of the law and by people taking to the streets during the state of siege. Indeed, it was a crisis that held the possibility of another coup (Hernaiz). In the pieces analyzed here, the socio-political unrest in the backdrop is more than just a setting, as it both anchors narrative and triggers conflict. Thus, they constitute narratives "post 19 and 20 December" (Hernaiz), which for Sánchez are produced as a result of the crisis (1595). Commonly referred to as *la crisis* (the crisis), the *argentinazo*, or simply "the 2001," this moment was a period of civil turbulence that culminated in a series of riots on 19 and 20 December 2001. These riots were held throughout the country but were particularly violent in Buenos Aires. Preceded by the widespread outcry against the last period of the democratically elected President Fernando de la Rúa (1999–2001), the *argentinazo* gave way to a politically unstable stage, during which Argentina went through five Presidents in less than a month. The economic, political, and social depression spanned years, roughly from 1998 until 2002. The December 2001 outburst

was a direct response to minister Domingo Cavallo's imposition of the *corralito* or "playpen" measures at the end of that year, which were intended to prevent a bank run. The policy restricted people's access to cash by enforcing a limit on the amount they could withdraw from their bank accounts. Access to savings in US dollars was also frozen. The onset of the crisis, however, had started a decade earlier. Attempting to prevent hyperinflation and to foster economic growth, a convertibility plan had been launched in 1991 under the Carlos Menem administration, which pegged the peso to the US dollar. The measure was in place until 2002. This convertibility plan created the short-lived illusion of the "uno a uno," or one peso for one dollar, which became synonymous with the opulent decade of Menem's administration (1989–1999).[2]

By 2001, with an overvalued currency, despite (or perhaps because of) Argentina's adherence to the International Monetary Fund's directives, the country's economy became impossible to sustain (Quispe and Kay 15). What caused more unrest than the depreciation of the local currency was the sudden "persification" of the accounts. As Hines points out, "[t]he period of official illusion finally came to an abrupt halt" in December 2001, when the "foreseeable crisis caused scores of victims to lose their money that they thought was safely stored in now bankrupt financial institutions" (114). Revolts became widespread on 19 December, when de la Rúa announced a state of emergency, which was followed by his resignation on 20 December. De la Rúa's successor, Adolfo Roríguez Saá, also stepped down, and in the next two weeks, three more "presidents were overthrown, one after the other, and the Congress building was sacked as the call that would represent the movement began to ring out: '¡Que se vayan todos! ¡Que no quede ni uno!' (they've all got to go! No one must be left!)'" (Moreno). Over the course of the few weeks leading to the new year, thirty-nine people were killed, nine of whom were minors. While most of the protestors were unaffiliated and the protests were overall not politically motivated, the damage done to the democratic process and to the legitimacy of the institutions left the whole country in a state of national mourning that was to last for years to come.

The riots of December 2001 triggered a volatile three-year period, during which there was a parade of two Finance Ministers and seven Presidents, some of whom only lasted a few days in office. For the most part, critics agree that the *corralito* crisis and the social unrest leading to it produced a type of fiction that engages with this particularly problematic period, which many consider the only "acontecimiento nacional, en un sentido narrativo" (Ducaroff) (national event, in a narrative sense) taking place in Argentina since the restoration of democracy in 1983. With the backdrop of the Argentine economic miracle of the 1990s, which promised to take the country into the ranks of the first world but which turned out to be a "state swindle" (Copertani 288),

*Nueve reinas*, *Las viudas de los jueves*, and *La noche de la Usina* are fine examples of narratives that reflect the anxieties of contemporary Argentine society. By considering the types of crimes committed and the victims of these crimes, the next two sections explore how these pieces reflect upon the crisis.

## Swindling for a Cause: It's No Crime to Steal from a Thief

This section focuses on Bielinsky's film and Sacheri's novel. According to Josefina Ludmer, depending on the period in which a text is set, the specific type of delinquency in that text can reveal important issues about the relationship between State, politics, society, citizens, justice, and culture (18). Both *Nueve reinas* and *La noche de la Usina* feature comedy and original conflict resolution, or humor and lateral thinking, which aligns them with the subgenre of the caper narrative.

With its "polished style and box office success" (Holmes 51), and despite being Bielinsky's opera prima, *Nueve reinas* soon became a classic of Argentine cinema.[3] It premiered in September 2000 and, given that Bielinsky finished the script in 1997 (Martínez), it is often read as both a metaphor and a prophesy of Argentina's December crisis. Albeit fast-paced, the plot is relatively simple: Juan (played by Gastón Pauls) and Marcos (Ricardo Darín) are two small-time swindlers who meet by chance and decide to join forces for a day. However, the film displays "secondary plotlines dealing with multiple forms of corruption—individual, family, judicial, banking, national, international" (Hines 113), and these secondary plotlines anchor the text to a particular socio-historical setting. By representing the protagonists' various private scams, Bielinsky's piece covertly but consistently exposes the many forms of public immorality of the 1990s, which was typified by "corruption and suspicions of corruption on the part of the government, as well as state-run industries, and private and international companies" (Hines 113).

*Nueve reinas* opens in the early hours of the morning at an Esso convenience store, where Juan and Marcos meet. The older and more experienced Marcos saves Juan from being caught in a small-time swindle the latter is trying to commit. They go on to spend the next few hours pulling petty cons together, with Juan trying to impress Marcos and intent upon tagging along with Marcos to make his day a more profitable one. Marcos remains unmoved, but when Juan wins the bet to convince an old lady to hand over her handbag within two minutes, Marcos agrees to stick together for the day. Their fate changes when a much larger job presents itself: to sell a forged copy of a set of stamps from the Weimar Republic known as the "Nine Queens," which an ex-partner of Marcos had exquisitely copied. The client is a Spanish businessman and

rich philatelist who is leaving Buenos Aires the following day. If they want to succeed, they will have to act quickly.[4] And so, the price is finally agreed upon: $450,000 US dollars. The pair have to navigate a series of obstacles, including securing the forged set, losing the counterfeit stamps after they are robbed, and improvising a plan B. Although time is ticking, they still have one final chance; they manage to buy the original stamps from a rich widow who uses her late husband's philatelic collection to finance her extravagant life style. While they will have to pull their savings to buy the second set, they will still make a considerable profit. One last thing remains: Marcos needs to convince his sister Valeria, who works at the luxurious Hilton hotel where the Spaniard stays (and to whom the Spaniard had been making advances), to spend the night with him. Marcos and Juan pass an anxious vigil in the lobby of the Hilton, a hotel which "represents corporate interests in its location of Puerto Madero" and embodies the spending culture of the epoch (Holmes 64). When Valeria (played by Leticia Brédice) comes down to the lobby the following morning, check in hand, Marcos and Juan hurry to the bank to cash it. What they find as they approach the bank is a mob of angry people trying to get in and they discover that the bank has become insolvent and no one will be able to access their money. Moreover, the Board of Directors had cleaned up the bank's reserves: "All 11 members. They took 135 million. The Central Bank already knew but they intervened just today" (*Nueve reinas*). Sadly, by the end of 2001, that would become all-too-common a scene. As it was later made public, many of the banks, themselves foreign-owned, had already transferred their capital abroad, "including $143 million on 30 November, the last working day before the *corralito* came into effect" (Rogers 8).

Frustrated and disappointed, Juan and Marcos part ways. Juan takes the subway, his journey ending in a warehouse that looks like the backstage of an old theatre, props lying around everywhere. As he amicably greets and thanks a group of people gathered there, spectators realize that everything (Juan, the stamps, the forger, the robbers of the first set of stamps, Marco's sister, the widow, and the Spaniard) is not what it had seemed. Along with Marcos, viewers have also been scammed. We learn that Valeria is engaged to Juan, whose real name is Sebastián, and they have both planned the elaborate con together. The rest of the crew came in to teach Marcos a lesson, as they all had been cheated by him at one time or another. In the end, Marcos's sister will recover what is rightly hers: the money Marcos had stolen from their grandparent's estate. Although she has "taken legal measures to sue" her older brother "for the theft, the plot of the film revolves around an alternative approach to extracting justice" (Copertari 283). Juan's swindle could also be justified, as he will finally get the money he needs to fund his own cause: bribing a judge so that his father, also a con artist, can pay his way out of jail. Set against

the backdrop of a country where a lack of transparency and corruption, "be it individual, familial, banking, judicial, national, or international" (Hines 115), is pervasive, Bielinsky's film invites viewers to question the various shades of ethics. As the director points out in an interview, in the film, the economic crisis of 2001 exposes the "cierta decadencia moral real" (certain real, moral decadence) in Argentina at the time, when sympathizing with the small-time swindler seemed to be idiosyncratic (Bielinsky in Colalongo and Fuentes 2006). Thus, the film interprets the process of national disintegration by highlighting how "the illusory promise of Argentina's incorporation into the first world augured by globalization in the 1990s ended up being no more than a state-sanctioned swindle" (Copertari 288).

Just as the socio-political backdrop is omnipresent, the urban landscape becomes an important character in the film's narrative, underscoring the distinctive features of the 1990s: "the trappings of Argentina's passing to the first world, the global metropolis" (Copertari 284). In *Nueve reinas*, the urban backdrop functions as shorthand of the years leading up to the crisis, as Juan and Marcos roam from the "old" to the "neoliberal" Buenos Aires. Indeed, in the film, "the architecture helps demonstrate a cultural transformation of the city from the small-town fraud illustrative of 'old' Buenos Aires to the overwhelming deceit embodied by the contemporary neoliberal city" (Holmes 53). Thus, the downtown streets, the little cafés, the typical apartment-style housing where the swindlers perform their first cons early in the film, and the iconic Kavanagh Building (where the widow selling the stamps lives) evoke the "old" Buenos Aires. In turn, the Esso gas station in the opening scene, the Hilton Hotel where the sale of the stamps is carried out, and the Banco Sudamericano illustrate the neoliberal setting typical of the 1990s (Holmes 53). In the second part of the film, Marcos and Juan spend most of their time at the Hilton, and the prevalence of the glass features, which are typical of the international, modern architecture associated with the "power of capitalism" (Ramírez-Montagut 21), is not incidental but signals the new aesthetics of the decade. As is also the case for *Las viudas de los jueves*, which is discussed in the following section, the urban topography reflects the changes in the wider social and political environment leading to the 2001 crisis.

The devastating effects of the 2001 crisis were by no means restricted to the metropolis. Set in the fictional small town of O'Connor, *La noche de la Usina* highlights how the debacle affected urban and rural populations alike.[5] The novel tells the story of a motley crew, led by ex-professional footballer Fermín Perlassi, and their quest to recuperate the money they were persuaded to part with the Friday before the explosion of the 2001 crisis. A corrupt bank manager takes advantage of the financial debacle of the *corralito* provision to dupe Perlassi into making a short-term deposit to gain interest and gather

the money he needs to invest in an agricultural cooperative. This investment would allow various people to survive the complex economic situation inherited by de la Rúa, which had been triggered by the previous decade-long administration of Menem.

Perlassi, whose gas station has barely been staying afloat, has been mulling over the idea of forming a cooperative. As they await to celebrate the arrival of New Year's Day 2000, Perlassi and his close friend Antonio Fontana wonder what the millennium has in store. De la Rúa's government (1999–2001) was skating on thin ice, and the U.S. dollar was so cheap that local factories were unable to compete with imports (Sacheri 22). Perlassi's plan involves buying an abandoned chicken farm, La Metódica, and turning it into silos, thus "les damos a los chacareros la posibilidad de almacenar" (Sacheri 26) (we give the farmers the chance to stock). Perlassi's enterprise aims to protect the interests of the small producer: "la armamos para la gente que tiene poco campo. . . . que no tengan que arrendarle la tierra a un *pool*" (Sacheri 26, italics in the original) (we set it up for the people who don't have much land. . . . so that they don't have to lease it off a *pool*). Negotiating the purchase of La Metódica and gathering the money takes them the best part of the year: Lorgio, the owner of a small fleet of lorries and trailers, becomes the major shareholder with 100,000 pesos, Perlassi and his wife put in 30,000, Fontana adds his 22,000, railway station manager Belaúnde contributes with 10,000, and the López brothers put in 20,000. Even the owner of the only small supermarket in O'Connor, the town pharmacist, and the owner of a modest garden center each puts in the little money they had managed to save: "En resumidas cuentas. . . . 242.000 pesos/dólares" (Sacheri 54) (In a nutshell. . . . 242,000 pesos/dollars). But they are 100,000 short, which is why Fontana concludes that "[a]unque no nos guste nada, tendremos que ir al banco" (Sacheri 55) (whether we like it or not, we'll have to go to the bank). O'Connor is so small a town that there are no banks; thus, Perlassi and Lorgio go the closest town to speak with Alvarado, the branch manager. Alvarado insists that Perlassi make a fixed-term deposit instead of requesting a loan: returns on US dollar deposits are much more profitable, and loans require collaterals, tax income affidavits, and a long list of etcetera. Opening an account in dollars is what he should do. Alvarado is persuasive, though Perlassi is torn because he would rather discuss it with the partners. But it is 3:40 in the afternoon, and the bank closes at 4:00, so Perlassi signs up, a decision that unleashes a chain of events that none of them could have ever imagined. It is November 2001, the last Friday of the month. On Monday, December 1, 2001, the finance minister announced the conditions of the infamous *corralito* plan, which would affect both individual savers and small businesses.

The 2001 crisis thus triggers the plot of the novel. The way the novel fictionalizes various national concerns and weaves in snippets of history permits O'Connor to be read "as a metaphor for Argentina's past and present" (Miranda, "Crime and Punishment" 113). Equally important is the fact that other historical events are alluded to as well. For example, the faded YPF sign dominating Perlassi's shabby petrol station (which stands for "Yacimientos Petrolíficos Fiscales," or Fiscal Oilfields) becomes an allegory of the afflicted state of the Argentine provinces (Miranda, "Crime and Punishment" 114). Founded in 1922, YPF was the first vertically integrated state energy company; in 1993 it was privatized and eventually sold to the Madrid-based multinational corporation Repsol S.A. in 1999. This occurred under Carlos Menem's second administration (1995–1999), and the move triggered a series of pickets driven by laid-off workers. Thus, the case of YPF is a synecdoche of Menem's decade-long administration, during which a number of State-run companies were privatized.[6]

With the *corralito* measures in place, Perlassi realizes that it will take them twenty years to recuperate their money. Because the money he had lost was not only his but everyone else's, he goes on a journey of anger, exasperation, frustration, despair, and eventually depression. Like Perlassi, his assorted crew "incarnate what the Nation was going through" (Miranda, "Crime and Punishment" 116), as they all try to come to terms with their losses. In the meantime, the "collective violence" generated by the "extensive spontaneous looting" ended in several foot riot episodes in various cities in Argentina during the week of December 14–21, 2001 (Auyero and Moran 1342–43). These episodes are embedded in the background, as well as in the mind of the local reader.

But all is about to change: Perlassi gets wind that bank manager Alvarado had "special" clients who had been warned of the bank run. Alvarado had tipped off a corrupt local businessman named Manzi to take his money out because a financial storm was brewing and all of the accounts would be frozen. Alvarado tells Manzi that some guys from O'Connor had just deposited U.S. dollars and asks if he would like to take "un préstamo exprés. Sacar estos dólares como sacaron todos los demás. Después, Dios dirá" (64) (an express loan. To take those dollars out, like they did with all the rest. Later, God only knows). When the group discovers that Manzi had a secret vault built in the middle of the countryside, which he guards with a very sophisticated alarm system, Perlassi wakes up and gathers his son Rodrigo, Fontana, Lorgio and his son Hernán, Belaúnde, the López brothers, and old Medina, each of whom would have an active role. Under Perlassi's command, they set out to rob Manzi's vault, but they decide to only take what belonged to them, plus the top up they would need to set up the cooperative. The heist is

carried out, although not without a glitch, on a night that is remembered by most in O'Connor as the night of the mythical storm. Perlassi's plan involves causing a power cut and using the storm, which they knew was coming, as cover for the controlled explosion they had organized. Perlassi instructs Medina to "aplicarle 93 hectogramos de dinamita, divididos en diez cargas de 93 decagramos" (304) (use 93 hectograms of dynamite, divided into ten loads of 93 hectograms). But Medina makes a mistake, instead using "[n]oventa y tres kilos de dinamita" (308) (ninety-three kilos of dynamite). Miraculously, not only do they survive the explosion, but they also manage to take the money. Most importantly, the cooperative is eventually set up and they are able to employ over thirty other people. Just as Perlassi and his partners could not go to the police when Manzi and the bank manager robbed them of their savings, Manzi will never be able to follow the proper channels of investigation. After all, it is not a crime to steal from a thief.

Discussing the tensions that are typical of fiction set in apocalyptic settings, Yar explains that we often see "simultaneous attachment *both* to law-and-order based in an objective system, *and* a yearning for vengeance and retribution" (4, emphasis in original). Looking at *Nueve reinas* and *La noche de la usina*, it is evident that Valeria and Perlassi, if not also Juan (who robs for a living), each embodies the figure of the avenger because they find themselves "compelled to commit a criminal" act to right a wrong. Writes Sim, "the justice system can no longer reliably guarantee that this outcome will occur" (3). In many respects, the 2001 crisis could be read as an event that constituted a crime against the people. As such, it is difficult for readers not to identify with Juan or Perlassi because, as a nation, we were all victims.

In a country where corruption is endemic, where political instability reigns, and where financial debacles, such as that of 2001, are in the background, justice can hardly be achieved through traditional legal channels. Like Juan and his "Nueve reinas" crew, Perlassi and his partners "must subvert the dynamics between investigator, criminal and victim taking matters into their own hands if they want to claim what is theirs" (Miranda, "Crime and Punishment" 116). Operating like Robin Hood, both Juan's gang and Perlassi's crew dispense a type of collective justice. This justice is epitomized by social robbery, which, according to Hobsbawm, is an "individual or minority rebellion" committed by those who are "*not* or not only regarded as simple criminals by public opinion" (19, emphasis in original). By extension, both Marcos and Manzi are dealt exemplary punishment, thus legitimizing the act of stealing from a bigger thief. In doing so, Bielinski's film and Sacheri's novel present interesting metaphors of the Nation: as the Argentine economy crumbles in the background, a frivolous sector of the population is becoming richer, while the rest of the nation is forced to "presenciar la impunidad,

la corrupción, la indiferencia hacia el bienestar común" (Bielinsky qted. in Martínez) (witness the impunity, the corruption and the overall indifference toward general well-being).

In the next section, I discuss how the *corralito* measures trigger conflict in Piñero's *Las viudas de los jueves,* which depicts a society obsessed with wealth and opulence. For Bielinsky, this wealth "alcanzó niveles obsenos" (reached obscene levels) in the decade leading up to the 2001 crisis (qted. in Martínez).

## Chronicles of the pizza con champán Generation: The Rapid Rise and Fall of a Class

Like *Nueve reinas*, which became an allegory of the "enriquecimiento veloz que prevaleció en el país durante la década 1989/99, cuando Carlos Saúl Menem era president" (Martínez) (fast enrichment thriving during the 1989–1999 decade, when Carlos Saúl Menem was president), Piñeiro's *Las viudas de los jueves* necessitates being read in the context of the 2001 crisis, as it depicts the rise and rapid fall of a class who typified the end of an era.[7] Often referred to as "la fiesta menemista" (the Menemist party), Menem's administration was driven by the convertibility law, which, although first adopted during the military dictatorship (1976–1983), inaugurated a decade of pro-neoliberal economics. Corruption and public scandals became the order of the day, as spending power was rapidly and very visibly transformed, even though it remained out of reach a large segment of the population.[8]

Set in the fictional gated community of Cascade Heights, the novel focuses on five families whose paths cross when they move into the exclusive country club. Every Thursday night, the husbands dine and play cards at the place of El Tano Scaglia, earning their wives the ominous name the "Thursday night widows." Through a series of flashbacks and flash forwards, the main narrator Mavi Guevara pieces together what really happened one Thursday in September 2001: "Ronnie was having dinner at El Tano Scaglia's house. The same as every Thursday—except that this day was different" (Piñeiro 9). It was different because Ronnie returned home unusually early but also because two accidents occurred that night, albeit only one was genuinely an accident: Ronnie broke his leg when he fell down the stairs at his house, and the bodies of El Tano Scaglia, Gustavo Massotta and Martín Urovich were found drowned in the Scaglia's swimming pool. Although a report established that the drowning was caused when a cable fell into the water and electrocuted the men, it is later revealed that their deaths were not in fact accidental. Having lost his job due to the financial crisis and encouraged by a corrupt lawyer and

neighbor in Cascade Heights, who explains the benefits of insurance fraud by "accidental death," El Tano had plotted to commit suicide and had persuaded his friends to do the same. The Uroviches were also broke: "they had been paying only for essentials—day to day shopping, utilities that could be cut off it they went unpaid" (161). Ronnie had refused to take part, which is why he had returned home earlier that Thursday. Yet, that night, El Tano had committed more than one crime. One of the men had wanted to pull out at the last minute but was prevented from doing so. At the end of the novel, it is revealed that corruption, coercion, and fraud should be added to the charges against El Tano. As Rocha highlights, "for those who believed wholeheartedly in the system, death—even murder—becomes preferable to poverty" (129).

With his imported four-wheel-drive vehicle, ostentatious life style, and boastful attitude, El Tano Scaglia epitomizes the type of man who came to be associated with the *pizza con champagne* generation.[9] Pizza in Argentina is often an affordable meal option, but when juxtaposed with imported wine, it functions as a synecdoche of the buying power of the decade. As Mavi points out, while imported champagne was still expensive the Convertibility Law "narrowed all manner of gaps and 'expensive' no longer had to be 'exclusive'" (Piñeiro 73). Mavi's narration goes on to reveal the early cracks in this idyllic gated society—and, by extension, the cracks in the country. According to Griesse, during the 1990s, the "pizza with champagne" sector of the population was one whose identity was "largely based on their level of consumption. . . . [T]he objects of their consumption function as signs that indicate their class status and mark their differences from other classes" (57). Set against the 2001 crisis, which according to Raso deepened social inequality and fostered a discourse of "winners" versus "losers" (25), the novel exposes a group of upper-middle-class families who, by the end of the Menem opulent years, are struggling to maintain their lifestyle. In doing so, the novel depicts a modern Buenos Aires, with the crime, setting, and victim(s) reflecting the social, political, and cultural anxieties of the milieu (Miranda, "Blood Beyond Borders" 80; Sánchez 1596).

As Argentina embraced neoliberal globalization in the 1990s, the geography of the city changed. Buenos Aires developed into "a financial and commercial centre" and self-segregation became the driving force of the gated community (Griesse 58). According to Rocha, swapping city living for a country club life signals "[t]he characters' apparently shared desire to separate themselves from the political reality of the other or real 'country' (the nation) further highlighting their view of themselves as consumers first, and only secondarily as citizens of a larger community" (126). While gated communities appeared as early as the 1930s, what really fostered the housing phenomenon was the short-lived economic surge of the 1990s (Himitian).

For Mavi, "[o]ne peso would be worth one dollar: the famous 'one for one' that restored Argentina's confidence and fuelled an exodus to places like Cascade Heights" (Piñeiro 31). As such, the fictional gated community epitomizes the type of country club that proliferated during that decade: areas that were built "largely to house the newly rich, ensuring their safety and comfort by excluding from their confines and barring from their sight the conditions of the growing number of Argentines who continued to toil at bare subsistence levels" (Rocha 124). The privileged dwellers of Cascade Heights reflect the flowering economy of the country at large. According to Mavi, a few years after they moved into the community, the price of land would "climb in line with the economic euphoria of the 1990s, and. . . . everybody wanted a piece. All of us speculated on how much the value of our houses was rising each day and how much higher it might go" (Piñeiro 90).

But the "Menemist party" was not to end on a high note, and "[b]y the end of the decade, the nation defaulted on its debts and banks closed their doors as the national economy collapsed" (Rocha 124). The volatile period brought upon by the 2001 crisis triggered a rapid economic crash, and no Argentine was immune. Mavi's family is the first casualty of the country's economic collapse in Cascade Heights. As Mavi reflects, "I have accepted that we could no longer afford full-time domestic staff. . . . Meanwhile, I had learned how to create the least possible mess. . . . It wasn't so much that the chores were a burden, but washing plates, making beds and ironing clothes reminded me of what I had once had, and lost" (9–10). Others face the shame of abandoning both the gated and the actual country, as they cannot longer afford their lifestyle—"the kind of money that buys you into a place like this can banish in the blink of an eye" (57). They are not the only ones. Not even El Tano, a pillar of the community, is spared: the Dutch company he worked for pulls out of Argentina, investing in Brazil instead. At first, El Tano does not worry; "[t]hings weren't easy [but] he had a lot of contacts" (149). But, being the most popular neighbor and having the best house was not enough. Thus, he spends eighteen months driving his Land Rover to a job that no longer exists, while plotting a way out of the crisis, a way that will allow his family to sustain their lifestyle.

According to Rocha, as the national dream "of easy wealth comes unraveled in the last years of the last century, the private tensions and deeply guarded secrets within the gated community begin to unravel" (128). Mavi's recounting of events offers an interesting perspective, and her third-person narrative signals her marginality. After Mavi and Ronnie confront the widows and the corrupt neighborhood lawyer reveals El Tano's fraud plot, the women refuse to come clean: they will not be both broke and widowed. As the neighbor points out, if anyone speaks out, then the men "would have killed themselves for nothing" (Piñeiro 268). Now it becomes a question of "us"

and "them": it was Ronnie's word against El Tano's and, like the latter, these people were "sure always to obtain everything that he wanted from life. From death too" (Piñeiro 34). But Mavi and Ronnie have proof: their son and his close friend often went on night strolls with a video camera. The two friends have on tape some of the many crimes and misdemeanors that occurred behind the closed doors of the gated community. For example, they know that El Tano Scaglia's son smokes marijuana, which one of the guards deals, and that Gustavo Massotta repeatedly beats his wife. They also recorded how those three bodies really ended up in the Scaglia's swimming pool.

Overall, *Las viudas de los jueves* constitutes a sharp reflection of how a privileged community is built and subsequently destroyed by the ephemeral economic boom of the so-called "Argentine miracle" of the 1990s. The cathartic pleasure is twofold: first, readers witness some kind of restoration of justice, as "the unsuspected killer takes with him some of 'the worst' husbands and turns three of the Thursday night widows into full-time ones" (Miranda, "Blood Beyond Borders" 87); second, as these men embody the nouveau riche epitomized by the Menemist administration, "their deaths signal the end of the apparent economic miracle under Carlos Menem and the neoliberal economic model" (Griesse 67). At the end of novel, Ronni asks Mavi "[a]re you scared to go out?" (274). In the context of the economic crisis of 2001, as Rocha points out, the question "finds easy application to the situation the country finds itself in" (129). Mavi's act of leaving the country club suggests that "staying in a community based on intolerance, abuse, corruption, fraud and murder" is much worse than facing the convoluted situation awaiting the wider country that December 2001 (Rocha 129). As Mavi's son points out "[y]ou're on one side or on the other. There's no alternative: pick your side" (Piñero 273). Leaving Cascade Heights, tape safely guarded, Mavi ensures that not only will El Tano's crime not go unpunished but also that she and her family have picked the right side.

Given that the decade of the 1990s was typified by "corruption and suspicion of corruption on the part of the government as well as state-run industries, and private and international companies" (Hines 113), the various crimes depicted in *Nueve reinas*, *Las viudas de los jueves*, and *La noche de la Usina* are emblematic of the ruthless institutional and financial crisis into which Argentina had descended by the end of the millennium. Arguably, the most enduring effect of the narratives discussed here is the fact that they are realistically anchored in the 2001 crisis. Discussing Bielinsky's film, Hines points out that "*Nueve reinas* scrutinizes the urban experience at the end of the twentieth century, and in the process reveals the connections among corruption, globalization, and memory" (51). Likewise, Sacheri's novel can be read as a humorous allegory of the national character who dared right a

private/public wrong. Similarly, Piñeiro's tale reflects and reflects upon the rise and fall of a class fostered by an Argentine economic miracle. In doing so, all three narratives cast light on the *pizza con champagne* era, questioning the various shades of grey of the ethics of this period while also typifying the evolution of Argentinian crime fiction following the 2001 crisis.

## Conclusion

Sim points out that crime fiction often provides a window into the morals and concerns of its time (2). In the case of Argentina, crime fiction narratives after 19 and 20 December typically engage with familiar and recurrent images, which are present in the media and imprinted in the popular imagination. Overall, the *corralito* crisis and the social unrest that followed became the trigger for a type of fiction that engaged with that particularly problematic epoch. As such, the type of delinquency observed in that particular period reveals details about everything, from the State to the politics, society, citizens, justice, culture, and literature of that the time. Indeed, the 2001 crisis constitutes a "'defining moment that changed forever the political, social and psychological landscapes" (Wallis and Aston), including local crime narratives. In a society where institutions cannot guarantee the restoration of peace typically needed in the classic whodunit and where the hard-boiled model only partially applies, the standard tropes of crime fiction no longer ring true. The pieces analyzed here epitomize post-2001 narratives in that they expose the moral anxieties of a time by depicting protagonists "en cuya biografía privada late lo público" (Drucaroff) (in whose private biography the public is latent).

On the whole, the narratives discussed here function like cautionary tales: when institutions fail, solidarity lies elsewhere and conflict resolution takes various forms. Indeed, in the absence of institutional resolution, small-time delinquents forge their own justice. That is clearly seen in *Nueve reinas*: both Marcos and Juan operate outside the law. While they are both crooks, to orchestrate their coup against Marcos, Juan and Valeria take advantage of the State looking the other way, and it is this same absence that ultimately allowed the pre-*corralito* bank run to happen. Conversely, in *La noche de la Usina*, Mansi is a corrupt businessman who takes full advantage of the institutional chaos dominating the build-up to the infamous events of December 2001. In this case, Perlassi and his gang constitute a synecdoche of the town and, by extension, the nation. Unlike Marcos and Juan, neither Valeria nor Perlassi's eight are thieves; rather, they are pushed by circumstances to take back what belongs to them. Meanwhile, in *Las viudas de los jueves*, El Tano's crime is

no misdemeanor: on top of committing fraud, he also committed murder so that his family could maintain their lifestyle. The novel underscores the social fissures that epitomized the decade culminating in the 2001 debacle. Furthermore, El Tano can be read as a metaphor for a class ostensibly coming to the fore during the convoluted 1990s. By contrast, Mavi's family represents the sector of the population who were not able to keep up appearances at all cost. While, the ends of *Nueve reinas* and *La noche de la Usina* feature individual antagonists who have been taught lessons, the end of Piñeiro's novel features a whole class who has been put in its place.

If crime fiction provides "a means of understanding the relationship between crime and community in the popular imagination" (King 14), then *Nueve reinas*, *Las viudas de los jueves*, and *La noche de la Usina* incisively interrogate a problematic point in Argentine history and offer alternative forms of conflict resolution, which can be read as synecdochal representations of a national type. In doing so, they constitute a space for readers and viewers to engage with both the past and present and to reflect on the most recent crisis, one which altered the social, political, and cultural physiognomy of the country. Accordingly, they cast light on the evolution of Argentine crime fiction. Ultimately, *Nueve reinas*, *Las viudas de los jueves*, and *La noche de la Usina* constitute a new lens through which to understand national histories in times of crisis.

## Notes

1. English quotes from *Nueve reinas* are taken from the subtitles provided by the film. English quotes from Piñeiro's novel are from Miranda France's 2009 translation. All other translations are my own.
2. It must be noted that Menem's Minister of Economy at the time was Domingo Cavallo, who was also Minister of Economy during de la Rúa's administration and who put the *corralito* measures in place.
3. Bielinsky (1959–2006) was considered a "hinge figure," a director between commercial and auteurist traditions (Lusnich 119). *Nueve reinas* received 22 awards in Europe, Latin America, and North America in a range of categories, including as Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Film, and Best Actor (for Darin's portrayal of Marcos). The screenplay was adapted in English as *Criminal* (2004), which was directed by Gregory Jacobs and produced by George Clooney, as well as for Bollywood productions *Bluffmaster!* (2005), *Gulumal* (2009), and *All the Best* (2012).
4. The fact that the Spaniard Vidal Gandolfo, archetypal "symbol of privatized Argentina" (Copertari 286), is in a hurry to leave the country before he is deported, coupled

with the various scenes in which many of the impresario's assistants are occupied with shredding documents in the background (the shredding machine is audible), reinforces the idea that the selling of the stamps is not the only dirty business in which he has been involved.

5. *La odisea de los giles*, the feature film version directed by Sebastián Borensztein, debuted in August 2019. The English tile is *Heroic Losers*.
6. Alongside the "uno a uno," or "one (peso) to one (dollar)" as the Convertibility Law was commonly referred to, a series of trade liberalization and privatization measures were introduced by Cavallo in 1991. These led to the privatization of key strategic industries, such as the oil company YPF, at "suspiciously low prices" (Rogers 5).
7. Piñeiro's novel was also adapted to the big screen: *Las viudas de los jueves* was directed by Marcelo Piñeyro (2009).
8. Menem's own obsession with public displays of wealth was notorious. The first of a long series of highly publicized scandals came in 1990, when a group of Italian impresarios presented him with a Ferrari Testarossa after Menem favored them in a public bidding process. Menem not only accepted the gift, but he also drove it publicly and posed with his new car in a glossy magazine. Eventually, Congress pressured him to return the car.
9. The name first appeared in Silvina Walger's 1994 *Pizza con champagne: crónica de la fiesta menemista*.

## Works Cited

Auyero, Javier, and Timothy Patrick Moran. "The Dynamics of Collective Violence: Dissecting Food Riots in Contemporary Argentina." *Social Forces*, vol. 85, no. 3, March 2007, pp. 1341–67.

Bielynsky, Fabián, director. *Nueve reinas*. Buena Vista International, 2000.

Chakravarthy, J. D., director. *All the Best*. Sudha Cinema, 2012.

Colalongo, Mariano, and Álvaro Fuentes. "Entrevista a Fabián Beilinsky." *La Ventana Indiscreta*, 21 April 2006. Accessed 1 April 2019.

Copertari, Gabriela. "*Nine Queens*: A Dark Day of Simulation and Justice." *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2006, pp. 279–93.

Drucaroff, Elsa. "Narraciones de la intemperie. Sobre *El año desierto* de Pedro Mairal y otras obras argentinas recientes." *El interpretador*, vol. 27, 2006. Accessed 23 May 2019.

Griesse, James. "Economic Crisis and Identity in Neoliberal Argentina: Claudia Piñeiro's *Las viudas de los jueves*." *The Latin Americanist*, vol. 57, no. 4, 2013, pp. 57–71.

Guano, Emanuela. "Spectacles of Modernity: Transnational Imagination and Local Hegemonies in Neoliberal Buenos Aires." *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2002, pp. 181–209.

Hernaiz, Sebastián. “Sobre lo nuevo: a cinco años del 19 y 20 de diciembre.” *El interpretador*, no. 29, 2006. Accessed 25 May 2019.

Himitian, Evangelina. “Countries, un ideal bajo la lupa.” *La Nación*, 18 December 2011. Accessed 20 November 2017.

Hines, Donetta. “*Nueve reinas*: A Signs of the Times (to Come).” *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, vol. 26, pp. 113–28.

Holmes, Amanda. *Politics of Architecture in Contemporary Argentine Cinema*. Palgrave McMillan, 2017.

Jacobs, Gregory, director. *Criminal*. Warner Independent Pictures, 2004.

King, Stewart. “Crime Fiction as World Literature.” *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, vol. 323, no. 2, 2014, pp. 8–19.

Ludmer, Josefina. *El cuerpo del delito. Un manual*. Eterna Cadencia, 2001.

Lusnich, Ana Laura. “Electoral Normality, Social Abnormality: The *Nueve reinas*/*Nine Queens* Paradigm and Reformulated Argentine Cinema, 1989–2001.” *New Trends in Argentine and Brazilian Cinema*, edited by Cacilda Rego and Carolina Rocha, Intellect, 2011, pp. 117–29.

Martella, Gianna M., and Jackie Collins. “Hispanic Detective Fiction: Introduction.” *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2006, pp. 3–5.

Martínez, Claudia, translator. “Presentada como una metáfora de la Argentina, ‘Nueve reinas’ se estrena en Nueva York.” *The New York Times* and *Clarín*, 2002. Accessed 24 July 2018.

Miranda, Carolina. “Blood Beyond Borders: Claudia Piñero’s *Las viudas de los jueves*.” *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2014, pp. 79–89.

_____. “Crime and Punishment: From Victims to Avengers in Eduardo Sacheri’s *La noche de la Usina*.” *Violence and Victimhood in Hispanic Fiction: Essays on Contemporary Works*, edited by Sharlisa M. Collins, Renée W. Craig-Odders, and Marcella L. Paul, McFarland, 2018, pp. 108–124.

_____. “Terra Nullius No More: The *Negro Absoluto* Collection and the Relocation of a Genre.” *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2016, pp. 82–98.

Moreno, Federico. “Four Years After the Argentinazo.” *Socialist Worker*, 27 January 2006. Accessed 25 October 2018.

Parash, V. K., director. *Gulumaal: The Escape*. Fowzia Fathima, 2009.

Pezzotti, Barbara. *Investigating Italy’s Past through Historical Crime Fiction, Films and TV Series*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Piñeiro, Claudia. *Las viudas de los jueves*. Clarín/Alfaguara, 2005.

_____. *Thursday Night Widows*. Translated by Miranda France, Bitter Lemon Press, 2009.

Piñeyro, Marcelo, director. *Las viudas de los jueves*. Castafiore Films, 2009.

Porter, Dennis. “The Private Eye.” *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, edited by Martin Priestman, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 95–115.

Quispe-Agnoli, Myriam, and Stephen Kay. “Argentina: The End of Convertibility. (International Focus).” *EconSouth*, vol. 4, no. 1, Mar. 2002.

Ramírez-Montagut, Mónica. "The Myths of Modern Architecture." *Revisiting the Glass House: Contemporary Art and Modern Architecture*, edited by Jessica Hough and Mónica Ramírez-Montagut, Yale University Press, 2008, pp. 7–28.

Raso, Laura Elina. "El edén cercado. Segregación espacial y construcción de identidades en las urbanizaciones privadas." *Topicos de Seminario*, vol. 24, 2010, pp. 25–39.

Rocha, Carolina. "Systemic Violence in Claudia Piñeiro's *Las viudas de los jueves*." *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*, vol. 1, 2011, pp. 123–29.

Rogers, Marc. "2001–2011: The Making of the Crisis." *The Argentina Independent*. 27 December 2001.

Sacheri, Eduardo. *La noche de la Usina*. Alfaguara, 2016.

Sasturain, Juan. "A partir de la novella policial." *Clarín*, 21 August 2019. Accessed 21 August 2019.

Sim, Stuart. *Justice and Revenge in Contemporary American Crime Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Sippy, Rohan, director. *Bluffmaster!* UTV Motion Picture, 2005.

Walger, Sylvina. *Pizza con champán: crónica de la fiesta menemista*. Espasa Hoy, 1994.

Wallis, John, and James Aston. "Doomsday America: the Pessimistic Turn of Post-9/11 Apocalyptic Cinema." *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2011.

Yar, Majid. *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster: Post-Apocalyptic Fictions and the Crisis of Social Order*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Miranda, Carolina. "Swindling in the Time of Crisis: Argentine Crime Fictions of the Millennium in Print and on Screen." *Crisis Unleashed: Crime, Turmoil, and Protest in Hispanic Literature and Visual Culture*. Ed. Diana Aramburu and Nick Phillips. *Hispanic Issues On Line* 29 (2022): 22–39.