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Donde todo se paga: Ricardo Piglia's Blanco nocturno as a Lesson in Noir Economics

Abstract

Ricardo Piglia's 2010 novel *Blanco nocturno* rewrites the noir genre as an economy. Just as the novel's initial murder is the dark result of an expansive and disperse market conspiracy (thus alluding to Argentina's own problematic insertion into the neoliberal economy at the beginning of the 1970s), so too is crime an excess that overflows within the economy of detection. In this sense, crime and its converse, justice, constitute a transaction wherein the crime introduces an imbalance, much like the lavish excess of the potlatch, and justice realizes a counter-payment that supposedly restores equilibrium. However, Piglia's use of the noir mode complicates such a balancing of accounts by casting a noir detective—Croce—who is unable to close the case, ever afflicted by unresolved loose ends and other phantasmal remainders that disrupt the economy of detection. Besides merely questioning the conventions of more traditional crime fiction, such failure has allegorical implications. The detective's problems with deduction are able to stand in for the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, a supposedly hyper-rational system that ultimately unravels itself.

Keywords: Ricardo Piglia, noir mode, crime, economy of detection, neoliberal economy

Economy flows through the veins of most noir fiction and film. Money propels the intrigue, whether it is the shadowy deals brokered between closed doors or Marlowe's proverbial fee of twenty-five-dollars-a-day plus expenses. Indeed, one of the conditions of noir's dystopian and alienated tone is the capital that feeds corruption and mediates all social and political relations. Beyond the ubiquity and pernicious influence of money, however, the dynamics of crime and detection may be conceived as an economy in a more figurative vein. Crime and its converse, justice, can be seen as a transaction wherein the crime introduces an imbalance, much like the lavish excess of the potlatch, and justice acts as a counter-payment that restores equilibrium. Nietzsche offers an analogous economy of crime and punishment in "The Genealogy of Morals" wherein a penalty is meted out in strict accordance with the magnitude of the infraction. If justice indeed attempts a settling of accounts, the investigatory act of detection does something similar. The mystery creates an interpretive excess in the economy of narrative and understanding, and requires that detection reciprocate by explicating the mystery and restoring balance. Such a transaction is what we have come to expect of most texts within the traditional crime genre.

Noir, however, often refrains from offering harmonious closure, as unsettled debts and other forms of narrative excess obstruct a clean closing of accounts. The leftover debt or excess muddles any totalistic explanation or restoration of justice, while also cueing other points that have gone un-illuminated. In Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, for example, the detective takes on the role of a narrative broker who intends to document and ultimately clear the Sternwood family's account in arrears. Marlowe is charged by General Sternwood to investigate Geiger, who is blackmailing the well-to-do general with his daughter, Carmen Sternwood's, gambling debts. The family's illicit monetary debt, however, is just scratching the surface of the wealth of liabilities they have accrued. Geiger blackmails Carmen's sister, Vivian, claiming that he will reveal pornographic photos of Carmen if she fails to pay him \$5,000. As Marlowe further investigates the Sternwood family, he unearths other secret stories that have cast their shadow onto Vivian, Carmen, and the General. At the end of the novel, we find out that Vivian's husband, Rusty Regan, has, in fact, been murdered by the neurotic Carmen in a fit of jealousy, and that his body currently lies in one of the family's decrepit oil sumps. In the 1946 film adaptation, Marlowe attempts to clear the account by suggesting that they seek psychiatric help for Carmen, and let Eddie Mars take the fall for Regan's murder. However, both versions leave the impression that this account will not be closed. Regan's murder will always hang over the Sternwoods, and even Marlowe himself is "part of the nastiness now" (230).

In many ways, Ricardo Piglia's 2010 *Blanco nocturno* rewrites the now canonical Chandler novel. General Sternwood, who stands in for the fading Los Angeles aristocracy, is recast in Piglia's novel as the oligarch Cayetano Belladona, a similar invalid-recluse whose familial legacy also finds itself in a state of decadence. Vivian and Carmen are displaced to the Belladona twins,

Sofía and Ada, who are well-known to provoke scandal for a family name, which, if economically powerful, is already blemished by previous indiscretions. And traces of Philip Marlowe are easily found in both Croce, who follows the hard-boiled sleuth's intuitive mode of detection, and Renzi, who also becomes entangled in the family's nastiness.

By tacitly referencing Chandler's novel, *Blanco Nocturno* inserts itself into the realm of unresolvable debt, excess and noir. Within Piglia's noir fiction, economic debt has its corollary in epistemological and semantic excess. [1] Gareth Williams' reading of *La ciudad ausente*, for example, extols the flows of *différance* found in the novel's recasting of the utopian Finnegans Island: "there appears to be no single conclusion to be reached in, and no end to, the language that this totality enclave can articulate. As such, there is no hegemonic ground to be consolidated, no single sense to be made, and therefore no place from which to exorcise difference and negativity" (167). This hallmark feature of Piglia's work—linguistic instability and alterity—while surely utopian and anti-hegemonic, also problematizes detection. The author's detectives attempt to broker the symbolic transactions of investigation, but are often afflicted by a cacophony of secrets that exceed documentation and refuse to come into perfect figuration, as we see with Junior in *La ciudad ausente*: "La condición detectivesca de Junior, su afán por desentrañar la historia oculta, es lo que permite que salga a la superficie la otra novela, esa que está integrada por los relatos propiamente dichos, cada uno de los cuales podría ser, a su vez, núcleo de una nueva novela" (Fornet 161).

While most of Piglia's works involve some sort of investigation, *Blanco nocturno*, as according to Patrick Dove, is the novel that most closely follows the format of the hard-boiled noir novel. [2] More than a mere excursion into the genre, by citing the hardboiled tradition, Piglia is able to comment on the tragic traits of a more properly *noir* detective and apply such a figure to the Argentine context. This essay will offer a close reading of Piglia's most recent sleuth, Croce, and the overflowing dimensions of his economy of detection. As the novel demonstrates, the detective is unable to close the economic circle of investigation as he is constantly disoriented by phantasmal remainders that resist closure. Such failure, however, besides merely questioning the conventions of more traditional crime fiction, has allegorical implications. The detective's problems with deduction are able to stand in for the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, a supposedly hyper-rational system that ultimately unravels itself.

In its first few chapters, the novel seems to pose a standard *who-dunnit* premise. Tony Durán, a Puerto Rican-U.S. citizen, has been murdered in a rural town within the Buenos Aires province in 1972, and, as is expected, an investigation ensues. At this point, we can already see the contours of an investigatory transaction: there has been a crime, and the local justice system, headed by the District Attorney Cueto, will identify the guilty party, impose a punishment, and ostensibly restore balance. While on a gambling spree in Atlantic City, Durán has met and become

sexually involved in an unseemly *ménage a trois* with the Belladona twins. Durán follows them back to Argentina, allegedly in hopes of acquiring locally bred steeds to bring back to the U.S.. Upon arrival, his romantic involvement with the girls provides fodder for the local gossip circuits. The stories surrounding Durán are even more sensationalized because of his racial difference as a *neoyorquino* mulatto and his exotic and salacious tales of debauchery as a gambler in Atlantic City that he recounts in the local hotel bar. After finding Durán stabbed to death in his hotel room, district attorney Cueto pretends to close the case by alleging that the guilty party was Yoshio Dazai, the Japanese hotel employee with whom Durán purportedly had a homosexual relation that caused just as much scandal as his *ménage a trois* with the twin daughters. Cueto's version maintains that the murder was a mere crime of passion, motivated by Yoshio's jealousy.

However, as the novel progresses, we see that D.A. Cueto's overly simplistic explanation is a cover-up for other covert interests that are never completely illuminated. The town's police-detective, Croce, does not accept Cueto's explanation, and, much to the latter's consternation, insists that there is a much larger conspiracy at play that involves Luca Belladona's factory, venture capital, and Cueto himself. Croce can be seen as the noir hero who unveils a plethora of disorienting narratives that exceed the strictures of the story and create a surplus that the town authorities would prefer to conceal. Such excess takes the form of a bag of some one hundred thousand dollars in U.S. currency that Croce finds in the hotel basement that leads him to speculate about a possible financial conspiracy behind Durán's death. Here, capital is the synecdochal debt or liability that continues to haunt the town, and signals other secret stories that complicate the official version woven by the District Attorney. Croce alleges that Durán's true purpose was to deliver the overseas capital that the elder Belladona held in hedge funds in the United States. Supposedly, Belladona wanted the money to help his quixotic son, Luca, liquidate his failed automobile factory. Other opaque interests, however, that could include Cueto, certain factory shareholders, as well as a host of speculating venture capitalists inside and out of Argentina, may be involved in an effort to divert the money and buy out the factory and lot in order to construct a shopping mall, and thus cater to the needs of fluid, international capital. The murder, according to Croce's theory, would be a mere distraction from the real operation at hand: the maneuvering of flexible accumulation, which, in itself, is an excess that is difficult to trace.

Rather than imputing a charge against a tangible guilty party at the end of the novel, both Croce and Renzi face a web of power relations that is both ubiquitous and hidden at all moments. In a metafictional move, the disorienting climax gives way to what Renzi sees as a new genre of detective fiction: *la ficción paranoica*:

La investigación no tiene fin, no puede terminar. Habría que inventar un nuevo género policial, *la ficción paranoica*. Todos son sospechosos, todos se sienten perseguidos. El criminal ya no es un individuo aislado,

sino una gavilla que tiene el poder absoluto. Nadie comprende lo que está pasando; las pistas y los testimonios son contradictorios y mantienen las sospechas en el aire, como si cambiaran con cada interpretación. (284-85)

Croce's subversive and alternative theories open up a flood of uncertainties, suspicions and possible avenues of inquiry that haunt the novel and ultimately unravel Croce's own deductive abilities as a detective. Nicolás Bratosevich offers a similar prognosis of *ficción paranoica* within Piglia's work, wherein the detective is overwhelmed by an untraceable and yet ubiquitous threat:

Lo que detecta Piglia como crítico en una porción considerable de la narrativa literaria occidental (el policial como género, el *Facundo*, cierto Onetti...) es el relato montado alrededor de dos ítems: el sentimiento de amenaza (de persecución) / el delirio de su interpretación (que intenta conjurar, disipar, lo misterioso e inasible de esa amenaza)...Pero aún más ampliamente: el relato paranoico parece derivar hacia, o proceder de una categoría donde el poder del más fuerte, siempre arrollador para un actante que está a la defensiva, o que incluso ignora ingenuamente su amenaza, deshace al otro, lo anula o lo hace caer en la desazón angustiosa. (78-79)

The form of the mystery is thus excessive, as it opens up a plethora of coordinates and criminal angles that no one could adequately triangulate.

Excess can be seen as a secret or stain that is partially shrouded from view. Jacques Derrida's *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* offers a provocative analysis of both economic and semantic excess that occupies a space in-between—between, on one hand, being understood and accounted for, and on the other, a formless stain that resists full figuration. The gift, says Derrida, is a sort of excess as it is “promised to recognition, to keeping, indebtedness, credit, but also[...] *must be, owes itself to be...excessive and thereby surprising*” (147). According to Derrida, for excess to exist, it must defy thought and remain unregistered or forgotten. At the same time, however, it weighs on us and demands our recognition. For Derrida it is “The secret of that about which one cannot speak, but which one can no longer silence” (147). Excess is thus a Lacanian stain within the monetary or narrative economy that perturbs us and elicits our attention, yet at the same time, refuses to come into perfect focus, lest it cease to be a surplus.

Within the noir theoretical framework that we are tracing, the detective is he who is inexorably drawn to this splotch that betrays another hidden and often sordid dimension, rather than merely letting it drop out of the equation. The sleuth embodies the excess himself as he is overly involved with the case that he is investigating and loses perspective. He is unable to fully account for himself and becomes one more opaque variable that adds to and sullies the equation. Whether the detective realizes it or not, he is his own obstacle that muddles detection. In his essay, *El último lector* (2005), Piglia states that the noir detective, unlike a solely logical

Dupin-type detective, loses his distance from the investigation, and thus alters the nature of the enigma: “Por de pronto, el detective ha dejado de encarnar la razón pura...en la novela policial norteamericana la práctica parece ser el único criterio de verdad: el investigador se lanza, ciegamente, al encuentro de los hechos, se deja llevar por los acontecimientos y su investigación produce, fatalmente, nuevos crímenes” (97).

Consistent with Piglia’s theory, Croce adds to the mire of the case. His obstinacy inadvertently precipitates el Chino Arce’s suicide, who leaves a note claiming responsibility for the murder while also revealing that he took his life precisely because Croce would not let up in the investigation. Consequently, Croce takes responsibility for el Chino’s death and recognizes that his actions produce unintentional consequences that bedevil the *pesquisa* at hand: “Renzi notó que Croce estaba apesadumbrado, como si se culpaba por la muerte del Chino. Había tomado algunas decisiones y esas decisiones habían provocado una serie de resultados que no había podido prever” (160). Because Croce brought his dissenting views to the attention of the public, he has forestalled the possibility for a more thorough investigation. Now the murderer has committed suicide which, by extension, rules out the possibility of further questioning him and pursuing the disperse conspiracy of which he is a mere pawn. What is more, most of the official powers claim that the suicide note is just one more “delirio gauchesco” (163). Rather than open up a new avenue of inquiry, the suicide note becomes an object of mockery that invalidates Croce’s investigation and ultimately aids the cover-up.

Croce’s insertion of himself into the investigatory circle produces contradictions, seeing as he attempts to decipher what he is also partially creating. On one hand, he would like to objectively observe the events. However, his presence, which creates “una serie de resultados que no había podido prever,” is that wild card of his own subjectivity that influences not only his conclusions but also the object of analysis itself. His own subjective involvement is that extra variable which is always present and thus complicating analysis, and yet, is easily forgotten and difficult to account for.

Beyond his physical involvement in the events he investigates, the detective incurs a debt for the very act of detection. His own arrangement of the evidence, as an effort to make sense of the crime, simultaneously rules out any perfect, dis-interested objectivity, embedded as he is in the arrangement that he himself has charted. Croce seems to recognize that his subjectivity is that which gets in the way: “Todo es según lo que sabemos *antes* de ver...Vemos las cosas *según* como las interpretamos. Lo llamamos previsión: saber de antemano, estar prevenidos” (142). More than merely describing the nature of interpretation, however, Croce is signaling a contradiction at the heart of subjective thought: while metaphysics would purport to attain unity between thought and object, the subject that applies his or her own concepts onto the world beforehand rules out the possibility of airtight objectivity. Patrick Dove reads Croce in a similar

vein: “In order to see (track), a certain prevision (anticipation, postulation of a subject) is first required. This hermeneutic circle poses a problem when it comes to detective work, which, if it is to lead to a true and just outcome, must be unbiased and open to all possibilities from the outset” (31).

Through his theory of ‘negative dialectics,’ Adorno similarly complicates thought. According to Fabio Vighi, Adorno calls on us to recognize the intractable difference that remains between concept and object. For Adorno, in Vighi’s words,

the object of thought can never be fully subsumed under conceptual identity, as it leaves behind an ‘indigestible’ remainder of itself, an “indissoluble ‘Something’” (Adorno 2000: 135), that is to say a ‘hard kernel’ that resists thought’s urge to identify. (10)

Traditional, non-critical, conceptual thought, for Adorno, incurs a liability insofar as it does not account for this ‘hard kernel’ that resists cognition nor the unassailable difference between concept and object. Adorno thus proposes the framework of negative dialectics wherein thought thinks against itself by interrogating the coincidence of concept and thing. According to Vighi, “The defining mark of negative dialectics is that it forces the concept to turn against itself, towards the non-identity of thought, and from there it attempts to connect with the material surplus within the object of thought” (10). Negative dialectics is thus more in tune with the remaining surplus—that hard kernel that resists conceptual thinking. It interrogates thought in order to affirm this excessive debt that remains.

Croce’s own philosophy of detection is similar to Adorno’s notion of negative dialectics as the gumshoe opens the door to the constant non-identity between things and their concepts: “a mí me interesa mostrar que las cosas que parecen lo mismo son en realidad diferentes.” Later on he states that “Todo consiste en diferenciar lo que es de lo que parece ser” (144). The “es” can be seen as the unattainable kernel—the ‘truth’ of the issue, if we can speak of that. The semblances to which he refers, or ‘lo que parece ser,’ are precisely the concepts that we would like to impose onto the thing, but which, according to Adorno, we must constantly whittle down in order to expose the inevitable remainder.

Croce’s recognition of this difference that cripples traditional, conceptual thinking demonstrates his desire to face an epistemological debt that could eventually pull him down into a whirlwind of uncertainty. However, such radical negativity has a political charge that defies Cueto’s overly simplistic account and rules out the possibility of closing the case any time soon. Croce assumes the debt of otherness, of non-official narratives, of the imperfection of the conceptual and by so doing recognizes the differences that work against thought. His example of the conejo/pato drawing evidences the uncertainty that this debt brings with it: “¿Ve?—dijo—. Éste es un pato, pero si lo mira así, es un conejo. –Dibujó la silueta del pato-conejo—. Qué quiere decir

ver tal cual es: no es fácil” (142). While Croce seems, on one level, to be saying that knowledge and objectivity are merely a question of adopting the proper standpoint, “Comprender... es solo adoptar el punto de vista adecuado para percibir la realidad” (143), we cannot help but notice the Adornean tension latent within such a declaration—if ‘comprehension’ is merely a question of adopting the proper viewpoint, it also opens the doors to an infinite range of alternative readings that must be sifted through in order to find the one that is most proper. And this, in itself, is a debt that is difficult to close.

Of course, by affirming this movement toward negativity, the noir detective becomes tragically enveloped in this storm of contingency wherein the foreign outside always bursts in and ruptures the economy of detection. Indeed, the liability of the undiscernible kernel can be spatially adduced as a sort of outside. Derrida similarly conceptualizes the economic circle in *Given Time* in spatial terms—there is an inside as well as an outside to economic activity. There are the normalized transactions which exist within the circle, as well as the unforeseeable moments of exorbitance that are seemingly “without”, yet intrude into the economy of detection. In spite of the tense relation between the two, the inside depends upon the outside for its very being. The outside pushes the economic circle along, just as the opaque enigma propels a private investigator’s economy of deduction.

Such quantification of the outside, however, as we have seen, is not always easy in noir. The outside invades and agitates the inside’s set configuration and often entraps the private-eye. It introduces a debt that is free-floating and difficult to capture, yet simultaneously inescapable. For Lacan, this debt takes the form of a gaze from the outside that intrudes on our subjectivity. The gaze renders us another’s object, much like the Sartrean voyeur who looks through the peep hole, only to see that someone else is watching him. Rather than remain an autonomous subject, the other’s gaze catches us off guard and objectifies us. A gap, stain, or debt of otherness opens up within our existence that asks us to see ourselves as the other sees us. In order to close the gap, we now desire to look at ourselves from outside or, as according to Lacan, “see ourselves seeing ourselves.” As Lacan states, we would like to assume this gaze from outside: “From the moment that this gaze appears, the subject tries to adapt himself to it, he becomes the punctiform object, that point of vanishing being with which the subject confuses his own failure” (83). While difficult to access, this excessive debt from outside is indeed a necessary part of our own subjectivity and must be taken into account if we are to gain some degree of self-consciousness and understanding of our relation to our surrounding milieu. Žižek sees this as the “truth” of our being that we find outside: “I am aware of myself only in so far as there is, outside of me, a place in which the truth about me is articulated” (208).

We see a similar external intrusion with Croce’s intuitive mode of detection, where thought seemingly arrives *at* him from outside: “No es que oyera voces, esas frases le llegaban como

recuerdos. *El ojo blanco de la noche. Una mente criminal superior*. Sabía bien qué significaban pero no cómo le entraban en la cabeza” (97). This is but one of many instances when foreign thought almost fantastically bursts in and hijacks his analytical process. Not only does thought intrude at this moment, but he seems to intuit a particular gaze, that of his disperse conspiratorial enemy that challenges him from unknown corners. The “white eye” is of course the “luz del faro” (96) from Luca’s factory. The *comisario* intuits the conspiracy emanating from therein—*Una mente criminal superior*—and thus finds in the factory an enemy staring back at him. The gaze from outside creates this mystery or debt of an *other* that challenges what Croce knows about the case and himself. It is to no surprise that Croce describes this intellectual competition as a game of chess, wherein one must anticipate the enemy’s tactics and how one is viewed by the enemy: “Esto es como jugar al ajedrez, hay que esperar la movida del otro” (143). However, doing so is not so easy. The other’s gaze is the excessive, unknown dimension that bursts in and ruptures his epistemological surety. The only way to close this account, wipe the stain clean, and gain a sense of epistemological stability, would be, in Lacanian fashion, to see himself from outside, from the other’s viewpoint, to *see himself seeing himself*.

Croce attempts to settle this debt later on, after Renzi’s arrival. Renzi initially serves as an other that can return the gaze to Croce and allow him the illusion of seeing himself through Renzi’s eyes. Croce thinks aloud and requires that Renzi reinforce his conclusions. By gaining Renzi’s approval, he is able to not only evaluate his own thought process, but to pretend to see himself as Renzi sees him:

En la mesa haciendo dibujitos el comisario reconstruyó los hechos para sí mismo, pero también para Renzi. Necesitaba siempre alguien con quien hablar para borrar su discursito privado, las palabras que le daban vueltas siempre en la cabeza como una música y entonces al hablar seleccionaba los pensamientos y no decía todo, tratando de que su interlocutor reflexionara con él y llegara, antes, a sus mismas conclusiones, porque entonces podía confiar en su razonamiento ya que otro también lo había pensado con él. (141)

Such an effort at self-contemplation is redoubled by the novel’s narrative structure. After his arrival, Renzi effectively replaces Croce as principal protagonist and becomes the novel’s narrative eyes as Croce is ostracized from the town and eventually takes refuge in a *manicomio*. If not absent from the narrative, Croce is relegated to the margins. He becomes one of the objects at which the novel gazes. Such a drastic shift in focalization, from Croce to Renzi, fulfills a compensatory operation. It gazes at Croce as he himself cannot. Yet it also reiterates the contradiction at the heart of Lacanian theory: we want what we cannot have. Croce would like to survey himself. Doing so, however, requires Renzi’s line of vision, which the detective cannot fully assume.

As a noir detective, Croce confronts and is disturbed by this gaze from the outside, whether it is the voice of the townspeople, the thoughts that arrive *at* him, his foe who he knows is watching him, or, later, the panoptic gaze of the asylum where he is confined. While less neurotic people would pretend this excessive debt does not exist in favor of an individually harmonious existence, Croce confronts it head on and exists in it. As a tragic noir hero, he cannot *not* assume this epistemological debt that will not be settled.

If detection can indeed be conceptualized as an economy, as a series of transactions that are compromised by excessive remainders and unaccountable outsides, then the detective himself is able to stand in allegorically for the movement of capital within the age of neoliberalism, which also gets lost in its own fluid, dizzying movement. This correlates to Joanna Page's reading of Piglia's use of the hardboiled genre in *Plata Quemada* (1997) which, beyond the immediate crime and characters, investigates the capitalist system itself: "In Piglia's novel, as in the *novela negra* in general, the central enigma is not posed by the crime. What is under investigation here is not the motive or identity of the criminal but the complex relations between criminality, capitalist society, and the mass media" (29). An investigation into the *why* of Croce's downfall as cogito/detective, springboards us into a discussion of the specific antinomies of capitalism. This is one of Croce's most crucial semantic functions within the narrative, though easy to overlook, seeing as we typically cast the hero as a site of resistance to the conspiratorial dynamics of international finance. By standing in for capitalism, however, rather than resisting power from a clear point of separation, Croce is able to symbolize the system's endemic problems, contradictions and exorbitant surplus. The detective's *praxis* of rationality corresponds to the similarly 'rational' logic of the international market, and just as Croce's investigation ties itself into knots, so too do the diverse forms of flexible accumulation evince a more rhizomatic, excessive structure that presages its own crisis.

Neoliberalism's consolidation in Argentina in 1976 created an irrational excess, which, viewed from the novel's 1972 context, is difficult to foresee. As is already well-documented, the pressures of neoliberalism, at odds with the various revolutionary-militant movements in Argentina (*Los Montoneros*, *ERP*, etc.) led to the military junta's excessively violent measures, detaining and disappearing thousands of leftist 'subversives.' Of course, the large influx of capital into the Argentine economy in the early seventies can, in and of itself, be seen as an excess. As according to David Harvey, the global inflation of the time led international investors to search for alternative avenues to inject capital in order to alleviate inflation in first world economies (182-83). Argentina posed a promising venue for the reallocation of private funds and excess accumulation. Santiago Colás asserts that "Now, economically as well, the military's desire for foreign capital corresponded to foreign capital's need for release into new financial markets" (147). However, the military regime's economic restructuring strategies consisted largely of deindustrialization

and record levels of foreign debt, all of which had devastating effects on Argentine economic stability on into the 1980s. [3] Argentina's economic crises after the dictatorship thus illustrate the contradictions which, according to David Harvey, are endemic to neoliberal capitalism: capital must expand in order to thrive, yet its expansion also creates an excess that must be redirected in order to avoid economic crisis. At some point, as we see with the Argentine case, the system is left without an alternative avenue to redirect excessive accumulation, and crisis ensues. Harvey maintains the following:

The Marxist argument is, then, that the tendency towards overaccumulation can never be eliminated under capitalism. It is a never-ending and eternal problem for any capitalist mode of production. The only question, therefore, is how the overaccumulation tendency can be expressed, contained, absorbed, or managed in ways that do not threaten the capitalist social order. (181)

Just as Croce's enterprise of deduction is weighed down by phantasmal specters, the consolidation of neoliberalism in Argentina in the 70s and 80s brings a storm of inflation and excess which, though temporarily allayed at times, culminates in the 2001 crisis. And just as Croce faces the unstable contingency of rationality, so too does crisis take the form of an unknowable void that is, from the novel's 1972 context, unmentioned and unimaginable, yet imminent all the same.

What is more, the spatial and Lacanian problems of Croce's thought correspond to the geopolitical machinations of international capital. As Croce's thought blurs the line between inside and outside, so too does the neoliberal market confound the local with the global. What becomes excessive, at this point, is the confusion of inside and outside, where the one serves to supplement the other. We know there is a difference between the two—the rational and the irrational, the knowable and the excessively unknowable—yet actually pin pointing where the one ends and the other begins is difficult.

While we have already demonstrated the seemingly fantastic intrusion of the excessive outside into Croce's thought, we also see this confusion on the level of narrative focalization that weaves seamlessly between the hearsay of the people and Croce's own introspection. The third person narrator's perspective enlaces the two and confuses them, to the point where we are hard-pressed to distinguish between Croce's deductions and those of the town's inhabitants that he is interviewing. On one hand, the 3rd person narrator's perspective seems to be founded on the locals' collective oral accounts of Durán, as the narrator occasionally inserts qualifications such as "según decían" (22) or "según parece"(23). In this sense, rather than enjoying omniscience, the narrator seems to limit him or herself to the "decir" of the pueblo, with the background information offered in the first chapter basing itself on the local gossip surrounding Durán, his arrival in Argentina, and the tantalizing tales of the Belladonna twins' promiscuity. However, at other

moments, and rather contradictorily, the narrator ventures into Croce's more intimate reflections, which exist outside the realm of the town's hearsay:

A la tarde, en el bar del Hotel Plaza, Durán solía contar fragmentos de su infancia en Trenton, la gasolinera de su familia al costado de Route One, su padre que tenía que levantarse a la madrugada a despachar nafta porque un coche que se había desviado de la ruta tocaba la bocina y se oían risas y música de jazz en la radio y Tony se asomaba medio dormido a la ventana y veía los veloces autos carísimos, con las rubias alegres en el asiento de atrás, cubiertas con sus tapados de armiño, una aparición luminosa en medio de la noche que se confundía—en la memoria—con fragmentos de un film en blanco y negro. Las imágenes eran secretas y personales y no pertenecían a nadie. Ni siquiera recordaba si esos recuerdos eran suyos, y a Croce a veces le pasaba lo mismo con su vida.
(17)

The intimacy of such an observation about Croce's and Durán's foreign memories makes us wonder where this observation is coming from. Was it something Durán said, now passed through the filter of the townspeople and, subsequently, through Croce? Was it Madariaga's observation with whom Croce is now conversing in the bar and has seemingly archived the town's gossip circuits? Or was it Croce's own reflection, seeing as he obviously experienced something similar and is the only one who could know that his memories are not his own? Consistent with Piglia's literary practice in which, according to Idelber Avelar, "se manejan combinaciones, barajamiento de viejos relatos, plagios, narrativas apócrifas" (426), the novel places Croce's thought at the crux of outside and inside, where it is unclear if his thought is his own, or if it is other—one for which he cannot totally assume responsibility nor account for, as he cannot he even lay sole claim to his own memories. Croce's own thought is thus marked by the debt or excess of otherness, of the strangely unverifiable, and thus exceeds the boundaries of the rational.

The spatial peculiarities of the novel's focalization likewise find their parallel in the disorienting overlap of inside and outside within neoliberalism, which, in the novel's context, is just beginning to consolidate its grasp on the Argentine nation. Indeed, it is precisely this confusion of the inside and outside, of the local with the global, that is the principal "excess" of neoliberal politics. A nationalistic practice like Peronism in the age of global neoliberalism, is rendered uncanny as it is determined by the needs of the outside, neoliberal market. This inability to parse inside from outside, national from global, familiar from unfamiliar, itself is the ghostly and uncanny debt that haunts national politics from the seventies on.

1972 was the moment when the ability to imagine an autonomous Peronist state that maintained its self-sufficiency and defiance of outside influences through import substitution was about to fade. The imminent obsolescence of the Peronist cause is attested to in the novel through the signs on Luca's dilapidated factory walls which read "*Perón vuelve*" (217). The sign's

placement emblemizes both the optimism and anticipation of millions prior to Perón's return, as well as the ruin that such a narrative would soon become, as it is found on tattered posters coarsely plastered to the walls of a factory that is on the brink of decrepitude. While the masses in the millions continued to anxiously await Perón's return and to believe in his cause of state protectionism, conditions in the international market had altered drastically since the previous Peronist government. Neoliberalism was underway in the early seventies, already actively chipping away at the viability of formerly state-protectionist models and making the effects of the global economy, as well as its crises, very much felt in Argentina. [4] The success or failure of a second round of Peronism would now depend upon the mercy (or lack thereof) of the international economy, thus betraying the interdependence of local and global. In spite of Perón's efforts to renew the traditional pact between labor and state, the world oil crisis left any state-labor reform in shambles. The administration's efforts to contain the effects of the international crisis within Argentina were fruitless. According to William Smith,

Finally, in 1974, the social pact among organized labor, the national bourgeoisie, and the state fell victim to the *coup de grâce* delivered by the Arab-Israeli war of the previous year. Argentina's favorable terms of trade were suddenly reversed as OPEC oil prices (and the price of exports from the industrial countries) sharply outdistanced the price of primary exports in international markets. Industrialists abandoned the price freeze, followed immediately by the CGT and the unions, who demanded large wage increases. Inflation, which had declined greatly in 1973, rebounded sharply upward. (229)

Like the detective who is unable to account for the outside voices that he hears in his head, the inside and outside of Argentine politics and economics are rapidly confused. Peronism, for example, which traditionally represented the *inside* of the state, is now beginning to be determined by the *outside* of international capital. Colás asserts that while Perón initially continued to court the leftist Peronist branch of the Montoneros, as a political "ace in the hole" (110), his other political alliances belied a more conservative, reactionary stance (110-111). According to Colás, Perón's post-'73 politics are increasingly unsympathetic to the left and their desires for socialist utopia, thus contradicting the Montonero's messianic view of Perón's return. [5] While Perón himself did not necessarily push for Argentina's further insertion into the increasingly global market, his more staunch, conservative stance upon returning in 1973 can be seen as a contribution to neoliberalism's imminent hegemony. His close advisor, López Rega, organized the *Alianza Anticomunista Argentina* death-squad that subsequently served as one of the blue-prints for the military regime's terror campaign to rid the nation of socialist resistance to free-market economics. The military regime itself purported to 'restore' the nation's true identity as a Western, Christian state that would continue the battle against Marxist infiltrators, all the while paving the way to

the nation's insertion into the free market. In hindsight, neoliberal capital is the surreptitious supplement that, in the seventies and on, renders nationalism uncanny. In this context, national culture is a mere masquerade. It is the disguise that international capital must assume in order to gain admittance into the local space. The uncomfortable alliance, of course, comes apart at the seams in the ensuing years.

The Carlos Menem administration, for example, brings the contradictions of nationalist rhetoric inflected by global capital to the fore. Menem's performance of the *justicialista* narrative conserved the histrionics of nationalist populism, while drastically re-semanticizing the content in order to cater to the needs of international capital. Such contradictions of the outside/inside are condensed in the administration's pegging of the peso's exchange rate to that of the U.S. dollar in order to ensure economic stability. While this maneuver can be seen as an effort on behalf of the administration to affirm its sovereignty over market flows, it also functions as a measure to better position the nation within the demands of the international economy. The artificial fixing of the peso's exchange value, however, is ultimately unsustainable, as outside neighboring currencies (Brazil, for example) without fixed exchange rates and growing inflation were unable to continually afford Argentine exports, thus freezing the Argentine economy and eventually causing the 2001 crisis. Whether the crisis is due to the state's desire to intervene in the fixing of value, or simply giving in to the excesses produced by capitalism itself, is difficult to discern. Like the detective who is disoriented by the thoughts and words that are not his own, yet a part of his thought process, the state is unable to account for the pressures of outside capital, which are now the intimate fibers of its very being, and capital is unable to account for its own tendency towards excess and crisis.

What this noir novel leaves us with is the inability to distinguish inside from outside, rational from irrational, secret from knowledge, or excess from system, within neoliberalism. The economic system is a mystery in and of itself and thus encloses its own uncanny remainder. This, for Piglia, is the central kernel of noir literature: "el único enigma que proponen—y que nunca resuelven— las novelas de la serie negra es el de las relaciones capitalistas" (Crítica y ficción 70). However, it is precisely the confusion of these dimensions, and the detective's downfall, which allows us to draw this structural parallel to the fluidity and imminent crisis of neoliberal capital. Rather than merely positing a disenchanting vision of Latin American politics and a lack of justice, the tragedy of Piglia's noir novel traces the coordinates of a capitalist system that is similarly laden with contradictions. Just as the novel ends in 1972, when a national crisis is imminent in both a political and economic sense, so too does it map the aporias of an economic system whose crises are always just over the horizon.

Endnotes

[1] Semantic excess can be seen as a trademark feature of Piglia's work. Jorgelina Corbatta mentions the different levels of literary citation in *Respiración artificial* (1980) as a means of disorienting the reader and evading censorship: "De allí provienen el carácter de archive (ya mencionado) de la novela, de palimpsesto, de enigma policial que reúne diversos niveles cifrados con el propósito de borrar las pistas. Piglia reconstruye el pasado, y el presente, mediante cartas en clave, documentos, falsificaciones" (53).

[2] As Patrick Dove observes, "While echoes of the hardboiled/noir tradition can be found as early as the short story 'La loca y el relato del crimen' (*Nombre Falso*, 1975) and while the investigatory motif is clearly present in *Respiración Artificial* and *La ciudad ausente*, it is not until *Blanco nocturno* that Piglia writes what could be considered—at least by half—as a crime novel" (26-7).

[3] William Smith sees the basis of the Argentine economic crisis during and after the *Proceso* as one of excessive debt combined with deindustrialization, which the military leaders sought to ameliorate, contradictorily, by even more foreign debt: "Argentina's crisis was one resulting not from debt-led expansion but from the paradoxical combination of debt and de-industrialization. Argentina's was a crisis of shrinkage. The dilemma facing the architects of the new strategy during the Proceso was how to take advantage of the rapid expansion in international liquidity that took place in the 1970s. Given the recessionary consequences of their strategy, it was impossible to look to internal demand to absorb external loans, credit, and investment. The economy's general contraction, plus the rise in foreign-exchange reserves, meant that the only way to attract external capital was through expansion of the foreign debt" (260).

[4] Gareth Williams similarly refers to this problematic, liminal space between national and global in which neoliberalism cues the "coming into being of a historical, epistemological, cultural, and political limit at which the social imperatives and conceptual systems of the past reveal themselves as still here and, indeed, still as imperatives. But they do so precisely by uncovering themselves as inheritances and imperatives that are no longer viable as such—that is, as they used to be. In the current order of global accumulation it is becoming increasingly obvious that words such as "nation," "the people," "development," or "national culture," can no longer mean what they used to mean in Latin America" (8-9).

[5] Colás asserts the following: "The montoneros continued to spin their myth of a Perón genuinely converted to their socialist cause but surrounded by right-wingers alienating the leader from the people and the movement. But López Rega's Triple A death squads operated with the tacit, and sometimes active, support of the federal police under Perón's administration. Perón enacted tougher penalties for acts of terrorism while ignoring the frequent right-wing massacres. The 'University Law' passed in March of 1974 banned politics on campus, restricted student unions, and discriminated against leftist lecturers, but the leader of the University Peronist Youth claimed his organization was 'convinced...it was not thought up to throw us out.' Even after Perón directly denounced the Montoneros and Peronist Youth as 'callow and stupid' during a May Day celebration in 1974, the Montoneros refused to abandon Perón. Only after his death on 1 July 1974, the assumption of the presidency by his widow Isabel, and the rapid escalation of right-wing attacks organized by López Rega did the Montoneros, in September 1974, finally go back underground in an alliance with other disappointed Peronist and Guevarist guerrilla groups." (111)

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