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SANTA CRUZ

**DERAILED:
AGING RAILROAD INFRASTRUCTURE AND PRECARIOUS MOBILITY
IN BUENOS AIRES**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

ANTHROPOLOGY

by

Stephanie Mc Callum

June 2018

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Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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Acronyms

ADIF	Administración de Infraestructuras Ferroviarias Sociedad del Estado (State Railway Infrastructure Administration)
AGN	<i>Auditoría General de la Nación</i> (Nation's General Audit Office)
CNRT	<i>Comisión Nacional Reguladora de Transporte</i> (National Commission for the Regulation of Transport)
FA	<i>Ferrocarriles Argentinos</i> (Argentine Railways)
FCO	<i>Ferrocarril del Oeste</i> (Western Railways)
MoNaFe	<i>Movimiento Nacional Ferroviario</i> (National Railroad Movement)
SOFSE	<i>Sociedad Operadora Ferroviaria Sociedad del Estado</i> (Railway Operating State Society)
TBA	<i>Trenes de Buenos Aires</i> (Trains of Buenos Aires)
UGOMS	<i>Unidad de Gestión Operativa Mitre Sarmiento</i> (Mitre Sarmiento Unit of Operative Management)

Abstract

Stephanie Mc Callum

Derailed: Aging Railroad Infrastructure and Precarious Mobility in Buenos Aires

This dissertation examines progress and decay in Argentina through an analysis of the social and material life of railroads. Investigating a protracted railroad crisis materialized in branch closures and frequent accidents, it explores how, in the wake of neoliberal policies and the largest sovereign default in world history, everyday life has been remade around dilapidated trains and tracks. During the course of this research, and after a series of high-profile train crashes, the national government launched a “railroad revolution,” predicated on the purchase of new rolling stock from China, the modernization of obsolete infrastructure, the renationalization of the network, and the re-education of the traveling public. This dissertation maps the uneasy meantime, the ambivalent anticipation and awkward arrival of modern trains amidst the patchy reconstruction of aging railroad infrastructure. Through an itinerant ethnography of the city and province of Buenos Aires, it shows how railroads are being (re)mobilized as machines of progress, inhabited as sites of uneven risk, and claimed as affective heritage.

Railroads have often been portrayed as a quintessential symbol of modernity, as much for their promise of progress (the speed of connectivity, the shrinking of distance, the circulation of people, goods, and ideas), as for their spectacular failures, with train crashes and derailments conjuring specters of technology gone awry. Drawing from 13 months of ethnographic research in Buenos Aires, including participant observation onboard trains and in train stations, railroad clubs, museums, and repair workshops, as

well as interviews with commuters, activists, railroad workers, and train enthusiasts (*ferroaficionados*), this dissertation charts the long-reaching effects of the concessioning of the metropolitan railroad system amidst neglect (*desidia*), and situates these within a longer genealogy of railroad decay. Attending to the sedimented traces of movement and the layered histories etched onto tracks and rolling stock, this dissertation argues that railroad infrastructure can be approached as an archive, a material repository of memory that shapes the experience and affordances of mobility.

While railroads have often been theorized as having compressed time and space, in Argentina, I argue, unreliable trains and their obsolete infrastructure brought about time-space *dilation*, as locales were rendered further apart by infrequent trains and pervasive uncertainty. I trace how the haphazard modernization of rolling stock by concession companies produced monstrous trains (*formaciones engendro*), and examine how passengers and railway workers grappled with a railway system that was falling apart, acquiring an embodied knowledge sedimented ride after jolting ride. Railroads, I propose, have functioned as a racializing infrastructure, through the uneven distribution of risk. Finally, charting the arrival of new rolling stock and the renovation of infrastructure, I show how infrastructural modernity is haunted by the obduracy of decay, requiring a constant labor of translation, tinkering, (re)assemblage, and care. This dissertation thus contributes to the anthropology of infrastructure, and to contemporary debates in the social sciences and humanities around new materialisms, affect theory, and the “turn to ruins.”

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Chapter One: Tragedy Foretold

The train known as *el Sarmiento* was running late, again. It was the first workday after carnival, and the *Chapa* 16 arrived at the suburban station of Ituzaingó a few minutes before 8am.¹ The train was even more crowded than usual. Quintana, in his late twenties and on his way to work in downtown Buenos Aires, managed to push his way on board. During the next 35 minutes, he traveled standing, as he often did, his body swaying with the train, held in place by the bodies pressing in against him. Quintana, who had been riding the train for the past decade, was accustomed to the Sarmiento and its ways. Still, he could not stop himself from cursing inwardly; his new suit and tie were getting crumpled, his new shoes trampled on. As the Chapa 16 pulled into the terminal station, Quintana looked at his watch. 8:29. Suddenly, a loud noise, like an explosion, and the sound of crunching metal. Quintana and the passengers around him fell on top of each other. A few seconds of silence ensued. Then the screams began.

This train crash, the third deadliest railroad accident in Argentine history, became known as *la Tragedia de Once* (“the Once Tragedy”), in reference to the Sarmiento railroad line’s terminal station, named Once de Septiembre (“Once,” pronounced *Ohn-see*, for short; “once” means “eleven” in Spanish). On that February 22, 2012, the Chapa 16 collided against the buffers at the end of the tracks in Once station at approximately 25km/h (roughly 15mph), causing the first rail cars to “telescope” into one other (a phenomenon known as *acaballamiento*), their walls contorting and their interiors literally

¹ *Chapa* means “plate”; the *Chapa* 16 was thus Train 16.

becoming unhinged, as hand rails and luggage racks sprang loose. Quintana, who was riding in the first rail car, was trapped for three hours while firemen struggled to extricate the mangled bodies around him from the distorted car structure—a scene that Alberto Crescenti, the director of paramedic services, described as “Dantesque.”² The crash killed at least 51 people, and another 789 passengers sustained injuries of varying degree, some requiring amputations.³ The damage sustained by the old rail cars was such that the body of Lucas Menghini Rey, aged 19 and compressed into a space 30cm wide, was not found until nearly 58 hours after the crash, when it began to reek (Di Nicola 2012). Quintana was lucky. He spent 12 days in hospital, but only suffered minor cuts and sprains—although his legs were bruised black for a month due to the crushing they sustained. He has been unable to take the train since.⁴

² Fieldnotes from court hearing on June 17th, 2014.

³ The official victim count is 51. One of the victims was six months pregnant, and her spouse has expressed strong preference for his unborn child to be counted as a victim. The relatives of the deceased, grouped in the collective *Familiares y Amigos de Víctimas y Heridos de la Tragedia de Once* (Relatives and Friends of the Victims and Injured in the Once Tragedy), have become a visible political presence, holding monthly commemorative acts in Once and using social media and traditional news outlets to broadcast their demands for justice. During public appearances, group members will often wear white t-shirts with the word “JU5T1CIA” (“JU5T1CE”) printed on them as well as on placards. A subset of the group uses the number 52 in their recounting of the crash and in their demands for justice. Yet because the 51st victim to be identified (Lucas Menghini Rey, whose body was not found until three days after the crash) became the visible face of the crash, most relatives use the notation “51+1” in their placards.

⁴ This brief account of the *Tragedia de Once* and of Quintana’s experience is reconstructed from court hearings (including Quintana’s court testimony), which I attended between March and October 2014.



Figure 1: An iconic image of the Tragedia de Once. Source: TodoNoticias. Downloaded from https://tn.com.ar/sociedad/tragedia-de-once-la-justicia-condeno-ricardo-jaime-ocho-anos-de-prision-y-le-bajo-las-penas-juan_867692 in May 2018.

Railroads are often portrayed as a quintessential symbol of modernity, as much for their promise of progress (the speed of connectivity, the shrinking of distance, the circulation of people, goods, and ideas), as for their spectacular failures, with train crashes and derailments conjuring specters of technology gone awry (Schivelbusch 1987; Aguiar 2011; White 2011; Latour 1996). Railroads have functioned as an infrastructure of empire, facilitating the extraction of raw materials, shaping modern sensibilities of travel and comportment in public spaces (Bear 2007; Lofgren 2008; Urry 2007), and delineating particular configurations of nation-states by bringing certain places into connection while disavowing others (Gordillo 2014). This dissertation examines railroads in Buenos Aires, Argentina, ethnographically tracing the material and affective lives of trains and their infrastructure as a lens into broader questions around the project of progress, the work of decay, and the uneven precarity of everyday life under contemporary capitalism. It

explores how citizens in contemporary Argentina negotiate capitalist modernity, on the one hand, with its promises of progress, and their relationship to the state, on the other, which was expected to deliver on those promises. Citizens in Argentina negotiate those twinned and intertwined relations through the materiality of their everyday lives, for example through daily commutes in a railroad system in various stages of ruin, as I show here.

My research is situated in the waning years of the so-called *década ganada* (“the won decade”), a period of economic recovery ushered in by the populist presidencies of Néstor Kirchner and his wife and successor Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in the long aftermath of Argentina’s 2001 dramatic financial crash.⁵ While the country was largely seen as having attained economic stability, the aging railroad system was systematically portrayed by the media and disgruntled commuters as being in a state of protracted crisis, as materialized in branch closures, pervasive delays, and frequent accidents. I set out to investigate this crisis and examine how, in the wake of neoliberal policies, everyday life was being remade around dilapidated trains and tracks. While my research shed light on the lived experience of precarity, particularly on how railroad workers and commuters navigated the risks of daily mobility in the aftermath of the *Tragedia de Once*, it also unsettled ready-to-hand narratives about the genealogy of railroad decay (e.g Solanas 2008), situating the latter in a longer history of ruination. During the course of my fieldwork, and in response to a series of high-profile train crashes, the national government launched a “railroad revolution,” predicated on the purchase of new rolling

⁵ The Kirchner presidencies were part of a larger trend of leftist governments in Latin America, dubbed “the Pink Tide.”

stock from China, the modernization of obsolete infrastructure, and the re-education of the traveling public.

This dissertation maps the uneasy meantime between protracted crisis and purported revolution, tracing the ambivalent anticipation and awkward arrival of modern trains amidst the patchy reconstruction of aging railway infrastructure. Through a multi-sited ethnography of the city and province of Buenos Aires, I show how railways are being (re)mobilized as machines of progress, navigated as sites of uneven risk, and claimed as affective heritage. This dissertation asks: How does modernity arrive and take hold? Or, perhaps more precisely, how does modernity keep arriving and receding, never fully taking hold? This exploration of the uneven and unstable nature of modernity opens up other questions: In the aftermath of the *Tragedia de Once*, how do railroad workers, passengers, and train enthusiasts grapple with aging trains, obsolete infrastructure, and the risks of daily mobility, particularly in the aftermath of the *Tragedia de Once*? How do railroad histories shape infrastructure and inform people's experiences of train travel in Argentina? More generally, how do railroads and their infrastructure mediate commuters' relations with the state, with each other, and with capitalist modernity?

As I show throughout this dissertation, infrastructure is a productive lens through which to examine modernity as a set of aspirational projects and constant deferrals. In Argentina, railroads are the material instantiation of contested national identities, memories, and state-citizen relations. Ethnographic attention to people's engagements with railroad materiality, I show, sheds light on the layered histories that

give infrastructure its particular affordances, the creative ways in which infrastructures get reworked and reclaimed for different purposes, and the affective force of modernity.

Engaging with the anthropology of infrastructure, the “turn to ruins” in the social sciences and humanities, and the study of mobilities, this ethnography contributes to ongoing transdisciplinary conversations on precarity and emergent possibilities of life in capitalist ruins (Tsing 2015). Infrastructural modernity, I show, is haunted by the obduracy of decay and requires a constant labor of translation, tinkering, (re)assemblage and care.

In this chapter, I introduce the themes and stakes of the dissertation. The next section contextualizes the *Tragedia de Once* in a longer string of events reflecting precarity and risk in the metropolitan rail network. I then discuss the theoretical framework that has informed my thinking and writing, and the methodology that guided my research. Finally, I offer a brief overview of the remaining chapters.

Risk Materialized

Argentina’s railroad network is the largest in Latin America in terms of extension, encompassing around 45,000km of tracks at its peak (Salerno 2014). Throughout most of the second half of the twentieth century, this sprawling grid was managed by *Ferrocarriles Argentinos* (Argentine Railroads), the railroad state company created after the network was nationalized by President Juan Domingo Perón in 1948. When *Ferrocarriles Argentinos* was dismantled in the early 1990s, most railway branches and workshops in the interior of the country were closed down, many workers laid off, and

freight and passenger lines concessioned to newly-formed private companies, as detailed in Chapter Three. In urban and suburban Buenos Aires, metropolitan commuter trains continued to offer an affordable, if increasingly precarious, means of daily mobility. After Argentina's 2001 financial crisis, the most dramatic sovereign default in world history, commuters increasingly traveled "like cattle," and discontent over delays and poor services became widespread, occasionally erupting in acts of violence and arson.

Railroad infrastructure itself became a terrain for protesting the precarity of daily mobility: on some lines, disgruntled commuters refused to purchase tickets in protest and jumped over turnstiles to enter station platforms. On a number of occasions when train services were delayed or cancelled due to technical failures, some passengers "attacked" ticket-vending booths, and even set train cars and stations fixtures on fire (see Rebón et al 2010); according to some accounts, they were aided by "political agitators." In 2010, during a public demonstration by railroad workers to protest precarious working conditions, student activist Mariano Ferreyra was murdered by individuals affiliated with the leader of the Peronist wing of the *Unión Ferroviaria*, the largest railroad union, triggering further widespread protests. In 2011, a bus crossed around a partially-lowered level-crossing barrier near Flores station, which lies on the Sarmiento line, in the city of Buenos Aires. It collided with an incoming train, which in turn derailed and collided with another trainset. This accident, the largest level crossing collision since 1962, killed 11 people and injured 228 passengers. It became known as *la Tragedia de Flores*, the Flores Tragedy.

The 2012 *Tragedia de Once* shook the Argentine nation's consciousness and constituted a political phenomenon, bringing to the fore decades of railway decay and

becoming a symbol of *desidia*, neglect, and corruption—yet another reminder of the precarity of everyday life in post-dictatorship and “post-crisis” Argentina.⁶ The crash crystallized how railway infrastructure, meant to order movement through space and time, can have drastically *disordering* effects. Yet the *Tragedia de Once* was hardly a surprise. Disgruntled passengers had been decrying their commuting conditions for several years, and numerous formal complaints had been lodged against Trenes de Buenos Aires (Trains of Buenos Aires, TBA for short), the concession company tasked with operating the state-owned railway line. Rubén “Pollo” (“Chicken”) Sobrero, a union leader in the Sarmiento line, had predicted the tragedy. In December 2004, a few blocks away from the Sarmiento’s Once de Septiembre terminal station, a fire in the discotheque known as *República Cromañón*, and the ensuing stampede, claimed 194 lives.⁷ Cromañón, the discotheque and the event, became a symbol of corruption, insofar as it exposed the faulty infrastructure of the premises and the oversight of city officials, in particular public venue auditors. Pollo Sobrero, no stranger to the limelight, took to appearing on television and radio to warn that there would be a “*Cromañón ferroviario*,” a railroad version of the Cromañón tragedy.⁸ In a context of protracted railway decay, the *Tragedia de Once* appears thus not as an anomaly, but rather, and as defined by one of the plaintiffs in the ensuing trial, as the “foreseeable materialization of risk.”⁹

⁶ See, for instance, Graciela Mochkofsky’s (2012) reconstruction of the tragedy.

⁷ For an ethnographic analysis of the Cromañón tragedy and ensuing political mobilization, see Zenobi 2012.

⁸ The two events are also entwined materially: in the aftermath of the Once tragedy, ambulances were unable to reach the site of the train disaster because of the promenade that had been set up to memorialize the victims of the discotheque fire. After Once, relatives of the train crash victims set up an informal memorial a few meters away from the sanctuary to Cromañón’s deceased.

⁹ Fieldnotes from 03/25/2014.

Sixteen months after the *Tragedia de Once*, two Sarmiento trains collided near Castelar station in what became known as *la Tragedia de Castelar*; this collision killed three passengers and injured over 300 others. Given the widespread perception that these crashes were the result of *desidia* (neglect) and that they could have been prevented (inasmuch as they were foreseeable), these events are commonly framed as tragedies, rather than accidents. Some activists even refer to the Once crash as “*la masacre de Once*,” the Once massacre.

The ensuing trial on the Once tragedy has become a landmark case of corruption, as it laid bare webs of complicity and bribes between TBA directors and state officials in the Secretary of Transportation. Journalist Daniel Politi (2012), writing on a blog published by *The New York Times* a week after the crash, situates the event in a context of “crony capitalism” fostered by the Kirchner government. Under President Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and his wife and successor Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2015), the Cirigliano brothers, the directors of TBA, “built a small business empire around transportation, subject to little government oversight” (Politi 2012). Politi writes, “Over the past eight years, the Kirchner government has repeatedly turned a blind eye to the deteriorating rail network, pumping millions of dollars into the system while demanding little in the way of upgrades or safety improvements in return.” State subsidies tripled during the six years preceding the crash, and ensured that the cost of travel remained low (less than 25 cents a ride) for the commuters who traveled daily into the city of Buenos Aires, who numbered over a million (Politi 2012).

While Marcos Córdoba, the train conductor at the time of the Once collision, was charged with the crimes of wreckage aggravated by involuntary manslaughter, a

number of state officials and several directors and supervisors of TBA were charged with the crimes of wreckage aggravated by involuntary manslaughter, and embezzlement. The trial was structured around the purported mutually-exclusive causal categories of “human error” and “technical failure.”¹⁰ Key witness Leandro Andrada, the train conductor who at the end of his shift handed the Chapa 16 over to Marcos Córdoba mid-service and warned him that the brakes were slow to respond, did not make it to court. He was shot dead in a bus stop, allegedly the victim of theft, cash still in his pockets.



Figure 2: At the inauguration of the city’s memorial to the victims of the Tragedia de Once, built across from the station on Plaza Miserere, the husband and young daughter of one of the deceased, who was pregnant, hold up a placard that reads: “The visible face of corruption is death and silence is its accomplice. JU5T2CE for my wife Tatiana and my daughter Huma.” Photo by author.

¹⁰ According to the prosecutor, Dr. Fernando Arrigo, and some of the plaintiffs, a technical failure (namely failing brakes) would have resulted from negligence at the hands of TBA and of the State, tasked with auditing the concession company. TBA and state defendants and their lawyers, in turn, attributed the crash to human error, alleging that Marcos Córdoba had failed to activate the brakes in time (during public hearings, they argued that he had fallen asleep or had been driving under the influence). Marcos Córdoba and his defense team, finally, argue that he had attempted to activate the brakes, but that these had failed to respond. They also claimed he had notified Traffic Control via radio of brake malfunction in stations preceding the Once de Septiembre terminal, and had received orders to continue.

The long-drawn-out trial laid bare the complicity of concession company directors, state officials, and union leaders (framed as a “triangle of corruption”) in laying commuter trains to waste. Ricardo Jaime, Secretary of Transportation between 2003 and 2009, for instance, was found to have accepted bribes (in the form of paid airfares for weekend holiday trips); he has been prosecuted for embezzlement, fraudulent administration, and culpable wreckage in the Once crash. The tragedy underscored the stark fact that, as decried by a victim’s father, *la corrupción mata*, corruption kills (see Figure 2).¹¹

In the convoluted political aftermath of the *Tragedia de Once*, concession companies lost their tenure, and state offices and officials were reshuffled, as the Secretary of Transport was moved from the Ministry of Public Works to the Ministry of the Interior.

Argentina, of course, has not been the only site of recent large-scale railroad accidents. In July 2013, at least 79 passengers died when a speeding train derailed on a curve near Santiago de Compostela, in Spain (*La Nación* 29/7/2013). In May 2015, a speeding AMTRAK train derailed in Philadelphia, killing eight and injuring more than

¹¹ For an analysis of how corruption has operated as a folk category of critique for members of the middle-class in post-crisis Buenos Aires, see Sarah Muir (2016). Muir shows how impoverished members of the middle-class presented corruption as “an internally driven and irreversible process of socio-moral decay” that cemented the “impossibility of a national future”—what she refers to as “historical exhaustion” (2016:130, 131). She argues that this folk category of critique served to create a sense of national belonging (a shared complicity in the “deterioration of civic decency,” a shared loss in post-crisis Argentina). Survivors and relatives of the victims of the Once crash appear to be mobilizing the concept of corruption differently. In court hearings, they mocked and pushed back against the defendants’ attempts to blame rampant railroad decay on passengers’ improper etiquette on board of trains. By framing the crash as a result of corruption, they did not appear to implicate their own moral behavior, but rather to highlight the very material effects of the illicit use of state funds, of improper state-corporate relationships, and of neglect. Other commuters, however, did point to lack of civic decency and vandalism as contributing to railroad decay. I further analyze these racializing discourses in Chapter Four.

200 passengers; numerous other AMTRAK collisions and derailments (some fatal) have occurred since. In the aftermath of the Philadelphia derailment, the *New York Times* found that “the United States has among the worst safety records despite having some of the least-extensive passenger rail networks in the developed world” (Clark 2015). In the U.S., debates around insufficient rail spending and poor safety have been embroiled in broader anxieties over “aging infrastructure.” In 2016, a train derailed near Pukhrayan, Kanpur, in India, claiming 150 lives. In a more striking comparison, in Britain the years immediately after the privatization of the railway network were marred by two train collisions and two derailments, leading to 49 deaths.¹²

In Argentina, however, as Chapter Two underscores, railroads have often been seen as a metonym for the nation.¹³ Sarah Misemer (2010:10, cited in Fraser 2015:10), for instance, claims that railroads in the River Plate “have stood as a symbol of progress, and conversely as a reminder of the nation’s failure to fully modernize.” As Gabriella Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo (2002:4) have reflected, the “image of Argentina as an incomplete being, an inauthentic reflection, or an unfinished product of modernity” has become a potent trope. This trope, they suggest, has been rooted in the country’s purported European genealogy: a popular refrain voiced by white elites, in fact, is that Argentines “descend from the ships,” that is, that the nation has been built by white European migrants. “From this angle,” they write, “Argentina appears to be a utopian

¹² Evans (2007), however, finds that while in the post-privatization period the number of *fatalities* as a result of train accidents increased, the number of *accidents* was smaller. Evans does not believe that privatization measures led to decreased safety. Other authors (e.g. Wolmar 2005) have argued otherwise.

¹³ In Argentina, trains have sometimes been described as “the veins of the nation.” This metaphor appears for instance on a webpage on Laguna Paiva featuring “railroad photographs.” Laguna Paiva used to be a central railroad node, home to a railroad repair workshop.

<http://www.lagunapaivaweb.com.ar/Fotografias/Ferrovias/fotosferrovias.htm>

dream that went awry. Its uneven modernity has led some abroad to portray the country as the lingering ruins of a stillborn great nation” (2002:4).¹⁴ Anxieties around progress and decay, I show in Chapter Two, have haunted railroad projects from the very beginning.

Progress and Decay

This dissertation is born out of a long-standing interest in stories that frame Argentina (and perhaps modernity more generally) in terms of progress and decay, nostalgic narratives that point to a past bursting with promise and a stunted present. It is inspired, in part, by the work of Walter Benjamin (1968, 1999), who compellingly showed that progress is always a *project*, never fully actualized, and is haunted by the ruination it leaves in its wake, piling wreckage upon wreckage. Decay is thus the underside of progress, not an occasional by-product, but rather intrinsic to it.

Scholars have shown that projects of progress are racialized, materialized at the expense of certain sectors of the population (at national and global scales) that bear the brunt of the *longue durée* of toxicity and waste created by progress (Nixon 2011; also Auyero and Swistun 2009, Bessire 2011, Garcia 2010, Masco 2006, Petryna 2002). In Argentina, the notions of progress and decay have particularly sinister connotations anchored in the last dictatorship (1976-1983), during which the Doctrine of National Security sought to cleanse the national body politic of subversion, coded as internal decay, through the incarceration and murder of the 30,000 *desaparecidos* (disappeared)

¹⁴ For a recent critique of Argentine racial exceptionalism, see Alberto and Elena (2016).

(Gordon 2008; cf. Rodriguez 2006). The last dictatorship, however, is just one instance of a longer history of projects of progress marked by state and capitalist violence (Gordillo 2014).

Railroads have been seen as mobilizing progress, embodying notions of forwardness and connectedness, and materializing a “rational utopia” (de Certeau 1984). Railroads have been hailed as the *symbol* of modernity (Urry 2007) and a *metonym* for modernity, insofar as mobility became a material sign for who was modern (Aguilar 2011). Like roads, railroads have been portrayed as an “archetypal technology of post-enlightenment, emancipatory modernity” (Harvey & Knox 2012: 523). It follows, then, that railroads are a prime site—a vantage point—for interrogating modernity in Argentina.

If, as Tim Ingold (2011:148) suggests, moving is knowing, and life is led not in places but “through, around, to and from them, from and to places elsewhere,” different technologies that enable movement shape particular ways of being in the world. British sociologist John Urry (2007) surveys the “mobility turn” in the social sciences as a belated acknowledgment of the fluidity of social life and a call for mobile and less-static theoretical work that highlights the centrality of movement in everyday life. He argues that different time periods are characterized by the predominance of a particular mobility system that, although coexistent with other mobility systems and forming hybrid modes of transportation with them, reshapes social life in significant ways. Transformations in the material forms of mobility appear to mark epochal shifts; different mobility systems both capture and produce the sensibilities, subjectivities, and sociabilities of a particular period (Urry 2007). If the eighteenth century was characterized by walking, essentially a

private form of mobility (Urry 2007), the rise of “capitalist entrepreneurialism” in the nineteenth century resulted in “the structuring of private mobility through ‘public’ mobilization” (2007:91).¹⁵

Railway mobility afforded new public spaces of connectedness, public not necessarily in ownership, but in the forms of regulation they were subjected to and in their open accessibility (open, that is, to all who could afford purchasing a ticket). The railroad reordered “the contours of time, space and everyday life” (2007:92) and “initiated a *longue durée* in which human life is dependent upon, and enormously entwined with, machines” (2007:92). Urry sees the imbrication of machines within human experience – the “cohabitation” of humans and machines (2007:100) – as the defining characteristic of modernity. The railroad occupied a central place in this imbrication and cohabitation, different from other industrial machines (that is, machines that make other machines or material objects or that transport machines or objects) in that it escapes the confinement of the industrial site. Being the “first of the systems that mechanized movement,” the railroad enabled “speeded-up circulation” (2007: 95, 101).¹⁶ Railroads required new building technologies to carve the landscape and mold embankments, dig tunnels, create bridges. Thus, “tracks and trains come to constitute a great machine covering the land” (Urry 2007:94; cf. Schivelbusch 1987).

¹⁵ Urry’s focus on *one* “mobility system” per period occludes the role played by other forms of mobility (for instance, horses and ships). Fernand Braudel (1995) and Engseng Ho (2004, 2006) address the role of ships in trade and migration in the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean respectively, and contribute to a decentering of modernity.

¹⁶ See Paul Virilio (2006) for a discussion of governance through speed (what Virilio calls “logistics” in modern society).

The development of the railroad had far-reaching spatial effects, both shrinking space by bringing places closer to each other, and expanding space by forging connections between places that otherwise would have never been connected (Schivelbusch 1987; Urry 2007).¹⁷ In this manner, railways shape people's relationship to the environment, rendering new places as available for visual consumption. As an effect of the scale and speed of movement, railways help project the natural environment as a "separate entity," as panorama (de Certeau 1984; Schivelbusch 1987; Urry 2007). In addition, railways underscore the relationality of places: localities are not discrete or isolated, but rather points in circulation. My research contributes to this scholarship by showing how railroads and their infrastructure are not stable objects and are not merely "built on" the environment as separate entity. Railroads, I show in Chapter Five, are sites of multispecies entanglements: weeds, for instance, can help hold tracks in place, but when let to grow amok they can disrupt rail services.¹⁸ While scholars have shown how railroads shape environments, my ethnographic attention to railroad materiality illustrates how environments, in turn, shape railroad infrastructure (for instance, through the rusting of metal). Terrain, furthermore, does not merely offer a substrate for tracks, I suggest, but rather also translates into particular bodily experiences of travel in the form of vibration, as Chapters Four and Five underscore.

The railway, Urry (2007:103) proposes, initiated new "micro-spaces," particularly the railway compartment and the station, as sites of new forms of sociability where class

¹⁷ I address the temporal effects of railroad expansion in Chapter Three.

¹⁸ See Carse (2012) and Howe et al (2015) for further discussions of how infrastructure more generally is materially and analytically inseparable from environmental spaces.

divides (who could travel and who could not, who could access certain compartments, who could afford a servant to carry the luggage) were rendered visible in these micro-spaces and institutionalized. Different destinations had different “social tones” (Urry 2007). Railways thus “played their part in institutionalizing the stratified class system that was emerging with industrial capitalism” (2007:104). In these micro-spaces, new ways of “keeping social distance” and of practicing “civil inattention” (Urry 2007:106, citing Goffman) and nonrecognition were developed, usually involving particular props (newspapers, books).¹⁹ The railway car also enabled new forms of governmentality: de Certeau saw the railway car as a “bubble of panoptic and classifying power, a module of imprisonment that makes possible the production of an order” (1984: 111). At times, particularly in accidents and terrorist attacks, the railway car became a deathly compartment, a veritable form of imprisonment (de Certeau 1984; Schivelbusch 1987; Aguiar 2011). My research illustrates how passengers, and also railroad workers, navigate trains in Buenos Aires as sites of risk, not only on account of aging infrastructure and the barely-latent possibility of accidents, but also on account of eroding civic decency and improper behavior. As public spaces, rail cars and stations are sites of encounter with and policing of racial difference, as I examine in Chapter Four.²⁰

¹⁹ Urry claims that the rise of the “car system” in the twentieth century proved “catastrophic” for railways” and “transformed the concept of speed into that of convenience” (2007:109). A similar narrative circulates in Argentina, where the demise of the railroad system is partly blamed on the power of the truck drivers’ syndicate, in connivance with the local automotive industry. According to Urry, the car system is more “adaptive” than the railway system and marks the shift from clock-time to instantaneous time, and to the desynchronization of time-space (in the sense that personal schedules are increasingly less collectively organized).

²⁰ The train car, in fact, is one site where Frantz Fanon (2008 [1952]) confronts “the fact of blackness,” the lived experience of the black man, in his encounter with a white boy who interpellates him as a Negro. “Look! A Negro!” exclaims the child upon seeing him on the train (2008 [1952]:91). Fanon describes this racial encounter as a shattering of his corporeal schema and a fixing of his melanin. Racialized bodies are made to occupy public space in particular ways: “In the train, instead of one seat, they had left me two or

Urry's narrative of railroads and their expansion seems seamless and celebratory. Viewed from the (post)colony, railroads tell a different story. Laura Bear (2007) has shown how in India railroad bureaucracy was an important technology of imperial governance and social engineering, producing and patrolling social and moral distinctions between colonizers and colonized, and transforming community, racial, and family affiliations into commodities. In his history of the transcontinental railroads in the U.S., Mexico, and Canada, in which he contests classic triumphal narratives of the conquest of the West, Richard White (2011:xxvii) highlights the *failure* of railroads, which "came too early, in too great an abundance, and at too great a cost." The transcontinentals, he argues, "created modernity as much by their failure as their success" (2011:xxi). They "flooded markets with wheat, silver, cattle, and coal for which there was little or no need", setting in motion "a train of catastrophes" (2011:xxvi). Transcontinentals were economic failures (ending in receivership or rescued by nation-states), political failures (creating the modern corporate lobby, but unable to bear the economic burden of competing with each other), and social failures (attracting settlers to areas where they produced goods beyond demand, to great environmental and social harm). Rather than seeing their dysfunctionality as exceptional, White (2011) sees it as a *mark* of their modernity. The transcontinentals thus reflect that modernity is characterized as much by projects of progress as by the failure of these.

three...I existed in triple: I was taking up room," Fanon (2008 [1952]:92) writes. Emanuella Guano (2002) and Daniela Soldano (2013) have shown how in Buenos Aires train routes, fares, and station infrastructure function as exclusionary devices, maintaining racialized class differences, and keeping particular social groups apart. I further discuss how metropolitan railroads function as a racializing technology in Chapter Four.

The railway also represents failed attempts to materialize hemispheric integration in the Americas, as shown by Ricardo Salvatore (2006), who traces the rise of machines as the “dominant representation of US superiority and supremacy” (2006:663). Salvatore coins the term *imperial mechanics* to refer to the interrelationship between imaginaries of empire and conceptions of machine-civilization. Machines were imagined to facilitate integration by overcoming geographical obstacles (the tenacity of the terrain, theretofore marked by indomitable jungles, mountains, and rivers) and disseminating U.S. modernity onto the technologically-backward Central and South Americas. Transportation utopias, concretized in blueprints for intercontinental railways and highways, created expectations about the *connectivity* and *transitability* of the hemisphere. A turn-of-the-century project of constructing an intercontinental, or Pan-American, railway, was never fully materialized; although stretches of the railroad were built, crucial connections were lacking, leading to incomplete connectivity at best.²¹ South America continued to be transitable only through a patchwork of different transportation technologies; for mid-century American travelers, this was a sign of the “unmanageable hybridity” of a region in which modernity coexisted with the unmodern (Salvatore 2006:684). Failed railroads thus underscore the fact that modernity, in Mary Louise Pratt’s (2008:227) words, arrived to South America “in bits and pieces.” I examine anxieties over the scope and reach of the rail network in Argentina in Chapter Two.

Over the last decade, anthropologists have attended to the material and social afterlife of projects of empire, the persistence of structures of domination, and the sites

²¹ Doreen Massey (2005:12) argues that space is always comprised by “loose ends and missing links.”

of dispossession and disenfranchisement created by imperial formations (Gordillo 2011; Navaro-Yashin 2009; Stoler 2008, 2013). This scholarship is situated within a broader “turn to ruins” in the social sciences and humanities (e.g. Hell and Schönle 2010; Edensor 2005; DeSilvey 2006, 2017). Ruins are read by these scholars not as static matter, but rather as ongoing processes, as what Ann Stoler (2008) has called “ruination.” Ruination operates at different scales and refers simultaneously to material debris, wasted landscapes, and degraded human lives. It is a political project and a sociohistorical configuration. While some scholars have attended to the altering of everyday life wrought by large-scale technology gone awry (Fortun 2001; Petryna 2002), others focus on the slow, insidious ruination wrought, for instance, by nuclear waste (Masco 2006). In my examination of the mundane ruination reflected in and wrought by trains in Argentina, I argue that the risks associated with living among ruins and decrepit infrastructures are differentially distributed and create cartographies of exclusion, with disenfranchised communities bearing the brunt of peril. This dissertation shows how *desidia*, neglect, creates differential structures of risk and abandonment along lines of race and class.

My research on railroads is informed by scholarship on the anthropology of infrastructure, which has mushroomed in the last few years.²² In his overview of the literature, Brian Larkin (2013: 328) defines infrastructures as “built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space.”²³

²² See, for instance, the “infrastructure toolbox” edited by Hannah Appel, Nikhil Anand, and Akhil Gupta (2015) for the journal *Cultural Anthropology*, which includes contributions from leading scholars on analytics such as accretion, temporality, emplacement, etc.

²³ According to Ashley Carse (2012:542), the term “infrastructure,” first used in English in 1927, was borrowed from French, where it in fact referred to “the substrate material below railroad tracks.”

As the “architecture for circulation,” infrastructures provide “the undergirding of modern society” and “generate the ambient environment of everyday life” (Larkin 2013:328).²⁴ As matter that enables the movement of other matter, infrastructures have a “peculiar ontology,” Larkin notes (2013:329), inasmuch as “they are things and also the relation between things.” Because of this ontological duality, Larkin finds that infrastructures are “conceptually unruly” (2013:329). Recent ethnographers of infrastructure have contested Susan Leigh Star’s (1999) adage that infrastructures become visible upon breakdown, mapping the hypervisibility of infrastructure, particularly in the Global South, where it often constitutes a “visible and proximate sit[e] of power and contestation” (Anand 2017:228). Anthropologists have underscored how infrastructures can have political effects that far exceed those envisioned by their planners. From water pipes to roads, prepaid meters, landmines, and bricks, scholars have shown how infrastructures enchant (Harvey and Knox 2012), attack (Chu 2014), and go rogue (Kim 2016). They have illustrated how infrastructures can serve as the terrain for the negotiation of political claims (von Schnitzler 2013) and as gathering points for political communities through the engineering of affect (Schwenkel 2013).

My research builds upon this scholarship, bringing it into conversation with scholarship on ruins and mobilities. I illustrate how infrastructure can be approached as an archive, a material repository of histories: infrastructural histories are *folded* into the material, laying claims on the future, and on the past. Ethnographic attention to the

²⁴ “What distinguishes infrastructures from technologies,” Larkin explains, “is that they are objects that create the grounds on which other objects operate, and when they do so they operate as systems” (2013:329).

materiality of transport infrastructure and to the sedimented traces of movement, I argue, can reveal the ways that the histories etched into material surfaces and structures shape the experience and very possibility of mobility. Ethnographically tracking the life of matter, its affordances and entanglements (Hodder 2012), its decomposition and recalcitrance (DeSilvey 2006), its complex temporalities (Bowker 2015), I propose, can shed light on how matter underpins and undermines human projects such as mobility. My attention to materiality is much inspired by Caitlin DeSilvey's (2006: 318) project of "telling stories with mutable things." An ethnographic approach to infrastructure, I argue, demands that we engage with concrete materials, rather than with abstract materiality (Ingold 2011). Beyond focusing on materials (their properties, agencies, and peculiar interactions), ethnographic engagements with infrastructure need to attend to the particular politico-social worlds in which materials are enmeshed and reworked, and to the way in which materials in turn enmesh and rework particular politico-social worlds. As my dissertation shows, in a context of *desidia* (neglect), material decay has stark effects, shaping travel experiences and claiming human lives.

Latin America has been a fertile site for the ethnographic study of capitalism: its terrors, aporias, and exclusions (Bessire 2014; Biehl 2005; Gordillo 2014; Han 2011; and Taussig 1987, 2004, to name but a few). Argentina in particular has been viewed as a case study of the effects of neoliberalism. The 2001 financial crisis is often described as one of the more spectacular defaults in world history, compounded by the fall below the poverty line of more than half the population, the purported dissolution of the middle class (in a country that has historically defined itself as middle-class), widespread social protests (most famously the *cacerolazo* protests, in which the impoverished middle class

took to the streets banging pots and pans), and the rapid succession of five presidents in ten days. Anthropologists have taken interest in the social actors and movements emerging out of this crisis, particularly the *cartoneros* or urban scavengers, the *piqueteros* or unemployed subaltern youth, and the recovered factory movement (Faulk 2008; Gordillo 2012; Manzano 2002; Trinchero 2007). Elana Shever (2012) has argued that neoliberalism has its own contingent and cultural inflections in Argentina and uses *neoliberalismo* as an emic term that indexes the restructuring of state, economy, and subjectivity in the 1990s in Argentina. *Neoliberalismo*, in fact, has become a term of everyday speech in Argentina, more so than in the United States.

I situate my project within this scholarship, and argue that trains provide a novel approach to study *neoliberalismo's* effects in everyday life. What does infrastructure look like in an age of neoliberalism? While my research points to a longer history of railroad ruination (and a longer afterlife of neoliberalism at hands of a populist administration), it also illuminates the acute forms of precarity created by new public-private partnerships and the outsourcing of infrastructure services. For instance, I show how shifts in maintenance practices and lack of investment produced monstrous trains with a proclivity to fall apart, run late, catch fire, derail, and crash. In doing so, I draw from Science and Technology Studies' insights on technological knowledge and technological artifacts, particularly on failing systems and the material consequences of neglecting things (Latour 1996; Law 2003; Puig de la Bellacasa 2011). Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift (2007:19), in this regard, have called for more analytic attention to repair and maintenance as the "engine room of modern economies and societies" (see also Anand 2017). My research sheds ethnographic light on different forms of maintenance, from

deferred maintenance of rolling stock by concession companies, to the amateur restoration and repair projects carried out by train enthusiasts and activists, and on how they come to matter.

Itinerant Ethnography

With the aim of tracking the social and material life of railways, I conducted thirteen months (September 2013 - October 2014) of ethnographic fieldwork in Buenos Aires. Recent train crashes (mainly the *tragedias* of Flores, Once, and Castelar in the Sarmiento line) had brought railway decay to the forefront of national conversations around failing infrastructure. A few weeks after I commenced fieldwork in September 2013, the government of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner launched a “railway revolution,” predicated on the purchase of new trains from China, the modernization of railway infrastructure, and the renationalization of the railway system. Thus, in addition to mapping the forms of precarity and sociality engendered by railway decay, as had been my original aim, I began to explore how trains were being (re)mobilized as machines of progress, and how these modernization efforts were woven with and reflective of a larger project to “refound” Argentina. In many ways, my research amounted to an ethnography of a transition period, what one of my interlocutors referred to as “the meantime”: the temporal space between the aftermath of the Once crash and the promised arrival of railway modernization. For most of my interlocutors, this was a period of ambivalent anticipation.

Because my object of study was mobile, my research was necessarily multi-sited,

and train travel was central to my project. I conducted fieldwork in the city of Buenos Aires, its suburbs and hinterlands, and in railway nodes in the province of Buenos Aires (both in former railroad towns and in the port city of Bahía Blanca). My research engaged with a range of ethnographic methods in order to map the multiple, material ways in which trains shape everyday life in Buenos Aires: I used research techniques of participant-observation, mapping, semi-structured interviews, life histories, and archival research. In developing ethnographic techniques for taking traveling objects seriously and tracking their social life in different spaces—a method I have called “itinerant ethnography”—my research offers important methodological contributions to the burgeoning anthropology of transportation and infrastructure.

Most of my fieldwork was conducted in the city of Buenos Aires and in Greater Buenos Aires, as I focused on the metropolitan railway passenger network (see Figure 3). Shortly after I commenced fieldwork I came across a group of train users (*agrupación de usuarios*) from the Mitre line who called themselves *Autoconvocados X los Trenes*, Self-Rallied for Trains. After a derailment near the terminal station of Retiro, they had begun rallying for a “safe and dignified public transport” (*transporte público seguro y digno*). They began to monitor railway infrastructure and services, denouncing railway decay on social media, and began teaming up with railway workers in order to better understand the railroad system. After attending a public event they had organized (a forum in which Mitre commuters could ask questions of a train conductor and a former railway worker-cum-historian), I began attending their group meetings, participating in their surveys of railway infrastructure, and accompanying them on their various visits to state offices.

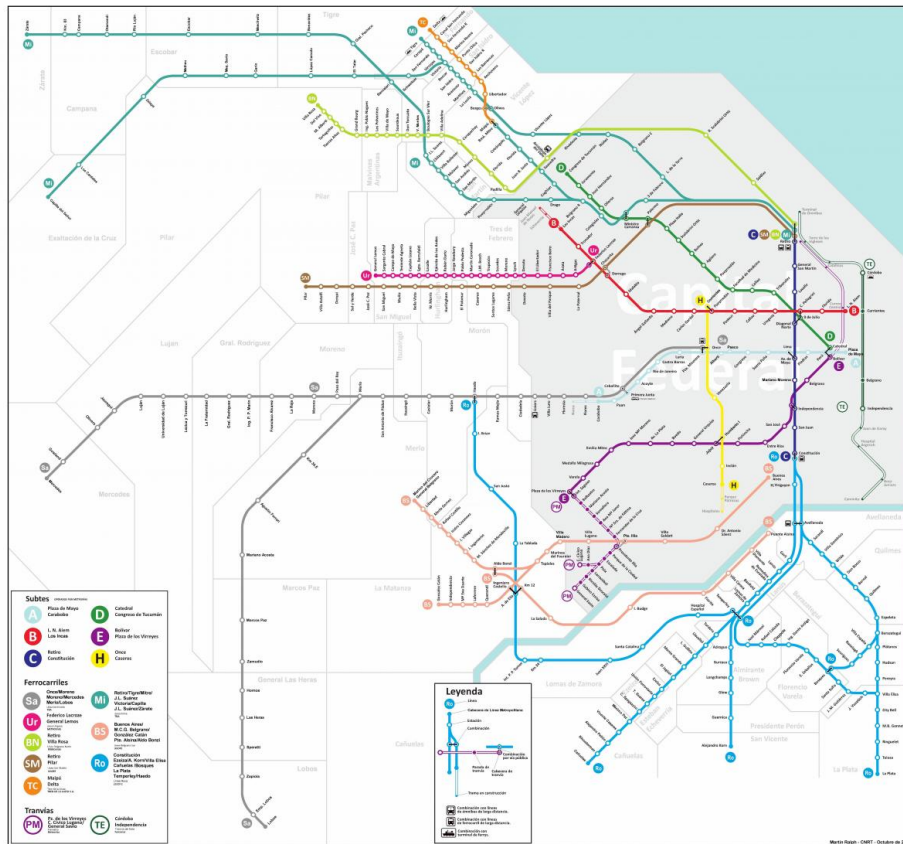


Figure 3: Diagram of the metropolitan rail network and the urban subway network in the City of Buenos Aires (represented by the shaded area labeled “Capital Federal”) and surrounding Greater Buenos Aires (in white). The different districts (“partidos”) are outlined in the background. Source: Comisión Nacional Reguladora de Transporte (CNRT). Image downloaded from <https://www.cnrt.gob.ar/mapas-y-croquis> in March 2018.

Through *Autoconvocados X los Trenes*, I met other groups of *usuarios* who were also documenting railway deterioration and demanding improvements in service. Each of these groups coalesced around a particular railway line and its specific problems: as one commuter told me, “Each railway line is its own world.” The groups included *Pasajeros del Roca* (Roca Passengers), *Usuarios Organizados del Sarmiento* (Organized Sarmiento Users), *SUBI Así Llegamos* (“Board so that we can arrive;” SUBI stands for *Somos Usuarios Bien Indignados*, “We are well outraged users”), *Salvemos al Tren* (Let’s Save the

Train), and *El Tercer Riel Mata* (The Third Rail Kills).²⁵ Some of these groups had encountered each other for the first time at a spontaneous demonstration held in Plaza de Mayo (the plaza located across from the Casa Rosada, the seat of government, and a traditional locus of protests) after the Castelar crash. Together with survivors and relatives of the deceased in the Once crash, they formed a broader coalition group under the slogan *Ni Un Muerto Más* (Not One More Dead, here NUMM for short). I attended NUMM meetings and participated in their efforts to audit railway infrastructure, as well as in their petition-signing campaigns in railway stations.

These *agrupaciones de usuarios* (groups of train users) represented a spectrum of political perspectives and party affiliations. Group founders were often either current or former *militantes* (militant members) of political parties, including the centrist *Unión Cívica Radical*, center-left *Proyecto Sur*, and the (radical) leftists *Partido Comunista Revolucionario* and *Partido Obrero*. While they differed in the language used to describe the railway crisis and even in their political aims (most envisioned a railway network administrated by the state; others were open to its administration by private companies), they shared a mistrust of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and her policies. Other groups, such as FUDESA (*Frente de Usuarios Desesperados del Sarmiento*, Desperate Sarmiento Users Front), of which I interviewed a former member, were seen as having been coopted by the governing administration.

²⁵ With the permission of group members, throughout the dissertation I use these groups' actual names. Members expressed a preference for their activist work to be associated with the groups they formed part of, and for these groups to be known for their work.

Once the public trial around the *Tragedia de Once* started in March 2014, I began attending court hearings on a nearly-weekly basis. Hearings were held on Mondays and Tuesdays, and I usually attended one a week, often sitting near the plaintiffs (survivors of the crash and relatives of the deceased), who placed themselves across the aisle from the family and friends of the defendants. In addition, I attended monthly commemorations and rallies held by the victims' families. Because the opinions of the group of relatives (*familiares*) of the Once victims were well represented in the media, with their spokespeople occasionally appearing on news shows and cited regularly in newspapers, and because they were visibly grieving during court hearings, I chose not to interview relatives of the deceased, and only engaged with two *familiares* who participated in NUMM meetings and activities.

Beyond my participation with *Autoconvocados X los Trenes* and their allies, I conducted extensive participant-observation in train stations and aboard trains (on both retiring Toshiba trains and new rolling stock from China), holding informal conversations with railway personnel (train guards, ticket vendors, evasion officers) and passengers. I kept track of the rhythms of train and station life, attending to the temporalities of train delays and interruptions. I charted railway landscapes, taking notes on the varied uses of railway spaces, mapping terminal layouts, and photographing ads, graffiti, and litter. I interviewed non-activist commuters regarding their shifting commuting patterns, and kept track of their ambivalent responses to the railway revolution under way. Once new rolling stock from China had arrived and infrastructural renovation projects were underway, I began tracing the material and affective frictions between the old and new.

PLANO DE RED LÍNEA SARMIENTO



PLANO DE RED LÍNEA MITRE

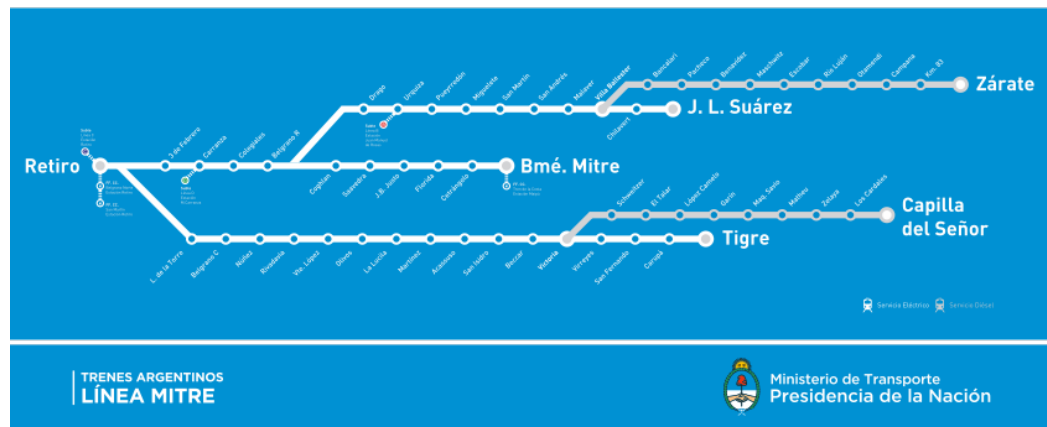


Figure 4: Diagrams of the Sarmiento and Mitre railroad lines (above and below, respectively). Branches served by electric trains are marked in white, while branches served by diesel-powered trains are marked in gray. Source: Comisión Nacional Reguladora de Transporte (CNRT). Images downloaded from <https://www.cnrt.gob.ar/mapas-y-croquis> in March 2018.

Participant-observation in trains and train stations focused primarily on the Once-Moreno branch of the Sarmiento line, where the Flores, Once, and Castelar crashes had taken place, and on the Retiro-Tigre branch of the Mitre line, widely regarded as serving a more affluent population (Figure 4). In order to gain a broader, comparative perspective of the metropolitan network as a whole, I traveled on each of the remaining five metropolitan lines (the Roca, San Martín, Belgrano Norte, Belgrano

Sur, and Urquiza lines) at least once. Participant-observation built upon my own decade-long experience and “expertise” as a train commuter on the Retiro-Tigre branch of the Mitre line, which I had used to travel from my home in an upper middle-class suburb to high school and later to university and work. As a researcher, my mobility was privileged: because I was not reliant on the train to commute to a job and meet quotas of *presentismo* (presenteeism), I could choose to exit a train if I felt unsafe (for example, if a train’s brakes appeared to be malfunctioning, or if a fellow passenger’s behavior was menacing) or uncomfortable (for example, if a train car was extremely overcrowded). Given the history of the train compartment (in Buenos Aires and elsewhere) as a site of sexual harassment, I relied on my embodied experience as a commuter to gauge and procure safety.²⁶

In addition, I visited railway clubs, train repair workshops, and museums. Interviews with railway workers, rail fans (*ferroaficionados*), railway experts, and members of the Anglo-Argentine community shed light on the complex affective engagements with railway histories and materialities, and on multiple efforts to curtail railway decay, including the restoration of steam locomotives, weeding campaigns to unearth and recuperate abandoned railway tracks, and artistic interventions of dilapidated stations. Railway clubs and railway repair workshops were coded as male spaces, and the presence of women was rare. As a female anthropologist, I was not expected to possess technical knowledge about railways, and this enabled me to ask broad-ranging questions. If

²⁶ In 2015, the National Women’s Council (*Consejo Nacional de las Mujeres*) and the National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia and Racism (INADI) launched a graphic campaign onboard trains and in stations to raise awareness on sexual harassment in railroad spaces; the campaign was called *Paremos la Mano*, Let’s Stop the Hand (*en el Subte* 11/4/2015).

anything, my interest in trains (both as an anthropologist and as a woman) was met with surprise and some degree of mirth.²⁷

Railways are a region-making technology, connecting certain places and eluding others. In order to gain a *regional* perspective on railroads as a project of progress and on the ruins left in their wake, I traveled along some of the interurban branches that stretch out from the metropolitan rail network. Interlocutors kept referring to specific stations and towns in the rural heartlands of Buenos Aires province; some argued that, given the shape of the railway network, railroads were mainly a phenomenon of the Pampas, Argentina's fertile grasslands. I thus complemented my research in Greater Buenos Aires with fieldwork in several railway nodes in the interior of the province of Buenos Aires and on their entwined, uneven histories. I traveled west along the Sarmiento's secondary, interurban branches, to Speratti, Lobos, and Mercedes (100km away from Buenos Aires city or less), and to Bragado and Mechita (200km away from Buenos Aires city). I traveled northwards on the Mitre line's interurban branch, to Capilla del Señor (80km away). Finally, I did brief ethnographic research in the southern reaches of the province, from Sierra de la Ventana to Bahía Blanca (600 to 700km away), where the Pampas give way to the drier sierras before approaching the Patagonian steppe.

Multisited fieldwork in the interior of the province enabled me to learn about the histories of different railway lines, their overlapping zones of influence, the manner in which they shaped local landscapes, and people's current mobility patterns and strategies.

²⁷ On one occasion when I was purchasing the latest number of the rail fan magazine *Todo Trenes* ("All Trains" or "Everything Trains") in Retiro station, the vendor inquired if it was for my father or brother: it did not occur to him that I myself might be interested in the magazine.

Each of these sites shed light on particular angles of my project, some more fruitfully than others. In Mechita, for instance, I interviewed a former railway worker, now an artist, whose sculptures made with *chatarra* (scrap metal) pushed my thinking on the afterlife of railway matter. In Sierra de la Ventana, a station master recounted his efforts to preserve the station's "authentic" appearance and provided insight on railway freight traffic (transporting cereal, gravel, and polyethylene). In Ingeniero White, Bahía Blanca's port neighborhood, a celebrated museum (the Ferrowhite Museum), where retired railroad workers gather and volunteer as guides, served as a fascinating counterpoint to the National Railway Museum, deemed by some rail fans as a place that gathers cadavers and dust. The surrounding port landscape attested to unanticipated effects of the infrastructures of modernity: Progress, a woman told me, gesturing towards the looming silhouette of Cargill's plant by the water, had taken their beach away.

In addition to the ethnographic work outlined above, I conducted archival work at the *Biblioteca Nacional* (National Library), the Library of Congress, the National Railway Museum, and in private collections. Newspapers stories from 1870-1930 on railway malfunctioning and improper passenger behavior unsettled the apparent utter contemporaneity of the railway crisis, pointing to anxieties over modernity and its malaise. I also tracked current railway-related news and their repercussions on social media sites. Over the course of the year, I formed my own personal archive of sorts, comprised of train tickets, train delay certificates, railway magazines, activist- and government-issued stickers and pamphlets, books, movies, documentaries, and personal recordings of train and station sounds.

For reasons of scope and space, not all of this material has found its way into this dissertation, but what *has* been included here is representative of the tenor of my fieldwork as a whole. With my interlocutors' permission, throughout the dissertation I have primarily used real names for people and organizations (for the former, I often use only first names, except for individuals who have published with their name and surname and/or who hold a leading role in an organization and preferred to be identified as such). In the case of railroad workers, however, I have opted to use pseudonyms even when I received permission to use real names, in order to protect them from repercussions for their opinions.

Itinerary

This dissertation maps the uneven meantime between a railroad crisis, as encapsulated in the *Tragedia de Once*, and a purported railroad revolution, symbolized by the purchase of new rolling stock and the renovation of aging track and station infrastructure. It examines how railroad ruination, particularly in the form of *desidia* (neglect) and *desguace* (gutting out or stripping bare), reconfigured everyday life, and how train commuters, railroad workers, and railroad enthusiasts navigated spaces of risk and enacted forms of maintenance and care.

Chapter Two, "The Spider's Web (History Refried)," offers a "high-speed" historical overview of the development and deterioration of the national rail network

until the concessioning of the system in the early 1990s.²⁸ It traces how, from the start, the railroad was a fraught symbol of modernity: enthusiastically endorsed by liberal elites as a technology for materializing progress and stitching the nascent nation together, and distrusted by nationalist intellectuals as an instrument of imperial domination. I then offer a re-reading of railroad history, decried by some of my interlocutors as “refried” and as tinged with nostalgia, that unsettles some taken-for-granted railroad “truths.”

Chapters Three and Four illustrate the long-reaching effects of the concessioning of the metropolitan railway system in the early 1990s. Chapter Three, “Clocks” takes up the disappearance of clocks from railway stations to analyze the temporal dislocations wrought by shifts in maintenance practices. While railways have often been theorized as having compressed time and space, in Argentina, I argue, unreliable trains and their obsolete infrastructure brought about time-space dilation, as locales were rendered further apart by infrequent trains and pervasive uncertainty. Traveling along railway branches in the semi-rural hinterlands of Buenos Aires, I show how aging infrastructure has reconfigured local topologies of dis/connection. Chapter Four, “Monster Trains,” begins with the *Tragedia de Once*, the largest train crash in recent Argentine history, and traces how haphazard modernization of rolling stock produced monstrous trains, assemblages of spare parts prone to malfunction. I examine how passengers and railway workers grappled with a railway system that was falling apart, acquiring an embodied knowledge sedimented ride after jolting ride. The quotidian manifestations of railway

²⁸ For a more complete discussion of Argentine history in English, see Rock (1985), Shumway (1991), and Nouzeilles and Montaldo (2002). For a history of railways in Argentina, albeit in Spanish, see Scalabrini Ortíz (2013 [1940]) and López and Waddell (2007). For a history, in English, of British-owned railways in Argentina, see Wright (1974).

precarity, I argue, are central to understanding the crash not as a fortuitous event, but as the foretold outcome of neglected infrastructure.

Chapter Five, “The Memory of Metals,” follows a group of commuter-activists as they embark on “diagnostic trips” to audit railway infrastructure. Taking seriously railway workers’ claim that metals have memory, this chapter attends to the histories of friction, care, and decay etched into tracks and rolling stock, and to the manner in which they translate into particular travel experiences. The malleable and sensorial qualities of metals, I propose, enable railway infrastructure to be read as a form of archive. Chapter Six, “Railroad Revolution,” finally, tracks the arrival of new rolling stock from China and the purported renovation of track and station infrastructure. I trace how glitches in this highly-anticipated modernization project—an automated communication system that announces imminent arrival to stations that have already been left behind, a brand-new locomotive derailing on its maiden trip—fuel anxieties over the incompatibility of foreign technology and local infrastructure and the obduracy of decay.

Inspired by the monster trains that run through this dissertation, I weave two ethnographic interludes after Chapters Four and Five, “scrap ethnography” that further illuminates and refracts the themes explored.

Chapter Two: The Spider's Web (History, Refried)

Railroads have been portrayed as *the* symbol of modernity in nineteenth century Argentina (Terán 2008). The history of railroads in Argentina, of which I offer a schematic, high-speed version in this chapter, suggests how one might have come to be seen as metonymic of the other. For some scholars, and for many railroad workers and train activists with whom I conversed, the railroad network appeared to constitute the infrastructural backbone of the nation-state. In many places, the railroad was the materialization of the state's presence, delivering drinking water and other services, and stations served as a central node of social life. As Patricio, a performance artist engaged in the recuperation of railway heritage, put it, railroads constitute the “intimate fibers of identity and memory.”

Taking my cue from my interlocutors, here I propose that railroads be approached as a *figure* for the power, stretch, and effectiveness of the Argentine nation-state. Figures are material as well as semiotic (Haraway 2004), and railroads can be productively examined not only as a *symbol* of modernity but also as a *material instantiation* of the modern nation-state. The presence of railroads has never been uniform across the national territory, of course: in many areas its reach was tenuous, in others nonexistent. Historical and ethnographic attention to infrastructure underscores how national territory is governed and managed differently, how governance and power can travel along the capillaries comprised by rails (and also along roads, pipes, cables). With the historically shifting shape and scope of the network, railroads charted cartographies of inclusion and exclusion, connecting certain places and bypassing or disavowing others

(Gordillo 2014, Salerno 2014, Martínez Estrada 2011 [1933]). The shape and scope of the network, in fact, have often been seen as reflecting Argentina's position in the world economy (as producer and exporter of raw materials and agricultural goods) and its economic entanglements (mainly with Britain): what poet and essayist Ezequiel Martínez Estrada (2011 [1933]) famously described as “the spider's web,” as discussed below.

This chapter charts how different governing regimes, since the second half of the nineteenth century, have used railroads to advance their dreams of progress – even as they cannot live up to them. This history matters to contemporary railroad politics, as it suggests that decay and ruination have always haunted railroads and their promise of progress. In some ways, the account offered here works against the grain of oft-repeated, familiar stories about railroad history, what one train enthusiast characterized as “a refried history” (*una historia refrita*). Acknowledging a longer genealogy of ruination, I suggest, does not amount to a flattening of history, nor to a disavowal of historical ruptures. There are clear distinctions in how progress and decay are related in different periods, and the neoliberal reforms described in the later sections created particularly acute forms of precarity, as this dissertation works hard to underscore.

Materializing Progress

During the period of consolidation of the Argentine nation-state (1852-1890) that followed the long war for independence from Spain and decades of civil war, liberal intellectuals presented railroads as a technology of progress, one that would precipitate modernity and stitch the nascent nation together. In his famous *Bases*, a set of

recommendations for the political organization of Argentina penned in 1852, Juan Bautista Alberdi expounded on the virtues of European (preferably Anglo-Saxon) immigration and the railroad for national progress. Alberdi argued that “rivers of steel” were needed to compensate for the absence of any river system of significance in Argentina (Wright 1974:16). Yet “freedom, like the railroads, needs English conductors,” he asserted (as cited in Terán 2008:95; my translation). His contemporary, statesman Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (2005 [1845]), believed that the project of modern nationhood was threatened by the “vast emptiness” of the land and the Indians and gauchos that roamed it, and similarly promoted European immigration, the expansion of the railroad, and education as a means to civilize the nation.²⁹ Thus, the 1853 Constitution explicitly endorsed the railroad as an instrument to attain prosperity (López 2007). The genocidal military campaigns led by Julio A. Roca and known as *la Conquista del Desierto* (the Conquest of the Desert), in turn, would open up land for the construction of railroad lines (Terán 2008; see also Viñas 2013).

Argentina entered the railroad age relatively late, after Great Britain and the United States had developed extensive networks, and after Mexico, Brazil, Peru, and Chile had begun to build theirs (Wright 1974; López 2007). Scholars have invoked Argentina’s political strife as an explanation for this tardiness, as the war for independence that ended in 1816 gave way to four decades of civil war and dictatorship.

²⁹ Alberdi and Sarmiento would become bitter enemies, and cultural historian Nicholas Shumway (1991:x) blames their generation (known as *la Generación del '37*, the Generation of 1837) for the “failure to create an ideological framework for [national] union.” The guiding fictions and rhetorical paradigms produced in this period, Shumway argues, continue to shape and haunt Argentina’s sense-of-self in the present.

Construction for the first railroad line in Argentina, the *Ferrocarril del Oeste* (FCO) or Western Railway (the predecessor, in fact of the Sarmiento line from the *Tragedia de Once*), began in 1855. Originally owned by a private company comprised by local and British businessmen and politicians, the FCO was bought by the Province of Buenos Aires in 1862, and later sold to British capitals in 1889. At a time when Buenos Aires saw itself as “the hinge [*bisagra*] between the country and the world” (Schvarzer and Gómez 2006:19), the FCO was one of three proposed railway lines that would connect the city and port towards the northern, southern, and western hinterlands, eventually stretching into the interior of the country. The FCO, in particular, would link the city to the fertile Pampas, and was thus to originate near Plaza Once de Septiembre, the point of reception for goods arriving from the interior by horse-drawn carts (Schvárzer and Gómez 2006). The line would run along the ridge of land that separated the basins of the Riachuelo and Maldonado rivers (Schvárzer and Gómez 2006), a notoriously muddy area troubled by flooding even today, with the aim of eventually crossing the Pampas and reaching the border with Chile, thus gaining access to a Pacific port (Roccatagliata 2012).

The FCO’s first locomotive, named *La Porteña* (an adjective depicting a female inhabitant of the port area, and, together with *porteño*, a term often used to refer to the inhabitants of the city of Buenos Aires) derailed on its maiden trip, in 1857, with statesmen and businessmen on board. Much of the material purchased for rolling stock and rail infrastructure was “second hand and obsolete” (Schvárzer and Gómez 2006:82, citing C. M. Lewis). Although originally envisioned primarily as a freight train (to transport fruit and grains into the city, and some wool for export), the FCO experienced a high demand of passengers and was thus saturated from the start; in its early days, in

fact, it was forced to adapt freight wagons to supplement its fleet of passenger cars (Schv rzer and G mez 2006; Rock 1985). Anxieties around the nature of imported rolling stock and the treatment of passengers as freight would resurface over a century later, as seen in Chapter Four. The railway line’s moniker as “the Train of Death” (*El Tren de la Muerte*), earned during the 1871 yellow fever epidemic when it was used to transport cadavers, would gain new valences after multiple railroad crashes both before and after the *Tragedia de Once*.

The fraught history of railways in Argentina underscores the manner in which infrastructure (its shape, scope, and very materiality) is always entangled in larger political processes. During the early years of railway construction, Argentina was still divided into two competing states: the secessionist State of Buenos Aires and the Argentine Confederacy. As the government of Buenos Aires built the FCO, the Argentine Confederacy sought to build its own line, but succeeded to do so only after national unification was achieved in 1861. The conformation of the Argentine Republic, and the federalization of the city of Buenos Aires in 1880 (a substantial political and economic loss for the province of Buenos Aires, which lost its most important city), altered the stakes in the layout of tracks. The nation and the province of Buenos Aires, in fact, developed their own railway systems (L pez 2007). The Great Southern Railway (Ferrocarril Sud), which spread southwards from the city of Buenos Aires and covered most of the province, and which was built by members of the local British commercial community, would become one of the most successful in the nation (Wright 1974). To this day, it remains a favorite of Anglophile rail fans.

Stitching the Nation

Most of the railroad network was constructed between 1870 and 1914. In the early years, the national government hired European engineers, primarily of Italian and Scandinavian origin, to conduct preliminary studies and oversee construction (Salerno 2008). With the first cohorts of nationally-trained engineers graduating from the *Universidad de Buenos Aires* in the 1870s, “local” professionals slowly began to take over (Salerno 2008).

Tracks were easy to build on the flat pampas, “a civil engineer’s paradise” (Wright 1974:18). Long expanses of flat land favored the use of broad-gauge railways (less common elsewhere in the world) and heavier rolling stock. Construction costs were relatively low, as the terrain required “few bridges, no zigzags or hairpin curves, and no major buildup of the track bed” (Wright 1974:18). Expenses primarily included steel for rails and the transportation of gravel for ballast and lumber for crossties (Wright 1974). Yet growth of the network was somewhat haphazard and lacked central planning. As British, French, and state railway companies competed in their quest for connectivity, gauges proliferated and branches overlapped (López and Waddell 2007). In 1887, in fact, the “rampant extension of poorly conceived railways” had garnered its critics, with newspaper *La Prensa* decrying a “railway delirium,” given the speed with which railway concessions (with their guaranteed profits) were given (Wright 1974: 64).

Railroads were met with ambivalence. By the end of the century, members of the *Generación del 80*, the liberal intellectual elite that succeeded Sarmiento and Alberdi, were already mourning the cypresses and *quintas* (weekend houses or small farms) displaced by

the railway (Terán 2008). More generally, railroad companies were accused of fueling land speculation, imposing high monopoly rates on consumers, and disrupting regional economies by facilitating the import of goods.

By 1890, the network, comprised by 9300km of tracks, was largely in the hands of private British companies, and had mostly displaced the old transportation network of ox carts and mules (Rock 1985). British companies controlled traffic in the fertile Pampas, while the state sought to construct lines in remote regions that were of little interest to private capital (Salerno 2008). State-owned railway lines amounted to 30% of the total network, and absorbed 45% of investments in public works (Salerno 2008).³⁰ These state lines in the interior, built with the intent of fostering commercial and political links between provincial capitals and with Buenos Aires, and of spurring regional economies, often ran at a deficit (Rock 1985, Salerno 2008). Significantly, they did not have their own access to ports (for the export of their goods), and instead fed into the private network of the littoral, giving the network its characteristic fan-like shape, radiating from Buenos Aires into the interior.

Between 1871 and 1914, some 5.9 million newcomers (largely from Southern Europe) arrived to Buenos Aires; over half would stay and settle (Rock 1985:141).³¹ Immigrants were contracted for colonization ventures in the national territories not yet incorporated into the system of provinces, and also arrived attracted to economic

³⁰ Ahead of the 1890 economic crisis, the government of Juárez Celman (1886-1890) granted many of the state-owned lines in concession to private companies; soon after the crisis, which ended Juárez Celman's presidency, the state recovered its role as railroad operator, building new lines, purchasing lines built with private capital, and absorbing lines that were returned by private companies when profit guarantees were cancelled (Salerno 2008).

³¹ Between 1830 and 1950, Argentina, in fact, would absorb 10% of the emigrants from Europe to the Americas (Rock 1985).

incentives, fueling the growth of the nation's main cities and the expansion of agriculture. The national government, in fact, promoted railroad expansion across the frontiers ahead of settlers, leaving them to follow (Rock 1985:146, Salerno 2008).³² The railroad thus became a central infrastructure of the nation-state, mobilized to conquer territory, to civilize, and to whiten, with railroad branches serving as veritable population axes. Railroad tracks often marked the border between "savagery" and "civilization," between unruly space and encroaching nation-state.³³ The state's policy of building railroads in the "national territories" (land not yet incorporated as provinces), of little economic interest to private companies because of the low prospect of profits, was key in the project to consolidate the nation-state (Salerno 2008). The first state railroad company, Administración General de Ferrocarriles del Estado (AGFE), was created in 1909 to manage the different state lines.

³² The national self-image of Argentina as a white nation of European descent is reflected in the still-popular saying (*refrán*), "*Los argentinos descendemos de los barcos*" ["We Argentines descend from the ships"]. This *refrán* silences and obscures Argentina's "other" ancestries and excludes from the myth of national origin and the body politic indigenous people, Afro-descendants (who first came on slave ships, "other" ships disavowed by the saying), and migrants from neighboring countries (Briones 2005; Geler 2005; Picotti 1998). In the early nineteenth century, for instance, Afro-Argentines comprised 30% of the population of Buenos Aires (Alberto and Elena 2016). For a recent critique of the idea of racial exceptionalism in Argentina, see Alberto and Elena (2016).

³³ The "whitening" of Argentina's population was sought through official state policy that actively recruited European migration (Pacecca and Curtis 2008; Rodríguez 2006), military violence and conquest of the hinterlands (Briones 1998, 2005; Briones and Guber 2008; Gordillo 2008), missionization and education (Gordillo 2004) – and, later, through the whitening of history, that is, the claim that indigenous and Afro-descendent populations were exterminated and thus no longer formed part of the nation (Geler 2005; Gordillo and Hirsch 2010; Zubrzycki and Agnelli 2009). As Paulina Alberto and Eduardo Elena (2016:7), drawing from contemporary scholars of race in Argentina, have explained, Indigenous people and Afro-descendants were subsumed into the "popular world," "a group considered white in racial terms but subject to longstanding social prejudice that linked darker skin tones to low socioeconomic status and lack of cultural refinement." "The victory of white racial order in Argentina (which earned the country its reputation as being exceptional)," they continue, "therefore depended not principally on 'extermination,' but on the renegotiation of the boundaries of ethno-racial difference in socioeconomic and cultural terms" (2016:7).

In 1915, Argentina had the third longest railway network in the Western Hemisphere (behind the United States and Canada), the longest in Latin America (claiming more than 40% of tracks in South America), and the eighth largest network in the world (Wright 1974). With Britain as its leading trade partner, Argentina had consolidated its role as producer of food and raw materials (wheat, corn, linseed, high-grade frozen beef), importing, in turn, coal, railroad materials, and finished metal and textile goods from the former. British investments, which accounted for 60% of foreign investment in Argentina (Argentina received 10% of Britain's total investment abroad), helped finance the construction of infrastructure, including a deep-draught port in Buenos Aires, tramway networks, and gas and sewage facilities (Rock 1985:169). Buenos Aires had by then acquired the spatial demarcation of class that continues to inform symbolic geographies of the city today, with the wealthy concentrating in the *barrios* (neighborhoods) and suburbs of the north, middle-class neighborhoods in the center and west of the city, and working-class *barrios* in the manufacturing zones of the south (Rock 1985).³⁴

Electoral reform legislation (Ley Sáenz Peña) was passed in 1912, establishing universal compulsory male suffrage for natives over eighteen years of age. By the start of World War I, Argentina's per income capita rivaled that of Germany and was higher than that of Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland (Rock 1985)—an oft-repeated trope in conservative historiography. Buenos Aires was the largest city in Latin America (and had

³⁴ Colin M. Lewis (2008:107) claims that the “railways were among the earliest large employers of urban labour – with a disproportionately large component of skilled workers.”

the largest middle class), and was the second city of the Atlantic seaboard in importance, after New York (Rock 1985:172). Yet economic disparities between the capital and the rest of the country remained stark, with David Rock (1985: 182) quipping that, “[a]cross its regions extreme modernity and immutable backwardness coexisted.” The state railroads, which linked the provincial capitals to Buenos Aires, had failed to bring prosperity beyond their immediate radius. Wartime inflation and the deterioration of working conditions and wages triggered strikes among workers of British railroad companies in 1917 and 1918, prefiguring *La Semana Trágica* (“The Tragic Week”) of 1919, the widespread worker strikes that were violently quelled by the Army and by protofascist vigilante groups (Rock 1985).³⁵ Shortly after in 1922, the largest railroad union, the Unión Ferroviaria (UF), was created, grouping workshop workers and railroaders (those involved in the movement of trains, known as *tráfico*, traffic, in Spanish). The UF rapidly gained prominence, reaching labor agreements with the main railroad companies and playing a significant role in the consolidation of the national workers’ movement (Aldao 2015).³⁶

³⁵ The first railroad union to be formed was La Fraternidad (The Fraternity), which grouped train engineers or drivers (*maquinistas*). It was created in 1887 and continues to exist today. Train engineers were an aristocracy of sorts among railroad workers, given their level of education and their higher salary (Aldao 2015). They staged their first strike in 1888. In the ensuing years, railroad workshop workers gained prominence as a political force in their own right, organizing the first national railroad strike in 1896, which lasted for four months. Railroad workshops rapidly became a “symbol of worker struggle and solidarity” (Aldao 2015:25). While La Fraternidad was influenced by socialist ideology, railroad workshops were influenced first by anarchism and later by revolutionary syndicalism (Aldao 2015). For a history of railroad unions in Argentina and an account of their most significant strikes, see Aldao (2015).

³⁶ Joel Horowitz (1985) has argued that the railroad union was made strong by the strategic nature of the railroad industry (that is, the government could not afford to have their exports halted by unrest among the workers), and by the strong sense of community among workers. Horowitz finds that railroad workers constituted an “occupational community,” as their work relationships permeated even their non-work lives and their leisure time. Railroad workers had a strong identification with their job, and spent much of their off-duty hours in the company of other railroad employees. Social service institutions, including mutual aid societies, consumer cooperatives, and technical schools, played a key role in the consolidation of this occupational community, as did place of residence and kinship ties: shop workers tended to live close to

The Spider's Web

The 1929 financial crash left Argentina mired in an economic, political, and social crisis that was experienced as a “rough awakening from a dream of grandeur” (Terán 2008:228). A *coup d'état* by General Uriburu ushered in the so-called *década infame* (the “infamous decade”), during which electoral fraud was rampant. Public sentiment had by now largely turned against the British railroads, increasingly seen as instruments of British imperialism (Rock 1985, Wright 1974). As Britain established its policy of Imperial Preference, which favored trade relations with its empire (to the detriment of Argentina), Argentina rushed to sign a bilateral treaty to ensure a quota of beef exports. The resulting Roca-Runciman Pact of 1933 was seen as a “betrayal of national interests” (Rock 1985:227), insofar as the trade conditions it established were more favorable to Britain.³⁷ Hostile propaganda campaigns against the British became widespread, and economic nationalism an increasing trope and force.

It was in this context that poet and essayist Ezequiel Martínez Estrada (2011 [1933]) published his influential *Radiografía de la Pampa* (X-Ray of the Pampa), denouncing the phantasmagoria of modernity in Argentina, comprised, as he saw it, of false forms, pure simulacra: a nominal modernity (Terán 2008). Critiquing the domination of Buenos Aires (which he later likened to Goliath's head) over the interior (a rickety body), Martínez Estrada famously characterized the railway network as a

where they worked, and the children of railroad workers were often given preference for railroad jobs. Railroad workers in fact saw themselves as “the elite of the working class” (Horowitz 1985:55).

³⁷ David Rock (2008) finds that the Roca-Runciman treaty (1933) is probably the clearest example of British economic influence in Argentina; with this treaty, Britain restored the flow of remittances from British companies, lowered Argentine duties on goods imported from Britain, and allowed beef exports from Argentina (an exception to the Imperial Preference system).

spider's web: the railroad system had connected most provinces to Buenos Aires, but had severed connections between them. "The iron ways were a dream of the metropolis," he wrote, "and they stretched out their predatory tentacles across the pampa" (2002 [1933]:260). "We possess lines that are responses to panic, products of the eagerness for greatness and the fear of losing it," Martínez Estrada lamented (2002 [1933]:261), criticizing the "urgency to lay rails where there were no roads" and the terms of concession that condemned Argentina to perpetuating its colonial position. He dismissed, too, the purported benefits wrought by the railroad, and their limited reach: "What we call *progress* is what has been produced within a league on each side of the railroad lines," he quipped (2002 [1933]:261).

Yet the strongest case against the railroads as an instrument of British imperialism came from writer Raúl Scalabrini Ortíz, who fervently advocated for the nationalization of the network. In his writings, Scalabrini Ortíz emphasized the network's material decay: "Railroad material is old, undoubtedly the machines pant, powerless in their senescence, already incapable of complying with their schedules. Mold-ridden and twisted rails protest with their jolts as every train goes by. Rust drips in suburban stations that resemble the *taperas* (ruins of abandoned houses) that still remind us of ancient posts" (2009 [1946]: 80; my translation).

As Argentina's trade with continental Europe fell drastically during World War II on account of Britain's naval blockades, "an army of ingenious repair specialists quickly learned to improvise with existing materials" (Rock 1985:239); tinkering practices, as shall be shown in Chapters Three and Four, would continue to play a significant role in the railroad decades later. Given shortages of coal, the railroads turned to burning

quebracho wood and even corn. Wartime disruptions in foreign trade also prompted a contraction of agriculture in the pampas, severe rural unemployment, and a marked increase of internal migration from rural areas to Buenos Aires (Rock 1985)

Nationalization

It was Juan Domingo Perón, an Army general who had participated in a military coup in 1943 and had served as Minister of Labor and Vice President, who finally nationalized the railway network. Perón had campaigned for presidency promising a “New Argentina,” founded on “social justice, political sovereignty, and economic independence” (Rock 1985:262); his electoral victory was in no small measure due to his widespread support among workers, including rail workers. He first negotiated the nationalization of the modest network of French-owned railways in 1946. Yet it was the full-scale nationalization of the British-owned railways (via purchase in February 1947, rendered effective in March 1948) that appeared to materialize his promises of political sovereignty and economic independence. Railway nationalization had been a topic of public conversation for the last decade, and was finally triggered by political and economic pressures, as Britain sought to liquidate its wartime debt with Argentina via the sale of the railroads, and as Perón sought to strengthen his political position among nationalist groups and the railroad unions (Rock 1985). The purchase agreement was signed in February 1947, and formal takeover was rendered effective in March 1948. Nationalization of the entire network was completed in 1951, with the incorporation of other minor lines owned by private Argentine companies.

While the state now controlled a vast network, it was a haphazard one, comprised as it was of five different gauges, and facing severe competition from automotive transport, as elsewhere in the world (Waddell 2007). Lack of investment on account of depression and war had resulted in widespread disrepair, and half of the rolling stock predated 1914 (Rock 1985). The new railroad state company (*Empresa de Ferrocarriles del Estado Argentino*, Company of Railroads of the Argentine State, known as *Ferrocarriles Argentinos*, Argentine Railroads), was created by decree in January 1949. Despite the need for a major reorganization of the network (with its redundant branches, lopsided focus on Buenos Aires, and insufficient connections between branches), existing railway lines were merely regrouped under new names, honoring prominent statesmen. The FCO, the first railway line, for instance, was renamed Ferrocarril Nacional Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (“el Sarmiento” from the *Tragedia de Once*). Stations and trains were also renamed, as Retiro station became “President Perón.” Jorge Waddell (2007) has argued that, if anything, the regrouping of lines exacerbated existing defects, weakening the ports of Rosario and Bahía Blanca and further concentrating maritime traffic in the port of Buenos Aires.

Despite the acclaim with which nationalization was met, the quality of passenger and freight services decreased over the next few years (Waddell 2007). Buenos Aires had grown exponentially over the last decade due to the rural-to-urban migration prompted by industrialization, and passenger railroad traffic continued to grow relative to freight traffic. Yet passenger traffic requires more personnel than freight traffic, and is less profitable; as tariffs were maintained artificially low, the railroad sector began operating at a deficit (Waddell 2007). In order to meet the demand of increased passenger traffic,

railway workshops resorted to the refurbishment of obsolete rail cars and wagons and engaged in practices of deferred maintenance. While some new locomotives were imported, purchases were inconsistent (as both steam and diesel locomotives were incorporated). Meanwhile, promising attempts to develop locally-designed locomotives (at the hands of the engineers Pedro Saccaggio and Dante Livio Porta) were short-lived (Waddell 2007). As industry stagnated and unemployment rose during a postwar economic crisis, the railroad industry was used to absorb workers: in the decade following the war the railroad force increased by 60%, while traffic volumes remained roughly the same (Rock 1985). The railroads thus contributed significantly to growing deficits in the public sector (Rock 1985; Waddell 2007).

Perón succumbed to a new military coup in 1955, that of the self-proclaimed *Revolución Libertadora* (“the liberating revolution”). Chronic inflation and periodic cycles of recession and recovery halted industrialization and manifested in institutional decay, unemployment, and the erosion of standards of living (Rock 1985). During this period, there were attempts to standardize railroad operations: new criteria for numbering and identifying rolling stock across lines were implemented, and a new railroad code (the *Reglamento Interno Técnico Operativo*, known as RITO, still in use today) was published (Waddell 2007). Yet the lack of standardization of rolling stock (as insufficiencies in the rail fleet were resolved through the hasty purchase of rolling stock that varied greatly in type, brand, and technology) would greatly affect the cost of maintenance (Waddell 2007:178-179).

Reorganization

Arturo Frondizi, who assumed the presidency in 1958, launched an industrial development program (*desarrollismo*) and a stabilization plan to combat recession. His promotion of the automotive and oil industries and his attempts at modernizing the railroad network were dubbed “the Battle of Transport.” During this period, new rolling stock was imported (including Toshiba electric trains for the Sarmiento line, still in use when I began my doctoral fieldwork) and two railroad manufacture plants, product of agreements with FIAT, were opened in Córdoba. As the national economy continued to deteriorate (increased manufacture had triggered an increase in imports, while exports continued to fall), in 1961 Frondizi’s administration attempted to reduce the labor force and close “unproductive” railroad branches. Railroad workers went on a six-week strike, known as *la gran huelga de 1961* (“the great strike of 1961”) and remembered as the gravest union conflict in railroad history. This strike contributed to the fall of Frondizi’s government a mere few months later (Rock 1985; Waddell 2007). Yet the strike had unforeseen effects: during the 40-day cease in railroad services, an informal system of alternative automotive transportation sprung up (Waddell 2007). This system would compete greatly with the railroad, and passenger and freight rail traffic decreased significantly after the strike.

Government propaganda, in turn, helped install the trope of railroad obsolescence in public opinion, one that was strengthened by the infamous “Larkin Plan.” This report, the result of a diagnostic study of the network commissioned by the Minister of Economy via the World Bank and conducted by NATO colonel Thomas

Larkin, highlighted the railroad's obsolescence. It issued a series of polemic recommendations for its restructuring, including the closure of one-third of its branches, the reduction of the workforce, the acquisition and reconversion of rolling stock, the reorganization of traffic, and the closure of several repair workshops. While railroad workers and activists often cite the Larkin Plan as a major factor in subsequent railroad decline, scholars have argued that the plan was never implemented – Frondizi himself was ousted shortly after (Waddell 2007, Aldao 2015). They have argued that branch closures responded to conflicts with the unions, and that railway reorganization was widespread elsewhere in the world, given the growing importance of automotive traffic (Waddell 2007).

During the subsequent government of Illia, electric Toshiba trains were purchased for the Mitre line and a few branches were reopened. Major restructuring would commence with the new military coup, which proclaimed a *Revolución Argentina*, an Argentine Revolution, based on a program of “national regeneration” (Rock 1985:349), banned political parties and political activities, and decreed interventions in the national universities and in several industries. As the Army took greater control of Ferrocarriles Argentinos (FA), increasingly centralizing the state railroad company, railway services were reduced in branches facing low demand and increased in the main rail arteries. An increase in tariffs, however, greatly reduced both passenger and freight demand. A Midrange Plan (*Plan de Mediano Plazo*) of railroad modernization was halted by Perón's return to power in 1973, after the dictatorship was unsettled by widespread strikes and increasingly violent confrontations between leftist guerrillas and paramilitary groups. Infrastructural works, such as the unification of Retiro's three railway terminals, were

abandoned, and railway unions gained a greater role in the administration of FA, as the workforce increased further (Waddell 2007). As maintenance dwindled, the poor state of tracks and trains resulted in lower circulation speeds and increased time of travel (Waddell 2007).

Traumatic Reforms

After the death of Perón while in office and the brief, ineffectual presidency of his wife and successor, Isabel Martínez de Perón, a new military coup (1976-1983) began a “Process of National Reorganization” that, through systematic forced “disappearances,” would leave profound scars in the national psyche. According to Jorge Waddell (2007:197), the fate of the country was entwined with that of the railways: “The crisis of the State accelerated the railroad crisis and the railroad crisis generated problems that contributed to the aggravation of the State’s general crisis” (my translation). He argues that the state railway company never attained real autonomy, nor a stable technical bureaucracy, and lacked sufficient funds (Waddell 2007:197-198).

At the time of nationalization, the railroad network had comprised 42.578kms of tracks; by 1977, it had dwindled to 36.930km (Waddell 2007). The decrease in quality was even more drastic: while some mainlines (*ramales troncales*) had been modernized in the 1960s (as some suburban lines, for instance, were electrified), light rails and inadequate trackbeds throughout the interior required the use of old, light rolling stock and limited freight and passenger traffic (Waddell 2007). Freight traffic, increasingly unpunctual and slow, had decreased by half and was focused on primary products (cereals, cement,

stone) with low tariffs, rather than higher-paying goods. As quality of service decreased, long-distance passenger services faced dwindling demands. Suburban passenger traffic, in turn, remained high (peaking in the 1950s), with low passenger fares indirectly subsidizing the growth of Greater Buenos Aires (Waddell 2007). The country's "structural lopsidedness" (Rock 1985:330) thus continued unabated: by 1970, 79% of the population lived in urban areas, and by 1980 one-third of the total population lived in or close to the capital.

It was during the last dictatorship's National Reorganization Process that the railroad system suffered its "traumatic reforms," according to Juan Pablo Martínez (2007), former Planning Manager at FA. During this time, 560 stations were closed and passenger trains were reduced by 30%, with the brunt of reductions suffered by interurban passenger services and local services in the interior. These reductions, Martínez claims, were often merely formal, insofar as some of these services had already stopped operating due to lack of demand, but had continued to figure on service schedules. Railroad branches that were deemed anti-economic (*ramales antieconómicos*) were closed down (and in some cases even physically removed), as were several emblematic steam locomotive workshops and depots. Between 1976 and 1980, railway personnel were drastically reduced, from 155,000 employees to 97,000, which greatly weakened the railroad unions (Martínez 2007, Aldao 2015). These changes responded to the *sprit du temps* that claimed the railroads were not profitable and that they would always operate at an economic loss.

The transition to democracy in 1983, with the election of President Raúl Alfonsín (from the Unión Cívica Radical party), did not signify major changes in railroad

policy – at least not at first. The top managers of Ferrocarriles Argentinos, most of them with close ties to the military government, were replaced, and new management evinced a greater willingness to negotiate with the railway unions, whose political power increased. Stretches of railroad land (*terrenos ferroviarios*), whether vacant or alongside operating tracks, became populated by *villas de emergencia* (informal settlements or slums), with the acquiescence, if not complicity, of the political establishment. During this time, the rehabilitation and remodeling of railway cars that had been cannibalized for spare parts (a practice that became known as *mantenimiento diferido*, deferred maintenance) was outsourced to private workshops (Martínez 2007).

“The Cancer of Argentina”

In 1989, President Raúl Alfonsín, facing hyperinflation and political weakness, was forced to transfer power to president-elect Carlos Menem, from the rival Peronist party, six months ahead of time. Through a state reform law (Ley 23.696), Menem’s government swiftly proceeded to privatize state-owned companies and public services, in an effort to curtail the public-sector deficit and stabilize the economy, and in accordance with recommendations issued by the Washington Consensus (Martínez 2007, Pérez 2012, Shever 2012). These policies resulted in the creation of a new business ecology in which transnational banks and companies, local economic groups, and foreign conglomerates coalesced in consortia powerful enough to shape local politics and the economy (Pérez 2012).

While most public companies were to be sold to private capital (that is, fully privatized), the railway system, hitherto owned and managed by Ferrocarriles Argentinos (the state company that resulted from the nationalization of the railway system by President Perón in 1948), would instead be concessioned, as established by Decree 666/89 (Martínez 2007, Pérez 2012).³⁸ While all railway rolling stock, infrastructure, and real estate would continue being owned by the state, concession companies would oversee commercial exploitation, operations, stations, and maintenance of rolling stock, infrastructure, and equipment.³⁹ The transfer of railway management to private hands was justified at the time by the claim that this transportation system was highly inefficient and cost the state a million dollars a day (Pérez 2012). Daniel, a commuter and member of the *Partido Obrero* (Worker's Party), remembers then-Minister of Economy Domingo Cavallo describing trains as “the cancer of Argentina.”⁴⁰

The surface railroad network (distinct from the subway system running underground) was comprised by three different kinds of services: freight, metropolitan passenger services connecting the city of Buenos Aires to the surrounding *partidos* (districts) of Greater Buenos Aires, and interurban passenger services connecting cities throughout the province of Buenos Aires. Freight lines were the first to be concessioned, in 1991. A widespread strike by railway workers, led by dissident union leaders who

³⁸ Juan Pablo Martínez (2007) surmises that this decision might have had to do with the scale of Ferrocarriles Argentinos, in terms of real estate, infrastructure, rolling stock, etc., and with the political outcry that a sale of this emblematic company would have generated. Pérez (2012) points out that the concession of the railway system followed a memorandum signed with the World Bank (the latter would finance the compensations for personnel laid off).

³⁹ Here I offer a succinct and schematic history of the concession of the railway network. For more detailed, albeit sometimes competing, analyses, refer to Martínez (2007) and Pérez (2012).

⁴⁰ In an article from 1996, the popular newspaper *Clarín* quotes Cavallo as having described the old railroad system as “a real cancer for the country” (*Clarín* 3/19/1996, my translation) because of its poor services and because of the deficit it generated.

opposed their unions' complicity with Menem's privatization policies, quickly ensued, paralyzing train services nationwide. Yet rather than deterring the privatization process, the strike appeared to accelerate it. Infamously proclaiming "*Ramal que para, ramal que cierra*" ("[Railway] branch that strikes, branch that closes down"), Menem issued a decree to separate the suburban passenger railway system in Buenos Aires from the purview of Ferrocarriles Argentinos (FA), and created a new state company, Ferrocarriles Metropolitanos S.A. (FE.ME.SA) to oversee these commuter lines (Martínez 2007). In 1994, the seven suburban passenger lines, together with the city's subway system, were finally granted in concession to four companies (Metrovías, Ferrovías, Metropolitano, and Trenes de Buenos Aires, known as TBA), each responsible for overseeing daily operations in their respective networks.⁴¹ These newly formed companies were comprised by a handful of local companies linked to the motor transport sector (mainly to commuter and long-distance buses, and to highway toll systems) and to construction (such as Benito Roggio e Hijos, S.A.), often with no experience with railroads.⁴² Several of these companies had shares in more than one railroad concession company. The long-reaching effects of the concessioning of the metropolitan surface railroad network are explored in Chapters Three and Four.

⁴¹ Interurban passenger train services, in turn, were canceled by Ferrocarriles Argentinos in March 1993, yet after widespread protests, these were handed over to the provincial governments for management via concession. For those provinces that were interested in continuing the operation of their interurban rail network, FA would provide them with locomotives and passenger cars. Provincial governments would be in charge of paying the toll fees established by the railway freight companies in order to run the trains on their tracks, in addition to paying toll fees in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires. Only a handful of provinces, including the province of Buenos Aires, continued operating their interurban passenger services (Martínez 2007).

⁴² See Pérez (2012) for a more detailed description of the concession companies and their composition.

History, Refried

The history of railroads in Argentina, told in broad strokes in the preceding sections, underscores how one came to be seen as metonymic of the other, how their fates were often seen as entwined. As a symbol of modernity, the railroad was met with ambivalence, raising specters over decay and over Argentina's role in the world.

Recent scholarship has examined, in particular, Argentina's relationship with Britain, central to the characterization of the railroad as an instrument of empire. Alan Knight (2008:35) portrays Argentina around 1890 as an example of indirect rule and de facto authority, "If India was the jewel in Britain's imperial crown, Argentina was the prize possession within her informal empire." He claims that mutual self-interest, rather than coercion, sustained Britain's informal empire in Argentina—one predicated on economic, rather than geopolitical, interest (with the exception of the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, invaded in 1833). David Rock (2008) appears to be more ambivalent about the usefulness of the rubric of "informal empire" to describe the relationship between Argentina and Britain. He argues that while in Argentina "[l]iberalism became the chief funnel for external influence as it promoted selective cultural borrowings throughout Western Europe and the USA," Anglophile attitudes always remained secondary to Francophile ones (2008:60). British cultural imperialism, he sustains, only "affected some segments of the elite and the upper middle class far more deeply than others" and "hardly touched the population at large" (2008:77). Fernanda Peñaloza (2008), in turn,

argues that British influence in Argentina was fostered by members of both the British and Argentine elites in a relationship of mutual benefit.⁴³

Colin M. Lewis (2008:99), finally, disputes the centrality of the railroad in British-Argentine relations, as put forth for example by Ezequiel Martínez Estrada and Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz. He asserts that “the hegemonic status of railways in the British-Argentinian equation is misplaced,” heavily influenced by the revisionist school of thought of the 1930s, which projected its attitudes back in time. Lewis cites the volatility and structural changes in the international economy circa 1930 as highlighting the flaws of the liberal, export-led growth model and sees them as coinciding with rail technology reaching the end of its “natural shelf-life” (99). Around that time, the image of the English octopus (*el pulpo inglés*) was popularized in cartoons, depicting “a greedy consortium of British railways, centered on Buenos Aires with tentacles spreading across the country, in control of natural resources and national assets, tenaciously constricting and suffocating Argentinian development” (Lewis 2008:105). Lewis argues that these critiques (which he dubs “imperialism of the free trade” literature) ignore the power and agency of the Argentine state, which sought and benefitted from British investment in the railways.⁴⁴ Given that railways are “natural” monopolies and a general-purpose technology, the Argentine state was heavily involved in their development. Railways were

⁴³ As Peñaloza (2008) notes, the Argentine state, for instance, relied on British (mainly Welsh) settlement to “colonize” Patagonia against Chilean interests. Peñaloza focuses specifically on British travel writing in Patagonia as “a significant part of the intricate layering of textuality, temporality, displacement, exclusion, inclusion and the interweaving of identities that characterizes the informal empire encounter” (2008:158). She thus traces how British travel and travel texts influenced naming practices (as Welsh names replaced indigenous ones, erasing them from the landscape), and how readings of Patagonian landscape as sublime, that is, at the limits of representation (most famously by Charles Darwin) worked to discursively erase indigenous people.

⁴⁴ These critiques, Lewis explains, emerged in the interwar period and have more to do with shifting Argentinian politics than with the position of Britain companies.

franchised and regulated by the state, which “determined the routes, chose the location of stations, set operating schedules and tariffs, and often policed construction costs” (2008:107), in addition to establishing profit guarantees. Lewis thus argues that early railway enterprises are best described as “Anglo-Criollo,” rather than just British or simply national.

Lewis revises pioneering literature and concludes that “early network configuration was largely shaped by late-eighteenth-century patterns of economic activity, rather than by an imperial design emanating from London (...) Railways were a substitute for pre-modern forms of communication, rather than a mechanism promoting new activities” (2008:119). While revisionist literature of the 1930s highlights the export bias and structural ‘deformities’ of network configuration, Lewis follows Argentine geographer Juan Roccatagliata in claiming that the network configuration did not simply favor Buenos Aires and the export economy, as several lines were constructed to “meet regional needs in the interior” (2008:119). Lewis thus asserts that railways helped “integrate the national market and provide essential transport facilities for sectors and social actors beyond the agro-export oligarchy” (2008:120).

Sergio García, editor of the rail fan magazine *Todo Trenes* (“Everything Trains”), similarly pushed against the “refried history” of railroads in Argentina when I interviewed him in December 2014. He portrayed this “stereotyped history” as follows:

There is an *official*, refried history, that is not duly documented nor revised. It is based on stereotypes. If I generalize it for you... Well, I do not know, the English were bad, they came to take away our riches, then Perón was good and put [the railroads] to the service of the people (*el pueblo*). I am not denying [this]. I am saying...you cannot be so drastic (*tajante*). Until Frondizi sold [the railroad] due to the interests of North American automotive and oil industries. And then, Menem completed the destruction (*terminó de liquidarlos*) and... Well, you see, it is those *judgments* (sentencias). Or for instance you will hear that the English got rid of the railroads (*se sacaron de encima los ferrocarriles*) because

their authority (*potestad*) over the railroad was about to expire, that is, they had to freely reintegrate them to the Argentine state. That is a lie! They were private property. It was a public service good, but it was *a property*. They were not obliged to do anything. Eh, but well... There are those who nurse (*enfervorizan*) the topic of nationalization as a patriotic act, and there are those who decry it (*lo denostan*)...with this excuse that one way or the other the railroads would be ours, that is, what Perón did was negotiate. No, it was not one thing nor the other, generally the truth sometimes lies somewhere between the extremes. Sometimes.

Sergio also unsettled another taken-for-granted “truth” about the railroad: that towns in the interior of the country had “died” because the train stopped running through or to them: "Let me tell you, there must practically be *three* towns that died because of the railroad." “It is true that there was a rural exodus,” he explained, “but it started in the 1940s, and because of other factors. I think it was the inverse: the railroad stopped reaching places because there no longer was a population there. And besides, the railroad *stopped* doing the meticulous job of reaching every town (*el trabajo minucioso de meterse por todos los pueblos*), because the automotive transport arrived.” According to him, “the railroad had to redefine its function, it is not the same one from the 19th century.”

Railroad history, both in its academic and popular veins, is highly contested in Argentina, with different versions reflecting different *visions* of what railroads, and the country more generally, might become. Some of the railroad workers and most of the train activists I encountered portrayed recent railroad history, particularly the period spanning from the concessioning of the railroads in the 1990s to the *Tragedia de Once* in 2012, in terms of *desguace* (gutting out, stripping bare) and *desidia* (neglect), a refrain on precarity and abandonment by the state. Some went as far as to describe recent railroad history in terms of *ferrocidio* (sometimes called *ferricidio*), ferrocide, the killing of the national railroad system (e.g. Cena 2003).

If the railroad is intrinsic to discussions of Argentina as a particular project, this lies not only in its capacity, like other infrastructures, as material substrate for the nation-state, but rather, perhaps, in the affects it elicits. Jorge Tartarini, an architect who specializes in station architecture and railroad heritage and who at the time of my research served as director of the *Museo del Agua* (Museum of Water), housed in the *Palacio de Aguas Corrientes* (the Palace of Running Water, itself an architectural and infrastructural gem in the city of Buenos Aires), described this affective resonance thus: “The topic of the railroad cuts across society transversally...It not only cuts across the society linked to the rail—obviously comprised by railroad workers (*los ferroviarios*), their descendants, railroad enthusiasts (*los ferroaficionados*)—but rather it also connects with (*se entronca en*), in my way of seeing it, this kind of nostalgia for better times that our society has.” One of the expressions of this nostalgia, Tartarini posited, was the “myth of the cornucopia,” which describes “a glorious past, a past of abundance, a happy world, more like Huxley than what happened in reality.” David Parsons, an Anglo-Argentine who presides the *Junta de Estudios Históricos Argentinos-Británicos* (the Council for Argentine-British Historical Studies), evinced a similar sentiment, musing, “We are like a family that was once rich, we live thinking about the good old days.” Nostalgia and melancholia were widespread sentiments: “You chose a topic fit for a tango,” a railroad workshop manager told me.

This affective “sensibilization,” Tartarini argued, has some positive facets, insofar as it mobilizes people to preserve railroad heritage and to make a number of demands based on their rights as citizens. Yet the “rescue of the train” (*el rescate del tren*), he continued, also has a political, nearly “Machiavellic” facet, insofar as it is utilized by

those in power (*los poderes políticos de turno*) for their political purposes and as political propaganda. “The banner (*estandarte*) of the rescue of the train is carried forth, but with proposals that are neither technically feasible nor economically practicable,” he quipped. The decline (*decadencia*) of the railroad system, according to Tartarini, began before railroad nationalization, and corresponded to a worldwide phenomenon by which the automotive industry replaced rail transport.⁴⁵

Different (and sometimes competing) railroad recuperation and revival projects, some spearheaded by the state and others by civil society, were underway at the time of my doctoral fieldwork, as I outline in Chapters Five and Six. Yet nostalgia, I found, was a fraught topic. Sergio García warned that “the railroad nostalgics (*los nostálgicos del ferrocarril*) want the nineteenth-century railroad to return—that is, they want to kill it off.” Jorge Waddell, who, like Sergio, is coeditor of *Todo Trenes* and who oversees the *Fundación Museo Ferroviario* (Railroad Museum Foundation), went as far as to claim that “the central problem of the railroad in Argentina is nostalgia,” as proposals for rail revival always look to the past, rather than imagining how the network might be repurposed differently.⁴⁶

Regardless of their views on history, and of their visions for the future, at the start of fieldwork all my interlocutors diagnosed railroads as being in a state of crisis and

⁴⁵ Tartarini believes that other countries responded to this phenomenon more successfully than Argentina: “It so happens that this battle between highways and the railroad was assumed in diverse manner by different countries, and in some countries [it was done] smartly... Countries that deactivated 700, 800, 900 railroad stations, and in which the railroad today is a reality, a reality of use (*realidad de uso*). Like for instance England, France, the United States... I think they managed to have transport policies that did not phagocytize each other (*no se fagocitaron entre sí*).”

⁴⁶ None of my interlocutors, however, admitted to *being* nostalgic. *Ferroaficionados* (railroad enthusiasts) who work towards preserving rolling stock, infrastructure, and modes of labor and comportment recognized the futility of yearning for the restoration of most railroad branches, as regional demographics and economies no longer justify their existence.

material ruin. This material ruin, I show in the following chapters, restructured the everyday lives of railroad workers and commuters. It is to these everyday experiences of temporal dislocation and risk that I turn to in Chapters Three and Four.

Chapter Three: Clocks

In the early 1990s, Carlos was sent by his supervisors to travel by train to different railroad stations throughout the province of Buenos Aires. His mission: to retrieve station clocks, and bring them to the city to safety. The first railroad freight line was about to be concessioned, in these early days of privatization, and rumor had it that station clocks would be pillaged.

Carlos had grown up among clocks. A son and grandson of railroad clocksmiths, Carlos defines himself as belonging to “the railroad race” (“*Soy de raza ferroviaria*”). As a child, when his father left for work at *Ferrocarriles Argentinos* (Argentine Railways), the state railroad company, he used to leave Carlos a couple of alarm clocks for him to disassemble and reassemble. The hands of the clocksmith are not unlike those of the surgeon, Carlos told me, and must be refined with practice. At the age of 17, he began working at the clock repair workshop (*taller de relojería*) in Constitución station, the terminal station of the Roca line, where his father was employed. The workshop was the last of its kind in Argentina, and it looked “just like the English had left it,” according to Carlos. Time appeared to have stood still. Carlos’ first tasks included cleaning clock pieces. On Fridays, he accompanied a supervisor on his rounds to wind up all the terminal station’s clocks, holding the ladder for him. There were clocks in each of the administrative offices that spread out over several floors, as well as in the guards’ room, the telegraph room, and in the bell tower overlooking the street. Winding up these clocks would take Carlos and his supervisor six hours. A large French clock in the telegraph office kept the official time, transmitting it to the entire Roca railway network,

all the way to Patagonia (station masters would receive the official time by telegraph and would wind their station clocks accordingly).

At 17, Carlos was by far the youngest employee in the workshop; his eight or nine colleagues were, on average, in their late fifties. He remembers his boss telling him at that time, “Kid, learn, because you will be the one who will remain.” He describes his career in the railroad as a pilgrimage, one that took him to clock workshops along different railroad lines, allowing him to observe their idiosyncrasies. In 1991, voluntary retirements, harbingers of the widespread layoffs to come, began to be offered. Carlos believes that railroad superiors, and the media, were preparing the ground for privatization: “They sweetened us up.” Work schedules became more flexible, and lack of control more evident.

When Carlos was sent to retrieve station clocks throughout the Roca line, it was rumored that the new freight concession company, Ferroexpreso Pampeano, would oversee track infrastructure, but not stations. In La Larga, Carlos met three railroad workers, brothers, who kept the station immaculately clean. He watched them weep. “Even the clocks they take away,” they cried. “Many things disappeared,” Carlos says of that period, “There was total *desidia* (neglect). There was pillaging.”

Clocks have long been integral to the railroad system. The expansion of the railroad, which for some scholars signaled the advent of modernity (Aguiar 2011), if not the Anthropocene (Swanson 2015), produced a radical shift in conceptions and conventions of time.⁴⁷ Regions had long had their own individual times. As Wolfgang

⁴⁷ Beyond simply “symbolizing” modernity, in some colonial contexts railroads were seen by the state as a technology that could “literally transport temporally backward societies into a normative historical

Schivelbusch (1986:43) has observed, in England “London time ran four minutes ahead of time in Reading, seven minutes and thirty seconds ahead of Cirencester time,” resulting in a “patchwork of varying local times.” These temporal discrepancies were manageable while railroad traffic was low; with increased traffic, however, came the need to standardize time in order to coordinate departure and arrival times in a “supra-regional schedule” (Schivelbusch 1986:43; see also Prasad 2013) and thus facilitate the circulation of goods, people, and information in a predictable and concatenated rhythm (Rieznik 2012).

Time standardization —the erasure of local times and thus local “temporal identity”— was first instituted in England by individual railroad companies in the 1840s, when each established its own time (Schivelbusch 1986: 42-43). It was only with the creation of a national railroad network that Greenwich Time was established as standard railroad time for all rail lines. Railroad time was finally recognized as national standard time in 1880, thus securing national temporal unity (Schivelbusch 1986).⁴⁸ Four years later, at an international conference in Washington D.C., the world was divided into time zones (Schivelbusch 1986). Coordinated time, or synchrony, as Peter Galison (2003:40-41) shows, entailed “coordinating not just procedures but also the languages of science and technology.” The history of time coordination is thus “not one of a forward march

modern” (Prasad 2013:1254). In this regard, railroads, as a technology of empire, were seen as precipitating modernity, as bringing it into being.

⁴⁸ Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1986:44) asserts that the process of standardizing time was more complex in the United States, where railroad companies were reluctant to cooperate: stations serving multiple railroad lines held several clocks displaying the time observed by each railroad company (often the local time of the company’s headquarters).

of ever more precise clocks; it is a story in which physics, engineering, philosophy, colonialism, and commerce collided” (Galison 2003:41).⁴⁹

In colonial contexts, the standardization of time was merely one of the modernizing corollaries of the railroad as a technology of empire. Prasad (2013) explores how passengers in colonial India grappled with the temporal restructurings wrought by railroads, both in terms of speedy transport and of standardized time. Prasad (2013:1275-1276) shows how station clocks and timetables were “artefacts that marked the establishment of a new temporal order,” and how train timings shaped “emerging time-structures of work and leisure.”⁵⁰ Train schedules were often contested, so that “among the demands of passengers for the alteration of train timings, one sees not only the spread of bureaucratic-capitalist structures, but equally a *tempering* of the theoretical abstractness of these with individual and local concerns—inserting the minutiae of daily life back into the theoretical empty homogeneity of standardized time” (Prasad 2013:1276-1277).⁵¹

In Argentina, before 1894 Buenos Aires time competed with time as established by the National Observatory in the province of Córdoba. Marina Rieznik (2012:9) describes the challenges of simultaneity and coordination: clocks carrying city time were

⁴⁹ Galison (2003) reflects on the centrality of clock synchronization to modern scientific and philosophical thought: at the turn of the twentieth century, synchronized clock simultaneity was upheld as “a beacon of modern thought” (24) and as the “paradigm of a proper, verifiable scientific concept” (25). In particular, Galison describes how the phenomenon of train coordination was integral to Einstein’s grappling with the problem of relativity: it was in observing the arrival and departure of trains that Einstein pondered the problem of the simultaneity of events separated in space.

⁵⁰ Anthony Giddens (1991:20) writes of the train timetable a “time-space ordering device,” anchoring a train’s arrival in a particular “when” and “where.”

⁵¹ The heterogeneity of reactions towards this new temporal order, Prasad argues, challenged imperial policies predicated on reified notions of colonial difference (which portrayed the colonized as possessing a distinct “time-sense” and existing in a time-lag).

transported by train to different locales, where they joined the cacophony of local time marked by church bells.⁵² Train tickets, in fact, had to specify whether departure time was in accordance with Buenos Aires time or with Córdoba time. As Rieznik (2012) shows, the imbrication of technologies and communication systems (railroads, telegraphs, postal service, horses) resulted in temporal overlays. Smooth and timely telegraphic communications in Argentina, furthermore, were hard won, undermined and upended as they were by a number of factors that at the time were seen as eminently “local” in nature. Trade magazines of the time reveal that “faults,” “interferences,” and short circuits were attributed to the bands of parrots that perched on wires, the ovenbird (*bornero*) that built its nest on telegraph poles, the dense spider webs known as *baba del diablo* (devil’s slime) that wrapped wires and poles, and the atmospheric dust and fog that altered insulators (Rieznik 2012: 14-15). The difficulties posed to modernity by an unruly environment underscore the multispecies nature of infrastructures, as further examined in Chapter Five.

In 1894, a decree established the time set by the National Observatory in Córdoba as official time for all national railroad lines, and later also for all public offices (Rieznik 2012). This enabled the “creation of a national space unified temporally and calibrated in such a way that communications between La Quiaca and Buenos Aires could take place in a hypothetical ‘common time’” (Rieznik 2012:13).⁵³ Argentina adhered to the international system of time zones in 1920, adopting GMT-4 as its official time. In 1923 the Navy was put in charge of maintaining correct time on the clock tower

⁵² I am indebted to Dhan Zunino Singh for bringing Marina Rieznik’s work to my attention.

⁵³ La Quiaca is the northernmost point in Argentina.

popularly known as *la torre de los ingleses* (“the Tower of the English”) in Plaza Británica (renamed Plaza Fuerza Aérea Argentina, or Argentine Air Force Plaza, after the Malvinas/Falklands War). Buenos Aires time, determined by the Naval Observatory, became the official time nationwide (Servicio de Hidrografía Naval, accessed 12/2/2016).

Curiously, today Argentina is in the “wrong” time zone by international standards: while its territory falls within the UTC-4 time zone (except for its westernmost region, which technically falls into the UTC-5 zone), as reflected in the 1920 decision to adhere to said time zone, a decree by de facto President Onganía in 1969 instituted Daylight Savings Time as official time year-round, leaving the country in the UTC-3 time zone permanently.⁵⁴ An attempt by the Executive Power in 2008 to implement daylight savings (to reduce power usage and curtail the blackouts that affect the country seasonally) backfired, with several provinces rebelling against the measure (Bullentini 2008; Ruchansky 2008).

Beyond their role in the standardization of time, railroads also reshaped the temporal *experience* of travel, decreasing the time it took to traverse space. Increased speed changed the texture of travel: travelers experienced landscape at a remove, from within the train compartment, and at a speed that defied a close observation of places. Mechanized transportation thus mechanized perception, and travel became “panoramic” (Schivelbusch 1986:52). In the 19th century, the railroad was seen as *annihilating* time and space. As trains “shot” through the landscape like projectiles (Schivelbusch 1986), travel

⁵⁴ See Bilinkis 2015, Videla 2008, and, for a discussion of chronobiology (i.e. bodily rhythms and time), Ruchansky 2008.

space (the in-between space connecting points of departure, way-stations, and terminals) seemed to disappear and localities grew closer together.⁵⁵ The temporal and spatial effects of accelerated travel, which David Harvey (1990) has theorized as “time-space compression,” have been deemed characteristic of life under capitalism.⁵⁶

Drawing inspiration from the “temporal turn” in anthropology (Bear 2016, Dawdy 2010), particularly scholarship on inequality and temporal insecurity (Auyero 2012) and the embodied experience of time in specific political contexts (Verdery 1996), in what follows I focus on temporalizing devices such as station clocks and train timetables as lenses through which to examine the effects of the concessioning of railroad lines in Buenos Aires.⁵⁷ If station clocks have epitomized the struggles over territorial expansion, synchrony, and coordination precipitated by the railroad, then the disappearance of railroad clocks from station landscapes in early 1990s Argentina can be seen as pointing to an unraveling of the dream-world of modernity and its hope in progress and technology. The lack of coordination signaled by absent or frozen clocks

⁵⁵ The 19th century poet Heinrich Heine described this collapsing of distance wrought by railways as follows: “Space is killed by the railways, and we are left with time alone (...) I feel as if the mountains and forests of all countries were advancing on Paris. Even now, I can smell the German linden trees; the North Sea’s breakers are rolling against my door” (cited in Schivelbusch 1986:37). Doreen Massey (2005) has critiqued the separation of time and space implicit in such conceptualizations. Nancy Munn (1992:94) has argued that “in a lived world, spatial and temporal dimensions cannot be disentangled.”

⁵⁶ For a discussion of how space-time compression has been understood by different theorists, see Dodgson (1998).

⁵⁷ Laura Bear (2016: 29.3) has underscored the heterogeneity of the times of capitalist modernity, and suggests ethnographic focus on “timescapes” to foreground how “human practices of time intersect and affect social and nonhuman rhythms.” Human practices of time, she argues, are forms of skillful making that “bring social worlds into being and link them to nonhuman processes” (29.4). Shannon Dawdy (2010) has provocatively reflected on anthropology’s own temporal practices (as evinced, in particular, in the “turn to ruins” in the discipline). Defining modernity not as an epoch or a set of practices and ideas, but rather as “a form of temporal ideology that valorizes newness, rupture, and linear plot lines” (2010:762), she calls for attention to alternative temporalities to release anthropology from the mirage of progressive time.

(for even where clocks survived, these were often at a standstill) seeped into the everyday in the form of delays, service interruptions, and cancellations. The concessioning of the metropolitan railroad system in urban and suburban Buenos Aires, I propose, exacerbated, if not produced, *temporal dislocations*. These were still prevalent when I began fieldwork in late 2013, in the midst of what was often portrayed as a “railroad crisis,” on account of the ubiquitous delays and frequent derailments and crashes (including the Flores, Once, and Castelar tragedies mentioned in Chapter One). While railroads have often been theorized as having produced time-space compression (Schivelbusch 1986; cf. Harvey 1990), in Argentina, I argue, unreliable trains and their obsolete infrastructure brought about time-space *dilation*, as locales were rendered further apart by infrequent trains and as train travel became increasingly marked by prolonged waiting and pervasive uncertainty.

In the next section, I offer an overview of the political and economic context in which the concessioning of the railroad system unfolded. Then, I show how in the aftermath of Argentina’s 2001 financial crash, exceptional measures taken to weather a perceived railway emergency became solidified into a context of “permanent exceptionality.” Drawing from interviews with a train ticket vendor, a train conductor, and a commuter in the rural hinterlands of Buenos Aires, I examine how shifting business models and maintenance practices produced temporal dislocations and a context of permanent risk.



Figure 5: *Twilight in Retiro, terminal station of the Mitre line. July 2014. Photo by author.*

Disappearance

Verónica Pérez (2012) has proposed that the state's handling of the railway concession process created a privileged environment of accumulation (*ámbito privilegiado de acumulación*) in the transportation sector. Arguing against portrayals of the privatization process as one marked by the withdrawal of the state, she traces the ways in which the Argentine state helped sustain spaces of little to no business risk, thus guaranteeing generous profits for the concession companies. Thus, for instance, the concession agreements acknowledged that the price of train tickets was too low to sustain the investments needed to run and maintain passenger services adequately, and established

the need for state subsidies (Pérez 2012).⁵⁸ In theory, the payment of subsidies would be subject to the fulfillment of contractual investments and improvements by the concession companies (Pérez 2012). However, in practice the concessionaires did not pay the fees (*canon*) for using state-owned railroad infrastructure and rolling stock established by contract. Furthermore, they were not forced to pay fines for their breaches of contract, insofar as the national Secretary of Transport routinely ignored the reports presented by the National Commission for the Regulation of Transport (*Comisión Nacional Reguladora del Transporte*, CNRT for short), tasked with auditing the concession companies. Despite initial improvements in passenger services,⁵⁹ the state's inability, or unwillingness, to enforce concession contracts would have pernicious effects on railroad infrastructure and passenger safety, as this chapter and the next underscore.

Concession did not merely imply a shift in management of rolling stock and infrastructure from within the purview of the state to that of private companies. The process is often described by railroad workers and train activists as a *dismantling* of Ferrocarriles Argentinos: as the network was carved up into sections and granted in concession to different companies, many of its assets (*patrimonio*), including real estate in

⁵⁸ Potential concession companies would thus be ranked and chosen based on the efficiency of their business proposals, i.e. on their alleged ability to carry out the maximum improvements with the lowest amount of state subsidies (Pérez 2012).

⁵⁹ Martínez (2007) portrays the period immediately after concession in a positive light. In his account, during these early years (in a period he defines as spanning from 1991 to 1998) railway traffic rebounded, freight and passenger demand increased, the workforce was reduced, and the indices of productivity increased (Martínez 2007). He attributes the increase in passenger demand to improvements in service frequency, punctuality, cleanliness, and safety, and to the fact that the cost of tickets remained low. Pérez (2012), however, suggests that records of higher passenger traffic might instead be a reflection of tighter controls of ticket evasion, procured through architectonic changes in the layout of stations and in the access to platforms, and through increased numbers of security officials. Furthermore, Martínez (2007) surmises that the availability of rolling stock (insufficient despite the fact that there was an abundance of inactive material from defunct long-distance services) acted as a limiting factor for passenger traffic, as did the number of railway crossings (*pasos a nivel*), which constrained the frequency of trains.

abandoned lines and branches, workshop and depot buildings, rolling stock, rails, and spare parts, were sold off (Martínez 2007). Some of the larger railway workshops, such as those in Rosario, Laguna Paiva, and Junín, were transferred to worker cooperatives. Patricio, a middle-aged artist who has long been fascinated by trains and who intervenes dilapidated stations with fellow performance artists, portrayed the months leading up to privatization as ones of *saqueo preventivo*, preemptive looting or pillaging. Railroad objects brought to Buenos Aires (clocks, bells, antique telephones, desks) were gathered (*acopiados*) in warehouses and later sold. Concession companies, in his words, were akin to occupation troops, and what was lost during this period was as much *fierros* (metal) as “human material” and “a sense of belonging.”

Privatization entailed the disappearance of artifacts, workers, infrastructures, and knowledge. Craft/trade workshops (those dedicated to train upholstery, metallography, even the printing press) were dismantled; these services would now be outsourced, and the chain of knowledge and apprenticeship (*cadena de formación*) was interrupted. “We were also gutted out,” Carlos, the clocksmith, lamented. When describing the long queues of haggard workers, lining up to collect their salary in the months leading up to privatization, uncertain whether they would be fired or not, he likened these to soup kitchen lines and to Auschwitz prisoners. “We were ghosts”, he told me.

‘95 was terrible, because many *compañeros* (colleagues or comrades) committed suicide. Many people who were attached (*aferrada*) to the railway were suddenly left *outside*—let us not forget the number of railway lines that closed, the kilometers and kilometers of tracks, the towns that have disappeared. The stations that died, the stations that were destroyed—because by the end they stole even the station roof plates.

Carlos mentions a stationmaster who hung himself, and another who jumped in front of a moving train. Others suffered from depression or turned to alcohol. Carlos

himself was rendered disposable when the Roca line's clock workshop was dismantled. He was offered a post in the signaling department (which he considered a downgrade), and later in the telephone department, but he only lasted ten days with the new concession company. He spent the next five years working in the CeNaCaF (*Centro Nacional de Capacitación Ferroviaria*), the National Railway Training Center, in Temperley. "Those years it was all about survival." He would see trains go by on their way to Constitución, his former workplace, and think to himself, "I should be on one of those." "I was someone who was left over," he lamented, "It was a painful period."

Permanent Exceptionality

Towards the end of the 1990s, the national government moved to renegotiate the concession contracts and adjust ticket prices, but was met with increasing complaints from opposition parties and commuter and consumer associations, who denounced delays in investment projects, lack of transparency regarding subsidies and their allocation, and insufficient improvements in terms of cleanliness, rolling stock maintenance, infrastructure, and customer service (Pérez 2012). President Fernando De la Rúa's administration (December 1999 - December 2001) finally granted concession companies an increase in ticket price and extended the concession periods. By then, Pérez (2012) finds, state subsidies to the metropolitan passenger concession companies (around \$376 million in 1999) were comparable to, if not higher than, the \$1 million dollars a day that the railway system in its entirety (including freight and interurban

transport) had allegedly cost the state prior to privatization, and that had served as its justification.

By 2001, in the wake of different international financial crises (in Mexico, Russia, and Brazil) and as export commodity prices fell and foreign debt increased, Argentina was in a severe economic recession. In December, the national government defaulted on its sovereign debt. The fall below the poverty line of more than half the population (and the purported dissolution of the middle class in a country that has historically defined itself as middle-class), the widespread social protests (most famously the *cacerolazo* protests, in which the impoverished middle class took to the streets banging pots and pans), and the political upheaval signaled in the rapid succession of five presidents in ten days have turned the 2001 financial crisis into one of the most spectacular defaults in world history (Shever 2012).⁶⁰ As unemployment rose, train ridership fell by 25.1% (Presidencia Auditoría General de la Nación 2013a), impacting concession companies' earnings through sale of tickets.

Under President Eduardo Duhalde, who stepped in to complete the presidential term after De la Rúa and a series of interim presidents resigned, the national government declared the railroad system to be in a state of emergency (Decree 2075/02), in the context of a wider public emergency outlined a few months earlier in Law 25.561 (Pérez 2012). This decree acknowledged that the fiscal crisis had thwarted the concession companies' programs of investment in infrastructure (insofar as these were reliant on state subsidies, which were by now heavily delayed) and that the devaluation of the peso

⁶⁰ As mentioned in Chapter One, anthropologists have taken interest in the social actors and movements emerging out of this crisis, including the *cartoneros* or urban scavengers.

had altered their cost structure (Pérez 2012). The railway emergency decree thus exempted the companies from investing in infrastructure and rolling stock (beyond a bare minimum needed for daily operations). In effect, the decree instituted a context of “permanent exception” (Presidencia Auditoría General de la Nación 2013a).

While the election of Néstor Kirchner as President in 2003 ushered in a period of economic recovery and a concomitant increase in demand of passenger railroad services (Martínez 2007), over the next decade commuting conditions only worsened in most railroad lines.⁶¹ Train punctuality decreased and derailments became more frequent. The *Auditoría General de la Nación* (the Nation’s General Audit Office, AGN for short, an independent body tasked with auditing public services that reports to Congress) audited all concession companies between 2002 and 2012, and found that the percentage of trains that ran according to schedule fell from 97% in 1998 to 78.5% in 2007 (Presidencia AGN 2013a).

Despite repeated reports by AGN and the National Commission for the Regulation of Transport (CNRT) on the deteriorated state of rolling stock and track infrastructure, state subsidies increased. In the case of Trains of Buenos Aires (TBA, one of the concession companies with the worse performance records), subsidies accounted for 33% of the company’s earnings in 2003, and 75% by 2009. TBA, in fact, is one of the major stakeholders in the public bus system (the Cirigliano brothers, of TBA, own Grupo Plaza, one of the largest commuter bus companies in Argentina), and had much to gain as disaffected train riders resorted to bus transportation (not the least because

⁶¹ Ferrovías and Metrovías, the concession companies that oversaw the Belgrano Norte and Urquiza lines respectively, are often cited as exceptions to the rule.

bus tickets are more expensive than train fares).⁶² As subsidies were not pegged to performance and profits were not accrued from the sale of tickets, concession companies had little incentive to improve train services. Instead, concession companies pursued the maximization of their profits by cutting back on operation and maintenance costs, and by pressuring the state for increases in ticket prices (Pérez 2012).

As subsidies increased, investments froze and quality of service diminished: while between 1995 and 2000 1.78% of trains were cancelled and 3.34% were late, in the following decade (2000-2010) the numbers had risen to 4.93% and 10.59% respectively (Presidencia AGN 2013a). Due to poor maintenance of rolling stock (as further examined below), the fleet of trains in working condition fell, and the average number of people transported by train increased from 450 in 2002 to 600 in 2008 (Presidencia AGN 2013a). Chronic overcrowding became a trait of most metropolitan railroad lines, as Chapter Four underscores.

As the next two sections illuminate, the restructuring of the railroad system into a hybrid public-private arrangement (where rolling stock and infrastructure belonged to the state, but services were managed by concession companies) brought forth a period of

⁶² TBA was comprised by COMETRANS S.A. (Consortio Metropolitano de Transporte, which was presided by transportation mogul Sergio Claudio Cirigliano and which held 41.65% of TBA's shares, as well as substantial shares in Metrovías S.A., the concession company that oversaw the Urquiza line and the subway system), MK Rail Corporation (an American company that produced locomotives), and Burlington Northern Railroad Company, also American (Pérez 2012; Ministerio de Economía y Obras y Servicios Públicos 1995). The brothers Sergio Claudio and Mario Francisco Cirigliano, President of COMETRANS and Director of TBA, respectively, also owned commuter bus lines in Buenos Aires and other Argentine cities; long-distance bus lines in Argentina; and participated in transportation concessions in Brazil and in the U.S. (in Miami). The Cirigliano brothers also purchased a rolling stock manufacturing plant in suburban Buenos Aires, naming it *Emprendimientos Ferroviarios S.A.* (literally "Railway Enterprises," and locally known as *Emfer*).

increased precarity for railroad workers and commuters, as experienced through unreliable trains and timetables (particularly after the 2001 crisis).

Boom and Bust

Sergio had never planned to work on the railways. He had developed a passion for trains as a teenager, when he traveled daily on the Roca line to high school in the industrial southern suburbs of Buenos Aires. His commute often led to *rateadas*, skipping school or cutting class in order to travel to new destinations. As an adult, he was one of the founding members of *Todo Trenes* (literally “Everything Trains,” or “All Trains”), one of the most popular “train buff” or rail fan magazines in Argentina. I met with Sergio in December 2014, in the library of the Fundación Museo Ferroviario, a private foundation set up by a group of railroad enthusiasts during the early years of privatization in order to safeguard the National Railroad Museum’s archive, which they feared would be dismantled. His entry into the railways as a worker had been purely circumstantial, “an accident,” he told me. In 1995, while unemployed, he was promised an administrative job in railway management, with the suggestion that, in the meantime, he should begin working in what is known as the “commercial sector” (*Sector Comercial*), that is, the ticket-vending office. The administrative job never materialized, and Sergio wound up working as a ticket vendor for eleven years (1995-2006). He trained in the San Martín railway line for a month, and was then transferred to Constitución (the Roca line’s terminal station) for a brief period, before finally winding up in the *boleterías* (ticket offices) of the Mitre line, concessioned to TBA. Sergio describes his time working for TBA as having

spanned a cycle of boom and bust: “I saw the boom...the moment of promise, the great projects, the renegotiations, the decline (*decadencia*), and the neglect (*desidia*).” He added, “I left aghast, precisely because I liked [the railway] too much to withstand the internal atmosphere [*la interna*] that we were living, no? And the decline of service, and that type of thing.”

After an initial period during which concession companies helped re-establish the “rules of the game,” managing to run trains according to schedule and to subdue railway unions and workers, things began to change. Sergio partly attributes the decline in the service offered by TBA to “political matters” that exceeded the railway world, beginning in 1998 or 1999 with what he refers to as the “wearing out” of the convertibility model (*el desgaste de la convertibilidad*), that is, the decreased capacity of the Argentine peso to remain pegged to the U.S. dollar.⁶³ During this period, Sergio began noticing “superfluous investments, little attention to service.” “The elemental basics were not attended to, but suddenly you found LED screens, things that were not essential to service, but that were part of collateral businesses, because the [concession] companies were negotiating other working conditions and, until they achieved these, they did not want to risk any investments,” Sergio explains.

In a context of economic and political crisis and uncertainty, the concession companies’ business model shifted. According to Sergio, “the business [*el negocio*] became basically sustained by subsidies. So, the companies lost interest...Their profit was no

⁶³ This measure had been instituted by President Menem to battle hyperinflation, but, in a context of increased political and economic weakness, particularly during President De la Rúa’s brief term, it became untenable.

longer linked to the fulfillment of service. Companies like Metropolitano, like TBA, said, ‘Well, my business [*negocio*] is to make this subsidy last, spending as little as possible. So I do not buy original spare parts, I patch things up [*ato con alambre*, lit. “tie with wire”], I lower the circulation speed.’⁶⁴ State subsidies, according to Sergio, generated an atmosphere ripe for distortions, as concession companies habitually overpriced spare parts and maintenance projects in their accounting books.⁶⁵ “There was no relation between what was done and what was made to figure,” he remembers.⁶⁶

Olivos station, where Sergio worked from 2002 to 2006 as a ticket-vendor, is nested in an affluent neighborhood (where the Presidential residence is located) in the northern suburbs of Buenos Aires, roughly halfway between the terminal stations of

⁶⁴ The expression “*ato con alambre*” (literally to tie things together with wire, to wire together) was often used by commuter-activists and railway workers to describe the concession companies’ practice of patching things together in a superficial, precarious manner.

⁶⁵ Many of my interlocutors engaged in frequent comparisons of different railway lines and concession companies. For Sergio, Metropolitano, the concession company that ran the Roca line, was particularly flagrant in its irregularities: “We’ve reached extremes that are shameful, like Metropolitano, which said: ‘We remove the trains’ windows [*ventanillas*, I think he actually meant the shutters, as this is the story that I heard from different sources] and we sell them as aluminum.” He describes his brief time working for Metropolitano in Constitución, the Roca’s terminal station, as “alienating,” and narrates occasions in which angry passengers even spat at him. Remarks of this sort on the distinctive behavior of passengers from different railway lines reflected a racialized affective geography of urban and suburban Buenos Aires. Activists from a commuter-coalition group, comprised by passengers from different railway lines, often appeared to compete with each other in terms of whose railway line was “worse;” at a group meeting, Juan, a commuter-activist, portrayed Metropolitano as the harbinger of precarity: whatever TBA did, Metropolitano had done it first, but without leading to large-scale tragedy, as did occur with the former.

⁶⁶ Like many of my interlocutors, Sergio made an exception with Ferrovías, the concession company that oversaw the Belgrano Norte line. Ferrovías is often regarded as the most successful concession company: although it suffered the same political and economic crises as the other companies, Ferrovías continued to offer a passenger service that is often described as reliable and safe. Sergio attributes their performance to a matter of moral standards: “Perhaps not because they are better people, I am not trying to make a judgment beyond what I am entitled to, but as a business model, you can take the responsibility of saying, ‘Well, I do not want to leave dead bodies along the way (*dejar muertos en el camino*)’...I think that Ferrovías’ policy, of *that* particular business group, is, ‘We will do our business projections, caring for what we have, and *without* disregarding our responsibility.’” That is, while Ferrovías did not renovate or “modernize” its rolling stock, maintaining diesel traction, the service that these trains offered was consistently reliable. Other interlocutors attributed Ferrovías’ better performance to the fact that the company retained older, knowledgeable railway specialists on staff, rather than replacing them, as other companies presumably did.

Retiro and Tigre. From within his ticket booth, Sergio observed that commuters on the Mitre line seemed oblivious to what was unfolding, and he grew impatient: “I, in particular, first got very angry with the people, because it seemed to me that they did not realize what was going on.” He partly attributes their complacency to class, describing Mitre commuters as belonging to a “*very* particular social spectrum.” “I noticed that people complained, but they complained about trivial matters. We would suddenly receive complaints about peddlers (*vendedores ambulantes*), or because there were people begging in the stations... It was as if people were not aware of the situation that was being lived beyond the station platform.” Towards the end of his tenure (before he resigned in 2006), however, the situation had become less manageable for commuters and workers: “Those last years, I experienced them, well, coexisting with a total disorder in the service, with complete non-fulfillment (*incumplimiento*) [of schedules], with permanent [technical] failures, with people’s anger [*bronca*]. Always fearing the explosion [*estallido*] or aggression.” “If people travel badly, they live badly,” he quipped. Passengers lost work bonuses because of recurrent tardiness due to the train’s unpunctuality, and university students’ choice of classes was limited by the train’s erratic schedule. While his coworkers remained impassive in the ticket-booth, perhaps out of self-protection, Sergio would walk out onto the station platform and try explain to passengers that the problem was systemic: “You know what the matter is? This railroad that you are traveling in, it is not investing.⁶⁷ You have to go and knock on the company’s door, you have to go and complain there.” He began plastering the station with posters.

⁶⁷ Here, “the railroad” (*el ferrocarril*) appears as a metonym for the concession company (in this case, TBA).

TBA was quick to retaliate: “As if it were a disciplinary measure, they punished us by withholding information about the trains. When you work with an absolutely irregular service, where timetables are not complied with, you need to have information about the trains, because the *basic* thing that people come to ask you is at what time is the train coming,” Sergio complained. He continued, “I was in a company that did not care whether you produced and worked, if trains ran, if they arrived on time... It was *so* evident that their profit [*negocio*] was elsewhere, this made room for that territory that the company did not occupy, that space that the company did not occupy, to be occupied by groups [*camarillas*], union groups... It was all really very sad.”

Although Olivos did not experience as much passenger traffic as other stations, it was a track-switch area, which meant that whenever there was a problem (such as a technical failure, a suicide, an accident), trains arriving to Olivos were turned around and sent back, leaving passengers stranded at the station. On those increasingly frequent occasions, angry passengers would gather in front of the ticket booth and demand a refund and an explanation, often insulting Sergio and his coworkers. In the tumult, it was impossible to control tickets and verify who deserved a refund. The cash register would thus often operate at a loss, which was compounded by the thefts that the booth suffered on a nearly daily basis, in the absence of security officers (and which eventually led to night shifts being cancelled altogether; that is, while trains continued to run, ticket offices remained unmanned at night). In this climate of unease, Sergio stopped wearing

his uniform when he rode the train to work; from source of pride to one of risk, TBA's uniform turned him into an easy target for passengers' fury.⁶⁸

The increasing precarity of train services and working conditions pushed Sergio to resign. "That violence that I experienced, which was antagonizing me with even my own affection for the railway, was stronger than I," Sergio reminisces of that time, "What I call violence... I took everything as an aggression, you see. That the trains did not work, that the station was dirty, that commuters complained all the time, and rightly so. That my coworkers did not seem to mind..."

During TBA's tenure, shifting train temporalities—frequency of service, delays, interruptions, and cancellations of service—rendered palpable broader shifts in business model and maintenance practice. As train timetables became increasingly untrustworthy and unavailable (withheld from station personnel as a disciplinary measure), train schedules became a site of struggle through which TBA asserted its mode of profit seeking, above and against the need to provide reliable service.⁶⁹ Train delays and interruptions in service, in turn, were largely attributed to shifting maintenance and work practices, as the next section underscores.

⁶⁸ Passenger outbursts (*estallidos*) became more common on railroad lines serving less-affluent commuters, who depended disproportionately on trains for their daily mobility (see Rebón et al 2010), as addressed further in Chapter Four.

⁶⁹ In other contexts of neoliberal reform, train schedules have been enrolled in battles of other sorts. Mark Fleming (2016) examines how in San Francisco's Municipal Railway (Muni) problems with time (namely, slowness and lateness) attributed to unproductive transit workers are mobilized to justify neoliberal restructuring, in particular, labor reform. Fleming explores how chronic lateness is produced and portrayed, and argues that, in exerting impossible demands on transit workers, neoliberal time discipline foments public disapproval and erodes solidarities that might contest flexible labor arrangements. In Buenos Aires, meanwhile, train conductors' work practices and ethics came under public scrutiny in the aftermath of a series of train crashes, when conducting habits deemed irresponsible and dangerous were invoked to justify increased security measures and undermine the railway conductors' union, as outlined in Chapters Four and Six.

Permanent Risk

Ramón, a middle-aged *motorman* (train conductor) with dark hair and an open face, has worked for decades on the Mitre line's José León Suárez branch, which connects downtown Buenos Aires with its northwestern suburbs and serves less-affluent communities than the Retiro-Tigre branch where Sergio worked. Like Sergio, Ramón claims to have witnessed the unraveling of the railroad system. A former delegate for *La Fraternidad*, the century-old train conductors' union, he abandoned the organization as he became increasingly aware—and critical—of its complicity in railroad decay; he participated, in fact, in the widespread strike led by railroad workers in 1991 to protest the massive layoffs that heralded impending privatization. Today, he is one of the more visible figures of MoNaFe (*Movimiento Nacional Ferroviario*), the National Railroad Movement, a group of current and former railroad workers who aim to revive the national railroad industry and recover defunct railroad services in the interior. In an inversion of former President Menem's infamous 1989 dictum "Branch that strikes, branch that will shut down" ("*Ramal que para, ramal que cierra*"), a phrase that for many veteran railroad workers encapsulates the destruction of the railroad system, MoNaFe's slogan is "Branch that fights, branch that returns" (*Ramal que lucha, ramal que vuelve*). Because of his affiliation with MoNaFe, Ramón has now been blacklisted by the union.

As we conversed in an office space shared by MoNaFe and the *Movimiento Emancipador* (the Emancipatory Movement),⁷⁰ surrounded by books, pamphlets, and

⁷⁰ On their blog, members of the *Movimiento Emancipador* (Emancipatory Movement) present themselves as the "heirs of the Sanmartinian-Bolivarian project" of Hispanic American unity and as supporters of the "Latin American socialists and revolutionary experiences led by Fidel Castro, Hugo Chávez, and Evo

portraits of Latin American revolutionaries (Juana Azurduy, Manuel Belgrano, Salvador Allende), Ramón described the current state of the railroad network as the result of 19 years of neoliberal policies and privatization: “We always say it was business schemes [*negociado*], looting [*saqueo*], corruption, and death,” he quipped. “I always say, I saw the splendor, the last splendor of Ferrocarriles Argentinos...Honestly, the railroad was something impressive,” he mused, “Well, I also had the opportunity to travel along different long-distance lines, and, well, I saw the end...”

Ramón began working in the Mitre line in 1980 as a *peón de estación*, a station handyman, cleaning the platforms and bathrooms in Urquiza station. When an opening came up for a railroad crossing guard (a *guardabarreras*), he took it. Two years later, he began training to become a conductor, first as a diesel locomotive assistant conductor, traveling to the interior of the country on both freight and passenger trains. His tasks included assisting the conductor with train check-up before departure, monitoring oil, water, and sand levels, and, on days with low visibility, calling out the position of railroad signals along the tracks. Ramón was also in charge of updating the *libro de abordo*, a journal kept on board of trains where anomalies were recorded (a practice, he says, that has since been dropped). But Ramón disliked traveling to the interior, and after a while asked to be transferred to the terminal station in Retiro, where he worked as an assistant conductor in the shunting yard, helping maneuver freight and passenger trains. By 1986,

Morales”, identifying imperialism as their greatest foe (see <http://movimientoemancipador.org/cartadepresentacion/>).

Ramón graduated as a train conductor and began driving electric Toshiba trains on the José León Suárez branch.

Throughout his tenure as *motorman* over the last 30 years, Ramón has witnessed shifts in management practice, workers' routines, and railroad infrastructure. He described how a “context that enabled and exposed workers to permanent risk,” as he put it, was created.⁷¹ In his early days as a conductor, Ramón began his shift (*servicio*), like all conductors, at the terminal station of José León Suárez. At the adjacent warehouse (*galpón*), a supervisor would assign him a train (*una unidad*, or “a unit”). For certain shifts, Ramón had to arrive half an hour early, and had 15 minutes to check the train “top to bottom” and test its brakes. “Of course, the brake test there is relative, because the train is at a standstill,” he conceded. But with TBA, shifts and checkups were reconfigured. Conductors now often began their shift not in the warehouse at the end of the line, but rather at a way station, where another conductor would hand over a train already in service, with passengers on board. The incoming conductor thus could not revise the train, much less check the brakes, and was forced to trust the previous conductor's judgment.

Changes in infrastructure also exacerbated the “permanent risk,” in Ramón's words, that workers were exposed to. During the time of Ferrocarriles Argentinos, each section of a railway branch had its own independent electric circuit. But under TBA these independent circuits were shorted (*punteados*) and could now only be shut down

⁷¹ The context of “permanent risk” illustrated by Ramón was not peculiar to TBA, but rather also characterized other railroad lines, under other concession companies, and even outlived their tenure.

from the power station. Short-circuits provoke fires, Ramón explained, a situation compounded by infrastructural decay. He described the material wear and the lack of maintenance that provoked or exacerbated the “incipient fires” (*principios de incendio*; literally, “the beginnings of fire”), the catchall term used to describe plumes of smoke rising from the train’s underside, often from where the train’s “shoe” (*patín*) makes contact with the electrified conductor rail (known as *el tercer riel*, the third rail). This phenomenon of incipient fires was not uncommon, and on at least one occasion panicked passengers jumped from a moving train to escape what they believed would become a full-blown fire (as reported, for instance, in *La Nación* on 12/21/2007). Most times, these fires prompted service delays and cancellations. Dirtiness, grease, oil, overheating resistors, and metals lying on the tracks (either accidentally detached or purposely thrown) all help provoke incipient fires, according to Ramón. “We attribute it to the lack of maintenance and the obsolete state of the systems, no?” he said. In earlier times, when rolling stock checkups were routine, a train’s different elements were cleaned and blown, and contactors and cables were revised. When these practices were abandoned or performed only rarely or superficially, unsupervised material wear began to pose greater risk. As changing labor practices and the deferral of maintenance enabled the unchecked advance of material decay, obsolete infrastructure and aging rolling stock translated into lower circulation speeds in order to minimize the risk of derailment. As faulty train units were taken out of circulation for haphazard repairs that always proved to be insufficient, a dwindling fleet resulted in lower train frequency, exacerbating already recurrent delays.

Topologies of Dis/Connection

For train commuters in Buenos Aires, habitual delays, interruptions of service, and cancellations of scheduled trains produced a pervasive sense of uncertainty that permeated their everyday. Yet the routinization of uncertainty and risk that came to shape the experience of mobility and citizenship (Soldano 2013) was unevenly distributed along lines of race and class and mapped onto geographies of precarity and abandonment, as TBA funneled its resources into branches serving wealthier sectors of the population (as I elaborate in the following chapter). If “temporal insecurity” is a central component of the experience of inequality (Bear 2016: 2-3), nowhere was this more apparent to me during fieldwork than along one of the diesel branches of the Sarmiento line, which, like the Mitre line where Sergio and Ramón worked, had been concessioned to TBA.

Known as “the Other Sarmiento” (*el otro Sarmiento*), this branch connects the working-class district of Merlo, in the western suburbs of Gran Buenos Aires, to the city of Lobos, an agrarian and touristic hub located 90km (56 miles) west, and is operated by diesel, rather than electric trains like the Sarmiento’s mainline. At the time of my fieldwork, the Merlo-Lobos train was comprised of an old locomotive emblazoned with TBA’s logo, and two or three cars that still bore the initials of the Roca line (where they had previously been in service). It was often cancelled for days at a time, and when it did run it did so with an unpredictable route and schedule.

Frequency of service in this area is partly determined by the nature of this railway’s infrastructure. This branch is comprised of a double track between Merlo and

the way station of Las Heras, enabling two-way traffic on that segment; between Las Heras and Lobos, however, there is a single track. In practice, this means that if a train arrives in Las Heras and is scheduled to continue to Lobos but there is another train heading from Lobos towards Las Heras, the first must wait in Las Heras until it has right of way (i.e. until the train from Lobos arrives to that station and the track is clear). Yet these trains often run late, and conductors are reluctant to work overtime (any labor beyond their shift goes unpaid). Thus, a conductor who is waiting in Las Heras for right of way and is behind schedule might decide to turn around and head back to Merlo, rather than continue on to Lobos as scheduled. This occurs often, leaving passengers stranded.

While Las Heras and Lobos are sizeable towns (with populations of over 11,000 and 30,000, respectively), the territory between them is sparsely populated, comprised mainly by farmland. Speratti, population 40 and one of the flag stops between Las Heras and Lobos, is home to a rural elementary school and kindergarten. In the absence of paved roads, schoolteachers depend on the train for their mobility, particularly in rainy weather, when the dirt road becomes impassable.⁷² Schooldays, in fact, are dictated by the train's varying frequency: on days in which the train does run, classes last from whenever the train drops teachers and students off in Speratti to whenever the train returns (usually, the length of time it takes the train to cover the distance between Speratti and the terminal station of Lobos, and back).

⁷² While Speratti does not appear on most maps, the dirt road that runs parallel to the tracks, connecting the area to neighboring communities, does. On maps, however, it appears as an asphalt road, in line with official documents that proclaim that it was asphalted in the 1960s.



Figure 6: Las Heras station. A train stops on its way to Merlo, while passengers await the train to Lobos. Note the sunken, undulated rails, and TBA's logo on the diesel locomotive. October 2013. Photo by author.

Cecilia, the school's caretaker, lives with her husband and two youngest children in a small one-bedroom house attached to the school. Like most folks in the area, she cannot afford a car, and relies on the train to commute to Las Heras, where she teaches. On any given day, Cecilia will call the stationmaster at Las Heras to inquire whether the train will make its way to Lobos, and hence Speratti along the way. When the train does not operate, Cecilia often travels the 9km to Las Heras by foot, unless she is able to catch a ride with a *capataz* or supervisor from a neighboring farm. As the train is rarely on schedule, Cecilia relies on her sharpened sense of faraway train horns and rumbling rails to head to the Speratti flag stop, texting neighbors and colleagues to inform them of the train's imminent arrival. The train's erratic schedule, its unexpected appearances in

areas where railroad crossing barriers are nonexistent and dense fog often shrouds visibility, have, in fact, led to fatalities.

Temporal insecurity in this region derives not only from the train's uncertain appearance, its erratic frequency, but also from its fluctuating speed and the unpredictable duration of travel. Although only 9km separate Cecilia's home in Speratti from her work in Las Heras, the trip by train can take anywhere between 15 minutes and an hour and a half. Some days the train runs so slowly that it would almost be faster to walk.

Along the Merlo-Lobos branch, as in other diesel branches that run through the rural and semi-rural hinterlands of Buenos Aires, dilapidated rails have forced conductors to lower the train's circulation speed, in some particularly rough sections of track to as low as 20km/h (around 12mph). Train conductors, in fact, are given a daily report [*boletín del día*] with the recommended maximum speeds for navigating specific segments of track. Precautionary speed has been routinized by infrastructural precarity.⁷³ The deteriorated state of tracks, which limits speed of travel, can be traced to dwindling maintenance: as concession companies such as TBA cut back on costs, they drastically reduced the size and number of track maintenance crews, tasked with traveling the length of railway branches and performing maintenance work.⁷⁴

⁷³ In railway parlance, conductors are required to circulate "*a precaución*," with precaution.

⁷⁴ Another example of how poor track maintenance shapes and limits rail mobility is the proliferation of weeds. Train services have on occasion been cancelled on these diesel branches because of weeds: where weeds cover rails and impede proper friction between the train wheel and the rail, trains are prone to skid. Weed proliferation was invoked by my interlocutors as a sign of dwindling track maintenance crews, unable to keep up with the rampant growth of vegetation.

Remoteness can result not only from physical distance to urban centers, but also, I propose, from the temporal dislocations produced by erratic, infrequent, or otherwise unreliable transport. In rural and semi-rural Buenos Aires, the increased slowness and unpunctuality of trains have rendered places like Speratti, bypassed by asphalt, increasingly remote – what here I call “space-time dilation.” Along the Merlo-Lobos branch, the unpredictability of mobility has reshaped everyday life. “We have known and unknown people,” Cecilia, the school caretaker, says of her family’s experience with the train over the last decade. “We will ask ourselves, ‘What happened to, say, Juan?’” The people they have met on the train have gradually moved to other towns with “better access, more vehicles.” “Because of the train, because of the train they cannot arrive [to work] on time,” she explained. When I visited Cecilia in 2014, her eldest son, a high school student who could not afford to miss class, was living with his grandparents in Las Heras. “It is hard on us, you see. Him being there...It changes us a family, and what happens to us, happens to others, to the rest,” Cecilia continued, listing other neighboring families, mainly farm caretakers and domestic employees, who have become split across locales or uprooted to Las Heras.

Railroad Emergency

This chapter has offered an historical overview of the concessioning of Buenos Aires’ metropolitan railroad system in the 1990s, and an ethnographic account of the temporal dislocations through which railroad workers and commuters experienced this restructuring of the public-private relationship, as station clocks disappeared and train

timetables became increasingly unreliable and unavailable.⁷⁵ Emboldened by generous state subsidies that were not hinged on performance, concession companies such as TBA had little incentive to offer reliable service. Fluctuating passenger demand did little to hurt their pockets: concessionaires made their profits not by selling tickets, the price of which was kept artificially low, but by cutting back on costs and pocketing subsidies. Shifting work and maintenance practices, including changes in train checkup protocol and drastic reductions in track maintenance crews, contributed to the further deterioration of obsolete infrastructure and aging rolling stock. Technical malfunctions, often attributed to improper maintenance, led to interruptions in service and delays, as services were cancelled and train units were taken out of circulation for repair, exacerbating the sense of uncertainty that came to characterize train travel in Buenos Aires. If railroad infrastructure was meant to order movement through space and time,

⁷⁵ Shortly before I began fieldwork, countdown clocks were introduced in railroad stations. These clocks purportedly displayed the number of minutes until the arrival of the next train (and sometimes, of one or two subsequent trains), perhaps in an effort to thwart the ubiquitous question, “¿Cuándo llega el próximo tren?” (“When will the next train arrive?”), posed by waiting passengers to station personnel, who rarely possessed this much-desired information. Yet time as marked by these countdown clocks rarely coincided with clock-time. For example, a countdown clock might indicate that a train would arrive in 5 minutes, yet those 5 minutes might be equivalent to 7, 10, or 15 minutes in actual clock-time (as measured by a watch or cell phone). Thus, the number 5 displayed on a countdown clock might take several minutes to switch to number 4. Sometimes a number would increase, instead of decreasing, for instance jumping from 5 minutes to 20 minutes, as trains appeared to retrocede. Other times, a train would be pulling into a station, but the countdown clock would still be announcing that the train’s arrival was 5 minutes away. In some stations, such as San Isidro (on the Mitre line), countdown clocks hung near analog clocks whose hands stood still, a palimpsest of alternative times. Capricious countdown clocks thus only exacerbated the temporal dislocation (and the space-time dilation I allude to in this chapter) experienced by passengers. In the San Martín line’s terminal station of Retiro, in turn, a large signboard listing the next train services does not display the official time, but rather an approximate time that gets renewed periodically. As Juan, a commuter-activist, noted, this approximated time has the effect of disguising service delays. For instance, at 17:45 (5:45pm) the board might indicate that it is 17:41 (5:41pm), and thus a train scheduled to leave at 17:43 that has not yet departed is still “on time,” per this signboard’s time-amendment.

its deterioration in a context of *desidia* (neglect) and *desguace* (gutting out) had drastically *disordering* effects.

Railroad decay points to the unraveling of the promise of modernity, predicated on coordination, connectivity, and time-space compression. Improperly maintained infrastructure and infrequent train service, I have argued, produced “time-space dilation,” particularly in the rural and semi-rural hinterlands of Buenos Aires, where reduced circulation speed (on account of the careful navigation required by dilapidated tracks and the risk of derailment), increased time of travel, and unpredictable train schedules had the effect of rendering locales further apart. Ethnographic attention to the speed and frequency of connectivity underscores that remoteness and proximity are historical conditions, insofar as they are shaped by infrastructures of mobility and their shifting affordances.⁷⁶ That is, aging infrastructure itself can reconfigure local topologies of connectivity, dictating the speed and frequency of mobility-as-connectivity.

The stories told by Carlos, Sergio, Ramón, and Cecilia are supported by reports penned by the Nation’s General Audit Office (AGN). In its audits of the metropolitan railroad system, AGN found that improper maintenance, waning investments, and poor oversight by the Secretary of Transport and the CNRT (the National Commission for the Regulation of Transport) colluded to produce an increasingly precarious passenger train service (Presidencia AGN 2013a). It concluded, too, that the Presidential decree of 2002 declaring a state of emergency in the railroad system only exacerbated railroad

⁷⁶ The buried tracks of two now-defunct railroad lines at the junction by Empalme Lobos hint at a more mobile and connected past, when railroad traffic warranted the existence of a large station and a coffee shop, now crumbling. Cecilia’s husband, Julio, remembers a more punctual past: “Before, the train would arrive on time. *Five* minutes late, but the guard knew that someone was waiting.”

precarity by exempting concession companies from investing in infrastructure and rolling stock, and increasing state subsidies despite poor performance. Increased subsidies did not, in fact, translate into better train services, AGN found, and the quality of these continued to deteriorate between 2003 and 2012, a period often acknowledged as one of “economic recovery” under the presidencies of Néstor Kirchner’s and his wife and successor Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

As early as 2003 AGN concluded that improper maintenance was impacting public safety. It found that barriers at railroad crossings often malfunctioned; the signaling system was obsolete; electrified third rails were missing proper insulation and posed a hazard for pedestrians crossing tracks; access to stations was often blocked; and security personnel were lacking. By 2008, a restriction on speed of circulation was imposed in most railroad lines due to the poor state of track infrastructure: as a precautionary measure, trains were to circulate at a maximum speed of 40km/h (Presidencia AGN 2013a). Deteriorated tracks were also seen as accounting for more than half of the derailments in the Sarmiento line, and over 90% of derailments in the Mitre line (both managed by Trains of Buenos Aires, TBA).

Under the so-called railroad emergency, the substrate of uncertainty that permeated the everyday was increasingly punctuated by accidents, most frequently at level crossings. With trains running late and off-schedule, barriers often remained down for long stretches of time with no train in sight. Some malfunctioning barriers would remain partially lowered for hours on end, the monotonous sound of their bell (*campana*) a regular refrain in the cacophonous urban soundscape. Faced with the prospect of waiting idly for an indeterminate period, motorcycles, cars, and even buses would often

drive around these barriers. (At some level crossings along the Merlo-Lobos branch, barriers were missing altogether). Between 2002 and 2012, there were nearly 20 collisions between trains and other vehicles at level crossings (Presidencia AGN 2013b). The largest of these, which became known as *la Tragedia de Flores* (the Flores Tragedy) occurred in September 2011, when a train from the Sarmiento line collided into a bus that was crossing the tracks, and then into another train, leaving 11 dead and 228 injured (Presidencia AGN 2013b). Beyond mere temporal uncertainty and the concomitant disordering of everyday life, the off-schedule circulation of trains thus posed a serious risk, particularly for those who, due to limited economic means and lack of access to alternate routes, had become *prisioneros del tren* (train prisoners), in the words of one of my interlocutors, depending disproportionately on trains for their mobility.

The social cost of the subsidized concessioning of the metropolitan railroad system, as Verónica Pérez (2012) has argued, was borne by commuters, who suffered the decreasing quality of train services and some of whom, by 2003, began resorting to acts of vandalism in protest (Pérez and Rebón 2017). Metropolitano S.A., in fact, lost its concession of the San Martín line in 2005 and of the Roca and Belgrano Sur lines in 2007 due to contractual breaches. Despite evincing a similarly poor performance, TBA, however, retained management of the Sarmiento and Mitre lines, shielded by a tight web of favors and complicity that tied company directors with government officials. It took a large-scale, high-profile railroad tragedy, the *Tragedia de Once*, for TBA's concession to be revoked. I turn to this event in Chapter Four, where I examine how TBA's haphazard modernization of rolling stock amplified the risk posed by obsolete track infrastructure

and improper maintenance, tracing how railroad workers and commuters learned to navigate a system in ruins.

Coda

Carlos, who in the early 1990s was sent to salvage railroad clocks, is now in his 60s and makes a living in the National Railroad Museum, preparing railroad objects for display. Himself a vestige of bygone railroad days, he is surrounded by railroad relics, tasked with repairing them for display. His workshop sits on a second floor, tucked out of sight and out of reach for museum visitors, overlooking the Mitre line's terminal station in Retiro. The sound of train horns punctuates his workday. Spare parts are hard to come by, with the dusty museum's sparse budget, and Carlos has had to master the art of mimicry in his repairs. Despite being the only museum employee who is a former railroad worker and despite his storytelling skills, he has been banned from serving as a museum guide—due to the fact that he is not a *kirchnerista* (i.e. a supporter of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, President at the time of my fieldwork), he suspects. The precarity of his current job situation had become corporealized: on one of my visits, he rolled up his shirt sleeves to reveal his psoriasis, flaking skin that appeared to mimic the peeling paint of his office walls; this was a manifestation, he insisted, of his anxiety over his uncertain future. Two of his sons work in the railway system, and Carlos has kept his private clock workshop to supplement his meager museum income. Given the clocksmith tradition of inscribing one's initials and dates of intervention on a clock's reverse side, Carlos occasionally comes across clocks that he himself repaired in the

1970s or 1980s. “We are materialists, we are part of the material,” he smiled. He himself has become something of a collector, amassing railway goods he has found in antiques fairs.

Three or four times a year, Carlos meets up with other former railway workers, most laid off in the 1990s, to share an *asado* (barbecue), and play *fútbol* (soccer) and *truco* (a popular Argentine card game). Around fifteen of them meet up, some of whom work as *remiseros*, private cab drivers. “We always tell the same stories,” he laughs, and I am left wondering whether his efforts at restoring railroad artifacts and communalism are a way of restoring the self. “I am a romantic of my trade, that is why everyone says I am the last one,” he says, “Yes, it is true, I am the last one. The one who has remained... They have all disappeared.”



Figure 7: Carlos' desk. Beyond, a view of Retiro terminal station (Mitre line). March 2014. Photo by author.

Chapter Four: Monster Trains

Edubijes Ocaranza shifts in her chair. She is facing the court, comprised by four judges, her back towards the prosecutor, the plaintiffs, and the defense attorneys representing the 28 defendants, most of whom are present in the room. Ocaranza appears to be in her mid-forties, has shoulder-length brown hair, and wears glasses. The courtroom is small and drab. Behind a glass wall, victims' families hold up placards displaying the word "justice" and listen attentively, as do a handful of activists, journalists, legal aides, and this anthropologist. The prosecutor asks Ocaranza to describe a train journey she took over two years ago, on February 22, 2012. She depicts her daily commute from her home in Mariano Acosta to the affluent downtown neighborhood of Palermo, where she worked as a domestic helper, a 40-mile journey involving two trains and a bus. On the day in question, the first workday after carnival, the Sarmiento train was running 40 minutes late, and was even more overcrowded than usual, so much so that she had to let two trains go by before managing to push her way on board the third. The train started and stopped several times before finally taking off. Two stations before her destination, she managed to secure a seat, and dozed off. She woke up to a sudden jolt and the loud sound of impact. She immediately blacked out, and when she came to she was lying on the station platform in Once, covered in bruises and with a sharp pain in her spine. Amid screams from passengers trapped within the train that it was about to catch fire, she hurried out of the station as best as she could, following those who, like her, had made it off the train.

The prosecutor asks Ocaranza to describe the specific conditions of her commute that day, to which she responds, “Every day is the same, sir. The trains are all broken, broken windows, broken doors.” She insists on using the present tense, describing doors that fall to pieces and that do not close properly. “Due to the amount of people, the multitude of people, the materials spring loose, because the material appears to be very weak”, she explains, “Every day is the same.” When asked to rate the service provided by the Sarmiento line, she responds emphatically, “A *total disaster*. Total. Traveling on the Sarmiento is inhuman. *Inhuman*. It is the train of death.” For a year after the crash, she adds, she approached the station, but was unable to board the train, overcome by severe headaches and the urge to vomit.⁷⁷

Public court hearings around the *Tragedia de Once* offered a glimpse of the everyday experience of traveling in dilapidated trains, as exemplified by Ocaranza’s testimony above. During the hearings, survivors of the 2012 crash who, like Ocaranza, were regular commuters on the Sarmiento line described their quotidian encounters with ramshackle, overcrowded train cars and with the assorted technical failures that rendered delays ubiquitous. While Chapter Three traced the history of the concessioning of the metropolitan railway system and the temporal dislocations experienced by railway workers and commuters, in this chapter I turn to the everyday experience of riding in trains whose maintenance had been outsourced to private companies with little incentive to invest. I focus on Trenes de Buenos Aires (TBA), the concession company tasked with managing the Mitre and Sarmiento lines, which connect the city of Buenos Aires to

⁷⁷ Fieldnotes from court hearing on May 19, 2014.

its northern and western suburbs, respectively. Here, then, I trace how TBA's practices of maintenance and purported modernization of rolling stock produced monstrous assemblages prone to break down, run late, and catch fire. I examine, too, how railway workers and commuters grappled with a system that was materially falling apart. This chapter thus asks: How did aging trains come to be seen as monstrous? How did railway workers and passengers navigate and survive a railway system in ruins? Finally, what kinds of publics were created by the "broken" trains described by Ocaranza in her court testimony?

This chapter does not aim to unpack the 2012 Once crash nor gauge the exact role that TBA's maintenance and retrofit policies played in that particular event (although, as I hope this chapter and the next will make clear, I believe that TBA's practices were certainly significant factors). Such an analysis is beyond the scope of this dissertation and beyond my expertise: the tribunal sat through 138 public hearings over the lapse of two years and listened to over 200 witnesses in order to piece together the event and determine how to assign culpability among the 28 defendants. The crux of the trial resided in determining whether Marcos Córdoba, the young conductor, had failed to apply the brakes as the train entered the terminal station ("human error" due to drowsiness or driving under the influence), or whether he had in fact applied them and they had failed to respond ("technical failure" on account of the train's dilapidated state and TBA's peculiar maintenance practices). The tribunal's decision, a sentence that has yet to be enforced, is outlined in Chapter Seven. Rather, the focus of this chapter is on the quotidian experience of railway deterioration: the discomfort, the overcrowding, the delays, the uncertainty. In any case, for many observers the crash and the everyday are

not unrelated, insofar as the former was the predictable outcome of the latter: as one of the plaintiffs argued during a court hearing, the *Tragedia de Once* can be seen as the “foreseeable materialization of risk.”⁷⁸ Furthermore, the very nature of the dilapidated train troubles the divide between human error and technical failure. As became evident in court hearings, the hybrid nature of the train in question, the Chapa 16, repeatedly disassembled and re-assembled, and subject to deferred maintenance, complicates the distinction and suggests instead the *confluence* of human and nonhuman agencies in the production of the Once tragedy (cf. Law 2003).

My characterization of rolling stock as monstrous is inspired by the language used by members of the *agrupaciones de usuarios* (groups of train users) whom I engaged with during fieldwork, who often referred to TBA trains as *formaciones engendro*. *Formaciones* is a term used by railway workers and specialists (rather than the average passenger) to refer to a trainset, a unit comprised by several train cars (what passengers might refer to simply as *un tren*, a train). *Engendro*, in turn, is defined by the dictionary of the *Real Academia Española* as: “1. fetus, 2. formless creature that is born without proper proportion, 3. very ugly person, 4. poorly conceived plan, design, or intellectual work.”⁷⁹ A *formación engendro*, thus, as used by commuter-activists can perhaps be best understood as a monstrous spawn, what here I translate as a monster train. Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1986:129, 130) writes of the “subliminal fear” spurred by the first railroads (sometimes perceived as “demonic”) and the “potential destruction” heralded by the specter of the

⁷⁸ Fieldnotes from court hearing on March 25, 2014.

⁷⁹ Accessed online at <http://dle.rae.es/srv/fetch?id=FN8QRC4> on 06/11/2017. The translation is my own.

accident: if modernity promised progress, it also brought forth the potential for destruction at an unprecedented scale.⁸⁰ Survivors of the *Tragedia de Once* (and even their close friends and relatives) often described bodily reactions to trains and railway stations similar to those of Ocaranza: vomit, acute headaches, dizziness, an inability to board a train car, and panic attacks. In the aftermath of the crash, members of commuter-activist organizations, none of whom had been aboard that fateful Sarmiento train, expressed concern over the risk that monster trains continued to entail.⁸¹ Precarious railroads, in fact, became a site of protest, underscoring the ways in which infrastructure serves as a terrain where relations between citizens and the state are enacted, contested, and redefined (Anand 2017, Von Schnitzler 2013).

Other passengers who were not active in commuter organizations described the *unsettling* experience of riding on trains that appeared to fall apart. Paula, a frequent Mitre rider, for instance, remembered hearing an explosion aboard her train one dark winter evening before the *Tragedia de Once*. As the lights went out inside the train, passengers started screaming, and she was overcome with *incertidumbre* (uncertainty), not knowing what was happening. On that occasion, the train retroceded a few meters and ended up stopping at her home station, and she hurriedly descended. She never did find out what had happened, and ended up not making it to the engagement she had been traveling to.

Much like the landmines Eleana J. Kim (2016:163) describes in the Korean Demilitarized Zone, monster trains can be seen as a form of “rogue infrastructure,” with

⁸⁰ For an erudite discussion of anxieties over technological inventions and the role of technology in society, as manifested in political thought, see Winner (1977).

⁸¹ On the railroad car as a deathly compartment and form of imprisonment, see de Certeau (1984), Schivelbusch (1987), and Aguiar (2011).

their “volatile materiality,” heterogeneous entanglements, and “unanticipated affects and relations.” According to Kim (2016: 165, 166), the roguishness of landmines (and, we can add, monster trains) lies in their “ability to deprive humans of agency” and in their “unintended affordances,” that is, their capacity to “exceed expected technological and political determinations.”⁸²

Railroads historically gave rise to new forms of sociability in the close quarters of train compartments (de Certeau 1984) and required new cultural skills, such as queuing, boarding, purchasing tickets, reading timetables, and passing time in the close presence of strangers (de Certeau 1984, Lofgren 2008, Schivelbusch 1987, Urry 2007).⁸³ Riding and conducting dilapidated trains in Buenos Aires required even more particular skills, as I show below: living in ruins demands bodily attunements and dispositions to avoid or mitigate risk. Passengers and workers, I argue, acquired an embodied or corporeal knowledge of trains and their infrastructure, sedimented on ride after jolting ride.

Yet railroad precarity, I also show, developed unevenly, unfolding along racialized geographies of risk and neglect, for not all trains were made equally monstrous. This chapter contends that metropolitan railroads in Buenos Aires serve as a “racializing” infrastructure, one that reinforces racial and class disparities through the unequal distribution of risk. The experience of infrastructure, failing or otherwise, can thus never be assumed to be uniform.

⁸² I am indebted to Alix Johnson for reminding me of the connection between Kim’s rogue infrastructure and the monster trains I describe.

⁸³ Social skills included maintaining appropriate distances and practicing “civil inattention” (Urry 2007).

In the next section, I examine how monster trains were made, by tracing how renovations in the name of modernization transformed obsolete trains into monstrous assemblages. I then examine how passengers experienced this transformation through the trains' shifting interiors (the shifting materiality and affect of seats, windows, and lights), before turning to an exploration of the embodied manner in which railroad workers and passengers learned to navigate monster trains.

The Making of Monster Trains

When Trenes de Buenos Aires (TBA) took over the Sarmiento and Mitre lines in 1995, it inherited an aging fleet of Toshiba electric trains.⁸⁴ These had been in service since the 1960s and were already obsolete; spare parts were no longer available. Per the concession agreement, TBA was tasked with recovering deficient rolling stock and rendering it fit for service. The company's response to this mandate was to subject Toshiba trains to so-called renovations. Each of these renovations was touted as a "modernization" of the rolling stock (as defined by Roque Cirigliano, TBA's head of Rolling Stock, in his court testimony⁸⁵) and was indexed by a new bodywork color. Thus, the Toshibas, originally yellow with red stripes, were repainted light blue and white under TBA, with the company's logo displayed on their exterior. In the early 2000s, some of these light blue and white trains were retrofitted again, painted purple, and renamed "Puma" (Memoria y Balances TBA n/d). It was not uncommon to see a trainset

⁸⁴ For a brief history of Toshiba electric trains in Argentina, see Mochkofsky (2012).

⁸⁵ Fieldnotes from court hearing on May 26, 2014.

(*formación*) comprised by a mismatched set of passenger cars, some purple, others light blue and white, corresponding to different renovation periods (see Figure 8).

Sergio, the former ticket-vendor introduced in the previous chapter, described this “restyling” of Toshiba trains as follows:

You saw a car that had been in service for 40 years, they presented it with a new *trompa* [literally, “trunk” or “face,” used in reference to the front part of a train’s first car], they changed the seats, etc. [They installed] air conditioning equipment that, not receiving proper maintenance, *complicated* [train] service, because there were [service] cancellations due to problems... Basically, what I see is that they gave them a facelift,⁸⁶ they presented it as something modern, and they charged it as much more than what it was really worth.

Bautista, employed in the Mitre line’s Hygiene and Safety department, echoed Sergio’s views, describing the Puma train in similar terms: “[The Puma] was the modification that TBA did to the Toshiba, they put air conditioning and meant to put a whole computerized system that...at that time...was the best. That obviously lasted...five years I believe... Then it began to break, there were no spare parts, and, well, today what is left is...what you travel in, you see it everyday...It is a modified Toshiba, yes. With air conditioning and a computer.” “The Puma, which seems more plastic, to put it one way, is the aerodynamized [*aerodinamizado*] Toshiba,” he continued, “They changed its name, but it was still the same one, that is, nothing changed.”

In a country where historically most imported rolling stock was already used, tinkering with trains was not uncommon.⁸⁷ As Bautista put it, “Nothing *new new* was ever

⁸⁶ The expression he used was “*les lavaron la cara*,” which denotes a cosmetic/light improvement.

⁸⁷ TBA’s practice of tinkering is not always described in purely negative terms, sometimes reframed instead as a form of resourcefulness and exploration. For instance, in an article he penned for *Todo Trenes* describing the state of rolling stock on the Merlo-Lobos branch, which was also administered by TBA, Sergio wrote: “By then, TBA had tinkered more deeply [*había metido mano más profunda*] in its former long distance car, and not satisfied with the elimination of toilets and the replacement of seats and lights that it had already undertaken, began to open intermediate doors and replace windows, which was not entirely wrong, except because it did so without a standardizing criteria, utilizing different designs and materials

bought. In fact, everything that was brought over was what was left over in another country. That is, what was not being used any longer, was discarded and was brought here.”⁸⁸

Despite the company’s modernizing impulse, TBA’s renovation projects mostly decreased the reliability (*confiabilidad*) of trains. While the addition of air conditioning to trains was meant to reframe the latter as a modern mode of transport, in practice this refurbishment only “complicated” operations, to use Sergio’s term. Air conditioning (A/C) equipment consumed more energy than fans and was prone to malfunction (particularly during the summer), causing trains to be taken out of circulation for repair. When functioning, the A/C would often drip, forming puddles and exasperating passengers. Train car windows, which could originally be lowered or slid open, were in turn replaced by fixed panes. This alteration meant that when the A/C did in fact break down, train cars would become veritable ovens, compounded by the fact that the metal shutters, whose function was to protect passengers from the sun’s glare, had been removed.⁸⁹

practically in each unit or in small batches of units” (García 2016:24). Sergio goes on to describe TBA as a “strange company that did not stop exploring, tinkering [*meter mano*] and try to improve the design of its vehicles, but that would then put them into service [*los libraba al servicio*] and forget to provide them with a basic care” (García 2016:25).

⁸⁸ Former Secretary of Transport Ricardo Jaime (2003-2009), in fact, faces criminal charges for the purchase of overpriced obsolete train cars from Spain and Portugal; these units, deemed to be merely *chatarra* (scrap metal), were in such poor condition that they were unable to be recovered for service. Jaime, who faces charges for illegal enrichment and corruption, received hefty commissions for this purchase (Lavieri 2017).

⁸⁹ Metal shutters were sold by concession companies as scrap metal and became a symbol of their profiting off *desguace* (the practice of gutting out railroads and their infrastructure).



Figure 8: A Sarmiento train en route to Once station on February 9th, 2014. Photo by author.

In its quest to stretch—or pocket—state subsidies⁹⁰ and in lieu of preventive maintenance, TBA engaged in a practice known as “deferred maintenance,” a superficial retrofitting of trains that postponed the proper maintenance recommended by the rolling stock’s manufacturer. Given the unavailability of spare parts for this model of Toshiba trains, TBA implemented a system of cannibalization, whereby train cars were repaired with parts gutted from other cars. (Repairs, in fact, were outsourced to Emprendimientos Ferroviarios, known as EmFer for short, a company also controlled by brothers Mario and Claudio Cirigliano, of TBA.) This was a modality of *atar con alambre*, of precarious wiring together, of making do with elements at hand. This practice was common across different lines and preceded TBA’s tenure; in fact, a railway

⁹⁰ The model of subsidized concession that metropolitan railways were subjected to is described in the previous chapter.

enthusiast I met at the *ferroclub* (railway club) in Remedios de Escalada described the locomotives and passenger cars that he and his fellow club members repaired in similar terms: “Every time we disassemble something, we find a cannibalization system, where a machine resembles a Frankenstein monster.”

TBA’s successive modernization projects thus produced what many of my interlocutors called *formaciones engendro*, Frankensteinian assemblages comprised by a haphazard suturing of spare parts. “They say they are new and they are not new,” Félix, a Sarmiento user, complained, “They are all, eh, assembled [*armadas*]. All taking a—how can I explain it... A spare part from one and putting it in another, and then they paint [the train]. And then they say they are new.” His voice rising in exasperation, he added, “No... *It is evident when it is not new.*”

Ramón, the train conductor on the Mitre line introduced in Chapter Three, confided to me that under TBA’s tenure, even the Toshiba trains’ metal shell or outer metal structure (known as the *chapa*) was altered. He described the original Toshiba trains as having a very different *chapa*: “It was very compact, very dense. It is *supposed* to meet certain standards, you see.” The original Toshibas never caught on fire, not even when there were short circuits on the tracks: “When we had the Toshiba, I mean the Toshiba from the ’80s, from the ’70s – I’ve had trains burn many times (*se me ha quemado muchas veces el tren*), but the fire never spread inside, not even the *chapa* burned. [Only] the paint burned.” But some five years ago, he claimed, a Puma (i.e. a Toshiba train refurbished by TBA) burned completely: “TBA adduced (*aducía*) in the quality controls that it was fireproof, that is, it could not catch fire. Well, this train burned, in just a matter of seconds! It was tremendous, it melted!”

Changing Interiors

From the point of view of commuters, TBA's "deferred maintenance" practices and "modernization" projects were experienced in the form of trains that were increasingly *less* comfortable, increasingly cheaper in quality, and increasingly dangerous.

Daniel, a veteran Sarmiento user who, at the time of my fieldwork was in his early thirties and wore a faint goatee and glasses, attributed the Sarmiento line's deterioration to what he referred to as "precarious repairs" (*reparaciones precarias*).⁹¹ As we conversed one hot January day at Cool Café, the one air-conditioned café in Once station, whose glass walls offered a panoramic view of the main hall and of the arrival and departure of trains, Daniel described how the interior of the Toshiba trains had changed over the years. "When they go, so to say, renovating [the trains], they use cheaper materials. Of poorer quality, or less comfort," he explained. He described the plastic carpets or mats that had been installed by TBA on Sarmiento trains as being thin and wearing away quickly with the incessant treading of feet. "The lights are more uncomfortable to the eye, because they are fluorescent tube lights," he continued, adding that when windowpanes broke they were replaced not with glass but with acrylic. "Originally the Toshibas had materials of a much better quality," he added, "There were...I do not know if you remember from when you were a child, I do not know in

⁹¹ Daniel lived in Morón, a municipality in the western *conurbano* (as Greater Buenos Aires is often referred to) and had been riding the Sarmiento for as long as he could remember: in elementary school, he used to accompany his father on his business routes on the train (his father sold commercial billboards, a business that Daniel has now taken over), and as a teenager he rode the train to school. At the time of our interview, he took the Sarmiento some four times a week for work purposes. He would take it more often, he clarified, if it were not for the line's poor service (he had the flexibility to work from home).

the Mitre [line],⁹² but here trains had upholstery. Seats were upholstered! In a green color. They were rotatable. That is, you could move them according to the direction the train was going in.” Now, train seats were made of plastic and were narrower and harder, “like those of a bus.” “But even the bus is more comfortable, because [its seats] are padded,” Daniel lamented. When I asked Daniel when he had begun to notice the Sarmiento’s deterioration, he replied, “It has always been in decline, for as long as I remember.” “Culturally, taking the train is a punishment in Argentina,” he quipped. “They say that long ago, I do not know, in the 40s or 50s, traveling by train was a luxury. Grandparents tell this. One can read about it. Older people even tell that the train was a source of pride.”⁹³

Natalia, an undergraduate student of anthropology at the University of Buenos Aires and frequent Sarmiento user, offered a similar view. “When they go renovating—renovating between scare quotes [*entre comillas*], no? — the trains, they give them a facelift [*se les lava la cara*] inside. The green seats, which were large, were removed... Basically, the criteria at the time, when the railway was created, was...for people to be able to rest, to travel comfortably.” Like Daniel, Natalia reminisced about the color and type of light used in the past: “The lights were yellow lights ... It was planned for a rest. A rest, an enjoyment.” “In the renovation, they put materials that are very *hard*, and in the first

⁹² Daniel knew I had grown up in the suburbs served by the Mitre line. Railway lines also function as a marker of class: the Mitre line is generally associated with a middle/upper-middle class public, while the Sarmiento line is generally associated with a lower-middle and working-class public.

⁹³ Here Daniel also reminisced about the country’s railway heritage: its extensive rail network, its domestic production and export of rolling stock. “There was a railway industry,” he said. When I asked Daniel why he thought this had all been lost, he paused and then replied, “Maintaining a good railway is expensive. If one looks at it from a capitalist perspective, no? It is expensive, because...it is like a hospital, or a school. In truth, it is meant to offer a service, so you have to continually put in money.”

cases of *very* poor quality, which is why they have to renovate again,” she continued. “If the green seats lasted *fifty* years it is because they were of a good quality... There was another *quality* in what was used,” she added. Claudio, a veteran railroad worker, who at the time was working as a supervisor in a locomotive repair workshop, decried the loss of seat upholstery in similar terms: “Today the seats are made of *plastic*. They did not *come* in plastic, they came in soft leather [*cuerina mullida*], some had armrests... They were comfortable seats! ... And today we’ve arrived to...this degradation.”⁹⁴

The type of upholstery in train seats has traditionally been a marker of class (Lofgren 2008). In Argentina, the loss of leather upholstery in metropolitan railways indexes the degradation of train travel, the loss of quality and comfort. Yet many of my interlocutors, both commuters and railroad workers, partly attributed the loss of leather seats to another factor: improper passenger behavior, often coded as “vandalism.” In court hearings surrounding the *Tragedia de Once* crash, TBA supervisors and directors and their lawyers blamed the Sarmiento’s notoriously decrepit state on its users. The plastic seats used to replace the Toshiba’s original leather upholstery are in fact termed “anti-vandal seats” (*asientos anti-vandálicos*). Daniel himself attributed the deterioration of Sarmiento’s interior not only to TBA’s “precarious repairs,” but also to “vandalism.” “They break windows, break the doors, the seats are broken, they are scribbled,” he

⁹⁴ This history of (dis)comfort is not without its dissenters. Félix had heard a different story: “I am told [by] older people, that in the Sarmiento one never traveled well (*nunca se viajó bien*). *Never*.” Around the 1960s, he had heard, people used to travel on the roof: “It has never been a good line. That is what I am told.”

complained (without specifying who “they” were).⁹⁵ In these views, then, the type and quality of train seats is merely the company’s response to improper passenger behavior.

The Toshiba trains’ original upholstery only survived on the Urquiza railway line, which was concessioned to Metrovías (the company that also manages the city’s subways).⁹⁶ In Claudio’s words, “The wagons [sic] are kept *originally as they came* from Japan! That is, they had the good fortune of having a *public* that cared for them, they always ran within the city of Buenos Aires, with another quality of people, so, eh, the costs are reduced. No, you do not have vandalism [there].”⁹⁷

The replacement of leather seats by plastic ones points to the forms of *desguace* (gutting out) and *desidia* (neglect) that transformed Toshiba rolling stock into monster trains under the guise of modernization. For Sarmiento trains were not always of poor quality: rather, they were *made* into cheap trains. Monster trains were thus the result of the haphazard modernization of obsolete rolling stock, deferred maintenance, and precarious repairs (and, according to some of my interlocutors, vandalism).

⁹⁵ Natalia, in turn, disagreed with the tendency to blame damaged seats on passenger behavior. The issue, for her, lies in the quality of the materials used by TBA: “With the overcrowding that there is, it is like the plastic chair in your house. That is, you bought a cheap chair, and you use it every day, 500 people, with different weight, different shape, with... What you cause is for it to break. So it is also easy to blame the user [i.e. the passenger or rider] with, ‘Ah, no, but they destroy everything,’ and leave it at that.”

⁹⁶ According to Jorge Waddell, when the metropolitan railways were under the purview of Ferrocarriles Argentinos, the state company dismembered in the early 1990s, company people (he in fact referred to the company’s “internal language”) would joke that the Urquiza was not a train. “It is the vehicle that old ladies take to do their shopping” [*en el lenguaje interno de la empresa, se dice que, “Nah, si el Urquiza no es un tren. Es el vehículo que toman las viejas para ir a hacer las compras!”*] “That is what they would say!” he chuckled.

⁹⁷ Claudio contrasted the Urquiza line with the Roca line, which connects the city to the southern suburbs, where he lives and which is often used by soccer fans: “On the Roca, fans [*la hinchada*] of Boca, or fans of River, Independiente, whichever, travel, and the next day that train that they took has to go inside (i.e. into the workshop) to erase the paintings, replace the windows, replace the seats.”

Navigating Monster Trains

While the two previous sections have examined the *materiality* of the transformation of aging Toshiba trains into monster trains, in what follows I turn to the *bodily* dispositions acquired by railroad workers and passengers to navigate and survive these dilapidated trains.

Driving monster trains required a particular kind of expertise, an embodied knowledge or attunement crafted over time – and not simply because of the unstable nature of refurbished rolling stock. Track infrastructure, as seen in Chapter Three, had deteriorated under TBA’s watch. Poor maintenance and heavy traffic had caused rails to lose their shape (their “straightness”) and to sink into the ground in places with insufficient railroad ballast or an inadequate track bed, a recipe for derailment. The signaling system, in turn, was largely obsolete. According to Ramón, the train conductor, many signals did not work properly, sometimes indicating “Caution” or “Danger” for no apparent reason (or rather, indicating caution or announcing danger so often that obeying them did not seem viable). Supervisors had thus developed a habit of instructing conductors to violate restricting or stop signals without following proper protocol—on the assumption that restricting or stop signals were simply malfunctioning. The risks posed by faulty signaling infrastructure and supervisors’ oversight were compounded, Ramón added, by the trains’ braking system, which, over time, had begun to lose its braking capacity. “This is because there are leaks in the pipes, because the cylinders are worn, because the air tanks are condensed with a lot of humidity and dirtiness... I mean, all of this helps to reduce the braking capacity, the application of compressed air to the

cylinders,” he explained. Under these conditions, train conductors’ experience became particularly relevant. “Lately trains have worked thanks to the conductors’ experience and expertise,” Ramón noted. Age was a significant factor: while older conductors knew to refuse to drive a train they deemed unsafe, younger, less experienced conductors were more “permeable” to supervisors’ pressure to stick to the service schedule.

Refurbished Toshibas also lacked speedometers. Ramón conceded, however, that in the nearly 30 years in which he has worked as a train conductor, he has never seen a speedometer on a Toshiba train, since these had been taken out even before TBA’s tenure. Ramón, like other conductors, has learned to rely instead on the manometer, the pressure gauge, and on his own knowledge of the terrain and of the machine. When I asked him how he gauged speed without a speedometer, Ramón launched into a detailed depiction of the terrain between Suárez and Retiro, the two terminal stations in his branch, describing the steep slope from Suárez to Chilavert and the manner in which the ground then levels off. He calculated that, in normal conditions (i.e. when the track signals indicate that he has right of way), he averages 50-60km/h (31-37mph) in most sections.⁹⁸ “But that is something that experience gives you,” Ramón clarified, “Experience gives you that”:

Yes, with time, you... For instance, you are entering a station, you apply [with the break] a kilo, kilo and a half, kilograms per squared centimeter [of compressed air], that is the reference, right? The manometer goes indicating that. And you can tell (*vos te das cuenta*), because the train... First because of the inertia, you feel a...in your back, like a thing that announces that the train is slowing down. As it also lets you know when you apply [kilos of air pressure] and the train continues sliding forward (*se sigue deslizando*). You see? You can tell. And then, of course, when you feel that sensation, you have already dominated the train (*vos ya al tren lo tenés dominado*). Because you see that the pace slows

⁹⁸ The length of a railroad branch is divided into “sections,” which could be the distance between two stations.

down (*la marcha se reduce*), and then *you* handle the train (*abí lo manejás vos al tren*). That is why I am telling you, it is very particular, very particular.

Different trains, however, have different braking capacity, insofar as their systems have been worn down to varying degree. Thus, conductors often find themselves driving units that do not brake properly and having to compensate: “With one’s experience with trains, you know how to go,” Ramón explained, “If my train is *flojo de frenos* [lit. “has loose brakes”], well, I would have to start applying the brakes 50 meters ahead of time.”⁹⁹

As can be gleaned from Ramón’s accounts, the knowledge required to drive a monster train is as much technical as it is corporeal. Such constant *attunement* to both train and infrastructure takes its toll on the motorman, as this excerpt from my exchange with Ramón reflects:

R: Our work, you know, is very stressful, you are exposed to personal accidents.

S: What makes your work stressful?

R: Above all, the attention that you have to pay permanently... In railroad crossings, pedestrian crosswalks, *every day*, or almost every day, you come across distracted people, imprudent people – and I do not mean to put the blame on others, it is a dynamic. Then, there are the suicidals (*los suicidas*), for some strange reason they always choose the train to end their problems, and all these things get to you (*te golpean*), in different ways. All organisms are set to withstand posttraumatic stress, which has been proven to cause general pathologies, no? Posttraumatic stress provoked by these accidents.

By “accidents” Ramón means situations in which a train runs over a person or car. Because trains take time to brake fully, often a conductor will see a person crossing the train’s path (either willingly, in the case of attempted suicide, or unwittingly, in the case of distracted or imprudent pedestrians) and will be unable to stop the train in time.

⁹⁹ “Loose brakes” is shorthand among Mitre workers for brakes that are slow to react; the phrase used by Sarmiento workers is *freno largo*, lit. “long brake.” These phrases point to the particular cultures of different railroad lines.

In his view, just as train bodies deteriorate over time, becoming more susceptible to material stress, so do human bodies:

I became a conductor at the age of 25, I was turning 26. Perhaps the emotional impact at that age, while it does startle you, it is something unknown. But the emotional impact, the shock, let us call it, well, because of your youth, your predisposition, your organism, the wear, in short, a natural biological thing, you obviously assimilate it better. Now, one says, when one gets older, in some matters one, well, one acquires certain experience, one gets tougher. But in these matters, it is the other way around, because the entire organism is already older, more worn down, and it has a different predisposition. Look, by now it must be... I never count them, I tell you... I never... I do not even know the accidents I have had because, thank God, I handled them that way, they never stick with me. It is not that I do not care, it is just that I do not turn it into, let us say, a psychological issue. Five or six years ago, in Urquiza station, I remember, the last one... And I noticed that with each accident it grew harder and harder for me to recover.¹⁰⁰

As veritable human-machine ensembles, monster trains blur the distinction between the human and the machinic, and their material deterioration appears to be entwined with the deterioration of the human body and psyche.¹⁰¹ Passengers, in turn, who were often subjected to long waits and cramped rides, also spoke of bodily fatigue. Paula, a commuter on the Mitre line and employee at a multinational company downtown, recounted, “It has sometimes taken me two hours, three hours, to arrive to work. And one arrives worn out (*desgastado*), one travels standing, one travels tiredly.”

Passengers’ bodies also became attuned to monster trains and their idiosyncrasies (as mine did over the course of a decade commuting by train in Buenos Aires, prior to the start of this research). Disruptions—the delays and cancellations, the self-evacuations

¹⁰⁰ Ramón spoke disparagingly of the psychological assistance provided by the ART (the *aseguradora de riesgo de trabajo*, the work risk insurance), saying that after accidents drivers received follow-up psychological assistance for merely three days. Workers can request for a longer treatment but are pressured to return to work quickly (Ramón defined this as *chantaje*, as blackmail, as drivers are threatened with losing their job if they do not return to service promptly).

¹⁰¹ See Schivelbusch (1986) on the history of physical and psychic deterioration, and their shifting medical explanations, in relation to railway accidents. The industrialization of travel wrought by the railway, and the new “industrialized life” it helped usher in, was seen as causing new medical phenomena.

from a train that had stopped between stations (due to technical malfunctioning, perhaps, or the running over [*arrollamiento*] of a person, it was rarely made clear), helping or being helped by other passengers as one jumped off onto the rocky ballast, taking care to avoid the electrified third rail—were part of the train’s folklore. Schedules seemed capricious, prone to fluctuation, and rarely matched posted timetables. One showed up at the station and expected the train to arrive sometime in the next 10 minutes or so. Finding an empty seat was a rare treat (except when riding late at night), and one learned how to maintain one’s balance on a moving train, feet set wide apart, swaying with the mass of compressed bodies, keeping a wary eye for gropers and pickpockets. One learned how to covet certain spots, sitting cross-legged against a door or with knees pulled up to the chest to make more room for others (every inch could make a difference). The sign that warned that leaning against the door was dangerous was perfunctory, if not ludicrous; were they to open suddenly mid-trajectory, one could only hope to be held inside by the mass of corporeal entanglement. A prized spot, apt only for the relatively young and nimble, was to climb on top of the waist-high cabinet present in some cars. One learned how to inch towards the door as one’s station drew near; how to read bodily dispositions that suggested that a person might be about to vacate a seat, and how to move quickly to secure it. One developed idiosyncratic preferences for particular train cars (at the front, middle, or back of the train)¹⁰² and for making time go by, listening to music, sleeping, reading a neighbor’s newspaper

¹⁰² Daniel, for instance, prefers to ride in the rear cars, where he more likely to find an available seat, as passengers tend to congregate in the first cars, especially as the train approaches the terminal station. When possible, he avoids traveling during rush hour, which he defines from 6:30am to 8:30am or 9am, and from 6:30 to 7:30pm, when traveling “like sardines” is inevitable.

surreptitiously, gazing out the window, observing fellow passengers while averting eye contact — forms of sociality that emerge within a transient community, temporarily enclosed in a moving train (Lofgren 2008, Urry 2007).¹⁰³

It was through these learned skills and bodily dispositions that passengers understood the Once Tragedy. This became evident during the trial, when survivors described how they could gauge the train's speed with their bodies (through the rhythm of jolts and swaying) and how on February 22, 2012 they had come to know that the train was not braking as usual. Passengers who always rode in the same compartment, in the same section of that compartment, and who at a given station could always see the newspaper stand through the nearest window, noticed that day that the stand was further behind; the train had stopped further ahead than usual, a sign, they said, that it had difficulty braking.

Racializing Infrastructure

The experience of infrastructure, however, is never uniform. TBA's monster trains, in fact, were not made equal across different lines and branches, and many of my interlocutors would offer unsolicited comparisons of the Mitre and Sarmiento lines, contrasting both their rolling stock and ridership. Descriptions of passenger behavior, couched in terms of (im)properness, were often thinly-veiled comments on the presumed (racialized) class position of riders. Galen Joseph (2000:334) has shown how in

¹⁰³ As Christina Schwenkel (2015:530), citing Susan Leigh Star (1999), writes, infrastructures are “learned arrangements that constitute membership in particular communities of practice.”

Argentina racial ideas “can be articulated through idioms that appear not to be about race at all.” Vandalism and im/proper passenger behavior, I suggest, appear to be two such idioms. Following Joseph (2000), concerns over passenger behavior and over improper care of public spaces and goods thus appear to reflect anxieties around the whiteness of Argentina and the purported degeneration of the nation, as well as middle-class *porteños*’ ambivalence about their own belonging to the nation.

Félix, a Peruvian handyman in his 60s who commutes regularly on the Sarmiento from his home in Ituzaingó to posh apartments in the city where he repairs A/C equipment and performs paint jobs, described the hassles he faced when trying to board the train: “[P]eople want to get off the train and others want to board, they want to board at the same time as people get off. The ones who want to get off, the ones who are boarding push them back in. So people begin to hit, shove, kick.” The Mitre, in contrast, offered a different experience for this erstwhile rider: reminiscing on a trip he took to Tigre, one of the Mitre line’s terminal stations, located by the Río de la Plata delta and a popular weekend destination, Félix mused, “In the Mitre [line], how well, how well one travels!” In his account, Mitre passengers queue on station platforms and wait their turn to board. “I would take the train in peace (*tranquilo*), seated. And at rush hour, peacefully, nothing of this shoving.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ While it is true that most Mitre passengers queue before boarding the train, they only do so in the terminal station, where lines have been painted on the station floor indicating where car doors will be located once the train pulls in. I did not see similar lines painted in the Sarmiento’s terminal stations. Also, in the Mitre line’s terminal station of Retiro, passengers descend on one platform, while those waiting to ascend do so on a platform on the other side of the train. Train doors open first on one side, letting passengers out, and only then open on the other to let passengers in. In the Sarmiento line’s terminal station, passengers descend and board on the same side, as each train is served by only one platform. Thus, station infrastructure and the railway lines’ distinctive operation methods appear to elicit or enable particular kinds of behavior and boarding/descending rituals. Furthermore, I have witnessed passengers trying to “cut the line” in Mitre stations (for instance, by boarding on the platform where passengers are

All those people from the Mitre.... They are all people who work and get off at San Isidro. These are places, let us say, of employees, office employees. Of a high economic level. That is, they are very cultured (*tienen mucha cultura*). Because those trains do not have any strikes, they do not go on strike, no, no, no, they do not have any disgraces (*desgracias*). Why? Because the people look after [the trains]. It gives you pleasure to board those trains' *furgones* [bike cars]. It gives you pleasure. Clean. Instead, the Sarmiento, the Roca, all the rest.... They are not...they are people with a black head (*gente de cabeza negra*) as they call them. I am not a racist, but *cabecita negra* (little black head) because... how can you destroy a [mode of] transport that you need?"

In Félix's account, the Mitre line's ridership is comprised primarily by "cultured" office employees "of a high economic level." Mitre passengers take care of their trains, and Mitre workers do not go on strike. These trains are clean, and even the *furgón*, the bike car, the most dreaded compartment in other railway lines, often associated with alcohol, smoke, and catcalling, is a pleasure to travel in.¹⁰⁵ The Mitre line is presented as an exception: the Sarmiento, the Roca, and "all the rest" transport *cabecitas negras* who purportedly "destroy" their trains. *Cabecitas negras* is a derogatory term first used to denote people who migrated from the interior to the capital (Ratier 1971, Galen 2000).¹⁰⁶ Galen Joseph (2000) notes that its use became widespread during Perón's first government (1946-1955), when thousands migrated to the capital, scandalizing *porteños* with their uncivilized behavior, such as the wetting of feet in public fountains. Today, the term is used to describe people perceived as having a darker phenotype and/or as being

descending, rather than queuing on the other platform, or, on the opposite platform, by rushing onto the train as soon as the doors open to let passengers in, skipping the line altogether). In these instances, those passengers are often publicly scolded and humiliated by other passengers, and sometimes even forced off the train.

¹⁰⁵ On one of my first rides on the Sarmiento line, I was accompanied by Soledad, an anthropologist friend and veteran Sarmiento user who assured me that her feminism had been largely shaped by years of enduring catcalls and warding off gropes on that line. Compounding the trope of the *furgón* as a dangerous place is the fact that in the *Traagedia de Once* this car sustained the greatest damage and the highest number of victims. As I discuss in the next chapter, one of my interlocutors attributes this heightened damage and victim count to the *furgón's* morphology: stripped of seats, the bike car was lighter than other train cars. It rose with the force of the crash, compressing like an accordion and penetrating the car in front.

¹⁰⁶ See Guber (1999) for an analysis of Hugo Ratier's classic ethnographic study of this social category and its role in Argentine anthropology.

poor, regardless of birthplace.¹⁰⁷ More generally, the term *negro* (black) has been used since the early twentieth century as a “class-based slur” (Alberto and Elena 2016:9), drawing from a “longstanding association in Argentina between dark skin and low socioeconomic status.”¹⁰⁸ Eduardo Elena (2016) argues that the term is now being used in new ways and even reclaimed as a self-identifying label, not least to criticize notions of Argentine racial exceptionalism (that is, the deep-rooted notion that Argentina is a white nation in a mestizo Latin America).¹⁰⁹

Félix’s comments, although more blatant than others’, were not unique. Ramón, the train conductor in the Mitre line, conceded that “the Sarmiento is a very complicated issue” [*El Sarmiento es un tema bravísimo*]. Bautista, former employee in TBA’s Hygiene and Safety department who worked on the Mitre line and lived near one of the Mitre’s stations, in turn, described the Sarmiento as follows:

¹⁰⁷ Gastón Gordillo (2016) explores how white middle-class anxieties and fantasies of racial purification have been triggered by the figure of the *malón*, the Indian hordes. The Indian *malón* traumatized white Argentina with its mobility (its transgression of spatial boundaries), conjuring images of invasion and pillage and threatening projects of white nationhood. While the *malón* has historically been placed outside of Buenos Aires, pressing in from without, it has more recently been reimagined as threatening the city from within, particularly in the figure of the *piqueteros*, unemployed sectors of the population who exert political pressure through roadblocks and marches (Gordillo 2016).

¹⁰⁸ Paulina Alberto and Eduardo Elena (2016:9) explain the term’s transformation from racial referent to marker of social class in the early twentieth century in a context of urbanization and industrialization and of growing activism of labor and leftist movements: “The growth of a proletarian sector and the importance of left-wing politics predicated on a belief in the essential historical reality of class and the secondary, ideological, status of other kinds of exclusion, meant that race further receded in visibility as a way of marking or explaining social difference. Yet even as class subsumed racial or ethnic identifications..., race strongly inflected the meaning of class.”

¹⁰⁹ Eduardo Elena (2016:203) notes that in a context of “widening economic inequality” in Argentina, despite some improvements during the Kirchnerista era, “the long-term trend has served to further racialize and politicize poverty: for many commentators, to be poor in Argentina is to be a *negro peronista* (a black Peronist).” “Those lumped into the category of ‘negro,’” he continues, “appear to be growing, thanks largely to cultural perceptions of prevailing socio-economic and political trends. This specter is apparent in dystopian visions regarding the ‘Andeanization’ or ‘Indianization’ of Argentina, which implicitly link anti-immigrant sentiment with a bitter sense that the nation has degenerated and lost its former superiority” (2016:204).

The people who live in the West are more complicated, I do not know why, they are more complicated than [the people] who live here. If they cancel a train here, at the most...[people] will start to yell, you see, insult, but it never goes beyond that. On the Sarmiento, instead, they execute you directly, or light the train on fire. That is very particular too, every... The people that each railway transports are very particular (*La gente que mueve cada ferrocarril es muy particular.*) The Sarmiento...they say it is the worst. I traveled [there], truth be told, and I attest (*doy fe*) that the few times I traveled... [The commuter] doesn't care about anything (*no le importa nada*). [They] break the doors, they climb through the windows, eh... They smoke, drink, anything, whatever you can think of, inside the train. They do not care about anything. That is, that one is...rougher (*más áspero*).

In symbolic geographies of Buenos Aires, particular railway lines are seen as standing in for particular kinds of people. In Bautista's words, "The people that each railway transports are very particular." Through the idiom of vandalism, people's behavior is racialized and seen as *amplifying* the material deterioration of trains.

In line with recent scholarship (e.g. Alberto and Elena 2016) that pushes against the notion of Argentine racial exceptionalism and the idea that race does not matter in social hierarchies in Argentina, I understand talk about vandalism and passenger improper behavior to be racializing idioms. The association of particular railway lines with particular publics, furthermore, sheds light on the "geography of race" (Alberto and Elena 2016:18) in Buenos Aires. Yet railways, I argue, are not a racializing infrastructure only insofar as they are wrapped up in narratives about civic indecency, risk, and degeneration, nor only insofar as they serve as a public space in which racial anxieties are played out. Railways have also served as a racializing infrastructure insofar as concession companies themselves made distinctions among ridership.

TBA itself was said to behave differently towards Mitre and Sarmiento users, offering dissimilar quality of service in each line. Natalia, like other commuters and activists I conversed with, believed that the company was not consistent in its treatment

of trains and passengers, and that it rerouted its more modern rolling stock to the Mitre line, that is, to the more affluent northern suburbs of Greater Buenos Aires. In her words, “The Mitre seemed to be for a different public ... it is as if those from the West were of a more marginal class.” A class action filed in 2001 against TBA, a case that eventually made its way to the Supreme Court, in fact, accused the company of violating the principle of uniformity with which public services must be rendered, as well as the constitutional right to equitable treatment, based on the markedly inferior quality of service rendered on the Sarmiento line compared to the Mitre, in terms of crowdedness, frequency of service, and levels of comfort and safety (insofar as the Sarmiento seemed more prone to malfunction).

But railway lines themselves are heterogeneous. In both the Mitre and Sarmiento lines, the diesel branches, which run through semi-rural areas, evince a greater degree of abandonment and deterioration compared to the electric mainlines, which run through urban and suburban areas. Different branches--and different branch sections—are in fact associated with varying degrees of comfort and risk. The Mitre line, for instance, is comprised by three electric branches (which connect the Retiro station downtown to the terminal stations of Tigre, Bartolomé Mitre, and José León Suárez, respectively); the affluence associated with this line is tied more closely to its Tigre branch. Looking out onto the platforms in Retiro station, where the three branches converge, I was always surprised by how noticeably different the trains corresponding to each branch looked. Trains on platforms 1 and 2, destined for Tigre, always looked markedly “newer” than trains on the remaining platforms, heading northwest. While the Mitre and Suárez branches shared rolling stock, the Tigre had its own *dotación* (fleet). Ramón, who

conducted trains on the Suárez branch, confided that, “TBA’s policy was to improve attention (*atención*) and service for Tigre people.” This preference, he clarified, was historical and predated TBA’s concession. “I do not know why we were always a little relegated in this regard,” he said. (Ramón did mention, however, that previous operators were “neater” (*más prolijos*) in terms of maintenance.) He remembers that TBA sent the first air-conditioned units, its Puma trains, to Tigre. “One associates it with the level of passengers (*el nivel del pasajero*),” he added.



Figure 9: View of the interior of Retiro station. Note that it is raining inside the terminal (due to missing slabs in the roof). Mitre passengers board on one platform and descend on another, while in the Sarmiento line's Once station outbound passengers must board on the same platform where incoming passengers are descending. Photo by author.

TBA’s differential treatment of the Mitre and Sarmiento lines reflects the manner in which railways in Buenos Aires have functioned as a “racializing” infrastructure, a sorting device (Bowker and Star 2000) that separates the population into distinct publics

and that translates class and racialized differences into differential/uneven (perceptions of) risk. Thus, historically the whiter and more affluent public in the Mitre line has been seen as more civilized and as more deserving of better trains and services than the mostly working-class, often darker-skinned, purportedly “complicated” riders of the Sarmiento line.

The uneven spatial and temporal politics materialized through trains and their infrastructure are perhaps best evinced in TBA’s so-called *tren blanco* or “white train.” This train was used to transport *cartoneros*, urban scavengers who make a living collecting and selling cardboard (*cartón*, from which their appellation derives), newspapers, and other recyclable refuse, and who became more visible as a social group in the prelude to and aftermath of Argentina’s 2001 financial crash. The *tren cartonero* (“cartonero train”) was comprised of fenced wagons; its seats had been gutted out to make room for *cartoneros’* carts. It transported its passengers from the *conurbano* (Greater Buenos Aires) to the city at night, serving only a few stops along the route and returning in the early hours of dawn. The Mitre line’s Olivos station (where Sergio worked as a ticket-vendor), nestled in an affluent suburb, operated as one such stop, thus catering to two distinct publics: that transported by the white train, and that by the regular-service commuter train. With its gutted interior and circumscribed route and schedule, the white train served as a “vehicle for class segregation” (Fraser 2015:6).¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ The white train, which also operated on the Sarmiento line, was discontinued in 2007: according to Gustavo Gago, TBA’s spokesperson, the train cars were needed to supplement the company’s “regular” services, and were sent to the workshop for retrofitting and renovation (*Clarín* 7/6/2007). The San Martín line, which connects downtown Retiro with the northwestern suburbs, continues to operate a *tren cartonero*. Daniela Soldano (2013) offers a detailed analysis of how station infrastructure and the special train’s schedule circumscribes *cartonero* mobility.

Argentina's metropolitan railways, fanning out from the capital city to the *conurbano* (greater suburbs) and hinterlands, can thus be seen as a racializing infrastructure.¹¹¹ If, as I argued in the previous chapter, the temporal dislocations wrought by uncertain and, in some cases, infrequent train schedules contributed to a kinetic hierarchy (Cresswell 2010), that is, a differential access to railway mobility that created cartographies of dis/connection, then, as I illustrate here, the material qualities of “monster trains” created a differential topography of comfort and risk along racialized class lines. Aboard trains, A/C equipment, LED screens, and upholstery appear as markers of a modernization reserved for some.

Like Cattle

If people were often quick to distinguish the Mitre and Sarmiento lines in terms of quality of service and ridership, most of my interlocutors also conceded that these lines faced very different *demands*. Daniel went as far as to define residents of the western suburbs (*zona oeste*) as “Sarmiento-dependent” (*Sarmiento dependientes*), insofar as there are no other direct public transportation routes between Once, in the city, and the western hubs.¹¹² “One takes the Sarmiento because one has no other choice,” he told me, “When the train does not run, the west collapses. It is impressive. When the train does not work,

¹¹¹ Verónica Pérez (2014) argues, in a similar vein, that the unequal mobility opportunities offered by the metropolitan passenger transport system reproduce social inequality.

¹¹² Bus routes are significantly more circuitous and thus imply longer commute times, and their fare is also more expensive.

it is like a heart attack to the city, it is an artery. Everything collapses.”¹¹³ Bautista conceded, “The quantity of people that [the Sarmiento] has...the demographic density that there is in the west is not the same as here [i.e. in the north], so the frequency, the frequency of trains, is already saturated [*ya está colmado*].” Natalia also saw overcrowded trains as a reflection of population distribution and density: “We here suffer an overcrowding [*hacinamiento*] that is not only with regards to the train.”¹¹⁴

Under TBA, the security system that warned conductors whether all train doors were properly shut, known as the *sistema de enclavamiento* (loosely translatable as “the interlocking system”), was altered. On the Sarmiento line, in particular, it became common practice to override the interlocking system, as doors were generally propped open during journeys, either by the sheer mass of passengers who could barely squeeze onto the overcrowded trains, or purposefully by passengers who enjoyed the fresh air (see Figure 8). This habit, whether instituted by passengers, workers, or management, is often portrayed as dangerous, as passengers can fall off (or be pushed out, as has occurred when passengers have been robbed onboard), and can be injured or killed.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ For some, this dependency or reliance on the Sarmiento line helped explain passengers’ allegedly improper behavior. Félix reflected on the branches that served the semi-rural hinterlands to the west of Buenos Aires, connecting these to the city and funneling people: “What happens is that many people from the towns (*del pueblo*) come from that direction. Working people (*gente laboradora*). Who I think arrive to Moreno [terminal station] and from Moreno sometimes have to catch another train. So people have a schedule. Because they say, “I leave at 3 and arrive at 5, and I have the connection/transfer (*empalme*) with the other train to continue on...That is why I think there is a desperation to travel (*Por eso para mí la desesperación de viajar*). That the train leaves and I have to board the train by whatever means possible, even if it is on the roof, because if not, I will miss the connection.” The constraints in schedule and the “desperation to travel” depicted by Félix point to classed geographies of dis/connection.

¹¹⁴ The Mitre line, particularly along its Retiro-Tigre branch, serves a mostly-wealthier area that is less densely populated (although some of its stations do serve working-class and poor neighborhoods). Many of my interlocutors believed that Mitre passengers had greater access to other forms of transportation, such as cars and buses, and were thus less dependent on the train.

¹¹⁵ The group of performance artists *Agrupación Boletos Tipo Edmondson* (ABTE), introduced at greater length in Chapter Five, reframed the act of propping doors open to let other passengers board as an act of camaraderie: next to the stickers that TBA placed by train doors begging passengers not to prop these

Overcrowded trains along the Sarmiento line partly resulted from the fact that TBA's Frankensteinian trains were prone to breakdown, thus limiting the number of trains in use and the frequency of service (as trains had to be taken out of circulation for repair). Recall, too, that Edubijes Ocaranza, in the opening vignette, attributed the breakdown of rolling stock to overcrowding itself, given the poor quality of materials: "Due to the amount of people, the multitude of people, the materials spring loose, because the material appears to be very weak." Breakdown, in turn, contributed to the saturation of alternate forms of transport. As Claudio, the railway workshop supervisor, explained:

When TBA takes the Mitre and Sarmiento in concession, the Sarmiento had 22 trainsets (*formaciones*) in service every day. 22 trainsets. In...In times of Ferrocarriles Argentinos, it had 25, and of 9 cars each. When TBA took over, it had...It had as many as 22 [trainsets] of 8 cars each. 8 or 9 cars, it never completed all of them with 9 cars. That, with the passage of time (*con el paso del tiempo*), has gone deteriorating, and today we have an offer of between 14 and 15 trains! That is, imagine that if 18 years ago when TBA took over, lets multiply, I do not know, eh, 2000 passengers on every train...*este*... by 20, 22, today those 2000 passengers for each train still exist! But the offer is not...is not there, so people turn to buses, cars, *combis* (minivans). We have saturated the highways, the roads, then come the delays, the noise, people's discomfort (*malestar*).

The depiction of the Sarmiento—and the city—as being *saturated* was recurrent.¹¹⁶

"The Sarmiento today is like being in rush hour all day," Bautista tells me.¹¹⁷ While *fewer trains* were in circulation since TBA took over management of the Sarmiento line,

open, ABTE added others of their own making proclaiming, "*Trabar las puertas también es un acto de solidaridad*," "Propping doors open is also an act of solidarity."

¹¹⁶ Conversations around the saturation and overpopulation allegedly suffered by the city of Buenos Aires fed into broader narratives around the "*modelo de país*," the kind of country, enabled or afforded by the shape and scope of the railway network. For instance, the fact that the railway network was shaped as a funnel (*embudo*), concentrating railway traffic in the direction of the city and its port, was often cited as a foundational flaw, as discussed in Chapter One.

¹¹⁷ Jorge Waddell and Sergio García, editors of *Todo Trenes*, told me of photographs that they have seen depicting people riding on the Sarmiento's roof as early as the 1950s. That overcrowding, they explained, was different to contemporary overcrowding: in the 1950s there had been a surge in demand; at the time of our meeting (2014), actual demand had decreased, but services were degraded and less frequent, contributing to overcrowded trains.

ostensibly because their obsolescence and the company's "modernization" projects rendered them prone to break down, *frequency of service* was limited by automobile traffic. Increasing frequency of service would "generate chaos in traffic," according to Bautista, as barriers would be constantly closed at railroad crossings, stopping the flow of cars. The length of station platforms, in turn, limits the number of train cars that can be strung together.¹¹⁸

As monster trains were prone to break down and were taken out of circulation for repair, the Sarmiento's fleet gradually dwindled and services became increasingly overcrowded. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that the Sarmiento line, which connects the city proper with the western suburbs, serves one of the most densely populated areas in metropolitan Buenos Aires. Overcrowding was often portrayed as dehumanizing, likening passengers to cargo. "They transport us like cattle," Félix complained.¹¹⁹

"Like cattle," in fact, became one of the gathering metaphors for disgruntled commuters, many of whom refused to pay for the poor service and resorted to riding ticketless in protest.¹²⁰ A group of passengers who called themselves the "Desperate

¹¹⁸ As Claudio put it, the Sarmiento line bisects the city and thus has to contend with many railroad crossings. Because of the limitation that railroad barriers pose to frequency of service, some railroad barriers have been replaced by underpasses. At the time I conducted fieldwork, a major infrastructural project to convert the first section of the Sarmiento line into an underground railroad had started – and stalled. This proposed "tunneling" (*soterramiento*) of the Sarmiento was controversial, its feasibility and appropriateness the subject of much debate among train activists and of many a newspaper article.

¹¹⁹ Interestingly, as noted in Chapter One, the Sarmiento line's predecessor, the Ferrocarril del Oeste or Western Railway, the first railway line to be built in Argentina, was originally a freight train; freight wagons were converted into passenger cars almost as an afterthought.

¹²⁰ Commuter fury occasionally irrupted in acts of violence and arson against infrastructure and rolling stock (although some of my interlocutors suspect the involvement of radical political groups as agitators, if not perpetrators). See Pérez and Rebón (2017) for an analysis of passenger protests and *estallidos de violencia* (outbursts of violence).

Sarmiento Users Front” (*Frente de Usuarios Desesperados del Sarmiento*, FUDESA for short), began organizing a series of mobilizations in Once station, in which members would wear cow masks and carry signs with the slogan, “We are not cattle.” Natalia, a university student who worked in retail and who at the time took the Sarmiento six times a week, describes the feeling of impotence that drove her to join FUDESA in 2006: “You never knew when the train was coming, much less whether you would be able to get on it or not.” Temporal uncertainty, addressed in the previous chapter, thus figures as a central factor in Natalia’s decision to protest commuting conditions. While acts of arson against rolling stock and ticket offices (as the material embodiments of concession companies accessible to passengers) had become highly visible forms of protest, given extensive media coverage and the further disruptions in service they triggered (see Pérez and Rebón 2017), FUDESA sought to take a nonviolent approach. Natalia attributes this to a founding member’s identification with/membership in the *Partido Humanista*, the Humanist Party, a non-Marxist Leftist party that, in her words, sought to uphold “the value of the human being.”

Natalia and other members of FUDESA conducted a survey among Sarmiento passengers and compiled a list of common complaints, which included uncertain frequency of service, lack of hygiene, lack of security, and overcrowding, and audited station infrastructure. The group created a petition to demand for the right to “safe and dignified public transport” and collected over 6000 signatures at train stations, which they then presented to the Comisión Nacional Reguladora del Transport (CNRT), the state agency charged with overseeing the fulfillment of the concession agreements. They also worked with the national Ombudsman (Defensoría del Pueblo de la Nación) and,

under the latter's auspices, filed 800 complaints (*denuncias*) (Fernández Moores 2012). According to Natalia, TBA responded with a facelift, *una lavada de cara* (literally "a face wash"). "This was when the purple trains appeared [i.e. the Pumas]," she recounts, "It was a face wash. We spoke of it as *makeup* (*maquillaje*) afterwards, no? Because it was the same train whose, I do not know, roof fan, for instance, had caught on fire. It was the *same one*, but they had removed the fan and put air conditioning..., which dripped water inside." "After all these complaints (*reclamos*), they applied makeup," she laments. Natalia defines the daily ordeals suffered by passengers in terms of violence: "We passengers were violated (*éramos violentados*) day after day, in having to transport ourselves in a form of transport that was completely deficient and dangerous." She remembers waiting for the train in Caballito station and watching as a train that was going in the opposite direction, towards Once, caught fire seemingly on its own: "It has happened to me, getting off in Ituzaingó and seeing a train go by that is catching fire underneath... Sometimes it is like grease (*grasa*), I do not know what the heck, *but it catches on fire.*"

FUDESA was not the only group mobilizing around the Sarmiento line's poor commuting conditions. A similar group who called themselves *Pasajeros del Roca*, Roca Passengers, had sprung up on the Roca line; they often met with FUDESA to discuss grievances and strategies. Shared experiences of discomfort and uncertainty also created communities on social media. Around 2011, Daniel created a Facebook page, titled *Un Sarmientista* (literally "A Sarmientite"), where he began to chronicle his daily tribulations as a commuter, inviting other passengers to share stories and photos of their own commutes. "To travel poorly was funny," he says of those times before the crash, which he refers to as *la Masacre de Once*, the Once Massacre. Although he himself has never

been in a major railway accident, Daniel recounts innumerable other incidents he experienced as a commuter: the train striking a pedestrian (*arrollamiento de personas*) and the ensuing delay, having to evacuate the train and walk along the tracks to the nearest station or crossing, incipient fires (*principios de incendio*), fist fights among passengers, cancellations because of severe weather. On one occasion, during a particularly bad storm in August 2012 that left the western suburbs looking “like a war zone,” he awaited on board a train from 8 to 11pm, as the time of departure kept shifting.

Daniel would later create a second Facebook page, titled *Usuarios Organizados del Sarmiento*, Organized Sarmiento Users.¹²¹ While he shared FUDESA’s concern with the deterioration of Sarmiento trains (which, recall, he attributes to TBA’s “precarious repairs” and to “vandalism,” as detailed in earlier sections), he criticized their “cooptation” by the Humanist Party. A staunch Marxist (of the Trotskyist strain, as opposed to other railway activists who identified themselves as Maoists), he couched the railway crisis in terms of class struggle: the bourgeoisie owned the State and the means of

¹²¹ I had first met Daniel at a meeting of representatives of different commuter groups from the Sarmiento, Mitre, and Roca railroad lines; it was the first time I attended those meetings (held once or twice a month in a building belonging to the Argentine Judicial Federation, a union of judiciary workers affiliated with the CTA, the Argentine Workers’ Central Union), and when I introduced myself and briefly explained my research project, Daniel had raised his eyebrows and offered to help. I took up his offer a month later and we met at a café in Once station for an interview. Daniel came armed with a piece of paper where he had scribbled down different topics and facts he wanted to address throughout our conversation. Although we were of the same age, Daniel tended to speak to me in a condescending tone: throughout our conversation, he asked me several times where I was from and whether I remembered who Cavallo was (a politician and infamous former Minister of Economy who is a household name). He also asked me if I had ever spoken to a Leftist militant before (he himself is an active member of the *Partido Obrero*, the Workers’ Party), in one swift move classifying me as non-Leftist, possibly non-militant, and probably not conversant in Leftist-militant-speak. I haughtily retorted that I had studied at the *Facultad de Filosofía y Letras* (a highly politicized school within the University of Buenos Aires, where radical Left militants are as much part of the landscape as the classrooms) and that I had read my share of Marx. To be fair, towards the end of our conversation, when he was describing commuter-activist groups in terms of class and class struggle—in a textbook Marxist analysis—, he did tell me that I was not a member of the bourgeoisie and that, as a commuter like him, I was also suffering from the bourgeoisie’s business schemes (*negociado*).

production, including railways, and lived off the working class, like parasites.¹²² The increasing precarity of labor conditions within the railway system, he explained, were inextricable from the deterioration of railway services. In their struggle for change, commuters should align themselves with railway workers, he believed.

After *Once*

As a member of FUDESA, Natalia was interviewed on national television after the *Tragedia de Once*—she cannot remember how soon after, perhaps it was the following day, or the day after that. She has seen video footage of the interview, and says she comes across as cold, almost anesthetized; the gravity of the crash had yet to sink in. She had already been deeply affected by the Flores Tragedy of 2011, when a bus crossed a malfunctioning barrier that was partly lowered and collided with two trains, leaving 11 people dead. For years FUDESA had requested the addition of *banderilleros* (railway crossing guards), to no avail. Natalia tells me she sees the Once Tragedy as a culmination of the violence that Sarmiento riders had been suffering on a daily basis, “a violence that reached its maximum expression that day,” she says.

The day after the crash, the Minister of Federal Planning, Julio De Vido, announced that, per President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s request, the State would act as a plaintiff (*querellante*) in the trial (see for instance *La Nación* 2/23/2012). Natalia

¹²² Another train activist, who identified himself as a Maoist, explained the differences between the Trotskyist and Maoist strains of the Argentine Left thus: Trotskyists prioritize building alliances with other worker struggles (*luchas obreras*) and have a classist perspective (*perspectiva clasista*), finding that the national bourgeoisie is as bad as the international or foreign bourgeoisie. Maoists, in turn, are not opposed to strategic alliances with the national bourgeoisie, and defend national industry.

remembers this with incredulity and indignation. One of FUDESA's slogans became "The State did not control, TBA did not fulfill, let the people be the plaintiff" (*"El Estado no controló, TBA no cumplió, que querelle el pueblo"*). Natalia and other commuter-activists provided federal prosecutor Federico Delgado with the numerous complaints they had filed (see Fernández Moore 2012). Taken as proof that the State had been made aware of the Sarmiento's condition and of TBA's breaches of contract, these documents ultimately prevented the State from acting as plaintiff. Despite this, FUDESA members felt defeated and many of them retreated from the public sphere, reticent to appear in media outlets. "There was a mixture of anger, indignation, and sadness," Natalia recalls, "Because if you have been working for something not to happen, and it suddenly happens, and with the cost of lives it had, you feel like breaking everything and sending everything to hell (*mandar todo a la mierda*)."¹²³ This feeling of impotence was compounded by the sense that, throughout their years of trying to change commuting conditions on the Sarmiento line, their efforts had often been met with indifference from fellow passengers, some of whom treated them as yet another hindrance in their daily travels.

Three months after the Once Tragedy, TBA's concession of the Mitre and Sarmiento lines was finally revoked. The company was replaced by UGOMS (*Unidad de Gestión Operativa Mitre Sarmiento*), a provisional consortium comprised by Ferrovías and Metrovías, the concession companies that operated the Belgrano Norte and the Urquiza lines respectively.¹²³ In the aftermath of the crash, the inscription "Trenes de Buenos

¹²³ These two companies, together with TBA, were also part of another consortium, UGOFE (*Unidad de Gestión Operativa Ferroviaria de Emergencia*), which had taken over operations in the Belgrano Sur, Roca, and San Martín lines after Metropolitano's concession was revoked.

Aires” that could be read on the side of the purple “Puma” cars was covered by a grey stripe, but the outline of the letters remained visible through the paint. A few months later, the Minister of Interior and Transportation, Florencio Randazzo, a presidential hopeful, oversaw the rebranding of the Sarmiento line as *transporte público*, “public transportation.” In an effort to erase the name and color-scheme of TBA, these life-expired (Barrows 2016) trains were repainted a darker, deeper blue—a hue that became known as *azul Randazzo*, Randazzo blue.



Figure 10: A "Randazzo blue" train in Once station. Note the "Transporte Público" ("Public Transport") brand displayed on the side.

Yet TBA’s logo remained etched onto windowpanes, a reminder of the obduracy of the concession company’s legacy and of the latent precarity of the railway system beneath a new veneer of modernization (see Figure 11). Repairs, in fact, were still outsourced to *Emprendimientos Ferroviarios* (Emfer), a company owned by the

Cirigliano brothers of TBA. The murkiness of the transition from TBA to UGOMS was even reflected in the juxtaposition of company uniforms: I often saw train guards wearing polo T-shirts bearing TBA's logo, under V-necked sweaters embroidered with the slogan "*Transporte Público*." While Toshiba trains were rebranded and repainted, the fact that this was, once more, a mere facelift was not lost on passengers. On one occasion I ran into Mario, an acquaintance, on board one such train in the Mitre line. Mario was a regular commuter on the line and although he had been momentarily beguiled by the newness of these trains, he told me while tapping on the train's interior wall, he suspected they were *los mismos de siempre*, the same as usual.¹²⁴

The *Tragedia de Once* seems to have shifted people's commuting patterns and strategies for surviving the dilapidated Toshiba trains. Some of my interlocutors (including Mitre passengers) mentioned they now avoided riding in one of the end cars and that they attempted to ride near the middle of a given train car, where they felt they would be safer in the event of a collision. Others avoided the second compartment altogether, as the second car had sustained great damage in the crash. The number of

¹²⁴ This suspicion of business-as-usual was shared by an employee of UGOMS who worked on the Mitre line. According to him, the "new" concession company included the "same people who worked before, just under a different name, basically." That is, while people from Metrovías and Ferrovías had been incorporated, none of the rank-and-file TBA workers had been replaced or dismissed. His evaluation of UGOMS was not positive: "They came here supposedly to bring order to the chaos that was TBA, but the...the...how do you say it? Reality shows that the two are worse than TBA." He attributed their poor performance to the fact that they were two different companies, with two different visions: "They mixed people from different places. So each had their own way of seeing things." But the problem also resided in the nature of the Mitre and Sarmiento lines, different in scale and substance from the smaller networks of the Belgrano Norte and Urquiza lines (which he described as "merely a straight line") administrated by Ferrovías and Metrovías respectively. With the Mitre and Sarmiento lines, particularly the latter, these companies had "encountered something unmanageable. TBA's people were already accustomed, so all in all it worked. But these people encountered a monster. They did not know how to manage it, and they [still] do not know how to." There was talk that these lines would now be reclaimed by the State (as they effectively were shortly after): "In fact, the faces of some TBA people that had supposedly been taken out are already reappearing," this employee claimed.

tickets sold in the Sarmiento line declined drastically; it is unclear to what extent this decrease corresponds to a decline in actual ridership, as many passengers refused to buy tickets (as a way to protest their commuting conditions) and as station personnel stopped controlling tickets.¹²⁵ The turnstiles guarding the entrance to station platforms were thus usually deactivated, a phenomenon referred to as *molinetes liberados*, freed turnstiles.

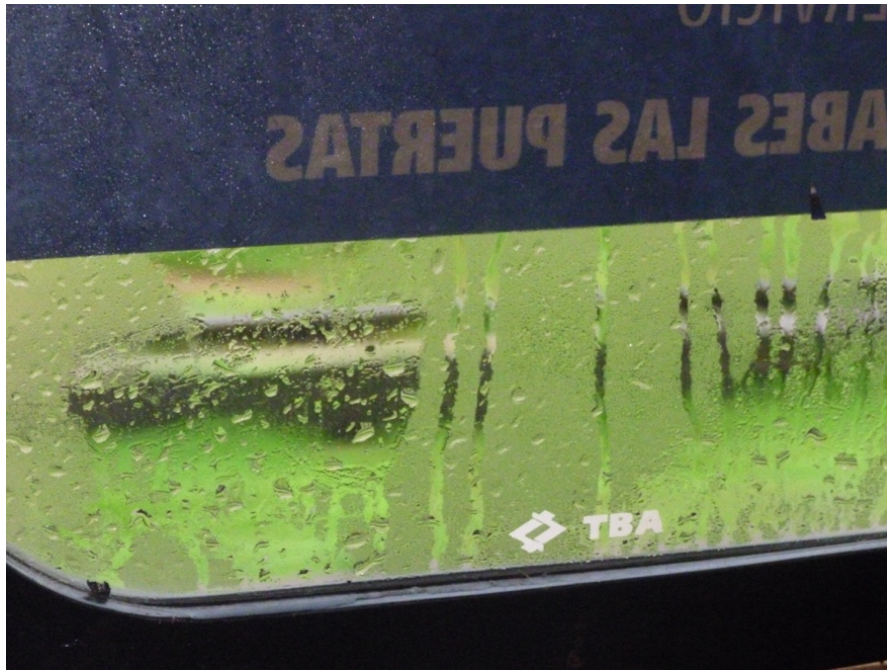


Figure 11: Etched on the windowpane: TBA's name and logo are visible on the windowpane of a refurbished "Randazzo blue" train car in the Sarmiento line. Photo by author.

In some ways, commuting conditions appeared to *worsen* in the months after the tragedy. The Sarmiento's fleet was reduced, as the units considered most "dangerous" were taken out of circulation. Frequency of service concomitantly *decreased*, with trains

¹²⁵ According to statistics collected by the CNRT, the total number of *ticketed* passengers carried by the Sarmiento line in 2011 was 88,613,508. By the end of 2012, that number had descended to 39,118,125. In 2013, the Sarmiento only sold 11,440,195 train tickets. These numbers began to increase in 2014, when train tickets began to be controlled again and when new rolling stock entered into service. Source: "Pasajeros Pagos Transportados 1993-2018," Excel spreadsheet compiled by CNRT and retrieved online from <https://www.cnrt.gob.ar/estad%C3%ADsticas-del-transporte-ferroviario> on 3/5/2018.

running every twenty, rather than every four to eight, minutes—when services were running normally, as the Sarmiento was still prone to malfunctioning. Trips, in turn, grew longer, as maximum recommended circulation speeds were lowered. Train conductors, in fact, were forced to reduce circulation speed to 5km/h (3mph) when entering terminal stations and to brake to a full stop a few meters before the buffers at the end of the tracks. Thus, while Félix’s commute from Ituzaingó to Once used to take 45 minutes before the Once crash, by September 2013 it generally took anywhere between 1 hour and 15 minutes to 1 hour and 40 minutes.¹²⁶ In his experience, riding the Sarmiento continues to take its toll: “It is a tremendous chaos, because one wants to ride in peace (*viajar tranquilo*), *one cannot ride in peace*. One is already stressed from the moment one leaves, from the moment one leaves one’s house until the moment one arrives.”

Beyond the problems of increased time of travel and decreased frequency of service, several of my interlocutors were preoccupied with the *uncertainty* that continued to permeate their daily commutes. “One does not know if one will make it to one’s destination,” Félix quipped. This uncertainty also prevailed in the Mitre line, where quality of service deteriorated drastically after the crash. Julieta commuted regularly from her home in Adrogué, a municipality south of the city of Buenos Aires, to university in Victoria, in the northern suburbs, a commute that entailed taking the Roca train, then a subway, then transferring to the Mitre train. She describes her experience with the Mitre’s station as “a lottery,” as she never knew when—and whether—the train would

¹²⁶ Because Sarmiento trains heading towards Once were already full as they left the terminal station of Moreno (i.e. the service’s starting point), Félix repeatedly found himself unable to board in Ituzaingó. He resorted to taking the train in the *reverse* direction of his destination, riding all the way to Moreno, waiting seated as the train emptied out and filled up again for its service to Once, and riding back to Once.

appear. Another Mitre commuter complained, “*Something happens every day ... And you do not know what the matter is. You do not know if there are signaling problems ... If it is the trains, if the trains that are [in service] have brakes or if they do not have brakes, you do not know what is going on. And you do not know where to find out, either.*”

The Meantime

As this chapter has traced, under Trains of Buenos Aires’ (TBA) watch, precarious repairs, deferred maintenance, and the haphazard modernization of rolling stock transformed aging Toshibas into “monster trains.” These Frankensteinian assemblages of spare parts, prone to malfunction and catch fire, posed a quotidian risk for passengers. The everyday, pregnant with risk and uncertainty, was itself rendered other. As trainsets were taken out of circulation for repair, frequency of service decreased, and service delays and cancellations led to overcrowding. Passengers experienced railway degradation through increasing discomfort, uncertainty, and unsettling incidents of technical malfunction. TBA’s so-called modernization of rolling stock, hence, placed the promise of progress in an ever-receding horizon, a state of deferral haunted by material histories. Modernization, however spurious, was made unequally available, and the disparities in quality of service offered by TBA in the Mitre and Sarmiento lines foreground how public transportation carves uneven geographies of risk and precarity (Pérez 2014, Soldano 2013). In a context of degraded railway service, popular discontent and uncivil behavior appeared to amplify the effects of lack of maintenance and obsolescence (Pérez and Rebón 2017).

In December 2012, a Mitre train derailed as it was nearing the terminal station of Retiro. Although the incident claimed no victims, it spurred Elda, a psychiatrist in her mid-sixties and erstwhile passenger whose two daughters were regular commuters, to found *Autoconvocados X los Trenes* (loosely translated as “Self-Summoned for Trains”). Beyond the spectacularity of large-scale train crashes, Elda’s concern was with what she calls the *pequeños incidentes* (“little incidents”), the minor derailments, incipient fires, and ubiquitous delays that permeated the everyday with a sense of anxiety and risk. During a spontaneous demonstration in Plaza de Mayo in June 2013 (historically the site of major protests in Buenos Aires) after the *Tragedia de Castelar* (which claimed three lives and injured over 300 passengers), Elda met members of other *agrupaciones de usuarios* (groups of train users), including Daniel (introduced above) from *Usuarios Organizados del Sarmiento*, as well as relatives of the victims of the *Tragedia de Once*. These and other *agrupaciones de usuarios* formed a broader umbrella group, together with the group that gathered the relatives and friends of the victims *Once Tragedy*, under the slogan *Ni un muerto más*, Not one more dead (see Chapter One). Members of these groups began to meet periodically in the venue of Argentine Judicial Federation (a union of judiciary workers affiliated with the CTA, the Argentine Workers’ Central Union). At these meetings, they discussed the state of the metropolitan network and organized events at railway stations to engage the broader traveling public in petitions demanding improvements in service.

In the aftermath of the *Tragedia de Once*, still riding monstrous assemblages that had received a fresh coat of paint, train users such as Daniel and Elda appeared to be in a state of anticipation of yet another tragedy. In October 2013, a month after I began

dissertation fieldwork, a Sarmiento train collided, once more, in Once, against the buffers at the end of the tracks. The collision occurred in the same platform as the *Tragedia de Once* (platform number 2) and at a similar hour (around 8:30AM, during the morning rush hour), producing an unsettling sense of *déjà-vu*. I myself was momentarily bewildered when I first saw images of the crash on the morning news. It took place a month or so after Interior and Transport Minister Florencio Randazzo announced a “railway revolution,” predicated on the purchase of new rolling stock from China and the (partial) renovation of infrastructure (a topic I address in Chapter Six). This crash, furthermore, triggered the nationalization (*estatización*) of the Sarmiento line: UGOMS’ concession was revoked, and the line was transferred to SOFSE (*Sociedad Operadora Ferroviaria Sociedad del Estado*), a state company that had been created by the 2008 *Ley de Reordenamiento Ferroviario* (Railway Reordering Law, *Ley* 26.352) and had hitherto not been put into effect.

In the face of Randazzo’s announced revolution, Elda’s concern was with what she referred to as the *mientras tanto*, the meantime, the time lag between promise and fruition, between the announcement of the revolution and the actual arrival of new trains and their promise of progress. With Daniel and other members of commuter-activist groups, Elda began organizing “diagnostic trips” (*viajes diagnósticos*) or “surveys” (*relevamientos*), as she called them, to audit passenger trains and their infrastructure and produce evidence for their petitions. It is to these diagnostic trips that I turn in Chapter Five, to examine more closely the link between railway infrastructure, memory, and risk.

Interlude: Heat

The sidewalks around Once station were replete, as they usually were, with street hawkers, their stalls cluttered with shoes, underwear, toys, and *bijou*, their sheer number signaling their triumph over city officials' attempts to push them off the streets, out of sight. Pedestrians hurriedly weaved their way to the train terminal, the subway station below, and the many bus stops crowding Plaza Miserere. Beneath the veneer of normality, the atmosphere was electric: like other Decembers, these weeks in late 2013 simmered with the threat of social unrest.¹²⁷ TV news stations had been broadcasting the nationwide *saqueos* or lootings by “mobs” in Tucumán, Jujuy, Chaco, Santa Fe, Tierra del Fuego, and other provinces where police officers had gone on strike. High inflation and widespread power outages further tempered collective moods. On the street, unease was almost palpable in the weary looks on people's faces, their hurried pace, the cadences of speech.

As I entered the station, I quickly spotted members of *Ni Un Muerto Más* (“Not One More Dead”). The group of concerned commuters had gathered to denounce the near-ubiquity of railroad accidents, technical failures, cancelled services. Elda, from *Autoconvocados X los Trenes* (Self-Rallied For Trains), was standing at the center of the station hall, across from the *boletería* (ticket booth), her clear, didactic voice (therapeutic even, fitting for a psychiatrist in her late 60s, I thought) amplified by a megaphone. She

¹²⁷ In December 2001, Argentina experienced one of the worst financial defaults in world history. The tumultuous political-economic crisis reached its climax when President De la Rúa escaped the *Casa Rosada* (the seat of government) by helicopter and resigned, succeeded by no less than four different Presidents in a week. High inflation and *saqueos* (mob lootings) prefaced *la crisis*. The specter of social unrest has been revived most Decembers since 2001.

was sharing the device with Jorge, a former railroad worker and member of *Salvemos al Tren* (Let's Save the Train), taking turns describing the *pequeños incidentes* ("little incidents") that caused service delays on a nearly daily basis. In animated tones, they encouraged passengers making their way to and from the station platforms to sign a petition demanding improvements. A long wooden table on trestles held pamphlets and sign-up sheets, while a pull-up screen played images of recent train accidents and faulty tracks. Tania, Norma, and Ana were distributing pamphlets to passersby, and I joined them.

An hour or two went by, the number of passersby swelling with each train arrival. A female reporter from *Todo Noticias*, flanked by a cameraman, interviewed Elda and Daniel. The air was dense with heat and expectation, and small streams of sweat made their way down my legs. After a few uncomfortable interactions with angry commuters (angry not only at the *pequeños incidentes* and crashes, I quickly learned, but also at the group's ties to *Pollo Sobrero*, the prominent union leader of that railroad line), I was overcome by déjà vu. The young man who had just now made his way to us had shown up at a similar activity we had held across town in Constitución terminal a few weeks back. His denunciation of the railroad system's failures had been animated, if incoherent, and he had threatened to detonate a bomb if commuters did not go on strike. When he had attempted to sign the petition, he had been unable to spell his name, nor identify the signature line, and we had wondered whether he was illiterate, or drugged. We were to spot him at different events over the next few months, every sighting prompting uneasy jokes around government surveillance.

I soon grew restless and decided to join Elda, Norma, and Ana, who were by then having lunch in the glass-walled, air-conditioned station café that reminded me of a fishbowl. Elda and Norma were finishing their dessert, and soon returned to join the others in the hall. While I ate a sandwich, Ana kept me company, and, to make conversation, I asked her how her year was wrapping up. She began to tell me about a road safety course she was teaching at schools in the northern suburbs, but, to my surprise, gradually shifted the conversation to her son's death. I knew, through Elda, that Teo had been 18 at the time, and that he and a friend had died attempting to cross the railway tracks late one stormy night. Apprehensive of a vacant property by the demarcated railroad crossing, they had decided to traverse the tracks a few meters down the way. Slowly, Ana recounted how one of Teo's friends had stumbled in a hole and fallen down, and had been electrocuted as his elbow grazed the electrified third rail. Teo had attempted to pull him up, but had died instantly, while another friend, who survived, watched in horror. Ana struggled to remember whether this had happened in 2011 or 2012. Two years ago, for sure, she said. Tears trickled down her face as she said that her eight-year-old daughter still cried at night, afraid that she was starting to forget her brother's face. A few months ago, she continued, she had been at a pet store, buying food for the dog she had finally bought Teo a couple of years before he died, when a boy walked in. His hair, his arms, his body were just like her son's. She did not dare look at his face, she said. Ana looked through the café's glass wall, and pointed to a group of teenagers. "He could be one of them", she said, tears coursing down her cheek, "I had a son and he vanished" [*Tuve un hijo y se esfumó*].

Ana's hair was thick, black, and fell to her shoulders. Side swept, it partially concealed her tears. Her black eyes were large, well defined. She would later tell me that her family was "Arabian," and that her mother had moved from Damascus to a northwestern province in Argentina. Her mother did not yet know about Teo's death; Ana was afraid to tell her, in her old age, and every time her mother asked to speak to Teo on the phone, she would tell her that he was studying, or out.

Ana had grown restless and wanted to get cash to repay Elda for lunch. In a haze, I offered to accompany her to the nearby ATM in the *Banco Nación* (the national bank), across Plaza Miserere. The plaza was full of people. One of the bus queues was a block long—abnormally long, I thought. Inside the *Banco*, only one of the three ATMs was working, and some 15 people were waiting in line. One of them grumbled out loud, "*Esto va a explotar antes de Navidad*" ("This will explode before Christmas"). Ana soon gave up, saying she would repay Elda another day, and we headed back to the terminal. As we were climbing the steps into the station, we overheard the word "*saqueo*" (looting). Uneasily, Ana said that she should go home, she was tired and worried that "things would get complicated." It was only when we crossed the hall and reached the rest of the group, hurriedly dismantling the wooden table, that I noticed that the station was almost empty and the shops shuttered. I began to help pack up. Someone announced that lootings were taking place a block away from the station (*están saqueando*) and that we needed to leave. Two of the three station entrances had already been shut off. I felt the slow rise of panic as I noticed that the station policemen had also disappeared. Norma proclaimed that it was probably just a setup (*está todo armado*), that there was no reason to panic, but Elda decided it was better to leave. I picked up as much of the protest

paraphernalia as I could carry, and headed out with Elda to her car, which was parked a few blocks away and which we would bring round to the station to load the trestles and table. A person was sitting on the station floor, propped against the *boletería*, and was being attended by two or three paramedics. The station was otherwise empty, and the staircase leading to the subway platforms had been closed off. Outside the station, we hurriedly walked past the *santuario* (sanctuary) assembled in honor of the victims of Cromañón, the 194 teenagers and adults killed in a fire in a nearby discotheque nearly a decade ago.

When we returned to the station, we loaded the car as quickly as possible. Daniel, Norma, and Jorge left by foot, hoping to catch a bus on Plaza Miserere. Ana and I needed to head northwards and could ride with Elda, but there was room for only one of us in the car, and I volunteered to take the bus instead. The sidewalks on Avenida Pueyrredón were bustling. I could see that some of the street hawkers had armed themselves with long sticks. A woman and her child ran towards me, “They are coming!” she yelled. I turned and ran to Plaza Miserere, prepared to jump onto the first bus I saw. A police officer assured me that there was nothing to worry about, nothing was happening. The passengers’ wary faces belied his words as the bus pulled away. A block away from the station, I saw a large group of people blocking a side street, two or three policemen in their midst. Further ahead, I glimpsed a group of ten policemen heading towards Once station; behind them, a police bus full of officers. The shops along Avenida Pueyrredón were shuttered, a strangely eerie sight at 4pm. Policemen stood in twos and threes at almost every corner. A woman clambered onto the bus, visibly

shaken: the bus she had just been riding had been stoned (*apedreado*). “*Vienen de Morón*” (“They come from Morón”), she exclaimed.

Later, the news depicted the events as an *intento de saqueo*, an “attempt” at looting, nothing more. Yet members of the *Ni Un Muerto Más* group found it an unlikely coincidence that, of all days, the attempted raid had occurred during their protest.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ To protect their privacy, I have changed Ana’s and Teo’s names, not least because Ana mentioned that her mother did not yet know about her grandson’s death.

Chapter Five: The Memory of Metals

On a crisp Saturday morning in October, I accompanied Elda and other members of the commuter-activist group *Autoconvocados X los Trenes* on a “diagnostic trip” to survey the Merlo-Lobos railroad branch. This branch was colloquially referred to as “the Other Sarmiento”: if the Sarmiento line was notorious for its poor service, frequently making the headlines for derailments, crashes, cancellations, and protests, this particular branch was deemed even more decrepit. It connected the mainly working-class district of Merlo, in the western suburbs of Gran Buenos Aires, to the city of Lobos, an agrarian and touristic hub located 90km (56 miles) west. The branch was served by older diesel, rather than electric, trains. Services were infrequent at best, and had been cancelled for the three days prior to our trip.

That day, seven of us met at Merlo station and climbed onto a train whose locomotive and cars had been borrowed from the Roca line. Our aim was to document the state of infrastructure and rolling stock, and gauge quality of service. During our long and bumpy journey (it took the train over two and a half hours to cover 56 miles), we took copious notes and photographs of the train’s state and its varying speed. Our goal was to write a detailed report to present the following Tuesday at a meeting with the national Ombudsman, Dr. Anselmo Sella. Partway through our journey we were joined by Leonardo, a station master, who acted as unofficial guide. As we jolted our way through the semi-rural hinterlands of Gran Buenos Aires, Leonardo pointed out the near-absence of barriers and proper railway crossings, a cause for many local fatalities (a hazard compounded by the train’s erratic schedule and unexpected appearances, as

discussed in Chapter Three). In Las Heras, the last station proper before Lobos, he signaled to piles of wooden cross ties, some rotten and discarded, others newer and of a redder hue.

Towns gradually gave way to vast expanses of flat farmland, dotted by cattle, horses, and occasional building clusters, and punctuated with “flag stops” in lieu of stations, bare-bones metal or wooden structures with no railway personnel. In Speratti, one of the last of such stops, we were joined by Cecilia and Julio, the caretakers of the rural elementary school, and their two youngest children. The former railway workshops in Empalme Lobos, the station preceding Lobos, had become an informal settlement (*asentamiento*), laundry swaying in the breeze, logs piled up next to an old camper van. Two steam locomotives, overtaken by rust, were visible through the trees; “*Jesús te ama*” (“Jesus loves you”) had been painted onto one of them.

Upon arriving to Lobos, Leonardo showed us around the station, pointing out the old track switch levers and the wood signs indicating the ladies’ waiting room and the parcel office. Elda proposed we walk towards Las Heras, inspecting the tracks. Over the course of a couple of kilometers, we took notes and photographed the wooden crossties (most of them were buried, and those that were visible between the weeds were usually rotten and broken), disjointed rails, missing bolts, and the traces left by the locomotives’ undercarriage on the soil. Speckled eggs, black-and-white mushrooms, and plastic bottles sprouted amidst the weeds, and *manzanilla* (chamomile) flowers grew along the tracks. We then walked back to Lobos and caught the next train to Merlo; the locomotive and cars were inscribed with the former private concession company TBA’s name and logo, their metal exterior rusted and pocked (Figure 12).



Figure 12: Boarding the train in Lobos station. Photo by author.

What stories does infrastructure tell? What does ethnographic attention to railroad materiality open up theoretically? In this chapter, I propose that the histories of railway infrastructure—both history writ-large, as in the political and economic histories of railroad privatization and renationalization processes, and an everyday history of railway work and commuting practices—are registered in the materials that comprise railroad infrastructure, contributing to shape its form and particular affordances. Taking my cue from *Autoconvocados'* diagnostic trips and from railroad workers, who, as I describe below, claim that metals have memory, I propose that infrastructure can be viewed as an archive, a repository of history and memory.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ See Mueggler (2011) for a view of landscapes as archives.

As I described in Chapter Three, topologies of dis/connection are shaped by infrastructure and its history: along the Merlo-Lobos branch, the poor state of track infrastructure (a result of changing maintenance practices) means that only relatively light rolling stock can be utilized on the sunken rails and that, on particularly rough sections of track, conductors have to lower the train's circulation speed.

Railroad infrastructure-as-archive not only offers traces of railroad pasts, but also charts probable futures. *Autoconvocados'* handful of members, largely middle-class professionals and university students from the northern suburbs of Buenos Aires, had come together after a derailment in the Mitre railway line, a few months after the *Tragedia de Once*. Elda, the group's unofficial leader, had a history of championing municipal causes, campaigning against the demolition of a former children's hospital and collaborating in efforts to preserve the riverfront ecosystem in the suburb where she lived. She was an active member of her local *asamblea vecinal* (neighborhood assembly), a form of popular political participation and mobilization that had sprung up during the 2001-2002 economic crisis (Rossi 2005); as such, she cohosted a weekly radio program covering municipal affairs. With *Autoconvocados X los Trenes*, Elda's aim was to demand "safe and dignified public transport" by monitoring and publicizing railroad decay, raising awareness among commuters, and pressuring state officials for improvements via reports and petitions.

In order to gain a better understanding of the railroad network and why it was failing, and thus be able to lodge better-informed complaints with different state agencies, Elda had begun organizing a series of outings to audit railway infrastructure and quality of service. She referred to these as *relevamientos* (surveys) and *viajes diagnósticos*

(diagnostic trips). On these trips, group members would travel the length of a railway branch, and survey the state of trains, stations, and tracks, in addition to chatting with passengers about their commuting conditions (Figure 13).



Figure 13: "Diagnostic trip" to the B. Mitre branch. October 2013. Photo by author.

Infrastructures, the work carried out by *Autoconvocados* suggests, are evidentiary (Weizman 2014), shedding light on processes past and possible futures to come.¹³⁰ As Elda later penned in the group's report to the Ombudsman (based on our collective observation of the Merlo-Lobos branch), "Walking along the rails, deterioration and lack of maintenance become evident." On diagnostic trips, deformed rails, missing bolts, and rotting cross-ties took on heightened significance, and were often invoked as omens of impending tragedy and as signs of the state's *desidia* (neglect).

¹³⁰ For a view on ecologies as evidentiary, see Kristina Lyons (2018).

It was on these trips that, together with members of *Autoconvocados X los Trenes* and the railroad workers who occasionally accompanied us, I learned to “read” railroad infrastructure. Inspired by these survey efforts, this chapter constitutes an experiment in engaging ethnographically with infrastructure and memory. Focusing on the materiality of railway infrastructure, rolling stock, and the traces etched on these, I attend to the histories of abrasion and friction and the sociomaterial engagements that shape the vicissitudes of mobility. Yet ruins, unstable signifiers, are often reclaimed for different purposes and sometimes enrolled in attempts to retell the past and craft alternative futures (DeSilvey and Edensor 2012; Gordillo 2014). Old railroad stations, I will show, have become one terrain in which the value and meaning of railroad (and national) history is contested.

Fierros Have Memory

On a cold, gray afternoon in May, I made my way to the National Railroad Museum in Retiro, a *barrio* nested alongside the Río de La Plata in downtown Buenos Aires, with the aim of conducting archival work at the small library located on the second floor. I decided to stop by clocksmith Carlos’ office to say hello. His office, tucked away near the landing, was a space kept off-limits to most museum visitors, and one that I had to tread with increasing care and varying protocol as the animosity between Carlos and other museum staff grew.¹³¹ To my surprise, Carlos, who was usually

¹³¹ As I hint in Chapter Three, in his capacity as “the last railway clocksmith” Carlos was the only museum employee who had actually worked in the railways and who remained “politically independent,” as he put it. In his view, the museum had been taken over by *kirchneristas*, by political appointees who supported the

alone, busily restoring one railroad object or another for display in the exhibit downstairs, was accompanied by a man I had never seen before: tall, with an angular face, graying brown hair, and glasses. Carlos had not been expecting me, but graciously introduced me as an anthropologist friend. This man, whom I will call Jorge, was a railroad engineer, an old friend of Carlos' who was overseeing the renovation of a railroad line in the interior and was currently in Buenos Aires on leave. Barely unable to contain my excitement at finally encountering a rail expert, I began to ask Jorge about the renovation process and the concrete crossties that were being used to replace the old *quebracho* wood ties. We were soon immersed in an hour-long conversation around the properties of different kinds of crossties, the dynamics dictating the relationship between train wheels and rails (Jorge's particular area of expertise), and the fate of different branches and stations. Drills and hammers, the soundscape of a different renovation project, one that was overhauling the museum's second floor in order to display images of the Minister of the Interior and Transport's railroad projects, occasionally drowned our voices. Our conversation was also periodically punctuated by train horns wafting through the window facing the three railroad terminals of Retiro.

Jorge's stories around railroads quickly became entwined with his own family history. Jorge's father had grown up in the Basque region of Spain and had become a guerrilla fighter at a young age during the Spanish Civil War, crossing the Pyrenees into France for refuge and back into Spain to attack General Franco's forces. After

Kirchner's government and railway policy, and who did not know much about trains. Despite being an excellent storyteller and well versed in railway folklore, Carlos had been banned from leading museum tours or engaging with museum visitors, allegedly because of his political views.

participating in the failed invasion of the Arán Valley, Jorge's father (one of 1,000 survivors, of the 4,000 guerrilla fighters who had participated in the invasion) migrated to Argentina, where he set up a small foundry. "The Basque all worked with *fierros* (metals), they were blacksmiths, you see," Jorge explained.

Jorge himself had grown up among *fierros*, learning to work with metal at a young age. In his stories, metals became alive. Jorge described the lasso movements (*movimientos de lazo*) made by train wheels as the flange (*pestaña*)¹³² grazes the rail. Because train wheels are conical in shape and rails are inclined at an angle, the wheel touches the rail at only a given point while rolling. Jorge described how, when walking alongside railway tracks, one could see a sinusoid (a line shaped like a curve) inscribed on the rail, traces left by the train wheel burnishing (*bruñendo*) the railhead. The train's movements are thus recorded, etched, on the surface of the rail. "I have been told that it leaves a kind of fingerprint", Carlos interjected. "It leaves a fingerprint of the state [of the train and the tracks]," Jorge replied, laughing, "And once you are savvy [*canchero*], you can measure it. I can measure the fingerprint and know its details."

Traces left by trains on the rail's metallic surface accrete over time. In the northern hinterlands of Buenos Aires, in the Victoria - Capilla del Señor branch of the Mitre line, I encountered rails that were tattered and frayed, like old cloth. When I described their rough edges to Jorge, he referred to them as burrs (*rebarbas*), explaining, "This is generated because by percussion, the metal is tempered. So, when the wheel

¹³² The flange is a protruding rim on one side of the wheel that keeps the train running on the rails.

passes many times, many times, when the material is very worn out, a kind of natural lamination is produced and you can see it, it has like little fish scales.”

A train’s “fingerprint” is thus recorded on the rails in the form of sinusoidal markings, “fish scales,” and burrs. Insofar as experts such as Jorge can learn to read a train’s movements and a rail’s deterioration in these traces, track infrastructure comprises an archive of sorts, an accretion of inscriptions that sheds light on the state of trains and tracks.

Jorge’s descriptions of the etchings on rails and of the fingerprints left by trains echo a railway saying I learned from Claudio, supervisor at a locomotive repair workshop:

If you do not paint your house this year, do not paint it next year, do not paint it the year after, when you want to paint it, you will not only have to paint it, eh, cover it in paint. You will have to reach the plaster, take the humidity out, add paint sealant, give...give it another type of treatment, give it a base, then, only then will you be able to paint it. The same applies to everything. We have a saying, eh, ‘*Fierros* have memory’ (*Los fierros tienen memoria*). That is, locomotives come here to have a maintenance check approximately every 200,000 kilometers. Some locomotives and cars are way past a million eight hundred, two million kilometers, without any profound interventions! So, the safety that you can offer with this service is very relative.

As Claudio suggests, railway history—not only in terms of a train’s movements, but also in terms of maintenance practices, or lack thereof—is *inscribed* in tracks and rolling stock. *Fierros*, in fact, are said to “have memory.” The “fishscales,” burrs, and sinusoids described by Jorge, then, can be seen as forms of memory inscription.

On Rust

Another form in which processes and histories are registered in metallic surfaces and rendered visible, I suggest, is rust. Rust is ubiquitous in railway landscapes in urban and suburban Buenos Aires, where fungal-like constellations of burnt orange, speckled greyish-white and ochre, wrap rails and discarded train carcasses, and even surface on new rolling stock. Rust corrodes the layers of paint aimed at modernizing trains, and spreads over signaling equipment and track infrastructure like a bad case of metallic eczema.

Rust expresses a particular relationship between iron (or its alloys), oxygen, and moisture — the ferruginous hue and texture of metallic decay. As such, it points to the intimate enmeshing of infrastructures and environments, to the coupling of metal and air. If metals, as Andrew Barry (2010:93) defines them, are “sites of transformation,” then rust indexes the dynamism of metal and infrastructure more generally, pointing to the manner in which surfaces and structures shift over time (Figure 14).

Metals as Barry (2010:93) has shown, are “extraordinarily fluid.” “Internally, they contain features, such as grain boundaries, regular lattice structures, impurities, dislocations, and catalytic sites, that provide the basis for both stability and rigidity *and* movement, elasticity and flow, and changes in intensive and extensive properties,” Barry (2010:93) writes, “They are spaces within which minute changes occur routinely.” It is these malleable qualities of metals, I suggest, that enable rail infrastructure to be read as a repository of memory – an archive, even.

This approach to infrastructure takes inspiration from forensic architecture,

which analyzes architectural evidence in investigations around human rights violations. Eyal Weizman (2014:15) and his team at Goldsmiths, University of London, see architecture as a “documentary form,” insofar as “it *registers* the effect of force fields, [and] it contains or *stores* these forces in material deformations” (emphasis in the original). They draw inspiration from building surveyors, who “see buildings as matter in formation, that is, as information” (Weizman 2014:14), coining the term “material aesthetics” to designate the sensorial capacity of matter, that is, the manner in which matter is aestheticized to its environment. Matter, Weizman argues, can detect, register, and respond to contact and impact, and to influences in its environment.



Figure 14: Rusted rolling stock in Liniers (top two), Retiro (bottom left), and Empalme Lobos (bottom right). Photos by author.

Rust underscores that metals are not only malleable, but also sensorial. Rusting occurs at different rhythms in different environments, revealing that particular environments render material infrastructures lively and precarious in specific ways. In coastal areas and in the proximities of lime quarries, for instance, rail corrosion is compounded by salinity and lime – what Daniel, a rail fan who specializes in amateur track repair, calls “chemical attack” (*ataque químico*). The particular geographies of decay of railroad infrastructure force us to reckon with what Caitlin DeSilvey (2006) calls the “ecology of memory,” and with the ways in which non-human agents, be these insects, chemicals, or other, partake in the decomposition of matter. In her archaeology of the recent past in a derelict homestead in Montana, DeSilvey (2006) describes how the history of the place is written as much by humans as by mold, mice, and maggots: “shifty materialities” (2006:321) comprise an archive co-edited by insects, rodents, chemicals, and other nonhuman agencies. Attending to railroad infrastructure as an archive, I propose, requires that we become similarly attuned to the multiple forces that shape railroad matter and to the different scales at which these interactions occur.¹³³

Far from being perceived as a “natural” phenomenon, rust has become a matter of political concern: for members of *Autoconvocados* and other *agrupaciones de usuarios* (groups of train users), and for some rail fans, rust is a sign of *ferricidio* (ferricide, the killing of the national railway system) and bears witness to *desidia*, neglect. Images of rolling stock abandoned to rust, often partially concealed by weeds, abound on railway

¹³³ Multispecies co-editing is of course also present in “traditional” archives, that is, in collections of documents, maps, and photographs. The documents I consulted at the National Railroad Museum’s library, for instance, were often covered in soot, remnants of a fire that had ravaged the museum years earlier; flames and mice had contributed to their unwieldy shape and helped account for some of the gaps or absences in the archive.

enthusiasts' Facebook pages and blogs, and have come to symbolize processes of deindustrialization and rural-to-urban flight.

Rust has also been invoked as a major factor explaining the scale, if not the cause, of the *Tragedia de Once*. Juan, an architect and the sole remaining member of the commuter group *Pasajeros del Roca* (Roca Passengers) and frequent collaborator of *Autoconvocados X los Trenes*, asserts that on that day the deteriorated state of the train's body prevented it from properly withstanding the force of the impact, as car walls contorted, floors rose, and hand-rails and luggage racks sprung loose. In YouTube video images of the crash, a reddish dust can be seen suspended in the air; this, he assured me, is rust from the train's decaying body. Juan described the role that railroad material decay purportedly played in the *Tragedia de Once* and the *Tragedia de Castelar* thus:

Notice that in Once, the most deteriorated car—the bike car, which was lighter because they had taken out the seats—rises up completely. Why? It rises due to the lack of weight, because as the seats were taken out, it is lighter. It rises. And when it rises, the floor from the car in front becomes detached. The cars' bodies (*carrocerías*) become like an accordion, squashing the people inside. So, the people there died not because of the brake, they die because the car's very body squashed them, it did not resist. In the Castelar crash, if you look, the three dead are in the train that is in front, which was deteriorated, without maintenance. The [train] behind collides, and the wagons batter against each other, but they remain whole. No one died. The dead are in the train in the front. Why? Because, again, the bike car rose and penetrated the car in front. And the car in front was detached, was cut, and the dead were there. That is, to speak of the brakes in the Sarmiento is a stupidity, because the problem in the Sarmiento was not death due to the brakes, but due to the car's body (*la carrocería*). That is why the State cannot say that it did not *know*. Because what happened is that you have 50-year-old [train] cars that were chipped (*picados*) and that did not resist the impact.

Juan was not alone in this view on the decay of the train's body and the role it might have played in the crash: in the ensuing trial, the prosecutor, Dr. Fernando Arrigo, referred to “material fatigue” as an aggravating factor.

Infrastructure as Archive

As a result of the uneven workings of decay, subsequent partial renovation projects, and the recycling of surviving pieces, railroad infrastructure is a patchy assemblage whose varying materials index different moments in railroad history.¹³⁴

Railroad landscapes, I learned on *Autoconvocados*' diagnostic trips, are complex, layered, and *historical*, a patchwork condensation of different periods in railroad history. The so-called "time of the English" (*la época de los ingleses*) persists in the electrified third rails and the signal systems, mostly installed in the first decades of the 20th century and still in use in many lines. Many stations, especially the formerly grand train terminals of the Mitre line in Retiro and of the Roca line in Constitución, maintain a distinctly British architectural style (Tartarini 2005), built as they were with wrought iron imported from Scotland and bricks from England.

Surviving wooden crossties, laid nearly 100 years ago, index the violent history of deforestation of *quebracho* forests in northern Argentina and the large-scale movement of materials and labor needed to build the railroad system. Rails, largely imported, attest to the nation's long-standing reliance on foreign imports for industrial products.¹³⁵ Some old rails and crossties have been repurposed, and can now be seen supporting a station's

¹³⁴ Daniel, a lawyer and rail fan who specializes in amateur track repair, described the railroad's recycling practices as follows: "The railroad always recycled itself. There are hundreds of kilometers of telegraph posts that are in fact old rails. And you can see fences made with metal crossties. *Everything* is like that. *Everything* is like that. The railroad recycled itself...With its own trash it made other things." Daniel spoke highly of the frugal railroad economy during the time of the English, praising the manner in which bolts, rails, and crossties were re-used. Recycling practices under TBA, and cosmetic attempts to patch up trains after the *Tragedia de Once*, however, are often described in a different light, as evinced in Chapter Four.

¹³⁵ Except during a 20-year period, between the late 1960s and late 1980s/early 1990s, when SOMISA (*Sociedad Mixta Siderúrgica Argentina*) produced them (until the company was privatized and its rail rolling mill sold). Nowadays, rails are imported from Spain, Poland and South Africa.

foundation, or in fences (see Figure 23). The logo of the state company *Ferrocarriles Argentinos*, Argentine Railroads, dismembered in the 1990s, in turn, survives on posters in stations and workshops, and on machinery used for track maintenance.¹³⁶

Successive renovation projects have meant that multiple sign boards—of varying color and different design—bearing the stations’ name coexist, side by side.¹³⁷ Stations, in this regard, are palimpsest-like, evincing layers of superimposed or parallel inscriptions. Station walls and the fences lining railway tracks serve as a canvas for proselytizing by national political parties and railway unions, and for graffiti (Figure 24): posters depicting the faces and promises of railway union candidates from elections past lie alongside graffiti aphorisms coined by urban artists, and are sometimes partially or completely covered by newer propaganda.¹³⁸

Stations, nodal points of mobility, also display stratigraphic layers of a history of a more quotidian sort. During my visits to Victoria station, located in the northern suburbs of Buenos Aires, I often conversed with Manuel, a long-time newspaper vendor. Victoria is a transfer station, an intermediate station for the Retiro - Tigre branch (served

¹³⁶ Other transport infrastructures are also an amalgamation of heterogeneous elements from different epochs: in New York’s subway system, for instance, signaling equipment from different eras coexist—much of it obsolete and prone to breakdown—, rendering the system vulnerable to delays (Somers 2015).

¹³⁷ The coexistence of multiple signs bearing a station’s name (signs that are called *nomencladores* in Spanish) can be seen, for instance, in Caballito and Núñez, on the Sarmiento and Mitre lines respectively.

¹³⁸ As assemblages of spare parts that underwent diverse paint jobs, the monster trains described in the previous chapter also evince a palimpsest-like layering of railroad material history. As outlined in Chapter Three, under TBA, Toshiba trains underwent successive “modernization” projects, each signaled by a different body color, as trains were painted and repainted (what my interlocutors referred to as “a facelift”). After the *Tragedia de Once*, Toshiba trains were repainted in a hue known as “Randazzo blue,” meant to cover TBA’s brand and to signal a shift in management and quality of service. These trains had the phrase “*Transporte Público*” (Public Transport) painted on their side: this new “brand” put forward by the Ministry of the Interior and Transport served as an euphemism, occluding a rapid succession of renationalization and re-concession processes (see Chapter Three). Despite their changing body color, Toshiba trains still had TBA’s logo etched onto their windowpanes, indexing the obduracy of the concession company’s legacy and the latent precarity of the railway system beneath the (new) veneer of modernization. The promise and tensions of modernization resurface in Chapter Five.

by electric trains) of the Mitre line, and a terminal station for the less-used branch (served by diesel trains) that stretches out to Capilla del Señor, a picturesque town 80km (50mi) north of the city of Buenos Aires. Victoria also houses the Mitre line's depot, where electric trains, in railroad parlance, "sleep" at night and undergo light maintenance. While the side of the station that serves the Retiro-Tigre branch sees plenty of passengers, Manuel's side is invariably deserted as of late. In the last few years, the Victoria - Capilla del Señor train service has become increasingly infrequent, running every four to five hours and off schedule, and thus prompting the majority of its passengers to search for alternative modes of transport. Needless to say, Manuel's business has dwindled considerably, but he refuses to move his newspaper stand to the other side of the station (where he would be impinging on other newspaper vendors' turf), in the hopes that the Victoria - Capilla del Señor train service will soon be normalized.

During one of my visits to Victoria, Manuel pointed out the debris lining the tracks and station. The muddy tracks exhibited a strange assortment of detritus: next to the ubiquitous plastic bottle and scraps of paper lay a muddied purse and the singed metal springs of a mattress that had been ignited on the tracks.¹³⁹ A tunnel connecting this station platform to another had been closed off to pedestrians, its floor flooded in muddy water and litter, its walls stained with human feces and urine. The ticket vending

¹³⁹ Katy Stewart (1996:72, 95) shows how discarded quotidian objects can serve to arrest master narratives and linear understandings of time-as-progress: "wrecked material becomes a sign, at once, of the power of a history on a place and of the transitoriness of history itself." Ruined and decayed objects, such as remnants of buildings, weedy yards strewn with tractor skeletons, plastic chairs and the "trash that collects around people's places" (1996:96), are imprinted with a life history, and they haunt. Ruins, she proposes, are thus chronotopes, "signs of a past, like the present, where things fall apart" (1996:96).

machines and turnstiles (*molinetes*), in turn, were covered in graffiti. Manuel read these remnants and inscriptions as signs of abandonment – by the railroad company, by the national government, and also by the *gerentes* (managers) of Victoria station, who seemed to care little about station hygiene. Station personnel, he claimed, only removed the top layer of litter from the platform’s garbage can, leaving the rest to rot. Manuel himself removes the trash when he can no longer stand the stench.

Beyond the mere juxtaposition of elements of different times, the palimpsest of inscriptions, and the tapestry of debris in tracks and stations, matter itself contains cumulative traces of the everyday. Although *quebracho* wood is celebrated for its durability (some crossties survive on the tracks for over 100 years), wooden crossties age with time. Daniel, a lawyer in his mid-50s and a self-proclaimed *ferroaficionado* (railroad enthusiast) who, in his spare time, restores rails at a subsidiary of the *Ferroclub Central Argentino* (the Central Argentine Railway Club), explained crosstie deterioration as follows: “A crosstie becomes lighter over the years. A new crosstie weighs 90kgs, and an old one weighs 60, 65 [kgs]. The difference is very noticeable. They go losing mass...due to the wood’s natural ageing process. Then they break when their carrying capacity (*capacidad portante*) is exceeded.”

Crossties also break during derailments, when the wheels of trains “walk” over them, splitting them in the process. Rail *breakage* (rather than deterioration) can also be produced by the overall poor state of the track, by metallurgical flaws (air bubbles in the

metallurgical process, the accumulation of phosphorus or sulfur) in weak sectors of the rail, and by overloading rails with vehicles that are too heavy for it.¹⁴⁰



Figure 15: Wooden (left) and concrete (right) crosssties near Caballito station, on the Once-Moreno branch of the Sarmiento line. The stretch of tracks on the right has been “renovated”, while the stretch on the left has not, presumably because the latter is a zona de cambios, a track-switching area. Track-switching areas see a higher number of derailments and thus need to be repaired/intervened more often; wooden crosssties, being lighter, are easier to maneuver by a track maintenance crew, without requiring heavy-lifting machinery. Photos by author.

On their underside, wooden crosssties reveal markings caused by the many years of friction with the ballast (the bed of multi-faceted rocks that sustains crosssties and rails) below. Concrete crosssties, which are gradually replacing wooden crosssties in railway branches undergoing “renovation,” in turn, evince a different engagement with the surrounding environment (Figure 15). For one, they are not affected by corrosion, bugs (*bichos*), nor by humidity. Daniel portrayed them as more “ecological” than wooden crosssties, as their fabrication does not imply the depletion of a natural resource, as railroad ties did with *quebracho* forests in northern Argentina. “The problem with the concrete crossstie,” he conceded, “is that it requires a mechanized process for its placement and its removal,” as it weights 300kgs. Specific materials, hence, require

¹⁴⁰ A rail, in turn, can be “strengthened” by adding more crosssties, i.e. placing these closer to each other, a solution known as *enjuague*, a rinse.

specific corporeal practices and knowledges: while wooden crossties can be removed manually by workers, concrete ones require machinery, and are thus harder to move in the event of a derailment.

Track decay is compounded by the mismatch between rolling stock and rail infrastructure's carrying capacity: after the nationalization of the railway system in 1948, diesel locomotives were purchased to replace steam locomotives (which weigh less tons per axle than diesel ones). Yet many railway branches were not adapted to withstand the heavier rolling stock, leading to the destruction of rails and crossties, the loosening of joints between rails, and the loss of leveling. According to Daniel, "Many branches had to be shut down, because the infrastructure of the tracks, and sometimes of the bridges, could not withstand the weight of the new machines."

The cumulative effects of movement, of friction between the train's wheel and the rail, further contribute to rail deterioration. Railroad vehicle traffic produces a kind of lamination on the protruding top of the rail known as the railhead. Excessive wear (that is, excessive and uneven lamination), as described above, produces burrs (*rebarbas*) on the sides of the rail. Over time, the railhead is flattened or crushed (a phenomenon called *aplastamiento* in Spanish). Wear is particularly apparent in railroad bends, where centrifugal force causes the train to lean on the outer rail, which, as a result, deteriorates more quickly than the inner rail. Railroad workers have devised a low-cost way of combatting this uneven deterioration: flipping rails around. Daniel explained that rails have an inscription with the technical details of their construction on one of their sides. He described a "universal" system by which foremen place rails with the inscribed side facing inwards. When a rail becomes deteriorated, workers turn it around. If workers

encounter a rail whose inscribed side is facing outwards, they know that it has already been flipped. “This way of knowing never fails,” Daniel chuckled.

Rail inscriptions, and even their location, thus help render infrastructure-as-archive legible to railroad workers. Another section of the tracks where rails deteriorate more quickly is the area near stations, where trains routinely slow down. Daniel described the “little hollows” that can be seen on rails (he gestured with his hands, drawing concavities in the air) when standing at the end of a station platform and walking in the direction that the train has come from. These hollows, he claimed, are “generally produced by the train braking.” “In the braking area,” he continued, “rails deteriorate *much* more quickly.” I had noticed that near Caballito, the station preceding the Sarmiento’s terminal, Once, rails appeared to be undulated, rather than straight (Figure 16). When I mentioned this track section to Daniel, he explained that, “The rail acquires the shape of the ground. The rail is very flexible... That is, when you see those undulations in the tracks, it means that the base of the tracks is defective, that is, that the track is sinking in the places where you see it dip.” The concavities on the rail thus points to the *malleability* of metal, which enables railroad memory to be recorded on metal surfaces.

Because of the malleability of metal, particular train trajectories and events can be “read” from the traces left on track infrastructure. Expert examinations (*peritajes*) conducted after the *Tragedia de Once* sought to determine from the rails themselves whether the train conductor had attempted to brake. When the train’s emergency brake is applied, the effect is one of skidding (*patinamiento*): the train continues to move forward for a few feet. “That produces an effect on the rail and on the wheel,” Daniel

explained, “You can see the drag of the material [on the rail] and on the wheel as well.” “Don’t you feel it sometimes?” he continued, describing the rattle, the *tacatán, tacatán, tacatán, tacatán*, experienced on trains and subways even where there are no joints. “The emergency braking causes the wheel to lose its circumference, its roundness,” he added.



Figure 16: Deformed rails in Caballito station. Photo by author.

The Lived Experience of Infrastructure

The layered histories manifest in railroad landscapes and recorded on railroad tracks are not merely contained *within* railroad materials, but rather also *translate* into particular travel experiences, as reflected in Daniel’s allusion to the *tacatán tacatán* of train journeys. Worn rails, that is, translate into uncomfortable, sometimes violent, lateral train movements, movements that are experienced as jolts by passengers. Jorge, the railroad

engineer I encountered at the National Railroad Museum, has conducted a few studies on corporeal vibrations and the experience of comfort. “The train car on the rail is not something static,” he explained, “It has a lot of dynamic. There are lateral accelerations, vertical [accelerations]. Well, all of that is transmitted it to the body.” He continued:

For instance, your stomach has 5Hz of, eh, natural vibration. The movement generated inside one’s body is known as natural vibration. If I surpass that index of 5Hz, if I increase it to 15, 20, I will provoke a discomfort in your stomach. And that discomfort in your stomach will provoke, eh, the urge to vomit, your discomfort on the seat...The greater the comfortability I can provide you on your trip, the greater the number of hours you can remain on the train.¹⁴¹

Violent or excessive lateral movements can ultimately result in derailments. In urban Buenos Aires, decayed rails have forced train conductors to lower their circulation speed, lengthening already tedious commutes further. In the Victoria - Capilla del Señor branch in the semirural outskirts of Buenos Aires, where track ruination was rampant at the time of my fieldwork, frayed rails translated into constant jerks and jolts aboard the light trains colloquially known as *Pitufos*, Smurfs, and nicknamed “The Cocktail Shaker” by Elda because of the pronounced vibrations (see Figure 17).¹⁴²

But the experience of train travel itself is of course historical, wrapped up as it is in peculiar infrastructural associations. In earlier decades, when railroad tracks had yet to reach their current state of deterioration, train travel had a different texture. Daniel claimed that when he traveled by train to the coastal town of Mar del Plata in the 1980s, he was able to rest his coffee cup on the Pullman car’s windowsill, even though the train

¹⁴¹ During our conversation, Jorge explained that the relationship between the wheel and the rail was governed by the “Nadal formula,” according to which a train will derail when the lateral force surpasses or exceeds the vertical load. He also explained that the comfort threshold (as measured in transversal acceleration) varies for passengers who are seated and passengers who are standing, as the former have greater stability.

¹⁴² The trains used on this branch are light precisely because the worn rails cannot tolerate heavier rolling stock.

was going over 80km/h (i.e. much faster than current long-distance trains); jerks and jolts were a thing of the future. Vibration thus is a proxy for material fatigue and points to the embodied experience of railway decay.



Figure 17: The light train colloquially known as Pitufo, “Smurf,” by railroad workers, serving Victoria - Capilla del Señor. It has been nicknamed “The Cocktail Shaker” by activists due to the jerks and jolts caused by poorly maintained tracks. Notice that the tracks are barely visible due to weeds. Photo by author.

The historicity of particular travel experiences (in the form of jerks and jolts rather than smooth rolling) points to the historicity of infrastructural decay. That is, what is recorded on railroad surfaces and materials is not merely the passage of *time* and the “natural” *friction* of the materials—a friction that, we must recall, enables the functioning of the system, as the train’s wheel must be able to grip the rail in order to move forward, but that must also be cared for, lest it upends it in the form of derailments. Rather, and as commuter-activists and many railroad workers are quick to point out, the accretion (Anand 2015) of infrastructural deterioration and its traces is embedded in particular

historical (which is to say political) contexts—particular forms of engaging with the material.¹⁴³ An oft-repeated term used by commuters, activists, and railroad workers alike to describe infrastructural decay is *desidia*, neglect. *Desidia* points to particular work practices and the political connivances that foster or enable them. *Desidia* infers a *letting* decay, a passivity that is agential in its purposeful neglect.¹⁴⁴

Desidia produces particular ecologies of memory. Weeds, for instance, are an important component of track infrastructure. According to Daniel, “The *malezga*, the common *malezga*, let us say, grass, weeds, has effects on the track. The main negative effect is that it retains humidity. When the track is on earth ballast and is in a poor state, the *malezga* helps to support it. It seems untrue (*parece mentira*), but it gives it greater stability.” Weeds, by forming a meshwork (*entretrejido*), uphold tracks, securing them in place. Weeds thus point to the multispecies collaborations that go into maintaining railroad infrastructure. But weeds can also upend this infrastructure, particularly when let to grow amok.¹⁴⁵ “When a track has been abandoned for a long time,” Daniel explained, “Trees grow! Sometimes there are trees in the *middle* of the track!” We discussed a recent report of a freight conductor who had died on account of an unwieldy branch piercing

¹⁴³ Gastón Gordillo (2014) shows that it is important to explore not only the *afterlife* of ruins, but also the *processes of destruction* that created them in the first place. Heeding his call, it becomes necessary to focus on the economic processes and political connivances that enabled trains, railroad infrastructure, and certain human lives to be dis-attended, as I have attempted to do throughout this dissertation.

¹⁴⁴ The temporal contours of decay and of the duration of the “railroad crisis” are hard to delineate, as the very act of defining them is political, anchored in different readings of railway, and Argentine, history, as discussed in Chapter Two.

¹⁴⁵ Tim Edensor (2005) shows that ruins, particularly railway sidings, are fecund spaces for nonhuman life (from mice to foxes to feral cats, to an assortment of plants that are usually coded generically as “weeds” but that include species that were once desirable and home-worthy, he says). Railway sidings thus comprise nature reserves and wildlife corridors in the city. In this manner, ruins trouble the purported binary divides between urban-rural and human-‘nature’ and are a prime example of “recombinant ecology” (Whatmore and Hinchcliffe 2003, cited in Edensor 2005).

his head through the locomotive cabin's open window, as the train made its way through a tunnel of trees. When I asked Daniel if this casualty was the result of a lack of maintenance and a failure to prune, he responded:

Yes. Before it used to be done. There used to be permanent crews, in the track maintenance systems there were permanent crews that took care of a sector [of tracks]. Now the sectors are enormous, because fewer personnel are employed, so the existing personnel, instead of having 20km under their care, have 100[km].

In the face of dwindling maintenance of infrastructure by railroad companies, rail enthusiasts like Daniel had undertaken their own restoration projects. Members of *ferroclubes* (railway clubs) gather on weekends to restore steam locomotives and other railway vehicles, working to erase the signs of corrosion and neglect. Groups of *amigos de las vías*, “friends of the rails,” in turn, embark on weekend weeding campaigns to rural Buenos Aires, seeking to render abandoned railway tracks visible and usable. Yet efforts at salvage maintenance did not only seek to combat railroad decay: as the national government launched its own infrastructural renovation projects in the name of “modernization” (as examined in the next chapter), railroad infrastructure became a terrain in which the very value and meanings of the archive were contested, as I show in the next section.

Affective Heritage

Patricio grabs a megaphone, but it does little to amplify his voice. “It must be Chinese,” he grumbles. Patricio is a member of ABTE (*Agrupación Boletos Tipo Edmondson*), a group of artists and collectors of Edmondson-type train tickets. We are standing on one of the platforms in Coghlan train station, in a leafy, middle-class

neighborhood near the northern edges of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. On this quiet Sunday afternoon, ABTE has summoned its network of supporters to a “precautionary Spring,” as they are calling it. Giving up on the megaphone, Patricio raises his voice to announce that he will shortly offer a tour of the station and narrate its history. He hands out yellow flyers that outline the cause of ABTE’s outrage: ADIF (the state’s railway infrastructure administration company) is planning to modernize, or, in ABTE’s words, “destroy,” Coghlan station. ADIF’s project proposes to “demolish” the original wood shelter, “amputate” a ticket-vending office, “erase” from the landscape the hydrants that used to feed steam locomotives, reinstall turnstiles in the station hall, and “cage” the platforms. The flyer adds, “Coghlan station is affective and cultural railway heritage. Coghlan station is part of our history. They shall not pass, nor shall they succeed!”

Two other members of ABTE, Ezequiel and Gachi, carefully wrap one of the endangered hydrants with a yellow-and-black tape that reads “Caution,” and affix a flyer that reads, “Stop ADIF! What for? Whom for?” For extra measure, they stencil the words “Not leaving” (*No se va*) on the platform floor, an arrow pointing to the hydrant (see Figure 18). Once they are done, they cross the tracks and repeat the operation with the hydrant that sits on the other side. Patricio hoists ABTE’s black-and-yellow flag, and, as a train arrives and passengers begin to descend, he grabs the megaphone once again. He then replaces Ezequiel at the hydrant, and as he continues covering it in precautionary tape, he notices an inscription engraved on the metal, “BAyR” (“BAandR”), the initials of “Buenos Aires and Rosario,” the British-owned railway company that built this line in 1890. Ezequiel is talking to an older woman, a curious

passerby, and explains to her that if ADIF removes the hydrant, that chapter of station history will be erased. She doesn't seem convinced by ABTE's approach. Can't they do something more concrete?, she asks before walking away and declaring that she will start a petition on Change.org.



Figure 18: "No se va" ("Not leaving"): Ezequiel and Gachi stencil the phrase on the platform floor in Coghlan station. September 2014. Photo by author.

ABTE was born out of a fortuitous encounter in the early 1990s, at the height of the dismantling of *Ferrocarriles Argentinos* and the concessioning of the metropolitan railway network. By then Patricio was in his twenties and a budding artist. Since his

teenage years, when he rode the train to school, he harbored a fascination for railway architecture and the transfer of technology, knowledge, and materials evident in railway infrastructure. One day he came across a train ticket tucked away in a vase in his mother's house, one he had used twelve years earlier and discarded. At the time he was working on a series of paintings that portrayed the brands and logotypes of national industry products, ubiquitous objects of everyday life that were either disappearing or mutating with the wave of privatizations sweeping through Argentina. The ticket he found in the vase was an Edmondson ticket, he would later learn, a type introduced in the British railway system in the 1840s that made its way to Argentina sometime between 1865 and 1875. Rectangular in shape, Edmondson tickets were pre-printed, serial-numbered, and color-coded for different types of fares, a vital cog in railway accounting practices that had survived different railway administrations and was still in use at that time. It occurred to Patricio that this ticket was now in danger of disappearing too, linked as it was to a printing technology that would surely be rendered obsolete by the new concession companies.

Patricio thus embarked on what he calls "fieldwork," contacting train ticket collectors and railway enthusiasts and befriending railway station personnel in his quest to recover a piece of furniture used to store Edmondson tickets. In the process, he began collecting other railway materials (signs, bronze window fixtures), rescuing them from being pillaged or disposed of in this transition period.

In 1998 he and a colleague formed ABTE, ostensibly a group of collectors of Edmondson train tickets. Some of its members are ticket collectors in earnest, mainly participating in the group's ticket-exchange meet-ups and convinced of the group's

existence as a serious ticket-collecting entity. Yet ABTE was, from the start, an artistic project, a mimicry of railway enthusiasts' "obsession" with railway minutiae, fascinations that Patricio saw as "absolutely hyper-specific of any old thing," as he puts it. ABTE thus became an exercise in occupying a space that straddled the real and the fictional.

When concession companies finally did faze out Edmondson tickets, ABTE artists contacted former workers from the last railway printing workshop to restore an old printing press. They continued printing Edmondson tickets for special occasions, such as the anniversary of the first railway strike and a march in commemoration of railway workers who were "disappeared" during the last military dictatorship.¹⁴⁶

ABTE's main activity, however, is the maintenance of station name boards (*nomencladores*). Patricio and other artists see these signs as comprising the "identity of a place," insofar as these boards often name not only the station, but also the surrounding locality. These signs have varied in construction and design over time, and their materiality (be it pine wood, metal, or concrete) and their color schemes index particular moments in railway history. ABTE artists first began repairing name boards in urban Buenos Aires, and slowly fanned out from the city, traveling on weekends to stations in the interior of the province, to places where trains seldom run, or have ceased to run

¹⁴⁶ ABTE also began printing stickers, which were concession companies' new visual medium of choice for communicating with passengers. ABTE's stickers utilize a Johnston typeface (the first typeface designed for public transportation, created for the London Underground) and also utilize the color schemes of different railway companies. ABTE artists and their friends place these stickers in stations and on board of trains, establishing a dialogue of sorts with railway management's instructions and with particular political moments. Where a company sticker forbade passengers from propping train doors open, an ABTE sticker declared holding doors open to be an act of solidarity towards other passengers. When ADIF grandiosely proclaimed in its institutional brochures that "A country without trains is a nation without a future," ABTE stickers responded, "A country without trains is boring." I, in fact, first learned of ABTE when I encountered one of these "A country without trains is boring" stickers on a ticket vending machine at a train station.

altogether. For these interventions or “actions,” as they call them, they don a worker’s uniform assembled from Ezequiel’s “textile archive,” a collection of uniforms, particularly from national companies that have disappeared. The artists begin by scratching the surface of a name board, studying the layers of paint that evince the succession of color schemes of different railway companies. They then repair the sign, fixing its posts, adding fresh layers of paint, sometimes respecting the palette of a particular period in railway history, other times mixing different periods. They often repair and repaint other station fixtures as well: antique water fountains, roof trimmings. But they always purposefully leave a section of the station untouched, in *dis*repair, for the sake of contrast. For their efforts, a quasi-archaeological engagement with the stratigraphic layers of railway history, are a commentary on “what is left behind,” as they put it, and on *desidia*, neglect.



Figure 19: A restored steam locomotive at the Ferroclub Central Argentino (Central Argentine Railroad Club), in Remedios de Escalada (Province of Buenos Aires). Photo by author.



Figure 20: Men repairing tracks at the Ferroclub Argentino (Argentine Railroad Club) in Lynch (city of Buenos Aires). Photo by author.

ABTE members see their work as fundamentally different from the preservation projects undertaken by railway enthusiasts at weekend railway clubs or *ferroclubes*. As custodians of state property, members of railway clubs—always male, and usually middle-class—restore steam locomotives and other rolling stock (e.g. dining cars), modeling their labors after British preservation societies (see Figures 19 and 20). ABTE members are critical of these clubs’ Anglophilia: their insistence on referring to different railway lines by the names of the British companies that preceded nationalization, their alleged disdain for railway workers and for everything related to nationalization and Perón. One ABTE member complained that for these railway clubs, the railway appears to be “an English mummy kept in formalin.” ABTE members, in contrast, are interested in engaging with a railway heritage they see as multiple. “We are artists, not restorers,” Ezequiel quipped. As Patricio explained, “We are interested in showing this question of

the passage of time. It is not a restoration that denies the historicity of the material. It also has to do with the hybridity of different temporalities.”

ABTE artists seek to embody not the British engineer or mechanic who tends to rolling stock brought to his workshop, but rather the railway artisan, a nomadic figure who traveled in his railway wagon with his pots and tools and set up camp at a railway station for months at a time to do maintenance and repair work.



Figure 21: “We are railroad memory”: an ABTE sticker at the National Railroad Museum. Photo by author.

As they undertake maintenance work, ABTE artists immerse themselves in railway history and lore, learning from current and former workers turns of phrase and manners of engaging with the material. “We are railroad memory,” one of their stickers declares (Figure 21). While ABTE works against disappearance—against the erasure, pillaging, and amputation of railway infrastructure—, their efforts are not born out of nostalgia, they are quick to point out. Against the grain of narratives of ferricide that

traffic in railway decay, that “relish in sadness and loss,” as Patricio puts it, ABTE artists engage with what remains and with what is emerging from the debris. In their travels, they have encountered formerly abandoned stations repurposed as public libraries, soup kitchens, and day cares.

ABTE artists are interested in reclaiming railway stations as *public* spaces—a commons made as such by the affective histories that bind people to the railway. Where concession companies acted as “occupation troops,” as the artists call them, swooping in, replacing long-standing station personnel, and severing ties with surrounding communities, ABTE’s maintenance expeditions always attract curious spectators, reinstating stations as nodal points of sociality. ABTE artists recognize that the railroad once constituted the infrastructural backbone of the nation-state, a “foundational and fundamental part of the country,” as defined by Patricio, transporting water and providing services and otherwise making the state palpable and present (not everywhere, of course, but in a particular cartographic configuration of the nation-state).

If infrastructure can be understood as an archive, as I propose in this chapter, then it is as much an archive of the frictions and histories of mobility and maintenance as an archive of affective histories, insofar as the railroad is seen by many as constituting the “intimate fibers of identity and memory,” in Patricio’s words. ABTE’s notion of “affective heritage” thus underscores how railroad infrastructure also functions as a repository of quotidian histories of travel and encounter.

Engaging Material Memory

In this chapter, I have ethnographically traced how histories of abrasion, friction, mobility, and encounter are inscribed in railroad infrastructure, shaping the rhythm and texture of mobility, and how commuters, railroad workers, and train enthusiasts engage with this infrastructural archive. Trains, I have shown, leave a “fingerprint” on rails, in the form of “fish scales,” burrs, and sinusoid lines. The nature of the supporting ballast or rail bed, and the type and weight of rolling stock used, in turn, leave traces on tracks, as crossties become pocked and sometimes break, and as rails become undulated over time, acquiring the shape of the ground beneath. Railroad workers have developed techniques for reading these traces. The geographies of rail decay (the rusting of rails, the rotting of crossties), in turn, point to the ecology of memory, to the enmeshing of infrastructures and environments, and the “co-editorial” work of nonhuman agents. I have shown, too, that train stations and their environs are palimpsest-like, with stratigraphic layers of trash, posters, and graffiti and coexisting name boards indexing particular moments in railroad history.

Surveying efforts by commuter groups such as *Autocomvocados X los Trenes* reveal how rust and other forms of material etchings render railway infrastructure evidentiary, a sensor of current precarity and future potential tragedy. My interlocutors thus appear to agree with Weizman (2014:14) that it is in the “material deformations and structural failures that micro and macro forces, political and historical processes might reveal themselves.” As the *Tragedia de Once* has tragically shown, the “memory” inscribed in railroad materials is not merely a “natural” history of railroad wear and use, the inevitable

passage of time, but, rather, or also, a history of *disrepair* (or *misrepair*) and *disregard*. The memory of metals reveals the way that history and decay accrete; this material memory, I show in the following chapter, can haunt and subvert infrastructural projects of progress.

Yet stories and images of rust and railway decay are themselves risky, threatening with an unraveling of their own. During a railway party at the crumbling station of Empalme Lobos, parts of which had been taken over by squatter families, I met a middle-aged couple who occasionally traveled throughout the province of Buenos Aires on track-maintenance cars (*zorras de vía*). The towns they visited had mostly dwindled in population size to a mere few families. When posting pictures of their travels on Facebook, they omitted photographs that depicted these places as ghost towns or ruins. The message they wanted to transmit, they explained, was one of hope and opportunity. Patricio, from ABTE, in turn, spoke disparagingly of documentaries that traffic in railway decay: “There is this thing that is very much a downer (*bajoneante*), no?, a relishing in sadness (*garrón*) and loss.” He chose to highlight the forms of liveliness and creativity emerging in the debris.

For railway matter is also ripe with what Patricio refers to as “affective heritage,” the “intimate fibers of identity and memory.” Thus, alongside and against state-led modernization efforts, commuter-activists, railway workers, and railway enthusiasts work to monitor, restore, and reimagine railways. In times of *desidia* and of a modernizing revolution that appears to disavow infrastructural and affective legacies, maintenance thus becomes a form of critique, an embodied safeguarding of railway memory.

In the next interlude, I turn to another form of safeguarding railway memory: the repurposing of *chatarra* (scrap metal) into sculptures. *Chatarra*, the afterlife of metal as

scrap, of that which is left behind, is perhaps a fitting last image of the memory of metals, as it speaks not only of lives and materials rendered obsolete and disposable by “micro and macro processes,” but also of recombinant possibilities and emergence.

Interlude: *Chatarra*

The aftertaste of Mechita lingers long after you have left the dirt roads behind. Kicked up by wind, motorcycles, and the occasional car, dust swirls up, envelopes the town, seeps into houses, settles on your tongue. Mechita lies 200km away from the city of Buenos Aires and is nestled alongside the tracks of the Once-Bragado branch of the Sarmiento line, three kilometers away from the *Ruta Nacional 5* (National Highway 5). The small town (population under 2,000) was founded in 1906 and is bisected by the border between the municipalities of Bragado and Alberti; only a few of its blocks are paved.¹⁴⁷ Mechita comes up frequently in railroad blogs and stories about the railroad crisis and ghost towns, for this was a formerly important railroad node that boasted of a train repair workshop founded by the British to cater to the *Ferrocarril del Oeste's* rolling stock, a train station, and one of the largest shunting areas in South America.¹⁴⁸ The town is said to epitomize railroad decay. I was drawn to Mechita by a different story, however, one of a scrap-metal artist.

Giommi, as he is known, is tall, with wavy white hair and white stubble. His *galpón* (warehouse), a personal museum of sorts, sits on a quiet corner of Mechita, at the intersection of two dirt roads. The small front yard is crowded with scrap-metal sculptures, presided by a towering crucified Christ. Wrought-iron letters arched above

¹⁴⁷ According to an article published by *La Nación* in 2011, Mechita's population is around 2000 (*La Nación* 10/09/2011). According to the official webpage of the Municipality of Bragado, Mechita is classified as a rural locality and a *cuartel*, drawing from the 2001 census (rather than the more recent census from 2010), the webpage claims that 1,444 people live on the portion of Mechita that lies within the Municipality of Bragado, while 397 live across the border in Alberti (www.bragado.gov.ar).

¹⁴⁸ A shunting area is an area used to maneuver trains and change tracks.

the front gate display the museum's name, "*El Recreo de Don José*" ("Don José's Recess," or "Don José's Playground"). The warehouse, built with wood salvaged from old railroad cars by the previous owner, used to house a carpentry workshop. Now, Giommi's art lies inside, covered with plastic sheets to fend off the dust.

As he gives me a tour of the workshop, Giommi unveils different ingenious sculptures made with *chapa* and *fierros* (two generic names for scrap metal): pistons, railroad brake shoes, railroad axle caps, and large nails, scraps of Mechita's railroad history assembled to form a Virgin Mary, a large insect, a Sacred Heart Christ. "All made with railway material," the artist assures me, "All old *chatarra*, all restored." Alongside his metal sculptures lie his many paintings, including portraits of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, of neighbor and famed artist Juan Doffo, and of his father, returning from fishing. Tucked among these stand busts of former-President Néstor Kirchner and of the Mayor of Bragado; in a back room, a full-scale car built with parts from over twenty different cars models (Giommi himself used to be a *chapista*, a car plater) in honor of the *Bicentenario*, the 200th anniversary of Argentina's struggles for independence, celebrated in 2010.

Giommi seems shy and speaks fast, in spurts. He is of blacksmith heritage (his great-grandfather made the crosses for the famous basilica in Luján) and trained as an art teacher. Following in his father's footsteps—a formidable, athletic man, locally famous for having once pulled seven railroad cars with his sheer strength—, Giommi joined the railroad in Mechita, eventually becoming a lathe/turnery foreman (*capaz de tornería*) until he too became a victim of privatization. As Giommi walks around his museum unveiling his motley creations, some of his sentences are lost or left hanging, as other objects catch

his attention and elicit new stories. “The infrastructure is bad,” he laments, “so things go to waste.”

Several diplomas adorn one of the walls, testifying to courses taken in turnery, welding, and locomotive machinery. “I have taken all of the courses,” Giommi says ruefully. “In ’94 they kicked us all out, [former President] Menem laid us all off... When we finished the courses, they laid us all off,” he repeats, “They kept *all* the useless [workers], because they were easier to manage.” Of the 2,000 workers that Giommi estimates were working in the railroad when he began, only 30 or 40 are left. He lifts a sculpture of a hand holding five railway spikes (*clavos de vía*), and explains that these represent the five railroad lines that cross Bragado. “The hand is trying to retain them, to stop the railroad from becoming deactivated,” he says.¹⁴⁹ He has named the sculpture “Yearning the Five Lines” (*Añorando las Cinco Líneas*). “You do not know what it was like after ’94. If you could see the misery that there is in the railway today,” he continues.

Although trains have mostly ceased to run here, the flow of railroad matter continues to forge connections between people and places. Some mornings, when Giommi arrives to the museum, he will find a *fierro* strewn in the yard, a gift from an anonymous neighbor. An army coronel who visited his museum some time ago later had a 330kg (700lbs) bullet delivered to him by an army truck; it lies in the yard, next to a helmet donated by the *acería*, the steelworks in Bragado that has become the largest employer in the area after the railroad’s demise. Other *chatarra* Giommi retrieves from

¹⁴⁹ I use the term “deactivated” (*desactivado*) because that is the term Giommi used, rather than the terms often used by other railway workers and activists in reference to railway branches that are no longer active, such as “closed down” (*cerrado*) or “cut down” (*cortado*).

the railroad workshop in Mechita, which he visits often, or purchases over the internet or obtains through barter. His is another version of *desguace* (gutting out or stripping bare): “When the railroads were deactivated, cut, I said, ‘I am going to go and fetch things,’” he recounts. When he learns of railroad museums closing down (“They are closing down, it is hard to maintain everything,” he laments), he travels to buy their remaining stock.

Giommi’s museum has thus become a repository of motley objects. One of the workshop walls displays a collection of keys to defunct railroad buildings, amassed by Giommi’s father, who was in charge of dismantling them. The longest key is missing, stolen by one of the schoolchildren who visit the museum.¹⁵⁰ Another collection of keys, a gift from a locksmith from the town of Suipacha, Giommi has shaped into two ships.

Outside Giommi’s museum, the large, crucified Christ towers above the *chatarra* sculptures, its silhouette stark against the expansive blue of Mechita’s skies (Figure 22). The Luján basilica has requested the Christ for its central plaza, but, although it would make him famous, Giommi cannot bring himself to part with it: “It kills me, you see.” Like his other sculptures of religious motif, the Christ has been blessed by the regional bishop. In his home, half a block away from the museum, Giommi has a back room filled with *fierros*. “Everything I find I use for something,” he laughs. He uses his father’s heavy tools to cut and forge his metal finds, but these have begun to take a toll on his hands, wrists, and back. “Railroad materials are heavy, that is why my arms are broken.”

¹⁵⁰ Making (forging) and unmaking (dismantling) run in Giommi’s family: both his great-grandfather and grandfather were blacksmiths, his father was tasked with closing down railroad buildings, and his brother, who lives a mere block away, makes a living selling spare auto parts.

Giommi takes me to visit the “*ferrocarril*” (the railroad) in his pickup, leaving his dog behind, lest the station mongrels attack her. Along the way, he points out the distinctive *colonias ferroviarias* (railway colonies) lining the street parallel to the tracks, one hundred and ten houses built over a century ago by the *Ferrocarril del Oeste* for its workers. We reach the *talleres*, the railroad workshop. One of Giommi’s former subordinates, Gonzalo,¹⁵¹ now a supervisor, shows us around, *cumbia* music wafting in the air. The large brick depot houses rusting railroad cars, wagons, and locomotives, a few of them brightly intervened by artists. Giommi brings up the recent public backlash against the graffiti painting of new Chinese electric trains while they stood in the port of Buenos Aires shortly after arrival. Gonzalo muttered in disgust, “That is *desidia*,” as if the strange forlorn landscape before us were something else. We walk out to an overgrown yard strewn with more wagons and locomotives, their colors fading into a mineral hue. Giommi admires a locomotive’s *trompa* (lit. face or trunk), a cross-section recently severed at his request. He plans to place it by the highway, at the intersection that marks the entry route to Mechita, beside the statue of the Virgin, “to give the town a bit of identity,” he explains. Conversation turns to Mechita’s railroad museum, operated by the municipality. It has been closed for a while, and Giommi and Gonzalo wonder whether the *chico*, the guy who serves as museum caretaker and guide, has fallen ill or died. The museum is very run-down, Gonzalo muses, its walls having crumbled down from the inside.

¹⁵¹ Pseudonym.

As we wander among the ruins of Mechita's railroad past, Giommi bends down and picks up a metal coil, speckled russet and grey. Gonzalo teases him and tells him he is a magnet; every visit, *fierros* stick to this man.



Figure 22: Giommi's sculpture of the crucified Christ, made out of chatarra. Photo by author.

Chapter Six: Railroad Revolution

“Bienvenido a bordo THE SARMIENTO LINE! La terminal de trenes es ONCE. La próxima parada es terminal ONCE” [“Welcome aboard THE SARMIENTO LINE! The train terminal is ONCE. The next stop is ONCE terminal.”] The announcement, in incongruous Spanglish, scrolls across digital signs placed throughout the sleek new train. As it departs the terminal station of Once, an automated female voice announces, “The next stop is Once.” Two vendors cross each other in the train car’s corridor and exchange smirks. “She came to Argentina and got dizzy,” one tells the other. En route to Caballito station, the train makes a sudden stop. “Testing brakes,” another vendor calls out, mimicking the automated voice.

The *chapa* (train plate) RC20 glides seemingly effortlessly along the tracks. Yet the automated voice continues off-kilter, announcing the train’s arrival to stations it has already left behind. “It is mistaken,” an elderly woman grumbles. We approach Villa Luro station, recently renovated, a harbinger of impending modernization along the line. It is bedecked in banners corresponding to different political parties and groups sympathetic to the national government: *Unidos y Organizados*, *Nuevo Encuentro*, the hammer and sickle of the Communist Party. Cameramen and police officers from the Explosives unit mill around the station. I inch towards the door, weaving my way around other passengers, hoping to descend and perhaps get a glimpse of the President as she officially inaugurates “*los trenes chinos*” (“the Chinese trains”), as the Sarmiento line’s new rolling stock, imported from China, have been dubbed. The train slows down, but does not stop.

In Liniers, where I descend, another “Chinese train” waits on an auxiliary track. It will carry Cristina, the President, a woman standing by me on the station platform tells me. She has yet to arrive. “They look beautiful on the inside,” her older companion, who saw images of the trains on television, muses. “I hope they are maintained,” the first one responds, “We will see how long they last.”

A train pulls in, yet it is an older Toshiba, the familiar Chapa 2. It is impossibly full, but Liniers is a busy destination and several passengers descend. I manage to squeeze my way onboard. On our way to the terminal, we pass one of the new *formaciones* (trainsets). “It is already scratched,” an older male passenger tells a younger man, possibly his son. In Once, people mill around the newspaper and hotdog stands. The mural of hearts honoring the victims of the Once Tragedy, assembled by their families and usually visible from the station platforms, is concealed by makeshift wooden panels. Men wearing black jackets with the word “Security” emblazoned on their backs, employees of a private security company recently hired to supplement the *Policía Federal*, walk in groups of five. The loudspeakers announce that the train service between Once and Liniers has been interrupted (due to the inauguration act, I presume, but no clarification is proffered); times of departure are yet to be determined. A few “Chinese trains” lie idly by the platforms, their doors open. A woman hurries towards one of them, the *Chapa* RC17, pulling a child along. “Take a good look at it, this will be the last time you see it this way,” she tells her, “Afterwards they will scratch it all up.”¹⁵²

¹⁵² The original, as overheard in Spanish: “*Míralo bien que es la última vez que lo vas a ver así, después lo van a rayar todo.*”

How does modernization arrive and take hold? In this chapter, I trace the awkward arrival of new rolling stock from China and the patchy renovation of aging railway infrastructure in the aftermath of the *Tragedia de Once*. I examine how glitches in this highly-anticipated modernization project fuel anxieties over the incompatibility of foreign technology and local infrastructure and the obduracy of decay (both infrastructural and “moral”). The renovation of the metropolitan railroad fleet and of track and station infrastructure by the Cristina Fernández de Kirchner administration was widely seen by commuter-activists, railroad workers, and rail enthusiasts as a response to the *Tragedia de Once*, although government officials were reticent to acknowledge the administration’s entanglement in the crash. As the national government came under increased public scrutiny for its inadequate supervision of metropolitan railway concession companies, in June 2012 the office of the Secretary of Transportation was moved from under the purview of the Ministry of Federal Planning, Public Investment, and Services, headed by the disgraced Julio De Vido, a close ally of the late former President Néstor Kirchner and his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, President at the time. The office was now under the Ministry of the Interior, under Florencio Randazzo, a rising Presidential hopeful. Under the newly expanded and renamed Ministry of Interior and Transportation, in January 2013 Randazzo announced a series of modernization projects that, in his words, would amount to “a real revolution in transport” (*Télam* 14/01/13). Most symbolically, President Fernández de Kirchner and Minister Randazzo announced the renationalization of the Sarmiento, Mitre, and San Martín lines.



Figure 23: “[Public] Works for Everybody. We are improving the railways.” This sign, poised over old metal cross ties repurposed as a fence, displays the name of the President (“Cristina Fernández de Kirchner Presidency”) and of the government agencies involved in the renovation (ADIF, the Railway Infrastructure Administration; the Ministry of the Interior and Transportation, newly renamed, as evidenced by the added patch; and the Nation’s Presidency). January 2014. Photo by author.

In the aftermath of the *Tragedia de Once*, the sense of urgency surrounding railway decay was compounded by two ensuing crashes on the Sarmiento line. In the early morning of June 2013, *Chapa 1* collided into *Chapa 19* while the latter was at a standstill outside Castelar station. Three passengers died and more than 300 were injured. In October 2013, four months after this crash, which became known as the *Tragedia de Castelar*, and a mere month after the metropolitan railway system had been renationalized, the *Chapa 5* failed to brake as it entered the terminal station of Once. Buffers at the end of the tracks forced the train to a stop, but the force of inertia caused the first train cars to mount onto the station platform as they became dislodged from their undercarriages. Unlike the *Tragedia de Once*, however, these subsequent crashes were

attributed (by public opinion, and by trial) to human error, rather than mechanical and structural failure, and enabled the Ministry of the Interior and Transportation to crack down on train conductors, installing security cameras in the conductor's cabin and instituting regular alcohol checks. These crashes fed into a broader narrative that the railway crisis was in part the result of improper passenger and personnel behavior, and fueled clashes between the federal government and the railway unions. Unionized railway workers were quick to reply that cameras "do not brake," and denounced these measures as purely cosmetic, as seen in Figure 24.



Figure 24: "Cameras do not brake. Less makeup, more spare parts." This sign, photographed through a train window, is signed by "UF," Unión Ferroviaria (the largest railway union), and is painted in the maroon red characteristic of La Bordó, the faction of the Unión Ferroviaria that presides in the Sarmiento line. January 2014. Photo by author.

The specter of these crashes, particularly of the Castelar Tragedy, haunted the inauguration of the new "Chinese trains." President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, poised to begin her inauguration speech onboard a train in Villa Luro, was caught on video telling her aides and inauguration attendees, "Look, we have to do this quickly,

because otherwise the next trainset (*formación*) will come and ram into us (*viene y nos lleva puestos*).” The phrase, portrayed by the media as “unfortunate,” was not well received by the relatives of the Once Tragedy’s victims (*La Nación* 22/7/2014).¹⁵³

Minister Florencio Randazzo’s “railway revolution”—a term that gained valence across unsympathetic media outlets and skeptical commuter-activists and railroad workers—thus disembarked in a politically fraught moment. Yet, given the number of crashes and derailments, most people welcomed the arrival of new rolling stock, even while some believed that their purchase was hasty and not necessarily of the best quality.¹⁵⁴ On the inauguration day of the Sarmiento line’s fleet, I traveled on an overcrowded new trainset whose air conditioning was not working. Unlike Toshiba train cars, whose original configuration featured windows that could be opened at passengers’ discretion, this train had fixed-pane windows.¹⁵⁵ When a female passenger complained loudly about the stifling heat onboard, a middle-aged male passenger was quick to retort from his seat: “*Señora*, do not complain. Until yesterday we were traveling in a blender (*licuadora*).”

¹⁵³ During that act, the President also mentioned that, in these new trains, passengers would no longer be able to prop doors open or hang from them. The following day, at the commemorative act held monthly by *los familiares de Once*, the relatives of the deceased in the Once crash, María Luján Rey, mother of a 19-year-old victim, commented in response, “The First Mandatary said that people would no longer be able to travel on the sill steps (*estribos*), or with the doors open, on account of being brave. Madam President, these attitudes were always the product of a train collapsed by lack of maintenance and overcrowded passengers (*pasajeros hacinados*). Doors opened by people hanging from them were, are, and will continue to be a product of the State’s abandonment of passengers” (*La Nación* 22/7/2014).

¹⁵⁴ Because of the convoluted, polarized, and high-stakes political context into which these trains arrived, some of my interlocutors would ask me to turn my recorder off when I inquired about the modernization of rolling stock and infrastructure. Those off-the-record stories and opinions have not made their way onto these pages.

¹⁵⁵ As detailed in Chapter Four, Toshiba train cars underwent successive “modernization” projects, which significantly altered their configuration and appearance. On some railway lines, roof fans were replaced by A/C equipment, and original window fixtures by fixed-pane windows.

The arrival of Chinese trains, furthermore, signaled the “thickening” of relations between China and Argentina (Armony and Strauss 2012:4). Scholars have framed China’s markedly increased preponderance in the region (as reflected in trade relations, commodity exports, investment in infrastructure, and joint ventures, for instance) as part of the country’s policy of “going out” (*zou chuqu*) (Armony and Strauss 2012).¹⁵⁶ On her first state visit to China, in July 2010, then-President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner signed several major contracts to upgrade freight and commuter networks, including the purchase of new rolling stock for freight, commuter, and long-distance passenger trains and for the capital’s subway system, and the electrification of several commuter routes.¹⁵⁷ Per accords signed on that visit, China would also finance several large-scale infrastructure works it planned to build in Argentina, including hydro-electric dams, a nuclear plant, and a space base—in line with the country’s worldwide “infrastructure expansion” (Háskel 2015).¹⁵⁸

While these infrastructure renovation projects, portrayed by different industry news outlets as a “rail revival” (Barrows 2017, *Railway Gazette* 2010), were certainly accelerated by the *Tragedia de Once* and its political aftermath, the first purchase of rolling stock from China in fact preceded the crash. Thus, the purchase of brand-new

¹⁵⁶ For a discussion of China’s own “infrastructural fix,” and the ways in which infrastructure is “shap[ing] the praxis of urban formation and citizenship,” see Bach (2016). See also Chu (2014).

¹⁵⁷ As reported by the *Railway Gazette* (7/19/2010), these contracts included a US\$10bn upgrade of the Belgrano freight network (85% of the funding would be provided by China Development Bank); the electrification of the Belgrano Norte and Belgrano Sur commuter networks (by Shaanxi Coal Group Investment Co Ltd and China Railway First Survey & Design Institute Group Co Ltd); the electrification of a branch on the Roca commuter network (by CITIC International); the purchase of metro (subway) cars for the city of Buenos Aires; and the purchase (from CNR) of new rolling stock for long-distance passenger services.

¹⁵⁸ Guillermo Háskel (2015), writing for the now-defunct *Buenos Aires Herald*, the last English-language print newspaper in Argentina, alludes to concerns that these accords are “shrouded in secrecy, strongly asymmetrical, and that they will deepen the trade commoditization of Argentina.”

locomotives and passenger cars from China Southern Rolling Stock (CSR) Sifang for the San Martín line was announced as early as 2006, but the fleet did not disembark at the port of Buenos Aires until February 2014 (Barrows 2013; Lukin 2014; *Railway Gazette* 2/5/2013).

The arrival of new rolling stock and the renovation of track and station infrastructure was presented in official discourse and propaganda as a “modernization” of the railroad system. Modernity has been theorized as a temporal rupture, one that is reflected in shifting modes of governance, uses of social space, and subjectivities. In this regard, modernity is, if nothing else, a “temporal ideology” that “valorizes newness, rupture, and linear plot lines” (Dawdy 2010:762). Scholars have argued that modernity is a “narrated imaginary” about otherness (Rofel 1999:13) that is remade as it travels, a “translational process” (Chakrabarty 2000:xviii) marked by disjuncture and deferral.¹⁵⁹ Modernity and modernization are best understood as “projects” (Tsing 2000), never complete, always aspirational. Narratives of modernization, Jim Ferguson (1999) argues in his account of the short-lived prosperity heralded by the Zambian Copperbelt, fail to account for the non-linearities and counter-linearities of the present, and the broken promises of progress. Progress, many scholars have argued, leaves ruins in its wake (Benjamin 1968, Gordillo 2014, Hell and Schönle 2010, Tsing 2015).

¹⁵⁹ Jean and John Comaroff (1993:xi) critique the term “modernity” itself, arguing that it is “closely connected to Western ideologies of universal development” and progress, and thus “serves ill as an analytic tool for grasping European expansion, most of all from the vantage point of the colonized” (xii-xiii). They prefer to view modernity not as an actual process, but rather as “an imaginary construction of the present in terms of a mythical past” (xiv). Modernity, in this regard, has its own enchantments and magicalities (xiv).

The following section traces how, in a context of purported modernization, commuters and railway workers viewed and experienced new rolling stock and a shifting infrastructure. This encounter with infrastructural difference often proved to be unsettling: as glitches and failures cracked the façade of “techno-utopia” (Schwenkel 2015), Argentina’s place in the world, its modernity, and its future, were called into question.

Water Closet Morris

Outstretched arms hold onto chrome bars, obscuring passengers’ faces from the camera’s view. At the far end of the train car, a digital screen is visible above the mostly dark-haired heads. The words “*Estación W. C. Morris*” scroll across it, as an automated female voice announces in thickly-accented Spanish the train’s arrival at “Water Closet Morris” station.¹⁶⁰ A lone cackle is heard, presumably from the camera’s holder. As the PA system instructs passengers to prepare to descend, the camera’s holder adds, “And flush the toilet!” (“*¡Y tiren la cadena!*”). “Before descending, flush the toilet in Water Closet Morris,” he repeats, with audible glee.

This YouTube video, shared on Facebook by a railroad worker in April 2014, was one of several such videos to document the unfortunate translation of “William C. Morris” into “Water Closet Morris” aboard new trains on the San Martín line. Located in the *partido* (district) of Hurlingham, in the northwestern suburbs of Greater Buenos Aires, the town and station of William C. Morris were named after an English-born

¹⁶⁰ The automated voice appeared to mimic an accent from Spain, distinctive from Argentinean Spanish.

pastor, educator, and philanthropist who founded several schools in Buenos Aires. Among train riders and YouTube viewers versed in English, the recasting of the station as a bathroom was met with mirth and indignation, with people complaining and celebrating the locale's unwitting association with a toilet (*inodoro*) and a shithole (*cagada*). Like the automated system on the Sarmiento line that announced the train's arrival to stations after these had been left behind, "Water Closet Morris" made all-too-explicit the fact that these new trains, meant to order and safeguard daily mobility, were undeniably foreign. These glitches—inaccurate announcements delivered in a peculiar accent—amounted to misrecognitions, and rendered familiar places momentarily strange.¹⁶¹

As the first trains to arrive from China (the first *new* trains, in fact, to be purchased in Argentina in several decades), the San Martín line's newfangled fleet served as a harbinger of progress to come in other metropolitan lines. Yet upon their arrival it was discovered that the Chinese rolling stock did not match existing infrastructure: station platforms were too low for these trains. "Look at the aberration we have come to!" Claudio, chief supervisor at a railroad repair workshop, lamented when we met one afternoon in Adrogué, a district in southern Gran Buenos Aires, "We bought high-floored locomotives and coaches (*locomotoras y coches de piso alto*) for the San Martín, knowing that the station platforms are low." His voice rising in exasperation, he continued, "These [trains] will arrive in a determined quantity of time. *All* this time, nobody thought of saying, '*Che*, let us start to build at least *one* high-platform station so that the train can arrive there one day, a platform in Retiro?' No. That is what I am

¹⁶¹ See Von Schnitzler (2013) on how technology—in her ethnographic case, prepaid meters in South Africa—gets reconfigured as it travels.

saying, many things are [done] by impulse.” Bautista, a workplace hygiene and safety specialist employed on the Mitre line, echoed a similar sentiment: “It was all improvisation,” he said of the purchase.¹⁶²

After the first batch of new trains arrived, station platforms along the San Martín line thus had to be raised to meet the floor height of passenger cars. This renovation took several months, and the new fleet did not enter into service on that line until April 2014 – over a year after their arrival.¹⁶³ In the meantime, three of the new formations were temporarily loaned to the Mitre line (which already boasted higher platforms) to provide peak-hour services (*Railway Gazette* 06/07/2013). These new trains, however, were operated by *diesel* locomotives, whereas the Mitre line was regularly serviced by *electric* trains, fed by an electrified third rail. For railroad workers and some *ferroaficionados* (railway enthusiasts or train buffs), the sight of modern diesel trains circulating on aging electrified tracks was an incongruous, and somewhat unseemly, spectacle. Rolling stock and track infrastructure did not meld nicely: “They brought over Chinese locomotives and there were parts that jutted out from the locomotive..., which could not circulate

¹⁶² Richard Campbell, president of the *Ferroclub Central Argentino* (the Central Argentine Railway Club), tempered this perception of improvisation and carelessness as a national peculiarity, recounting a recent scandal in France after the discovery that a recently-purchased large fleet of railway cars did not match existing infrastructure. There, too, station platforms had to be hurriedly raised. In his telling, however, the French’s realization had come shortly before the manufacturing of the cars was complete, whereas in Argentina the incompatibility was only noticed *after* the arrival of the rolling stock: “When the [rolling] stock arrived, there were still no plans to redo the stations!” he added. “It happens, it happens in different places,” he conceded, “Like accidents happen, there are a lot of variables...that can happen. The thing is, they *all* seem to happen to us!”

¹⁶³ When the fleet was finally inaugurated on the San Martín line in April 2014, some stations were still being serviced by makeshift platforms (slabs of wood upheld by metal scaffolding), while others (Muñiz, Santos Lugares, and La Paternal stations) were temporarily bypassed altogether and serviced by free buses instead (Cabot 2014, Lukin 2014).

because they bumped against the third rail. So, they had to go and cut that piece out,” Bautista recalled.

In Bautista’s and Claudio’s descriptions of mismatching trains, tracks, and stations, improvisation emerges as an idiom through which railroad workers both make sense of the ad hoc nature of infrastructure and critique the state’s inadequate planning. Station platforms that needed to be raised and train parts that had to be chiseled off underscore that infrastructural work is never complete. They evince, too, the *translational* work demanded by modernization, in this case, as an ongoing process of accommodating trains, platforms, and riders (as underscored below) to each other.¹⁶⁴

For Mitre commuters, meanwhile, these trains temporarily borrowed from the San Martín line were a novelty and offered a taste of modernized travel. One young man described them as “lemon-scented trains” (*trenes olor a limón*), a welcome, if somewhat sterile, shift in olfactory register. This scent of progress (Flikke 2013), together with a novel chromatic palette (dark blues, peach accents, creamy whites tinged with grey), gleaming surfaces, and a new soundscape (the purr of motors, the hiss of pneumatic brakes, the chime that heralded the opening and closing of doors), created a new sensorial mode of travel—even as soft jolts along certain sections of track served as a reminder of the timeworn infrastructure beneath. Uneven tracks, in fact, limited circulation speed, and on particularly dilapidated sections of track, such as between the

¹⁶⁴ Antina von Schnitzler (2013) argues that translation is always at play when technology travels. She writes, “[T]echnologies are enrolled within ethical and political assemblages in historically specific ways that may or may not ‘travel’ elsewhere and that may shift over time” (2013: 675). Thus, “labor of translation [is] required for a technology to be made operational in new contexts” (2013: 676). Von Schnitzler traces how meters, “tools of moral improvement” in Victorian Britain, were “re-assembled as devices of counterinsurgency” in post-apartheid South Africa (2013:682).

stations of Núñez and Belgrano C, train conductors were forced to reduce speed to avoid derailment.

Paula, a young communications specialist at a multinational company who rode the Mitre train daily to and from work, reminisced about her brief experience aboard those loaned train cars: “That train was a *pleasure*. The seats were super ergonomic. You had the sound of the opening and closing of doors.” She contrasted this with the Mitre line’s regular Toshiba fleet, whose doors were prone to malfunction, often opening and shutting several times before finally closing. Riding in the new train cars, she had apprehended just how noisy her regular commute was: “The *auditory* contamination that the train has is impressive. One does not realize it, but when I started riding on those, I said, ‘*I cannot believe it!*’” She had been disappointed to learn that those trains were destined for another railway line.

When the fleet of diesel trains from China finally entered service on the San Martín line in April 2014, the progressive and *kirchnerista* (i.e. supporter of the Kirchners’ governments) newspaper *Página 12* celebrated the commuter line’s renovation (Lukin 2014). The conservative and *anti-kirchnerista* newspaper *La Nación*, in turn, pointed out that these trains were new but “not modern” (Cabot 2014), as they lacked A/C and were not powered by electricity, as had initially been promised.¹⁶⁵ The Sarmiento and Mitre lines, in turn, inaugurated their new electric fleets (also purchased from CSR) in July 2014 and November 2014, respectively. Major newspapers, including *La Nación* and

¹⁶⁵ Writing for *La Nación*, Héctor Guyot (2014) ponders the cost paid for new rolling stock, in a thinly-veiled allusion to the *Tragedia de Once*. “How much gratitude would you reserve for someone who gets you good orthodontics after shattering your teeth with a punch? And if they also pay for it with your own money?” he concludes.

Página 12, reported that riders were satisfied with the new trains. Several of my interlocutors, particularly railroad specialists and train activists, however, were more ambivalent and skeptical.

Norma, a veteran Sarmiento passenger in her sixties, and I met at a coffee shop in Once station roughly a month after the Sarmiento's new fleet was inaugurated. Norma was formerly employed at the Dirección General de Ferrocarriles, prior to privatization, and was now an active member of a commuter activist group. She had heard stories of recent malfunctioning and of the train's abrupt stops, which threw standing passengers off balance, and was concerned about the trains' brakes. "It is not just the brakes," she mused,

This monster (*engendro*), this monster...the mixture of —I am tired of repeating it—, the mixture of: they took out the Chinese bogies, they put in Japanese Mitsubishi bogies...The brake is German. The chassis is Chinese, and some other thing that I cannot recall now is French. The Chinese buy all that. It all comes from China prepared like that. The first [passenger] cars that arrived, I do not know how they... if they are somewhere, or if they were repaired here. But it all comes from China already like that. All bought like that.

According to Norma, the new trains were monstrous assemblages, comprised by elements of disparate (and presumably incommensurate) national origin. They were also obscure, a black box of sorts, assembled in China, by Chinese technicians and engineers. I was surprised by this characterization, as the aging Toshiba trains that had been replaced by CSR trains were often referred to as *formaciones engendro*, monster trains, as discussed in Chapter Four. When I started saying so, Norma quickly interrupted me, re-contextualizing the Toshiba's monstrosity in post-concessioning resourcefulness: "[W]hen all the general repair workshops disappeared, [the Toshibas] landed in

Materfer¹⁶⁶ and most in EmFer,¹⁶⁷ so some modifications were made by people who came from the railroad, who knew, hence the mixture that [the trains] had before. Because there were no...¹⁶⁸ That is, they gutted out (*se desguazaba*), they took out from another old car and used it, but it was the same.” In Norma’s retelling, while Toshiba train cars were repaired with parts scrapped from other cars, they were assemblages of *like* parts, put together by “people who came from the railroad,” people “who knew.” These were assemblages born out of necessity and scarcity, a tinkering anchored in skill and expertise. CSR trains, in contrast, were assembled from disparate parts of various national origins, by foreign technicians whose skill Norma could not gauge. CSR trains were foreign, in more ways than one. Toshiba trains were of course initially foreign too, designed and manufactured abroad. Through practices of gutting out, disassembling, tinkering, and reassembling, Toshiba trains appeared to have been domesticated — monstrous, perhaps, but domesticated and local.

Sonny, a railroad signaling expert, expressed skepticism over the new rolling stock, particularly over claims that these would be equipped with automatic train stop technology to avoid collisions. “What is it that they [the Chinese] have? What was bought? Nobody knows very clearly. The Chinese had a very big accident in Wenzhou, two years ago. The signaling system failed. Something that—how can we say it—*cannot*

¹⁶⁶ Materfer (Materfer Ferroviario S.A.) is an Argentine railway manufacturing and remodeling company; its industrial plant is located in the province of Córdoba. In recent years, it has diversified its production to include the manufacture of buses, roadwork machinery, and agricultural machinery (Materfer 2013).

¹⁶⁷ EmFer (Emprendimientos Ferroviarios S.A.) is a railway factory located in the San Martín district of Buenos Aires. It was formerly owned by the Cirigliano brothers of TBA (and of Grupo Plaza, a transportation conglomerate), when it was used to repair Sarmiento and Mitre rolling stock, and was purchased in 2014 by CSR (*En el Subte* 2014).

¹⁶⁸ I interpret this ellipsis as referring to the absence of spare parts.

happen. Even if Murphy’s Law says that everything that cannot fail, will fail.”¹⁶⁹ Paula, meanwhile, had read in the newspaper that these new trains contained toxic substances. “As a [train] user, I do not know [*desconozco*], and I cannot tell if it is true or not, but one *hopes* that the investment is well made,” she mused, “I am quite skeptical. I imagine they are not... They are buying what they can buy.”

Others were cynical about the factors that led the Argentine government to import rolling stock and railroad technology from China. Bautista attributed this decision to the political fallout after the Once crash and to the need to save face in preparation for elections: “[Decisions] are largely driven by the people’s pressure (*la presión del pueblo*), to put it one way. When they feel that they are corralled or there are elections, that type of things, they make these...these...famous clutching at straws (*manotazos de abogado*),” he said. Ramón, a train conductor, echoed this view: “The Once tragedy was the trigger (*detonante*), right? An urgency where the government somehow had to give a social answer (*una respuesta social*) in face of such a failure, product, well, of bad businesses (*malos negocios*), corruption, irresponsible businessmen, state officials who look the other way, and a series of factors.” Claudio, the repair workshop supervisor, in turn, framed the purchase of Chinese trains within a larger context of trade relations and economic dependency:

Everything was bought from China, and – I will say this again, I give you *my* presumption. Why was it bought from China? The—There are other operators, other makers, like [CAFT? Kraft?], like Alstom, like Mitsubishi, I do not know, Toshiba,

¹⁶⁹ Sonny recounted another story that illustrated the hasty and haphazard nature of the government’s modernization project. He and a colleague were invited to inspect and comment on the tender documents (*el pliego de la licitación*) for the Sarmiento line’s signalling system. “The document was made with a large scissors and several [tender] documents for [railroad] signals, they cut pieces and thus went assembling the collage,” he told me, laughing, “We wrote a report, and when that report was published, everybody hated us.”

that...that... Siemens too. Perhaps I am forgetting another important one, like General Electric. That have highly developed the railroad system and in fact have it out in the *world*. But we buy from the Chinese. Why do we buy from the Chinese? Because the Chinese are the main consumers of our products! Yes? So, eh, *my* presumption.... And I think the minister recently said it... That the Chinese will settle down here. There will... There will come a time when we *will not be able* to pay the Chinese with money. And the Chinese *are not interested* in us paying them with money. The Chinese are interested in us paying them with *food*. Yes? The majority of people...do not see it, or do not want to see it. You are conditioned. It is like...it is like a future mortgage (*hipoteca a futuro*).

Ramón similarly thought that the government's decision to buy from China—a quick fix—was a strategic mistake. He couched the railroad as “a company strategic to national sovereignty, to national development,” and skewered the national government's populist and nationalist rhetoric: “For many years there has been talk of a ‘national and popular project’ and such... Eh, *this* precisely is not part of such a project,” he said. “This is a deal that from here to China¹⁷⁰ favors *the Chinese*,” he proffered, chuckling.¹⁷¹

If the purchase of rolling stock from China was seen as rendering Argentina economically vulnerable on account of its financial dependency, the transfer of foreign technology threatened to render the country vulnerable in other ways as well. Ramón summed it as follows: “The country is deferred (*se posterga*), it gets in debt (*se endeuda*), and, well, we subject ourselves to a technological dependency.” When we met in October 2014, CSR electric trains had already entered into service on the Sarmiento line, but had yet to do so on the Mitre line, where Ramón was employed. Just the previous

¹⁷⁰ The idiomatic expression “*de acá a la China*” (lit. “from here to China”) is used to convey that something is evident or obvious.

¹⁷¹ Ramón was also dismissive of the *scope* of the purported revolution, arguing that it focused primarily on the metropolitan area (that is, on Buenos Aires and its proximities). The relaunching of a few long-distance passenger services, in his eyes, was piecemeal: “little bits of trains (*pedacitos de trenes*), we call them,” he said, chuckling. As part of MONAFE (*Movimiento Nacional Ferroviario*, National Railway Movement, a group of current and former railway workers), Ramón envisioned an alternative revival project, one that would emphasize domestic production (thus reviving now-shuttered railway workshops and factories), national territorial integration to aid the development of regional economies, and national sovereignty.

day he had begun a training course on the new trains. Leafing through the thick manual, he described some of the features he was becoming acquainted with. “They have *programs*, you see, they come programmed. They have programmed functions,” he explained. “Anyways, it is a *very* basic knowledge, I tell you, it is nothing...nothing profound, because the Chinese will run it,” he was quick to clarify, “According to what they have informed us, during three years the Chinese will take care of absolutely everything. The only thing that we will touch when we drive those trainsets...is to disable a given function. In the case of an imperfection or failure, or supposed failure, it will go to the depot and there the Chinese will be in charge of repairing, or seeing where the failures are.”¹⁷²

Ramón’s description echoes Norma’s portrayal of new rolling stock as black boxes, and underscores train conductors’ estrangement from the machines they drive – a far cry from the intimate, embodied knowledge that conductors relied on to maneuver older Toshiba trains (where, as detailed in Chapter Four, the absence or failure of basic mediating technology, including the lack of speedometers, rendered human experience and expertise paramount). It echoed, too, rumors I had heard from railway workers and activists about “the Chinese” setting up shop in Argentina, taking over factories, displacing the local workforce. The obscure, cryptic nature of Chinese trains,

¹⁷² A year after I meet with Ramón, the conservative newspaper *La Nación* published an article that offers a rough sketch of the daily life of the Chinese technicians sent to lend technical assistance in the Castelar workshop, as part of CSR’s warranty. There are 70 technicians, 65 men and five women. The journalist writes that they have left their names, and families, back in their “millennial land”: their supervisor, “Yang,” has become “Ángel,” their translator (“Sasha”), “Susana.” They sip their tea noisily, the journalist takes care to note, and envy the freedom and leisurely attitude of their Argentinean counterparts, whom they do not engage with much, “captive[s] of their language” (Mac Mullen 2015). This portrayal exemplifies racist attitudes towards Asians and Asian-Argentines prevalent in Argentina (see Ko 2016, as discussed below).

furthermore, seemingly extended to the purchase of rolling stock itself: “Everybody hides the truth, the [tender] documents (*los pliegos*), the contracts, they are *never* known, they are State secrets,” Ramón complained to me, “This information should be public, but it is not public. So, it is a mystery (*una incógnita*).”¹⁷³

If the arrival of new rolling stock from China was meant to signal the advent of definitive (infrastructural) modernity, then, modernity was seen to be somewhat hollow. The foreignness of the new machinery, brought to the fore by automatic announcements that misrecognized names and locations and by the labor needed to render new rolling stock and existing infrastructure commensurable (through the excision of jutting parts and the raising of station platforms), raised specters over the loss of national sovereignty, as articulated in anxieties over financial and technological dependency and the increased redundancy of workers.¹⁷⁴ While modernization appeared in official discourse and propaganda as a proximate, attainable reality, an endpoint, in practice modernization was shown to be an ongoing project of work, aspiration, and striving. Modernization required constant tinkering and translation, and threatened to unmake and unravel (human and national sovereignty, for instance) as much as it promised to deliver.

At the same time, and as can be gleaned from their comments above, commuters’ and railroad workers’ encounter with the particular form of infrastructural

¹⁷³ Ramón also spoke of the need to “*assimilate* technology” and acknowledged that the process of assimilation would not be immediate. By way of example, he pointed to the Sarmiento’s new fleet: while the CSR trains were already in service, the automatic train stop technology—the promise of safety much proclaimed by the government and one of the “railway revolution’s” main selling points—had yet to begin functioning.

¹⁷⁴ These anxieties, however, were voiced primarily by railway workers, specialists, and *ferroaficionados*: passengers were mostly grateful to have newer, and allegedly safer, trains to travel in. As Ramón put it, “What does the passenger see today on the Sarmiento [line]? A new train? And they applaud! And that is fine! Of course, they do not have the obligation to know.”

difference comprised by Chinese trains was informed by and reflective of deep-rooted xenophobia towards Chinese and Chinese-Argentines in Argentina. Chisu Teresa Ko (2016) traces the representation of Asians and Asian-Argentines in academic and cultural discourse in Argentina, and shows how people of Chinese (and Korean) origin have been targets of racism and xenophobia. Estimated to be more than 100,000 people, the Chinese population is reportedly the largest Asian group and the fourth-largest immigrant group in Argentina, but it has received the least scholarly attention (Ko 2016:272). Chinese immigration to Argentina is more recent than Japanese and Korean immigration, becoming more significant in the 1990s and 2000s and peaking during the post-crisis years. Asian-Argentines in general have been statistically invisibilized: there is no “Asian category” in the census, and there is no sustained official data, except for foreign-born Asians, which excludes locally-born Asians who might identify as Argentines (Ko 2016). “This practice,” Ko (2016:272) writes, “at once reflects and reproduces the common attitude that Asians cannot be Argentines.”¹⁷⁵

Xenophobic accusations towards Chinese-Argentines, who traditionally work as grocers, include frequent accusations of mafia connections and unethical business practices (Ko 2016). The purported utter foreignness of the Chinese has percolated into particular idiomatic, everyday expressions: the expression *un cuento chino*, a Chinese story, means a tall tale, a far-fetched story or lie, while describing a situation as *un chino* means that it is complicated. Japanese immigrants, in contrast, have a longer history in the

¹⁷⁵ Ko also writes, “Public sentiment also reflects an assumption that people of Asian descent are physically, culturally, and linguistically too different to belong to Argentina or less prone to ‘become’ Argentine compared to other immigrant groups” (2016:269).

country and a more favorable image (Ko 2016). Differential perceptions of the Japanese and Chinese communities in Argentina might inform, if not explain, different valuations of CSR (Chinese) trains vis-à-vis the historic Toshiba (Japanese) trains by train commuters and railroad workers.

At the same time, in surveying recent Argentine films that include Asian or Asian-Argentine protagonists, Ko (2016:270) finds that the figure of the Asian has been reappropriated “as a symbolic multicultural subject that can mediate between old and new definitions of the nation.” Ko (2016:279) suggests that questions of national identity are reemerging, prompted by 2001 economic crisis, which shattered the myth of Argentine racial exceptionalism and of Argentina as a “white and modern nation” (with the near-dissolution of the middle class and the increase in poverty). Official celebrations of the Bicentennial, she argues, appeared to embrace multiculturalism, redefining the nation in terms of diversity. If the figure of the Asian is indeed being reappropriated as a mediator between an old national order and the new, both the incorporation of Chinese rolling stock, presented as symbols of modernity, and the ambivalent reactions to these raise interesting questions for future research. How do “Chinese” trains fit into broader narratives around national progress and decay? How does the perceived failure or success of these trains inform public sentiment towards and public conversations around the Chinese community in Argentina?

The Graveyard

In January 2014 I visited a place known as the “locomotive graveyard” (*cementerio de locomotoras*), which lies a few meters away from Liniers station, a bustling transit hub at the edges of the city of Buenos Aires. High brick walls mostly concealed the languishing locomotive repair workshop from the view of passersby. The muddy road that traversed the grounds wound around ramshackle warehouses long in disuse, their glass windows ragged. Discarded train seats lay piled high in the open, like exposed railway innards. Across, weeds had colonized a group of rusted train cars. British industrial-style brick buildings housed a motley assortment of diesel locomotives awaiting repair, so old that spare parts were no longer produced. In adjoining rooms, discarded tools lay in still-life arrangements, and stray dogs took refuge. The prevalence of dust and rust lent the air an uncanny sheen (Figure 25). Signs of the railway revolution were scarce, barely punctuating the landscape with the allure of change: here a billboard announcing the imminent renovation of workshop floors and ceilings, there a truck carrying new concrete crossties. Most conspicuously, a brand-new locomotive, purchased from China and bearing an inscription commemorating the 200th anniversary of Argentine struggles for independence, lay out in the open. A handful of policemen sharing an *asado* (barbecue) on old train seats kept a watchful eye on the locomotive, looking to preserve this centerpiece of the revolution from vandalism and graffiti.



Figure 25: Train graveyard in Liniers, province of Buenos Aires. January 2014. Photos by author.

My guide was Marco, a young electromechanical technician sent by Claudio, the workshop manager (*jefe de taller*) and my research contact, to pick me up at Liniers station, where I had arrived by train. Marco laughs when I tell him I had planned on walking to the workshop grounds by myself. “*Esto es un asco*,” “this is disgusting,” he says, waving at the surrounding neighborhood. He asks me what it is like to live in California, and whether there one must also worry about *la inseguridad*, lack of safety. Marco looks to be in his late twenties or early thirties; he has dark hair and light eyes. He tells me he began working at the railway workshop straight out of high school; he comes from a *familia ferroviaria*, a railway family. Marco wanted to be a mechanical engineer and

enrolled at the University of Buenos Aires, but he was working full-time and barely sleeping three and a half hours a day. He left school before the end of the first year. He has a one-year-old daughter; his wife is from another town, several hundred kilometers south of the city of Buenos Aires, and they often talk of moving there, or elsewhere in the interior. At the workshop, he mans the *camioneta*, the white pick-up truck used to run errands.

As we drive towards the main building, we pass the remains of burnt railway cars. Marco tells me that these were burned down by EMFER, Cirigliano's company, which then sold new ones to the railways. "The bosses will not tell you this," he confides. Marco shows me around the *nave principal*, the main workshop room, pointing out the different locomotives awaiting repair: General Motors, ALCO, Gaia. Some of these have long been abandoned by the rest of the world, and spare parts can often only be found in India. It is lunchtime, and there are no workers in sight. There used to be 1,200 workers employed here, Marco tells me, but now there are only 43, or 46 if you count the *jefes*, supervisors. There are stray dogs in one shed, Playboy posters in another. I am overwhelmed by the mounds of scrap metal, by the rust and dust, the materiality of *desidia* (neglect) and decay. It seems unlikely that these machines will ever run again.

At Claudio's behest, Marco drops me off at a makeshift office, a prefab unit over to a side. There I meet the two workshop supervisors, David and Tomás, both of whom work under Claudio and who look to be in their fifties.¹⁷⁶ David resembles Claudio, and I recall that they are brothers-in-law. His face is bearded but his hair is wavier, and he

¹⁷⁶ I have used pseudonyms for Claudio, Marco, David, and Tomás.

tends to look to one side when he talks. Tomás is rounder and his face is pocked. David has been working in the railways for 38 years, Tomás for 26. Both come from a *cuna ferroviaria* (a railway cradle, i.e. a railway family) and, like Claudio, had been recruited from the Roca line's workshops, as supervisors were lacking in the Sarmiento. David's father, in fact, had been a train conductor, and David had practically been raised on board locomotives.

We sit in the tiny office, the two men smoking one cigarette after another. I ask them about the railway system, its current state and the proposed modernization projects. "The railway itself is very deteriorated," David says, "In every regard, every regard." He describes the "disastrous" state of tracks, the aging rolling stock (the newest diesel locomotive in service in the Sarmiento line is a 1967 model, he says), the lack of spare parts, the sluggish bureaucratic procedure to import them from abroad. The degree of deterioration of locomotives often demands as much as a year of work to repair. "Here, everything is done by dropper (*a cuentagotas*). You do a small thing one day, you leave it, fifteen days later you start to do something else, you leave it, because there is no budget and there are no materials. And you are...sewing a suit poorly (*cosiendo mal un traje*), you see," Tomás explains. "You do not even have the guidance of a work structure, because there is no one above you telling you what to do. Here we are on our own, conducting ourselves," David added.¹⁷⁷

The men are skeptical about the government's modernization projects, which, they say, are largely focused on the metropolitan area. They criticize the government's

¹⁷⁷ The original in Spanish reads: "Ni siquiera tenés un lineamiento de una estructura laboral, porque no tenés nadie arriba que te baje una línea. Acá nos estamos manejando nosotros por la nuestra."

lack of a long-term project, a lack of imagination for railways otherwise. Yet, in their telling, the so-called revolution is threatened not only by shortsightedness, but by the public's own disregard for trains' physical integrity. Tomás proffers an illustration: the new Chinese trains were covered in graffiti even before they entered into service.¹⁷⁸ "The new locomotives might work four, five years," David remarks, "But then they will begin to..." "To fail! Like all *fierro* [metals/machinery]," Tomás exclaimed, "You have to maintain it." But, although, new rolling stock had already begun to trickle in from China, and to break down, David, Tomás, and other workshop employees had yet to receive training on how to repair these new machines. "They sent people to *China* to take the course, in China," David tells me, "As an experience, the trip was extraordinary. Extraordinary. But they did not learn." "The Chinese came here," David continues, offering an imaginary exchange between an Argentine technician and his Chinese counterpart, "'What is this?' 'I do not know. I do not know.'" Tomás picks the imaginary conversation up: "'Why did this break?' 'It broke. We replace it and that is it,'" his imaginary Chinese interlocutor responds. The translator, a woman, was herself not a technician, he says, and she had trouble with the questions and the vocabulary. "It was all improvised," David complained.

David tells me another story, one I had heard a few months earlier from Claudio. Walter, a colleague of theirs who works at the Mitre line's railway workshop in Victoria, had asked the Chinese technicians how the window panes could be replaced, as in the

¹⁷⁸ Just then a young shop floor worker appears at the window with an inquiry. *They* would have never thought of interrupting their supervisor in that manner, they tell me after he leaves. David lists his subordinates' lack of commitment, poor manners, and reticence to clean, and unionized workers' refusal to work. Later, David himself will open a packet of cigarettes and toss the wrapper out the window.

new locomotives they were glued in place. “No, the windows are not to be replaced,” a Chinese man (*un chino*) had responded. “What do you mean, they are not replaced? And if they break?” Walter had insisted. “No, they will not break,” had been the response. David looks at me with incredulity. “In *China* they do not break!” he exclaims. In telling me this story a few months prior, Claudio had underscored the need to replace trains’ window panes frequently in Argentina: “They shoot at it with a slingshot (*gomer*), they throw anything they can at you. And the windows break!” David and Claudio etched similar racialized geographies of risk and cultural decay, locating slingshot throwers in the *villa*, the informal settlements where the poor (often viewed as nonwhite) live. “It is a game to them,” David told me of the slingshot throwers, “Our culture is already like that. How do you correct that?”

Yet according to David and Tomás it was not just passengers and *villa* residents who endangered the welfare of trains and their infrastructure: the supervisors also lamented the loss of *railway* culture, of a particular work ethic, a sentiment I had heard from other railway workers. They described workers’ habit of taking long breaks, their lack of respect for supervisors, their reticence to work. “How to change our mentality? How do you do it? It is impossible!” David said, shaking his head. “It is our culture, our culture.” The leading faction in the workers’ union in the Sarmiento line, a left-wing faction known as *la Bordó*, is partly to blame, in their eyes. “Historically, the Sarmiento was always leftist, this area above all,” David explained, “They do what they want, what they want.” A railroad worker, a man known among commuter activists and union members as *La Bronca*, The Anger, in allusion to his pseudonym on social media (“Everybody’s Anger, Railway Struggle,” *La bronca de todos, lucha ferroviaria*), where he

exposes working and commuting conditions, would tell me a few months later: “The railroad worker was known as a solidary person. Today we have become the demon of society.”¹⁷⁹

After we converse a while, Tomás excuses himself to attend to some shop floor matters, and David offers to give me another tour of the main workshop. Lunch break is over, and shop floor workers have resumed their tasks. We walk among the rusted machinery, and David tells me their uses and stories. “Everything was done here, everything was *manufactured* here. There used to be a foundry back there,” he says, pointing towards the back of the large room. “Here in every spot there was a machine,” he continues, “The machines that they took away!” I ask him where the machines have gone. “*A chatarra* [To scrap metal],” he replies, “All sold as *fierros* [metal].” He shows me the furnace used to dry paint, built in 1886, and a similarly-ancient crane. “We are 150 years behind the times,” he laments.

We step outside, as David wants to show me “*las máquinas chinas*,” the Chinese machines (locomotives). We stop to look at new wagons, recently arrived from China, that have already derailed. “The thing is, even if they come, the tracks...the tracks are all broken,” David explains, hinting at the futility of new rolling stock on dilapidated infrastructure.¹⁸⁰ We then pause to look at the locomotive, its undercarriage damaged

¹⁷⁹ Beyond the presumed loss of certain ethical qualities among railroad workers, their expertise was also deemed lacking. Sonny, the signaling expert, decried the nonexistence of a “new professional generation”: “The railway professional—let us leave aside my side, signaling—in general terms is not a brilliant profession. That is, it is not something glamorous, there is no advanced technology.” Railway specialists have largely disappeared, he claimed. “Technicians’ and engineers’ lack of interest in approaching this mode of transport, due to considering that the latter does not assure them a brilliant and attractive future, results in the increased average age of the crews and the lack of younger cohorts that could be trained in issues exclusive to railway exploitation,” he explained.

¹⁸⁰ Track infrastructure was indeed being upgraded under the Ministry of the Interior and Transportation’s railway modernization project. Yet modernization had different valences in different places: while some

(Figure 26).¹⁸¹ David tells me that his men cannot repair it yet: the locomotive is under warranty, and they must wait for Chinese technicians to come and tell them what to do. In any case, the necessary spare parts have yet to arrive. “If they had asked us, I would have told them, ‘Look, you should better buy the spare parts before bringing the railway cars,’” he says.

David tells me that these Chinese locomotives have “sensors everywhere.” “*Claro*, in China they are used to the fact that you sit in a train and you can sleep on a long journey.¹⁸² Here you wake up. It is the other way around (*Es al revés*). *Claro*. You put a glass of water on one of those tables that the train cars have, and the water does not move. Here you cannot put anything!” he exclaims.¹⁸³ “So, they have sensors everywhere, and here these locomotives *will not work*, as much as they would like them to.”

We continue walking, and David gestures towards a vacant building where locomotives used to be repaired. “That used to be called “the motor house” (*la casa*

branches underwent “renovation” (*renovación*), that is, replacement of entire sections of track (new sections readily identifiable due to the concrete cross-ties that replaced wooden ones), others simply underwent “improvement” (*mejoramiento*), a more superficial betterment (for instance, through the addition of ballast). On their diagnostic trips to audit railway infrastructure, members of *Autoconvocados X los Trenes* would take note of what, exactly, was being upgraded, as some branches announced as being “renovated” were in fact only being “improved.”

¹⁸¹ I heard other stories of Chinese locomotives damaged on their maiden trips. A couple of weeks after my visit to the train graveyard, during a meeting of the commuter-activist umbrella group *Ni Un Muerto Más* (Not One More Dead), Charly told of a brand-new locomotive that had recently derailed in Sierra de la Ventana, while being tested on the Constitución – Carmen de Patagones railway corridor. Station personnel had seen it go by at full speed, only to return with its cowcatcher or pilot (*mirriñaque*) broken and its body scratched by *malezas*, weedy bushes. The unruly proliferation of weeds was often invoked as a sign of dwindling maintenance crews, tasked with clearing the tracks.

¹⁸² “*Claro*” is an adverb denoting something evident, akin to “of course.”

¹⁸³ This description echoed the “coffee cup” story told to me by Daniel, a lawyer and member of a railway club who repairs railway tracks on weekends, as recounted in Chapter 4. As Daniel reminisced about long-distance train journeys that he took to the coast in his youth, in the 1980s, he told me that back then he could rest his coffee cup on the window sill, and it would not spill. Nowadays, he continued, he would be unable to rest his cup, on account of the train’s violent oscillations, the bumpy ride afforded by dilapidated tracks. That story was about a better past, a past in which tracks were in better condition, enabling smoother train rides. The water glass story told by David, in turn, is about an elusive future: here, smooth tracks and somnolent rides are a thing of elsewhere.

motora). All abandoned, all abandoned,” he says, shaking his head. Back in his office, he shows me a video of an American manufacturer of diesel locomotives. “You see the difference?” he asks me, gesturing towards the sleek machinery and automated processes paraded on screen. Later he tells me, “We say, ‘We will raise up the railroad.’¹⁸⁴ I do not understand. You cannot lie to me. The person who does not live inside the railway can buy that.”



Figure 26: "Chinese" locomotive awaiting repair. January 2014. Photo by author.

The locomotive graveyard, with its rusting machinery, vacant buildings, and dwindling workforce, indeed seemed at odds with the revolution. According to my workshop guides, modernization efforts were threatened not only by unrelenting infrastructural decay, but also by cultural and moral decline. David and Claudio’s story

¹⁸⁴ The original phrasing in Spanish was, “*Vamos a levantar el ferrocarril.*”

about railway blight¹⁸⁵—about the jagged ruination of rolling stock wrought by improper passenger behavior—echoed similar views proffered by other railroad workers, commuters, and rail enthusiasts. “Argentines do not know how to look after their things,”¹⁸⁶ Darío, a commuter and rail fan, told me during a diagnostic trip organized by Autoconvocados X los Trenes. Hernán, who used to work in the Sarmiento line’s administrative offices, located in Once station, before he was rendered disposable by the concessioning process, declared that “People are harmful,” citing passengers’ habit of littering the tracks.



Figure 27: Left: A sign in San Isidro station (Mitre Line) reads, “Do not travel without your ticket” and, in smaller print, “Your ticket is seen in works” (September 2013). Right: A screen in Retiro station (Mitre Line) reads, “The train is yours, take care of it” (March 2014). Photos by author.

In tandem with the modernization of railway infrastructure and rolling stock, in fact, the Ministry of the Interior and Transportation embarked on a media campaign to reeducate the traveling public. New signs popped up in railway stations, exhorting passengers to purchase train tickets: “*Tu boleto se ve en obras*,” “Your ticket is seen in works,” the signs proclaimed (Figure 27). This purported transmutation of (low-cost,

¹⁸⁵ Narratives about improper care and behavior are somewhat resonant with racialized narratives about urban blight in postindustrial cities.

¹⁸⁶ The original reads: “*El argentino no es muy de cuidar lo suyo.*”

heavily-subsidized) train tickets into infrastructural improvements signaled the end of the de facto truce that enabled passengers to ride ticket-free, in silent recognition of the decrepit state of the railway services. These signs appeared to shift the cost of modernization onto passengers. Other signs read, “*El tren es tuyo, cuidalo*” (“The train is yours, take care of it”). Elda, the spirited psychiatrist who led Autoconvocados X los Trenes, was quick to reframe the public nature of the railway, retorting on social media and in group meetings: “*El tren es nuestro, cuídenlo*” (“The train is ours, [you] take care of it”).

Progress...Derailed?

During the 2015 May Week celebrations commemorating the 1810 May Revolution and the struggle for independence, President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and Minister Florencio Randazzo held an act in the Mitre line’s terminal station in Retiro, near the port of Buenos Aires, to celebrate the newly-promulgated Law of Recovery of *Ferrocarriles Argentinos*, Ley 27.132.¹⁸⁷ The terminal had once been an architectural feat, considered one of the most beautiful stations in South America, or so Omar, the custodian of the clock tower across the road, told me.¹⁸⁸ It was here, in fact, that 67 years earlier the nationalization of the railway system had been announced. Now

¹⁸⁷ This law declared railway reactivation policy, infrastructure renovation and improvement, and the incorporation of modernizing technology and services to be of “national public interest” and a “priority objective” of the Argentine Republic (Ley 27.132, 2015). For an analysis of the scope of the new law and the proposed policy, refer to the specialized railway blog *En el Subte* (April 5, 2015).

¹⁸⁸ The tower, a replica of the Big Ben, is officially known as *la Torre Monumental* (the Monumental Tower), but is often called by the name it had before the Malvinas War: *la Torre de los Ingleses*, the Tower of the English.

several glass slabs were missing from the grand iron arches that towered over the station platforms, exposing passengers to the elements. A stage had been erected in the central hall. It faced the tracks, and was flanked by CSR diesel and electric trains. The President and Minister were accompanied onstage by the Minister of Economy, Axel Kiciloff; the Chief of Staff, Aníbal Fernández; and the Secretary General, Eduardo “Wado” De Pedro. Other state officials, as well as sympathetic union leaders, sat in a VIP section. A dense crowd of spectators filled the closest station platform. In nationally-televised speeches, first Minister Randazzo and then President Fernández de Kirchner celebrated the administration’s progress in recovering the national railway system. “We are repairing a debt that is over a half century old,” the Minister exclaimed, “We are giving back part of the memory that had been stolen from many Argentines who grew and lived around the development of the railway. It is an act of social justice, because the train integrates, it gives inclusion, across the length and breadth of the entire country.” During her speech, in turn, the President reminded attendees that it had been her husband, the late former President Néstor Kirchner, who had first announced the need to (re)nationalize the railways; at the time even she had thought the prospect to be impossible. She exhorted workers and passengers to look after the trains.

The ceremony at times struck a foreboding tone, with the President and Minister’s speeches sounding caution over possible shifts in the political wind: the presidential elections were a few months away, and the President’s principal political opponent, Mauricio Macri, Mayor of the city of Buenos Aires and leader of the center-right *Cambiamos* (Let’s Change) party, was running for president. (Minister Randazzo, in fact, was at the time of the act vying to become the President’s political heir; he would

later lose the primaries to Daniel Scioli, Governor of the Province of Buenos Aires).¹⁸⁹ Never one to miss the chance to raise the specter of the 2001 crisis, the President issued a warning during her speech, “Then the ones who screw everybody will come,” in thinly-veiled reference to her opponent as conservative heir to the neoliberal policies of the 1990s.

The creation of *Nuevos Ferrocarriles Argentinos* had been announced by the President two months earlier, during her last speech to Congress (akin to the State of the Union address in the United States). Yet it was *this* act in the Retiro terminal—the site where 67 years earlier President Perón had nationalized the railways—that marked the symbolic undoing of the dismemberment wrought by the concessioning process of the 1990s. *Ferrocarriles Argentinos* had officially been resuscitated—not just in name, it seemed, but also in the purported goal to reunite and revive the national rail network. History seemed to have come full circle.¹⁹⁰

The historic typography and logo of *Ferrocarriles Argentinos* had in fact begun reappearing in official speeches and visual materials two months earlier, since the President’s address to Congress. They were now poised to replace the short-lived brand of *Trenes Argentinos* (Argentine Trains), imposed unsystematically by the Minister in the chaotic reshuffling of the railway administration in the aftermath of the *Tragedia de Once*

¹⁸⁹ During his speech, Minister Randazzo made a point of publicly reiterating his allegiance to the President: “I, Cristina, as a political militant (*militante político*) vow to defend railway recovery, the recovery of YPF [*Yacimientos Petrolíferos Estatales*, the state oil company], the recovery of railways (sic), the human rights policy, *Fútbol para Todos* (Soccer for Everyone, a TV program aired by the state broadcaster), the *Ley de Medios* (Media Law), so that together we might advance towards the definitive consolidation of Argentina.”

¹⁹⁰ This restorative memory work was in line with other *kirchnerista* policies around *memoria, verdad y justicia* (memory, truth, and justice).

and the ensuing crashes, and rebranded by skeptics as *Trenes Argentinos* (Argentinian Trains) on social media and street signage.¹⁹¹ Yet in the months to follow, these brands (together with their predecessor, the equally-short-lived *Transporte Público*) and their logos would coexist haphazardly in institutional materials, stations, and rolling stock, generating confusion as to what, exactly, was changing.¹⁹²

The much-anticipated arrival of new rolling stock from China had already underscored the blundering limits of modernization: the misrecognitions and infrastructural mismatches, the carryovers of renewal. Beyond the glitches that pointed to the awkward translations at play when technology travels from one context to another (von Schnitzler 2013), the infrastructural modernity heralded by new trains seemed not only suspect and incomplete, but also costly (as revealed by my interlocutors' anxieties around the technological dependence that might shackle Argentina to China).¹⁹³

The railroad revolution seems to underscore that modernity is always in-progress, that modernization does not arrive and take hold once and for all. It sheds light on how modernization keeps arriving, not getting fully installed, and then arriving again. It illustrates, too, how the technologies and infrastructures that underpin modernity are entangled in messy relationships and shaped by unruly material histories. The derailed Chinese locomotive from the train graveyard is perhaps an apt image: Incongruous

¹⁹¹ The brand-name *Trenes Argentinos*, as the specialized railway blog *En el Subte* (August 26, 2015) points out, was fictitious, insofar as there was no state company by that name. Rather, it was utilized on signage and rolling stock to unify the state's railway brand, comprised of several distinct companies: SOFSE (the awkwardly-named *Sociedad Operadora Ferroviaria Sociedad del Estado*), ADIF (*Administración de Infraestructura Ferroviaria*), *Belgrano Cargas y Logística*, and ARHF (*Administradora de Recursos Humanos Ferroviarios*). Per Law 27.132, the re-created *Ferrocarriles Argentinos* would oversee the four state companies.

¹⁹² See, for instance, *Enelsubte.com* 8/26/2015.

¹⁹³ Even while modernization is aspirational and never able to deliver on that which it promises, it is still productive of a host of other things (if not of betterment). Thus, as this chapter has shown, modernization is a process by which different cultural things take place, including striving, imagining, and improvising.

amidst the dust, rust, and weeds, the shiny locomotive appeared to taunt the revolution, having derailed on its maiden trip due to the dilapidated state of tracks (Figure 26). The rhythm of decay, it seemed to say, outstrips the pace of progress. Progress is always belated, and has already derailed.

Yet for all its failed promises, progress is also fervently reclaimed and laboriously upheld. Many commuters and railroad workers had strong affective investments in the project of modernity and wanted to believe that the arrival of new rolling stock and the renovation of infrastructure, however piecemeal, would translate into better and safer commuting conditions. For many commuters, it did, and statistics collected by the Comisión Nacional de Regulación del Transporte (the National Commission for the Regulation of Transport, CNRT for short) indicate ridership, as measured by the number of train tickets sold, is increasing across the different commuter lines (CNRT 2018). If anything, improvements in quality of service might point to the power of collective protests and struggles against railway decay, including the diagnostic trips charted in Chapter Five, and their ability to influence state policy.

The derailed Chinese locomotive thus appears not so much as a cautionary tale about progress itself and the impossibility of the project of modernity, but rather as an important reminder of the relevance of material histories – a significant corrective given decades of dwindling maintenance. The derailed brand-new locomotive is as much an apt image for the railroad revolution as are the creative ways in which workers assemble local and foreign parts to make trains move and the alternative restoration projects pursued by train enthusiasts, as described in this chapter and the previous. In the face of state-led modernization, affective engagements with and political mobilization around

trains and their infrastructure reclaim railroads as a *public* service, and in the process contribute to redefine what “public” can mean.

Chapter Seven: Re-Engineering the City

In November 2015, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner suffered a political blow as her candidate, former speedboat racer Daniel Scioli, lost the presidential race by a narrow margin to opposition leader Mauricio Macri, of the center-right coalition party *Cambiamos* (Let's Change) and son of industrial tycoon Franco Macri.

Urban mobility has been central to Macri's vision of progress. As Mayor of Buenos Aires, Macri (an engineer) had championed the construction of the Metrobus, the city's first rapid transit system and *macrismo's* "biggest bet and electoral payoff" (O'Neill 2017). The Metrobus is comprised of dedicated bus lanes in the city's main avenues, including the iconic 9 de Julio, often considered the widest boulevard in the world (Valente 2014). Travel time has purportedly been reduced by 50 percent for buses and by 20 percent for cars; this streamlining of traffic has been likened to a "transport surgery on the beating heart of the city" (Valente 2014). This rapid bus transit system has been accompanied by other measures to "unclog" the city and render it more pedestrian friendly, including the building of 130 km of bike lanes and the designation of many side streets downtown as "pedestrian-priority zones" (Valente 2014).

As President, Macri and his team have continued "spending big on infrastructure projects," claims Shannon O'Neill (2017), writing for *Bloomberg News*: "Ubiquitous yellow signs hover every few blocks next to piles of dirt, slabs of concrete, reams of steel rods and pots of paint, touting repairs to broken sidewalks, darkened street lamps and blackened buildings." Guillermo Dietrich, the city's former undersecretary of transport,

has been named Minister of Transport (as the former Ministry of the Interior and Transport was split in two).

Macri has announced his own version of a rail revival, one which hinges on a proposed megaproject: the Regional Express Rail (RER) network. RER seeks to extend existing metropolitan railway lines, tunneling them underground into downtown Buenos Aires and linking them through subterranean transfer stations. The proposal anticipates the construction of 20km of tunnels and eight subterranean transfer stations to connect six of the eight lines, and increasing ridership from 1.4 million daily passengers to 5.1 million (*Proyecto RER* 2018). This megaproject would require rendering different railroad lines and their heterogeneous infrastructures commensurate, electrifying those that are still operated by diesel traction (such as the San Martín and Belgrano Norte lines) and standardizing disparate electric systems. Construction of new viaducts has begun, yet the tendering process for the construction of the first subterranean station has been delayed.

In promotional materials, RER is presented as an urban transformation, its improvements couched in terms of speed, comfort, and safety; connectivity, in turn, appears as a foil for national unity. Yet, as this dissertation has shown, connectivity is not without its discontents, with shifting cartographies of inclusion and exclusion awakening anxieties over the proximity and mobility of racial and class others. Ultimately, RER promises to solve traffic congestion and change the way people travel and live in Buenos Aires. Yet this infrastructural fix, based on its Parisian counterpart, is not without its critics, raising concerns over feasibility, commensurability, and national solvency (the specter of the country's spectacular sovereign default in 2001 never far from mind). Some critics have pointed out that RER would render recently-purchased rolling stock

from China obsolete. Others have noted that RER further concentrates mobility and connectivity in downtown Buenos Aires, rather than distributing them outwards (Rascován 2017). Others fear that future ridership has been grossly underestimated, and that the planned number of tracks and platforms will constitute important bottlenecks (*en el Subte* 3/12/2018).



Figure 28: RER: Computerized image of a proposed subterranean transfer station under the obelisk, in downtown Buenos Aires. Source: Railway Gazette 2018. Downloaded from http://www.railwaygazette.com/news/news/cs-america/single-view/view/buenos-aires-rer-to-be-built-through-a-ppp-1.html?word_list%5b%5d=argentina&no_cache=1 in March 2018.

Through close ethnographic attention to railroad materiality, this dissertation has underscored how infrastructural forms, old and new, are the result of multiple accretions, sedimented histories, and competing engagements—what here I have proposed thinking of as an archive. The technologies and infrastructures that underpin

modernity, I have shown, are entangled in messy relationships and shaped by unruly material histories. In Argentina, railroads have periodically been mobilized to advance dreams of progress, but these projects have often been patchy (hastily conceived and precariously implemented to uneven results), and have often elided or deferred larger questions about connectivity and integration at regional and national scales (or, conversely, have failed to attend to the laborious vicissitudes of daily mobility in particular locales).

Attending to the long, complex genealogy of railroad ruination in Argentina should not render contemporary demands for and projects of railroad betterment futile. Attention to railroad history (in its multiple, sometimes incommensurate, versions), and to popular and expert interpretations of contemporary railroad matter, can help render suspect grandiose promises of progress via infrastructural modernization. If the “enchantment” of infrastructures has been said to lie in their ability to hold disparate “hopes and expectations” together in a “generic social promise” despite instances of concrete failure (Harvey and Knox 2012:522, 523), it is worthwhile holding this affective power of infrastructure in tension with its inherent paradoxes. As Howe et al (2016) have argued, infrastructure is prone to ruin (degenerating even as it is generative), it requires constant retrofitting to meet new exigencies, and it magnifies and creates risk even as it mitigates it.

Railroad histories and stories, such as those laid out here, matter in order to galvanize creative, collective conversations on alternative infrastructural figurations. Mobility, after all, is a central patterning of everyday life, and transport infrastructures mediate people’s relationship to place, to the state, and to each other. As scholars of

mobility and infrastructure have shown, transport infrastructures instantiate “kinetic hierarchies” (Cresswell 2010) through the uneven distribution of speed, slowness, immobility, and connectivity. As these chapters have underscored, maintenance (and lack thereof) is a key site through which these hierarchies can be exacerbated (as publics are catered to differently, as resources are allocated unequally, as decay is thwarted here and disregarded there).

The diagnostic and repair work carried out by commuter groups such as *Autoconvocados X los Trenes* and *Ni Un Muerto Más* (among several other groups that preceded them and that coexist with them), and by railroad workers, members of railroad clubs, and artists, reveals the affective investments that gather around railroads. Attending to these different constituencies—better still, enrolling them in design processes—can only help render infrastructure more democratic.

In terms of RER, in particular, future ethnographic research might explore how engineers, railroad workers, commuters, and residents envision and enact alternative configurations of the city. How does RER Buenos Aires work to materialize a particular spatial and racial project of urban modernity? How are existing railway lines, with their distinct infrastructures and communities, rendered commensurable? As the surface of the city is cracked open and its subterranean anatomy of pipes and tunnels exposed, how do people experience and navigate a shifting urban landscape?

Beyond RER, Macri’s administration appears to be courting new international partners to undertake its rail revival via public-private partnerships. In February 2018, a memorandum of cooperation was signed between the Argentine state railroad company and its Russian counterpart, Russian Railways (Télam 2018). The Russian company

Transmashholding (TMH), in turn, is allegedly investing \$200 million USD to reactivate the railroad workshop in Mechita (which had been largely disused since 2011 and where, recall, Giommi collects *fierros* and *chatarra* for his sculptures) and to develop a *polo industrial*, an “industrial cluster” (Ensinck 2017, *Railway Gazette* 2017). In May 2018, in fact, TMH reopened the Mechita workshop; President Mauricio Macri, Governor of the Province of Buenos Aires María Eugenia Vidal, and Minister of Transport Guillermo Dietrich arrived to the inaugural act in an old wooden rail car (Krom 2018). TMH has also been awarded a contract to repair rolling stock in the metropolitan passenger fleet.

Track infrastructure renovation has also continued in some branches. In the Belgrano Cargas freight network, for instance, 400km of tracks in the provinces of Chaco, Santiago del Estero, and Santa Fe have been upgraded with new rails, new concrete cross-ties, and reballasting (*Railway Gazette* 2/23/2018). These renovations in particular follow agreements signed between Argentina and China during the previous administration, that of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner; here, Chinese capital and rolling stock are being mobilized to lower the cost of transporting soy from the north to the port city of Rosario. Significantly, only freight, rather than passenger, trains are being revived in the north, underscoring the privileging of an economic model based on the export of primary commodities.

While interurban railway services to certain cities in the interior, such as Mar del Plata, Rosario, Córdoba, and Tucumán, have continued to be offered (in some cases evincing record numbers of ridership), other interurban and regional services that had been relaunched by the previous administration have been suspended (*En el Subte* 9/23/2016; see Figure 29 in the Appendix for a map of the national rail network in

January 2018). Interestingly, the current administration has renamed the railway state company (re)created by former President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's administration: loathe to use the historic name of *Ferrocarriles Argentinos* (with its Peronist undertones), the company is now officially known as *Trenes Argentinos*, Argentine Trains (*En el Subte* 7/19/2016).

As the current administration embarks on new public-private partnerships for the ongoing modernization of the railroad network, the histories of private profit-making at the expense of passenger safety and of inadequate state control laid out in previous chapters serve as important cautionary tales.

These railroad projects raise important questions: What kinds of communities are being envisioned and engineered at different scales through the ongoing, partial modernization of railroad infrastructure? What displacements and deferrals are written into the shape and scope of current transportation infrastructure projects? If infrastructure is always recombinant, what unanticipated futures might be emerging?

Since I concluded ethnographic fieldwork in 2014, the infrastructural landscape of Buenos Aires has continued to be in uneven flux. The selective renewal and ongoing decay of railroad infrastructure continues to produce shifting topologies of connection, as places are still brought into proximity or rendered remote by the fluctuating fluidity of mobility. Some places seem to be bypassed by the railroad revolution, further entrenching geographies of neglect. Along the Merlo-Lobos branch, a section of track between Merlo and Las Heras has been renovated, wooden cross ties replaced by concrete ones enabling heavier rolling stock and greater speed. Similar renovations have yet to reach the rest of the branch. Brightly painted trains bearing the new state brand of

“public transport” have arrived on scene. These, however, have turned out to be the same trains that used to serve the branch over a quarter of a century before they were rerouted to other branches (García 2017). Beneath their new veneer, these trains serve as a reminder of the obduracy of legacies of precarity. Despite these modernization efforts, train services between Las Heras and Lobos still suffer from frequent cancellations due to insufficient personnel and conflicts between railroad management and workers’ unions. Cecilia, the rural school caretaker and adjunct teacher introduced in Chapter Three, and her family, in fact, have moved back to Las Heras.

Natalia, the anthropology student formerly affiliated with FUDESA (of the “we are not cattle” protests that antedated the *Tragedia de Once*), has begun a new organization called *Tren de los Pueblos* (Train of the Towns). Like the organization *Pueblos que Laten* (Towns that Pulse), *Tren de los Pueblos* fights for “the right to rootedness” (*el derecho al arraigo*), which is essentially the right to connectivity, the right to remain in one’s place of origin and to have access to means of transport to places where jobs are concentrated. Other commuter-activists, including members of *Autoconvocados X los Trenes* and of *Ni un muerto más*, continue working to raise political awareness on railroad matters, defending their right to “safe and dignified public transport.” While facing what they see as a renewed complacency among train riders, acquiesced by railway modernization in the form of new rolling stock, they continue to bridge conversations between commuters and railroad workers, and to carve spaces for greater political participation. Like members of the performance art group ABTE and of the *ferroclubes* (railroad clubs), they continue to resignify what the “public” in “public transport” and “public infrastructure” means. Whether by reclaiming railways as affective heritage or by working against profit-

driven narratives and emphasizing instead the “social benefit” (*beneficio social*) that railroads provide, these actors continue to reclaim infrastructure as a commons.

Meanwhile, 21 of the 28 defendants in the trial surrounding the Once Tragedy have been sentenced to prison, but these sentences have yet to materialize in actual imprisonment. The sentences were issued by the judges of the *Tribunal Oral en lo Criminal Federal N° 2* (the Federal Criminal Oral Tribunal N° 2) in December 2015, after two years of public hearings. The most severe sentence went towards Sergio Claudio Cirigliano, owner of TBA and a close ally of the Kirchners, who was sentenced to nine years in prison for fraudulent practices and culpable derailment (Iricibar 2015). His brother, Mario, was absolved. Ricardo Jaime, Secretary of Transport from 2003 to 2009, was sentenced to six years in prison for fraudulent administration, bribery, and attempts to steal evidence.¹⁹⁴ Juan Pablo Schiavi, Secretary of Transport from 2009 to 2012 and in office at the time of the crash, was sentenced to eight years in prison for fraudulent administration and culpable derailment (*estrageo culposo agravado*), and was barred from ever serving in office again. Roque Cirigliano, TBA’s Head of Rolling Stock (*Jefe de Material Rodante*), was sentenced to five years. Marcos Córdoba, the train conductor, was sentenced to three years and six months in prison and was barred from driving trains for six years. The two state officials from the National Commission for the Regulation of Transport (CNRT), Pedro Ochoa Romero and Eduardo Sícara, were absolved. The judges also requested that Julio De Vido, Minister of Planning and Public Investment at

¹⁹⁴ The trial uncovered the close relationship between Sergio Claudio Cirigliano and Ricardo Jaime. The owner of TBA was said to have paid for Jaime’s international holidays (in tacit acknowledgment of hefty state subsidies and little oversight), and to have used the company credit card to purchase expensive Polynesian furniture and jewelry (*The Economist* 10/3/2013).

the time of the crash and another close ally of the Kirchners, be investigated for his role in the events. De Vido was stripped of parliamentary immunity and detained in October 2017; he is currently being investigated for several cases of corruption, including embezzlement of money destined for a coal mine in Río Turbio (Trejo-Valli 2017, *BBC News* 2017).

When giving grounds for the sentence in March 2016, the court outlined TBA's systematic omission of maintenance of rolling stock and the effects that said omissions had on passenger comfort and risk. The tribunal concluded that these practices were not the result of negligence, but rather of a business decision "evidently oriented to obtaining a drastic reduction in the economic resources destined for periodic repairs and daily maintenance of rolling stock" (cited in Werner 2016; my translation). These practices, the tribunal argued, had the effect of reducing the service life (*vida útil*) of rolling stock. With the tacit acquiescence of state officials and through recourse to funds provided by the state (in the form of subsidies), TBA directors paid Cometrans S.A., owned by the Cirigliano brothers, for consulting services, and rerouted the refurbishment of rolling stock to Emprendimientos Ferroviarios S.A., controlled by Cometrans (Werner 2016). While the judges determined that Córdoba, the conductor, had trespassed the speed limit and had failed to activate the brakes in time (given the train's condition of *freno largo*, unusually slow brakes), they concluded that his actions had been in line with the company's lax policies and lack of interest in rendering a safe and trustworthy service (*segura y confiable operación del servicio*) (Werner 2016). Furthermore, the court's 1415-paged sentence pointed to overcrowding as a significant factor (*un elemento concluyente*) in the scale of the tragedy. In particular, the court argued that the deaths

“practically were not produced by the violence of the crash,” but rather primarily by the squashing or compression (*aplastamiento*) provoked by the telescoping (*acaballamiento*) of train cars into one another (Werner 2016; my translation).

The Once case now sits in the Court of Appeals. The indicted remain free, except for Ricardo Jaime, who has been imprisoned for a separate case of corruption: the purchase of railway *chatarra*, of unusable train cars from Spain and Portugal, at exorbitant prices (Origlia 2016). The Once trial has been hailed as a landmark trial (Etchenique 2018); Jaime was the first Kirchnerite official to be imprisoned for corruption, but others have followed (Origlia 2016). The trial has confirmed how the Kirchners’ so-called populism enabled the private looting of public assets, and how this private-public *engendro*, monster, led to many preventable deaths. It raises, thus, provocative questions about the afterlife of neoliberalism under populism.¹⁹⁵

Neoliberalism, in fact, is haunting Argentina once more, as the middle-, working, and popular classes are suffering economic disenfranchisement at the hand of the austerity measures put forth by President Macri’s administration. While Macri has blamed the country’s woes on the empty state coffers and economic disarray left by his predecessor, at the time of this writing (May 2018), Argentina faces troubling currency and inflation crises. The Argentine peso is depreciating (at the time of writing, 24.80 pesos per dollar) and has been called “the world’s worst-performing currency this year” (Olivera Doll et al 2018). Inflation, at 25.5%, is among the highest in the world, and the government is negotiating a deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), fueling

¹⁹⁵ I thank Gastón Gordillo for helping me articulate this point.

public outcry (Otaola and Bianchi 2018, Nelson 2018). Given the unpopularity of the IMF in Argentina and the enduring specter of the 2001 crisis, for which the institution's policies are widely blamed, it is not surprising that news of the negotiations has prompted several social movements to take to the streets in protest (*La Nación* 5/16/2018, *Página 12* 5/16/2018).

On every February 22nd at 8:32AM, a siren still sounds in the terminal station of Once de Septiembre, in remembrance of the victims of the crash.

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