

# The Detective Novel in Puerto Rico



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By

Benjamín Torres Caballero

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*For my wife Cathy and my children, Seth,  
Romeo and Deborah*



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## PREFACE

*The Detective Novel in Puerto Rico* is the first comprehensive book-length study in English of the detective novel on the Island. It is an exhaustive study of the genre in Puerto Rico from its origins (1984) to the present (2024). This volume describes the historical events—the police murders on Cerro Maravilla on July 25, 1978, and their subsequent investigation—that served as a catalyst and led to the inception of the genre, as well as its subsequent development, from the 1984 publication of Wilfredo Mattos Cintrón’s *El cerro de los buitres* and of its precursor, Luis López Nieves’ *Seva*—to the present. In the process, this study establishes a canon for the genre on the Island over the last 40 years. This volume covers 20 authors and some 50 works, many of them hybrid texts, for instance, Rafael Acevedo’s science fiction detective novel *Exquisito cadáver* (2001) or Marta Aponte Martínez’s neo-gothic whodunit *Sobre mi cadáver*. The authors are arranged chronologically based on the date of publication of their first detective novel, and each text is analyzed from one or more critical approaches, whether it be socio-political—the novels of Mattos Cintrón—intertextual—the multiple literary references in Arturo Echavarría’s *Como el aire de abril*—ideological—Ana Lydia Vega’s feminist narratives—philosophical—Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá’s existential noir novel *Sol de medianoche*. The reader will come away with an overview of what has developed in a short span of time into a diverse and innovative literary genre on the Island. The study begins with an introduction to the detective novel, specifically to those elements that make it an identifiable “national genre,” as well as chapters on the detective novel and the press, and on the crime novel, as distinct from the detective novel in Puerto Rico.



# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The detective novel is any narration that has as its unifying thread the inquiry into a crime, notwithstanding who conducts it, what methods are employed or the result of the investigation (Colmeiro, 1994, 55).

There are two subgenres or paradigmatic detective novel structures, the *whodunit* and the *hard-boiled*. The *whodunit* was created by Edgar Allan Poe and popularized initially by Arthur Conan Doyle, and practiced by writers such as Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Ellery Queen (Colmeiro, 1994, 32-33). In the classic *whodunit* the murder is investigated in a rational and logical manner by an amateur sleuth not affiliated with the police, with an aid who has the function of narrator, in a closed, local, and predetermined space with a refined atmosphere, among a small group of well-mannered suspects. The investigation is constantly interrupted by analepsis to reconstruct what happened leading up to the crime, but social, political, or psychological digressions are not allowed (Pöppel, 2001, 7-8). The golden age of the *whodunit* was the interwar period (Colmeiro, 1994, 33).

The term *hard-boiled* refers to the subgenre created by Dashiell Hammett and practiced, among others, by Raymond Chandler, James Cain, Chester Himes, Ross McDonald and Patricia Highsmith —not all *hard-boiled* novels, for instance, Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, are detective novels — in which the investigation is marked by unnecessary violence —often there is no intention of sustaining the illusion of deductive reasoning (Colmeiro, 1994, 52)— which places the life of the private investigator in constant danger, and has as scenario the open spaces of the city, its sordid settings. The *hard-boiled* novels transform the “sub-literature” of the *pulp*s characterized by suspense and imbued with violence and sex into texts that serve as a vehicle for social criticism.<sup>1</sup>

If logic and reason govern the inquiry, then the novel leans towards the English version of the detective novel, the *whodunit*; if brute force prevails, then it is closer to the American version, the *hard-boiled* (Pöppel, 12, 2001). Both the *whodunit* and the *hard-boiled* detective novels tell the story of the investigation and the solution of the crime; the *hard-boiled*, much like the

*thriller* and the *spy novel*, narrates the pursuit that often places in danger the life of the detective, “the story of the vulnerable detective” (Todorov, 1977, 51). Stated somewhat differently, and following Todorov’s typology of the detective novel, the *whodunit* is composed of two plots, the story of the crime and the story of its investigation (Todorov, 1977, 44-47). The latter takes place in the present, and in terms of action it pales in importance in comparison to the former, which takes place in the past. The inquiry in the narrative present is constantly interrupted to reconstruct the particulars of the crime. By contrast, the *thriller* and the *spy novel* consist of one plot, in which what is unknown is not what has taken place, but what has yet to happen. The *hard-boiled* is built as a hybrid structure that depends on the story of the detective whose life is in danger.

The detective novel does not consist of a fixed, but rather of a variable arrangement of conventions. The presence of certain elements—a detective, his assistant, a murder victim—does not determine whether a novel belongs or not to the detective genre, since a detective novel can be written following as well as subverting the conventions of the genre. For Hubert Pöppel, instead of postulating definitions of the detective novel, it is more productive to consider different ways of describing the genre, by focusing on certain elements that over a hundred and fifty years have become data in a complex system of coordinates (Pöppel, 2001, 7). It is a matter then of determining in what sense specific novels deviate from a theoretical model based on those elements that recur in what are considered “classic” or “typical” examples of the genre.<sup>2</sup> New exemplars of the genre may eliminate certain elements or develop them further or introduce new ones. So, if we attempt to define the detective genre in a minimal way, we can point to Spanish scholar José Colmeiro’s proposition that the works that belong to this complex genre are “narrativa ficcional cuyo hilo estructural lo forma la investigación de un hecho criminal” (Colmeiro, 1994, 53). Colmeiro reiterates that proposition when he states that the detective genre is “toda narrativa inquisitiva alrededor del fenómeno del crimen (en la que es frecuente, pero no necesario, la participación de un detective, ya sea oficial, privado o aficionado)” (Colmeiro, 1994, 54). As Pöppel affirms, “Lo que se requiere, entonces, es mínimamente un caso por resolver: un misterio o enigma o la amenaza de un crimen” (Pöppel, 2001, 12). So, the quintessential element of detective narratives is the investigation. Even in the case of the postmodern detective novel in which most of the conventions of the genre are subverted, the narration is still conceived in terms of some type of inquiry.

Stefano Tani argues in *The Doomed Detective* that contemporary “serious” novels assume some of the conventions of the detective novel, and

affirms that, inversely, the characters, setting, etc., of the detective novel are no longer created exclusively as a function of an artificial structure —crime-investigation-solution— but are used to transform the detective novel into a vehicle for social criticism (Tani, 1984, 34). In Latin America, the detective novel, the “neopolicial” —designated by Diego Trelles Paz as the “*novela policial alternativa*”<sup>3</sup>— is a contemporary form adopted by socially engaged fiction. In the Puerto Rican detective novel this social function can take the form of questioning official history, of searching for cultural identity, of advocacy for the rights of women and the LGBTQ community, and as a medium for considering philosophical questions and proposing metafictional themes. When the structure of the detective novel is used as a pretext to reflect on the collectivity and the individual, then works begin to be written that resemble less the “typical” detective novel and more a literature that promotes change in different areas of society. This social function is at the core of all Wilfredo Mattos Cintrón’s detective novels, each of which takes up a different issue that affects Puerto Rican society. Mattos Cintrón also explores the inescapable theme of *puertorriqueñidad* or Puerto Rican national identity, a concern that is also present in the detective novels of Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá and in much of twentieth century Puerto Rican literature. Rodríguez Juliá’s detective narratives, particularly the third installment of his detective trilogy, show a concern with the devastating effects of the trafficking and consumption of controlled substances —the great scourge of our times— on the Island. Ana Lydia Vega explores the dangers that the insubordinate woman runs in a patriarchal society, and Max Chárriez describes the hazards of being gay in a sexually intolerant society, as well as the destructive pathology of child sexual abuse, and explores *puertorriqueñidad* from a gay perspective. In other cases, such as *Seva* (1983) by Luis López Nieves and *El cerro de los buitres* (1984) by Wilfredo Mattos Cintrón, *Crimen en la calle Tetuán* (1996) by José Curet and *Huesos secos* (2013) by Max Chárriez, the detective narrative becomes an exploration and a re-writing of History. So finally, the inquiry, performed by a police detective or a private investigator, a professor or a journalist or simply by an individual who confronts a mystery, is a way of describing or criticizing social order or disorder in Puerto Rico.

Héctor Fernando Vizcarra in his study titled *El enigma del texto ausente* points to the existence of narratives that utilize formal resources of detective fiction, and therefore can be analyzed structurally as such, even though they are not considered as belonging to the genre (Vizcarra, 2015, 19). As examples Vizcarra refers to three short stories, “El triple robo de Bellamore” by Horacio Quiroga, “El hombre” by Juan Rulfo and “La cara de la desgracia” by Juan Carlos Onetti, whose plots, he states, follow the model

“huir-perseguir” (“flee-pursue”) and “ocultar-revelar” (“conceal-reveal”) (21). Vizcarra associates this model with the structures of the detective narrative, which, in addition to containing the themes of crime and subsequent punishment, “tienen como soporte [...] una serie de pautas que recuerdan en algo a la ficción de detectives; ese *algo* es lo que llamo *registro policial*: la tensión dramática producida por la exposición gradual de incógnitas, los obstáculos y vericuetos surgidos en el transcurso de la historia, sus resoluciones paulatinas (acertadas o no), y en última instancia, una conclusión análoga al fallo irrevocable y disciplinario otorgado por el detective como colofón a la pesquisa” (Vizcarra, 2015, 20). Vizcarra affirms that, to comprehend the notion of “*registro policial*” (police register), it is necessary to consider the concept of “tensión narrativa” elaborated by Rahaël Baroni. For Baroni, tension arises when the story places the demand on the reader to expect an ending, expectation characterized by anticipation and colored by uncertainty, which in turn confers passionate traits to the act of reception. That narrative tension would be considered a poetic effect of the structure of the story. In narrative tension we can recognize the dynamic aspect or force of what is called “*intriga*”:

[Narrative] tension is a phenomenon that arises when the interpreter of a story is required to anticipate an ending, an anticipation characterized by uncertainty, which confers passionate features to the act of reception. Narrative tension will then be considered a poetic effect that structures the account, and in which we will be able to recognize the dynamic aspect or “force” of what we customarily call *intrigue*.

La tensión [narrativa] es el fenómeno que surge cuando al intérprete de un relato se le exige estar a la expectativa de un desenlace, expectativa caracterizada por una anticipación teñida de incertidumbre, la cual confiere rasgos pasionales al acto de recepción. La tensión narrativa será, entonces, considerada como un efecto poético que estructura el relato, y en la que haremos de reconocer el aspecto dinámico o la “fuerza” de eso que acostumbramos llamar *intriga*. (Baroni, 2007, 18)

Obviously, narrative tension is not the exclusive domain of the detective genre. It can be present in narratives belonging to other genres, but in works that unfold following the *police register* the role of suspense as structural element operates in the same manner as in the formulaic detective genre, “la tensión entre la ceguera y la observación; el vaivén entre lo encubierto y lo que se descubre” even in the absence of crimes and violence (Vizcarra, 2015, 20-21). Ricardo Piglia puts it this way in “La ficción paranoica”:

El género policial convierte en anécdota y en tema un problema técnico que cualquier narrador enfrenta cuando escribe una historia. Aquello que no se

narra y que funciona como un lugar vacío. Todo narrador enfrenta siempre el problema del secreto, del suspenso, del misterio. Todo relato va del no saber al saber. Toda narración supone ese paso. La novela policial hace de eso un tema. (Piglia, 2011, 229)

In other words, detective narrative turns into a theme the act of solving for unknowns following the pattern flee-pursue, conceal-reveal, but this *police register* may be employed by works that do not belong to the genre, incorporating the suspense of the detective narrative (Vizcarra, 2015, 21).

Vizcarra stresses the importance of Stefano Tani's study on the use of the conventions of the detective novel in *The Doomed Detective*. Tani argues that the detective novel was radically transformed in structure and signification by the asymbolic and destructuring postmodern sensibility, which found in the detective narrative a highly structured and symbolic genre that needed intervention (Tani, 1984, xii-xiii). The result is a mutation or inversion of the detective novel, that is, the emergence of an anti-detective novel, characterized primarily by the lack of resolution or of an unsatisfactory resolution (Tani, 1984, 41-45). Referring to writers who do not belong directly to the tradition of detection —Borges, Robbe-Grillet, Nabokov— Tani affirms that it is those writers who have intermittently employed the conventions of detective narrative to express chaos and existential vacuum by means of a genre created to convey the opposite:

The conventions of the detective novel are more exploited than renewed by these writers, who deconstruct the genre's precise architecture into a meaningless mechanism without purpose; they parody positivistic detection. They dismantle the elegant engine Poe constructed, pulling apart the once functional machinery and removing its pieces (now the plot, now the suspense technique, now the clichéd detective) to do different things with them. (Tani, 1984, 34)

Another significant element which contributes to the notable hybridity of contemporary narrative is the mixing of literary genres. Diego Trelles Paz considers this trait to be one of the main characteristics of the “novela policial alternativa,” which he defines as “esa rama del género policíaco cultivada en los países hispanoamericanos que reformula, invierte o, bien, elimina algunos de sus elementos canónicos, al mismo tiempo que incorpora algunos de los mecanismos de la narrativa contemporánea, con el fin de adaptarlo a una lógica más cercana y verosímil a la de sus propias realidades” (Trelles Paz, 2008, 144). Among those works that Trelles Paz includes in this classification are Vicente Leñero's *Los albañiles*, Jorge Ibargüengoitia's *Las muertas* and Ricardo Piglia's *Nombre falso*, none of which are considered as belonging to the formulaic detective genre, since

they reformulate or subvert the classic patterns of the genre in the same manner as Tani's anti-detective novel. Trelles Paz considers the alternative police novel an "anti-genre" constructed based on contrasts with the matrix genre (Vizcarra, 2015, 41). For example, Mayra Santos-Febres' *Cualquier miércoles soy tuya* can be approached as a hybrid text that intertwines the "artist's novel" with the detective novel and *Exquisito cadáver* is also a hybrid narrative that combines science fiction with detective fiction. In "Problemas de género: narrativa policial y ciencia ficción en Puerto Rico, 1872-2014," Persephone Braham analyzes several hybrid Puerto Rican texts, beginning with Alejandro Tapia y Rivera's *Póstumo el transmigrado* and closing with two novels by Pedro Cabiya, *Trance* (2008) and *Malas hierbas* (2011). Cabiya's texts, says Braham, "combine elements of the police and crime novel, with horror and science fiction" (Braham, 2014, 41).

These texts by Cabiya use what Vizcarra designates as the *police register* of the detective novel, that is, they introduce narrative tension based on the model *flee-pursue, conceal-reveal*, and in a general sense they employ, as Tani proposes, conventions taken from the formulaic detective genre. *Trance* is divided in four parts, "Perro," "Poeta," "Pato" and "Principiante," with the first two narrated in first person and the last two in third person. It is the reader who must play the part of the detective and propose possible correlations among the four parts. As the first three parts are narrated certain facts allow the reader to perceive connections among them, but those links will take on a radically different significance when reading the last part, "Principiante" (novice, beginner). In other words, the narration follows a pattern in its first three parts of conceal, conceal, conceal, and finally, "Principiante" initiates the reveal mode. From the perspective of the last part, certain plot elements take on new meaning and importance. For instance, in the first part, a dog barks furiously at an animal hidden in the foliage of a bush (Cabiya, 2008, 22). This being is described in the third part when Cano offers details of the physical appearance of the extraterrestrial who appears in his recurrent nightmare (81-84). But it is only on the penultimate page of the novel that the reader fully understands that the extraterrestrial novice has occupied Figueroa's body, after placing the latter's spirit in the barking dog (128-29).

If the reader reconsiders the story once this fact has been revealed, it becomes clear that when Figueroa goes to find out why the dog is barking, the extraterrestrial takes over his body and places Figueroa's soul in the dog. The first part ends with the dog yelling (barking) "¡Mierda! ¡Cuidado! ¡Pare! ¡Pa...!" (23). The second part tells the story of the protagonist's sentimental education. Towards the end of this second part, the poet, who has two couples in his car —Evelyn and Paco, Lymaris and Luis— runs

over a dog and leaves, accelerating and turning down the streets of the housing development (46-48). The poet —Hugo— slows down, but then a vehicle coming from the dog's street appears behind him. The poet accelerates. The other vehicle chases and catches up to him. The first bullet hits the poet in the arm, and subsequent shots kill both couples (48-52). In the third part the reader is made aware that the shots came from the vehicle of the gay —“pato”— narcotrafficker, Cano, with Cheo driving. Cano thinks, mistakenly, that Wichi, Sandra and her friends are in the car. Cano, inconsolable from Wichi's betrayal with Sandra, decides to kill them all. In other words, there is a chain reaction that appears to be motivated by human passions, but in the last part of *Trance*, the reader discovers that the humans are not in control of their actions, that their consciousness has been kidnapped by extraterrestrials. In fact, human beings on occasion are used as transmitting devices for interstellar communication. That is what the extraterrestrial who occupies Figueroa's body is doing to the latter's wife, Doña Puruca. Here he is tuning in, using her like a radio set:

Figueroa procedió a apretar el lóbulo de la oreja derecha de doña Puruca con su dedo índice, colocando el pulgar de la misma mano justo debajo del mentón. Con la otra mano tocó levemente la nuca de la aterrorizada señora, y afinó la posición de sus brazos, alzándoselos apenas dos centímetros. Echó un último vistazo a la configuración y, al darse por satisfecho, acercó la boca al oído de doña Puruca. (110-11)

Extraterrestrials live among us. When faced with difficulties the “Principiante” contacts by phone an “agente residente” who occupies the body of a girl (117-18). In the first three parts *Trance* has relied on three genres: horror, like Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, but without the psychological implications; sentimental education; narconarrative, with a nod and a wink to feminist literature — “Si tú no vas a ser mío, no vas a ser de nadie” (86). *Trance* changes genre once more in the closing section and becomes science fiction narrative with spy novel elements. The text employs the *police register* model of narrative suspense: flee-pursue. Cano is looking for Wichi to kill him. But it is the girl resident agent who has orchestrated these human passions with the purpose of improving interstellar communications for the novice agent Figueroa: Doña Puruca must be placed in a washbasin full of blood, to strengthen the signal. The flee-pursue dynamic is dictated by the conflict between extraterrestrials, perhaps a civil war. The message that the novice wants to send is of vital importance in the conflict. But it is also crucial that the “Principiante” avoid rookie mistakes that threaten his mission by exposing him to his enemies, as becomes abundantly clear in the closing lines of the novel.

Cabiya's *Malas hierbas* presents much the same characteristics as *Trance* with respect to the use of the *police register*, of the conventions of the detective novel and the mixture of literary genres. The body of the novel—preceded by an “Advertencia” from the author—begins with the transcription of Mathilde Álvarez Koch's interview with two detectives, Jaime Almánzar Soto and Reynolds Rivera Sigardí. Although the questioning is soon stopped because the interviewee is inconsolable, the detective narrative frame of *Malas hierbas* has been established. In the following section the protagonist explains why he writes —“si vacío sobre el papel las circunstancias que me condujeron a sentir que estaba vivo (o a olvidar que, desgraciadamente, soy un zombi), acaso pueda detectar mejor la combinación de factores que operó el fugaz milagro y descubrir la existencia de la fórmula que me permita completar el proceso de resucitación” (Cabiya, 2011, 20)—, and he describes his relation with other zombies, in particular with the old and wise Dionisio, owner of a canteen frequented by the living dead. When he resumes telling his story in the section titled “Un ejecutivo diligente | El laboratorio No. 3” the protagonist states that he is the executive vice president of the division of Research and Development of the local subsidiary of Eli Lilly (31), but, he explains that he is not a “recluso burócrata en una oficina inaccesible” (31), but can be found “en la mesa de trabajo con el resto del personal, quemándome las cejas frente al mechero Bunsen y graduando soluciones en los *beakers*, como un aprendiz” (31). He carries out these tasks in lab 3 with the only all-female team: the lab director, Dr. Isadore Bellamy, and Patricia Julia Cáceres and Mathilde Álvarez. All three had studied at the same American university, had taken the same classes and had graduated the same semester. Subsequently Isadore had completed a doctorate in Molecular Biology. The text states that “Eran inseparables” (34). It is because of his interaction with the three friends—the cover of the book reproduces Rubens' *The Three Graces* with the Caribbean twist of each Grace being a different race—that the protagonist regains his “qualia.” Dionisio explains to the protagonist that qualia “es la capacidad que tienen los seres vivientes de establecer una conexión entre su experiencia del mundo y el yo...” (24). Zombies are bereft of qualia. When the protagonist feels himself “resurrect,” it is that he has recovered his qualia.

*Malas hierbas* presents the story of a zombie—a condition shared with others who like him live among us—who is the boss of three brilliant and beautiful young women who wish to seduce him. It is also, more specifically, the story of one of them, Dr. Isadore X. Bellamy Pierre-Louis, of Haitian origin. Much of the content of *Malas hierbas* is taken from her “*scrapbook*,” a *cahier* of her return to her native land, which the protagonist

describes as a voluminous field journal which she had compiled for a research paper she wrote as a graduate student working on a subspeciality in ethnobotany (98) — “Apéndice I” is titled “Glosario de malas hierbas” composed of excerpts from the field journal (241-48). The protagonist continues his description of the field journal, pointing out that many of the entries were not related to the drawings of the plants: “Algunos eran breves disquisiciones de tema neurobiológico, ideas escritas a la carrera para elaborarlas después; otros eran transcripciones de cuentos o de conversaciones que habría ido recogiendo durante su expedición” (99). The manuscript is described by the protagonist as “caótico” and not following a “progresión lineal” (99), and in reproducing it, Pedro Cabiya —real author— says in the “Advertencia” that the order of the manuscript has been respected, which requires then an active reader that acts as detective and assembles the puzzle. *Malas hierbas* also has a “Scrapbook” index which divides the entries into an appendix and four categories: “*Récords*,” “*Laboratorio*,” “*Vacuu*” and “*Field Journal*.” Among the stories belonging to the *Field Journal* is the story told to Isadore by her second cousin, Sandrine Bellamy. It is a hair-raising narrative of her and Pascal’s — Isadore’s father— nighttime excursion to the town of the *cajuileros* (zombies) (81-86, 123-28, 161-75, 221-23), as well as an account of the origins of that town, which in turn is part of her grandfather Papá Vincent’s story (197-204). The content of Isadore’s journal points to a traditional or vodou explanation of how individuals are transformed into zombies. They are enslaved after being treated with substances extracted from certain plants and animals. Tetrodotoxine or tetrogodine, a poison produced by the blowfish or porcupinefish, is used to simulate the person’s death and later a psychoactive substance contained in the fruit of the *Datura stramonium*, the so called *concombre zombie* or “zombie cucumber,” which causes disorientation, acute confusion, and total amnesia, is employed to enslave them. Both substances appear in the “Apéndice I” or “Glosario de malas hierbas,” the first under “malpitte,” and the second under “frou-frou” (244-45). It is a fatal event that drives Isadore to pursue studies that take her to Haiti. One evening, coronel Simònides Myrthil, comes home and kills his daughter, Valérie, a classmate of Isadore, and his wife Adeline, with a machete. This double murder leads Isadore to follow graduate studies in the United States: “Asistí a clases que no pertenecían a mi pensum: psicología, neurología cognitiva, ciencias del comportamiento... En menos de dos semestres comprendí a fondo la insania que se habría apoderado de Simònides. El detonante, sin embargo, seguía siendo un misterio para mí” (70). The search for the “trigger” will take her back to Haiti. Isadore, then, brings together both explanations, the one offered by science and the one

offered by vodou. The decision that the reader must make is which of the two best explains the zombie phenomenon.

There is a scene that takes place in Isadore's apartment during which the protagonist peruses her collection of zombie movies. Isadore loves zombie movies and collects them; the protagonist has seen all the zombie movies, but he only feigns interest by saying, "Conozco algo" (93). More than the analysis of specific films, such as George A. Romero's trilogy in which the zombie's condition is conceived as transmissible, the effect of a kind of virus communicated through a bite, what seems interesting is the implication that the protagonist could have been influenced by those movies—like Don Quijote by novels of chivalry—to conceive his condition as that of a zombie.

*Malas hierbas* employs the detective novel convention of the police interrogation of Isadore Bellamy by Almánzar Soto and Rivera Sagardí to present a scientific explanation for the condition suffered by the protagonist and Simónides Myrthil. Simónides turns out to be the Dionisio, the wise zombie, owner of the canteen frequented by zombies, and a friend of the protagonist. Rivera Sagardí points out that those who suffer from Capgras syndrome "debido a una lesión o, como en el caso del coronel Myrthil, una intoxicación con sustancias nocivas, la corteza temporal del cerebro, localizada en el lóbulo temporal y utilizada para el reconocimiento de rostros, queda desconectada del sistema límbico, responsable de adscribir emociones a los estímulos y los recuerdos" (230). Consequently, "la persona que sufre del Síndrome de Capgras puede reconocer físicamente el rostro de un ser querido, sin estímulo que provoque la reacción emocional rutinariamente adscrita a ese reconocimiento" (230). He later adds that "El cerebro [...] sabe que algo anda mal, pero jamás se achaca la responsabilidad" (230). Myrthil would have followed the following logic: if now, each time I see my wife and my daughter I don't feel what I used to feel before for my wife and my daughter, the reason is that they likely are not my real wife and daughter, but impostors (230). The protagonist's case is even worse, because he is affected not by Capgras, but by Cotard syndrome: "La diferencia entre uno y otro es que la desconexión emocional no afecta sólo el reconocimiento de rostros amados... La desconexión emocional afecta el reconocimiento de absolutamente todo... *incluyéndose a sí mismo*. ¿La historia que inventa el cerebro para explicar la situación? 'Debo estar muerto y putrefacto'" (232). It makes sense then that zombie movies for the protagonist, like novels of chivalry for Don Quijote, are decisive in creating an image of himself. For reasons that are never made clear, the security guard at the pharmaceutical facility murders the protagonist (144-45, 233). In any case, as he aims his weapon, the question

that the security guard directs at the protagonist —“¿Cuál quiere que mate primero, doctor?” (144)— has the effect of “resurrecting” him. Isadore states that, “Me tomó la mano y me miró, como si esperara mis instrucciones. Al instante sonrió; era una sonrisa nueva, como de verdadera alegría, como si por fin hubiera entendido algo” (144). Then the protagonist shields the women with his body and says to them, “Cuando suene el primer disparo, corran” (145).

The mystery that obsesses Isadore, and the reader presumably also wants to resolve, is which is the true explanation for the protagonist’s condition. Is the valid explanation the one provided by modern science, or is it the explanation found in vodou and that Isadore describes in her journal? The text does not decide for the reader. During the interrogation the detectives put forth the scientific explanation, but the book concludes with the glossary of “malas hierbas,” and the text thereby reiterates the other possible explanation associated with vodou tradition, with frou-frou and malpitte.

On the one hand, as Persephone Braham points out, *Malas hierbas*, like *Trance* brings together elements of more than one literary genre, that is, of the horror genre, as well as the sub-genre of the zombie narrative, and of the detective genre, specifically the investigation by two police inspectors, and on the other, it also employs the kind of narrative tension created by the *police register* with its dynamic of conceal-reveal (possible explanations for the zombie condition), and flee-pursue (here literally running away from the zombies, but also, parodically, the protagonist is accosted by three women, who could “contaminate” him, and give him back his full humanity). By placing chapters from different categories at “unpredictable intervals” (10), the revelatory moment is postponed. As Colmeiro affirms, “toda fragmentación de la exposición implica necesariamente una estructura retardativa” (Colmeiro, 1994, 79). *Malas hierbas* distributes the exposition throughout the text, creating intrigue (Colmeiro, 1994, 78-79).

In sum, *Malas hierbas* can be seen as a detective novel that centers on two investigations, one conducted by Almánzar Soto and Rivera Sigardí and the other Isadore Bellamy. In *Trance*, on the other hand, Pedro Cabiya, as Tani would argue, exploits the detective genre as a kind of “scrapyard” for new narrative techniques, but it is not a detective novel.

There are two more important examples of Puerto Rican writers who use the conventions of the detective novel to create narratives that, finally, should not be categorized as belonging to the genre: Elidio La Torre Lagares’ *Historia de un dios pequeño* (Story of a Small God) (2000) and Félix Córdova Iturregui’s *La agonía de la máscara* (The Agony of the Mask) (2017).

Elidio La Torre Lagares' *Historia de un dios pequeño* begins with a monologue by the protagonist, Jabí:

Hoy mi vida transcurre como una película en cámara lenta, como si tuviese una constitución viscosa y le fuese difícil abrirse paso entre la arefacción del tiempo. Bajo mis pies, el suelo es un mar de hule hirviente, pero sólo yo lo veo o nadie quiere creerme, cosa que es un problema, porque la gente puede pensar que soy un mentiroso o que estoy loco. (La Torre Lagares, 2000, 7)

In fact, at the beginning of the novel Jabí finds himself in a room with four white walls, matching the color of the sheets, and of his clothing, as well as that of the “angels” who visit him, but who, he admits, are probably not angels, but nurses (8). He acknowledges that he confuses windmills with giants, and at times is not able to distinguish the “real” from the “imaginary”:

[...] y por eso es que tal vez no puedo precisar si en realidad anoche vi salir de la cabeza del tipo que estaba sentado justo a la entrada de La Almeja Bar a un molusco grisáceo y baboso —embozado en un manto de espuma— que rebotó contra el cristal de las vitrinas y se deslizó inertemente hasta el suelo, en donde besó una silueta de sangre, todo como consecuencia de un disparo que le reventó fuegos artificiales en los sesos al desprevenido individuo, o si en realidad lo imaginé todo. (8)

Jabí is also obsessed with the moon, which at times smells to him like rancid cheese. To Jabí this malodor is a bad omen. So, from the start, the protagonist is portrayed as psychotic, a lunatic who might start howling at the moon at any moment.

The title suggests that, since this is his story, that Jabí is a “small” or “minor” god, a demiurge who is not in control of his creation, to the point that he complains, “Me pregunto quién será el dios que está detrás de todo esto” (49). So, almost from the beginning, the reader is forced to ask, “What world are we in?” and “What ‘I’ of the protagonist acts in this world?” As Brian McHale has pointed out, the conventions of the traditional detective novel —crime, investigation, solution— are based on epistemological considerations. *Historia de un dios pequeño*, like the postmodern detective novel in general, is centered more on ontological than epistemological considerations. What complicates the reading of the text is that, on the one hand, except for some minor breaks attributable to Jabí’s psychosis, the novel is a realistic description of contemporary Puerto Rico, but on the other, the plot tests the credulity of the reader, by stringing together an implausible series of coincidences. The reader is in fact left to wonder, what world is being depicted in the text and what role does Jabí play in it.

The last chapter takes place in the clinic where the protagonist is confined: “Parece que he estado aquí toda mi vida, pero todo me parece tan poco familiar” (272). The reader becomes aware that the two men dressed in white coats resemble police detectives Ostolaza and Oropel, who conclude that most decidedly, nothing happened at La Almeja Bar (146-47). Jabí says to Doc (Ostolaza), “Yo sólo salí a darme unos tragos,” to which the latter responds, “Tú no saliste de aquí” (278). It is probable, then that the protagonist, confined to a mental institution, imagines the murder at the La Almeja Bar and the subsequent events of the story he is narrating, just as in Carlos Fuentes’ *Cambio de piel* (1967). In Fuentes’ novel what happens may plausibly be the product of the imagination of the Narrador, an inhabitant of the insane asylum in Cholula.

*Historia de un dios pequeño* confronts the reader with ontological dilemmas regarding the protagonist and the world he inhabits. The investigation into the murder at the La Almeja Bar serves to corroborate Jabí’s psychotic condition, but finally La Torre Lagares’ narration is not a detective novel.

Félix Córdova Iturregui’s *Agonía de la máscara* uses some of the conventions of the detective novel. Enrique Soltero, a seasoned detective about to retire, is enticed to accept one last case. Alejandro Rosich, a banker and very wealthy man has died, according to the autopsy report, of natural causes. Rosich’s two cousins suspect murder, and they hire Soltero to investigate Elvira Fuentes, housekeeper and presumed lover of the deceased, to whom Rosich has left his house and a substantial monthly rent. Initially, the detective, pretends to work for an insurance company, not revealing his true clients to Elvira. When asked whether she thought that Alejandro’s was a natural death, Elvira responds by asking Soltero if he was discarding the possibility of a suicide. She opines: “Pienso que hubo un suicidio y también un homicidio [...] Si me obliga a resumir su crisis la haría así: *se hirió de ser quien era* [...] En un sentido, se suicidó. Mató su existencia anterior [...]” (Córdova Iturregui, 2017, 35). This unconventional line of inquiry would not sit well with clients steeped in conventionalism. This marks the beginning of a complicity between Elvira and Enrique (36). Elvira discovers a safe and the deciphers the combination. Once Enrique and Elvira start ordering Alejandro Rosich’s papers —“esa novela que nunca voy a escribir y siempre me paso escribiendo” (153)— into a coherent text, they become readers of literature, exploring a socio-psychological theory proposed by *el filósofo*, involving physical spaces and masks, and represented by the characters and their doubles, in particular, Alejandro/the clown/Nicolás and Lobo Azul/Juan Herminio González Alba. The murder-suicide of Alejandro/Nicolás, as Soltero knows, is a literary interpretation

not a real-life event. The detective returns to search for a real-life *filósofo*, to write a report that would be acceptable to the cousins, but he has disappeared. The bulk of *Agonía de la máscara* is a psychological, sociological, and even a philosophical novel, that only assumes the façade of a detective novel.

## The City

As Leonardo Padura Fuentes has explained, the detective genre is the only one whose exact date of birth is known: December of 1841 when New York's *Lady's and Gentlemen's Magazine* publishes Edgar Allan Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue." It is not by chance that the genre originated in the United States towards the middle of the nineteenth century, Padura states, for it is there that the socio-economic, artistic and philosophical conditions arise that will combine to create the structure of the basic investigative story: industrialization and philosophical rationalism as a method of knowledge. Poe employs in his story the contributions of that philosophical rationalism —induction and deduction— in combination with literary techniques to conceive a new mold or artistic genre. Industrial modernity stimulates the growth of large urban centers whose growing population required the creation of a modern police force —Poe would have been inspired by the memoirs of Vidocq, who created a new police department (police de sûreté) in Paris (Padura Fuentes, 2000a, 119-23). The growing population in the cities, the anonymous mass of its inhabitants, allows the criminals to hide their secret in the multitude. The individual inclined to criminality takes advantage of crowds as camouflage in Poe's story "The Man of the Crowd." It would not be until the decade of the thirties that American authors —Hammett, Chandler— would introduce realism into the detective literature, and as a result "the arduous deductive processes are replaced by a couple of slaps in the face" (Padura Fuentes, 2000a, 125).

Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá states that the setting of the hard-boiled detective novel is the city:

[...] las novelas de Dashiell Hammet y Raymond Chandler, en las primeras décadas del pasado siglo, ya fijaron para siempre el entramado policíaco, el "who did it", quien lo hizo, quien cometió el crimen, en sendas ciudades, San Francisco y Los Angeles. El género aparecerá, en su codificación moderna, con la inevitable atmósfera, el particular ambiente, de esas ciudades; es decir, buscando al asesino retratamos, hacemos semblanza de la ciudad (Rodríguez Juliá, 2010b, 257)

Rodríguez Juliá adds that it does not matter if the plot does not entirely resolve the crime or identify the criminal or that the pieces of the puzzle do not fit or that information has been omitted: “Pero ello no impide que el laberinto trazado, es decir, nuestra persecución a través de la ciudad, no aparezca como justificación, en última instancia, de tanta astucia narrativa” (Rodríguez Juliá, 2010b, 257). Further on he affirms that “siendo la novela policíaca un género evidentemente urbano, la ciudad, su búsqueda y descripción, es quizás, aunque inconfesa, la meta última” (Rodríguez Juliá, 2010b, 258). So, the narrative space is not only a function of the investigation of the crime, but allows also for a critical view of society, and finally, it becomes a profile of the city.

As far as the representation of the city in the Puerto Rican detective novel, Wilfredo Mattos Cintrón and Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá are the two writers who have most consistently described San Juan and its different barrios. Mattos Cintrón’s novels, through the eyes of his detective, Isabelo Andújar, expresses the “tierna vinculación suya [...] con el Río Piedras de la Plaza del Mercado” (Rodríguez Juliá, 2010b, 258). In *El cerro de los buitres* Río Piedras is described as a twelve-block space where several worlds converge and is characterized historically as a transition zone between country and city (Mattos Cintrón, 1992, 109-10). By *El cuerpo bajo el puente* Isabelo Andújar has established his office in calle Vallejo, and the Plaza del Mercado and its adjoining streets represent his base of operations. He is a regular at several of the market stalls at the Plaza del Mercado with whose owners he has established a friendship, and he often eats at the local diner “El Obrero,” and uses the services of professionals in the area, such as the lawyer Chino Perales. Andújar is a neighbor in an urban barrio which has been described by Rodríguez Juliá as “ese Río Piedras quincallero y dominicano” (Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, 2004-2005, 27). Isabelo also moves around the Metropolitan Area, from la Puerta de San Juan to Cataño at the other side of the bay, and from historically proletarian Tras Talleres to middle-class Puerto Nuevo.

As Piglia points out, the origin of the detective genre coincides with the rise of urban masses, of the crowded city, of the multitude, of the anonymous other as threat:

A diferencia de lo que es el mundo del barrio, o el mundo del pueblo, donde todos se conocen, la aparición de la sociedad moderna supone que uno convive en un espacio anónimo. La selva, la ciudad, es la gran máquina social del género. En ese lugar el otro anónimo, al que no conozco, puede ser un criminal. (Piglia, 2011, 230)

In contrast to the rest of the Metropolitan Area of San Juan, Isabelo Andújar's Río Piedras is depicted as a barrio where the detective knows his neighbors, and where the threat of anonymous crime seems absent.

Rodríguez Juliá's private detective, Manolo Pérez Cáceres lives in a guest house in Punta Grande: "La Punta Grande es ese sector de Isla Negra que desemboca en la llamada "Playita", abreviada península o saliente donde están localizados los hoteles La Hamaca y Atlántico" (Rodríguez Juliá, 2014, 19), and which separates the beaches of Isla Negra —Isla Verde— into two wide arcs: El Alambique and El Balneario. By the beginning of *Mujer con sombrero panamá*, Manolo has become a "facilitador" and has moved from Punta Grande to De Diego, from "un vecindario con vocación de pueblo" (Rodríguez Juliá, 2014, 19), to another section of the Metropolitan Area with a barrio vocation. Nevertheless, Manolo is a schizophrenic, a divided being who is unable to remember what he does under the influence of alcohol. Manolo is the good neighbor, but he is also that inhabitant of the city who hides a homicidal secret, in this case, unbeknownst even to himself.

In *Cualquier miércoles soy tuya* Mayra Santos-Febres describes the nocturnal city, whose emblematic space is the motel Tulán on carretera 52. The protagonist, Julian Castrodad, inhabitant of the diurnal city, must integrate himself fully into that other world to resolve the enigma of the three individuals who coincide at the Tulán during the novel, and thereby find the story that he has been looking for, the story he wants to tell, the story that will make him a writer. The Tulán is located at the intersection of different spheres of Puerto Rican society. Castrodad's experiences at the motel will lead to his exploration of certain urban spaces that were alien to him for reasons of social class: Parcelas Falú, Paralelo 37, and residencial (public housing project) Los Lirios. These are alternate spaces with which a "blanquito" like Castrodad needs familiarity if he is going to tell the true story of the city and the country.

## The Detective

Many of the texts that will be analyzed in this study are hard-boiled detective novels. José F. Colmeiro describes the moral perspective of the hard-boiled sub-genre as follows:

La novela policiaca negra parte de una desconfianza total en la sociedad y sus instituciones. La constitución de la sociedad se considera intrínsecamente injusta e inmoral, basada en el dominio del poderoso sobre el débil, del rico sobre el pobre, a través de la explotación y la violencia; la inmoralidad de esa sociedad es más palpable todavía al ir apareada con el

fenómeno de la corrupción de los políticos (que hacen y deshacen las leyes a conveniencia de los poderosos, y si es preciso, hacen pacto con los criminales) y la corrupción de la policía (que se deja comprar al mejor postor) lo cual trae consigo un debilitamiento de la confianza en la ley y la justicia. (Colmeiro, 1994, 62)

The hard-boiled detective novel rejects the “happy ending” of the classical detective novel; its outlook is pessimistic since the unsuccessful resolution of the criminal case reveals “la auténtica dimensión social del delito.” The immoral complicity of politicians, magnates and law enforcement officers make it impossible to regenerate society, and the detective’s task, like that of Sisyphus, is seen as absurd (Colmeiro, 1994, 63).

Colmeiro asserts that, generally, the goal of the investigator in the detective novel, both in its classical as well as its hard-boiled variants is the pursuit of truth and justice. The individual mission of the detective is like that of the knight errant; it is a crusade motivated by a code of superior conduct:

El detective-como-caballero reestablecedor de la Justicia es hasta cierto punto un elemento característico de la novela policiaca en todas sus formas [...] Sin embargo, es en la novela policiaca clásica donde los paralelismos son más abundantes. La función ideológica del detective en la novela policiaca clásica va más allá de la aparente búsqueda de la verdad y la justicia. La verdadera función distintiva del investigador policial (o parapolicial) es la legitimización de esa operación de vigilancia “silenciosa e inadvertida” a la que se refiere Chesterton, que trae consigo la reintroducción de la ideología burguesa dominante, y la restauración de la ley y el orden. Por el contrario, la aventura del detective de la novela policiaca negra es irónica y antiheroica; la justicia rara vez es sinónimo de la ley y del orden, sino más bien todo lo contrario; su empresa está abocada al fracaso [...] (Colmeiro, 1994, 68)

Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá states in his introduction to the special issue of *La Torre* titled *Nuestros detectives, la novela policial iberoamericana* that the noir novel “concebía el *private eye* como un pequeño empresario con inclinación dipsómana, mundana y citadina [...] en la búsqueda de quién lo cometió o desapareció, y enfrentándose a esa oficialidad corrupta en el camino del esclarecimiento del crimen y revelación del culpable” (Rodríguez Juliá, 2010a, ix). Rodríguez Juliá also states that it was Philip Marlowe who “otorgó virilidad y músculo a lo que era una profesión de estupendos diletantes” (Rodríguez Juliá, 2010a, x). For Colmeiro and for Rodríguez Juliá, Marlowe, the brilliant creation of Raymond Chandler, is who best exemplifies the detective as a hard man —of both physical and

moral strength— and a vulnerable man at the same time. In “The Simple Art of Murder” Chandler characterizes the detective of the *noir* novel the following way:

But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero: he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor [...] He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. (Chandler, 1988, 18)

Colmeiro points out that despite his exceptional qualities, the detective of the *noir* novel is not a hero in the traditional sense, but a marginal element in society.

Indefectiblemente, el investigador protagonista adopta una actitud de rechazo a la sociedad, por la cual siempre será considerado como un intruso; es un perdedor nato. Su carácter, condición y actuación no son heroicos sino antiheroicos. (Colmeiro, 1994, 70)

In “La ficción paranoíaca” Ricardo Piglia explains that the detective can deal with issues of truth and the law precisely because he is marginal, lacking “inserción institucional,” principally in the police. The lack of institutional insertion suggests, by implication, that this institution, the police, in which the State has delegated the responsibility of overseeing the issues of truth and the law does not work (Piglia, 2011, 227). Piglia adds that the detective “se asocia con un espacio no institucional,” in other words, “el detective no está ni en la sociedad de los delincuentes ni en la sociedad de la ley, en el sentido institucional de la policía. Más bien yo diría que se mueve entre esos dos campos: sociedad criminal y sociedad institucional” (Piglia, 2011, 228). In addition, affirms Piglia, the detective is always “celibate,” in the sense that he is not integrated in the family structure, that “punto institucional de anclaje del sujeto con el conjunto de las instituciones” (Piglia, 2011, 227-28). When this is not so, then there is parody (Piglia, 2011, 228). Wilfredo Mattos Cintrón’s private eye, Isabelo Andújar, a widower, has not remarried, and perhaps will never marry Elvia, his companion of many years. In contrast, Tirado, Alejandro Carpio’s investigator in the detective novel parody *Papel de lija*, is married.

If the classical detective novel is closely related to the novels of chivalry, then the hard-boiled detective novel is more so to the picaresque genre. The picaresque novel sets the precedent for criminality as literary theme, and in addition, employs a “personaje móvil” who can enter diverse social settings and “permite la irrupción del ojo crítico en ciertos ambientes y grupos