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Modernity in Transition: Roberto Arlt's *Aguafuertes porteñas*

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Hispanic Languages and Literatures

by

Chak Han Lee

2022

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Modernity in Transition: Roberto Arlt's *Aguafuertes Porteñas*

by

Chak Han Lee

Doctor of Philosophy in Hispanic Languages and Literatures

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Verónica Cortínez, Chair

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Argentina becomes a key player in the global market by turning into a major exporter of natural resources. As it secures economic prosperity, the country enters a period of accelerated modernization. Hence, by the first decades of the twentieth century, Argentina will witness the spectacular growth of Buenos Aires, the rapid commercialization of the city, and the drastic increase of its population—with the mass influx of immigrants arriving on its shores. The changes brought about by the country's transition into modernity contributed to the increasing sociopolitical, socioeconomic and sociocultural tensions that mark this period and were lived out as crises by the porteños.

In my dissertation, I will study Roberto Arlt's *Aguafuertes porteñas* in light of two modern sociocultural crises—national culture and gender relations—and the respective debates emerging during the first decades of the twentieth century about both. I will argue that his *aguafuertes* point to the rise of an alternative model of literature and gender relations.

The issue of national literature as part of national identity has mostly been examined through the works of the martinfierristas; however, Arlt's intervention in the debate via his aguafuertes is gaining critical attention. Critics have mainly focused on his use and defense of spoken language, but also on his alternative representation of Buenos Aires and the porteños to underscore how he combats cultural nationalist ideologies. In the process, they have contributed to our understanding of the modern qualities of his writing. However, in my present work, I propose that against the backdrop of this debate, Arlt formulates a modern theory of national literature: national literature is that which is read (purchased) by its people. By conceptualizing literature in terms of a relationship with its readers, Arlt points to culture's entrance onto the marketplace and its impact on the value and function of literature. Aside from his foreword to *Los lanzallamas*, which is widely read as his literary manifesto, Arlt did not write a literary manifesto per se. Yet a close reading of his aguafuertes that deal with the question of what is national literature allows us to reconstruct his proposed modern concept of literature, previously unexplored, which I define in chapter 2.

Critics have already observed that Arlt systematically dedicates three months to the subject of marriage and courtship and that he is critical of traditional gender relations. Yet by highlighting his critical treatment of women, they have tended to minimize the position of the author vis-à-vis the conservative sector on the issue of gender relations. However, by reading these aguafuertes in light of the sociocultural transformations set in motion by Argentina's transition into modernity and the discourses proliferating on family, love and sex, I argue that in contrast to the leading intellectuals, statesmen and public health physicians who defend the traditional gender relations paradigm by singling out women's entrance onto the public sphere as the source of the current crisis of the family and nation, Arlt calls for its revision by portraying

the crisis as a conflict between the established and an alternative gender relations emerging during this period, which I call modern love and is subject of many of his aguafuertes. I also address Arlt's contradictory position on women—where he simultaneously targets women for the crisis and advocates for the liberalization of women—and question critics' commonly held assumption that he is misogynist. Signaling the impact that Argentina's transition into modernity was having on everyday practices and the concept of gender relations, the street of Buenos Aires turns into a stage of modern love. Inspired by Walter Benjamin's and Marshall Berman's interpretation of Baudelaire's poetry, I examine the seemingly cliché imageries associated with modern love registered in his aguafuertes as well as in his novels—sudden (dis)encounter and public display of affection—and propose that the street was not merely a stage but also a catalyst of modern love.

The dissertation of Chak Han Lee is approved.

Efraín Kristal

Jorge Marturano

Maarten H. van Delden

Verónica Cortínez, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

For Him



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## CLARIFICATION

Since many of the titles of the texts from which I cite Roberto Arlt's *Aguafuertes porteñas* begin with similar words, to avoid confusion, and for the purpose of consistency, instead of utilizing the (first words in the) titles, I will use the following initials for my citations in the text:

*OC* = *Aguafuertes porteñas*. In *Obra completa*. Tomo 2. Buenos Aires: Carlos Lohlé, 1981.

*VC* = *Aguafuertes porteñas: Buenos Aires, vida cotidiana*. Buenos Aires: Losada, 2005.

*CP* = *Aguafuertes porteñas: Cultura y política*. Buenos Aires: Losada, 2003.

*LAPRA* = *Las aguafuertes porteñas de Roberto Arlt*. Comp. Daniel C. Scroggins. Buenos Aires: Culturales Argentinas, 1981.

*LMBA* = *Las muchachas de Buenos Aires: Aguafuertes porteñas*. Buenos Aires: Edicom, 1968.

*SF* = *Secretos femeninos: Aguafuertes inéditas*. Comp. Sylvia Saítta and Gastón S. M. Gallo. Buenos Aires: Página, 1996.

*TD* = *Tratado de delincuencia: Aguafuertes inéditas*. Comp. Sylvia Saítta. Buenos Aires: Página, 1996.

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I want to also express my gratitude to graduate division and our department for the financial assistance in the form of fellowships while at UCLA.

If it weren't for my parents who through example taught me that quixotic quests are at times worth undertaking, I would not have set out on many of my own adventures. In the early 1980s, mom and dad, dreaming of a large rice field of their own, transplanted their young family from a small town of South Korea to a remote rural area called Colonia Teresa in the province of Santa Fe, Argentina. Their second child did not share their passion for farming, nor inherit their green thumb, but from them she learned that the pursuit of interests can be rewarding.

My return has been possible because of Steve's encouragement so thank you and also thank you for all your love and support through the writing process. And thank you Ethan for your infinite patience, especially during the final leg. Mom looks forward to spending lazy evenings together.

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## Introduction

“De modo que Borges es anacrónico, pone fin, mira hacia el siglo XIX. El que abre, el que inaugura, es Roberto Arlt. Arlt empieza de nuevo: es el único escritor verdaderamente moderno que produjo la literatura argentina del siglo XX.”

*-Respiración artificial, Ricardo Piglia*

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Argentina becomes a key player in the global market by turning into a major exporter of natural resources. With its increasing economic prosperity, the country enters a period of accelerated modernization, a process that began in the second half of the nineteenth century but intensifies at the turn of the century. As a result, Argentina, but especially Buenos Aires, will undergo dramatic transformations. The wave of immigration diversifies its until then homogeneous population made up mostly of criollos and swells the population of Buenos Aires as most immigrants arriving on its shore settle in the capital city; thus, Buenos Aires, once a colonial town, by the first decades of the twentieth century will become a cosmopolitan city.

On one hand, the economic boom leads to the increasing commercialization of Buenos Aires, speeds construction projects that will beautify the city, and secures Argentina a place on the global map; on the other hand, the unequal distribution of wealth and the initial concentration of the working class population in the downtown center, near upscale department stores, coffee shops and the exclusive social clubs of the Argentine elite, accentuate the economic gap of the classes. While the wealthiest Argentine bourgeoisie exhibits its new purchasing power by making frequent extravagant trips to Europe and swapping the earlier sober Spanish colonial style homes with ostentatious mansions filled with imported furniture and décor, its proletariat is

often forced to squeeze its entire family in a tenement housing room. The widening economic gap will translate into increasing social clashes between the Argentine elite and the working class made up mostly of immigrants, evidenced in the numerous strikes that marked this period. In face of the growing social tensions and pressure from the emerging middle class for a share of political power, in 1912 the Argentine government will extend voting rights to all of its male citizens eighteen and older, moving the country away from its long history of oligarchic rule to a democratic form of government.

The country's transition into modernity exacerbates socioeconomic and sociopolitical conflicts, but it also intensifies sociocultural tensions which will contribute to the proliferation of writings and surge of public debates during this period. In my dissertation, I will read Roberto Arlt's *Aguafuertes porteñas* in light of two such debates that mark this period: national culture and gender relations.

Alarmed by the changes brought about by the country's accelerated modernization—the growing presence of immigrants and their culture, urbanization, the appearance of the mass, anonymity, secularization, among others—in the first decades of the twentieth century, the leading intellectuals, nostalgic for a familiar past, will reaffirm traditional criollo values by championing the gaucho as symbol of national identity and protagonist of national literature thus reviving the issue. Roberto Arlt will also intervene in this debate from his *aguafuertes* but sidestepping the proposed question—what is our national identity and literature?—for it assumes that there is an authentic vs. a nonauthentic one, Arlt will posit that national literature is that which is read by its people, thus pointing to the emergence of a modern concept of literature and a shift in the concept of what a nation is.

This period will also witness a proliferation of writings on the issues of family, love and sex attesting to the crisis of traditional gender relations and its institutions. Conservative intellectuals, statesmen and public health physicians will target women by linking their growing public presence with the dissolution of the traditional family, hence nation. In contrast, although in his *aguafuertes* Arlt also calls attention to the crisis, by attributing it to a conflict between emerging practices and sensibilities with the established gender relations institutions, Arlt advocates for a revision of traditional models and defends the nascent alternative gender relations paradigm which I call modern love, a subject of many of his writings.

The rising debates that the sociocultural conflicts set off will bring visibility to the crises of traditional sociocultural models, but also to the social practices and the institutions themselves. Daily practices and ceremonies that, due to their repetitive nature, had receded into the background of peoples' lives, and traditional institutions, which have warranted the repetition of these performances by supplying them with meaning, will gain greater visibility during this period. As the city embarks on its intense renovation and construction process, demolition and construction sites become a common sight and a repeat subject of Roberto Arlt's *aguafuertes*. These warzone-like images, which attest to the intense physical transformation that the city was undergoing, however, can also be read as a metaphor for the impact that the accelerated modernization had on the porteño sociocultural sphere. As they are torn down, buildings will lay bare private spaces letting passersby gaze into the sanctuaries of peoples' intimacy. Fractured and displaced, the interior spaces and everything that once belonged to them will produce a jarring sight forcing pedestrians to a halt. In "Demoliciones en el centro," Arlt writes:

Los cielorrasos se han destripado tan bruscamente que los flejes se retuercen en el espacio como sorprendidos nidos de víboras. En el muro de un dormitorio,



pegada a la pared, una cabeza de Greta Garbo. El polvo de la demolición sube hasta la nariz violeta de la Greta, pero la Greta no estornuda. Mira abstraída un paisaje siberiano, envuelta en su pelliza.

Caprichos de la demolición. Hay rellanos de escalera, sin baranda, misteriosamente suspendidos en el aire. Parecen púlpitos para orates. Tribunas para hombres que tengan media cara blanca y media cara negra. (VC 140-41)

Just as the torn ceiling, the staircase hanging midair and Greta Garbo's wall poster standing amidst the debris, removed from their familiar references, become a spectacle to the passersby, social practices and institutions are taken note of and reexamined when sociocultural infrastructures that sustain them begin to falter and lose their persuasive power.

*Aguafuertes porteñas* (1928-1932) are daily chronicles that Arlt wrote for the newspaper *El Mundo*, whose main clientele was the working and middle class of Buenos Aires. Albeit brief, they capture poignant and suggestive images of Argentine's modernity. The flexibility of the chronicles, a hybrid genre halfway between journalism and literature, allows Arlt to intervene in a wide range of issues employing different registers, thus placing the aguafuertes in a favorable position to relate a modernity that was at once tense, fluid, and chaotic. As a modern reporter, unlike the traditional ones who crafted their piece from the comfort of their office or home, Arlt will set out to the city as a flâneur in search of his daily topics. As such, although they deal with a wide range of issues, his chronicles will privilege the ordinary porteños, their shared experiences and Buenos Aires. They will register, among others, the intense transformation that the city was undergoing, emergence of new human types, daily experiences, the spoken language, the consequence of the country's economic recession on the lives of the working and middle class porteños, the impact that technological and scientific progress had on the popular sector,

but also intervene in the sociocultural debates of the period, thus collectively providing contemporary readers a unique insight into the 1920s and 1930s of Argentina. By favoring as subject of his literature the shared urban experiences, adopting the first person pronoun and an anecdotal tone in his writings, in his *aguafuertes* Arlt inaugurates a new relationship between the writer and his readers: one of complicity and intimacy.

Since I study Arlt's *aguafuertes* in light of two modern debates that intensify during the first decades of the twentieth century as Argentina transitions into modernity, I will start by offering a definition of modernity. According to Marshall Berman, modernity is a mode of experience marked by radical transformations to which we have been ushered into by scientific discoveries, secularization, industrialization of production, urban growths, systems of mass communication, the expansion of capitalism, the rise of increasingly powerful national states, and mass social movements (15-16). The social processes that bring modernity into being are called modernization (16). Its beginning can be traced back to roughly the early sixteenth century and while some, including Berman, argue that it is still ongoing, others claim that we have entered a different era: post-modernity (16, 17, 33). Change is intrinsic to any historical period, but as Anthony Giddens well puts it, the changes that take place during this era produce an abrupt break from the traditional way of life: "The modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from all traditional types of social order, in quite unprecedented fashion" (4). In face of the dramatic social changes that characterize modernity, Berman points out, people are filled with a sense of hope and excitement, but also with growing anxiety and fear as they are at the expense of the familiar. "To be modern," he writes, "is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformations of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything

we are” (15). Modernity is at its heart contradictory as the same forces that contribute to produce positive social changes almost always help create negative social consequences (19). The intellectuals of the nineteenth century, Giddens states, were already grappling with the dark side of modernity and in their writing examined some of the contradictions that they were dealing with or looming over the horizon of their particular historical moment such as class struggle (Marx) and material progress at the expense of individual creativity and autonomy (Weber) (7).

In *Culturas híbridas: Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (1990), Néstor García Canclini tackles the question that has haunted Latin Americanists: whether one can talk about cultural modernity in Latin America in face of its problematic modernization process. Departing from Perry Anderson’s work “Modernity and Revolution,” in which he posits that cultural modernity in Europe has not emerged in England, where structural modernity was achieved, but in Europe, where there existed “coyunturas complejas,” Canclini shows us that the question that Latin Americanists have been asking betrays a faulty assumption—that European modernization was unproblematic—and that structural modernization is no prerequisite to cultural modernity (81-86). This concept of cultural modernity, one that has Latin American’s uneven modernization process as its backdrop, helps explain the rising sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and sociocultural tensions in Argentina during this period.

As Argentina transitions into modernity, the country’s cultural field undergoes dramatic transformations. As the result of the literacy campaigns launched by the State in the second half of the nineteenth century, by the 1930s Buenos Aires boasts an illiteracy level as low as 7% (Gutiérrez and Romero 74). The increase in the number of the potential reading public and disposable income of the rising middle class will secure the success of the cultural enterprises that make their debut during this period. In addition to the modernized newspapers, now the

porteño can choose from an array of cultural offerings: from culture and popular magazines to (non) popular literature and to theatre, radio and cinema. If traditionally literature had been linked with class and cultural distinction, this notion will be challenged as culture enters the public sphere and the popular sector joins the cultural marketplace. The aguafuertes point to the emergence of a modern concept of literature during this period, one that Arlt enthusiastically embraces. Whereas traditionally writers enjoyed an aura of prestige and literature served to distinguish the initiated from the noninitiated, thus separated people along socioeconomic and sociocultural lines; with literature's entrance to the marketplace, according to Arlt, writers become mere producers and literature loses what Walter Benjamin called its aura, but also, forced out of its isolation and in its attempt to appeal to the masses, literature will begin to speak to the people and in doing so it will animate public discourse. As such, optimistic about the market, Arlt conceives it as a democratizing agent.

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), Walter Benjamin, a contemporary of Arlt, on the other side of the Atlantic, by examining the impact that mechanical reproduction has on art, postulates that it alters art's value and function. As it becomes mechanically reproducible, art will lose its "aura," that is, its authority (221). The loss of its aura is due to technological advances but also to people's change of perception, which is conditioned by modern social changes—democratization, commercialization, and consumerism (223). Along with the loss of its aura, art will also undergo a change in function: shedding its ritual function, art will gain a political one. While Benjamin is mainly concerned about the consequences of modern technology on art; because of his involvement in journalism, his personal ties with Antonio Zamora of the publishing house Claridad and the boedistas, Arlt is preoccupied with how the market is affecting literature. In their writing, both men reflect about

the repercussions that modernity is having in the art; and in the process, the two propose a modern concept of art.

Secularization, urbanization, the increasing commercialization of the city, the emergence of the mass, the introduction of public transportations, the radio and cinema, among others, will modify the porteños' everyday practices and sensibilities, which in turn will alter gender relations. In his reading of Baudelaire's "The Eyes of the Poor," Berman singles out how the Parisian boulevards were transforming men and women's relationships:

What did the boulevards do to the people who came to fill them? Baudelaire shows us some of the most striking things. For lovers, like the ones in "The Eyes of the Poor," the boulevards created a new primal scene: a space where they could be private in public, intimately together without being physically alone. Moving along the boulevard, caught up in its immense and endless flux, they could feel their love more vividly than ever as the still point of a turning world. They could display their love before the boulevard's endless parade of strangers—indeed, within a generation Paris would be world-famous for this sort of amorous display—and draw different forms of joy from them all. (152)

In his aguafuertes, Arlt, as many of his contemporaries, will associate alternative gender relations emerging during this period—modern love—with the street. By reading his aguafuertes in light of Berman's above proposal, I will argue that the street was not only a stage of modern love, but also a catalyst of the emerging gender relations model.

What are everyday life practices or daily life? In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau argues that consumers, the protagonists of everyday life or the sphere of consumption, are not passive social agents that merely use cultural products or symbols designed by the

producers, but endowed with critical thinking, even within their limited circumstance, they may partake in the construction of meaning. By using cultural products or symbols for foreign purposes, assigning them alternative meanings, consumers can subvert the dominant order. The religious syncretism of the indigenous people during colonial times attests to the ingenuity and resilience of the subalterns, who, from their marginal position, successfully subvert Christianity, the imposed order, by inscribing pagan meanings to Christian rites and ceremonies (32).

Rossana Reguillo defines everyday life as following: “Armada sobre la certeza de su repetición, la cotidianidad es ante todo el tejido de tiempos y espacios que organizan para los practicantes los innumerables rituales que garantizan la existencia del orden construido” (1). Citing Giddens, Reguillo explains that daily life is both “habilitante y constrictiva:” it is enabling because within the sphere of everyday life there exists what she calls “una franja de indeterminación,” which can be translated as a margin for improvisation; but daily life is also constraining for its repetitive nature tends to restrain critical thinking (2). According to Reguillo, one may think of everyday life as a hybrid space where private and public practices, logics, spaces and times intersect; a negotiations zone where social agents reconcile private and public discourses; or a battle ground where social agents fight for the definition of order and meaning.

In *Buenos Aires, vida cotidiana y alienación* (1964), Juan José Sebreli shows us how taste—in clothing, home architecture, automobiles etc.—as well as the rites and ceremonies that a given social class favors over others can reveal not only the prejudice and idiosyncrasies of its members, but also lead us to the predominant ideology of a period. As such, examined closely, daily life practices can be conceived as symptoms and expressions of a political and economic climate. In his study of the Argentine bourgeoisie, Sebreli highlights its preference for enclosed over open spaces: it chooses Barrio Norte as its residential area which, unlike the rest of Buenos

Aires that follows a grid pattern, “ofrece la originalidad de sus calles a la europea” (32); in contrast to the Parisian and Roman elite, who prefer to exhibit themselves on the street coffee shops of the Avenue des Champs-Élysées and Via Veneto, respectively, the Argentine upper class prefers to patronize coffee shops with secluded areas and windows covered with metallic blinds. According to Sebreli, this propensity for setting itself apart from the rest is symptomatic of the exclusionist ideology shared by the members of this class, a reaction to the wave of immigration that threatened the national identity of the oligarchic nation: “Estos juegos, aparentemente tan vacío y ridículos, cumplen una función: dejar afuera a quienes no están iniciados, poner en evidencia a quien no tiene derecho a entrar, constituyendo así una contraseña contra los curiosos, los arribistas, los parvenus, los cazadores de fortunas” (53).

In spite of its popularity, Arlt’s *Aguafuertes porteñas*, relative to his novels, initially received less attention from literary critics. Regarded as complimentary to his novels, his chronicles were mainly used to support viewpoints expressed in his *El juguete rabioso* (1926), *Los siete locos* (1929), *Los lanzallamas* (1931), and to a lesser extent his *El amor brujo* (1932). This attitude was due to the fact that the chronicle, a genre in between journalism and literature, did not neatly fall into one of the canonical literary forms. While Jorge B. Rivera and Eduardo Romano observe that “la crítica arltiana parece haber soslayado sistemáticamente el campo de las ‘aguafuertes’” (177), Roberto Retamoso laments that “[a] setenta años de la aparición de las *Aguafuertes porteñas*, los textos periodísticos de Roberto Arlt (1900-1942) aún constitu[y]en un territorio marginal y supuestamente ‘menor’ en las consideraciones críticas de su obra” (299).

With *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* (1989) and *La invención de la crónica* (1992), Julio Ramos and Susana Rotker, respectively, have paved the way for a literary reading of the Latin American chronicles. Ramos proposes that

the modern literary subject in Latin America emerges within the chronicle, in the heterogeneous domain of the newspaper: “The chronicle was not a mere supplement to poetic modernization, an idea that dominates nearly all the historiography of modernism; rather, it was (in the literary subject’s encounter with other fields) the condition of possibility for a new degree of consciousness and self-reflexivity in this subject, well on the way to autonomization” (107).

Departing from the commonly held notion that the rise of modern literature in Latin America is the result of a division of labor or the professionalization of writers, Ramos will link its emergence to a shift in the social function of the press in the last two decades of the nineteenth century: distancing from its earlier political-state functions, the newspaper will turn into a commercial enterprise and thus favor information and advertisement over partisan editorials (54, 90-94). Due to Latin America’s uneven modernization process, even towards the end of the nineteenth century, unlike Europe, literature lacked its own institutional base. In the absence of a publishing market, literature will become dependent onto the press, contributing to the formal heterogeneity of Latin American literature. Exemplary of this hybridity are the modernist chronicles (80). Yet these chronicles, particularly José Martí’s, Ramos observes, although hybrid in form, expressed an emphatic will to aestheticize, even more so than in poetry (87). This will to stylize is attributed to the chroniclers’ impulse to differentiate their writing from the anti-aesthetic discourses within the newspaper (107). And in contrast to the earlier letrados’ journalistic texts, which were validated by political institutions or what Ramos calls the “rationalizing will,” the modernist chronicles, displayed a new means of authorization (55).

Speaking from a locus of speech outside of politics, and in opposition to material interests, beginning with Martí, the chroniclers guaranteed their writing mainly by critiquing the problematic modernization process, thus signaling that literature and politics had parted ways



and literature had become an autonomous field (46-51, 105). “This voice,” Ramos states, “marks the specificity of a gaze, of a literary authority, that had not until that moment existed in Latin America. Modern literature is brought into being and proliferates, paradoxically, by announcing its death and denouncing the crisis of modernity” (xxxviii). Hence, if for literary critics the generic imprecision of the chronicle and the discursive space of journalism from which it emerges were considered problematic, for Ramos, these conditions make possible the rise of modern literature.

In *La invención de la crónica*, Rotker conceives the modernist chronicles—mainly Martí’s—as a new literary genre whose significance does not derive merely from newness itself (107). Modernity, which brings about a disruption on traditional institutions and values, also causes a crisis in the classical system of representation (46). In face of this crisis and the growing contradictions, modernist writers will set out in search of a new poetic language. This quest will coincide with the professionalization of writers and their increasing involvement in the newspapers of the Latin American urban centers. Between 1880 and 1895, the discursive field of the press, still in the process of becoming specialized, would lend itself to literary experimentations (91-108). According to Rotker, it is in the chronicle that the modernist writers are able to carry out these literary exercises and formulate a new literary system (139-70). Since the publication of their work, Latin American chronicles in general, but Arlt’s *aguafuertes* in particular have received greater critical attention among literary scholars. Following their conceptualization, I will read Arlt’s *aguafuertes* as literature.

Next I highlight the most important literary criticism on Arlt’s *Aguafuertes porteñas* as well as those that relate to my proposed research topic:

In *Aguafuertes porteñas de Roberto Arlt* (1981), Daniel C. Scroggins offers a study and a select compilation of Arlt's chronicles which is now considered a classic. By meticulously tracing the texts and authors cited by our chronicler in his aguafuertes published between 1928 and 1931, Scroggins puts together a comprehensive reading list of Arlt and, whenever possible, reconstructs the chronicler's view of the mentioned writers and books. By doing so, he disputes the notion that Arlt was uncultured and demonstrates that, despite his short lived formal education, he was exceptionally well-read. In addition to the Russian novels and the Spanish picaresque novels, whose influence in Arlt's *Los siete locos* (1929) and *El juguete rabioso* (1926) has been singled out by many literary critics, and his contemporary Argentine writers, his long reading list includes the works of the French Anatole France, Gustavo Flaubert, Hugo, Balzac, Maupassant, and Proust; of the British Charles Dickens, Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, Rudyard Kipling, Thomas De Quincey, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, James Joyce; of the North American Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, Jack London, Walt Whitman, Sinclair Lewis and John Dos Passos, among many others.

Rita Gnutzmann and Sylvia Safta are the first critics to undertake a literary reading of his chronicles. In *Roberto Arlt o el arte del calidoscopio* (1984), Gnutzmann includes a section dedicated to *Aguafuertes porteñas*, where she examines, among others, the recurrent motifs as well as Arlt's treatment of these, the different human types that are profiled in his aguafuertes and in the process identifies humor as an element that, even though prevalent in his aguafuertes, stands out from his writing: "El humor es precisamente el elemento que brilla por su ausencia en la narrativa, con la excepción de algunas breves chispas en *El juguete rabioso* y de los 'dos bergantes' (los hermanos Espila) en *Los lanzallamas*" (37).

Sáitta selects and compiles two collections of his works for Losada, which are each introduced with a study by the scholar. In her prologue to *Aguafuertes porteñas: Cultura y política* (1992), by identifying Arlt's aguafuertes as writings for the innovative newspaper *El Mundo*, Sáitta helps establish their audience, the emerging popular sector, and their immediate objective: to entertain. Formatted as a tabloid and marketed to the emerging urban working and middle class, the critic informs, *El Mundo*, unlike the traditional *La Nación* and *La Prensa*, favored brief news articles and although its main object was to inform, it explored the potential entertainment value of the newspaper: "Su rasgo distintivo es ser un diario que, además de informar, entretiene" (8). She also highlights both Arlt's sensitivity to the changes that Buenos Aires undergoes during this period and the wide range of issues of his aguafuertes:

Su extrema sensibilidad en captar los mínimos cambios y transformaciones convierte a su columna diaria en una caja de resonancias en la cual se cruzan todas las polémicas y debates del período. Nacionalismo, criollismo, idioma de los argentinos y lunfardo, Boedo y Florida, nueva sensibilidad y modernismo, teatro comercial y teatro de vanguardia: los tópicos de Buenos Aires de las décadas del veinte y treinta son los universos por los que Arlt transita, provocando polémicas o suscitando elogios. (10)

Moreover, Sáitta traces the evolution of the aguafuertes during the length of their publication period (1928-1942). Initially titled "Aguafuertes porteñas," his chronicles mainly dealt with Buenos Aires and its people, yet over the years, reflecting their shift in focus, they will take on different names. For example, between January and February of 1933, when his chronicles expose the public authorities' neglect of the city hospitals, they will temporarily be published under "Hospitales en la miseria;" and again, between March and July of 1934, as they

systematically bring to light the public authorities' neglect of the peripheral neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, they will be known as "Buenos Aires se queja" (16-17). His aguafuertes will also become chronicles of travels, initially of his domestic travels, first along the fluvial coastline of Argentina known as el litoral (1930, 1933) then to Patagonia (1934), and later of his voyage to Spain (1935). This visit to Spain sponsored by *El Mundo* allows him to turn his long desired travel to Europe into reality and expands the topic of his writings even further.

In her introduction to *Aguafuertes porteñas: Buenos Aires, vida cotidiana* (1999), Saítta, after identifying the main subject matters of his aguafuertes, she proposes that Arlt, bypassing the aristocratic Florida, establishes avenida Corrientes, between Callao and Esmeralda, as the new center of Buenos Aires for "su insolencia en mezclar, en yuxtaponer elementos contradictorios, en no respetar órdenes ni jerarquías" (V), an idea that Viviane A. Mahieux takes up and develops in her dissertation *Accessible Intellectuals: Three Cronistas of the 1920's and 1930's*. Also, she notes that during three months, beginning in August of 1931, Arlt will dedicate his aguafuertes exclusively to the issue of gender relations. According to Saítta, he attempts to expose traditional gender relations problems and their norms and in the process he will single out women as the source of the problem, reading that I will take into account in chapter 3.

The collection *Historia crítica de la literatura argentina* (2002), directed by Noé Jitrik, includes a critical essay on Arlt's chronicles thus signaling a shift of perception towards his aguafuertes within academia: if once regarded as marginal works, they are now part of his literary production. In "Roberto Arlt, un cronista infatigable de la ciudad," Roberto Retamoso identifies their narrative devices and elements, such as the use of the first person and its high subjectivity, their relationship with his other prose works and vice versa, the constant presence of

the readers as interlocutors, popular themes and characters, the use of everyday language, among others.

The works of Julio Ramos and Susana Rotker on modernist chronicles have generated greater interest in Arlt's aguafuertes, which can be evidenced in the increasing number of doctoral dissertations written on his chronicles, or that include his chronicles in the literary corpus they examine. *The Semiotics of a Bourgeois Society: An analysis of the "Aguafuertes porteñas"* (1992) by Victoria J. Martinez; *Vanguardia y geopolítica en latinoamérica: Mario de Andrade y Roberto Arlt* (2002, revised and published as a book in English) by Fernando Rosenberg; *Modernity and Marginality: The Destruction and Renovation of the Latin American City and Writer in the Chronicles of Joa do Rio, Lima Barreto, and Roberto Arlt* (2003, revised and published into a book as well) by Steven P. Sloan; *Accessible Intellectuals: Three Cronistas of the 1920's and 1930's* (2004, revised and published as a book) by Viviane A. Mahieux; *Expressing Patagonia: Sightseeing, Journalism, and Immigration in Argentina* (2005) by Jennifer M. Valko; *Roberto Arlt or the Subversion of Order: Confession, Madness and Modernity in Argentina in the 1920's and 1930's* (2011) by Paula S. Saslow; *Imaginación falogocéntrica y feminista, diferencia sexual y escritura en Roberto Arlt, Alfonsina Storni, Enrique González Tuñón, Roberto Mariani, Nicolás Olivari, Salvadora Medina Onrubia y María Luisa Carnelli* (2012) by Tania Diz; *La vanguardia en los tabloids: episodios de reconfiguración cultural en la prensa argentina de los años veinte* (2017) by María Carolina Baffi; and *Shifting Cartographies: Transformations of Urban Space in Buenos Aires, 1920-2001* (2017) by Gregory J. Przybyla; are some examples.

In the *Semiotics of a Bourgeois Society: An Analysis of the "Aguafuertes porteñas,"* Martinez dedicates a section of her last chapter to the aguafuertes women and female and male

relationships, where she examines the author's portrayal of women and gender relations. According to Martinez, Arlt represents women either as strong (domestic women) or weak (women who work) and characterizes bourgeois gender relations as corrupt and even amoral. In the first chapter of *Shifting Cartographies: Transformations of Urban Space in Buenos Aires, 1920-2001* (2017), Gregory Przybyla, with an interest in the representation of urban space, examines the *Aguafuertes porteñas* in light of the ideologies championed by the cultural nationalists and argues that while the cultural nationalists advocated for a monoglossic reading of signs and of the city, Arlt proposed heteroglossic ones. Even though we read Arlt's *aguafuertes* in light of the same debate, I reconstruct Arlt's theory of (national) literature that he articulates in his *aguafuertes*, especially in the ones where he intervenes on the issue of what is national.

Since my dissertation examines Arlt's *Aguafuertes porteñas* in light of two sociocultural crises derived from the accelerated modernizations process of Argentina, in chapter 1, "Mapping Argentine's Uneven Modernity (1880s-1930s)," I begin by offering an overview of the ramifications that the rapid modernization process had on the country's, especially Buenos Aires', demographic, economic, political and cultural spheres, emphasizing the tensions brought about by its uneven modernization process. To this end, I draw upon the studies of historians David Rock (*Argentina 1516-1987: From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín and Politics in Argentina 1890-1930: The Rise and Fall of Radicalism*), James R. Scobie (*Argentina: A City and a Nation* and *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870-1910*) and Tulio Halperin Donghi (*Una nación para el desierto argentino*), Luis Alberto Romero (*Sectores populares, cultura y política*); literary critics Beatriz Sarlo (*El imperio de los sentimientos* and *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930*), Adolfo Prieto (*El discurso criollista en la formación de la argentina moderna* and *Estudios de literatura argentina*), David Viñas (*Literatura argentina y realidad*

*política: De Sarmiento a Cortázar*), Noé Jitrik (*Ensayos y estudios de literatura argentina*), Francine Masiello (*Lenguaje e ideología: Las escuelas argentinas de vanguardia*), Graciela Montaldo (“Consagraciones: Tonos y polémicas” and “El origen de la historia”) and Claudia Gilman (“Florida y Boedo: Hostilidades y acuerdos”), among others.

The question of what is national has been already examined by critics but mainly through studies of the martifierristas works. Departing from this traditional approach, recently, in his first chapter of his dissertation, Gregory Przybyla has studied Arlt’s *Aguafuertes porteñas* by reading them against the hegemonic ideologies championed by the cultural nationalists. Although we share a similar point of departure, due to our different focus and interest, we end up making different propositions. In chapter 2 “The Rise of a Modern Concept of Literature,” I read the aguafuertes in light of the debate on what is national identity and literature; however, my objective is to reconstruct Arlt’s modern theory of (national) literature. Considered the first Argentine modern novelist, the modern qualities of his writing have been amply discussed but his proposed concept of (national) literature has yet to be formulated. Besides his foreword to the *Los Lanzallamas*, which is widely read as a literary manifesto by his critics, Arlt did not write a literary manifesto per se. Yet against the backdrop of this debate and informed about the cultural changes brought about by modernity, Arlt will articulate a theory of (national) literature: national literature is that which is read (purchased) by its people. Dismissing the traditional concept of literature and in tune with culture’s entrance into the marketplace, Arlt examines the new role of literature and in the process he postulates that as literature enters the public sphere it will lose what Benjamin called its aura and establish communion with its people. By entering the public sphere, literature will animate public discourse and increase social awareness. I will open the chapter by underscoring the ramifications that the entrance of the minority to the literary

institution had on the question of what is national. Prior to the 1880s, the issue was mainly a subject of writing of the elite intellectuals; however, as the popular sector joins the literary institution, it will set off heterogeneous and cacophonous discourses. Next, I will establish Arlt's intervention in the said debate and examine some of the main criticisms he launches against the cultural nationalists. And finally, I will examine the concept of national literature he proposes in his *aguafuertes*: literature that is read by its people.

In chapter 3, "The Emergence of Modern Love," taking into account the literary critics' contribution on Arlt's portrayal of gender relations and his treatment of women in his *Aguafuertes porteñas*, I will read his chronicles on gender relations against the proliferating discourses on gender relations and women emerging during the first decades of the twentieth century. This period sees an implosion of writing on the private domain pointing to a crisis of traditional gender relations paradigm. To reconstruct this debate, in addition to Arlt's chronicles, I will consult the work(s) of literary critics Francine Masiello, Beatriz Sarlo; historian Luis Alberto Romero; feminist historian María del Carmen Feijoó; the poems by Evaristo Carriego; the essay "El problema feminista" by Leopoldo Lugones; *Tratado de amor* of José Ingenieros; and the chronicles by Alfonsina Storni, among others. According to the conservative sector, the crisis is brought about by women's entrance to the public domain—as workers and activists. However, by portraying women as still staunchly conservative, Arlt dismisses the argument put forth by the reactionaries. Alternatively, in his *Aguafuertes porteñas*, Arlt, I will argue, will attribute the crisis to a clash of two gender relations models—the traditional and an emerging one, which I will label as modern love.

What is modern love and how does it rise? Testifying to its newness, modern love still lacks a proper place and name in his *aguafuertes*. Yet some of its expressions can be traced from



his aguafuertes, of which I will examine two: spontaneous (dis)encounters and public display of affection. Modern love is brought into being by the modernization of Buenos Aires: among others, secularization, women's entrance to the public domain and foreign influence, but also the growing urbanization and commercialization of Buenos Aires, the crowd and new urban practices—namely strolling and erotic gazing—will contribute to the emergence of modern love. The idea that the modern city, its crowd and new urban practices can help catalyze modern love has been inspired by Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire's sonnet "To a Passer-By" in "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" and Berman's interpretation of Baudelaire's "The Eyes of the Poor." Also, to configure the concept of modern love, in addition to Arlt's chronicles, I refer to his novels *Los siete locos*, *El amor brujo*, Enrique Gómez Carrillo's *El encanto de Buenos Aires*, and Benjamin's "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century" and "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," where he posits that the modern city alters the way the urban dwellers experience the public spaces—as interiors.

As new gender relations practices and sensibilities begin to alter traditional gender relations, conservatives, perceiving the change as a threat to the established social order, will mount a defense of the traditional family, marriage, and courtship and prescribe women to return to their traditional role. Arlt, on the other hand, will advocate for a revision of traditional gender relations institutions by highlights on the crisis that the conflict is causing on the institutions and people's lives—dissatisfied men and women, multiplication of failed marriages, growing hypocrisy and deceit, among others.

## 1. Mapping Argentina's Uneven Modernity (1880s-1930s)

By the turn of the twentieth century, as the demand for raw sources from the industrialized European nations—mainly England—increases, Argentina becomes an economic player and solidifies its role as purveyor of natural resources. With the entrance to the global market, Argentina secures continued economic prosperity and accelerates its modernization process. As a result, within a short period of time, Argentina, but especially its capital city Buenos Aires, undergoes dramatic transformations in the following four areas: demographic composition, urban landscape of Buenos Aires, economic—emergence of the middle class—and political organization and its cultural scene.

### 1.1. Immigration: From Solution to Problem

Economic prosperity, a centripetal force now and then, attracts Europeans laborers to Argentina, the new land of promise. The relative higher wages in Argentina than their countries of origin set off a massive influx of immigrants.<sup>1</sup> According to David Rock, between 1857 and 1916, a total of 4,758,729 immigrants entered the country. Of these, 2,575,021 chose to remain and settle in Argentina (*Politics* 10). But the mass immigration was not the result of a spontaneous human fluctuation driven solely by economic factors. Its national policy played a pivotal role in complementing the economic pull and directing the European immigrants to

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<sup>1</sup> David Rock, James R. Scobie and Donna J. Guy have noted the relatively high wages of Argentine workers compared to those of their European counterparts. See David Rock, *Politics in Argentina 1890-1930: The Rise and Fall of Radicalism* (London: Cambridge UP, 1975) 12; James R. Scobie, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870-1910* (New York: Oxford UP, 1974) 136; and Donna J. Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1995) 45.

Argentina. In support of the interest of the landed elite, the State sponsored recruitment campaigns in Europe and subsidized shipping rates for third class steerage passengers (13).

Argentina's immigration policies were the implementation of a sociopolitical vision long proposed by its intellectual and political elite, who sought to resolve the country's problems largely by importing European people and model. After the 1830's development in Europe, it seemed aware that the European model was not infallible, but that did not deter the intellectual and political elite from looking to Europe for answers.<sup>2</sup> In *Facundo*, Sarmiento offers us an insight into this Eurocentric ideology. After the 1810 Revolution, two forces had been waging war for supremacy in Argentina: civilization and barbarism. Whereas civilization stood for Buenos Aires and urban life, progress, French and English civic and political ideals and institutions, industries, commerce, Western culture and science; barbarism represented the way of life of the native Americans and the gaucho—Facundo and Rosas being its embodiment—the Argentinean plains and its *campamento* lifestyle, superstitions, untamed nature, the violence of the *montoneras*. Championing for civilization, Sarmiento advocates for European immigration as the antidote to the threat of barbarism:

Pero el elemento principal de orden y civilización que la República Argentina cuenta hoy es la inmigración europea, que de suyo y en despecho de la falta de seguridad que le ofrece se agolpa de día en día en el Plata, y si hubiera un

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, in *Facundo* Sarmiento points out the shortcomings of the European political thoughts and models: “¿Qué había de suceder cuando las bases de gobierno, la fe política que le había dado la Europa, estaban plagadas de errores, de teorías absurdas y engañosas, de malos principios; porque sus hombres políticos no tenían obligación de saber más que los grandes hombres de la Europa, que hasta entonces no sabían nada definitivo en materia de organización política?” (149) and “Desde entonces empiezan a llegarnos libros europeos que nos demuestran que Voltaire no tenía mucha razón, que Rousseau era un sofista, que Mably y Raynal unos anárquicos, que no hay tres poderes, ni contrato social, etc.” (150).

gobierno capaz de dirigir su movimiento bastaría por sí sola a sanar, en diez años no más, todas las heridas que han hecho a la patria los bandidos, desde Facundo hasta Rosas, que la han dominado. (291)

To counter the native and Hispanic culture, which according to Sarmiento was holding back Argentina from progressing, he proposed to import European culture by populating Argentina with its people. But not all Europeans were equal to him. In *Facundo*, the English and French are favored over the Hispanics. Córdoba and Buenos Aires, two important Argentinean urban centers, signified the contrasting elements of these two cultures:

Córdoba, española por educación literaria y religiosa, estacionaria y hostil a las innovaciones revolucionarias; y Buenos Aires, todo novedad, todo revolución y movimiento, son las dos fases prominentes de los partidos que dividían las ciudades todas; en cada una de las cuales estaban luchando estos dos elementos diversos que hay en todos los pueblos cultos. No sé si en América se presenta un fenómeno igual a éste; es decir, los dos partidos, retrógrado y revolucionario, conservador y progresista, representados altamente cada uno por una ciudad civilizada de diverso modo, alimentándose cada una de ideas extraídas de fuentes distintas: Córdoba, de la España, los concilios, los comentadores, el Digesto; Buenos Aires, de Bentham, Rousseau, Montesquieu y la literatura francesa entera. (153)

While Córdoba, deeply rooted in the Spanish tradition, was home of the stagnant, conservative and religious forces; Buenos Aires, heavily influenced by the English and French, was progressive, dynamic, and revolutionary. In contrast to the Northern Europeans desired by

Sarmiento, most immigrants arriving to the shore of Río de la Plata were Italian and Spanish laborers, stricken by poverty and crossing the Atlantic in hopes of “hacer la América.”<sup>3</sup>

While in the United States immigrants never surpassed 15% of the total population, in Argentina between the presidency of Julio Argentino Roca and the 1920s, immigrants reached 30% of the total population (Di Tella 50). Due to their concentration in urban centers, the percentage of immigrants was even higher in Buenos Aires, where by 1914 about half of its population was foreign born (Rock, *Politics* 14). As the immigrant population increases and begins to diversify the until then more or less homogeneous population and culture, there emerges an increasing concern with national identity among the natives. In an attempt to control the heterogeneous forces that threatened to make of Buenos Aires a Babel, State officials introduced and implemented national policies that aimed to assimilate their new members: They mandated free public elementary education for all (Ley de Educación 1420, 1884) and compulsory military service for all males (Ley de Conscripción Universal, 1901). By the Centenario, Argentinean writers who traced their lineage to the colonial days responded with an increasingly nationalistic and xenophobic discourse. The list of those most vocal on this topic included poet Leopoldo Lugones, literary critic Ricardo Rojas, and writer Manuel Gálvez (Masiello, *Lenguaje e ideología* 33-49).

In “En Familia” (1899), Fray Mocho sheds light on the growing anxiety among the natives as immigrants, with their foreign culture and languages, begin to alter and redefine the concept of family, hence nation. As such, the chronicle, styled as a dialogue between husband

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<sup>3</sup> In *Buenos Aires*, James Scobie states: “The two leading immigrant groups, Italians and Spaniards, appeared in Flores in percentages well below those nationalities’ averages for the city as a whole” (24).

and wife, is told from the *criollo* perspective. Euleterio “más criollo que la Concepción” (14) and his wife Ramona, who already have four daughters married to foreign men, are now about to wed their fifth and last one to yet another foreign man, a Frenchman: “La primera que comenzó fue Julia con su alemancito, y de ahí siguieron no más como lienzo de alambrao, Petrona con su italiano, Antonia con su portugués, Eulogia con su inglesito ¡y aura se nos viene Susana con un francés!... ¡No, che, no... a no embromar, vamos!... ¡No faltaba más!” (15). As the family becomes multicultural and polyglot, the older native generation begins to feel estranged from their own children and fear that the new cultural and linguistic elements will end up disrupting their family ties. While in the past they altogether celebrated the Argentine national festivities and holidays, Euleterio states, now each of his five daughters, along with their respective husbands, is celebrating foreign holidays. Euleterio and his sons-in-law, who still lack fluency in Spanish, struggle to communicate with one another. The Italian son-in-law, unable to pronounce his name Euleterio, calls him “Cementerio”: “Figúrate que al italiano todavía no le puedo hacer agarrar el paso... ¡Me dice don Cementerio, y se queda muy suelto e cuerpo!” (16). This somewhat humorous play of words can also be read as a death sentence to the traditional *criollo* family and language. Interestingly, of the five foreign sons-in-laws, it is the Italian that calls him “Cementerio.” If we take into account that, among the many foreigners that were arriving in Argentina, the Italians made up the most prominent group and went on to leave an indelible linguistic mark with the lunfardo, then this coincidence may be read as a foreshadowing: Through the death sentence pronounced against Euleterio by the Italian son-in-law, Fray Mocho announces the end of Buenos Aires as a *gran aldea*—thus referred by the writer Lucio Vicente Lopez—and the dawn of a cosmopolitan era.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In *Politics*, David Rock states that of the 2,575,021 that entered and remained in the country

By the time Arlt writes his aguafuertes, there are some clear ethnic enclaves and areas with a heavy immigrant population within Buenos Aires. In “Comerciantes de Libertad, Cerrito y Talcahuano,” Arlt dedicates an aguafuerte exclusively to the Jewish community anchored within the said streets. Writing about the crowded living conditions of certain centric areas of Buenos Aires (Census Districts 8, 9, 10, and 11), James R. Scobie mentions in passing that there were two Jewish ethnic communities—one in District 9 and another in District 11—in the city: “a cluster of 4000 Russian Jews who occupied two blocks in the center of District 11—one of the few clearly visible ethnic enclaves in the city—gave evidence of these crowded conditions” (*Buenos Aires* 24-25); “Aside from the Jewish enclave in District 11 and another smaller Jewish settlement in District 9, these four districts [8, 9, 10, and 11] provided an ethnic mixture quite similar to that of the city as a whole” (26).

If in “En familia” the foreign elements are regarded with suspicion and as threat producing angst in the narrator-protagonist Euleterio, here, the Jewish elements are esoteric objects of curiosity and even wonder. With their Yiddish language, distinct and colorful customs, Arlt tells us, the Jewish people are transforming these streets into Gaza or Jerusalem and, in doing so, marveling the narrator: “todo un mundo maravillosamente exótico se mueve en este pseudo ghetto injertado en el corazón de la ciudad” (*OC* 193). And neither the Jewish celebration, nor the Jewish flag waiving in the middle of the city, are the cause of anxiety in Arlt for as much as they are transforming Buenos Aires, the Argentine Jews are also being influenced by the native culture:

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between 1857 and 1916, the Italians made up about half of this number, making them the leading immigrant group, with the Spanish trailing second (10).

¿Quién no ha recorrido estas calles los días del “año judío”? Entonces no hay casi balcón en donde no flamee la bandera con el simbólico pentagrama de Salomón, cuyos triángulos invertidos, según un israelita escéptico significan que “arriba” es igual que “abajo” y que el judío pobre sufrirá en la otra vida como en ésta.

Y quizá sea cierto, porque la base del culto ya falla entre el *israelita argentino*.

Observan el sábado, pero con ironía, sin esa religiosidad de sus mayores, que en sagrado día no tocaban ni levantaban nada. Comen jamón como cualquier “goin”.

*Y la raza se pierde, se pierde en las bocacalles que miran a todas las caras de la ciudad.*

En tanto, *pero no como antes*, Cerrito, Talcahuano y Libertad, son el más puro y auténtico barrio judío que se haya aferrado a la ciudad. (193; my emphasis)

As a second generation immigrant, Arlt understands that culture is not unidirectional but bidirectional. Some of the Jews are slowly losing their characteristic religiosity and, in true *porteño* fashion, ironically reading the hexagram of their flag, the symbol in the center that represents the star of David, as “‘arriba’ es igual que ‘abajo’ y que el judío pobre sufrirá en la otra vida como en ésta” (193). The Jew Argentineans, Arlt writes, are slowly being assimilated and becoming “israelita argentino.”

In “Canning y Rivera,” Arlt finds a “Babel de todas las razas,” where one can meet an ethnically diverse group going about their daily business:

Desfile humano interminable. Babel de todas las razas. Pasan sefardíes con piezas de tela, judíos con cestos cargados de gorras, turcos cristianos con canastas de carne, checoslovacos de blusa (trabajan en las obras del subte), alemanes con baratijas de venta imposible; italianos amarillos de tierra, españoles con manchas



de vino en el delantal despensero, y un zumbido incesante se filtra a través del aire, bajo el dorado cielo azul de la mañana. (*OC* 190)

In “Las cuatro recovas,” Arlt takes the reader to Paseo de Julio, Paseo Colón, Mataderos, and Once, all immigrant enclaves. But sidestepping the conventional association of immigrants and their quarters with crime and immorality during this period, Arlt sheds light to their nostalgia and their daily struggles. Let’s take his account of Paseo de Julio as example. Paseo de Julio, according to Scobie, was predominantly made up of foreign population:

On the right, rooming houses and bars predominated in the narrow blocks between Paseo de Julio and 25 de Mayo. Here the population was almost entirely foreign-born, save for an occasional infant born to recent arrivals. There you found the usual mixture of Italians, Spaniards, Frenchmen, Germans, and Englishmen, but the large number of sailors and peddlers also contributed some nationalities rarely encountered elsewhere in the city—Danes, Greeks, Russians, Swedes, Poles. (*Buenos Aires* 66)

In addition, it was a place famed for crime and prostitution as registered by Borges in his poem “Paseo de Julio:”

Juro que no por deliberación he vuelto a la calle de la alta recova  
de alta recova repetida como un espejo,  
de parrillas con la trenza de carne de los Corrales,  
de *prostitución* encubierta por lo más distinto: la música.  
[.....]  
Barrio con lucidez de *pesadilla* al pie de los otros,  
tus espejos curvos denuncian el lado de la fealdad de las caras,  
tu noche calentada en *lupanares* pende de la ciudad.  
Eres la *perdición* fraguándose un mundo  
con los reflejos y las *deformaciones* del nuestro;  
sufres de caos, adoleces de irrealdad,  
te empeñas en jugar con naipes raspados la vida;  
tu alcohol mueve peleas,

tus adivinas interrogan envidiosos libros de magia. (*Cuaderno San Martín* 103; my emphasis)

Although renowned, Paseo de Julio is unfamiliar to criollos like Borges: “Sólo poseo de ti una deslumbrada ignorancia” (103). Because of it or in spite of it, Borges sets out to write his own impression of this place, one derived from an inquisitive excursion to this area and not based on familiarity: “pero mi verso es de interrogación y de prueba/ y para obedecer lo entrevisto” (103). Prostitution, whorehouses, nightmare, alcohol, ruin, chaos, quarrels are some of the words he uses to define this quarter.<sup>5</sup>

In his rendition of Paseo de Julio, although alluding to them, Arlt does not dwell on prostitution nor crime. Instead, he offers an unfiltered account of the immigrants’ daily lives and their struggle. He registers the culinary aromas of the humble immigrants saturating the street: “chinchulines podridos,” “pizza,” “polenta” and the likes (*Buenos Aires* 18). He pauses on the exploitative employment agency that is conveniently located in the area, takes notice of the human diversity and even captures their “caras congestionadas” (18-19). Thus Arlt offers the readers an insight into the harsh life of the immigrants.

## 1.2. The Surge of Socioeconomic Tensions

Socioeconomic factors further exacerbated the tension between the Argentine elite and the immigrants as the former, mostly consisting of traditional creole families and the latter, which made up the bulk of the working class, clashed over the question of housing but, mainly,

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to Borges, Donna J. Guy writes “The Paseo de Julio (now Leandro Alem Avenue) in El Bajo was yet another urban area where prostitution was rife” (45) and in the same aguafuerte, Arlt, referring to Paseo de Julio, states: “Es la recova canalla, la recova explotada por todos los periodistas” (18).

wages. The numerous massive general strikes, the violent confrontations between the workers and the police, and the state of siege declared to combat the strikers evinced this class conflict. *Ley de Residencia* and *Defensa Social* came to symbolize the tense relationship between the natives and the immigrants and crystalized the attitude of the former towards the latter. Refusing to see their grievances as a legitimate cause, through these two legislations, the Argentine elite sought to deport and imprison those they perceived as social menace (Rock, *Politics* 83).

Unlike the United States and Australia, Argentina did not carry out major land reforms (Rock, *Politics* 2; Di Tella 83). The preeminence of large estates, encouraged by its agricultural export economy, leads to the emergence of a powerful landed elite (Rock 3). After the middle of the nineteenth century, immigrants and their descendants started making their way into its rank. Among others, for instance, there were Antonio Devoto, a wealthy landowner, investor and businessman of Italian descent; Luis Zuberbühler, a second generation Swiss Argentine, who was also a wealthy landowner and businessman; and Nicolás Mihanovich, a Dalmatian immigrant, who had arrived penniless to Argentina but amassed a sizeable fortune some fifty years after and went on to own almost all the coastal steamships (Rock, *Argentina* 173-74). Although the composition of its members fluctuated over time, it was still predominantly made up of traditional criollo families (*Politics* 3). These powerful families will establish control over the State and police and use their influence to implement socioeconomic policies favorable to their interest. For example, after 1900, to defend the interest of the elite—who desired to keep workers' wages down to maximize their profit—the State will mobilize the police and intervene in labor disputes undercutting the bargaining power of the working class. Also, reflecting the elite's economic interest, State revenues were raised by levying taxes on products of urban

consumption as opposed to land or landed incomes, further favoring the wealthy at the expense of the lower and middle classes (4).

If the Argentine elite were composed largely by the natives, the working class was comprised overwhelmingly by immigrants. “Of the working class in Buenos Aires in 1914,” Rock remarks, “some three-quarters were immigrants” (*Argentina* 175); “The great majority was Italian or Spanish by birth, or, as a result of a wave of heavy immigration before 1914, from the Middle East and the Balkans” (*Politics* 69). About half was concentrated in the industrial sector working either at the meat packing plants (frigoríficos) or at the small scale factories that supplied the local market. The other half was dispersed throughout the railway and tramway companies, the Port of Buenos Aires, and commercial distribution and service sectors (68-69).

The economic boom that speeds the modernization process did not translate into prosperity for all. While the rural and commercial elite profited most from the economic expansion, and wealth trickled down to other segments of the population, the working class faced increasing economic pressure. In 1913, it was estimated that 80% of the working class population of the city of Buenos Aires lived as families in single room tenements (Rock, *Politics* 93). Its socioeconomic condition remained precarious even during the boom years. Following the economic downturn of the war years, between 1918 and 1921 Argentina experienced an economic boom with the rural and commercial elite benefiting from the high export prices (106). During this same period, however, wages remained depressed as they were not compensated for the war period inflation worsening the workers’ economic condition, as illustrated in the following account:

Before the war a number of studies were made of the cost of living for working class families. These were based on an assumed monthly income of between 100

and 120 pesos per family, and they may be taken as standard subsistence levels before the war. Taking wartime inflation into account, money wages ought to have risen to around 160 pesos by 1918. However, for the majority of the workers who took strike actions between 1916 and 1919 money wages were in the region of between 50 and 100 pesos. This may illustrate the extent to which the war had the effect of redistributing income away from the working class, and the pressures which encouraged strike outbreaks. (126)

Thus, inflation contributed to further economic gain for the elite at the expense of the workers' condition.

In face of mounting economic pressure, urban immigrants began to organize, mobilize, and protest demanding wage increases. The numerous strikes evince the working class's discontent and economic struggle. Rock notes that in 1907 some 231 strikes were recorded in the city; in 1917, 138 strikes; in 1918, 196 strikes and in the first half of 1919 alone, 259 strikes were registered (126). The Socialist party, the Anarchist movement and Syndicalism will try to channel the working class's discontent into political actions. While the Anarchist had the most success with the working class before Radicalism; Syndicalism, which favored peaceful tactics and negotiations, will move into a position of dominance after the rise of Radicalism (129).

With the rise of Radicalism to power, workers experienced some improvement, but their position in relation to the State remained precarious. In spite of the foreign status of the majority of the working class, after 1916 Radicalism began to court this sector for the votes of the native-born workers for although making up a minority, their votes became decisive to political control of the city of Buenos Aires (119). However, Radicalism did not unconditionally support the workers' demand for higher wages. It backed the workers whenever there were clear electoral

considerations or it was not at the expense of its political position within government (125). Therefore, even though Radicalism initially adopts a conciliatory tone at the outbreak of the Vasena strike, in face of mounting political pressure, the emergence of a para-military organization—La Liga Patriótica—, and finally the threat of military intervention, the government will turn to repressive measures against the strikers leading to the tragic events known as Semana Trágica.<sup>6</sup>

### 1.3. Politics of Exclusion

On one hand, we have a country that promoted immigration and on the other, by not facilitating citizenship to the newly arriving population, one that excluded the immigrants from political participation. By the early twentieth century, except for the 2% that succeeded in obtaining citizenship, the immigrants that accounted for 30% of the Argentine population did not partake in the political process (Di Tella 50-51). How do we explain this seemingly contradictory attitude towards the immigrants? By attributing this political situation to the immigrants' unwillingness to naturalize, Di Tella suggests their political marginalization was voluntary. However, Halperin Donghi offers an alternative explanation, one that I find more persuasive. He claims that the elitist Argentine lettered men who played a vital role in shaping the Argentine political vision and system, after the fall of Rosas, wary of the political unrest set off by the popular movements in Argentina—which had led Rosas to the seat of power—as well as Europe, favored an authoritarian form of government and in doing so excluded the immigrants, a population they desired yet distrusted.

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<sup>6</sup> See Rock's *Politics* Ch. 3 for more on Semana Trágica and the events leading to it; and his Ch. 8 for a discussion on the rise and significance of La Liga Patriótica.

In *Historia social de la Argentina contemporánea*, although Di Tella acknowledges that there existed a political sector in Argentina that was reluctant to extend citizenship to the newly arrived immigrants, he claims that immigrants forewent political participation by choosing to retain their original citizenship because of their continued allegiance to their homeland and their attitude of superiority towards the natives for there was a general tendency among Europeans to look down on criollos, the black and mulatos (51). As such, Spaniards and Italians who arrived and settled in Argentina, feeling “aristocracia de la piel,” despised Argentine citizenship: “Los extranjeros se sentían relativamente superiores al resto del país—con la excepción de los estancieros—y ese era uno de los motivos por los cuales no se tomaban el trabajo de adquirir la ciudadanía” (51, 53); “Simplemente, los extranjeros, en su mayoría, no querían tomar la ciudadanía” (54). Moreover, Di Tella explains the xenophobic and nationalist discourses emerging during this period as the natives’ response to the immigrants’ continued political and cultural allegiance to their countries of origin. Instead of constructively channeling their discontent through established social venues and political parties, immigrants established their own foreign schools, newspapers and political organizations—the anarchist movement, socialist party and leftist organizations—thus raising suspicion among the natives who regarded the increasing foreign cultural and political elements in Argentina as a threat to their national identity. Hence, to counter their perceived threat, the natives responded with xenophobic and nationalist discourses:

Toda una masa mayoritaria del país moderno sentía nostalgia e identificaciones positivas fuera de sus fronteras: una situación fascinante para muchos observadores pero que dificultaba la construcción de una nación. Y la respuesta nacionalista no tardó en venir y generar toda esa serie de expresiones ideológicas

xenófobas y nativistas que son la contracara del extranjerismo de amplios sectores del país. El resultado fue un país dividido en dos mitades culturales, de las cuales una, la criolla, estuvo mucho tiempo tapada, pero que con el desarrollo urbano e industrial se trasladó del campo (o el interior) a la ciudad (o la capital), y además influyó a las nuevas generaciones de hijos, o más bien nietos, de inmigrantes que se iban adaptando a su condición de argentinos. (59)

Their continued allegiance to their homeland and racial prejudice may have played a role in discouraging immigrants from seeking Argentine citizenship; however, considering their political activism in face of economic pressure, which often was at the expense of their freedom, deportation, or life itself, these alone do not account for the immigrants' failure to seek naturalization and in turn participate in the political process. Moreover, the scale of the failure—let us reiterate, only 2% succeeded in becoming citizens—points to one that is systemic in nature.

In *Una nación para el desierto argentino*, Halperin Donghi does not address the issue of political exclusion of immigrants, but examining the writings of the Argentine lettered men, studies the different political propositions that emerged and competed to replace the government of Rosas after his fall, and in doing so, he highlights the elitist attitude among the Argentine lettered men and its enduring legacy in Argentine politics. Halperin Donghi traces the elitist culture in Argentine politics to *la generación de 1837*—also known as *la Nueva Generación*. After the clear defeat of the unitarios by Rosas, a group of lettered men self-proclaiming itself as *la Nueva Generación* band together to continue the fight against the federales and their leader Rosas. Rebranding itself as “nueva,” it attempts to differentiate itself from its predecessors; however, much like the unitarios, Halperin Donghi points out, its members came from the upper socioeconomic echelon, but most importantly, they shared the same conviction: viewing the



general population as a passive mass, they believed it had to be guided by the enlightened few:

“La hegemonía de los letrados se justifica por su posesión de un acervo de ideas y soluciones que debiera permitirles dar orientación eficaz a una sociedad que la Nueva Generación ve como esencialmente pasiva, como la materia en la cual es de responsabilidad de los letrados encarnar las ideas cuya posesión les da por sobre todo el derecho a gobernarla” (36).

Halperin Donghi places Juan Bautista Alberdi and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, among other political thinkers of their time, as heirs of this elitist tradition:

Aun es así, si es posible rastrear en los escritos de madurez de Alberdi, de Juan María Gutiérrez, de Sarmiento, temas y nociones que ya estaban presentes en las reflexiones de 1837, no es siempre sencillo establecer hasta dónde su presencia refleja una continuidad ideológica real; hasta tal punto sería abusivo considerar el interés por esos temas y nociones, encarados por tantos y desde tan variadas perspectivas antes y después de 1837, la marca distintiva de una tradición ideológica precisa.

En cambio, esa avasalladora pretensión de constituirse en guías del nuevo país (y su justificación por la posesión de un salvador sistema de ideas que no condescienden a definir con precisión) está destinada a alcanzar una influencia quizá menos inmediatamente evidente pero más inequívocamente atribuible al nuevo grupo generacional de 1837. (40)

Why does Halperin Donghi establish Sarmiento and Alberdi within a political tradition? By doing so, he emphasizes on the entrenched nature of this ideology in the political life of the Argentine. No longer an isolated, individual attribute, or of the most notable political thinkers, it was a generally shared sentiment by the Argentine lettered men and would have lasting

consequences in the political sphere. After all, according to Halperin Donghi, what sets Argentina apart from other Latin American countries is not the accelerated progress it achieved during the second half of the nineteenth century—however much this is cited by Latin Americanist as making up its exceptionality—but the role of its lettered men, especially of Sarmiento and Alberdi, in shaping the Argentine political vision and institutions after the fall of Rosas:

La excepcionalidad argentina radica en que sólo allí iba a parecer realizada una aspiración muy compartida y muy constantemente frustrada en el resto de Hispanoamérica: el progreso argentino es la encarnación en el cuerpo de la nación de lo que comenzó por ser un proyecto formulado en los escritos de algunos argentinos cuya única arma política era su superior clarividencia. No es sorprendente no hallar paralelo fuera de la Argentina al debate en que Sarmiento y Alberdi, esgrimiendo sus pasadas publicaciones, se disputan la paternidad de la etapa de historia que se abre en 1852. (31)

As enthusiastic as they were for Argentina to enter the global market and accelerate its modernization process, Halperin Dongui states, the nineteenth century lettered men expressed reservations about their plausible negative social and political consequences. The dramatic events unfolding in the United States and Europe during their lifetime served them as warning of the dangers of capitalism and industrialization. Whereas José María Rojas, a political advisor to Rosas, feared that the immigrants would pose a threat to the Argentine political stability, Sarmiento was wary that immigrants' economic advancement would be at the expense of the native population's economic well-being. The political projects that these men drafted and proposed for the post-Rosas Argentinean government, Halperin Dongui argues, took into account

the dangers derived from the modernization process and aimed to minimize them. In response to the European popular unrest, Alberdi proposes France and the authoritarian government of Napoleón III as a model for the Argentinean government, while Sarmiento, seeing the USA as an alternative, advocates for an inclusive, democratic form of government: “Pero mientras Alberdi juzgaba aún posible recibir una última lección de Francia, y veía en el desenlace autoritario de la crisis revolucionaria un ejemplo y un modelo, Sarmiento deducía de ella que lo más urgente era que Hispanoamérica hallase la manera de no encerrarse en el laberinto del que Francia no había logrado salir desde su gran revolución” (65). Sympathizing with Sarmiento’s inclusive political vision, Halperin Donghi deems his proposal superior to Alberdi’s.<sup>7</sup> However, Argentina, privileging Alberdi’s proposal, will follow in the French footsteps and opt for an oligarchic government and exclude the immigrants from political participation in fear of political instability and in turn, economic stagnation.

#### 1.4. The Arrival of Radicalism

As the emerging social sector begins to pressure the oligarchic Argentine government for a share of political power, in 1912 the Argentine government concedes electoral vote to all of its eighteen years old and above male citizens. And in 1916 the country finally elects Hipólito Yrigoyen as its first democratic president. By yielding political power to the larger society, Argentina seemed to steer away from its long history of oligarchic rule and inaugurate a new

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<sup>7</sup> In *Una nación para el desierto argentino* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2005), Halperin Donghi writes: “Sarmiento elaboró una imagen del nuevo camino que la Argentina debía tomar que rivaliza en precisión y coherencia con la alberdiana, a la que supera en riqueza de perspectivas y contenidos” (65).

democratic political era. However, as Di Tella well said, “El destino quiso que [Yrigoyen] llegara al gobierno, pero no al poder” (177). The political conquest was more symbolic than real: the newly democratically elected government neither succeed at diversifying the economy of the country nor distributing the political control concentrated in the hands of the old Argentine elite to a larger segment of the population. As a result, the large cattle ranching and export agriculture system economy and its interests prevailed even during Radicalism.<sup>8</sup> However, Radicalism inaugurates a change of style in Argentine politics, from closeted oligarchy to popular politics (99).

Why did Radicalism and Yrigoyen fail to accomplish significant changes after coming into power? The elite concedes electoral vote to the larger segment of the population in hopes of securing political stability, which was regarded as crucial in protecting the economic interest of its members, and not to promote any structural changes (Rock, *Argentina* 184-85; *Politics* 42-43). Although there were competing factions within the elite, from 1880 to the turn of the century, the oligarchic system proved effective in maintaining order by appeasing the different factions within its members. However, in face of the increasing politization of the urban middle classes after 1900, two factions emerge within the oligarchy. While Roca favors maintaining order by continuing with the status quo, Pellegrini, along with Figueroa Alcorta and its successor Roque Saenz Peña, push for reform as a political concession intended to control the dangers of a radical movement or coup (*Politics* 26-34).

Also, although Radicalism was able to mobilize and gain wide public support, the party began as a splinter group within the elite and only later, after the turn of the century, did it

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<sup>8</sup> Radicalism’s failure to accomplish significant structural changes has been discussed by David Rock in *Argentina 1516-1987: From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín* (Berkeley: University of California P, 1987) Ch. 5 and *Politics* Ch. 3 and Ch. 5.

develop its populist features (41). It neither advocated for land reform nor industrialization, that is structural changes, but rather its economic objective was redistributive in nature (98). To garner support of the heterogeneous sectors of the urban population, Radicalism avoided a concrete political program and appealed to the masses through paternalistic measures (59, 99).

Radicals redistributive objectives were shared by the middle class, whose politicization helped catapult the Radicals into the seat of power (98). By 1914 the urban middle class in Argentina was “the largest group of its kind in Latin America” (*Argentina* 175). In spite of its size, the political influence of the middle class was compromised by its client relationship with the landed elite. Instead of using its new found political influence to steer away Argentina from the primary export economy—one that helped solidify the current economic and political elite to its position of power, it supported it. And in doing so, it ultimately upheld the economic interest of the conservative elite making it more difficult to introduce significant social changes for its own benefit (*Politics* 18-19).

Due the complex relationship between Argentina’s elite and middle class, David Rock underscores, the country lacked an aggressive and mature entrepreneurial industrial sector: one of dependency and not struggle along the patterns established in the industrial nations. Middle class aspirations were not realized in the industrial sector in opposition to the elite but by supporting it in the service and administrative sector. Hence, the Argentine middle class was made up by native, white collars who offered mainly legal, administrative and legal services to the primary export sector. “The result of this,” Rock observes “was the emergence of an important stratum of the middle class in Argentina, possessed not of the aggressive entrepreneurial instincts of its capitalist counterparts in the United States, Britain or Germany, but of a clientelist, dependent—one is tempted to say mendicant—character” (20). Arlt,

perceptive of individual and group idiosyncrasies, in “Aristocracia de barrio,” criticizes this passive and dependent bourgeoisie and their excessive high regard for government jobs with their comfortable retirement.

In addition, in 1916, although the Radicals won the presidency, they were still a minority in Congress hence the conservatives still kept control over government legislation (96). As such, Yrigoyen found himself having to do a balancing act: upholding the economic interest of the landed elite while establishing a new relationship with the urban sectors, which proved challenging during economic downturns as Radicals gained the allegiance of the middle class chiefly by increasing government jobs and public spending, but the elite opposed such actions because they endangered the elite’s relationship with foreign capital and overseas market (98). Failure to achieve a fine balance between these two acts will ultimately cost Yrigoyen his seat of power. The coup d’état that overthrows him from power during his second term is attributed to his increasing public spending—which was burdening the country with external debt to a breaking point—in the midst of an economic downturn (256).<sup>9</sup>

### 1.5. Buenos Aires: From *la gran aldea* to Cosmopolitan City

Modernization also deeply alters the panoramic view and life in Buenos Aires. Once fondly referred as the *gran aldea*, in the beginning of the twentieth century Buenos Aires goes on to become the largest Latin American city, and second largest American city (*Argentina* 172). Although by opening its door to European immigration the Argentine government hoped to populate its countryside, large number of immigrants, who arrived in the country through its

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<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the Radical’s mechanisms of political patronage as way of redistributing income from the rural and exporting groups to the middle class, see Rock’s *Politics* 104-14; 241-64.

main port city Buenos Aires, settles in the city.<sup>10</sup> In addition to immigration, internal migration—the exodus from the interior to the port cities—also contributed to the swelling of the population in Buenos Aires and the growing anemia of the interior. Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, alarmed about the disproportionate size of the capital, writes: “Empezamos a darnos cuenta de que no era la cabeza demasiado grande, sino el cuerpo entero mal nutrido y peor desarrollado. La cabeza se chupaba la sangre del cuerpo” (40).

This dramatic increase of population, along with Buenos Aires’ economic growth and federalization in 1880, on one hand, leads to the modernization of the city, speeding construction and beatification projects; but on the other, it contributes to a housing crisis and crowded living conditions, which in turn contributed to the outward development of the city and rise of the suburbs, as well as to the growth of its informal economy and organized crime, hence sharpening the gap between the center and the margin.

Mayor Torcuato de Alvear (1880 to 1887) brings to fruition the porteños’ long held vision of beautifying and modernizing the city. During his tenure, he led the city’s effort to develop the sewer system, expand the public water supply, complete two new hospitals and remodel some of its most travelled avenues—Callao, Entre Ríos, Santa Fe, Corrientes, Rivadavia, and Independencia, among others. To beautify the city, he planted trees and shrubs in the many barren porteño plazas. As his most dramatic act, with the support of President Roca, Alvear modernized the main Plaza de Mayo. He removed the dividing arcade, which sheltered commercial shops and activity in the plaza, uniting the two plazas into one. He also gave it a new

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<sup>10</sup> In *Buenos Aires*, Ch. 3, Scobie identifies three locational forces that contributed to concentration of resources, industries, and people; and the expansion of Buenos Aires over that of the rest of the country: the location of the port in Buenos Aires; the railroad system, which radiated from Buenos Aires to the provinces; and the federalization of Buenos Aires in 1880.

air by planting palm trees, arousing bitter comments from his opponents in the municipal council who accused him of turning Buenos Aires into a Jamaican village. Although Avenida de Mayo was inaugurated in 1894, its fruition has also been credited to Alvear's vision and drive (Scobie, *Buenos Aires* 110-11).

Within Buenos Aires, the downtown area becomes especially popular, hence congested. Since colonial times, it had been customary for public officials and its prominent residents to settle in close proximity to the main Plaza de Mayo. As such, government buildings, public offices as well as financial, educational, religious institutions, entertainment venues, and major retail and wholesale establishments were all built surrounding the plaza. Only the hospitals due to quarantine customs were built in the perimeter of the city (27).

The political and intellectual center—also known as “Square of Enlightenment”—was located south of Plaza de Mayo and housed the country's most prestigious preparatory school Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires; the School of Law of Universidad de Buenos Aires—relocated to Moreno in 1880; the national library; the legislative chambers of the province of Buenos Aires—moved to La Plata after the federalization of Buenos Aires; the commercial tribunals; the public health office, museum and departments of education and topography as well as the Church of San Ignacio and the parish church of Catedral al Sud (41). Religious establishments also were concentrated along this southern section. On Bolivar stood the parish Church of San Ignacio; on Defensa, in the “Square of Churches,” the Church of San Roque, the Church of San Francisco, and the Convent of San Ignacio (50-51). Prestigious social and political clubs; shops of tailors and seamstresses that dressed the well-to-do; French fashion, furniture and perfume stores; and the city's and nation's financial institutions were all found in the vicinity as well (59-62).



Before 1900, the most prominent citizens settled in the downtown area. For instance, while José Mármol, one of the most important intellectual figures, and the Saénz Peñas, a family of future Presidents, resided on the Southern side of the Plaza; both Carlos E. Pellegrini, the future Vice President and President, and the city's mayor Torcuato de Alvear lived on Florida, on the Northern side of Plaza (43).

As Buenos Aires expands and enters the nineteenth century, it undergoes major transformations; however, new services and businesses catering to government officials and the well-to-do will remain concentrated around this downtown area (115). By 1910, if Piedad, between 25 de Mayo and San Martín, and its adjacent streets remain as the favored locations of financial institutions; Perú and Florida will continue to house the important Social Clubs—such as The Jockey Club, the Club Naval y Militar and the Club del Gimnasio y Esgrima. And the downtown center will continue to be the chosen location for new hotels, coffee shops, and fine clothing and furniture stores. Nevertheless, due to space constraint, the city will witness locational shifts (116-19). Although originally the influential families had congregated on the southern side “in an area of fifteen blocks enclosed by Belgrano, Chacabuco, Rivadavia, and Defensa,” by 1880 Florida will replace it as the home of the elite (122, 126). The theatre district, initially anchored around Plaza de Mayo, will expand and move northwest (119). In 1906, Congress will also move from the plaza area to the opposite end of Avenida de Mayo (120).

If by 1870 Buenos Aires still remains a peaceful town, in the 1920's and 1930's, crowd, traffic, and construction sites will alter the experience of Buenos Aires. “To the person who stood at the center of Buenos Aires in 1870,” Scobie states, “the principal sensation was of having entered a large, peaceful town. Brisk activity took place on the waterfront and in a few adjacent commercial streets, but the rest of the city, stretched out along quiet streets, seemed at

rest within the patios and behind the brick and stucco walls of its one-story buildings” (36). By the time Arlt writes his *aguafuertes*, getting around downtown has become almost an impossible challenge akin to boxing with one’s shadow. In his “Encantos de las calles del centro,” Arlt gives an account of the ongoing remodeling projects, growing commercialization and congestion of the downtown area and their effect on the narrator and his contemporaries. Esmeralda, Cangallo, Sarmiento, Arlt states, are plagued by congestion: “En Esmeralda agonizan de impaciencia los motorman en la imposibilidad de arreglar los obstáculos del tráfico con malas palabras” (VC 82); “En Cangallo y Sarmiento se confabulan los camiones, carros de tres caballos y el diablo a cuatro” (83). Carlos Pellegrini is jammed by shoppers and window shoppers who together crowd the pedestrian sidewalk: “en Carlos Pellegrini, además de los tranvías estacionados, usted encuentra tales brigadas de mujeres abriendo la boca frente a las vidrieras que si se resuelve a caminar, tiene que hacerlo a base de ‘gambetas’ como si estuviera boxeando con su sombra” (82-83). And Corrientes, Arlt states, is perennially under construction: “En Corrientes, es la peste de los destructores de calzadas y veredas. Cuando no es una empresa, es otra, o si no es la O.B.S. de la N. y aquí ya no son ‘gambetas’ las que tiene que hacer, sino saltos como si se dispusiera a entrenarse para intervenir en un concurso de garrocha” (83).

In his *Aguafuertes porteñas*, Arlt tells us, demolitions are becoming a commonplace in the Buenos Aires landscape. They are everywhere—on Corrientes, Cangallo, Pellegrini, and Sarmiento—prompting Arlt to say “El intendente, sea dicho entre paréntesis, parece regocijadamente dispuesto a tirar abajo la ciudad” in “Buenos Aires, paraíso de la tierra” (148). Yet, as ubiquitous as they are becoming, they can’t help but be a dissonant sight. In “Demoliciones en el centro,” Arlt conveys this dissonance by evoking foreign, exotic places in his description of the demolition sites. The clouds of dust stirred up by the demolition remind

him of the African dessert: “Nuves de arena como en el desierto africano, en el centro de Buenos Aires” (138) and the scaffoldings on sidewalks in front of construction sites, of Moorish streets: “Hay veredas techadas por andamiajes tan bajos que súbitamente el caminante se siente transportado a las callejuelas moriscas de Tetuán” (140).

In this same *aguafuerte*, while for his contemporaries the demolition and construction sites are mere spectacles or obstacles, these same sites produce feelings of anxiety in our narrator. The simple minded, Arlt states, rejoice in front of the demolition sites—“los papanatas deleitándose en la demolición” (139)—, and the voracious female shoppers, disregarding the dangers of the construction and demolition zones, wrestle the guard on duty to access the sales of nearby shops. But the narrator associates the same sites with images of war and its destructive forces, hence conveying feelings of anxiety, and even terror.<sup>11</sup> What elicits such strong emotions in the narrator? I believe “El espíritu de la calle Corrientes no cambiará con el ensanche” (*OC* 160), which can be read as a poetic defense of Corrientes, offers us a clue to this question. Arlt pens this *aguafuerte* when the forces of modernity threaten to alter his bohemian Corrientes Avenue—between Callao and Esmeralda. However, undeterred by his poetic defense, the numerous remodeling projects continue to modernize Corrientes, altering its physiognomy and replacing its cafes and restaurants with modern commercial shops and skyscrapers.

His pen proves too feeble against the forces of modernity and its insatiable appetite for newness. As modernity speeds the beautification of the city, the narrator is made painfully aware that the remodeling projects are at the expense of the familiar. An awareness that sets him apart from the intoxicated throng, which captivated by the remodeling projects as spectacle and the

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<sup>11</sup> The association of demolition and construction sites with war zones can be found in three of his *aguafuertes porteñas*: “Demoliciones en el centro,” “Nuevo aspectos de las demoliciones,” and “Buenos Aires, paraíso de la tierra.”

new replacing the old, fails to see their negative side effects: “Ver destruir es el espectáculo que más gusta presenciar al hombre porque su instinto le dice que tras de lo que se ha destruido tiene que levantarse algo nuevo. El hombre desea lo nuevo, lo busca y se entusiasma en su posibilidad” (“Nuevos aspectos de las demoliciones” 142). Unlike it, our narrator, conscious of the negative consequences of these projects, wrestles with what scholars of modernity dubbed the contradictions of modernity. The narrator’s foresight warns him of their dangers hence the association of these sites with warzones.

By the turn of the century, there begins a trend of settlement among the well-to-do towards the northern side, first towards the northern side of Plaza de Mayo, but eventually closer to Plaza San Martín and beyond. Several developments contributed to this relocation. Before the turn of the century, the areas close to Plaza de Mayo were the preferred location for residential homes of the well-to-do (Scobie, *Buenos Aires* 121-22; Sebreli 23). However, with the increasing commercialization, congestion of the downtown area and the growing presence of immigrants and *conventillos*, the well-to-do begin to look for alternative locations and settle in the area that is now known as Barrio Norte. This northbound settlement was reinforced by the outbreak of the yellow epidemic in 1871, which originated in the lower side of town and pushed people away from the downtown area in search of safer, higher grounds, towards Flores and Barrio Norte (Scobie, *Buenos Aires* 126-24).

But according to Sebreli, “la revolución habitacional,” a cultural shift derived from the country’s commercial relation with Europe, best explains the elite’s locational shift. With their increasing ties with Europe, the elite will experience a change in taste and everyday life lifestyle that together will condition their northbound move in search of more space for their lavish new homes and lifestyles: “Pero un hecho político y económico más significativo que la mera

anécdota de la fiebre amarilla condicionó la creación del Barrio Norte: la alianza entre la burguesía agropecuaria y la burguesía comercial importadora y exportadora de Buenos Aires—tradicionalmente federales y unitarios—se realizó por intermedio del capital extranjero [. . .]” (*Buenos Aires* 25); “El torbellino del capitalismo incipiente arrasaba con el pequeño mundo aldeano de la permanencia, la monotonía y el aburrimiento. La revolución habitacional sería una de las consecuencias de esta modificación de la vida cotidiana [. . .]” (27). After 1880, Scobie notes, private housing of the affluent changed dramatically in aspect (*Buenos Aires* 129). It went from the patio-style housing to the *palacio* and the *petit hotel* look, architectural styles borrowed from the French (131). These new architectural designs required more land; hence, the elite, in search of bigger lots, moved from the crowded quarters next to the central plaza to Barrio Norte. Some of these most ostentatious mansions went to occupy an entire city block: “The palacio of José C. Paz on the Plaza San Martín completed in 1912 and still used in the 1970s as the social center for the Circulo Militar, took up a wedge-shaped block. The design for the building was drawn up in France by a leading French architect, Louis Sortais” (132). One key shared characteristic of these mansions was their hermetism. Sebreli writes:

La característica urbana del Barrio Norte, como la de todos los hermosos barrios del mundo, es encerrar, separar y proteger a los ricos contra los pobres.

Respondiendo a esta finalidad, el planeamiento urbano del Barrio Norte contrasta vivamente con el resto de la ciudad. Rompiendo con la monotonía de las calles en damero, a la manera americana, el Barrio Norte ofrece la originalidad de sus calles a la europea [. . .]. (*Buenos Aires* 32)

What were these mansions guarding themselves against? Against the poor, who as we will see, lived not too far from these mansions.

By 1914, David Rock notes, Buenos Aires becomes a socially stratified city with clearly demarcated zones for its three socioeconomic classes:

Buenos Aires was now divided into clearly demarcated zones. To the north were the well-to-do, the *gente bien*, in an area that stretched from the mansions of Barrio Norte and Palermo toward the city center through Belgrano across to the suburban *quintas* of Vicente López, Olivos, and San Isidro in the province of Buenos Aires. In the center and west of the city were its middle class neighborhoods. The south, the barrios of Nueva Pompeya, Barracas, Avellaneda, and the Boca, were the working-class and manufacturing zones. (*Argentina* 173; italics in original)

However, simultaneously, Buenos Aires was becoming an increasingly fluid city. Defying this clearly demarcated zoning, there appeared sizeable pockets of low income housing within the center and the well-to-do areas and the disreputable went on to coexist alongside the reputable blurring the above mentioned geographical zonings. Also, the city's expanding and improved infrastructure along with the introduction of modern and now more affordable public transportations, such as the electric streetcars, buses, and subways facilitated circulation of its population within the city, thus diminishing the distance between them.

With economic growth and the sudden increase of population, towards the end of the nineteenth century there appeared the first conventillos or tenement housings: older colonial homes minimally refurbished to house the newly arrived immigrants. The first conventillos, Sebrelli writes, popped up in the downtown center: "Los barrios típicos de conventillo [. . .] son, en un primer momento, los barrios decadentes cercanos al Centro, abandonados por la burguesía a partir del 80: el Sur, San Telmo" (*Buenos Aires* 155). However, as demand for affordable

housing increases, entrepreneurs, with an eye on the high profit that tenement houses yielded, set out to build this type of housing multiplying their number. As job opportunities—in the port; construction sites; service, commerce and industry sectors—were mainly concentrated in the downtown area, and the streetcar fares were beyond the reach of most workers up until 1900, the immigrants initially settled in the center magnifying their visibility and alarming the criollos (Scobie, *Buenos Aires* 135).

The high rental prices created crowded and unsanitary living conditions eventually leading to the 1907 “Tenant Strike,”—documented in detail in Juan Suriano’s *La huelga de inquilinos, 1907*. It was common for workers to cohabit a room and in some extreme cases, when families could not afford the rent, to share it with other individuals:

Debido a los elevados alquileres era frecuente el agrupamiento de varios trabajadores para arrendar un cuarto, pues cuantos más fuesen, menos sería el precio a pagar. La situación tornábase más grave cuando una familia se veía imposibilitada de acceder al valor solicitado por una pieza; la única alternativa era entonces compartir la vivienda con otros individuos, lo que sin duda debió provocar graves trastornos en los vínculos familiares. (Suriano 10)

Their crowded and unsanitary living conditions will constantly be subject of suspicion of public health officials and the well-to-do, who regard them as source of contagious diseases but also moral vice hence public safety.<sup>12</sup>

Although conventillos initially appeared in the downtown center, they soon sprang up in different parts of the city, including in District 20, the same district that contained Barrio Norte:

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<sup>12</sup> For more on this subject see Jorge Salessi’s *Médicos, maleantes y maricas: Higiene, criminología y homosexualidad en la construcción de la nación Argentina. (Buenos Aires: 1871-1914)* (Buenos Aires: Beatriz Viterbo, 2000).

Census District 20 encompassed much of Barrio Norte, the cemetery of the upper classes at the Recoleta, and the elegant Socorro parish. It also embraced the railroad tracks, the newly expanding port area, the Immigrants' Hotel, and the squatter huts along the riverbank. As few as four mansions might occupy an entire city block, while nearly 1000 turcos crowded into several conventillos just around the corner in a block along Paseo de Julio. (Scobie, *Buenos Aires* 33)

As such, along with its clearly demarcated zones, what we find is an increasingly fluid Buenos Aires: squatter huts, conventillos, mansions, modern office buildings and elegant shops at short distances from one another. The appearance of conventillos next to newly developed commercial areas, remodeled public spaces and mansions accentuated the contrast of the two cities as well as contributed to rising tensions between them—a contrast that Arlt was acutely aware of and which will go on to become a literary subject in his works including his aguafuertes.

The two socioeconomic extremes not only share a common stage, but are brought together to an unprecedented proximity in modern urban centers. In his reading of Baudelaire's "The Eyes of the Poor," in *Paris Spleen*, Marshall Berman points this out as one of the many ironies and contradictions of the modern French urban life:

Alongside the glitter, the rubble: the ruins of a dozen inner-city neighborhoods—the city's oldest, darkest, densest, most wretched and most frightening neighborhoods, home to tens of thousands of Parisians—razed to the ground. Where would all these people go? Those in charge of demolition and reconstruction did not particularly concern themselves. They were opening up vast new tract for development on the northern and eastern fringes of the city; in the meantime, the poor would make do, somehow, as they always did.



Baudelaire's family in rags steps out from behind the rubble and place themselves in the center of the scene. The trouble is not that they are angry or demanding. The trouble is simply that they will not go away. They, too want a place in the light. (152-53)

Following in Haussmann's footsteps, Torcuato de Alvear will also embark on ambitious renovation projects to modernize Buenos Aires; however, what brings forth the wretched in Argentina is not the razing down of its old and poor neighborhoods, but immigration and its settlement and concentration at the center. Regardless of their differing sociohistorical circumstances, Paris and Buenos Aires both will witness the two extremes, the wretched and the well-to-do, being brought closer together.

In addition, along the reputable, the disreputable or what Sebrelli calls "la mala vida" thrived in the arrabales—the outskirts of the city, where "la ciudad se mezclaba con la ciudad"—but also within the downtown district, along Paseo de Julio and its adjacent streets 25 de Mayo and Reconquista (113). "La mala vida," according to Sebrelli, is neither the side effect of demographic growth nor the product of biological degeneration or aberration as claimed by the bourgeoisie and the social positivists, respectively, but a symptom of the precapitalist Argentine society:

No era una enfermedad, sino un síntoma, el aspecto sucio de la acumulación primitiva del capital. En el país precapitalista, con escasas industrias, la inmensa muchedumbre trasplantada a la ciudad, que no podía ser asimilada por el limitado mercado de trabajo, formaba inevitablemente, al margen de la sociedad organizada, un proletariado harapiento, el lumpenproletariado, según la clásica expresión de Marx, "esa putrefacción pasiva", la clase de los que no tienen

ninguna y ni siquiera pueden agruparse entre ellos: vagabundos, mendigos, prostitutas, ladrones, rufianes, estafadores, matones profesionales, pícaros, vividores y mantenidos de todo tipo, trabajadores de cosas impuras dispuestos a venderse por nada. (*Buenos Aires* 126-27)

Marginal social agents, the protagonists of “la mala vida,” will become notable literary characters in Arlt’s many writings, especially of his *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas*, but also of his many aguafuertes—“Conversaciones de ladrones,” “Mala junta,” “Dos millones de peso,” “El hombre que quiere que le levanten la vigilancia,” to name a few.

At the heart of “la mala vida” was organized crime with its bordellos and their prostitutes. In the early twentieth century, Buenos Aires had up to three hundred registered brothels (Rock, *Argentina* 176). As Buenos Aires was gaining fame internationally as the “Sin City,” Donna J. Guy states, there was a growing concern among European officials about white slavery in Argentina (37). If Europeans regarded the presence and growth of white slavery in Buenos Aires as a sign of immorality of its general population, Guy, noting that it was often controlled by foreigners, sees them as symptoms of two social problems that the city was facing at the time: Male and female population imbalance in the country and lack of employment opportunities for women in a rural and commercial economic system (42-43).

In 1875, Argentina legalizes prostitution. The 1875 statutes and their subsequent amendments attempted to control the spread of venereal disease and keep bordellos and their prostitutes under surveillance in the center (47-55). However, its legalization neither succeeded at controlling the white slave commerce, nor did it solve the tension between those who were involved in the business and the “decent” porteño neighbors who regardless of its legality continued to view it with contempt. Due to the high license fees and the city’s burdensome

requirements, the number of clandestine establishments actually had increased after its legalization (50-52). Arbitrary actions of the police, which often evicted and closed down bordellos, even the legal ones, without due process, were instigated by neighbors who regardless of their legal status did not want these businesses near their residences or businesses (54).

The tension between these establishments and the “decent” neighbors was most likely aggravated by their proximity. Guy informs us that the renowned El Club de los 40, a Jewish establishment consisting of forty pimps, was located at the heart of the Jewish neighborhood, and to make matters worse, only a few distance from the Jewish synagogue: “Furthermore, the problem of Jewish prostitution in Buenos Aires was hard to ignore because until 1908 many bordellos, as well as El Club de los 40, were near Plaza Lavalle in the midst of the Jewish business and religious center” (18). Paseo de Julio, located just a few blocks from Plaza de Mayo, was also another street renowned for its many bordellos (45). Due to their desire to beautify the city and the residents’ complaints, in 1908 city officials revised the law creating an exclusionary zone: “Rather than declare a specific red-light district, it banned bordellos in the immediate downtown area defined by San Juan, Entre Ríos, Callao, 25 de Mayo, and Balcarce Streets, except those on side streets shorter than 301 meters” (61). However, even after the creation of the exclusionary zone, some of the already established businesses, like the ones on Paseo de Julio, were not closed down but allowed to operate: “Although the Paseo de Julio was added to the exclusionary area in September 1913, most houses there were still allowed to operate” (62).

The proximity between the reputable and un reputable areas has been registered by Arlt in *Los siete locos*. On a whim, Erdosain would sometimes get on a bus and get off in Palermo or Belgrano. Feeling overwhelmed by the infinite gap between the wealth of those who inhabit these exclusive areas and him, he would then head over to the whorehouses in vain hopes of

finding comfort. The distance that separated the affluent residences from the filthiest whorehouses, Arlt tells us, could be covered on foot: “Y en las calurosas horas de la siesta, bajo el sol amarillo caminó por las aceras de mosaicos calientes en busca de los prostíbulos más inmundos” (*Los siete locos* 13). Two worlds wildly apart, one of wealth, Hollywoodesque, and of fairy tales and the other inhabited by “los prostíbulos más inmundos” with their filthy hallways, Arlt tells us, are only walking distance from each other.

Prostitution is one of the central themes in *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas*, after all the Astrólogo plans to finance his secret and revolutionary society with the income generated by a chain of bordellos and their prostitutes, and Arturo Haffner, a notable character in the novels, is a pimp. Although his chronicles, which were meant for a bigger audience (the entire family), avoided salacious and graphic content, including the direct mention of prostitution and prostitutes, allusion to the them can be found in many of his aguafuertes. For instance, in “Corrientes, por la noche,” although avoiding direct reference, he alludes to prostitutes and clandestine bordellos by saying “Calle de las rusas, de las francesas, de las criollas que dejaron demasiado pronto el hogar para ir a correr la juerga tras de un malevito” (*OC* 267) and “Peluquerías de mujeres donde entran y salen hombres,” respectively (266).

The electrification of the streetcar system leads to the expansion of its services—mainly west and northbound— and the outward growth of the city. Up until 1900, due to their high fares the streetcars were not accessible to the manual laborers. However, as electricity replaces horses, the streetcar becomes more cost effective, but also gains speed. Its new affordability and speed allowed workers and middle class professionals who were bound to the crowded and expensive downtown districts to move inland where land was more affordable and available. After 1900 the streetcar becomes the preferred public transportation of workers and professionals

for their morning and evening commute. As such, with the expansion of the public transportation services, Buenos Aires witnesses an exodus of the immigrant and native population to the outskirts and the emergence of the *barrio* and a *barrio* culture.<sup>13</sup>

Considering that it required capital for workers and middle class professionals to make this outward move, it is not surprising that the native-born Argentines—the second generation immigrants—were more successful at making this transition and predominated in the suburbs (Scobie, *Buenos Aires* 200). That is not to say that immigrants did not participate in this outward exodus. Although appearing “in percentages slightly below their city-wide averages,” Spanish, French and Italian immigrants were represented in the suburbs with the Italians being the most aggressive and successful (201). Often lacking skills and resources, the recently arrived immigrants favored the downtown district finding manual labor jobs nearby. The western and northern areas, which had served as summer homes of people with financial means, went on to be occupied chiefly by the middle and upper classes, while the southwest neighborhoods, with their vacant and swampy lots, became homes of the working class (195; Sebreli, *Buenos Aires* 156). The deplorable condition of the southwestern areas will serve as a stark contrast with the modernizing center and affluent neighborhoods and will be denounced by Arlt in his *aguafuertes* such as “Escuelas invadidas por las moscas,” “Calles terribles,” and “Caza de patos en la Capital Federal.” As a consequence, Buenos Aires will witness the rise and development of *barrios* with its unique culture. From the *barrio* will come out the tango, fútbol and the *compadrito* but also the *barrio* culture with its man and woman and their own idiosyncrasies that Arlt will immortalize in his *aguafuertes*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For a study of the development of streetcars in Buenos Aires, see Scobie’s *Buenos Aires* 160-207.

As we have seen, with the modernization process that began in the mid-nineteenth century, Argentina, Buenos Aires especially, undergoes dramatic transformations in its demographic composition, economic and political sphere, and panoramic view. These transformations will dramatically alter the everyday life of the porteño, bringing it to the forefront. This modernization process creates economic progress but also creates and accentuates economic and sociocultural gaps exacerbating tensions, which will be the subject of Arlt's many chronicles.

### 1.6. A Stratified Culture Sphere

Perhaps the most significant and effective modernizing project launched by the State is its literacy campaigns. Even before the implementation of immigration policies, Argentina began investing considerable share of its public resources to the development and expansion of its free public education programs, especially at the primary level. "El progreso de la instrucción pública en el nivel primario," Adolfo Prieto states "fue francamente excepcional a partir de 1857" (*El discurso criollista* 27). Citing data collected by the Censo Nacional, the critic verifies a drastic increase in student enrollment among school age children: from 82,000 students in 1869 to 247,000 in 1895 (27). However, along with this optimistic set of data, there were other set of data and accounts evidencing the many challenges that the literacy campaigns were faced with: in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, more than 90% percent of the enrolled students dropped out of school within the first two years (28); the literacy campaigns were often plagued by ill trained personnel, limited resources and poorly equipped facilities (29); and finally, oftentimes those that the censuses dubbed as literate were unable to carry out some type of

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the development of Argentine barrios, see Scobie's *Argentina* 169-77.

sustained reading, thus downplaying the success of the literary campaigns (Gutiérrez and Romero 74).

In spite of its many shortcomings, the literacy campaign launched by the State was a success. Census records indicate that the increase in student registration resulted in a drastic reduction of illiteracy by the 1930s. Leandro H. Gutiérrez and Luis Alberto Romero, basing on data collected by Alejandro Bunge, claim that in Buenos Aires “el porcentaje de analfabetos mayores de siete (o diez) años cae del 18% en 1914 al 7% en 1938” (74). And among the native residents of Buenos Aires, Beatriz Sarlo states, illiteracy is almost eradicated: “A mediados de 1930, en Buenos Aires, los analfabetos nativos alcanzan sólo al 2,39 por ciento sobre un total porcentual del 6,64.” (*Una modernidad* 18). The success is also corroborated by the proliferation and density of printed materials circulating in Argentina towards the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Prieto states: “Bastará informarnos sobre la formidable producción de material impreso que empezó a circular desde comienzos de la década del ochenta para entender que la capacidad de lectura creada por la escuela pública era ya, por entonces, un dato de la propia realidad” (*El discurso criollista* 33-34). Similarly Gutiérrez and Romero claim: “Esto está corroborado por la elevación de la tirada de los diarios, la aparición de revistas de gran popularidad, de folletines o ‘novelas semanales’ y de un amplio espectro de editoriales dedicadas a la edición de libros baratos” (74).

In an effort to keep up with the increasing demand, both *La Nación* and *La Prensa* updated their printing presses with newer versions. With their modernized presses, by 1890 *La Nación* was churning out close to 35,000 copies daily and by 1904 *La Prensa* was publishing 95,000 copies daily (Prieto, *El discurso criollista* 37-40). Numerous accounts by Argentine nationals and foreigners alike also testify to the growth of the newspaper industry by the late

nineteenth century. Among nationals, Ernesto Quesada registered 148 newspapers circulating in the country in 1877 but 224 in 1882, verifying an increase of newspapers even after factoring in the growth of the population during this time frame, from 2,347,000 to 3,026,000 inhabitants (34-35). In *Anuario Bibliográfico*, Alberto Navarro Viola found 109 newspapers and journals in 1880, but 407 in 1886, identifying a fourfold increase in only six years (36-37). Foreigners also left their impression of the modern state of the Argentine newspaper industry. In their fifth edition of the *Handbook of the River Plate* (1885), the Mulhall brothers noted that in Buenos Aires there were 25 newspapers, altogether producing close to 17,000 daily copies, which translated into 23 copies per 100 inhabitants. However, the total number of copies produced in Argentina as a whole did not exceed 3,000,000 bringing the ratio of newspaper copies per population down to 3. Nonetheless, even after accounting for the discrepancy between the state of the newspaper industry in Buenos Aires and that of the provinces, Argentina's newspaper industry did not lag too far behind those of the most advanced countries such as that of England, the United States and France (36). By 1930, according to Aníbal Ford, Jorge B. Rivera, and Eduardo Romano, *Crítica*, with its impressive 350,000 copies, becomes the most circulated newspaper in the Spanish language: "hacia 1930 llegó a ser, con sus 350 mil ejemplares, el diario de más tirada en lengua española" (31).

Along with the growth of the newspaper industry, Argentina also witnesses the emergence and proliferation of magazines which, as Nora Mazziotti explains, will contribute to the professionalization of the writers, consolidation of the publishing houses and further spur Argentine journalism. Mazziotti writes:

La existencia de más de cuarenta títulos de revistas diferentes entre 1910 y 1934 se explica como parte del proceso de modernización que afectaba a la sociedad



desde 1880 y constituye un fenómeno que debe inscribirse en la configuración de un campo intelectual donde se destacan el surgimiento de la figura del escritor profesional, el afianzamiento de la industria editorial y el desarrollo del periodismo. (71)

Debuting in 1898, *Caras y Caretas* set out to conquer modern Argentine readers by appealing and guiding their taste (Ford 33). Haynes, a company funded by English capital, introduced *El Consejero del Hogar* in 1903 and *Mundo Argentino* in 1911 and Atlántida debuted *Para Ti*, *El Gráfico* and *Billiken* in the 1920's reaching unprecedented popularity in Argentine magazine history (34). “*Para Ti*, por ejemplo,” Aníbal Ford maintains, “incrementa sus ventas en forma sostenida, pasando de 6.361.152 ejemplares de 1921 a los 24.365.756 de 1933” (34).

With the rise and increase in popularity of the national theatre, magazines dedicated to this genre also made their appearance contributing to the density of the printed material. In addition to publishing plays, these magazines featured reviews of the latest shows, actors, and also announced writing contests. They were sold in bookstores and the neighborhood kiosks alike. Between 1918 and 1923 Mazziotti identifies about ten magazines dedicated to the theatre:

A pesar de la corta existencia de muchas, entre 1918 y 1923 por lo menos diez revistas coexisten, repartiéndose la aparición de tal manera que cada día de la semana salía a la venta alguna: los lunes aparecía *El teatro*; los martes, *Teatro popular*; los miércoles *El teatro nacional*; los jueves, *La escena*, y los suplementos de los sábados; los viernes, *El teatro argentino*, los sábados, *Bambalinas*. Los años pico resultan ser 1918, en el que surgen cinco, incluyendo tres de las más importantes: *Bambalinas*, *La escena* y *El teatro nacional*, y 1922,

en el que hacen su aparición siete revistas en Buenos Aires y dos en el interior.

(82)

Cultural magazines catering to the more specialized readers also make their debut between the 1920s and 1930s. Even though they did not have the reach that popular magazines enjoyed, as Sarlo explains, they played an important role not only in shaping the culture field but also the social discourses of this period:

La incidencia de estas publicaciones en las transformaciones culturales no puede ser medida sólo en términos de ejemplares vendidos (aunque los 14.000 que declara *Martín Fierro* en algún momento, incluso si se redujera la cifra en un cincuenta por ciento, no son despreciables), sino de repercusiones en el campo intelectual que luego desbordan y se refractan en el espacio del público y las instituciones, sin duda con una temporalidad e intensidad diferentes. (*Una modernidad* 27)

*Martín Fierro*, *Proa*, *Inicial*, *Claridad*, and *Contra* featured the most important cultural debates by the renowned intellectuals of this period.<sup>15</sup>

While the newspaper and magazine industry thrived in face of the growing number of readers, during the same period (1880-1910) the publishing houses and bookstores did not see an increase in the sale of books. Prieto states:

Buenos Aires, en el nudo neurálgico de un sistema por el que se canalizan todos los signos de progreso, disponía ya de una industria impresora capaz de proveer millares de copias diarias de material destinado a la lectura. Pero era para las

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<sup>15</sup> For more about these cultural magazines, see Francine Masiello, *Language e ideología: las escuelas argentinas de vanguardia* (Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1986) 60-66.

necesidades de la prensa periódica como se había constituido esa industria, y los nuevos contingentes de lectores parecían destinados para responder a los incentivos de la prensa periódica. Ante estas circunstancias, el libro no aparecía ya como relegado por la indiferencia de unos cuantos lectores en una sociedad básicamente iletrada. Era el gran marginado en una sociedad en la que el dominio de los códigos de lectura y escritura se volvía mayoritario. (*El discurso criollista* 44)

The readership of books remained static throughout this period and there is no disruption on this area. According to *Anuario Bibliográfico* by Navarro Viola—where extensive and detailed information about the publication and circulation of books of the early 1880s can be found—by 1882 there were only 40 publishing houses in Argentina, producing barely 420 books that year and, on average, printing 500 copies per edition. Only in rare cases, such as Eugenio Cambaceres' *Silvidos de un vago* and Cane's *Juvenilia*, was a book able to command enough readership to warrant a subsequent edition: “‘Edición de pocos ejemplares’ es una frase que se lee con frecuencia en el *Anuario Bibliográfico*. A veces se precisan las cifras: 40 es la más baja anotada para una edición; 500 parece ser la regular para la mayoría de los libros mencionados, y la primera edición de los mismos la única computable” (43).

The book market did not look up by the Centenario, or so it was claimed by the literary critics as well as by the writers of the period: “Falta de escritor profesional/indiferencia del público: esta fórmula condensa todos los lamentos de los escritores argentinos alrededor del Centenario” (Sarlo, *El imperio* 92). The memoirs of José Ingenieros and Manuel Gálvez, —Altamirano and Sarlo claim, —point to a yet volatile book market. Simultaneously seduced by and apprehensive of it, they craved the success and the recognition rendered by the market, but

also feared possible failure in and indifference by it. Such conflictive feelings, Altamirano and Sarlo explain, were byproducts of a precarious book market:

Por supuesto que el valor adjudicado por todos los testimonios a una vidriera en la librería de los Moen revela la precariedad que, por los años del Centenario, acompañaba a la aventura de editar y que los trescientos lectores de Lugones o los mil ejemplares de *Nosotros* son el índice de un desarrollo difícil que explica las reacciones ambiguas, mezcla de desconfianza y de ansiedad, de los escritores.  
(173-74)

Bypassing the book, Prieto proposed, the new emerging readers did not enter and participate in the sphere of the lettered culture, but forged their own. These new readers improvised their newly acquired skills as consumers of newspapers and magazines but also as consumers of popular literature:<sup>16</sup>

Puede presumirse que una proporción considerable del nuevo público agotó la práctica de la lectura en el material preferentemente informativo ofrecido por la prensa periódica. Pero puede conjeturarse al mismo tiempo, con bastantes indicios a la mano, que otro sector numerosísimo del mismo público se convirtió en el receptor de un sistema literario que en sus aspectos externos no parece sino un remedo, una versión de segundo grado del sistema literario legitimado por la cultura letrada. El libro es aquí un objeto impreso de pésima factura; la novela es

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<sup>16</sup> Following the conceptualization of popular proposed by the cultural critic, I understand it not as a passive and subordinate entity but as co-participant of a complex power relationship, albeit of an unequal one. Therefore, I regard popular literature not as that which is produced and imposed by an external entity—i.e. newspapers and magazines—but the result of a complex relationship between producers, distributors and consumers. See Canclini, *Culturas híbridas* 242.

folletín; el poema lírico, cancionero de circunstancias; el drama, representación circense.

Decenas de títulos con estas características y una impresionante suma de ejemplares, cuya dimensión exacta resulta imposible determinar por las condiciones anárquicas del aparato editorial improvisado a su propósito, buscaron su propio circuito material de difusión. Lo hicieron fuera de las librerías; viajaron de la mano del vendedor de diarios y revistas; se asentaron en quioscos, tabaquerías, salas de lustrar, barberías y lugares de esparcimiento. (*El discurso criollista* 15)

Notwithstanding their success, popular literature and its industry were initially shunned by those within the lettered culture and nearly absent from most literature historiography that attempted to survey the Argentine literary production between the end of the nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth century. In 1985, Sarlo stated:

La revista *Nosotros*, que se ocupó prácticamente de todo lo editado en la Argentina de esos años con un eclecticismo insuperable, ni siquiera menciona a estas colecciones de cuentos como publicaciones en curso. Gálvez, cuyas memorias no dejan superficie del campo intelectual sin recorrer, sólo menciona a Otto M. Cione, entre los escritores que pertenecen al espacio de la literatura semanal. (*El imperio* 104)

In 1988, Prieto noted: “En la mayoría de los manuales de historia literaria escritos desde entonces, en los depósitos de las bibliotecas públicas, en las listas de textos escolares, en la celebración de los fastos, en todo lo que supone memoria y recuperación oficial del pasado, el espacio ocupado por el *corpus* de la primera literatura popular es prácticamente un espacio en

blanco” (*El discurso criollista* 21). With their pioneering work on popular fiction, Sarlo and Prieto shed light onto the popular fictions debunking the myth that emerging readers did not venture outside the newspaper and magazines and offering us a more comprehensive literary history.

Why did the emerging readers, sidestepping the book, become consumers of popular fiction? Underscoring the cultural level of the emerging readers and their circumstantial factors, Sarlo explained that the first readers favored the newspapers and folletines over books due to their accessibility. By 1910 most libraries were located downtown, removed from the barrios, especially from the youth and the women, hence new readers naturally gravitated to what was easily accessible to them, the folletines: “Hacia 1910, las librerías de Buenos Aires, tanto por su disposición interna, por su ubicación en el centro de la ciudad, como por el mundo cultural que las ocupaba, eran reductos minoritarios destinados a los intelectuales y a sus interlocutores más inmediatos” (*El imperio* 34). Unlike books sold in the bookshops, folletines were distributed to and sold within the familiar neighborhood kiosks hence well within reach of the popular sector. Also, the selection of a book required a level of cultural agility that most of these first readers did not possess due to their limited formal training:

Presidido por sus dueños políglotas, el mundo de la librería presenta un desorden que sólo puede ser entendido por la mirada adiestrada capaz de orientarse y elegir en la acumulación, guiándose por el nombre de autor, por el sello editorial, por los índices o los prólogos. Por su organización inaccesible al no entendido, por su escenario que simula el de la biblioteca (otro ámbito sagrado), a la librería se va para adquirir fragmentos de una cultura, a condición de que otros fragmentos ya hayan sido adquiridos antes. (35)

Finally, while books could have been beyond reach, popular fiction, costing a fraction (approximately one tenth) of the price of a book, were comfortably within the readers' mean (36). Much like the movies and the horoscopes, they also provided a fictional escape to the popular sector from their everyday life (26).

Why should popular fiction be taken into account? The literary historiography of the 1920s and 1930s is dominated by the vanguard with its Florida and Boedo groups. As critical as the vanguard is for Argentine literature, its prominence tends to overshadow the rich and complex cultural dynamic of the period. A reconstruction of the cultural panorama that takes into account Argentine's prolific popular fiction of this period can help us better identify the cultural tensions of the rapidly modernizing Buenos Aires, not just between the members of Florida and Boedo, but between two cultural spheres, an elitist and a popular one. The cultural market once only reserved for the elite, opens up to the masses, who will enter as consumers as well as producers, bringing the elite and the popular sector to an unprecedented proximity onto the cultural platform. Although at times fostering a sense of community, this proximity will turn the porteño cultural sphere into a site of increasing tensions.<sup>17</sup> If the production of cultural symbols was only reserved for the elite, with the emergence of popular fiction, the popular sector begins producing its own, thus contesting this exclusivity. By the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, as the elite marginalizes the most prolific cultural production of the period, there emerges a clearly stratified cultural sphere, —a high and a low.

The erasure of popular literature from the official cultural historiography points to the lettered culture's snobbish attitude towards the popular sector and its literature and a clearly

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<sup>17</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

stratified, if not exclusive, cultural scene, where the lettered culture occupied a place of privilege within the national cultural platform while the popular culture, in spite of its vitality with production numbers ranging in the tens of thousands to the hundreds of thousands, remained eclipsed for many decades.<sup>18</sup> This cultural practice went very much hand in hand with the country's long-standing tradition of disfranchising immigrants from political participation; excluding them from a fair share of the national economic wealth and resources; and also evidenced in the elites' geographic choice for their residences, —removed from the masses.

In spite of the clearly stratified cultural sphere—high and low—emerging during this period, we can identify points of contact suggesting that the cultural field was also fluid, at times allowing for crossings. A reconstruction of the Argentine cultural field that takes into account the popular literary productions reveals that popular cultural symbols were subject to appropriation and resemantization by the dominant culture. Such was the case of the *gauchesca* literature and the tango.<sup>19</sup> Although they originate at the margins, they go on to become emblematic of Argentine culture. Why does the high culture at times end up absorbing popular cultural symbols it once condemned? Perhaps the role of culture in the consolidation of power during the emergence of the modern state highlighted by Jesús Martín-Barbero and the Gramscian concept of hegemony can help us answer this question. To consolidate its power, Martín-Barbero informs, the hegemonic class of the emerging modern states—the bourgeoisie—sets out to establish a national culture (77, 98, 99). It does so, on one hand, by identifying and labeling culture as

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<sup>18</sup> Sarlo also arrives at a similar conclusion: “Estos silencios significativos hablan de una temprana estratificación del campo y de sus zonas de prestigio, que desplazaba hacia sus márgenes a los que sólo eran productores de literatura de consumo” (*El imperio* 104).

<sup>19</sup> The trajectory of the tango from its humble origin to its mainstream absorption is studied by Noemí Ulla, *Tango, rebelión y nostalgia*, (Buenos Aires: CEAL, 1982) 18-35.



modern and traditional, high and low, but on the other, by reconciling the cultural differences among the classes:

La idea de cultura va a permitirle a la burguesía *escindir* la historia y las prácticas sociales—moderno/atrasado, noble/vulgar—y al mismo tiempo *reconciliar* las diferencias, incluidas las de clase, en el credo liberal y progresista de *una sola cultura para todos*. Durante el siglo XIX, constata Hobsbawm, la burguesía hace la simbiosis de lo noble y lo popular y no sólo concilia las clases en su cultura, también los fines y los medios en la unidad de una sola razón que integra cultura y tecnología. (105; italics in original)

The Gramscian concept of hegemony advances that a dominant class does not exercise its power by sheer force but by achieving consensus with the subaltern classes. Key to achieving this consensus is its ability to articulate shared interests (82). From these we can extrapolate that popular cultural elements gain acceptance among members of the dominant class and go on to achieve the status of national symbols as they present themselves as a means to unification. Popular cultural symbols as the gaucho and the tango help the dominant class bring together the increasing heterogeneous national demographic and culture of modern Argentina.

As the gauchesca literature strikes the chord with the masses, first of the rural sector and later of the urban sector, for the first time the masses turn into consumers of literature buying folletines and books in the tens of thousands. According to Prieto, José Hernández's *El gaucho Martín Fierro* (1872) and *La vuelta de Martín Fierro* (1879), both of which were instant successes, especially among rural readers, mark the beginning of the genre and phenomenon: *Martín Fierro* goes on to sell more than 48,000 copies, and *La vuelta*, 20,000 copies in its first edition alone (*El discurso criollista* 52-55). These are impressive sale numbers, especially when

compared to works of the lettered circle, which ranged in the few hundreds. However, it is with the works of Eduardo Gutiérrez—mainly *Juan Moreira*, *Juan Cuello*, *Hormiga Negra*, *El tigre de Quequén* y *Santos de Vega*, his most popular works—that the criollista literature becomes a popular urban sensation. Citing Ernesto Quesada's *El "criollismo" en la literatura argentina* (1902), Prieto notes that the sale of Gutiérrez works surpassed the famed 62,000 copies of *Martín Fierro* (56-60). As observed by Carlos Olivera in *El Diario*, his works—first published as folletines and later as books—were so popular that they allowed Gutiérrez to live off his writing and his *Juan Moreira* ended up playing a key role in the early stages of the national theatre:

Se anuncia, en cambio, la pantomima *Juan Moreira*. La mayoría de los diarios hace el vacío alrededor del suceso. Se ha reído de *Juan Moreira*, novela, se continúa riendo de *Juan Moreira* pantomima. Se dice "cosa para la plebe", pero la novela hace el éxito de un diario y se vende a miles de ejemplares en la ciudad y en la campaña; el autor, antes pobre como araña, compra casa; y la pantomima atrae inacabable cadena de espectadores de circo.

Se dirá que la concurrencia que gusta de *Juan Moreira* está separada por un abismo de la que gusta de *Otelo* o de *Hugonotes*; no lo negamos; se dirá que la pantomima en cuestión, producto inferior para espectadores inferiores, es simplemente una *guazada* que no puede jamás representar el gusto de la gente culta de Buenos Aires; tampoco lo negamos. Pero mantenemos que es indiscutible que ella ha llenado las aspiraciones de la multitud; que esta multitud forma parte del público, y por consiguiente hay que tener en cuenta sus movimientos. *Juan Moreira*, drama, ha vencido en el teatro como ha vencido en los folletines a las

novelas que han tratado de hacerle concurrence. (qtd. in Prieto, *El discurso criollista* 60-61)

The above passage helps to crystalize what Gutiérrez and his works had set in motion: a cultural phenomenon that mobilizes the masses to read, securing a livelihood for the author and the success of the newspaper *La Patria Argentina* and that also mobilizes the masses to the theatre. By appealing to the sensibilities of the multitude, his *Juan Moreira*, adapted by the Podestás brothers, packs the theatre houses catapulting them into the limelight and popularizing the theatre, which until then was mainly attended by a reduced number of people. As such, even though Gutiérrez never wrote for the theatre, Gutiérrez and his *Juan Moreira* are credited for playing a decisive role in the foundation of the national theatre and are included in studies of national theatre.<sup>20</sup>

Writers of the *gauchesca* did not come from the traditional lettered culture thus diversifying the profile of writers. Lacking formal training that went beyond basic reading and writing, most of these writers taught themselves how to write:

Probablemente todos los autores incluidos en la “Biblioteca Criolla” carecieron del entrenamiento y del dominio de los recursos expresivos que podía encontrarse en cualquiera de los escritores contemporáneos asimilados al círculo de la cultura letrada. Convocados, de pronto, a satisfacer la enorme demanda de lectura creada por las campañas de alfabetización y estimulados por la rápida expansión de la prensa periódica, muchos de estos autores debieron ser el producto directo de esas campañas y necesitaron, literalmente, improvisar el perfil de una profesión por

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<sup>20</sup> See Osvaldo Pellettieri, *Historia del teatro Argentino en Buenos Aires*, (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 2001) 2:99-111.

encima de las penurias instrumentales, la confusión ideológica y los reclamos del  
instinto de supervivencia. (69)

Hence they and their works were often subjected to open criticism or silent treatment by those within the intellectual circle.

The response by the intellectuals to the gauchesca literature and its writers and the defense of their works by the gauchesca writers bring to light the cultural friction between the writers of the elite and the popular sector. The above cited passage by Carlos Olivera underscores the intellectual circle's indictment against the gauchesca literature: in spite of its success, it was looked down by those within this circle. While the popularity of *Juan Moreira* secures the success of a newspaper and even the incipient national theatre, the elite, Olivera tells us, turning their nose up "se ha reído de la novela, se continúa riendo de *Juan Moreira* patomima" (qtd. in Prieto 60-61). The obituaries commemorating the death of José Hernández in 1866, according to Prieto, betray the intellectuals "simpatía condescendiente" and Hernández's condition of outsider of that circle (87). As renowned poets become silent at his death, a fellow writer of the genre Sebastián Berón will publish a posthumous homage to José Hernández lamenting their indifference at the loss of one of the greatest Argentine men (87-88). Miguel Cané has also left his impression of these popular fictions. Even though a childhood friend of Gutiérrez ("desde muy jóvenes habíamos sido amigos con Eduardo Gutiérrez"), Cané tells us, he refused to read Gutiérrez's works ("Puesto en el yunque, en el yunque seguirá hasta la muerte, dejando ese fárrago de folletines, que no he leído, que no leeré jamás") (qtd. in Prieto 103). Not even their mutual friendship will spare Gutiérrez and his works of the disdain that Cané obviously feels towards this type of literature. Aware that they were marginalized, writers of the genre felt redeemed in knowing that their writing was read by the people. In a personal letter to a

fellow gauchesca literature writer, Gabino Ezeiza confides, “Muchos dirán que nuestro verso no es bueno, que es deficiente, sin ritmo ni compás, a esto hay que agregar por ahora que nosotros lo poco que podemos escribir lo dedicamos al pueblo; otros más sabios escriben para las Bibliotecas, y las mejores producciones no están al alcance del pueblo general” (qtd. in Prieto 70).

The popularity of the gauchesca literature and its strong sale allow the professionalization of writers of the genre. As stated earlier, no national library has compiled and stored the literature criollista produced during its height years. But fortunately not all has been lost. Roberto Lehmann-Nitsche, a German professor of anthropology hired to teach at the Universidad de la Plata between 1897 and 1930, took personal interest in this production, amassing an impressive private collection which he ended up taking back home after retirement and donating to the city of Berlin. Thus, in a curious twist of fate, the most comprehensible archive of Argentina’s first popular literature is found in Germany. Although Lehmann-Nitsche’s “Biblioteca Criolla” holds close to thousand folletos, not all fall within this genre as in its heights “criollo” and popular were used interchangeably (63-65). After examining this collection, Prieto identified 500 as falling within this genre and traced 60 authors, of which 40 can be considered non-professional and 20, profesional. Among the most prolific were Manuel Cientofante (87), Félix Hidalgo (56), Eladio Jasme Ignésón (Gaucho Talerito, 53), Santiago Rolleri (Santiago Irellor, 47), Silvio Manco (30), among others, leading Prieto to argue that some of these professional writers were able to make a living out of their writing: “A la cantidad de títulos, que sugiere para algunos casos un tipo de producción contractual, debe añadirse el número de ediciones y la tirada reconocida para algunas de ellas, porque de la suma de estos indicadores se obtiene la certeza de

que varios de estos autores pudieron, como Eduardo Gutiérrez en su momento, vivir de la venta de sus textos” (67).

Due to its accessibility and popularity, if not the gauchesca literature itself, elements from it go on to permeate the different social layers to the point of acquiring the status of national symbols. For the newly arrived immigrant, the gaucho and his way of life were accessible means of assimilating to the new land. Putting on the gaucho outfit and imitating his most characteristic gestures were seen by the immigrant as ways of becoming Argentinean. Between 1899 and 1914, there were approximately 268 “centros criollos” functioning in Buenos Aires (130). An ethnically diverse group of young men and women would gather in these “centros” to recreate the pastoral atmosphere and the gaucho lifestyle, facilitating the socialization of foreigners:

Los centros criollos y las actividades paralelas o derivadas de estos centros, como los encuentros de payadores en teatros y salas de entretenimiento, debieron de contribuir, entonces, a articular un proceso de socialización encaminado tanto a asegurar el sentimiento de identidad de grupos de jóvenes de procedencia y orígenes étnicos diversos, como a facilitar para los mismos las pautas de movilidad interna consagradas por el sector social dominante. (131)

For the native popular sector, as Argentina was growing increasingly cosmopolitan, the gaucho and his way of life were ways of asserting national values. Prieto tells us that by the late 1880s, the gaucho figure—Juan Moreira being the most popular—becomes the main figure of the carnivals in Buenos Aires with immigrants and natives contesting to best represent him: “En muchos casos, Juan Moreira, el disfraz de Juan Moreira, pareció revelar la identificación con un modo de ser, una conducta, una personalidad en la que se inscribían los rasgos más específicos del carácter nacional” (151). In spite of their initial rejection of this type of literature, the elite are

not immune to the phenomenon. Juan Moreira the play goes on to gain the adhesion of young intellectuals, including Manuel Gálvez and Enrique Williams Alzaga (157-58). If Juan Moreira the play first debuted under the humble tent of the circus, by 1897, a slightly tamed version of it will venture into the posh stage of the opera (159-61). Although during this period the porteño cultural scene is highly stratified, elements of gauchesca literature are absorbed onto the different layers of the social pyramid, even by the most prestigious circle, hence evidencing the fluidity of the porteño cultural scene. Born humble, Juan Moreira goes on to conquer the most exclusive national stages and circles.

As the gauchesca literature was eclipsing, folletos of another kind were gaining popularity among readers: literatura sentimental or also known as “literatura de barrio, de pizzería y de milonguitas” among the vanguard writers (Sarlo, *El imperio* 20). According to Sarlo, who has spearheaded the study of this genre, between 1917 and 1925, at the height of its production, it achieved a circulation in the hundred thousand with *La Novela Semanal* alone declaring a readership of 400,000 in 1922 (20, 84). Resorting to cliché rhetorical devices and figures, typified situations and redundant plots, these fictional narratives were highly formulaic and although presented as novels, lengthwise, they were brief and closer to short stories (25, 55, 58). With love being their main recurring topic, they often skirted erotic scenes. The drama was set in motion when the protagonists’ object of desire entered into conflict with the social or moral norms (21-22, 25). Even though the lead couples were often caught violating these norms, the end always reaffirmed the social status; as such these texts were deemed highly conformists and apolitical in nature (22). Young women made up the bulk of the readers but these narrative fictions were also consumed by men alike (20-21). During its height years, Sarlo informs, *LNS* published about 200 stories annually suggesting that the market demand for these writings were

strong enough to warrant the professionalization of writers of this genre (87). José Quesada, Alejo Peyret and Hugo Wast were among its most prolific and successful writers (79).

The silent treatment, the debates and some of the serial writers' internal conflict all shed light to the tension between the cultured and popular sphere. As almost contemporary to the vanguard, the serial and vanguard writers, often publishing for the same weekly publications, must have crossed path. However, those belonging to the cultured circle, Sarlo informs, gave the weekly narrative writers the silence treatment. In their memoir, the vanguard writers made no mention of these writers:

Ahora bien, en las publicaciones periódicas de ficción estos escritores se mezclan con otros que provienen de la literatura culta: Quiroga, Güiraldes, Reyes, Darío, Ingenieros, Canela, Gerchunoff, Gálvez, Mateo Booz y un hombre que solía escribir para públicos muy variados como H.P. Blomberg. Sin duda, la serie integrada por estos últimos escritores tenía una diferente imagen de sí. Ello puede comprobarse fácilmente cuando se revisan sus memorias: ninguno menciona en ellas a los escritores típicos de las publicaciones semanales (aunque el mismo memorialista haya escrito relatos de ese circuito) e ignora *por completo* esta zona de la producción narrativa. (104; italics in original)

From their silence, one may infer their perception of this literature and their standing: as occupying a lower status.

Under the section "Comentarios de la semana," issue number 268 of *LNS*, registers a debate between a member of the cultured circle and an industrial writer about the literary value of these weekly narrative fictions. In this issue, Carlos Ocampo includes an excerpt from an article published in *La Razón*, where a cultured writer made a diatribe against these popular



fictions. According to this critic, the morbid nature of this genre, which is even beneath the cocheros and verduleras, instead of contributing to the national cultural progress, as it was initially hoped for, only poses harm (88). In his defense, Ocampo credits these popular fictions for introducing the masses to the habit of reading and if they have not yet reached the aspired quality level yet, he is hopeful that they will in the future (90). The debate and the arguments from both sides highlight the marginalized place of these fictions in the cultural scene. Notwithstanding their popularity, to the lettered culture, they were literature that was beneath even the most humble. Sarlo states:

Literatura plebeya (éste es también el adjetivo que la vanguardia arroja a las revistas de ficciones periódicas), escrita por escritores a quienes los miembros de pleno derecho del campo intelectual no consideran sus iguales o por lo menos, no lo hacen en tanto escritores de estas ficciones. Escritores de literatura para sirvientes, arrojados fuera del círculo de prestigio, pueden sólo redimirse de esta condena mediante la redacción de otras obras, práctica que, por lo demás, muchos de ellos intentan. (89)

While some took pride in their literary production of this genre, a significant number of authors struggled to come to terms with their identity as serial writers. Many successful authors of the weekly narrative fictions aspired to “redeem” themselves by making incursion into the cultured sphere. The Colombian born Pedro Sonderéguer is a good case in point. A prolific and renowned writer of the genre, Sonderéguer also wrote articles of various kinds for different newspapers (105). However, Sarlo observes, what he valued was not his weekly narrative productions, but his failed attempts in the cultured sphere (105). His personal collections and his bibliographical introduction heading one of his articles—suspected as his own—almost

completely omit his weekly popular fictions (106). His personal collection consists of his articles published mainly by *La Nación*. In the aforementioned bibliographical introduction, Sonderéguer presents himself as author of a novel and two essay collections, but makes no mention of his *novelas sentimentales* (107). Speaking of these writers, Sarlo states: “Hombres de dos mundos culturales, conocieron la gloria efímera de la novela semanal (gloria de barrio, como diría la revista *Martín Fierro*) y el olvido, quizás piadoso, de sus proyectos literarios serios” (108).

Although initially publishing houses failed to capture the popular sector, they go on to successfully conquer the emerging reading public by simultaneously catering to and cultivating its taste. After examining the period between the two World Wars, in “Una empresa cultural: los libros baratos,” Luis Alberto Romero points to the emergence of publishing houses marketing to the wider public as a singular development of this period. Singular not merely because what they published were mass marketed and priced within reach of the popular sector, but also because of their carefully designed, thought-out content. By World War I, publishing houses set out to cater to the growing number of readers with a higher level of education and published collection of literary works deemed representative of Argentine culture. *La Biblioteca Argentina* by Ricardo Rojas, *La Cultura Argentina* by José Ingenieros and *La Cooperativa de Buenos Aires* by Manuel Gálvez were the result of such efforts (Romero 51-52). However, in the 1920s and 1930s, in contrast to these former attempts, Romero claims, for the first time, publishing houses, invested in cultivating the masses, take on a more ambitious cultural project: the dissemination of high quality literature among the untrained and trained readers alike. To this end, they began publishing careful selections of renowned universal and Argentine works, lowering prices by cutting cost and easing access by distributing them to neighborhood kiosks and bookstores alike:

Buenos Aires conoció un fenómeno singular: el desarrollo de una serie de empresas editoras que ofrecieron, a precios económicos, un conjunto significativo de buenas obras de la literatura y el pensamiento universal. La cuidadosa selección, las extensas tiradas, su organización casi didáctica en bibliotecas y colecciones, la combinación de obras consagradas con otras de tendencias estéticas o sociales de avanzada, todo lleva a pensar en una verdadera “empresa cultural.” (47)

They appealed to future potential readers by simultaneously captivating and cultivating their interest. Publishing houses, in tune with the readers’ desire for entertainment, supplied to them a great deal of fictional narratives, including adventure novels, in the form of weekly installments, but also, by bringing eclectic collections of renowned works within reach of untrained readers, it sought to educate them on a wide range of issues—politics, philosophy, social studies, literature (56-57). Two collections published in 1922, *Grandes Obras* and *Los Intelectuales*, included European novels of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century (Hugo, Zola, Tolstoi, Hansum) as well as political and philosophical essays by anarchist thinkers (Kropotkin, Gori, Nordau, Ghiraldo) (53). The publishing house Sopena was instrumental in putting in circulation nineteenth century European novels and in 1934, through its magazine-book *Leoplan*, in addition to literature, it brought the readers to speed with the latest on sports, fashion, cinema, and radio (53, 55). By lowering prices, the publishing house Tor also helped disseminate European and Argentine literary works alike (52-53).

However, the publishing house Claridad was the most successful of all of these emergent cultural enterprises. After publishing *Los Pensadores* in 1922, a collection of selected works of universal literature, Antonio Zamora went on to found *Claridad* magazine in 1926. The

magazine featured essays, literary criticism and editorials on politics. Along with the magazine, *Claridad* also published collection of works on a wide range of issues, including poetry, prose, Argentine vanguard works, adventure novels, the Sherlock Holmes series, works on social studies, astronomy, and theosophy. It also covered topics on sexuality which until recently had been taboo but was becoming increasing popular among the porteños:

El desarrollo de *Claridad* fue verdaderamente notable y marcó toda esta época. Reduciendo costos, elevando tirajes y agilizando la distribución en quioscos y librerías, Zamora pudo ofrecer libros muy baratos, a un costo promedio de cincuenta centavos. No sólo cada uno encontró allí su tema sino que *Claridad* fue captando y orientando los cambios de sensibilidad, como lo prueba su vuelco creciente hacia los temas políticos y hacia la vertiente latinoamericana. (54)

An increase in the number of the potential reading public and the multiplication of cultural channels make possible the entrance of new social agents—members of the emerging middle class, sons of immigrants, and to a lesser extent, women and members of the proletariat—to the cultural scene and their professionalization, thus democratizing what has been a homogeneous, exclusive letrado class and introducing new sociocultural practices within the cultured literary circle.<sup>21</sup> The porteño youth, perhaps emboldened by other youth led historical events such as la Reforma Universitaria (1918) and the Russian Revolution (1917), charged against tradition and the old literary status quo and cultivated a cult to everything new

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21 See Julio Ramos, *Divergent Modernities* 93-97; Angel Rama, *The Lettered City*, (Durham: Duke University P, 1996) 112; Graciela Montaldo, “El origen de la historia,” *Yrigoyen entre Borges y Arlt: (1916 1930)*, dir. David Viñas and comp. Graciela Montaldo (Buenos Aires: Paradiso, 2006) 28; Sarlo, *Una modernidad periférica* 19.

inaugurating a new beginning.<sup>22</sup> In contrast to the courteous rhetoric practiced by their predecessors, members of Florida and Boedo, adopting a polemic tone, battle each other over the question of how to write Argentine literature in the twentieth century as well as what ought to be the relationship between art and life.<sup>23</sup> The debate gives rise to the Argentine vanguardia literaria.

Writers who make their debut during this time align themselves either with the Florida or Boedo group. Those familiar with Buenos Aires may quickly recognize Florida and Boedo as designating two topographies with strong class associations: Florida denoting affluence, while Boedo representing the working class barrio. Each group has its own outlet; members of Florida mostly write for *Martín Fierro*, hence they are also known as “martinfierristas” and those of Boedo publish for *Claridad* and *Contra*. It is said that members of Florida are preoccupied with aesthetics and write mainly poetry, while Boedo writers are concerned with the relationship between art and life, and produce a mix of poetry and prose. “Florida y Boedo” Gilman states, “emergen de la lucha con la mitad del botín: unos se apropian de la vanguardia literaria, los otros de la vanguardia política” (49).

Their sociocultural and economic background perhaps influenced their choice of literary style and subject matter as well as their attitude towards the market. Confident of their heritage

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<sup>22</sup> Prieto helps contextualize the Argentine vanguard movement within a broader socio-historical framework. See Adolfo Prieto, “Boedo y Florida,” *Estudios de literatura argentina*, (Bernal: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2013) 47-69.

<sup>23</sup> Among others, Graciela Montaldo highlights the polemic tone of the vanguard. See her “Consagraciones: Tonos y polémicas,” *Yrigoyen entre Borges y Arlt: (1916 1930)*, dir. David Viñas and comp. Graciela Montaldo (Buenos Aires: Paradiso, 2006) 31. Critics often emphasize the similar and differing stances of the Florida and Boedo groups on the question of how to write Argentine literature. For more on the topic, see Noé Jitrik, *Ensayos y estudios de literatura argentina*, (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1970) 207-10; David Viñas, *Literatura argentina y realidad política: De Sarmiento a Cortázar*, (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veinte, 1974) 57-69; Francine Masiello, *Lenguaje e ideología: Las escuelas argentinas de vanguardia*, (Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1986); Beatriz Sarlo, *Modernidad periférica* 40-43.

and socioeconomic standing, Florida members felt unconstrained by regional issues and trends and went on to borrow from what the universal library—mainly European—had to offer and experiment with the latest artistic movements.<sup>24</sup> Attentive to the latest European -isms, they set out to experiment with the Spanish ultraísmo—introduced by Borges in 1921 and which was especially popular among members of this group—and make it their own: “Pero el arte combinatorio no fue todo en el grupo orientado por Borges; hay que tener también en cuenta el ultraísmo que es lo que el joven vate trae a su regreso de Europa. Del mismo modo que Echeverría unos noventa años antes, Borges llega con un deslumbramiento en la mente que quiere hacerse programa teórico” (Jitrik 208). However, they eventually distanced themselves from it—including Borges himself—in favor of criollismo and capturing the local color, personalities and customs of Buenos Aires (Prieto 53). Florida members’ disdainful attitude towards the market reflects their comfortable socioeconomic status: “Por su posición y origen de clase, por su colocación profesionalista, purista, cultora—al menos en teoría— del arte por el arte, el rechazo del mercado en *Martín Fierro* hace el arte gratuito en relación con quien lo produce. El artista gasta (las ediciones de lujo son la señal de esta actitud dispendiosa) pero no cobra, no se contamina con dinero” (Gilman 48).

On the other hand, the Boedo writers—Elías Castelnuovo, Leónidas Barletta, Alvaro Yunque, and Roberto Mariani, among the leading figures—, following in the footsteps of Gorki

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<sup>24</sup> Of the Florida writers, Borges and Gironde were the most prominent figures who proposed and espoused this conceptualization of literature. Borges’ reading of Sarmiento helps him formulate his universal approach to literature: “En el juicio de Borges sobre Sarmiento, la argentinidad ha encontrado su fórmula: la ausencia de límites frente a la cultura occidental y a sus traducciones de oriente” (Sarlo, *Una modernidad* 43). Gironde, on the other hand, unconstrained by local cultural politics or history, exalts the present: “Seguro de su origen, de su cultura, de su riqueza, Gironde no comparte las preocupaciones de Borges o de Güiraldes [por fundar una historia]: su optimismo se funda también en una exaltación del presente” (63-64).

and Zola, favor social realism, and denouncing the literary vanguard as frivolous, identify themselves as the political vanguard. Coming mainly from the proletariat and the middle class and often second generation immigrants, Boedo writers fought for the democratization and dissemination of culture by promoting affordable reading materials to the mass public and by creating and supporting editorial houses, Claridad being their most important enterprise: “Con este último grupo se va a producir una reconsideración de los términos ‘cultura alta’ y ‘cultura popular’ ya que se intentará luchar a través de la escritura por una popularización de la cultura alta, por una redistribución de los bienes simbólicos que acabe con el ‘injusto reparto’ de los bienes culturales” (Montaldo 27). They felt called to make social issues front and center of their writing, especially social inequalities and tensions so much so that they were also known as “escritores de izquierda.” According to Pablo Ansolabehere, these writers defined themselves as leftist writers not necessarily because they identified with a particular political position within the left, but because of their strong commitment to the socially marginalized and their plight:

En la década de 1920 aparece en la Argentina un grupo de escritores jóvenes que irrumpe en el campo literario y que se reconoce, sobre todo, por una ubicación política: la izquierda. Ser un escritor de izquierda implica para ellos, en primer término, no tanto una adhesión definida a determinada postura política dentro del arco de la izquierda vernácula o internacional (anarquismo, socialismo, comunismo, sindicalismo) como la adopción de una forma de entender el arte y de concebir la práctica literaria que los ubica necesariamente en la izquierda. Ser un escritor de izquierda presupone asumir con los más humildes el compromiso de brindarles una literatura sincera, interesada principalmente en el registro de la realidad, en especial de sus aspectos socialmente más desagradables, a través de

una serie de textos, en prosa o en verso, que, inmunes a las tentaciones del juego con la forma y el preciosismo verbal, tengan como premisa ser accesibles a todos.

(49-50)

As Ansolabehere points out, writers with a strong social consciousness in Argentina have a long tradition, but what sets them apart from their predecessors is their belief that they were inaugurating a new beginning much influenced by historical events such as the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the rise of Radicalism to the seat of political power.

In spite of these differences, Florida and Boedo writers shared much in common. They both identified themselves as intellectuals and professional writers (Gilman 45). Writers from both groups pursued to acclimate foreign cultural trends and define the parameters of national literature, a quest that had also guided earlier Argentine intellectuals: “En verdad, tanto los *martinfierristas* como los realistas sociales de *Claridad*, asumieron la misma causa nacional que guió a la cultura argentina, a la vez que domesticaban las lecciones de la vanguardia internacional; pero lo que quedó en las páginas de las historias literarias es menos su causa común que un discurso en oposición” (Masiello, *Lenguaje e ideología* 58). Following Argentine’s best tradition, forgoing formal training either because of their suspicion of official institutions or their difficulty accessing it due to their constraining socioeconomic circumstances, writers debuting during this period were self-taught.<sup>25</sup> As a sign of their rejection of scholarly criticism written by the establishment, they begin to write their own (Montaldo 34). Let us remember, Arlt at times becomes a cultural and literary critic in his aguafuertes porteñas,

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<sup>25</sup> Autodidactismo was a shared trait among Florida and Boedo writers but also of Argentine writers all the way to the 1950s. Montaldo states “Los escritores de esta década comparten además un rasgo con los intelectuales argentinos que se extiende casi hasta los años ’50: el *autodidactismo*” (28; italic in the original) and similarly Mangone writes: “Los intelectuales, siguiendo la mejor tradición argentina, eran autodidactas” (92).



entering into debates with his contemporaries on a wide range of issues, from the state of the national literature (e.g. “Por qué no se vende el libro argentino”, “La lectora que defiende el libro nacional”) to the state of the national language (“El idioma de los argentinos”). Also, with them the city takes the spotlight, as they begin registering the changing city landscape and the everyday life, the new urban rhythm, and the emergence of a new subject—the crowd—in their writing.

## 2. The Rise of a Modern Concept of Literature

Change is the trademark of the porteño cultural sphere of the last decades of nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. The modernization of the newspaper industry and the rise of the cultural enterprise will alter the profile of the traditional writer and go on to disrupt the literary institution. The newspaper, departing from its initial pedagogical function, turns into a commercial enterprise and prioritizes information and advertisement over the defense of particular political views (Ramos 90-94). And as we have already seen in chapter one, the popularity of the gauchesque literature and the novelas sentimentales attests to the success of popular magazines and fictions and a growing reading public which emerge during this period. The commercialization and proliferation of writing will pave the way for the rise of the professional writer and create an alternate access to culture thus opening the door to the minority into the literary institution, once an exclusive field of the elite. As a result, this period will see an important literary corpus written by women and sons of immigrants. Alfonsina Storni and Roberto Arlt are a case in point.

If the modernization of the newspaper and the emergence of the cultural industry enabled the professionalization of authors and made writing more accessible to the minority, they did not level the playing field; the literary institution still remained highly stratified and to a large extent exclusive. By the 1920s and 1930s the immigrant writers gained visibility, yet the martinfierristas often questioned the legitimacy of the boedistas by pointing to traces of contamination—namely Italian—in their writing. For example, in response to the now well-known Roberto Mariani's diatribe against the martinfierristas, in issue 8 and 9 the editorial board of *Martín Fierro* writes:

Cuando por curiosidad ha caído en nuestras manos una de esas ediciones de conventillo, ya clásica, relatada en una jerga abominablemente ramplona, plagada de italianismos, cosas que provocaba en nosotros más risa que indignación pues la existencia de tales engendros se justifica de sobra por el público a que están destinados: no hay que echar margaritas a puercos. Nunca imaginamos que pudieran aspirar sus autores a la consagración literaria. La reclaman, sin embargo, por boca del señor Mariani, quien llega a afirmar seriamente que ese grupo de fabricantes de novelas entronca mejor que nosotros con la tradición argentina encarnada en el poema de Hernández... ¿Será posible? (2)

In this passage the editorial board clearly defines insiders and outsiders: while the inside was made up by the editorial board of *Martín Fierro* who represented Argentine literature, outside remained the immigrant writers, referred despectively as “fabricantes de novelas,” with their cocoliche, novels and readers.

## 2.1. Literary Debate on National Identity and Literature

With the centenary, there emerges a renewed interest in Argentine national identity; as a consequence it becomes the central subject of the writings of the leading intellectuals. A review of their works reveals a concept of national identity that is both elitist and traditionalist manifesting their cultural prejudice. For instance, in their quest to promote national consciousness, Leopoldo Lugones championed the gaucho as symbol of national identity and celebrated the select few, whether it be for their all-around natural superiority or their singular ability with words; and similarly, Ricardo Rojas, although acknowledging the influence of popular traditions, sought to found the parameters of Argentine literature on the works of a few

distinguished men (Masiello, *Lenguaje* 33-44). Hence, if the modernization process was altering the country's demographic composition and its cultural dynamic, the leading intellectuals, resisting these changes, defended traditional values and excluded the newcomers and their influence from their proposed concept of nation.

The surge of reactionary nationalist movements at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century was not unique to Argentina, however. In *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, E. J. Hobsbawm had observed that the national question intensifies throughout Europe in the period that goes from 1870 to 1914 as traditional leading groups face the consequences of the continent's transition into modernity—the rise of the middle class, urbanization, and mass immigration:

Socially three developments gave considerably increased scope for the development of novel forms of inventing “imagined” or even actual communities as nationalities: the resistance of traditional groups threatened by the onrush of modernity, the novel and quite non-traditional classes and strata now rapidly growing in the urbanizing societies of developed countries, and the unprecedented migrations which distributed a multiple diaspora of peoples across the globe, each strangers to both natives and other migrant groups, none, as yet, with the habits of coexistence. (109)

In contrast to its earlier version, the nationalism of this period was distinctive, the historian explains, for the central role that language and ethnicity play in the construction of nationhood (102). As race gains greater importance in the definition of nationhood, Hobsbawm notes, nationalist movements in Europe gain a racist character. During this period, along with a greater emphasis on purity of race, there arises also a growing concern with purity of language (108).

In face of the increasing entrenchment of the leading intellectuals, the new generation of writers, commonly referred as la vanguardia argentina, will contest for space and legitimacy by founding their own cultural publications and producing their own literary criticism. Unlike the predecessors who employed a courteous tone to relate to each other, the vanguard writers, adopting a polemic tone, will debate each other over a range of issues. As noted by the literary critics who have studied this period, a subject that will continue to be intensely debated is the issue of national literature couched within the question of national identity. Eleven years after *Nosotros* inquired whether José Hernández's *Martín Fierro* was a national poetry or not, in its fourth issue the magazine *Martín Fierro* (1924) will publish its first two part survey questions—"¿Cree Ud. en la existencia de una sensibilidad, de una mentalidad argentina? Si Ud. cree en la existencia de una sensibilidad, de una mentalidad argentina, ¿cuáles son sus características?"—evidencing that the question of national identity had not died down with the centenario writers (28). Pedro Juan Vignale and César Tiempo's concluding remarks to their anthology *Exposición de la actual poesía argentina (1922-1927)* reinforces this notion: "A los problemas tácitos de la poesía, se ha agregado aquí, y podríamos asegurar que en América, el problema de lo nacional. Nunca se ha debatido tanto acerca de este punto ni se ha sentido casi con angustia como en la presente generación la falta de una tradición racial, única y milenaria. ¿Qué es lo nacional?, ¿quién hace lo nacional?" (245).

But the quest to define national identity and literature is not new. In fact, it can be traced back to the Argentine romantics—that is, the beginning. "Este tema de lo nacional es objeto de discusión desde hace bastante tiempo" remarks Jitrik "[q]uizá se le deba a Ricardo Rojas la primera preocupación sistemática contemporánea, pero el antecedente fundamental debe situarse en 1837, cuando los románticos argentinos, en especial Alberdi y Echeverría, formularon las

primeras condiciones de una literatura nacional” (*Ensayos* 181). The romantics, sharing a deep faith in the power of the letters and the authors, felt that they were not only called to describe but also prescribe the identity of their young nation (Viñas, *Literatura* 13-15). Speaking of this generation of writers, Viñas observed: “El libro, idealizado, se hace Biblia y el escritor se propone como ‘elegido’ en reemplazo del sacerdote en una sociedad que se quiere laica” (15). However, if up to 1880 the production of cultural symbols, especially those pertaining to national identity and literature, was monopolized by the elite as most intellectuals belonged to the upper class; in the first decades of the twentieth century, reflecting the new sociopolitical and cultural dynamic, we will see a dissolution of the old monopoly (Jitrik, *Ensayos* 180-81). Hence the issue of national identity and literature will set off heterogeneous and cacophonous discourses that will be publicly aired in the multiplying cultural channels. The period’s discussion of national identity is described by Sarlo: “Se plantea entonces, por primera vez de manera global y dramática, la cuestión de identidad nacional, interrelacionada con la de la tradición cultural y el carácter sintético del ‘ser nacional’ argentino” (*Ensayos* 225).

The issue of national identity and literature is often attributed to the martinfierristas. Sarlo states: “The question of cultural nationalism, and by extension of cosmopolitanism, divided the intellectual field along distinct class lines. The social writers of Boedo group rarely brought the matter up; when they did, it was to accuse the avant-garde of being truly *extranjero* (following foreign models in an unquestioning fashion)” (*Jorge* 106). By highlighting the contribution of Scalabrini Ortiz, Prieto had brought to our attention that the issue was not exclusive to the martinfierristas:

Es fácil perseguir en los libros más representativos de este grupo [Florida]  
abundantes pruebas de esta inclinación un tanto paradójica y, frecuentemente,

esnob, pero esos libros apenas reflejan una parte de la manía criollista: la otra se dispersó y se agotó en excursiones colectivas a los suburbios porteños, en discusiones de café, en tal o cual disquisición sociológica, en la admirada contemplación de atardeceres, en el erudito registro de los más viejos tangos y milongas orilleros. (*Estudios* 53)

Most recently, in the first chapter of his dissertation *Shifting Cartographies: Transformation of Urban Space in Buenos Aires, 1920-2001* (2017), Gregory Przybyla, with an interest in urban space, reads Arlt's *Aguafuertes porteñas* against the hegemonic discourses of the cultural nationalists and in doing so he argues that while the cultural nationalists defended a monoglossic reading of signs and of the city, Arlt proposed a heteroglossic ones and embraced the increasingly heterogeneous urban society that Buenos Aires was becoming in the first decades of the twentieth century:

Through his columns he [Arlt] begins to fragment the cityscape of Buenos Aires in the same way that he fragments the hegemony of the book. It is in his *aguafuertes* where Arlt disallows and does away with the concept of the city as a holistic and one-dimensional idea held fast by cultural nationalists. Instead he introduces the city as a dynamic, interrelated, and always *becoming* series of places. He unravels the city and unveils it as an open, yet fractured place; it is an ever-expanding collage constituted by heterogeneous relations and ever-shifting meanings that the subject only uncovers during their *movement* through and articulation of the city. (31; italic in original)

Although my work shares a similar point of departure with his, as I contextualize the aguafuertes within the ongoing debate on national identity and literature, due to our distinct interests, we underscore different aspects of this debate and go on to make different propositions.

From his daily *Aguafuertes porteñas*, Arlt will intervene in this debate on the issue of national identity and literature in the 1920s and 1930s. However, he sidesteps the question—what is national identity and literature?—for it presupposes that there is an authentic vs. non-authentic identity and literature and instead, as we will see in his answers, he reformulates the question to what is the role of national literature? In the process he proposes that national literature is that which is read (purchased) by the people. Thus departing from the traditional concept of literature Arlt defines (national) literature in terms of a relationship. At the heart of this concept of literature is the market for it is what makes this new relation possible.

## 2.2. The Gaucho: Arlt's intervention in the Debate

In 1913 Lugones pronounces a series of conferences in homage to the gaucho in the star studded Odeón—the country's president and its ministers were among those in attendance. In *El payador* (1916), where he finalizes the ideas originally presented at the Odeón, Lugones opens the book with a thesis statement: “El objeto de este libro es, pues, definir bajo el mencionado aspecto la poesía épica, demostrar que nuestro *Martín Fierro* pertenece a ella, estudiarlo como tal, determinar simultáneamente, por la naturaleza de sus elementos la formación de la raza, y con ello formular, por último, el secreto de su destino” (xviii). In other words, in addition to defining epic poetry, he will offer a reading of *Martín Fierro*. In the process, he goes on to portray the gaucho as a noble character possessing of “serenidad, coraje, ingenio, meditación, sobriedad, vigor” and declares him a hero and civilizing agent for playing a decisive role, first, in



the country's inner frontier war against the natives and later, in the independence war (25). In his reading, all traces of conflict between the authorities and the gaucho are minimized to the point where they are smoothed out of the original story. If historically his disappearance evinced the conflict between the backward lifestyle that the gaucho symbolized and the liberal national model, in *El payador*, the gaucho emerges as the ultimate embodiment of courage and sacrifice, whose bravery and death will warrant the birth of Argentina as a political nation but also its cultural independence: "La Guerra de Independencia inició las calamidades del gaucho. Este iba a pagar hasta extinguirse el inexorable tributo de muerte que la sumisión comporta, cimentando la nacionalidad con su sangre" (45).

By the time Lugones presents his conferences and publishes *El payador*, el gaucho, however, has over a century old reputation. Around the end of the eighteenth century, when he first entered the South American scene, Enrique Anderson Imbert explains, the gaucho was subject of suspicion of the urban population:

La palabra "gaucho" apareció en el Río de la Plata, alrededor de 1790, con una significación negativa: era el vagabundo, el cuchillero, el alzado contra la autoridad, el cuatrero, etc. Sin duda la palabra recortaba, de toda la población pastoril que vivía suelta y desparramada, los elementos humanos que por su rebeldía, por su inercia, alarmaban más a los hombres de orden y de ley. (212)

The gaucho gains popular esteem thanks to Bartolomé Hidalgo and later Hilario Ascasubi and José Hernández, yet his portrayal in *Facundo* as a barbaric caudillo deals his image a significant blow.

How does Lugones authorize his account of the gaucho? After all, *El payador*, as he had declared in his thesis statement, is an opinion essay based on a fictional work. To do so, he will

claim absolute control over discursive authority by inscribing the *Martín Fierro* within the epic poetry genre and investing the poet with deity qualities. Epic poetry, Lugones contends, expresses the heroic life of a race, speaks its truth, beauty and justice and foretells its character: “puesto que dicho tesoro [poema épico] está formado por los tres conocidos elementos: verdad, belleza y bien” (1); “Cuando el poema épico, según pasa algunas veces, ha nacido en un pueblo que empieza a vivir, su importancia es todavía mayor; pues revela en aquella entidad condiciones vitales superiores, constituyendo, así, una profecía de carácter filosófico y científico” (2-3). Then he goes on to claim supernatural qualities for the poet: “Era esto lo que veía Grecia en los poemas homéricos, y de aquí su veneración a ellos. Homero había sido el revelador de ese maravilloso supremo fruto de civilización llamado el helenismo; y por tanto, un semidiós sobre la tierra” (3); “Platón creía que obra perfecta de belleza es una creación inconsciente, porque asignando al artista el atributo representativo de su raza, aquél venía a ser como expresión sintética de toda vida superior en la raza misma, un agente del destino, a semejanza de las deidades cuyo linaje patentizábase en su condición de semidiós” (13).

Endowed with divine qualities, epic poetry and the poet not only reveal a nation its identity and future, but they themselves also embody and express the essence and excellence of a race. Because truth and beauty are intrinsic qualities to the poet and the epic poem, the latter is “una creación inconsciente” to the poet. Central to his assertions is the premise of hierarchy: the poet along with the poem is a superior entity. By inscribing the *Martín Fierro* within the epic genre and portraying the poet as a semi-deity, Lugones attempts to override the other narratives surrounding the gaucho with his own account for his is based on an epic poem and he is a poet.

Critics have already singled out how the author endows the poetic voice with mythical attributes. In reference to his *Las montañas del oro*, María Teresa Gramuglio observes:

Como texto de “comienzos” la “Introducción” no podría ser más significativa: abre *Las montañas del oro*, el primer libro que Lugones publica en Buenos Aires; acuña la figura del Poeta como “el gran enunciador”, el que puede transmitir al “Pueblo del Nuevo Mundo” la revelación de su destino dictada por los dioses; representa, en la dimensión simbólica, el advenimiento del propio Lugones a la escena literaria nacional y diseña el lugar fundante que imagina para sí, en la literatura y en la sociedad; coloca al poeta en un lugar de altura, de autoridad y de dominio sobre la multitud; le asigna una misión que los tiempos reclaman, y que tarde o temprano habrá de cumplirse. (12)

And specific to *El payador*, Jorge Monteleone notes: “En sus conferencias sobre el *Martín Fierro*, que integran *El payador* (1916), Lugones precisa aún más las relaciones entre él y el heroísmo de acuerdo con las premisas estéticas que apuntamos. El poeta es un predestinado, representante de la vida heroica en su raza” (141).

But I wanted to revisit Lugones and the way he authorizes the text because they help explain Arlt’s as well as his contemporaries’ insistence in challenging notions of hierarchy. Although the specific text we have studied dates back to 1916 and Arlt writes mainly in the late twenties and thirties, a careful reading of his *aguafuertes* shows that Lugones and his generation served as a backdrop against which Arlt and the new generation of authors were writing. Lugones, Gálvez, Rojas, Capdevila are names that resurface in his chronicles. For example, in “El conventillo de nuestra literatura,” we read:

El señor Lugones encuentra bolcheviques a los escritores que, como Mariani, Barletta, Castelnuovo, Tuñon y yo, quizá, se han ocupado de la mugre que hace triste la vida de esta ciudad.

El señor Lugones encuentra mal que todos los muchachos de la izquierda, es decir, del grupo llamado Boedo, se ocupen de la miseria y de la angustia de los hombres argentinos. Él prefiere las frases, las rimas de azul de metileno con las durezas del tungsteno y otras combinaciones por el estilo que, con un poco de dificultad y otro poco de genio, constituye cualquier estudiante aventajado. (*CP* 54)

And in “La inutilidad de los libros” he writes: “¿Para qué han servido los libros, puede decirme usted? Yo, con toda sinceridad, le declaro que ignoro para qué sirven los libros. Que ignoro para qué sirve la obra de un señor Ricardo Rojas, de un señor Leopoldo Lugones, de un señor Capdevila, para circunscribirme a este país” (*OC* 187).

By the time Arlt writes, the gaucho has caught on as a national symbol to the point where the term has become part of the porteño’s everyday language. Notwithstanding his popularity, in his *aguafuertes* Arlt will reject the gaucho as archetype of argentinidad and denounce the current excitement around him as “nacionalismo al cuete” (*CP* 103). On what grounds does Arlt dismiss the gaucho as the embodiment of national essence? According to Arlt, the gaucho is a problematic figure because it is a literary construct based on the distortion of historical facts and because it is subject to further distortions. He calls attention to its artifice by identifying two distinct literary productions centered on the mythical figure of the gaucho. In “La mula de lo gauchesco,” Arlt calls into question the historical authenticity of the gaucho by acknowledging him as protagonist of popular fictions:

Yo, de buena fe, ignoro si han existido gauchos. Al menos no los he visto.

Recuerdo, sí, que en mi angélica infancia, me detuve más de una vez, asombrado, frente a cuadernillos que costaban diez centavos, escritos en décimas y titulados *El gaucho Hormiga Negra* o *Juan Moreira* y representando a los susodichos con

calzones puntillados y facón negro en duelo con unos polizontes que tenían rostro colorado y patillas a la zanahoria. (101)

Interestingly, although the caricaturesque visual representation of these stories gracing their cover is ridiculed, the gauchesque fictions per se are recalled somewhat fondly as captivating literature—“me detuve, más de una vez, asombrado”—perhaps because they are filtered through the eyes of a child or because the gaucho of these fictions still retained his signature rebelliousness by being often portrayed in conflict with the authorities. As charming as the gaucho character may be, it is a made-up figure: “si he de ser sincero, los únicos gauchos que vimos en aquella época y veíamos en el arrabal y entre gente que desvainaba con más facilidad un cuchillo que un breviario, fueron los gauchos de carnaval” (101-02). By denying seeing a real gaucho, Arlt is not dismissing the historical gaucho but merely emphasizing that the gaucho figure the Argentines herald as symbol of national identity is a literary construction.

The confusion between the mythical and historical gaucho among the general public is pervasive, however. This most likely due to the fact that

[t]he gauchesque poem *Martín Fierro* used to be learnt by heart, and was taught in schools along with the official version of local history according to which the gauchos had willingly given their lives in the Wars of Independence against Spain only to be rewarded with social instability, as the nation-state extended its control over all the territory of the Argentine, liquidating regional resistance and waging genocidal campaigns against the Indians. (Sarlo, *Jorge* 37)

In his second aguafuerte “Algo más sobre lo gaucho,” Arlt says that in response to the former aguafuerte, he received numerous letters from readers shielding the gaucho from his attacks. In defense of the gaucho, his readers cited verses praising the gaucho and brought up his

role in the inner frontier war, among others. Through such responses, Arlt learns that his readers, in the manner of Lugones, are mixing fiction and facts: taking the gauchesca poetry literally, readers are quoting fictional verses to counter his criticism on the gaucho; and ignoring or forgetting that the historical gaucho's participation in the inner frontier war was forced, they praise him for waging war against the indios.

Alarmed by the widespread ignorance—"estos benditos días de ignorancia elevada al cubo"—Arlt will attempt to set the record straight (*CP* 105). As such, in the second aguafuerte, he will spell out that the gaucho that is now on trend is a literary invention fabricated by the martinfierristas, Güiraldes and Larreta and popularized by the cultural enterprise:

Todos los países, me refiero a los europeos, por su antigüedad de cultura han tenido a su disposición un material mitológico para proporcionarle a sus artistas motivos de arte por lujo. En el nuestro, país reciente, lo único que se ofrecía era el gaucho o las guerras civiles. El elemento indígena y sus leyendas carecían de interés. O faltó el artista que supiera explotarlo. La generación de escritores del año 1921 empezó con una revista: *Martín Fierro* (donde se enalzaba a la nueva sensibilidad ¡y qué distante está esto del gaucho!) a remover los escombros de una tapera ha mucho tiempo desmoronada. Luego Güiraldes, con *Don Segundo Sombra* y Larreta con *Zogoibi* hicieron circular esa desvalorizada moneda del gaucho, y los eternos imitadores, la califa de escritorzuelos desocupados, recitadores de radio, compositores de tango y declamadoras profesionales, hicieron el resto. (105)

Moreover, he offers a portrait of the historical gaucho consisting of a long list of negative attributes he gained from the criollos who had found him so repulsive that ended up

exterminating him. Branded a backward element, the gaucho was considered, among other things, lazy and temperamental, as such prone to conflict and violence (106-07). Thus Arlt calls attention to the irony of upholding the gaucho as symbol of national essence: the element eradicated from the national body because it had been deemed a threat to its wellbeing is now defended as national essence. Furthermore, by singling out the literary institution and their texts as responsible for this distortion, Arlt challenges the notion that intellectuals and their texts are sacred—topic I will further explore in the next section. If the literary institution is guilty of misguiding the public, the general public is not an innocent bystander but complicit in what Arlt calls “nacionalismo a la violeta y por demás ingenuo” by uncritically consuming cultural products (104). By branding the current popular enthusiasm with the gaucho as a frivolous consumerist behavior—“la moda del gaucho”—Arlt criticizes the porteños’ mindless consumption of the symbol (106).

Not only is the gaucho symbol a distorted image of the historical gaucho, but it is also subject to further distortions. To bring the readers’ attention to this phenomenon, in “La mula de lo gauchesco,” Arlt, attributing the observation to the poet Novillo Quiroga, writes: “Se está incurriendo en un lamentable abuso del calificativo ‘gaucho’. Se le aplica con ligereza y arbitrariedad desconcertantes. Así, gaucho es cualquiera en nuestra peregrina babel, aunque su apellido, su físico o su actividad trasciendan a cosa absolutamente inversa” (102). Currently the misuse of the word gaucho or gauchesca is so widespread, Arlt informs, that even newspapers are introducing people of foreign last names such as Nelson, Harrington, Nijisky or Cattaruzzo as gauchos (103). The cultural industry is singled out by Arlt as responsible for the phenomenon. The radio frequently mislabels dance forms of various origins, including Russian, Hungarian, and even Italian ones, as gauchescas. The radio, he continues, confusing indigenous and

gauchesque, often uses the terms interchangeably. Concerned about the further mutilation of the gaucho figure and the role of the cultural industry in this process, Arlt registers the phenomenon in his aguafuertes.

Effectively, the martinfierristas revive the question of national identity and the gaucho. Let us remember *Martín Fierro*'s two part survey question—"Cree Ud. en la existencia de una sensibilidad, de una mentalidad, argentina? En caso afirmativo ¿cuáles son sus características?" (28). Not only did they take up the question of national identity but they also named the literary magazine *Martín Fierro*. The meaning behind this symbolic gesture was not lost to contemporary writers. In a letter to the editorial board, which is published in its seventh issue, Mariani states:

Símbolo de criollismo por el sentimiento, el lenguaje y la filosofía, es Martín Fierro, el poema de Hernández, el personaje de Hernández.

¿Por qué los que hacen Martín Fierro—revista literaria—, se han puesto bajo la advocación de tal símbolo, si precisamente tienen todos una cultura europea, un lenguaje literario complicado y sutil, y una elegancia francesa?

¿Qué tiene Martín Fierro, —revista literaria—que pueda ajustarse como anillo al dedo, al patrón criollista Martín Fierro? (2)

Even if the martinfierristas go on to propose alternative aesthetic representations of what is Argentina, *Martín Fierro* and José Hernández, which were championed by the centenary writers, maintain their vitality as symbol of argentinidad even among vanguard writers. In its twenty second issue, in response to Girondo's proposition to erect a monument to José Hernández, Evar Méndez its director writes:



¡Magnífica la idea de nuestro camarada Gironde! Y oportuna. Porque cada día es más sólido y verídico, en el espíritu de la juventud, el concepto del mérito indiscutible de esta obra fundamental de la literatura americana, *la única pura y esencialmente argentina*.

El Martín Fierro, reivindicado por la literatura oficial hace quince años, a raíz de estudios de Lugones, Rojas, Bunge y otros, sitúa a José Hernández en el primer plano entre los escritores argentinos: es el único, entre una inmensa cantidad, que posee la cualidad suprema: es un creador, el creador más original que hayamos tenido. (2; italic is mine)

### 2.3. Borges' Position on the Gaucho

Although the martinfierristas titled their magazine after José Hernandez's gauchesque poem, which carried a symbolic significance, and its members proposed to honor him with a statue, the relationship between its members with this genre and its hero is rather complex. This complex relationship is perhaps most evident in Borges, considered the leading literary figure among the martinfierristas.

Borges' view of the gauchesque literature has been subject of extensive literary criticism. It has been covered by, among many others, Beatriz Sarlo and Josefina Ludmer in their books, and has been a topic of many articles.<sup>26</sup> Bypassing his short stories, literary corpus most frequented by critics when analyzing his position on the subject, in the following pages, I will

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<sup>26</sup> To name a few, "El tamaño de la influencia: Gauchesca, criollismo y nación. Sarmiento y Güiraldes leídos por Borges" (1999) by Christian Fernández; "Borges y el 'endiosamiento de Hernández'" (1999) by Carlos García; and "Gauchos at the Origins: Lugones, Borges, Filloy" (2015) by Jason A. Bartles.

examine Borges's view on the gauchesque poems and its elements by focusing on *Evaristo Carriego* (1930), and his essays "El escritor argentino y la tradición" (1952) and "La poesía gauchesca" (1932). The first two are widely read as his literary manifestos among critics.<sup>27</sup> If in *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (1926) Borges professed "Es indudable que el arrabal y la pampa existen del todo y que los siento abrirse como heridas y me duelen igual" (25), in *Evaristo Carriego* (1930) Borges distances himself from his earlier position. The titles of Carriego's last two collections of poems *El alma del suburbio* and *La canción del barrio* will serve Borges as a pretext to delve into the ongoing debate on national literature. After praising the poet's diction in his final title—canción and barrio instead of alma and suburbio, respectively—for privileging familiar over stilted language, Borges goes on to discuss the tendency among critics and writers to favor exotic—or what he calls "palabras de lejanía"—over everyday language when speaking of Argentina (140). As evidence of this observation, Borges alludes to their frequent use of the term pampa at the expense of accuracy:

La distinción [entre barrio y suburbio] es pertinente: el manejo de palabras de lejanía para elucidar las cosas de esta república, deriva de una propensión a rastrearnos barbarie. Al paisano lo quieren resolver por la pampa; al compadrito por los ranchos de fierro viejo. Ejemplo: el periodista o artefacto vascuence J. M. Salaverría, en su libro que desde el título se equivoca: *El poema de la pampa, Martín Fierro y el criollismo español*. *Criollismo español* es un contrasentido

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<sup>27</sup> For instance, speaking of *Evaristo Carriego*, while in *The Gaucho Genre* Josefina Ludmer, reading *Evaristo Carriego* as a literary manifesto, states: "In the confrontation with Carriego, with piety and realism, in the confrontation of registers, in the telling of confrontations and violences, Borges found his own literary intonation" (189); in *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*, Beatriz Sarlo writes: "So *Evaristo Carriego* mimics a biography but in reality it is written as a chapter of a mythical history of Buenos Aires and, at the same time, as a literary manifesto, albeit ironic and understated" (24-25).

deliberado, hecho para asombrar (lógicamente, un *contradictio in adjecto*); *poema de la pampa* es otro menos voluntario percance. Pampa, según información de Ascasubi, era para los antiguos paisanos donde merodeaban los indios. Basta repasar el *Martín Fierro* para saber que es el poema, no de la pampa, sino del hombre desterrado a la pampa, del hombre rechazado por la civilización pastoril centrada en las estancias como pueblos y en el *pago* sociable. (*Obras completas* 140; italics in original)

The Argentine pastoral civilization and its people are often traced to the pampa; however, in the gauchesque literature, Borges explains, the pampa designated the desert or uncivilized plains, a place that its heroes associated with feelings of sorrow and emptiness. Borges cites two passages from *Martín Fierro* where Fierro is distressed by the open plains.

Furthermore, Argentines's (over)identification with the pastoral civilization leads to misreading of passages that are rather self-evident. Borges writes: "La predisposición a rastrearnos barbarie es muy general: Santos Vega [...] armó o heredó la copla que dice: *Si este novillo me mata — No me entierren en sagrao; — Entiérrenme en campo verde — Donde me pise el ganao*, y su evidentísima idea (*Si soy tan torpe, renuncio a que me lleven al cementerio*) ha sido festejada como declaración panteísta de hombre que quiere que lo pisen muerto las vacas" (141). This frequently misunderstood statement made by Santos Vega opens a discussion on the topic of the gaucho. In a footnote to the cited passage, as he considers the relationship between the gaucho and the pampa, Borges problematizes the portrayal of the former as a wanderer by his contemporary Argentine writers, including Vicente Rossi, Ricardo Güiraldes and Paul Groussac:

Hacer del paisano un recorredor infinito del desierto, es un contrasentido romántico; asegurar como lo hace nuestro mejor prosista de pelea, Vicente Rossi,

que el gaucho es el *guerrero nómada charrúa*, es asegurar meramente que a esos desapegados charrúas les dijeron *gauchos*: Conchabo primitivo de una palabra, que resuelve muy poco. Ricardo Güiraldes, para su versión del hombre de campo como hombre de vagancia, tuvo que recurrir al gremio de los troperos. Groussac, en su conferencia de 1893, habla de gaucho fugitivo “hacia el lejano sur, en lo que de la pampa queda”, pero lo sabido de todos es que en el lejano sur no quedan gauchos porque no los hubo antes, y que donde perduran es en los cercanos partidos de hábito criollo. (141; italics in original)

From the outset, Borges intervention into the question of the pampa and the gaucho is set as one of language; yet there lies within an implicit critique of what contemporary intellectuals do with gauchesque poems and its tropes: in their quest to turn them into an emblem of what is national, they often misread the former.

The propensity to favor the exotic over what is plain was explained by Borges as following: “La distinción [entre barrio y suburbio] es pertinente: el manejo de palabras de lejanía para elucidar las cosas de esta república, deriva de una propensión a rastrearnos barbarie” (140). As it is well-known, during the second half of the nineteenth century, the pastoral civilization and its elements, mainly the pampa and the gaucho, were stigmatized as backwards (read “barbarie”) by the country’s elite, with Sarmiento being one of the most vocal among its members. However, in the first decades of the twentieth century, the same tropes that once were associated with barbarism will be championed as national symbols by the leading intellectuals. Because of Argentines’ complex relationship with barbarism, the above cited statement lends to two very dissimilar readings. If we interpret “barbarie” as the cultural nationalists did, then it could be read as follows: the tendency to employ exotic words (pampa, gaucho) when speaking

of Argentina is due to our identification with the pastoral civilization and the gaucho.

Alternatively, if we understand “barbarie” as the nineteenth century liberals did, the same phrase could be construed in a very different manner: the propensity to use exotic words (pampa, gaucho) stems from our perception of ourselves as inferior or lack of confidence. However, within the context of the rest of the passage, the latter is more fitting; by bringing up pampa as an example of “palabra de lejanía,” Borges had questioned Argentines’ identification with the pastoral civilization. Interestingly, this idea of the use of grandiloquent speech or exotic words as a compensatory mechanism is revisited by Borges in “El escritor argentino y la tradición,” another essay that is regarded as his literary manifesto. He writes that there is a tendency among “el pueblo,” whether that be people of the margins or the gaucho poets, to avoid everyday language and seek “voces y giros altisonantes” when writing poetry: “He podido comprobar lo mismo oyendo a payadores de las orillas; éstos rehuyen el versificar en orillero o lunfardo y tratan de expresarse con corrección. Desde luego fracasan, pero su propósito es hacer de la poesía algo alto; algo distinguido, podríamos decir con una sonrisa” (284). According to Borges, common folks, conceiving poetry as “algo alto,” try to fill the perceived gap between their everyday language and that of poetry by making use of grandiloquent speech.

The ciphered criticism on the treatment of the gauchesque literature by the nationalists, embedded in a discussion of language or set aside on a footnote, goes on to be unequivocally expressed in his later essays. In “La poesía gauchesca,” Borges clearly rejects Lugones’s epic reading of *Martín Fierro* by dismissing it as “forzada” and “estrafalaria”. “La segunda—la del hiperbólico elogio—no ha realizado hasta hoy sino el sacrificio inútil de sus ‘precursores’ y una forzada igualación con el *Cantar del Cid* y con la *Comedia dantesca*,” and a few lines down he continues stating: “La estrafalaria y cándida necesidad de que el *Martín Fierro* sea épico ha

pretendido comprimir, siquiera de un modo simbólico, la historia secular de la patria, con sus generaciones, sus destierros, sus agonías, sus batallas de Tucumán y de Ituzaingó, en las andanzas de un cuchillero de 1870” (205). In the same essay, he also takes issue with Rojas’s attempt to ascribe the gauchesque literature to the gaucho poets (los payadores) by, among others, outfitting Hidalgo in the typical gaucho attire: “Lo hace, de una plumada, payador, y lo describe en forma ascendente, con acopio de rasgos minuciosos e imaginarios: ‘vestido el chiripá sobre su calzoncillo abierto en cribas; calzadas las espuelas en la bota sobada del caballero gaucho; abierta sobre el pecho la camiseta oscura, henchida por el viento de las pampas; alzada sobre la frente el ala del chambergo” (190). The attempt, Borges points out, falls flat when Rojas himself informs Hidalgo also composed sonnets and hendecasyllables, literary forms that were foreign to the gaucho poets: “Harto más memorables que esas licencias de la iconografía, y la sastrería, me parecen dos circunstancias, también registradas por Rojas: el hecho de que Hidalgo fue un soldado, el hecho de que, antes de inventar al capataz Jacinto Chano y al gaucho Ramón Contreras, abundó—disciplina singular en un payador—en sonetos y en odas endecasílabas” (191).

Borges position on aesthetics and politics has evolved over time, including his attitude towards the gauchesque as singled out in the beginning.<sup>28</sup> Yet his criticisms of the nationalists’ take on the gauchesque literature, articulated in *Evaristo Carriego* and “Poesía gauchesca,” remained consistent with those he expressed in later years. In “El escritor argentino y la tradición” Borges begins by presenting the argument of the nationalists, mainly of Lugones and Rojas.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> His changes of opinion on aesthetics and politics are often unapologetically assumed by Borges himself in his essays.

<sup>29</sup> In “Borges, *reescriptor*. En torno a ‘El escritor argentino y la tradición’ y la *intriga* de sus contextos de publicación,” Sebastián Hernaiz clarifies that although in 1957 Borges revises and

Heralding the gauchesque literature as national literature, Borges explains, they propose that the former should be a point of departure or archetype for Argentine writers:

Antes de examinarlo [el problema del escritor argentino y la tradición], quiero considerar los planteos y soluciones más corrientes. Empezaré por una solución que se ha hecho casi instintiva, que se presenta sin colaboración de razonamientos; la que afirma que la tradición literaria argentina ya existe en la poesía gauchesca. Según ella, el léxico, los procedimientos, los temas de la poesía gauchesca deben ilustrar al escritor contemporáneo, y son un punto de partida y quizá un arquetipo. Es la solución más común y por eso pienso demorarme en su examen. (282)

By introducing this argument as one “sin colaboración de razonamiento,” he rejects it from the very beginning. As in *Evaristo Carriego* and “La poesía gauchesca,” Borges dismisses the nationalists’ proposal for distorting gauchesque literature in their quest to celebrate it as emblem of Argentine culture and again cites as evidence Lugones’s and Rojas’s (mis)readings. Borges states that while Lugones claimed the *Martín Fierro* to be the Argentine’s national epic poem, Rojas argued the gaucho poets authored the gauchesca: “Ha sido propuesta por Lugones en *El payador*; ahí se lee que los argentinos poseemos un poema clásico, el *Martín Fierro*, y que ese poema debe ser para nosotros lo que los poemas homéricos fueron para los griegos” (282); “Ricardo Rojas hace de Hidalgo un payador; sin embargo, según la misma *Historia de la literatura argentina*, este supuesto payador empezó componiendo versos endecasílabos, metro naturalmente vedado a los payadores” (283). In this essay, not only does he oppose modeling Argentine literature after the gauchesque poems or using them as a point of departure, but goes

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includes his essay “El escritor argentino y la tradición” in *Discusión*, a collection of essays published in 1932, it was first presented as a conference in 1951 at Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores and published for the first time in 1953 in the journal *Cursos y conferencias*.

even further: distancing from his earlier criollista experiments, he declares himself against formulas or imposing any constraints on Argentine writers, whether that be staying within the Spanish tradition or not borrowing from European trends (286-87). “La idea de que la poesía argentina debe abundar en rasgos diferenciales argentinos y en color local argentino,” Borges asserts, “me parece una equivocación” (284). And towards the end of the essay, he goes on to write his well-known statement on Argentine tradition: “¿Cuál es la tradición argentina? Creo que podemos contestar fácilmente y que no hay problema en esta pregunta. Creo que nuestra tradición es toda la cultura occidental, y creo también que tenemos derecho a esta tradición, mayor que el que pueden tener los habitantes de una u otra nación occidental” (288).

Yet the gauchesque literature and its hero the gaucho are not dismissed altogether. In “El escritor argentino y la tradición,” Borges declares “Creo que el *Martín Fierro* es la obra más perdurable que hemos escrito los argentinos; y creo con la misma intensidad que no podemos suponer que el *Martín Fierro* es, como algunas veces se ha dicho, nuestra Biblia, nuestro libro canónico” (282). Although he does not conceive of the *Martín Fierro* as the essence of what is Argentine, he acknowledges the valuable literary contributions of the gauchesque literature. In “La poesía gauchesca,” Borges highlights the accomplishments of its writers and their respective works. Bartolomé Hidalgo is credited for inventing the genre: “Bartolomé Hidalgo, descubre la entonación del gaucho; eso es mucho” (191). Ascasubi is praised for being a master of (scenic) portraits: “Lo escénico otra vez, otra vez la fruición de contemplar. En esa inclinación está para mí la singularidad de Ascasubi, no en las virtudes de su ira unitaria, destacada por Oyuela y por Rojas” (194); “Coraje florido, gusto de los colores límpidos y de los objetos precisos, pueden definir a Ascasubi” (195). Estanislao del Campo is lauded for his pleasing dialogues that register



the bond of friendship: “Lo esencial es el diálogo, es la clara amistad que trasluce el diálogo” (198). And last but not least, the *Martín Fierro* is celebrated as the first Argentine novel:

En esta discusión de episodios me interesa menos la imposición de una determinada tesis que este convencimiento central: la índole novelística del *Martín Fierro*, hasta en los pormenores. Novela, novela de organización instintiva o premeditada, es el *Martín Fierro*: única definición que puede transmitir puntualmente la clase de placer que nos da y que condice sin escándalo con su fecha. Ésta, quién no lo sabe, es la del siglo novelístico por antonomasia: el de Dostoievski, el de Zola, el de Butler, el de Flaubert, el de Dickens. (209)

If the gauchesque poems are appreciated for their literary accomplishments, their hero is a fictional, idealized character. Borges writes: “Sobre la mayor o menor autenticidad de los gauchos escritos, cabe observar, tal vez, que para casi todos nosotros, el gaucho es un objeto ideal, prototípico” (“La poesía gauchesca” 190); “No pertenece el *Fausto* a la realidad argentina, pertenece—como el tango, como el truco, como Irigoyen—a la mitología argentina” (198). And because Borges conceives the gauchesque oeuvres as a literary genre he is not bothered by two criticisms often leveled against them: that they are not written by the gauchos and that they are artifices of the writers’ imagination.

Returning to *Evaristo Carriego*, in its chapter XI titled “Historia del tango,” one that may have been added decades later, Borges inserts a section that examines the significance of the gaucho and the compadrito figures and he makes the following observation:<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Borges states: “años después, la anécdota me ayudó a imaginar un cuento afortunado, ya que no bueno, “Hombre de la esquina rosada”; en 1950, Adolfo Bioy Casares y yo la retomamos para urdir el libro de un film que las empresas rechazaron con entusiasmo y que se llamaría los orilleros” (176).

Nuestro pasado militar es copioso, pero lo indiscutible es que el argentino, en trance de pensarse valiente, no se identifica con él (pese a la preferencia que en las escuelas se da al estudio de la historia) sino con las vastas figuras genéricas del gaucho y del compadre. Si no me engaño, este rasgo instintivo y paradójico tiene su explicación. El argentino hallaría su símbolo en el gaucho y no en el militar, porque el valor cifrado en aquel por las tradiciones orales no está al servicio de una causa y es puro. El gaucho y el compadre son imaginados como rebeldes; el argentino, a diferencia de los americanos del Norte y de casi todos los europeos, no se identifica con el Estado. (172)

Although Borges rejects the cultural nationalists's reading of gauchesque literature and their proposal that the gauchesque poems and their protagonist the gaucho represent what is Argentine and that Argentine writers should model their work after it, he recognizes the symbolic significance of the mythical gaucho: it, alongside the *compradrito*, projects the Argentine sensibility, their identification with the rebel and not the State. Considering that this section may have been added later during one of his revisions, it may be argued that this latter view of the gaucho does not reflect his opinion on the subject during the 1920s and 1930s; however, his above statement echoes one that he expressed in the 1920s. As Carlos García singled out, Borges was one of the many intellectuals that intervene on a public debate on the gaucho held on *Crítica* in 1926 (183). On this occasion, Borges said: "Debemos mantener el culto al gaucho? Si el culto al gaucho es culto al estoicismo, al valor sin compadrada, a la quieta incredulidad, me parece muy bien; si es pretexto para idolatrar a los patrioterros, a los Moreiras y a las cursilerías estilo Gardel, mejor es olvidarnos del gaucho. Sobre todo no infiramos a la ciudad una estatua más" (185).

## 2.4. Literature that Is Read by Its People

Critics have already remarked on Arlt's relationship with either the *martinfierristas* or *boedistas*. In spite of the fact that he did not fit neatly into either of the literary vanguard groups, his *aguafuertes* evince that Arlt shared the same concerns frequently taking sides on heated debated topics. One such topic was national identity and literature. Against the backdrop of this debate—on how to write in the first decades of the twentieth century and what Argentine identity and literature is or ought to be—and within the hybrid discursive site of the *aguafuertes*, Arlt will formulate his own theory of national literature. Often labeling traditional writers and their literary production as “*escribidores*” and “*literatura mala y falsa*,” respectively, Arlt condemned the literary institution for being stagnant and removed from its own people and advocated for the entrance of literature onto the marketplace.<sup>31</sup> Optimistic about the innovative force of the market, he believed that it could galvanize literature: by leaving its sanctuary and entering the market, literature would be forced to constantly innovate itself to establish communion with fellow *porteños*. His participation and success as a chronicler must have played a role in shaping his optimism towards the market.

According to Arlt, national literature is literature consumed by the people. In other words, for literature to earn the national title, it must be able to establish rapport with the people of its own country, an idea that crystalizes in his critique of the current literary establishment. The disconnect between the national writers and the readers becomes the main subject of many *aguafuertes* that deal with Argentine authors and literature.<sup>32</sup> In “*Sociedad literaria, artículo de*

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<sup>31</sup> The use of “*falsa literatura*” can be found in his *aguafuerte* “*La crónica n° 231*” and “*escribores*” in his *aguafuerte* “*Argentinos en Europa*.”

<sup>32</sup> This observation has also been made by María Carolina Baffi in her dissertation (56-57).

museo” (1928), after informing the readers about the recent establishment of the Sociedad Argentina de Escritores (SADE), he notes that its members are all advanced in age and that they have chosen as their meeting location a museum—a place that is commonly associated with storing and showcasing things of the past. By portraying the SADE members as outdated and socially distant Arlt questions their qualifications to represent the current interests of fellow Argentine writers. Then he moves on to point out that the books written by its members are not read (purchased) by the public:

Analicemos un poco.

El presidente de dicha sociedad [Leopoldo Lugones] es un autor del cual no se han vendido nunca más de mil ejemplares. Del vicepresidente ocurre lo mismo [Horacio Quiroga]. Del secretario [Manuel Glusberg] puede decirse que el libro que escribió lo repartió entre los amigos, parientes y agnados de la tribu. El tesorero [Manuel Gálvez] está en decadencia, tuvo su momento de apogeo. Hoy su literatura de la guerra del Paraguay no desentona con el museo.

Luego aparecen veintiún vocales. De éstos, quince son autores pocos leídos, es decir, no pasan de ediciones de quinientos ejemplares, de los cuales no se venden ni doscientos cincuenta, encargándose los infraescriptos de repartir los ejemplares restantes entre los amigos, los parientes y los enemigos. Luego aparecen tres mil ejemplares de venta efectivos, y otros tres que oscilan entre los dos mil y tres mil ejemplares.

Yo creo que el padre putativo de Rocambole tenía razón al decir que para hacer guiso de liebre, hacía falta, ante todo, una liebre. (*CP* 59)

The SADE, which counted Borges among its members, was made up by the most renowned writers of the period as well as those belonging to the upper class. However, by introducing his or her ability to establish rapport with the reading public—gauged by the number of book sales—as a crucial criterion in the consideration of someone as a writer, Arlt proposes a revision of the concept of writer and literature as well as questions the inclusion of its current members in the SADE. Arlt reinforces this criterion when reviewing Enrique González Tuñón and his freshly published book *La rueda del molino mal pintado* in “El libro de los pelafustanes.” “Es un libro muy bueno,” Arlt remarks, “tan bueno, que si se le comienza a leer no se larga hasta que no se ha terminado. Creo que éste es el mayor elogio que se puede hacer de un escritor. Porque los libros se compran para leerlos y no para decir que son buenos y luego arrinconarlos en un estante” (46-47).

Once again, in “Por qué no se vende el libro argentino” and “La lectora que defiende el libro nacional,” Arlt singles out the low sale of books by national authors among the popular sector. In response to his negative assessment on national books expressed in the former aguafuerte, a female reader, we are told, writes him a letter making reference to the positive coverage that the Exposición Nacional del Libro has received in various newspapers of Buenos Aires. The female reader may be real, or she could be a character merely devised to propose his counter argument: that the reviews of national books and the national book fairs are, akin to fixed boxing matches, scripted and that, although known to journalists but not apparent to the readers, literary criticism is just another form of book marketing. And underscoring his initial criticism of Argentine books, Arlt writes:

Al público argentino se le da dos pepinos la literatura. Está harto de idioteces.  
Está harto de elogios de doce centímetros de longitud. ¡Está harto de todo!

Mientras el periodista, renegando del oficio, tiene que escribir, tiene que escribir que las novelas de Hugo Wast con sus personajes de “mirada fatal” son geniales, tiene que escribir que nuestro público se descrisma ante las librerías para poder leer la astracanada de un camello, el periodista, única víctima del periódico que lo inutiliza en cinco años de escribir pavadas, tiene que redactar un suelto diciendo que el público porteño es afecto a la literatura nacional, y que la Exposición Nacional del Libro, con sus discursadores eternos y sus editores deshonestos, constituye un éxito del cual debe enorgullecerse el país... Cuando lo único que le interesa al público porteño son los “burros”, el “football” y otras cosas más entretenidas, pero que nada tienen que ver con la literatura. (*OC* 246)

Yet as one can see in the above cited passage, Arlt far from placing blame on the readers, validates their indifference towards national books, thus proposing that the lack of readership speaks to the writers’ inability to capture the interest of the ordinary porteños.

As covered in chapter one, in the first decades of the twentieth century, in face of the growing reading public and success of the cultural industry and the newspapers, the question of audience becomes of increasing concern among writers. As it has been analyzed by Sarlo, the relationship between literature and the market turns into a point of contention between the martinfierristas and the boedistas (*Ensayos* 212-19). The latter, as discussed in the previous chapter, were actively involved in the dissemination of literature to the popular sector by participating in the cultural enterprise Claridad. The former rejected the mass marketing of books and went as far as disassociating themselves with fellow writers for their participation in the cultural industry even though they were neither affiliated with the Boedo group nor descendants

of recent immigrants—Horacio Quiroga being a case in point—and accused the boedistas of commoditizing art (222).

Although at times Arlt aligns with the boedistas, as evidenced in “El conventillo de nuestra literatura” (where he defends them against the attacks of Lugones by siding with the boedistas) and is friends with many of its members, he remains relatively neutral in the ongoing debate between the two vanguard literary groups. For example, in “Por qué no se vende el libro argentino,” Arlt remarks:

De una parte están los viejos periodistas, que creo todavía leen a Campoamor, y de otra una turba de muchachos que macanean a gusto en las revistas literarias. Ésta es la desagradable verdad.

Aquí no se piensa bien de nadie, pero se opina regularmente de todos.

No hay crítica, no hay espíritu nacional de literatura, no hay un fin social o artístico determinado, no hay nada.

Se escribe por escribir; unos para darse bombos mutuos: los ricos; otros para ganarse un premio municipal: los pobres. (*OC* 247)

Dismissing the vanguard writers as “una turba de muchachos que macanean a gusto en las revistas literarias,” he distances himself from the literary institution. His preoccupation with the public indifference towards the Argentine literary production was not merely an attack on the martinfierristas and their position on the market. Instead, it also reflected a larger preoccupation of his about the relationship between the writer and the audience, the art and the market, as well as with the concept of (national) literature: issues that were central to authors during the first decades of the twentieth century regardless of their affiliation.

Implicit in his above criticism on national writers and literature—for their lack of readership—there is a rejection of the traditional concept of literature, an endorsement of culture's entrance to the marketplace and a declaration that a nation is the people. With the rise of the cultural industries and commercialization of the newspapers, culture enters the marketplace. If for the elite writers this was a cause of alarm, for the middle and working class writers like Arlt it signaled the democratization and politicization of culture. After all, the commercialization of culture is what opened the doors to sons of immigrants and, to a lesser extent, women and the working class people to the cultural institution. With the entrance of the minority to the cultural field, the production of symbols, once a domain monopolized by the elite, will be shared with the popular sector, which from its new condition as producer will begin to attack the establishment, including the literary institution. During this period, along with the entrance of culture to the market, let us remember, Argentina moves from an oligarchic form of government to a more democratic one by extending voting rights to all its male citizens eighteen and older in age. The rise of Yrigoyen to power may have not produced tangible economic and political changes, yet it did redefine, albeit virtually, the concept of nation. If once the nation was the elite, with the ascension of Radicalism to the seat of power, the nation became the people in the social imaginary. Culture's entrance to the marketplace and the democratization of the country will lead Arlt to reflect on the new role of art, a reflection that is shared by his contemporaries in Argentina but also in Europe as these modern cultural and social phenomena were not unique to Argentina.

Around the same years, as Italy was also transitioning into modernity, the Italian philosopher, writer, activist, journalist Antonio Gramsci will highlight on the detachment of national writers and their literature from the reading masses. During this period, like in Argentina,



in Italy, while the cultural industry was taking off, the book market lagged behind. Instead of chastising the newspapers for publishing foreign novels that were highly successful among the readers, or the people, like Arlt, Gramsci will turn his attention to the domestic literary production and its writers: “But why does the public not read in Italy, when in other countries it does? Besides, is it true that in Italy nobody reads? Would it not be more accurate to state the problem in this way: why does the Italian public read foreign literature, popular and non-popular, instead of reading its own?” (367). To Gramsci, as to Arlt, the popularity of foreign fiction—popular and non-popular—among Italian readers is a sign that the masses in fact read. They do consume culture but a foreign one bypassing the so called “artistic national literature” (367). As Arlt, Gramsci attributes the lack of readership of national literature to the Italian authors:

The lay forces have failed in their historical task as educators and elaborators of the intellect and the moral awareness of the people-nation. They have been incapable of satisfying the intellectual needs of the people precisely because they have not known how to elaborate a modern “humanism” able to reach right to the simplest and most uneducated classes, as was necessary from the national point of view, and because they have been tied to the antiquated world, narrow, and abstract, too individualistic or caste-like. (367)

As culture enters the market, both Arlt and Gramsci begin to examine the relationship between the writers and the audience and the role of the art.

Walter Benjamin, also a contemporary of Arlt, on the other side of the Atlantic, will pen his own reflection on the consequence of modernization for the art in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935). Fittingly he opens the essay with an epigraph by Paul Valéry where the latter declares that the fine arts are undergoing radical transformations in form

and function due to modern technological advances. As art becomes technically reproducible, Benjamin examines the implication of such phenomenon for the art and in the process he posits that mechanical reproduction affects its value and function. Whereas traditional art derived its authority from its uniqueness and its ritual function, with the advent of modernization—namely mechanical reproduction—its original value and function will undergo a crisis. To make his point, he will refer to the cases of photography and the phonograph: the photograph through its close-up function allows the viewer to perceive things that the original landscape itself could not communicate to the viewer; and the phonograph, by reducing the distance between the original and the beholders, meets them in the comfort of their own home or in an auditorium. By doing so, although they do not alter the original work of art (landscape or the music piece), he claims, they depreciate its value or what he calls “presence”. Thus, he claims “[...] that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (*Illuminations* 221). As we have seen, the loss of “aura” is attributed to technological advances, but also to change of perception, which is affected by social transformations. Even though he does not use the terms cultural industry, commercialization, consumerism, democratization, urbanization, Benjamin alludes to these modern phenomena—which were also dramatically disrupting the cultural and social life of the Argentines during this period—as the forces driving the change of perception in the below passage:

This image makes it easy to comprehend the social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura. It rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things “closer” spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by

accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmed eyes. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former. To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose “sense of the universal equality of things” has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. (223)

The loss of its “aura” not only will impact the value of art but also its function. He writes: “But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics” (224). The function of art has been subject to change throughout history. While in prehistoric times the art object served as a religious instrument, later it went on to be appreciated for its exhibition value, and he presumes, its function will continue to evolve over time (225).

Both the loss of “aura” of art as well as the introduction of photography and film onto the cultural field are welcomed by the cultural critic. By focusing on film, he proposes that the loss of aura of art could lead to critical consumption of cultural products and could promote greater self-awareness of the masses. The distance that the camera imposes between the actors and the public would allow the latter to assume a critical stance towards the cultural product: “Also, the film actor lacks the opportunity of the stage actor to adjust to the audience during his performance, since he does not present his performance to the audience in person. This permits the audience to take the position of a critic, without experiencing any personal contact with the

actor” (228). Moreover, because with its advanced equipment the film can represent people and our environment in nonconventional ways, such as through close-up or slow motion, he theorizes, it would promote self-examination:

The film has enriched our field of perception with methods which can be illustrated by those of Freudian theory. Fifty years ago, a slip of the tongue passed more or less unnoticed. Only exceptionally may such a slip have revealed dimensions of depth in a conversation which had seemed to be taking its course on the surface. Since the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* things have changed. This book isolated and made analyzable things which had heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception. For the entire spectrum of optical, and now also acoustical, perception the film has brought about a similar deepening of apperception. It is only an obverse of this fact that behaviors items shown in a movie can be analyzed much more precisely and from more points of view than those presented on paintings or on the stage. (235-36)

By underscoring art's entrance onto the marketplace, in his *aguafuertes* Arlt also deals with these notions—the loss of aura of art and the artists and the social function of art—in relation with the question of nation literature. Berman has brought to our attention that in his *Communist Manifesto* Marx tears the halo of the professionals' head but especially the intellectuals. As we will see, both Benjamin's and Arlt's theory of art seem to be influenced by Marxist ideas, which may explain the similarities between them. Reading his *aguafuertes* in light of Benjamin's essay has definitely been helpful in reconstructing Arlt's concept of (national) literature and I will borrow Benjamin's concepts such as aura and (political) function of art when analyzing the chronicles, yet I hope they do not overshadow the foresight and originality that

Arlt demonstrates in his theory of literature. In tune with the sociocultural changes of his time, Arlt perceives the rise of a modern model of literature in the horizon, one brought mainly by culture's entrance onto the marketplace.

Because traditionally the production of cultural symbols was in the hands of the members of the elite, they were the writers and they defined what a nation or literature is. According to the traditional model, writers were sacred figures and literature served to separate people along their socioeconomic and sociocultural lines. Literature is written in a Spanish uncontaminated by foreign languages, with French and English being the exception of course, and does not mix with the masses. By advocating the gaucho as symbol of national identity and criollo values, they defined an inside and outside. While the criollos belonged inside, outside were the non-criollos. This concept of literature in practice has been clearly seen in Lugones' *El payador*. However, by claiming that national literature is that which is consumed by readers, Arlt, embracing literature's entrance into the market, proposes that literature is a cultural product thus removes the aura of literature; writers are mere producers tearing the halo of the writers head; the nation is the people; national literature is defined by the people (consumers), and not the writers; the concept of nation and literature is not immanent but is defined in relation to (in function of) its people. At the heart of this new concept of literature is the market for it is what makes this new relationship between writers and readers possible. Thus because Arlt conceives the modern culture market as the democratizing agent that disrupts the traditional concept of (national) literature, he advocates for the introduction of literature onto the market. And since the development of the emergent model of literature is dependent on the success of the book market, in his *aguafuertes* about (national) literature we frequently find Arlt preoccupied with what he conceives as a dysfunctional incipient book market.

As such, while the traditional writers and the martinfierristas fear the commoditization of literature, Arlt repeatedly declares the entrance of literature onto the marketplace. In addition to endorsing readership—the sales of books—as a measure of an author’s success, in “Por qué no se vende el libro argentino,” Arlt reinforces the notion of national literature as commodity and the reader as a strategic buyer and also addresses the current problem of the book market. He writes: “Entre pagar dos pesos por 15.000 palabras de un mal autor nacional y desembolsar sesenta centavos por 80.000 palabras de un gran escritor, esto es preferible. Como se ve, la diferencia no es poca. ¿Cómo se va a vender, entonces, eso que algunos llaman libros nacionales?” (*OC* 249). A book can be evaluated qualitatively but like other commodities sold at the marketplace it can also be measured quantitatively—by the number of words. National books are criticized because they fare poorly on either of the two categories: not only are they worse in quality than international classics but they are also significantly shorter in length. Given their limited economic means, the readers compare and contrast between the different options available to them and opt for the smarter buy: the international classics. Thus, Arlt, like Benjamin, removes the aura from art; and by underscoring that national books are not competitive against foreign books in the marketplace, he identifies the current obstacle that national books face in the market, obstacle that is delaying the development of the modern concept of literature in the country.

Moreover, in “La inutilidad de los libros,” Arlt presents the writer as a member of the working class by comparing him to a homebuilder:

Si usted conociera los entretelones de la literatura, se daría cuenta de que el escritor es un señor que tiene el oficio de escribir, como otro de fabricar casas. Nada más. Lo que lo diferencia del fabricante de casas, es que los libros no son

tan útiles como las casas, y después... después que el fabricante de casas no es tan vanidoso como el escritor.

En nuestros tiempos, el escritor se cree el centro del mundo. Macanea a gusto.

Engaña a la opinión pública, consciente o inconscientemente. No revisa sus opiniones. Cree que lo que escribió es verdad por el hecho de haberlo escrito él.

Él es el centro del mundo. La gente que hasta experimenta dificultades para escribirle a la familia, cree que le mentalidad del escritor es superior a la de sus semejantes y está equivocada respecto a los libros y respeto a los autores. Todos nosotros, los que escribimos y firmamos, lo hacemos para ganarnos el puchero. Nada más. Y para ganarnos el puchero no vacilamos a veces en afirmar que lo blanco es negro y viceversa. Y, además, hasta a veces nos permitimos el cinismo de reírnos y de creernos genios... (*OC* 188)

That Arlt desacralizes the author and literature has already been noted by his critics. However, this passage has lent to various interpretations leading to somewhat contradictory claims.

Christina Civantos, citing this passage as evidence of Arlt demystifying the writing process, states:

In this aguafuerte, as Arlt undermined notions of authentic, pure Truth, he questioned the very utility and purpose of books. In particular he targeted those Argentine writers who most strongly represented the conservative, cultural nationalist oligarchy: “Yo, con toda sinceridad, le declaro que ignoro para qué sirven los libros. Que ignoro para qué sirve la obra de un señor Ricardo Rojas, de un señor Leopoldo Lugones, de un señor Capdevila, para circunscribirme a este país” (*Aguafuertes* 183). While here Arlt dissolves the aura surrounding the value

of the written word and literature in particular, in other passages of this same essay, and various other texts, he demystified the creative process itself. (124)

Yet Mahieux has noted that in his *aguafuertes* Arlt performs a balancing act between humanizing the writer, including himself, and calling attention to himself as an intellectual thus at times he would set himself apart from the reading public and by doing so she has read this particular passage of such instance: “Roberto Arlt once compared his role as writer to the builder, emphasizing his condition as a salaried worker paid to construct text (*RA II*, 201). This analogy was apt, for in the 1920s and 1930s Buenos Aires expanded and new neighborhoods were sprouting up on its outskirts. In this manner, Arlt proposed himself as an agent of change that was transforming his city. He didn’t simply adapt to urban novelty; he set down the foundation for his city’s future” (5).

As Mahieux has perceptibly remarked, Arlt does both: while he is invested in systematically dethroning writers from the pedestal that they had placed themselves onto by tearing the halo from their heads, at times he will distance himself from the mindless throng. According to Berman such paradoxical behavior among modern intellectuals was singled out by Marx in his *Communist Manifesto*:

Why does Marx place that halo on the heads of modern professionals and intellectuals in the first place? To bring out one of the paradoxes of their historical role: even though they tend to pride themselves on their emancipated and thoroughly secular minds, they turn out to be just about the only moderns who really believe that they are called to their vocations and that their work is holy. (116)



In the case of Arlt, the emphasis on himself as an intellectual does not entail a belief in the holiness of his work but rather an emphasis on merit. As an immigrant writer with no cultural heritage, he often contested for legitimacy by calling attention onto his merit and denouncing the lack of it among traditional writers. In this particular passage, however, in agreement with Civantos, I find that he is in fact removing the aura of books and authors. The rest of the aguafuerte strongly reinforces this reading. According to Arlt, this aguafuerte was written in response to a letter from a reader who requested that the chronicler provide a list of must read books, one that may help the youth formulate a clear concept of life. Identifying the hidden assumption in the request—that books contain truth or can help access it—he sets out to demonstrate that this underlying premise is false hence he goes to the extreme of disavowing the utility of books altogether, a stance that puts him at odds with his other statements about books as we will see. He dedicates the first half of the aguafuerte to attacking the utility notion associated with books: “Para qué sirve esa cultura de diez mil libros por nación, volcada anualmente sobre la cabeza de los habitantes de esas tierras? ¿Para qué sirve esa cultura, si en el año 1930, después de una guerra catastrófica como la de 1914, se discute un problema que debía causar espanto?” (*OC* 187). Then he targets any pretense of authority by authors and goes as far as calling them fraudsters: “Es el oficio, ‘el metier’. La gente recibe la mercadería y cree que es materia prima, cuando apenas se trata de una falsificación burda de otras falsificaciones, que también se inspiraron en falsificaciones” (188). And again, in the process, he refers to the book as a commodity calling it “mercadería” (188).

Regarding books as cultural products and highly invested in the development of the book market, Arlt examines the problem of national books—their low sale—the way a modern analyst does: he scrutinizes the product, the producers, the marketplace and its strategies, and the buyers.

As we have seen, he found that national books were not selling because they were not competitive against international books and because domestic writers did not know how to appeal to their clientele. In “La falsa benignidad periodística,” “La lectora que defiende el libro nacional” and “Críticos teatrales,” Arlt will take issue with the marketing strategy, namely the protectionist approach taken by the newspapers. The newspapers, instead of submitting domestic books to fair and honest reviews, we are told, practice rigged literary criticism. Ordered to give them special treatment, their staff tasked with literary criticism fills the section with superficial and empty praises. Yet this protectionist approach, adopted by the newspapers to spur the national literary production, Arlt warns, is hurting everyone involved in it. In “La falsa benignidad periodística,” he remarks:

¿Quién tiene la culpa? ¿El editor, el autor, el crítico o el director?

Hasta la fecha, he conversado con mucha gente que se dedica a hacer crítica en los periódicos de circulación más importante de nuestro país y todos me han confesado lo mismo:

—Al libro argentino hay orden de no pegarle.

¿Quiénes se perjudican con esto? Pues los autores, los libreros y los editores.

Los libreros y los editores, porque no pueden vender libros; los autores, porque cuando son sensatos, comprenden la bancarrota intelectual que ofrece nuestro país y la inutilidad de continuar trabajando con buena intención, si es que alguna buena intención tienen; y el público, que harto de ser estafado por la crítica, el autor y el editor, se niega rotundamente a gastar dinero en el libro argentino. (*CP* 65-66)

Hence, he advocates freeing the marketplace from fixed literary reviews and allowing for fair reviews.

By claiming that national literature is that which is consumed by the people, Arlt proposes that a nation is its people, an idea that becomes apparent in his criticism of the traditional national writers for their neglect of the ordinary people in their writing, and disputes the concept of nation advanced by the cultural nationalists: that Argentina is the criollos and their culture and is defined by the elite. In “¿Para qué?” as is often the case, the aguafuerte is framed as a response to a question sent by a reader. According to Arlt, someone has recently written him saying: “Estoy extrañado de que no haya visitado en el Uruguay y ni de señales de hacerlo allí, en el Brasil, a los intelectuales y escritores, ¿qué le pasa?” (*OC* 242). From the cited statement and question, we learn the reader regards a visit with the intellectuals as a required stop over for a chronicler-writer like Arlt while visiting foreign countries. And that seems to be the norm; Arlt informs: “No pasa mes, casi, sin que de Buenos Aires salgan tres escolares en aventuras periodísticas, y lo primero que hacen, en cuanto llegan a cualquier país, es entrevistar a escritores que a nadie interesan” (243). Yet breaking with this convention, Arlt skips such visits because he finds intellectuals to be conceited and prone to lying. Instead, he prefers to spend his time with regular folks away from “literatos” for that is the only way to get to know a country: “Cada vez me convenzo más que la única forma de conocer un país, aunque sea un cachito, es conviviendo con sus habitantes; pero no como escritor, sino como si uno fuera tendero, empleado, o cualquier cosa. Vivir... vivir por completo al margen de la literatura y de los literatos” (243). Thus Arlt equates a nation with the common people as well as contends that insight into what a nation is like cannot be gained through traditional literature and their writers, notions that he reinforces in his criticism of writers for their tendency to favor either trivialities or high profile personalities

instead of taking on the common citizens of the country as subject of their writings. Due to the writers current tendency to neglect the common citizens in their visit of foreign countries, we are told, “los pueblos no terminan de conocerse nunca” (244).

Because to Arlt a nation is not the country’s elite nor the criollos, but the ordinary people that comprise the majority, their neglect by the traditional Argentine writers, whether at home or while travelling abroad, becomes often an object of his criticism. In “Usura Transatlántica,” as Arlt relates the tragic fate of some of the Spanish female domestic workers who arrive in Argentina alone—death by suicide—and the money lending scheme that forces them into domestic work in Argentina, he informs that one day he plans to write more about this matter in his literary writings, something that has not been done so as Argentine writers “se considerarían avergonzados de tocar un tema como el de la sirvienta” for “[a] los escritores argentinos les interesan las cosas superfina” (*LAPRA* 191). Thus Arlt singles out the traditional writers’ tendency to bypass the common people and their life stories in favor of superficial matters contributing to the public’s disinterest in national literature.

In addition, in “Argentinos en Europa,” Arlt condemns the current trend among the moneyed Argentines who, upon their return from Europe, feel obliged to publish a book or chronicles of travel in the newspapers. Noel, Lagorio, Rohde, and Manuel Gálvez are Argentines who do so and Arlt denounces. All of them, if they go to Rome, they religiously pay tribute to the ancient ruins because “ello es muy elegante;” and if they go to Paris, they predictably write about cabarets, Parisian women, and their gangsters thus evidencing their “miopía trascendental” (*OC* 233, 234). What they fail to see is the ordinary people in their visit of foreign countries and the main reason Arlt criticizes the travel writings of the upper class Argentines:

Lo que no ven los “escribidores” que nos aturden con chorros de correspondencia pseudo literaria, es que en los países que visitan hay una mayoría que vive y trabaja, que en todos los territorios recorridos hay industriales y fábricas que nosotros ni sospechamos, y con la inconsciencia de los botarates si van a Roma nos hablarán de cuadros y ruinas, y si van a París de tango, apaches y “entretenidas”. El resto, los millones de gente que vive ejerciendo mil oficios diversos y pasando mil tragedias distintas, eso sí que no lo ven. (234)

By entering the market, literature loses what Benjamin called its “aura”, but it gains its social function. Isolation may help literature clothe itself with mythical power, but it risks its own death. People, Arlt warns again and again, are growing indifferent to literature. The alternative for literature would be to join the marketplace (public sphere) and enjoy communion with fellow porteños.

Contrary to what has been claimed by the centenary writers and the martinfierristas—that the lack of readership is due to the cultural insensibility of the public—, when Arlt starts working as a chronicler, he finds an audience that is engaging and that there exists among the popular sector a level of culture that makes it receptive to intelligent writing. His aguafuertes are well received by the porteños. As evidence of their popularity, Arlt will get daily letters from his readers, which he has noted and thanked in many of his chronicles. In “La crónica n° 231,” while making an assessment on his experience and literary production in *El Mundo* at the mark of his 231<sup>th</sup> aguafuerte, he writes: “No ha pasado un día sin que yo recibiera cartas de mis lectores. Cartas joviales, cartas portadoras de un espíritu cordial, cartas que, lógicamente, uno lee con una inevitable sonrisa de satisfacción y que de pronto le descubren al escritor la conciencia de su verdadera fuerza” (*CP* 28). Similarly, in “¡Con ésta van 365!” he remarks:

Hay algo que me enorgullece, y lo digo sin vanidad. Son las cartas que me han escrito, no las personas que llamamos cultas, sino las otras: aquellas que escriben una carta cada dos o tres años y que movidas hacia mí, no sé por qué sentimientos, que agradezco profundamente, han llenado una página de garabatos, con cientos de faltas de ortografía. Cuando he leído esas cartas, sencillas, cordiales, y redactadas con palabras fuertes y giros dificultosos, he sonreído satisfecho. Esa correspondencia me daba la impresión de haber llegado hasta la sensibilidad de gente que los intelectuales dicen que no tienen sensibilidad. Lo digo con orgullo. (LAPRA 133)

And again in “Sobre la simpatía humana,” Arlt relates: “Escribo esto porque hoy me he quedado caviloso frente a un montón de cartas que he recibido” (OC 169).

Critics have already observed the positive reception of the aguafuertes and their ability to establish communication with the readers by making reference to the aguafuertes where the readers’ letters become subject of Arlt’s writing.<sup>33</sup> For instance, in “Work, Art, and Bourgeois Myths in Roberto Arlt’s *Aguafuertes porteñas*,” (2009) Steve Sloan writes:

Arlt begins his aguafuerte “Rosmarín busca la verdad” by referring to letters he has received in response to his publication. Inviting his readers’ responses was the most direct form of communication between Arlt and his readers. His readers were thus encouraged to assume the role of the interlocutor, and do so both by writing directly to him and by sending him samples of things they had written. (813-84)

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<sup>33</sup> In addition to Sloan, Sylvia Saítta makes this observation in her *El escritor en el bosque de ladrillos* (59).

However, I would like to single out that the letters not only evince to Arlt that his chronicles can open a dialogue between himself and the readers, but they confirm to him that communion between writers and readers through writing (literature) is possible in his country, a notion that excites him for he realizes that the alternative literary model is in the cusp of becoming a reality in his country. Since there is a receptive intelligent public, all Argentina would need is a writer that knows how to appeal to the public for the emergent model to take off. In the same aguafuerte, following a detailed account of the different types of letters he has received and the impression they have caused on him, he remarks:

¿Cuándo aparecerá, en este país, el escritor que sea para los que leen una especie de centro de relación común?

En Europa existen estos hombres. Un Barbusse, un Frank, provocan este maravilloso y terrible fenómeno de simpatía humana. Hacen que seres, hombres, y mujeres, que viven bajo distintos climas, se comprendan en la distancia, porque en el escritor se reconocen iguales. (*OC* 170)

Arlt is aware that European writers were already successfully establishing rapport with their readers. If Europeans were successfully doing so and the local market is receptive to intelligent writing, then Argentina can follow suit. All the country is lacking is a writer that can speak to its people as “iguales.” Literature made its entrance onto the market, but literature has not yet learned to captivate the Argentine public. His experience as a chronicler plays an important role in gaining such insight, an insight that helps him formulate his own theory of literature.

One can conjecture that Arlt lasted as long as he did in *El Mundo* for various reasons: among others, out of financial need, because it was a privilege for an author to have a signed and

dedicated column of a newspaper for himself, but also, I believe, because he derives great satisfaction from the communion he achieves with his readers, an experience that writers yearned yet was hard to come by in the incipient national book market. In “Por qué dejé de hablar por radio,” we are told that he is interested in a cultured audience and that after speaking on the radio three times, he stopped going because as he puts it: “No era posible perder tiempo con semejante clientela” (CP 100). Unlike his readers, who never fail to write him thought-provoking comments, he discovers that his listeners consisted of frivolous porteños: “Pero aquí aconteció algo que me puso nervioso. Fue la tontería, la enorme sarta de tonterías que contenían las cartas de las radioescuchas que tuvieron la bondad de escribirme. Como decía anteriormente: estoy acostumbrado a recibir cartas. Y raras son aquellas que no tienen algo interesante” (99).

To establish rapport with the readers, among others, Arlt tells us, one must try to speak (write) plainly. In “La crónica n° 231,” Arlt says: “‘Yo hablo en la estima de las cosas’ escribía el joven poeta cubano Saint Leger, y esa es la única forma de interesar al público; la sola manera de acercarse al alma de los hombres. Hablando, escribiendo, con una estima efectiva de las cosas que se nombran, que se tratan. Acaso sea el gran secreto para conquistar el estímulo de la multitud” (29). The use of everyday language in his writings, which has been extensively studied by many critics, has been conceived as a literary strategy against the establishment.<sup>34</sup> For instance, Lindtorm states:

Con tales preocupaciones, Arlt se incorpora en un fenómeno cultural más amplio: la búsqueda de un discurso alternativo, marginal al oficialmente aceptado. Es una reacción contra la fuerza opresiva del modelo presentado por los escritos patrióticos del Centenario, del lenguaje tal como lo utiliza Leopoldo Lugones,

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<sup>34</sup> Jitrik made this observation in *Ensayos y estudios de literatura argentina* (248).



figura emblemática del productor literario que se ajusta a las necesidades del “establishment.” (47)

To that, I would like to add that the use of everyday language was not meant to be a gratuitous offense, but had as its objective to establish rapport with the readers, which was central to his concept of (national) literature. When Arlt defends his use of lunfardo and everyday language against the language purists, he will remind them that “a esos ‘valores’ ni la familia los lee, tan aburridos son” (OC 153).

As it enters the public sphere and establishes communion with people, literature should bring about awareness in hopes of bringing social change. In his aguafuertes we often find Arlt acting out his theory on the social function of literature—most notably perhaps when he writes about the marginal zones of the city to denounce their neglect in “Buenos Aires se queja”—but this theory is also embedded in many of his aguafuertes. In “El teniente 1º interrumpe su lectura,” Arlt writes about a chance encounter on his ride from Morón to Once: He spots a military man reading *Sin novedad en el frente* by Remarque. The meeting, the military man and the novel may well be a set up to introduce the said book and others like it to the readers—*El fuego* by Barbusse, *El hombre es bueno* by Leonard Franck, and *La revolución desfigurada* by Trotzsky, which Arlt is currently reading. After praising the officer’s choice of reading, Arlt offers a quick synopsis of the book, which happens to be translated by Álvaro Yunque. The book apparently recounts the horror of war in its rawest form and it is praised by Arlt because it exposes the lies about war taught to people by the official institutions. Incidentally, reading, we are told, “es recibir influencias; leer significa perder conceptos antiguos para adquirir los nuevos, y lo bueno es que estos conceptos nuevos son contradictorios con el militarismo como profesión y más como profesión activa, es decir con el estado de guerra” (CP 78). And by writing about the book, we

may agree, Arlt is practicing what he preaches. In “Música y poesías populares,” while criticizing the tango poems as “estúpida, grosera,” Arlt laments saying: “Yo no me explico cómo algunos poetas de auténtico valor no dedican su atención a ese tópico de educación popular indirecta” (87).

### 3. The Emergence of Modern Love

Towards the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, as Argentina accelerates its modernization process, it will witness a proliferation of discourses on sex, love and family.<sup>35</sup> Conservative writers, statesmen and public health physicians examined, wrote and debated about these issues. In addition, sex, love and family were becoming the new hot topics of the emerging cultural industry. *Novelas sentimentales* (1917-1925), earning the ire of the conservative sector, often ventured into risqué territory—erotic desire. “Fuertemente erotizadas, y muchas veces condenadas por los moralistas de la época a causa de este mismo rasgo,” Beatriz Sarlo states, “las narraciones semanales cultivan el erotismo del lugar donde el vestido se entreabre: el erotismo del lenguaje de las miradas, de los roces, de las caricias furtivas, de los besos robados que anticipan y potencian el placer de la entrega” (25). Biblioteca Científica, the most popular collection of Editorial Claridad, Luis Alberto Romero notes, was dedicated exclusively to the question of sex: “Pero el mayor éxito provino de una línea totalmente diferente: la Biblioteca Científica, dedicada a temas sexuales: *El matrimonio perfecto*, de Van der Velde, conoció cuarenta ediciones en veinte años, y probablemente fue uno de los principales sostenes económicos de la editorial” (54). The finding leads Romero to declare: “Hay en estas décadas una verdadera avalancha de obras dedicadas al sexo” (64). Around this time, as Dora Barranco points out, the anarchists in Argentina also produced a significant corpus of writing on the question of sex and gender relations proposing alternative views on these issues: “El discurso sobre la sexualidad producido por el anarquismo hacia finales pasado y principios del nuestro se

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<sup>35</sup> This phenomenon is not unique to Argentina. A proliferation of discourses on sex has been identified in Europe with the advent of modernity—during the eighteenth and nineteenth century—as well by Foucault. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (New York: Random, 1990).

incorporó con densidad relevante a una vasta tentativa subversión de las costumbres” (17).

Furthermore, Roberto Arlt dedicates himself to the subject of marriage and courtship: “desde agosto de 1931 Arlt dedica tres meses a tratar de modo sistemático una problemática que atraviesa las primeras décadas del siglo” (Saítta XVII); and in 1910 José Ingenieros hosts a series of lectures on love which were posthumously compiled and published under the title *Tratado del amor*.

Why does the private domain become a subject of public interest as well as scrutiny during this period? The surge of writings on sex, love and family point to the emergence of modern practices and shifting sensibilities among porteños and a crisis of traditional gender relations and its institutions—the traditional bourgeois family, marriage and courtship.

In 1920, writing for *La Nación*, Alfonsina Storni remarks:

Observamos que la familia se disgrega: los padres pierden su autoridad antes de tiempo, los niños no obedecen sin razonamientos personales, las mujeres quieren hacer su vida, los hombres no saben mandar, han perdido sus fuerzas morales y la familia carece de un ideal profundo que encierre todas sus energías en un solo cauce.

Podríamos hallar infinitos hechos a que atribuir esta disgregación de la familia, que caracteriza y define nuestra época.<sup>36</sup> (63-64)

Roberto Arlt, a self-taught writer, and José Ingenieros, one of the leading public health physicians of his time—two intellectuals who were not always ideologically aligned—contend that the traditional bourgeois gender relations model is in crisis. In “Los novios no pueden conocerse,” Arlt declares: “Los millares de casos de matrimonios separados, desavenidos, etc.,

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<sup>36</sup> Cited from her chronicle titled “¿Existe un problema femenino?”

dan la sensación de que el matrimonio es una solución para un caso de locura amorosa, y que el noviazgo no ha sido un método eficaz para que un hombre y una mujer lleguen a conocerse” (VC 222); and in *Tratado de amor*, Ingenieros claims:

Asistimos a una profunda revolución de las costumbres y del derecho,  
encaminada a sanear los vicios morales inherentes al régimen doméstico patriarcal.  
Las consecuencias más funestas del matrimonio monogámico indisoluble  
comienzan a atenuarse en la familia contemporánea; la esclavitud de las mujeres y  
la servidumbre de los hombres han recibido ya robustas sacudidas, siendo  
verosímil presumir el advenimiento de nuevas formas de organización familiar,  
más respetuosas de los derechos individuales. (87)

According to conservative writers, statesmen and public health physicians of the period, the crisis is brought about by women—their entrance to the public sphere—hence in their writing women were singled out and held responsible for the dissolution of the traditional family. However, contesting such argument, in his aguafuertes, with a focus on the everyday life of common porteños men and women, Arlt points to the emergence of modern practices and shifting sensibilities among young porteños as the source of the crisis. Although Arlt also registers the changing role of women and their growing freedom, he depicts a Buenos Aires that is still predominantly conservative. Indeed some aguafuertes working women are using their economic independence and increasing freedom to alter the gender relations dynamic, but not only do they comprise a minority, they are hardly described as a threat. Aside from few exceptional working women, the aguafuertes women overwhelmingly emerge as guardians and champions of the traditional gender relations paradigm.

### 3.1. Women's Entrance to the Public Sphere: Threat to Family and Nation

The representation of the female subject in cultural productions as well as political discourses—of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century—articulated a national ideology that was clearly patriarchal in nature. In the late nineteenth century, as the increasing wave of immigration and liberalization of women threatened the traditional Argentine national identity, the intellectual circle commonly known as *generación del 80*, Masiello notes, through the use of the family metaphor, proposed a national vision that was highly xenophobic and misogynist in character. According to this model, the well-being of the family qua nation was predicated on the elimination of disruptive foreign elements and the return of women to her natural subordinate position.<sup>37</sup> As women began to advocate for legal reforms and suffrage rights in the early twentieth century, literary writings of the 1920's and 1930's, much like their predecessors, tried to curtail the perceived deviant behavior by articulating their entrance to the public space as a threat to the unified family hence nation (167-71).

The use of the family and erotic love allegories is not new in Argentine literature. Prior to the late nineteenth century, the romantics made use of them to make political projections in their foundational novels.<sup>38</sup> However, the sexual and family metaphors undergo a shift in treatment in the hands of the naturalists writers. Whereas the romantics use them to promote the early liberal model proposed by Sarmiento and Alberdi and to project political alliances among the heterogeneous sectors of Argentine society, the naturalists will use the metaphors to propose a biological model that was intrinsically xenophobic and misogynic. Certainly the liberal model

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<sup>37</sup> Francine Masiello, *Between Civilization and Barbarism: Women, Nation, and Literary Culture in Modern Argentina* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1992) 84-89.

<sup>38</sup> Doris Summer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991).

espoused and promoted by the romantics was not free of social and racial biases; however, as Gabriela Nouzeilles notes, such biases did not preclude the possibility of alliances among competing factions. With the advance of modernity, these metaphors—and the proposed national model they stood for—grew markedly more xenophobic and misogynistic.<sup>39</sup> If in the early liberal model the immigrant embodied the civilizing force that was going to help Argentina rid of its barbaric vestiges and women served as mediators between civilization and barbarism, as Argentina began dealing with the dark side of modernity—the growing anonymous mass, rising crime, social unrest and prostitution, among others—both the immigrant and women, now linked with modernity’s excess by pseudo-scientific discourse, will symbolize a threat to the national family.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, underscoring the central role that gender rhetoric played in the construction of Argentina’s national identity, Diana Taylor claims that the competing national models emerging during this period not only prescribed clear gender roles for men and women—with men occupying the public and the dominant role and women, the domestic and subordinate place—but also projected this misogynist bias onto the national platform. To assert their political legitimacy, the competing models resorted to highly charged gender rhetoric. In their contest for political power, unitarios and federales alike claimed themselves as the rightful national authority by exalting their masculine character while feminizing the opposition. In the early

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<sup>39</sup> The shift in treatment of the family allegory and the immigrant and female figures between the Latin American romantics and naturalists has been noted and discussed by Nouzeilles 20-21.

<sup>40</sup> The literary representation of the immigrant figure by the Argentine naturalists has been studied by Viñas, among others. See David Viñas, “Biología, escepticismo y repliegue: Cambaceres y los naturalistas”; “Naturalismo, herencia y purificación bajo Roca y Juárez Celman,” *Literatura argentina y realidad política: De Sarmiento a Cortázar* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veinte, 1974) 35-39; 217-19. And the symbolic realignment of gender and race has been identified by Masiello 140.

twentieth century, Taylor observes, the emergence of the Argentine military as a professional body was tied to discourses that exalted the military male as the ideal Argentine man. And to cement their political power, Perón and Evita relied on public performances and discourses that framed their political partnership along traditional gender roles: while Perón won over the crowd by projecting himself as the alpha male apt for public leadership, Evita wooed the mass by portraying her public works as that of the dutiful wife.

Corresponding to its patriarchal culture, the 1869 Argentine Civil Code established a clear hierarchy between man and woman within the family. When a man and a woman married, he became the wife's legal tutor; that is, he gained sweeping legal rights over her, from administrative control over her property to the right to establish the couple's residence.<sup>41</sup> Thus, by the turn of the century, the legal standing of Argentine women was precarious. In *La mujer y la política* (1890), the Argentine lawyer Luis A. Mohr finds their legal plight comparable to those of the mentally and physically disabled, or minor in age:

Segun la ley civil, la mujer ocupa la baja escala del idiota ó del impúber, sobreponiéndose aquella, por su dictado, á los sentimientos que emanan de la naturaleza y le señalan derechos propios no reconocidos.

Por ejemplo: la mujer no puede ser testigo en ningun instrumento público, como tampoco puede serlo el menor de edad, el demente, el ciego, y los demás incapaces reputados tales por las leyes civiles; como testigo testamentario se la rechaza lo mismo que á los privados de razón, los ciegos y los sordo-mudos; respecto á la representacion de terceras personas su incapacidad es también

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<sup>41</sup> Asunción Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890–1940* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1995) 194-97.



absoluta; no tiene así mismo patria potestad sobre *sus hijos naturales*, mientras el hombre la tiene sobre estos y los legítimos, con menos razon que ella: no puede ejercer en manera alguna la tutela dativa correspondiendo esta funcion tan solo á los varones, sin sujecion á condicion alguna; tampoco le es dado ejercer cargos civiles; y por fin, si en la plenitud de la mayor edad y durante el celibato la mujer tiene limitada su capacidad civil gravitando sobre ella, en medio del esplendor de su razon, las mismas exclusiones que pesan sobre los dementes y los idiotas, que han perdido los dotes de la conciencia, *en el matrimonio desaparecen y son absorbidos todos los derechos que le eran propios antes de este cambio de estado.* (116-17; italics in original)

Moreover, even by early twentieth century Argentine women were forbidden to speak in public.<sup>42</sup>

However, as Argentina accelerates its modernization process, women will contest their traditional gender role by stepping outside the home as workers and activists. It is widely held that this period sees a jump in the number of working women. Between 1895 and 1914, historian Asunción Lavrin registers an increase of female workers with a high concentration in the industrial and commercial sector: “Two relatively close national censuses in 1895 and 1914 delineated the growth of female labor and its occupational categories, despite the disparity of their classification. Between 1895 and 1914 women’s participation in the industrial and commercial sectors of the economy was striking” (56). This increasing female participation in the economy is explained as the result of the country’s growing industrialization, rising inflation

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<sup>42</sup> Marifran Carlson, *¡Feminismo! The Woman's Movement in Argentina from Its Beginnings to Eva Perón* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1988) 108.

and latest economic crisis. As the male head of the family's income proved insufficient to cover expenses, it forced middle class mothers and daughters to seek employment outside the home (90).

However, feminist historian María del Carmen Feijoó questions the commonly held view that an increasing number of Argentine women join the workforce during this period by indicating that empirical data does not corroborate such assumptions.<sup>43</sup> According to census data, between 1887 and 1917, the percentage of working women in Buenos Aires, she points out, does not rise but remains steady—close to 24% of the total labor force—except for a slight 4% jump in 1909 (288). The misinterpretation of census data and the growing anxiety around working women are attributed to their high concentration in certain industries and commerce (28%) and their growing visibility due to the shift in the nature of their work, from traditional domestic work to modern work outside the home:

Dadas las fuentes utilizadas en las secciones anteriores—personal empleado en establecimientos comerciales e industriales—no tenemos dudas sobre el total de mujeres desempeñándose en establecimientos, que alcanza a unas veintiséis mil. Si calculamos la proporción que esto representa sobre el total de mujeres con profesión, veremos que el número de empleadas en establecimientos diversos constituye alrededor del 28% del total. Se trata, en todos los casos, de trabajo que podríamos llamar moderno, trabajo afuera, definido por esta característica espacial, con una dedicación diaria o semanal preestablecida y un ritmo impuesto

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<sup>43</sup> In addition to Lavrin, this assumption is shared by other scholars. See James R. Scobie, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870-1970* (New York: Oxford U Press, 1974) 141-43 and Donna J. Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1995) 68-69.

por el empleador. Implica, por lo tanto, el abandono del hogar por parte de la mujer y de su función doméstica. Y esto debe de ser lo que seguramente asustó a los contemporáneos. (300)

Thus, whether a growing number of women join the workforce during this period, or not, seems subject to debate; however, what historians agree on is that there is a high concentration of women in the modern sector of the economy and a growing number of women entering the public domain.

In addition, women will begin to participate in the rising Argentine political and social conflicts. Highlighting women's participating in the rent strike of 1907, Juan Suriano indicated that "[t]anto en la defensa de los inquilinos como en las manifestaciones o en la organización de los huelguistas, la mujer desempeñó un rol destacado. Ausentes los hombres durante el día, la mujer era quien organizaba las tareas cotidianas en el conventillo" (17). And Mohr, paying tribute to Elvira Rawson and Eufrasia Cabral's role in the 1890 political rally, wrote:

Entre las muchas ignoradas, que preparaban hilas y vendas, alentando á sus hermanos, esposos ó padres en la lucha, la señorita Elvira Rawson, aventajada estudiante de medicina, dió la prueba mas acabada de lo que es capaz la mujer, haciendo destacar su simpática figura, ennoblecida por la conciencia de su mision, ora sobre el humo y el fuego de la pólvora, curando á los heridos, ora sobre las multitudes ébrias de entusiasmo, dejando oír su voz inspirada, que aplaudia los triunfos de la justicia y hacía cumplido honor á los combatientes, caídos en la fratricida pero inevitable contienda!

Y como la Sta. Elvira Rawson, tambien la señorita Eufrasia Cabral, inteligente educacionista argentina, habia sabido asociarse dignamente á los entusiasmos del

pueblo, con gran motivo de la gran manifestacion de regocijo que el domingo, 10 de Agosto... En la histórica plaza de Mayo, en el Club de la *Union Cívica* y por último en la casa del senador nacional, doctor Dardo Rocha, vestida con los colores de la patria, y haciendo oír su palabra, noble y sentida, fue objeto de estruendosos, de delirantes aplausos. (69-71; italic in the original)

But most importantly, during this period women will launch their fight for legislative reforms. Female writers from the creole elite will advocate for the emancipation of women and try to mobilize their fellow sisters to enter the public domain through their writings.<sup>44</sup> Professional women will also join the emerging feminist movement. Cecilia Grierson (1850-1934), the first Argentine physician, for instance, inspired by the democratic attitudes of her European sisters, found the Argentine chapter of the National Council of Women (NCW) upon her return from the second International Council of Women held in London in 1899. Because most of its membership was made up of elite conservative women, the Argentine chapter remained socially conservative dedicating itself mostly to volunteering work. However, the chapter served as a social venue for feminist women to meet others who were likeminded and discuss women issues thus helping further the feminist cause.<sup>45</sup> Cecilia Grierson, Elvira Rawson de Dellepiane, Julieta Lanteri and Alicia Moreau de Justo—all of them early professional women—are among its former members who went on to become notable feminists.

Early female political activism also contributed to the feminist movement. Within the anarchist ranks, Virginia Bolten and Juana Rouco Buela distinguished themselves for fighting for better working and living conditions for women. The anarcha-feminist periodical *La Voz de la*

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<sup>44</sup> Masiello, *Between Civilization and Barbarism* 87-93.

<sup>45</sup> The role of the Argentine chapter of the NCW in furthering the feminist cause is studied by Marifran Carlson 87-105.

*Mujer* (1896-1897) played an important role in disseminating feminist ideas; it called attention to the oppressed and subordinate condition of women.<sup>46</sup> But because the anarchist espoused radicalized ideals, the Argentine feminists gravitated towards the more moderate Socialist Party which took on the issue of gender equality as an integral part of its agenda (Lavrin 200). The socialist party, advocating for women issues, proposed full civil and political rights for women and protective legislation for female workers and also founded the Socialist Feminine Center and the Feminine Guild Union. Female socialist members played a pivotal role in the socialist party's pro women effort. For example, the Socialist Feminist Center was founded by Alicia Moreau (second wife of Juan B. Justo), Fenia Chertkoff and Gabriela Coni. Its party newspaper *La Vanguardia* also played a vital role in bringing women issues front and center.<sup>47</sup> As a result of these concerted efforts by the early feminists, in 1926 Argentina will grant women of legal age all civil rights allowed to men (Lavrin 210).

Contributing to their growing visibility, writers of this period will register working women in the emerging modern sector. The textile worker, la milonguera (the cabaret professional dancer) and the prostitute were among the most popular modern working women penned about during this period. A female textile worker who has fallen ill is the protagonist of Evaristo Carriego's "Residuo de fábrica:"

El taller la enfermó, y así, vencida  
en plena juventud, quizás no sabe  
de una hermosa esperanza que acaricie  
sus largos sufrimientos de incurable. (45)

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<sup>46</sup> Masiello, *Between Civilization and Barbarism* 87; Adriana J. Bergero, *Intersecting Tango: Cultural Geographies of Buenos Aires, 1900-1930*, (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2008) 134.

<sup>47</sup> To study the role of the anarchists and socialists in promoting women issues, in addition to Lavrin, I have also referenced to Marifran Carlson, one of the early historians of Argentine feminism 121-37.

And a textile worker turned prostitute is the main character of his poem “La queja:”

Porque era linda, joven y alegre  
ascendió toda la suave escala:  
supo del fino vaso elegante  
que vuelca flores en la cloaca.  
Porque a su abismo lo creyó cumbre,  
leves mareos de la esperanza  
quizás embriagaron sus realidades  
puesto que huyeron sin inquietarla;  
y la salvaron de los hastíos  
que levemente la desolaran,  
como poemas sentimentales,  
largos idilios de cortesana. (47)

If the textile worker from “Residuo de fábrica” is now bedridden from being exposed to the factory’s harsh environment, the textile worker from “La queja” succumbs to *la mala vida*. An early death is the grand finale awaiting both female workers of these poems. Linking female work outside the home with illness and moral corruption and eventually death, Carriego, much like the reactionary intellectuals and public authorities of his period, portrayed women’s entrance to the public sphere as a threat to the family and nation.

Textile workers also make their appearance in Armando Discépolo’s play *El rincón de los besos* (1911). In contrast to Carriego’s textile workers, however, they represent an alternative life model to the isolated, indolent and frivolous lifestyle of the Argentine bourgeois women:

¿Es que se puede vivir en esta monotonía?... ¡qué aburrida de vulgares estoy,  
mamá!... de comidas delicadas, de fiestas hipócritas, de cortesías mentidas, de  
luces, de alfombras... de brillantes... (*Se levanta.*) ¡qué hastiada de vulgaridades  
estoy!... (*Parada en el centro de la escena.*) No te has preguntado nunca, mamá,  
¿para qué sirve todo esto si al fin de cuentas respiramos como las obreras que van  
a la fábrica de tejidos y dejamos de respirar el mejor día, también como ellas?...

¿O, es que los ricos deben vivir su vida sin hacer parangones porque al hacerlos resultan más chicos que los pobres?... (169-70)

Albeit poor, unlike the bourgeois Elena, the textile workers chart their own path and have a clear sense of purpose.

Departing from the stereotypical profile of the working women, in addition to the domestic worker and the seamstress, Arlt will register working women from a wide range of professions in his *aguafuertes*, including the postal worker, the office worker, the dentist, and the modern shopkeepers.<sup>48</sup> Alfonsina Storni, also will dedicate her chronicles to working women. Domestic workers and seamstress, teachers, operators, typists, female nurses and doctors, manicurists, factory workers, writers, illustrators, shop keepers, among others, go on to become the subjects of her chronicles.<sup>49</sup>

Women's entrance to the public domain is met by a proliferation of reactionary discourses. The sight of independent women and women in public engendered anxiety about the future of the family and nation. Associating independent women and women's presence in public spaces with the dissolution of the traditional family as well as social chaos and disorder, intellectuals, popular tango song writers, authorities and public health physicians will begin to

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<sup>48</sup> His *aguafuerte* "La empleada que hace guardia el domingo" is dedicated to a female postal worker and her slow Sunday shift. The protagonist of his *aguafuerte* "¿Existe la felicidad para la mujer que trabaja?" is a twenty four years old female office worker who earns one hundred thirty pesos monthly. "Parecidos con artistas de cine" alludes to a female dentist who has a soft spot for Hollywood movie stars. In his *aguafuertes* "Pasajes Güemes," the readers are introduced to female shopkeepers, who in keeping with the "atmosfera neoyorquina" of the open-mall, are all wearing "[v]estidos reglamentados, melenas de corte reglamentado, tacos de altura reglamentada" (VC 11).

<sup>49</sup> Storni's working women can be found in "Las manicuras," "Las heroínas," "Acuarelistas de pincel menor," "La perfecta dactilógrafa," "Las mujeres que trabajan," "La costurerita a domicilio," "La médica," "La emigrada," "¿Por qué las maestras se casan poco?," and "Las poetisas americanas."

target women as threat to family and nation and reaffirm the traditional male-female relations paradigm.<sup>50</sup>

In “El problema feminista” (1912), Leopoldo Lugones, an emblematic reactionary intellectual of this period, blames the decline of the family and the rise of social crises, war and even the fall of great ancient civilizations on feminism. The welfare of a family and a nation, the author argues, is predicated on men and women taking on their respective traditional gender roles and women remaining within the domestic space, and men occupying the public sphere: “Los éxitos de la civilización que los pueblos disfrutaban en la prosperidad y en la paz de las ideas coinciden a su vez con el estado exclusivamente doméstico de la mujer” (3). Women’s entrance to the public sphere poses danger to the family for it entails their repudiation of maternity, their natural role, hence higher role, in favor of selfish and superfluous pursuits such as intellectualism and materialism: “Desde luego, insisto una vez más en la esterilidad efectiva que coincide con las épocas del feminismo; en el menosprecio de la maternidad, que el intelectualismo femenino comporta; en el abandono de la maternidad que ocasiona el lujo. Es que todas esas, son formas de egoísmo, mientras la maternidad significa una generosidad suprema” (5). Thus to Lugones, a feminist is a “mala madre,” “solterona” or “cortesana” (3-4). Evidently colored by bias, he does not conceive the possibility of a woman joining the workforce to care for her family or a woman fighting for equal rights to protect her children. But women’s entrance to the public sphere not only is a threat to the family, but also poses danger to society at large. He attributes the fall of the Ancient Greek Civilization and the Roman Empire, the decline of the European civilization

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<sup>50</sup> The reaffirmation of the patriarchal values in face of women’s entrance to the public sphere is not unique to Argentina, however. In the late nineteenth century, when England was threatened by “sexual anarchy,” Elaine Showalter contends, the dominant sector responded by prescribing the nuclear family as antidote to sexual perversion. See Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1990).



during the Middle Ages and even the social unrest that the French Revolution represented to the author to women's entrance to the public sphere (1-2). And he also goes on to blame the rising class tensions in Argentina to women's entrance to the public sphere: "Así la guerra social en que estamos com prometidos, tiene por causa y por responsable a la mujer. Es su abandono del hogar el origen de todos esos males [...]" (5). And if such distortion of history alone did not evince his misogyny, he also characterizes women as being short on logic and as morally and intellectually inferior to men: "La lógica nunca fue un tesoro femenino"; "Los derechos son una consecuencia de aquéllas [sus diversas condiciones], provienen del carácter moral, intelectual, filosófico, que reunidos determinan a su vez la actividad normal de los individuos [...]" (5).

In *El estado de las clases obreras a comienzos del siglo* (1903), a government commissioned report on the conditions of the working class, physician-lawyer-professor Juan Biale Massé opposes women's entrance to the labor market by arguing that their main role was motherhood and that the factories posed danger to their reproductive and moral health:

La misión de la mujer, en lo que a cada sexo toca en la perpetuación y mejora de la especie, es la maternidad, la crianza y educación de los hijos; en el vientre de las mujeres está la fuerza y grandeza de las naciones, y en sus primeros cuidados, la honradez y el espíritu de los hombres.

En la mujer casada, la vida del taller es incompatible con tales funciones, de una manera general; en la soltera, menor de edad, lo es también por lo que afecta a los órganos de la generación y porque es casi imposible salvar su moralidad en una edad en que la razón no puede substraerse al imperio de las pasiones y a las solicitudes de la carne; y en la impúber es un crimen, porque de una manera segura se sabe que vicia su organización física y mata su moral. (2: 151)

Similarly, in *Curso de derecho constitucional* (1902), lawyer-writer-politician José Manuel Estrada claims that her natural sphere is the private domain, her mission is to educate children and her entrance into the public domain would translate into the neglect of the family, which would have dire consequences for the family, but also for society at large:

He aquí la fértil y sublime misión de la mujer sobre la tierra: educar, bajo la inspiración de aquel inagotable y luminoso amor que centuplica sus fuerzas y le revela todos los misterios del corazón y del alma de sus hijos. Así comparte con el varón la soberanía del mundo; él gobierna en el vasto terreno de la política y la vida pública: ella gobierna desde el hogar. Las funciones domésticas de la mujer son incompatibles con las funciones políticas que se le quiere atribuir: aquéllas son naturales, éstas son artificiales: aquellas son las verdaderas, por consecuencia, y éstas las falsas. La condición social de la mujer limitada á las primeras se hermana con los principios de la democracia. Si la madre de familia fuera desalojada de su hogar y comprometida en las luchas políticas, desaparecería su elemento preparatorio, porque el agente educador de la infancia sería distraído en el gobierno de los hombres hechos. (2: 336)

Moreover, he claims that women's vote could disrupt the unity of the family:

Supongamos los derechos políticos de la mujer, y veremos que ha de producirse irremediabilmente uno de estos dos fenómenos: ó la esposa se adhiere á las opiniones de su marido, y entonces la familia no tiene sino una, y puede ser representada por un voto como en la organización presente de la sociedad, que no implica el peligro de alejarla de la cuna de sus hijos; ó bien se separará de ella, y

las exasperaciones de la pasión de partido introducirán la semilla nefanda de la anarquía en el hogar, dispersando lo que Dios unió. (2: 337)

Tango, the popular expression of the early twentieth century par excellence, echoing this period's anxiety about women leaving the private domain, discouraged them from leaving the home and reaffirmed traditional gender roles. Linking the barrio with family, the downtown with vice, and the milonguera's transition from barrio to the downtown center with moral crossing, the tango songs warned women against their physical departure from the barrio (Ulla, *Tango, revelión y nostalgia* 35-53). However, such portrayal highlighted an evidently male centered perspective. As much as the tango songs liked to romanticize the barrio and condemn the milonguera's departure as a moral crossing, her choices were often conditioned by her dire economic situation, her lack of formal training hence skillsets to enter the formal economy, and the limited opportunities available to women (Guy 66-67). Furthermore, if the dominant culture held chastity as a priced quality in women and portrayed women who failed to safeguard their virginity as fallen; men, on the other hand, were not held to the same standard. In fact, male sexual experience was regarded as a sign of male virility. Arlt exposes this double standard in his novel *El amor brujo* (55-62). Tango songs did not stop at trying to dissuade women from crossing the private-public boundary, but also attempted to discourage them from aspiring to improve their socioeconomic standing altogether by portraying women who dared to do so as vain and ambitious social climbers (Ulla 39-41). The tango songs with their mitología de la perdición and their increasing popularity contributed to fuel the danger associated with women working outside of home. Because of its humble origin, the explicit sexual language of its first songs and its dance moves with copular expressions, the tango was initially scorned by the Argentine upper class; however, as it gained popularity in Paris and with its well-to-do youth,

tango left its marginal status in the zona arrabalera to enjoy mainstream standing in the downtown cabarets (17-34). As tango moves to the center and its cabarets become popular with the porteño men of all classes, women working in these establishments also gain visibility. Their visibility is further amplified by the tango poets, who taking note of these new female subjects go on to dedicate their songs to the milonguera, making her the most popular female subject of the tango songs (36-37). Thus, even if they comprised a small percentage of the overall female population, the songs contribute to their increasing visibility in the Argentine social imagery.

Municipal authorities and public health physicians, who shaped public policies, also targeted women who did not mold to traditional gender roles and entered the public sphere. In her study of white slavery in Buenos Aires at end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Donna J. Guy observes that municipal ordinances that regulated prostitution and female work outside the home betrayed public officials' deep bias against women and their intolerance of women's presence in public. If prostitution was a symptom of an economic infrastructure that tended to marginalize lower class women, public officials did not go beyond targeting female prostitutes (40-43, 65). By associating female prostitution with moral vice and the source of social disorder and venereal disease, public officials simply enacted ordinances that enforced social and medical control of female prostitutes (46-47). For example, the 1875 ordinance only required female prostitutes to report to the municipality for health checks (50). Although it was known that men were also responsible for the spread of venereal disease, neither measures to examine and control male customers who frequented bordellos nor efforts to curve the male sexual behavior were implemented (44, 86). Moreover, even if extensive evidence pointed to the existence of male prostitutes and their role in spreading venereal disease, municipal laws exempted men prostitutes from mandatory health examinations (85).

Public officials biased view of women in public not only influenced public ordinances that regulated female prostitution but also female work. By linking working women with prostitution, municipal authorities enacted laws that drove working women out of the commercial sector: “In a society where working women were the exception, female wage labor in public places was equated with sexual commerce” (46). In October 1903 the municipal authorities passed an ordinance that imposed high license fees on establishments that used female waitresses and, treating them like prostitutes, required female waitresses to undergo venereal disease exams (67). The 1903 ordinance was further amended in April 1910 to ban female waitresses from cafes altogether (67). As a result of such public policies, women’s participation in the commercial sector diminished: “An analysis of commercial employment reveals that between 1895 and 1914 the proportion of female employees declined from 21 to 11 percent. The shift is particularly noticeable within the category of food and lodging” (67). Yet a municipal survey of 368 new female prostitutes conducted in 1893 contradicted the assumption of public authorities that work in these establishments led to prostitution: “[j]obs as cigarette sales women and café attendants did not lead women into bawdy houses, nor did work in the public sector. Instead, unemployment and those who worked in private homes or behind the scenes in businesses were most at risk. Unemployment and poorly paid domestic service, rather than employment outside the home, drove women into prostitution” (65). Public authorities’ response to working women in the commercial sector further highlighted public officials’ intolerance against women in the public sphere.

### 3.2. *Aguafuertes porteñas*: The Crisis of Traditional Gender Relations

In his *aguafuertes*, Arlt also targets women and holds them responsible for the current gender relation crisis; however it would be a mistake to group Arlt with the reactionary voices. If according to conservative writers, statesmen and public health physicians, women threaten the family by stepping outside the home, according to Arlt, women are aggravating the crisis by holding onto the traditional gender relations paradigm and its institutions—marriage and courtship—which in his view are increasingly proving problematic. Not only are they antagonistic to women's socioeconomic independence but also no longer compatible with the emerging modern sensibilities among his fellow porteño men and women. As such, contrary to reactionary intellectuals, who often portray women as a threat to the traditional gender relations paradigm and its institutions, in his *aguafuertes* Arlt represents them as defenders of the status quo. Independent and feminist women become subjects of his *aguafuertes*, but they represent an exceptional minority. Thus, although both the reactionary discourses and Arlt attack women, in fact they go on to take opposite sides of the debate; disagreeing on the source of the crisis, they propose different solutions. While the conservatives are defenders of traditional gender relations and family and they want women to return to their homes by claiming that their increasing freedom and work outside the home are threatening the family; contesting the traditional model of femininity, Arlt advocates for women's socioeconomic and political independence, and identifying both traditional courtship and marriage as the source of the current gender relationship crisis, he promotes an alternative gender relations paradigm, one that is more respectful of both men and women's rights and freedom.

The *aguafuertes* porteñas women emerge as champions of conservative values. If men formulate and uphold misogynistic systems in the public domain, Arlt claims, women, complicit in patriarchic systems, pass on their values and enforce their norms within the home and the

barrio. Often times in his aguafuertes, young women's obsession with marriage is explained as the result of their upbringing. For example, in "¡Quiero casarme!," Arlt writes: "Este desolador cuadro de vida porteña, se debe, exclusivamente, a la educación falsa que en nuestros hogares reciben las muchachas" (VC 175). Although Arlt does not specifically name mothers as culprits, by attributing young women's fixation with marriage as the result of the "educación falsa que en nuestros hogares reciben las muchachas," he clearly holds mothers responsible for their attitude towards marriage. After all, during this period mothers were the main caregivers and instructors of children within the home. Mothers also enforce the patriarchal cult of female virginity. With their vigilant eye, mothers jealously guard young couples to ensure that courtship does not lend to premarital sexual activity, that is deviate from its main objective: marriage.<sup>51</sup> If courtship drags on beyond the customary time frame, mothers will expedite marriage by coaching their daughters on how to effectively trap the young men or interceding on the daughters' behalf.<sup>52</sup> And finally, mothers ensure that bourgeois norms are adhered to by neighbors alike. In "Carta de otra madre," for instance, when a recently separated man moves to the neighborhood and, to the scandal of its female residents, starts showing up in his balcony in company of a string of women, even a black woman, the neighborhood mothers are the ones who will mount a moral crusade to put an end to the perceived deviant behavior. They will take up the issue to the newspaper and the authorities to expose and correct the morally reprehensible behavior of the man: while a mother appeals to Arlt in hopes that our chronicler will curb his scandalous behavior by

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<sup>51</sup> Roberto Arlt, "La madre en el balcón," *Secretos femeninos: Aguafuertes inéditas* (Buenos Aires: La Página, 1996) 27-31.

<sup>52</sup> Roberto Arlt, "Se casa... ¡o lo mato!," *Aguafuertes porteñas: Buenos Aires, vida cotidiana* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 2005) 181-82; Arlt, "Pase nomás, joven...," VC 188-92.

publicly censuring the man and his behavior in one of his aguafuertes, another mother in the neighborhood takes the matter to the barrio police.

Moreover, except for some notable progressive women, most aguafuertes young women are represented as defenders of the traditional family and gender relations. In “Primeras palabras para conquistar a la dama,” Arlt remarks, “La mayoría de las mujeres quieren arreglar económicamente su vida. Es decir, casarse” (VC 160). The petition by a group of girls in the neighborhood of Belgrano to fine men who choose to stay single is, according to Arlt, glaring evidence of young women’s obsession with marriage.<sup>53</sup> To fulfill their obsession with marriage, they resort to unscrupulous schemes. While in “‘Sacame de este infierno’...” a young woman tricks her boyfriend into marriage by making him believe that her family is a living hell, in “‘Quieren que me case con otro’” another one pushes her boyfriend into marriage by telling him that her family is pressuring her to marry a moneyed family friend.<sup>54</sup> As such, if for the reactionary sector the traditional family represents the foundation upon which a strong and healthy nation is built on, Arlt problematizes it by tracing the beginning of the traditional family to questionable motives and lies. Domestic women who, according to conservative intellectuals, ensure the prosperity of the traditional family, in the aguafuertes emerge as the main culprit of the crisis. Because in a patriarchal society like Argentina, women marry to gain financial stability and not out of love and resort to unscrupulous means to achieve their goal, Arlt suggests, marriages are doomed from the beginning.

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<sup>53</sup> Roberto Arlt, “Impuestos a solteros,” *LAPRA* 261.

<sup>54</sup> Arlt, *LAPRA* 259; Arlt, *VC* 206.



Such portrayal of women earns him during his lifetime the animosity of his female readers and posthumously, the criticism of his female scholars.<sup>55</sup> Speaking of Arlt's treatment of the gender relation crisis, Sylvia Saítta says:

Porque si bien “este desolador cuadro de la vida porteña” encuentra a sus culpables en todos sus participantes y en toda su estructura social, el dedo acusador de Arlt apunta siempre para un solo lado: son las mujeres las que, con motivo o sin ellos, bloquean la existencia de una sociedad más libre. Arlt no logra quedar al margen de los prejuicios morales que él mismo está denunciando y por lo tanto el discurso femenino ingresa en las notas desde una mirada escéptica que lo introduce para diferenciarse. (Introducción XIX).

Donna J. Guy, writing about the author's portrayal of women, specifically of prostitute women in his *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas*, laments that “Even to a leftist like Arlt, female empowerment was intolerable at a time when religion was useless and there appeared to be no hope for men” (170).

However, a close reading of his aguafuertes question the commonly held assumption that Arlt is a misogynist. In “El voto a la mujer,” as given away by the title, he argues for women's right to suffrage, but in the same aguafuerte he also sheds light to other forms of institutional misogyny. Circumscribed to domestic and subservient roles, Arlt laments, women are systemically denied access to the same opportunities as men. Although tasked with bearing and nurturing future citizens, he continues, women have no rights over the children they labored and cared for. Thus, Arlt promotes other women issues, but also by setting women's fight for political participation within the broader cultural and legal context, he identifies their struggle to

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<sup>55</sup> Arlt, “Reflexiones tranquilas,” VC 210; Arlt, “Interesantes cartas de mujeres,” VC 200.

gain political right as just another example of systemic discrimination against women. The argument of the opposition seems to make that evident. The opposition, Arlt writes, has denied them the right to vote on the ground that women are ignorant. However, he points out, ignorance has never been used as a criteria to deny voting rights to men: “Los enemigos del voto a la mujer dicen: ¿Cómo es posible darle el derecho de voto a una mujer ignorante? Sin embargo se olvidan que del derecho de voto disponen los hombres más ignorantes” thus rendering its argument baseless (*LMBA* 36). While the conservative sector fuels fear about women’s participation in politics by linking the feminization of politics with moral decay and national downfall, Arlt enthusiastically embraces women’s entrance to politics for they would help rid of two main ills plaguing the political system: charlatans and empty promises. With their practical side and community mindedness, gained through their domestic experience and family life, they would force politicians from resorting to vain rhetorical language and empty promises.

In “La muchacha en el balcón solitario,” Arlt condemns the patriarchal culture that curtails women’s freedom. Presenting a Buenos Aires in transition, he writes that while some young women can enjoy a walk down the street cozied up to their dates, most of them, prisoners of their own home, must conform to living vicariously—spectating fellow citizens love and live life from their balcony. In contrast to conservative writers who argue that women belong in the private domain, Arlt, by linking the public sphere with life and community, and the domestic space of the young single women with sterility and emptiness, suggests that barring women entrance to the public sphere is tantamount to depriving them of the most basic human rights. As Buenos Aires is modernizing, some of its women can venture outside, but according to Arlt, patriarchy still remains the dominant ideology and most families still adhere to its norms. As such, not just in the provinces but even in Buenos Aires, homebound girls are a common sight,

especially in the suburbs. Sympathizing with the fate of these young women and advocating for their freedom, Arlt questions a system that keeps women locked up in the name of (false) morality:

Y uno comprueba que este fenómeno de aislamiento no es exclusivo de provincias, donde la vida es por completo absurda, pues se tiene un sentido de sociabilidad completamente falseado, sino que éste también prima en muchas familias de esta capital donde las muchachas [son] víctimas de una moral que ya no es moral, sino majigatería. ¿Qué hacen? ¿Qué piensan? ¿De qué modo se entretienen estas sacrificadas? No se llega uno a explicar estas anomalías.

Aisladas, reducidas al balcón del crepúsculo; hurañas a veces, melancólicas otras, estas muchachas en flor dan pena por lo lindas y curiosidad por lo recatadas, con ese recatamiento conventual, saturado de curiosidades que no se satisfacen, de anhelos que no se cumplen, de proyectos que no se realizan. (*LMBA* 21)

In addition, in “La traición en el tango,” Arlt takes issue with tango poets’ sexist representation of the working class women as traitors and criticizes such portrayal for being both cliché and false. This is not the first time that tango poem lyricists are criticized by Arlt. In “Música y poesías populares,” while praising the tango musicians for their ability to synthesize the popular angst through their music; he dismisses the tango poem as “grosera,” “estúpida” and at times “canalla”:

Es cierto, escuchando la música y la letra de un tango, se aprecia esta diferencia: por lo general, el tango es triste, lamentoso, lleno de angustia popular. Y la letra es estúpida, grosera; a veces canalla y canalla sin objeto, porque la música rechaza ese embrutecimiento del coplero, que a falta de algo más lindo y más

sentido y más sincero, ha puesto todo lo atorrante que había en lo que creyó ver la música.

El tango, musicalmente, es lo más sincero que ha producido la inspiración popular argentina. (*CP* 85-86)

In “La traición en el tango,” Arlt revisits the tango songs’ misrepresentation of the working class as a whole but specifically of its women. If the tango songs, with their machista portrayal of women as fickle and unfaithful, reinforce sexist stereotypes of women, Arlt will problematize such portrayal by questioning the reliability of the tango lyricists’ own account. With that objective, Arlt presents their narrative as partial; he emphasizes on the lyricists’ abuse of cliché and dramatization:

Salvo dos o tres autores de tangos, el resto de los letristas hacen coplas verdaderamente infames. Es el eterno lugar común. Así como una mujer no puede ser linda, según ellos, si no tiene los “labios como claveles o coral”, así tampoco hay lugar a la letra de tango si el argumento dramático no versa en torno de una fuga complicada con las lágrimas del damnificado, que es el que pone el grito en la guitarra. (*CP* 89)

After questioning their reliability, he will offer an alternative account of the working class and its women, a version that must have rung true to his middle class readers who were not unfamiliar with economic volatility hence poverty. Although tango poems tend to romanticize their love affairs, Arlt writes, working class people, women and men, are too busy actually laboring to be fooling around. Traitors there are, but they are the exception. Sometimes a woman leaves her man behind, but if she does, she does so because the man is either a woman beater drunkard or a lazy pimp: “A veces la mujer suele irse, y lo hace la pobre cuando le toca un mal hombre de

aquellos que se pasan la vida en el despacho de bebidas y trata después de curtirle la piel a bastonazos” (CP 90); “Estas ‘milongueritas’ se cansan a veces del parásito que llevan a cuestras, y desaparecen un día del escenario de sus trabajos habituales. Escapan, se pierden, desaparecen” (CP 90).

But why does Arlt the chronicler overwhelmingly come across as both anti-women and anti-feminist to scholars and lay readers alike? I believe he is perceived so due to the fact that our reading of his aguafuertes is frequently conditioned by our reading of his novels. Usually narrated from the male perspective, the female characters are often portrayed as calculating, frivolous, insincere and untrustworthy. In addition, Arlt himself may have helped fuel this notion by often alluding to angry and threatening letters and even phone calls from his female readers over his latest portrayal of women.<sup>56</sup> But our reading of Arlt as biased against women may also be attributed to our preconception of patriarchy. Because patriarchy is an ideology that asserts male dominance, we often conceive it to be both formulated and advocated by men and men to be the victimizers, and women to be the victims. However, clashing with our predisposition to view women as victims of patriarchy, Arlt frequently portrays women as victimizers and this, in my opinion, could have reinforced the perception of Arlt as biased.

If Arlt is a feminist, why does he, portraying them as conservative and complicit in patriarchic systems, hold women responsible for the current gender relations crisis? Although Arlt’s portrayal of his aguafuertes women has been read as evidence of the author’s bias against women, it does not necessarily stem from an anti-women or anti-feminist sentiment. In her chronicles published between 1919 and 1921 in the newspaper *La Nación* and the magazine *La Nota*, Storni also represents women as both complicit in patriarchic systems and marriage

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<sup>56</sup> Arlt, “Me escriben ‘simpatizantas’,” VC 167; Arlt, “Reflexiones tranquilas,” VC 210.

obsessed. The poetess-chronicler often criticizes fellow Argentine women for hindering their own legal and social progress. In “¿Quién es el enemigo del divorcio?” (1919), as Storni deals with Argentines’ prejudice against divorce, she informs that this sentiment is especially prevalent among women who played a key role in stalling the legalization of divorce in Argentina: “¿Por qué no existe el divorcio en la Argentina? Porque tiene un enemigo declarado; la propia mujer. No ha habido vez que se haya hablado de divorcio, con alguna seriedad, que elementos femeninos influyentes no hayan tendido sus redes, oculta o abiertamente, para hacerlo fracasar en proyecto” (38). Frustrated by women’s opposition to its legalization, Storni will denounce women and their “ideas prestadas” and their “poca confianza” that keep women from improving their own legal status in Argentina:

El divorcio es singularmente beneficiador para la mujer. Frecuentemente esta no lo cree. Es decir: la mujer que se basta a sí misma, sí, lo cree; la mujer de cierto carácter, de cierta línea, de cierta ideología, sí lo cree.

La mujer que vive con ideas prestadas y tiene poca confianza en sí misma, le teme.

No se vaya a creer que siempre exista un temor sentimental; frecuentemente es un pobre temor económico, social. (40)

But Storni realizes that women’s fear of divorce is driven by their economic and social vulnerabilities, hence, much like Arlt, she also advocates for women’s economic independence and greater emphasis on women’s education.<sup>57</sup>

Likewise, in “Derechos civiles femeninos” (1919), Storni, while advocating for equal civil and political rights for women, attributes their current legal plight to no other than women

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<sup>57</sup> On the role that money plays on marriage and separation, see Arlt’s “Se casa... ¡o lo mato” VC 180-81; on social pressure to marry, see “Interesantes cartas de mujeres” VC 202.

themselves: “Y las mujeres somos las verdaderas responsables de ello; es nuestra hipocresía la que nos destruye, la que destruye a nuestra compañera; es la falsedad entre lo que somos y lo que aparentamos; es la cobardía femenina que no ha aprendido a gritar la verdad por sobre los tejados” (48). Storni holds women responsible for the state of their legal affairs. Their hypocrisy and cowardice, she contends, are prolonging the legal inequalities that Argentine women face. Thus, the poetess, much like Arlt, deems women complicit in the patriarchic systems.

Finally, in “La mujer enemiga de la mujer,” Storni notes that unlike men who, forming strong male bonds, become accomplices of one another in their pursuit of various life goals, women easily turn against each other thwarting their cause. Thus, Storni is no less critical of women than Arlt. Whereas Arlt attributes the current gender relations crisis to women, Storni blames the legal inequalities facing Argentine women on her sisters. Does that make her anti-women or anti-feminist? Indeed not.

Contrary to what has been assumed about Arlt, I believe, such portrayal of women in fact is indicative of the author’s feminism. Informed of women’s emancipation and alternative gender relations that are beginning to sweep across Europe and the United States, both Arlt and Storni must have eagerly anticipated these changes at home.<sup>58</sup> However, watching women thwart such

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<sup>58</sup> In both Arlt’s and Storni’s writings, Europe and the United States are cited as points of reference to assess the state of affairs of various issues at home, whether it be to speak of the gender relations dynamic or women’s legal standing. For example, Arlt writes, “En las grandes ciudades de los países civilizados, el matrimonio constituye un accidente vulgar en la vida de los hombres y mujeres” *VC* (171) and “¿Podemos aceptar que en las ciudades más civilizadas de Europa se practica la amistad amorosa? Sí, pero no debemos olvidar que allí un alto porcentaje de la población masculina y femenina se ha librado de la preocupación sexual” *VC* (239). And Storni states: “Votan, además, las mujeres, en casi toda Europa, y en medio de América. Lo que se concedería a las mujeres nuestras, es algo insignificante comparado con los privilegios de que hoy disfrutan en casi todo el mundo civilizado” (48) and “No imaginéis que sean, por cierto, mujeres que ejercen la profesión de bombero, pues esta clase de heroínas todavía no se han

efforts or being complacent with the current status quo must have been frustrating. Their anticipation and their disappointment at the delay of Argentine women's emancipation and the embrace of traditional gender relations must have contributed to their criticism of women.

Neither were marriage obsessed women exclusive to Arlt's aguafuertes nor were they portrayed in better light by Storni. "La mujer casadera," as Storni calls her, is the subject of many of her chronicles (126). In "Sobre el matrimonio," we are told she is twenty five years old or less, naïve and melodramatic (125). Her passions are marriage and children (119). As the modern version of the traditional woman, she places all her hopes in her (future) husband: "¡cómo no se ha de ser enemigo del que lo hemos esperado todo!" (129). Storni evidently questions her values when she characterizes "la mujer casadera" as frivolous but also as devoid of a worthy life objective: "la falta frecuente de altas finalidades donde asentar el objeto de la vida" (127). Although fixated with marriage, she lacks a good understanding of men and how relationships work hence she is predisposed to disillusion and failure: "Todas estas pequeñas grandes cegueras, conspiran para que la mujer no tenga una habilidad muy refinada para conservar a su marido (127). Nonetheless, this type of women comprises the group of married women.

She reappears as the protagonist of "Compra de maridos," a chronicle that ironizes women's fixation with marriage. The strong and steady demand of men among women, Storni writes, is creating a shortage of men to the point where "los hombres están a punto de adquirir el valor de aquellos terribles roedores" (118). According to historic accounts, during the famed siege of Paris (1870-1871), rat meat became a hot commodity due to food scarcity. By

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registrado en nuestra ciudad, llevándonos Francia la delantera en tan fogoso progreso feminista" (83).



associating the current value of single males with the value of those Parisian rats, the chronicler suggests that women's obsession with men is distorting their real value. In face of the current scarcity of men, some females are ditching marriage and venturing into spaces that were until then reserved solely for men, while others, horrified by the prospect of remaining single, propose doing away with the word "solterona" altogether (119). Yet a significant number of women remain hopeful that their tactics will yield them a husband. As for Storni, she would let the market with its law of supply and demand settle the matter. Thus, the poetess, much like Arlt, as we will see in the next section, associates marriage with business, an idea that resurfaces in her other chronicles. For example, in "Por qué las maestras se casan poco?" Storni claims that, for both women and men alike, money is an important factor in the love and marriage equation. While poor women tend to fall in love and marry more easily—"Más fácil le será entrar en estado de amor, o en estado propicio al de casamiento, a una joven necesitada del apoyo económico masculino, que a quien pueda ir sosteniendo su vida material con sus propios esfuerzos" (113)—single males who are in economic ascent favor females from families with money or social status over salaried ones like teachers—"A su vez éstos [los hombres], echan ojo sobre los apellidos o las fortunas y el desencuentro se produce" (114). Moreover, Storni links women's demand for husbands with consumerist culture: she concludes "Compra de maridos" stating that she would not be surprised if in the near future she comes across an advertisement of woman seeking to buy husband. Thus, if according to the reactionary sectors traditional gender relations and marriage are the foundations upon which a strong nation is built on, Storni, much like Arlt, questions such notion by portraying marriage as an interested business transaction and comparing women's desire for marriage with consumerist impulse.

Whereas Arlt's women relied on schemes to trap a husband, Storni's "mujer casadera" deploys her physical charm to that end. A mean of conquest, her physical appearance is the object of her obsession. In "La irreproachable," Storni tells us she is consumed by it: "absorben largo tiempo a la irreproachable para salir, como tal, a la calle a efectuar copras, o a tomar té, o simplemente a estrenar el último traje" (147). For her long and luscious looking eyelashes alone, she spends about half an hour just curling them and additional time every night treating them with essential oils. But lashes are not the only objects of her obsession. She devotes equal care to other parts of her body and her overall appearance: "uñas, piel, cabello, mejillas, prendas interiores y exteriores, absorben largo tiempo a la irreproachable para salir" (147). To look "irreproachable," she complements her daily self-care rituals with an endless list of mannerisms when out in public, including constant checkups in the mirror, touch ups of make-up, and tidying her clothes. Such passion for her overall look is linked to marriage when the narrator calculates the cost and the reward of all her self-care rituals and mannerisms in terms of a hypothetical future husband:

Lo que nos hace deducir que, si después de dos años de esta táctica para mantener la irreprochabilidad callejera, este fervor estético alcanzara el premio de un esposo, este esposo representaría, en el supuesto que la irreproachable hubiera salido a la calle nada más que dos veces por semana, cerca de 45.000 movimientos "ad-hoc", lo que significa un desgaste muscular, con su correspondiente acumulación de toxinas capaz de despertar el celo literario de cualquier moralizador higienista. "N'est pas".

Y luego, que se atreva a afirmar alguien que un hombre no vale nada.... (148)

Consequently, Storni's chronicles seem to enforce the notion that Argentine women were conservative when it came to their concept of gender relations.

Both Arlt and Storni dedicate many chronicles to working women recognizing their contribution to the economy and attesting to their increasing presence in public. In "Las mujeres que trabajan," Storni writes: "En la Capital Federal trabajan, según el último censo, más mujeres de los que a simple vista se sospecharía. Sobre un total de 1.132.352 personas que ocupan su tiempo en diversas tareas, con profesión determinada, o sin ella, 505.491, casi la mitad, son mujeres" (97). But like the aguafuertes women, as we have seen above, women in general are described as socio-culturally conservative and complicit in patriarchic systems. Enrique Gómez Carrillo's portrayal of Argentine women supports their assessment of their fellow female country women. In *El encanto de Buenos Aires* (1921), he writes:

Lo que a mí me deja perplejo cuando reflexiono en ello es que las deliciosas argentinas, que han sido educadas en todos los refinamientos de la cultura moderna, que han viajado, que conocen la existencia de las mujeres europeas, puedan tan de buen grado convertirse apenas se casan en las silenciosas y casi solitarias damas de quien todos hablan con admiración algo irónica. (88)

Even though while single the well-to-do Argentine women enjoy ample freedom, Gómez Carrillo observes, these highly educated women, exposed to the latest European ideas, willingly become submissive to their husbands as soon as they marry. Perplexed by their embrace of traditional gender relations, he conducts a survey among Argentine men and women alike to which an Argentine woman responds: "Y en cuanto a nuestra esclavitud tan glosada, puede que no sean siempre nuestros maridos quienes nos la impongan. Hay en nosotras mismas, no sé por qué singular atavismo árabe o español, un amor del hogar que nos invade el alma apenas nos

casamos” (94) thus presenting women’s submission to men after marriage as a choice.

Consequently, Arlt’s portrayal of women as conservative and his emphasis on their role in perpetrating the status quo cannot be simply ascribed to gender bias.

If on one hand there were fiery feminist Argentine women like the ones’ I have discussed in the first section, on the other hand, there were also plenty of earnest conservative Argentine women. In “The Visible and Invisible Liga Patriótica Argentina, 1919-28: Gender Roles and the Right Wing,” Sandra F. McGee sheds light to women’s contribution to the rightist movement in the first decades of the twentieth century thus further supporting Arlt’s representation of women as conservative and complicit in patriarchic systems. During the economic depression of the late 1910’s and 1920’s, as high inflation and stagnant wages deteriorate the living condition of the working class, Argentina will see a rise of workers’ strikes. Alarmed by the mobilization of workers, the conservative sector will reinforce its state forces with its civilian lead organization the Liga Patriótica, which will make its first public emergence during La Semana Trágica. In support of the police and the military forces, its armed vigilantes helped break strikes and re-establish order by repressing workers as well as patrolling the neighborhood streets. However, its role was not limited to providing reinforcement to the state forces during strikes: it complemented its repressive measures with more peaceful, didactic ones, which were led by the female Liguistas.

The Liga, which associated social order with the strength of the traditional family, also reaffirmed the traditional family and the traditional gender relations:

To the Liga, public tranquility depended on the strength of the home. Thus, in its view, the issues of nationalism, order, morality, and family were inextricably linked. In turn, the strength of the home rested on motherhood. As one Liga

member had previously observed, nationality had its roots in the home, and the mother was the “queen bee-teacher” of *argentinidad*. Mothers were the ones responsible for teaching children to love God and country, be obedient to authority, follow their moral duty, and resist unreasonable passions. (240; italic in original)

To this end, they recruited and mobilized women from the conservative elite thus creating two exclusively female Ligas: the Liga Patriótica de Señoras (June 1919) and the Liga Patriótica de Señoritas (October 1919) (243). Drawing upon their philanthropic experiences, the female Liguistas provided the working class women with an array of social services. While the Señoritas taught working class women national civics and values and offered vocational education at factories and workshops, the Señoras established neighborhood schools, maternity hospitals and day care centers. As varied as their services were, their concerted efforts had a common goal: to strengthen the traditional family (251). As such, their services were complemented with messages that reaffirmed “the conservative feminine sense,” which the Liga’s leader saw as the antidote to the “red lady,” that is the social feminist (252). Religion also made up a crucial element of the curriculum as it was viewed by the Liga’s leader to be instrumental in combating feminism: “As the ‘real woman’ was religious, teaching the catechism became an integral part of the Liga curriculum. Manuel Carlés [the Liga’s first elected president] considered religious training for women particularly important, not only because it encouraged obedience to authority, but because it neutralized feminism” (252). Even though over time these female Liguistas were forgotten by the general public, McGee writes, through the 1920’s, during the height of their activism, they enjoyed a strong public presence thanks to publicity efforts of the Liga: “The Liga issued many photographs to the press, and women appeared much more frequently in them than

the size of their membership would have warranted. A favorite outlet for these pictures was the mass circulation magazine *Caras y Caretas*” (257). If we read his aguafuertes in light of Storni’s and Gomez Carrillo’s accounts of Argentine women as well as McGee’s research on women’s contribution to the Argentine rightist moment, then Arlt’s harsh criticism of conservative women comes across less as an expression of his sexist bias and more as a criticism of conservative women who, to their own detriment, supported ideologies and systems that were responsible for their own disfranchisement.

In *The Girl on the Magazine Cover* Carolyn Kitch proposes that the United States, at end of the nineteenth century and during the first decades of the twentieth century—a period that coincides with its increasing urbanization, commercialization, bureaucratization, and the emergence of the suffragist movement—witnesses the rise of media stereotypes of women, construed and showcased in popular magazine covers. Kitch advances that these stereotypes expressed sociocultural ideals and anxieties of a rapidly modernizing nation. In “Las ‘chicas modernas’ se emplean como dactilógrafas: feminidad, moda y trabajo en Buenos Aires (1920-1930),” María Paula Bontempo and Graciela A. Queirolo, following on Carolyn Kitch footsteps, study the various types of women articulated in the popular publications of Argentina in the 1920s and find that

Los cambios en las costumbres femeninas introducidos por las nuevas concepciones de belleza y asociados con una mayor libertad—cuerpos más descubiertos, circulación pública—alimentaron distintos estereotipos en las industrias culturales: la *vamp*, la *feminista*, la *chica moderna*, la *trabajadora*. Como todos ellos colocaban en un lugar de tensión a la feminidad doméstica y maternal, fue el estereotipo de la mujer moderna, fiel a la carrera matrimonial, a la

domesticidad y a la maternidad el que se impuso como legítimo. (59; italics in original)

“La mujer moderna,” or the professional homemaker, they claim, was promoted as the standard model of femininity by the cultural industry; she appeared in newspapers *La Prensa* y *La Nación*, magazines *Caras y Caretas*, *El Hogar*, and *Mundo Argentino* as well as magazines directed to women *La Mujer y la Casa*, *Para Ti*, *Femenil*, *Maribel*, *Vosotras*, where women’s appearance was often emphasized by linking physical attractiveness with a successful “carrera matrimonial exitosa” (54-55). In the said article, Bontempo and Queirolo examine the figure of the typist as an example of “la chica moderna,” the single version of “la mujer moderna,” and find that there were few recurring characteristics associated with her: although negligent of her work responsibilities, she was often represented as strongly committed to her marriage career and her looks. In light of the cultural productions of this period, we can see that the aguafuertes marriage driven women are not unique to Arlt’s aguafuertes. In fact, they constitute a type of women that was frequented by the newspapers and magazines and other fellow writers like Storni. Thus, rather than attacking women per se, Arlt, attentive to the cultural productions of his period, criticized the dominant model of femininity for reinforcing traditional male-female gender relations.

Arlt’s contempt towards the traditionalist women, which often is interpreted as a sign of his sexist attitude towards his female counterparts, may have to do more with his concept of hegemony, to be more specific, his view of the role that the marginalized play in a given sociopolitical, socioeconomic and sociocultural structure, than sexual bias. In line with Gramsci,

Arlt conceives the marginalized as complicit in enforcing the dominant ideology and system.<sup>59</sup>

Having internalized the values of the dominant ideology as its own, it not only shows little resistance, but also upholds the hegemonic values and systems that are responsible for its own subordination. Women are not the only disenfranchised groups that are portrayed as doing so and that Arlt is harsh with. Arlt has shown equal contempt towards the middle and working classes for supporting the dominant ideologies and systems. Speaking of the middle class, in *El amor brujo*, Arlt writes:

Por inexplicable contradicción nuestros criados de cuello duro eran patrioterros, admiradores del ejército y sus charrascas, aprobaban la riqueza y astucia de los patronos que los explotaban, y se envanecían del poderío de las compañías anónimas que en substitución del aguinaldo les giraban una circular: el remoto Directorio de Londres, Nueva York o Amsterdam “agradecía los servicios prestados por la excelente y disciplinada cooperación del personal”.

Sociedad, escuelas, servicio militar, oficinas, periódicos y cinematógrafo, política y hembras, modelaban así un tipo de hombre de clase media, alcahuete, desalmado, ávido de pequeñas fortunas porque sabía que las grandes eran inaccesibles, especie de perro de presa que hacía deportes una vez por semana, y que afiliado a cualquier centro conservador, con presidencia de un generalito retirado, despotricaba contra los comunistas y la Rusia de los soviets. (64)

The working class also becomes the object of his bitter criticism for affirming dominant ideologies. For instance, in the same novel, when Alberto the mechanic asserts bourgeois norms,

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<sup>59</sup> For the Gramscian concept of hegemony, see Jesús Martín-Barbero, *De los medios a las mediaciones: Comunicación, cultura y hegemonía* (Barcelona: Anthropos; México: U Autónoma Metropolitana-Azcapotzalco, 2010) 82-83.



Balder, dismayed at his defense of the same values that supposedly are oppressive of his class, denounces Alberto in an interior monologue saying: “¿En que país estamos? Este obrero que tiene la obligación moral de ser revolucionario me viene a conversar a mí que soy un ingeniero, de la necesidad de respetar los convencionalismos sociales. Qué lástima no estar en Rusia. Ya lo habrían fusilado” (117).

As such, the traditionalist women, the middle class, and the working class often become the target of the author’s criticism. And they do not go unnoticed. For example, female readers, taking offense at the way they have been represented, will write Arlt angry letters, we are often told. What should one make of his offense of the marginalized? In Arlt’s own words, offense can serve as a means to arouse the humiliated into action. In “¿Qué curiosa es el alma humana!” Arlt states:

Sin duda alguna, todo esto es interesante. Más aún: revela la utilidad de las ofensas, lo cual puede considerarse un razonamiento trivial o cínico, a simple vista, pero que esencialmente, significa lo contrario.

Hay almas que sólo despiertan del embotamiento en que yacen sumergidas, por la presión de sucesos terribles.

Incluso, los necesitan, para que en ellas los valores básicos. Son como los explosivos de alto poder, que únicamente desarrollan potencia, cuando se los prensa a centenares de libras por pulgada cuadrada.

Creo profundamente en las posibilidades de estas almas humilladas, justa o injustamente, que desde su interior anhelan hambrientas el triunfo con el esfuerzo del éxito la magulladura terca que les ha quedado en el alma. (*SF* 76)

By describing it as “desastre,” “catástrofe” and “trágica,” Arlt calls attention to the gender relations crisis. For example, in “¡Quiero casarme!” he remarks: “Las relaciones entre ambos sexos (me refiero a los países de habla española) son un desastre en lo que se refiere a moral y espíritu. Físicamente no habremos: el desastre se convierte en catástrofe” (VC 171) and in “Si la gente no fuera tan falsa...” he writes, “las relaciones entre ambos sexos, se caracterizan por la práctica de una falsedad sistemática” (176). Whereas the conservative blames the crisis to women’s entrance to the public sphere, Arlt identifies the traditional gender relations paradigm and its institutions themselves as the source of the crisis. Portraying bourgeois marriage as a business transaction motivated by personal gain, Arlt on one hand questions the institution of marriage, but also by attributing the distortion of marriage into a business transaction to the traditional model of femininity and the strict courtship norms, Arlt advocates for women’s socioeconomic independence and greater freedom for young adults.

According to Arlt, bourgeois marriage is a mere transaction. In “‘Se casa... ¡o lo mato!’” Arlt observes: “No es sólo esto. Actualmente el casamiento constituye un negocio que en las familias se trata con la misma naturalidad con que se estudiaría la adquisición de un caballo... no de carrera... sino de tiro y pesado a ser posible” (181); and in “¡Quiero casarme!” he remarks: “Netamente se comprueba una descomposición espiritual en las mujeres que esperan marido. Una generación más... y el negocio del matrimonio forzado tendrá que declararse en quiebra rabiosa” (175). While women marry for money, men marry for sex. For most women, marriage is their ticket to economic (in)dependence. In “Primeras palabras para conquistar a la dama,” we are told: “la mayoría de las mujeres quieren arreglar económicamente su vida. Es decir, casarse” and similarly, in “¡Quiero casarme!” Arlt asserts, “Casarse es resolver el problema de la ‘piñata’, como dicen los ítalos” (160, 172).

On the other hand, a man marries, we are told, “[c]uando el tipo ‘no da más’ o ‘no puede más’” (*LAPRA* 251). The high vigilance that young couples are subjected to during courtship grooms young men, who otherwise are disinterested in settling down, into marriage. After a year or two under the sadistic system, we are told, “terminan por convertirlo a un individuo en un perfecto imbécil capaz de firmar el acta de su casamiento, y aun su propia pena de muerte” (250). By proposing that the high vigilance put in place to safeguard the sexual purity of women is used as a bait to push men into marriage, Arlt seems to question both the high vigilance and the societal obsession with women’s sexual purity. In this business transaction, where love is rarely or never part of the equation, men and women’s objective is simply to maximize their end of the bargain.<sup>60</sup> To this end, in some cases, parents would go as far as allowing their daughters to be courted by married men with a formal promise of a divorce.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, to seal the deal, mothers and daughters will resort to questionable schemes and brothers, to verbal threats and violence.<sup>62</sup> Thus, Arlt characterizes bourgeois marriage as riddled with amorality and hypocrisy and describes the current gender relations as a “lucha endemoniada y curiosa” (*VC* “Primeras palabras para conquistar a la dama” 162).

By referring courtship as a “régimen, verdaderamente sádico” and “comedia,” Arlt also underlines the shortcomings of bourgeois courtship (*LAPRA* “El noviazgo y el matrimonio” 250; *VC* “Dos comedias: flirt y noviazgo” 185). According to Arlt, the strict social norms to which boyfriends and girlfriends are subjected to during courtship are an obstacle to its main objective: getting to know each other. The rules that are in place to safeguard women’s sexual purity build

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<sup>60</sup> Arlt, “Lo esencial es casarse,” *VC* 166.

<sup>61</sup> Arlt, “‘¡Quiero casarme!’,” *VC* 174.

<sup>62</sup> Arlt, “‘Se casa... ¡o lo mato!’,” *VC* 180.

such a sexual tension in men that it makes it impossible for them to get to know their female partner:

A ese período de inflamamiento psíquico, de recalentamiento sensorial, de exaltación de todas las facultades del alma, amarradas con chaleco de acero y cinturón de castidad, la gente—no sé si para burlarse de su comedia—, lo titula noviazgo, o período de mutuo conocimiento. Este período de conocimiento, es tan real, como si tomáramos a un individuo y lo emborracháramos, para que las determinaciones que toma en ese momento de embriaguez, le sirvan luego de guía en la vida, cuando no estuviera borracho y si bien fresco. (*LAPRA* “El noviazgo y el matrimonio” 251)

Hence Arlt advocates for a relaxation of the current rules surrounding courtship and declares himself in favor of couple’s right to privacy. Though not helpful in getting to know each other, the build-up of sexual tension is certainly effective in speeding up marriage. A year or two under such a system, we are told, young men are not willing just to marry but even willing to sign their own death sentence: “Dos o tres horas de este régimen, verdaderamente sádico (para el que lo observe desde un punto de vista clínico y prolongado durante un año o más) terminan por convertirlo a un individuo en un perfecto imbécil capaz de firmar el acta de su casamiento, y aun su propia pena de muerte” (250). In addition, the high moral standard placed on the young men and women while dating, Arlt claims, often turn courtship into a scripted play or “comedia,” as he calls it. “En esta comedia de gravedad doméstica participan ambos, aunque a veces, el exagerado es él, y la más venenosa por contagio, ella” Arlt notes and further elaborates that while she “tiende a representar el papel de estatua de la virtud ambulante con bisagras en las rodillas,” he “[s]e transforma en un ente moral, supermoral” (*VC* “Dos comedias: flirt y noviazgo”

186). Caught up in playing the roles, young men and women fail to be their own self and talk about what truly matters to them. Once married, they discover that they do not know each other: “Y la única vez en que se muestran el uno al otro, tal cual son, aparece la verdad en todo su auténtico relajamiento. No se conocen” (187). The thousand marriages that end in separation or divorce evince the failure of bourgeois courtship.

His criticism of marriage and courtship points to shifting attitudes towards traditional family and gender relations. What contributes to this shift? Arlt points to the emergence of a modern subjectivity and modern practices that conflict with established traditions and their institutions. In “Si la gente no fuera tan falsa,” after assessing the current state of gender relations as a crisis, Arlt observes:

Hombres y muchachas inteligentes viven hoy día oscilando entre la mentira y la verdad. Cuando les conviene, dicen la verdad; cuando no les conviene, mienten. Mienten y son veraces con sinceridad; parecerá un absurdo “mentir con sinceridad”, pero es que ante los ojos tienen dos verdades presuntas: *la verdad de los sentimientos y la verdad de los conocimientos y obligaciones que les han sido transmitidos desde la infancia en su hogar. Los libros dicen una cosa. Los hombres dicen otra cosa. Los padres dicen una tercera cosa. ¿Dónde está la verdad? ¿Quiénes mienten? ¿Los libros, los extraños, o los padres?* (VC 178-79; my emphasis).

As the emerging modern sensibility and practices clash with the traditional gender relations paradigm, the old model is revisited and there emerges a quest for what “la verdad” is.

The clash between social structure and praxis and the crisis resulting from this clash have been the subject of attention by cultural studies scholars. Reguillo writes:

Sin embargo, como se ha dicho la vida cotidiana es histórica y de acuerdo a la teoría de la práctica de Bourdieu (1987), las prácticas (cultura en movimiento) y estructuras (cultura objetivada) se articulan mediante el *habitus* (cultura incorporada) en una dinámica garantizada por las estructuras de plausibilidad, es decir, por las condiciones que hacen posibles las prácticas. Cuando estas estructuras de plausibilidad fallan o entran en crisis, se produce un desajuste o una ruptura, entre la práctica y la estructura que genera movimientos en el *habitus*, es decir, en los esquemas de percepción, valoración y acción sobre el mundo social.

(4; italics in original)

Beginning the late nineteen century, as a consequence of its accelerated modernization process, Argentina will see a surge of conflicts disrupting life as once known. Referring to this period, Sebreli observed: “el cambio rápido y violento de las condiciones sociales trae como consecuencia un desarreglo, una profunda desorganización y desasimilación” (20-21). The clash between traditional institutions and the emerging modern praxis and ensuing crisis is one example of the rising conflicts that mark this period.

In face of this clash, while the conservative sector, as we have seen, perceiving it as a threat to the established social order, will mount a defense of tradition, Arlt will advocate for a revision of the traditional institutions by both highlighting on the crisis resulting from the clash and defending the modern emerging sensibility and practices. Although his criticism of the traditional gender relations paradigm and institutions can be clearly outlined, the practices that Arlt defends or the alternative models that he proposes are not always self-evident but often ciphred as references. This could be due to the fact that the practices he defends and the alternative models he advocates for could have been deemed scandalous and controversial to his

*El Mundo* readers hence subject to censure. He tells us: “Si en un diario le fuera permitido a un hombre contar todo lo que sabe, yo no sé si el diario se agotaría o el autor del artículo perecería de muerte violentísima. [...]. Yo, que disfruto de una libertad inmensa, me tengo que callar del setenta y cinco por ciento de las cosas que podría decir. Ese resto de veinticinco por ciento, comunicable, lo doy a la publicidad” (VC 178).

It must be noted that this widely cited passage on censure is actually inscribed within his aguafuerte “Si la gente no fuera tan falsa...,” where he deals with no issue other than the current gender relations crisis. Following this passage, Arlt will allude to Judge Ben B. Lindsey and endorse his book *The Revolt of Modern Youth* by simply stating “Yo quisiera ser millonario para poder hacer una edición gratuita del libro de un juez americano, me refiero al doctor Lindsey. Este libro se titula *Rebelión de la moderna juventud*” (178). The lack of a synopsis to this book, I believe, is not accidental. The ideas espoused by Lindsey and his co-author in this book were considered controversial by the public even in the United States when it was first published in 1925. In it, Lindsey, an experienced juvenile and family court judge from Denver, along with his co-author Wainwright Evans, emphasizing on the current crisis among the youth and the young adults, advocates for sexual freedom and a revision of the traditional institutions—marriage and courtship. Drawing from his twenty five years of experience working with youth from diverse socioeconomic background, Lindsey writes about a shift in attitude towards sex and the institution of marriage taking place among the American youth. Although not apparent to parents, community leaders, school administrator, and teachers, he claims, teenagers and young adults are increasingly engaging in sexual acts before marriage. The strict moral code taught and enforced at home as well as at school may have been successful at driving them out of sight, but have not succeeded at stopping them. Countless high school girls of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds

had sought his help either because they became pregnant or were ailing from a sexual related illnesses. As diverse as their circumstances were, they all shared one thing in common: they sought his help because they were afraid of their parents. Their cases, Judge Lindsey claims, point to the fact that the rigid social standards and conventions are not effective at addressing the problems he is seeing among the youth. If they don't drive these issues underground, he argues, they foster greater defiance and rebellion among them. Mary would be a case in point. In open defiance to social norms, twenty-two years old Mary—whom the Judge came to know while assisting their mutual acquaintance Mauve—refusing to marry chose instead to live with her partner and her family was not able to stop it. Before moving away with her current partner, she had been in a relationship with a young man named Bill for two years. Bill had proposed, but she turned him down. As a financially independent young woman, she did not see the need or benefit of marriage. Legally speaking, Mary claimed, marriage was an institution that favored men at the expense of women. To address these social issues, he proposes on one hand reassessing the unrealistic sex standard—celibacy—imposed upon the youth and the reconsideration of the traditional institution of marriage:

On the other hand, I cannot, with sincerity or honesty, say to Mary or anybody else that I think the institution of marriage *as we have it* [is] capable of guaranteeing happiness to persons who enter it. I cannot escape admitting that if marriage is ever to merit the unqualified support of society it must be able to show results reasonably commensurate with its claims; and that for whatever unhappiness it produces by reason of its present rigid code it must be held answerable. Nor can I pass in silence over the fact that marriage is ordained for the welfare and happiness of mankind, and that mankind was not made for it; that



marriage is not an end but a means; that when a shoe does not fit, it is the shoe rather than the foot that must be altered. As to the demand for celibacy as an alternative to a possibly disastrous marriage, why waste one's breathe making demands which people would never meet and which would do violence to a necessary instinct if they did meet it? (139-40)

In addition, Arlt declares himself in favor of de-institutionalizing gender relations by citing the British thinker William Russell:

Un pensador inglés, bastante conocido en los países sajones, sir William Russell, sostiene una tesis muy interesante. Esta tesis, como todas las tesis repleta de sentido común, se expresa en muy pocas palabras:

“El estado (y en consecuencia la familia) no tiene derecho a inmiscuirse entre las relaciones de ambos sexos hasta que no aparece un hijo, que es el que sanciona la intervención del estado, convirtiendo entonces dicha relación en un matrimonio.”

A mí [Arlt] me parece que como tesis es interesante... Sobre todo para pensarla.

(VC “Los novios no pueden conocerse” 225-26)

Although he does not openly advocate for the idea, from his support of Russell's proposal, we can infer that Arlt favors the alternative gender relations model espoused by this thinker.

### 3.3. Modern love

According to Arlt, during the first decades of the twentieth century, while the traditional gender relations paradigm remained dominant, an alternative gender relations model, which I will call modern love, emerged disrupting the traditional concept of family and gender relations. What is modern love and how did it come about? Whereas the old gender relations paradigm

stressed on duty, family, and tradition; modern gender relations valued individuality, spontaneity and sensuality. If the locus of traditional gender relations was the home, the street—albeit not exclusively—was the stage for modern love. Women’s changing gender role and their increasing freedom certainly contributed to the nascent modern sensibility around love and marriage, but as we have in the section 2, Argentine society and its women were still predominantly conservative hence the emergence of modern love cannot be attributed to women’s changing gender role and their increasing freedom alone. In *Aguafuertes porteñas* Arlt registers how the modern city street with its crowd and anonymity, along with the emerging urban social practices—namely strolling and erotic gazing—was altering the traditional gender dynamic.

In addition to Arlt, the emergence of modern love was registered by other writers of the period. In *El hombre que está solo y espera* (1931), Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz attests that along with its modernization, the city witnesses the emergence of new urban practices, which in turn will alter gender dynamics. Initially alarmed by the influx of single male immigrants, the city rushed to guard its women by cloistering them behind walls, but by 1920, Scalabrini Ortiz observes, a more relaxed Buenos Aires where “[u]na camaradería sin cortapisas se traba entre los sexos” emerges (53). The presence of young couples and their display of affection in public, once objects of suspicion and alarm, are now becoming the new norm signaling a shift in gender relations: “Ahora se baila en todos lados. Ya ningún polizonte espía los menesteres en que se distraen las parejas que en el fondo de un auto se hunden en el Bosque de Palermo. La ciudad se desencastilla a ojos vistas, abre los apocados postigos de su enclaustramiento” (54). In his *La cabeza de Goliat* (1940), Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, also attesting to a shift in gender dynamics, writes:

Hay también autos sedentarios, lo opuesto precisamente a los colectivos. Autos para intimidades, confidencias, y preámbulos. Cumplen desde hace algunos años la función que tuvieron las góndolas. En las avenidas solitarias, donde espaciados focos vierten una luz propicia al ensueño en compañía, están estos autos estacionados sin ninguna razón aparente. Lo mismo serviría la cabina de un teléfono, por ejemplo. Apartados para no estorbar, permanecen horas enteras en lugares apacibles y enervantes. Dentro hay una pareja—o dos—.

Ese amor tiene un nombre, pero sólo se atreve a decir su seudónimo; defiende lo más íntimo y se enardece con una ilusión; amor de fantasmas que acaso mañana mismo, a la luz del día, no se reconozcan, si es que existen y vuelven a encontrarse; ilusoria realidad de cuerpos de carne, engañosa como en los sueños de la solitaria nubilidad; coloquio de sombras; tristes y casual amor de caminantes, en el camino. (55)

By associating it with the modern form of transportation (“auto”) and communication (“la cabina de teléfono”), and noting that it is still fairly new (“desde hace algunos años”), Martínez Estrada identifies the public display of affection as an expression of a new type of love (“ese amor”), a love that is intimate, carnal, passionate, and fleeting. Although bold, this love has yet to gain official status (“sólo se atreve a decir su seudónimo”). And finally, in *Tratado de amor*, José Ingenieros posits that patriarchy, the dominant and decadent system, and its nuclear family, are yielding to an alternative familial model, one that is more respectful of the partners’ rights:

Asistimos a una profunda revolución de las costumbres y del derecho, encaminada a sanear los vicios morales inherentes al régimen doméstico patriarcal. Las consecuencias más funestas del matrimonio monogámico indisoluble

comienzan a atenuarse en la familia contemporánea; la esclavitud de las mujeres y la servidumbre de los hombres han recibido ya robustas sacudidas, siendo verosímil presumir el advenimiento de nuevas formas de organización familiar, más respetuosas de los derechos individuales. (87)

What contributes to the emergence of modern love? Certainly foreign culture, arriving to the country via print media and cinema, was altering the porteño gender dynamic. His *aguafuertes* evinces Arlt's awareness of new European and American trends. In "Peligros involucrados por la amistad," Arlt claims that friendship between men and women in Argentina is not viable because Argentine men and women, unlike Europeans, neither enjoy sexual freedom nor financial independence hence they are bound to enter friendship for financial gain or sexual favors:

¿Podemos aceptar que en las ciudades más civilizadas de Europa se practica la amistad amorosa? Sí, pero no debemos olvidar que allí un alto porcentaje de la población masculina y femenina se ha librado de la preocupación sexual. La lucha por la vida, ardua tarea en la cual participan por igual hombres y mujeres; el nivel de cultura; la libertad en las costumbres que permiten besarse en los lugares públicos, etc., han hecho que lo que podemos llamar "las necesidades afectivas" estén racionalmente calmadas.

Discutir la amistad entre ambos sexos, refiriéndose al Viejo Mundo, es una tontería. (VC 239)

In addition, as Arlt examines women's obsession with marriage in "¡Quiero casarme!" he explains that their obsession is due to their upbringing: Argentine women, in contrast to their

European and North American sisters who are raised to be financially independent, are groomed to believe that their only aspiration in life is marriage:

En las grandes ciudades de los países civilizados, el matrimonio constituye un accidente vulgar en la vida de los hombres y mujeres. Y se explica. Hombres y mujeres se ganan la vida y las relaciones entre ambos son en absoluto desinteresadas. Casamiento y divorcio es un suceso tan corriente como aquí beberse un copetín. He leído una estadística norteamericana en la cual se constata que de cada cinco matrimonios, uno se divorcia.

En cambio, en los países de habla española, las mujeres son criadas con el exclusivo pensamiento de que al llegar a determinada edad “hay que casarse”.

Casarse es resolver el problema de la “piñata”, como dicen los ítalos. (171-72)

In the process, we learn that Argentines are not only informed that Europeans and Americans, shifting away from the traditional gender relations paradigm, are gravitating towards a more modern gender relations model; but also that they use Europe and the United States as a point of reference to discuss Argentine gender dynamic. When Arlt assesses the state of Argentine courtships and marriages, he does it in light of what is going on in Europe and the United States. The contrast between the state of Argentine gender relations and the other two regions' gender relations must have contributed to the increasing dissatisfaction among Argentines with the current status of their own gender relations.

Such dissatisfaction is shared by his readers who learn about alternative gender relations through foreign books and cinema but also word of mouth. In “Interesantes cartas de mujeres,”

we come across a female reader who has read the scandalous French novel *La Machona* and heard of affairs similar to the ones described in the book through friends:<sup>63</sup>

Nosotras, las mujeres, no podemos ser francas. Lo he comprobado por propia experiencia; he sido testigo de la dolorosa desilusión de uno que se decía mi enamorado. Cuando le dije que *La Machona* de Paul Marguerite no era novela con secretos para mí, porque de mis amigas había escuchado conversaciones parecidas, se desilusionó completamente. ¿Qué quiere decir esto? Para que no nos juzguen mal, tenemos que fingir una ignorancia que no existe. Cuando se trata, en el caso más simple, de un escritor catalogado “no apto para señoritas”, hay que callarse la boca. (VC 203)

Even though she is aware that some single women abroad and at home are sexually active with multiple partners, we are told, she must pretend ignorance due to fear of social disapproval. She learns from personal experience that not merely the free sexual conduct by women, but also the admission of its knowledge is taboo in Argentine society. Upon her admission to her boyfriend to reading the French novel and awareness of such affairs, she becomes subject of his condemnation. Whereas in Europe men can take on risqué topics in their writing, women in Argentina must be fearful to even express sexual curiosity. This realization produces in her discontent.

In addition to references to foreign books by his readers, as we had seen in section 2, Arlt himself makes reference to the American Judge Ben B. Lindsey and his book *The Revolt of Modern Youth* as well as to the British thinker William Russell and his writing. Although books

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<sup>63</sup> *La Machona* (1922), or *Le Garçonne* is a French novel by Victor Margueritte—and not, as stated, by his brother Paul Margueritte—that deals with the free-living of a young French woman.

are effective at disseminating new trends, cinema is becoming the most influential medium. By the time Arlt writes, Argentina sees an exponential growth in the numbers of movie theatres. According to Beatriz Sarlo, by the 1930's there were more than a thousand movie theatres in the country and after the introduction of sound film approximately an additional six hundred movie theatres open to play the latest type of films: "Los medios de comunicación escritos de carácter masivo se agregan a la trama cultural de una ciudad donde también el cine se difundió a un ritmo comparable con el de los países centrales: hacia 1930 existen en todo el país más de mil salas y, según la revista *Señales*, pocos años después de introducido el sonoro, se abren 600 salas preparadas para esta nueva técnica" (*Una modernidad* 21). Movies are altering everyday life practices, including ones relating to gender relations. Although parents, holding to traditional ways, may try to pass on old ideals about gender relations, we are told, movies are disrupting such effort: "Fíjese: mientras que un padre y una madre se preocupan por inculcarles ciertos principios a sus hijos (principios en los que ellos posiblemente creen o no creen) permiten que estos principios sean anulados por la cátedra amorosa del cine" (VC 93). After a year of going to the movie theatres, girls start disregarding the native rules: "He conocido chicas que al cabo de un año de ir al cine, cuando se les hacía reflexiones de orden hipócrita-moral, contestaban: 'Esas son pavadas'" (95). The contrast between the native way and what is represented on the screen, we are informed, exacerbates women's disconformity with the status quo: "Insensiblemente, el cine está creando una atmósfera de disconformidad en las mujeres y en los seres de ambos sexos" (95).

Foreign influence undeniably has contributed to the emergence of modern love in Argentina. However, foreign influence alone does not explain the emergence of modern love. For a foreign concept and social practice to thrive at home, they must be supported by certain

social and cultural conditions that ensure their success in the new host country. In addition to foreign culture, Buenos Aires and its streets were contributing to the emergence of modern love. According to Arlt's aguafuertes, by the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, the streets of Buenos Aires were becoming at once the catalysts and stages of modern love. The modern streets of Buenos Aires opened doors to spontaneous and sensual encounters between men and women. Sudden (dis)encounter or "instantaneo apasionamiento," as Arlt would call it, is the subject of two aguafuertes and is taken up again in his novels *Los siete locos* and *El amor brujo*. "El indeciso," Arlt informs us, is triggered by an account of a friend. While out on the street, his friend comes across a girl who captivates his attention. As he debates whether to pursue her or not, she vanishes in a car. Due to simply ten seconds of hesitation, he lets the girl of his dreams get away from him:

Hoy he encontrado a un amigo. Estaba consternado. Le pregunté lo que le pasaba, y me contestó:

-¿Se da cuenta? Por un minuto de indecisión... qué un minuto... ¡diez segundos!, he perdido de vista a una mujer que me interesaba.

-Hombre -repongo- ¿no la conocía usted?

-No..., y ahí está lo triste. Cuando yo estaba cavilando si la seguía o no, subió a un auto y desapareció. No se ría...

Luego me comenzó a hablar de la desconocida, y yo pensaba, en tanto, que éste era un asunto para nota. (*SF* 48)

Similarly, in "Don Juan Tenorio y los diez centavos," echoing the first story, Arlt writes that the aguafuerte is inspired by a story of a friend. While out and about on the street, the friend crosses path with a girl for whom he feels an instant attraction. After exchanging a few glances, she



stops and gets on the tramway. But for the lack of ten cents, he is unable to chase after her thus losing track of his love interest:

Caminaba por la calle y, de pronto, una muchacha se complació en mirarlo. Lo miró recatadamente dos o tres veces, y de pronto, se detuvo en una esquina para tomar el tranvía. Y nuestro hombre se detuvo, pero pálido. No tenía diez centavos. En ese momento no tenía los diez centavos indispensables para pagar su boleto y seguir a la amable desconocida. Cuando llegó el coche ella subió y luego se quedó mirándolo con extrañeza de ver que él permanecía como un poste en la ochava, mirándola desaparecer.

Nuestro individuo dejó caer la cabeza sobre el pecho, y permaneció allí atontado varios minutos. Había perdido la posible felicidad por diez centavos. Estaba seguro que había perdido su felicidad. ¿Cómo sería el amor de esa muchacha que lo había mirado tan profundamente? (*OC* 58)

In addition, in the opening chapter of *Los siete locos*, Erdosain, Arlt writes, would take a bus and get off either in Palermo or Belgrano. As he wondered the streets, he would often imagine an idyllic encounter with a young girl that would set him free from his present misery: “Me verá una doncella, una niña alta, pálida y concentrada, que por capricho maneje su Rolls-Royce. Paseará tristemente. De pronto me mira y comprende que yo seré el único amor de toda la vida, y esa mirada que era un ultraje para todos los desdichados, se posará en mí, cubiertos los ojos de lágrimas” (12). In Erdosain’s imaginary escape, the street will lend itself as the conduit of love by enabling the chance encounter of two strangers—Erdosain and the anonymous rich girl. She will spot Erdosain while driving her fancy Rolls-Royce and instantly fall in love with him. Arlt further elaborates on this idea of the public place as a place of encounter where two

strangers fall instantly in love in his novel *El amor brujo*. But this time, it will be revisited to set up the encounter of his two protagonists. Balder and Irene meet for the first time in Estación Retiro. While pacing up and down the train station platform, Balder is interrupted by the stare of a girl. As the eyes of these two strangers meet, the two experience an instant attraction towards each other.

The brief encounter of two complete strangers on the street sets in motion a powerful emotional response on the porteños but also Arlt's writing. Why does Arlt come back to this seemingly cliché scenes? He does so, I propose, because what strikes to us as cliché was in fact a novelty to Arlt and the porteños of this period. By the 1920s and 1930s, porteño men and women were familiar with imageries of modern love (the public space as the stage of sudden encounters and display of affection) popularized by the domestic and foreign cultural industries. Hence, imageries of modern love per se were no novelty. The novelty was that porteño men and women were becoming partakers of these experiences; sudden encounters and passion, once leit motifs of romantic and modern fairy tales, during modernity go on to become an ordinary man's experience.

In his reading of Baudelaire's sonnet "To a Passer-By," Walter Benjamin suggests that the modern crowd changes how and why the city dweller falls in love:

This sonnet presents the crowd not as a refuge of a criminal but as the refuge of love which flees from the poet. One may say that it deals with the function of the crowd not in the life of the citizen but in the life of the erotist. At first glance this function appears to be a negative one, but it is not. Far from eluding the erotist in the crowd, the apparition which fascinates him is brought to him by this very crowd. The delight of the city-dweller is not so much love at first sight as love at

last sight. The word ‘jamais’ marks the high point of encounter, when the poet’s passion seems to be frustrated but in reality bursts out of him like a flame. He is seared by this flame, but no phoenix arises from it. [...]. What makes his body twitch spasmodically is not the excitement of a man in whom an image has taken possession of every fiber of his being; it partakes more of the shock with which an imperious desire suddenly overcomes a lonely man. (*The Writer of Modern Life* 77)

Although at first glance the crowd seems to be the obstacle between the poetic voice and the woman in black, the crowd, Benjamin posits, helps ignite the city dweller’s searing passion, for not her appearance, but her disappearance amidst the crowd is what sparks the sudden passion in the poetic voice. Thus, Benjamin conceived the modern street with its crowd as a social catalyst that could alter the urban dweller’s love dynamic.

During modern times, the street goes from being the means to a destination to the destination itself (68). As Buenos Aires becomes increasingly commercialized, the porteño heads out to the streets to buy, but also in search of entertainment. With the perception of the street as a site of not merely public pathway but diversion, by the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, the stroll emerges as a new urban practice allowing women to be seen in public.<sup>64</sup> In *El encanto de Buenos Aires* (1921), where Enrique Gómez Carrillo pens his impressions of his 1914 trip to Buenos Aires, the female stroll is registered as a recent novelty for porteños. Porteños, Gómez Carrillo notes, still recall a time when their women were not out and about on the street.

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<sup>64</sup> Julio Ramos writes “Strolling is a kind of entertainment, distinctive of those fin de siècle cities subordinated to an intense mercantilization that aside from erecting productive labor and efficiency as supreme values, instituted the spectacle of consumption as a new form of diversion” in his *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in the Nineteenth-Century Latin America* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001) 127.

“En otro tiempo, según dicen,” Gómez Carrillo states, “las damas no se atrevían a pasar por estas aceras, temerosas de la juvenil galantería” (50).

As widespread as the female stroll was becoming, during the first decades of the twentieth century, it was still viewed as an imported practice with some porteños still holding reservations about it. Some porteño men, Gómez Carrillo informs, apprehensive of the new social practice which they distinctively identified as a foreign phenomenon—Parisian—that was at odds with the native culture, would go as far as prohibiting their women from walking down the streets: “Yo—decía anoche un porteño distinguido—no le permitiría a mi mujer que fuera a pasearse por Florida como se pasean las señoras por la rue de la Paix” (51). Even by the time Arlt writes, female strolling and female reading—two modern cultural practices—were still regarded with suspicion: “No leerá, porque leer pervierte la imaginación; no paseará, porque paseando se incuban tentaciones. Por lo tanto, manifestará una alegría infinita en quedarse en casa, encerrada entre cuatro paredes, tejiendo un honestísimo calcetín” (*LAPRA* 253); “Actualmente encuentra usted señoras que le confiesan que sus maridos llegan al extremo de no permitirles, no tan sólo ir a la calle solas... ¡sino ni leer libros! Así, como suena, en pleno siglo veinte, en el centro de la ciudad de Buenos Aires” (*VC* 187-88). Among the elite women, reading was not a new practice, but to the middle and working class women, it was a relatively new practice—one instituted with the introduction of public education and the rise of cultural industries.

When the flâneur enters the modern city, Walter Benjamin remarks, “he develops reactions that are in keeping with the tempo of a big city. He catches things in flight” (*The Writer of Modern Life* 72). With its crowd, modern transportations, and perennial construction sites, the modern street demands that its pedestrians adjust their walk to its new tempo and ever changing

physiognomy. The modern street of Buenos Aires alters the walk of the porteño and his conception of the street but also of love. Under the traditional model, the process of pairing young single men and women was carefully regulated by the two sides of the families. Reinforcing Arlt's testimony on the highly ritualized gender dynamic of the middle class, historian Dora Barrancos describes the standard courtship norms of the period as following:

Ponerse de novia significaba acatar la siguiente normativa básica:

- a) el “filo” podía comenzar en cualquier lugar, pero esa situación clandestina no podía ir más allá de días, si la muchacha era seria;
- b) el pretendiente debía luego pedir formalmente la mano para poder ingresar en la casa;
- c) si la familia consentía, el pretendiente debía visitarla no más de dos veces por semana y no más de dos horas en cada ocasión. El domingo corría aparte.

Los novios permanecían en lugares de alta visibilidad en los domicilios y, para alcanzar alguna intimidad—algún trueque más o menos furtivo de besos—, era imprescindible aprovechar descuidos: resultaba poco probable que la familia abandonara la discreta vigilancia yéndose a dormir, ya que antes el novio debía retirarse. (408)

Furthemore, in *El encanto de Buenos Aires*, as Gómez Carrillo writes about his impression of the porteño well-to-do, he offers the readers a window to the match making process of the upper class:

Toda la existencia de las familias, con su diplomacia y sus luchas, con sus alternativas de entusiasmo y desesperanza, con sus despilfarros y sus aparatos de vanidad, se concentra alrededor de la grande, de la única idea, que es el

matrimonio de los hijos. La casa entera se ocupa y se preocupa de ello. El padre, la madre, los hermanos, los parientes, los amigos, todo el mundo, en fin, toma parte en la cacería matrimonial. (87)

For the well-to-do, match making was an all-consuming family affair that was painstakingly orchestrated. Thus, the carefully scripted gender relations of porteño young adults allowed a narrow or no margin for improvisation. However, the modern streets, along with their crowd and the growing popularity of the stroll, were beginning to disrupt the traditional gender dynamic by opening the doors to spontaneous encounters and display of affection between men and women. By the time Arlt writes, as ordinary men and women could find love and love on the street, the street becomes increasingly associated with modern love in the social imaginary.

How did spontaneous encounters and sudden passion threaten traditional gender relations? The transgressive implications of spontaneous encounters and their ensuing sudden passions are explored by Arlt in his novels. In *El amor brujo*, they lead to an extramarital affair. In *Los siete locos*, they would bring together a man and a woman from polar opposite socioeconomic positions. Erdosain, who is on the verge of prison for defrauding company's money, fantasizes about being rescued by a young rich girl he meets on the street. The crossing of men and women of distinct socioeconomic backgrounds in public spaces was the source of growing anxiety among conservative men. This anxiety is registered by Gómez Carrillo in *El encanto de Buenos Aires*. When porteño men express alarm in face of the increasing popularity of the female stroll and Gómez Carrillo dismisses such alarm as an overreaction, a porteño man hands him a recent article featured in *La Razón*, where an intellectual from the dominant class articulates the cause of concern of women's presence in public for the dominant class stating:

No hace mucho, en Palermo, tuvimos ocasión de anotar un ejemplo del contraste de refinamiento e ineducación que Buenos Aires ofrece. De un lado, el espectáculo de la elegancia, de la finura de costumbres, de los gustos artísticos en las hermosas mujeres que paseaban. Del otro, sobre el espejo del lago, admirable de tersura y de serena belleza con sus márgenes encantadoras de árboles y de suaves follajes, un grupo de remeros en mangas de camisa, gritando y gesticulando como salvajes, y ofendiendo con soeces invitaciones a las damas... (53)

As the modern city blurs the class boundaries and the stroll gains popularity with the dominant class, intellectuals of the dominant class grow especially concerned about their women becoming prey of classless men. They feared that the contact between their women and the classless men would result in unwanted unions. To the elite, such unions represented a threat to the social structure that guaranteed their current status quo. The socioeconomic significance of marriage during this period has been highlighted by Sebrelli: “En la mencionada encuesta del Instituto de Sociología, el 80% de los encuestados manifestó que el ascenso de la clase media a la alta se realizaba por medio de casamientos. Estos casamientos, por muy frecuentes que fueran, significaban una asimilación de las clases nuevas por las viejas, sumamente controlada y vigilada” (*Buenos Aires* 64). Because in the old order political and economic alliances were often reaffirmed or new ones were established through marriage, it became the object of careful scrutiny and choreography for the well-to-do.

As the street becomes a place of entertainment, along with the stroll, there emerges the social practice of watching fellow passersby. The street showcased the latest trends but also stylish men and women. If the sight of merchandise displayed on windowshops has an

intoxicating effect on women, Arlt tells us, in turn, the sight of stylish women on the street has an intoxicating effect on the male passersby: “De la calle Florida y de sus petimetres; de la calle donde siempre ‘hay un día convalesciente’ de claridad, con sus vidrieras que retuercen de deseos el alma de las mujeres, y con sus mujeres que se llevan los ojos de los hombres que pasan en busca del amor inesperado” (VC 31). Likewise, as the ladies walk along Ave. Corrientes, they activate “un volcán de deseos” among the male clientele of coffee shops: “Bajo estas luces fantasmagóricas, mujeres estilizadas como las que dibuja Sirio, pasan encendiendo un volcán de deseos en los vagos de cuellos duros que se oxidan en las mesas de los cafés saturados de jazz band” (44). Therefore, as men and women enter the public space and the field of view of fellow passersby, they will be subjected to erotic gazing. I call erotic gaze the gaze that seeks and derives sensual pleasure from watching fellow passersby. To contemporary readers who are used to this modern experience, the novelty of the erotic gaze escapes us. However, I propose that the erotic gaze was a recent phenomenon in Buenos Aires. The contrasting reactions to this phenomenon by Gómez Carrillo and the native porteños highlight its novelty in Buenos Aires. While for someone like Gómez Carrillo, who is familiar with modern European cities and has grown used to seeing women in public and men admire their presence, the porteño’s erotic gaze does not strike him as problematic; for natives, who are unaccustomed to it, the same behavior elicits alarm and concern. Admiring the way porteño men watch their women in public, Gómez Carrillo states: “...pues no sólo nada me choca en las maneras de los que se detienen en las puertas de las tiendas para ver pasar a las muchachas, sino que hasta los encuentros mucho más finos, mucho más discretos que sus hermanos de España. ¡Venid aquí, tenorios de la Carrera de San Jerónimo, venid y aprended a admirar sin insolencia y a cortejar sin grosería!” (51).



However, unlike Gómez Carrillo, porteño men, as I have pointed out earlier, are reluctant to let their women go out and be seen in public.

Although reactionary men attribute the rise of sudden passion to women's entrance to the public sphere, its rise was not simply due to closer physical proximity but also due to the emergence of erotic gazing. Modernity—the modern street and its crowd, increasing secularization, technology, mass media and modern marketing strategies,—conditioned a new way of conceiving the body. As the crowd drowns out all personal traces tied to the city dweller, he or she becomes nothing more than an image—a floating body. Photography and mass media will further exacerbate the objectification of the body and its image. To attract its potential clientele and increase its profit, the market, exploiting this modern phenomenon, will institute marketing strategies that targeted our senses. If cinema wooed its potential customers into the movie theaters by featuring sensual men and women, magazines enticed potential readers with eye catching images and messages and businesses lured customers in by making use of lighting, displays and even fragrances (Bergero 183-206). Thus, modernity deeply alters the way city dwellers process body images. Among Arlt's contemporaries, the vanguard poet Oliverio Girondo best captures this shift. Much to the scandal of his contemporary readers, in his *Veinte poemas para ser leídos en el tranvía* the poetic voice, turned into a pornographic eye, turns women into sexual objects; they become at times nipples, pubis or breasts.

The growing sexual objectification of women can also be attributed to a shift in femininity. During the first decades of the twentieth century, along with the traditional paradigm of womanhood, which circumscribed a woman's gender role to her domestic functions as mother and wife, Adriana J. Bergero identified the emergence of a new paradigm of womanhood promoted by a culture of consumption. Whereas the former had prized self-sacrifice as the

female virtue, the latter, characterizing women as sensual creatures, popularized the image of the self-absorbed woman:

Having become a fetish of herself, an engaged in the task of her own sublimation, this female Narcissus was very common in the visual arts of the time, especially on covers of publications intended for women. Such an aesthetic is captured in George Barbier's *Shéhérazade* (1914), Georges Lepape's *Le miroir rouge* (1919) or *Gabriel Ferrot* (1925-30), Frank Mackintosh's *Asia* (1932), and William Welsh's *Summer* (1931), and on the covers of *Women's Home Companion*, *Vanity Fair*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Vogue*. Only one of these images endorses maternity: George Barbier's illustration for *Feminina* (1922) of a woman lifting a child. [...] Copied to the point of saturation by advertisers, especially *Caras y Caretas*, this new paradigm of womanhood diminished the model of self-effacement associated with maternity and, in doing so, made it easier for proletarian *porteñas* to avoid looking at what they left behind on their hazardous journey to the city center. (170)

This new woman does not go unnoticed by Arlt. Accounting for a shift in porteña women's appearance and demeanor, in "Corrientes por la noche," Arlt notes: "Primeras actrices que tienen catadura de dueñas de pensión en tren de compras. Señoras honestas que parecen artistas", and similarly in "El bizco enamorado," he notes: "Iba sentado hoy en el tranvía cuando al volver la vista tropecé con una pareja constituida por un robusto bizco, con lentes de armadura de Carey y una moza rubiona, cara de pseudo estrella cinematográfica (hay que ver la de pseudo estrellas que han salido en estos tiempos de perdición)" (VC 46; OC 266). The cosmetic industry is indissociable from the emergence of this new woman. Modern cosmetics made her up; she made

up with modern cosmetics.<sup>65</sup> Certainly the introduction of mass produced make up aided her appearance, but Arlt also highlights on the role of cinema in bringing about this shift: it provided the new models of femininity—the movie stars.

Although she became subject of scorn in popular as well as non-popular writings of this period, she was in fact fostered by the dominant culture. As Bergero pointed out, she was “Copied to the point of saturation by advertisers, especially *Caras y Caretas*” (170). And effectively a review of the magazine *Caras y Caretas* during the late 1920’s and early 1930’s shows advertisements as well as sections dedicated to women promoting this new model of femininity. In its issue published on 19 March 1927, under a segment titled “La mujer y la casa,” it says: “La mujer hermosa no debe olvidar un solo instante el conservar su belleza. Y se ve obligada para ello a una serie de cuidados: no llorar, no reír mucho; regular su apetito para no engordar en extremo, perdiendo así la esbeltez, y tampoco le conviene enflaquecer, pues así perdería la firmeza de sus carnes. Debe, por lo tanto, ceñirse a una combinación higiénica, metódica y perpetua, para no quebrantar en lo más pequeño el tesoro de sus hechizos” (Ivonne 97). The piece endorses a concept of female beauty based mainly, if not solely, on her physical attributes as opposed to personal or spiritual qualities. As such it encourages women to constantly self-care and bombards them with an endless to-do list. In another issue published on 16 July 1927, *Caras y Caretas* features a piece titled “La Beba va al Colón,” whose protagonist la Beba much resembles the flapper in her looks and manners. Self-absorbed and care-free, la Beba makes her presence in the Colón “deliciosamente vestida con un traje azul pastel, vaporosa, insinuante” and does not miss her chance to playfully flirt with the porteño well-to-do bachelors

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<sup>65</sup> For more on this subject, see Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2011).

during intermission (Roxanna 81). Yet the writer's tone is neither critical nor condescending but rather indulgent. The spotlight on the likes of la Beba in the magazine no doubt both reinforced the notion of women as frivolous among men and incited the young female socialites to follow suit.

By the time Arlt writes, erotic gazing becomes a normalized pastime among porteño young men and is registered in many of his aguafuertes. With the increasing popularity of his chronicles, Arlt becomes the subject of growing interest and speculation among his readers. In “No: Yo no soy así” he clarifies that, contrary to his readers’ assumptions, he is not “un hombrecillo nervioso que piensa mucho y estudia más” but “un robusto vago, bien vestido y razonablemente alimentado, que no se detiene ante los escaparates de las librerías, sino en las circunstancias en que, frente a ese escaparate, haya alguna mocita que valga la pena de mirarse; pero no para estudiarla, sino para admirarla” (*LAPRA* 129-30). In his self-portrait, to project the image of an ordinary healthy man, Arlt emphasizes on his physical attributes and his interest in the opposite sex—he likes to dwell in front of bookstores if there is a young woman worth watching. Thus, by now, if once it was cause of alarm, erotic gazing goes on to become a sign of healthy male virility. In addition to the above reference, erotic gazing reappears in “Psicología simple del latero” and “Pasaje Güemes,” where it is described as daily urban pastime. Speaking of a monotonous yet relaxing afternoon in the barrio, Arlt writes:

Precisamente, yo me encontraba en la mesa de un café; tenía medio litro delante de mis narices y contemplaba a las mujeres que pasaban, con esa bondadosa ecuanimidad que albergaban los sujetos que saben que las mujeres no les llevan el apunte. Pero, como decía, me recreaba mirándolas pasar y alababa el arte que el

Todopoderoso puso en esa costilla que arrancó de nuestro pecho cuando vivíamos en el paraíso. (OC 156)

And describing an outing to Pasaje Güemes, he comments: “Hacía la mar de tiempo que no ponía los pies en el Pasaje Güemes. No sé si de aburrido o por faltarme plata. El caso es que me había olvidado que sobre esta santísima ciudad se elevaba un edificio-colmena, especie de Puerta del Sol de Madrid, donde se cita una infinidad de gente para mirar a sus semejantes o ‘semejantas’” (VC 9). In these two aguafuertes, erotic gazing is presented as a social practice that is indissociable from the city and the portenos daily life, whether in their neighborhood café or in one of their outings to the downtown center, from which we can infer that erotic gazing has become a mainstream social practice.

As women and men enter the public space, they become objects of desire of fellow passerby; this erotic gaze, in turn, will activate sudden passion in the recipient contributing to the rise of sudden passion. In “Don Juan Tenorio” and *El amor brujo*, Arlt captures this phenomenon. In “Don Juan Tenorio,” Arlt writes: “Caminaba por la calle y, de pronto, una muchacha se complació en mirarlo. Lo miró recatadamente dos o tres veces, y de pronto, se detuvo en una esquina para tomar el tranvía. Y nuestro hombre también se detuvo, pero pálido. No tenía diez centavos” (OC 58). Although it may be assumed that his sudden passion was ignited by him sighting the girl, a careful reading would reveal to us that prior to him spotting her, she has noticed him first. In fact it is her glance that directs his attention to her. As he looks at her, he is taken by her. Likewise, in *El amor brujo*, Erdosain’s back and forth pacing on the train platform is cut short by the persistent stare of a girl. Shaking him off from his deep inner thought, this stare will turn his attention and gaze onto her. As their eyes meet, he develops a curiosity for the gazer—curiosity that eventually will lead him to jump on her departing wagon. Hence the street

along with its crowd and the new urban social practices (strolling and erotic gazing) catalyzes modern love.

Public display of affection is another scene Arlt revisits in his aguafuertes. In “El amor en el parque Rivadavia,” Arlt dedicates the aguafuerte to “[las] innumerables parejas de niños y señoritas, jóvenes y caballeros, [que] se arrullaban de dos en dos bajo las ramas de los árboles” (OC 61). To his dismay, once on a rainy day and another during a humid and foggy day, Arlt finds young and not so young couples displaying affection for one another seated along the park benches that line the perimeter of the park. Taking up the suggestion of one of his readers, a prison guard, in “El amor visto desde una cornisa,” Arlt writes about the young couples that are popping up against a prison wall.<sup>66</sup> In “Despedida,” the reader comes across a public kiss scene:

Faltaban tres minutos para la salida del tren, cuando llegó una cupletista que había trabajado en un teatro de esa ciudad. La acompañaba el administrador del mismo, y de pronto, delante de todos los pasajeros, el hombre tomó la cabeza de la mujer y le dio un beso; pero uno de esos besos largos, desesperados; un beso donde se adivina el lanzamiento del alma en un caricia definitiva. (SF 11)

And in “Guardianes de castidad,” Arlt, inspired by a friend’s account, introduces us to a type of waiter common in the neighborhood cafés: the enforcer-of-propriety waiter. In addition to waiting on his clients, this waiter takes on the self-added responsibility of policing young couples who engage in public display of affection within the café. In the process, we are informed that young couple’s display of affection in public places has become a common practice: “Suceso muy natural por cierto, si se piensa que hay millares de jóvenes y jovencitas

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<sup>66</sup> This aguafuerte porteña can be found in Roberto Arlt, *Tratado de delincuencia: Aguafuertes inéditas* (Buenos Aires: La Página 1996) 44-47.

que todos los días cambian un beso. En resumidas cuentas, en la soledad de la confitería nosotros nos besábamos encantados y joviales, como si fuera la primera vez en la vida que concediéramos y nos concedieran una mereced semejante” (*SF* 63).

As widespread as the public display of affection is becoming, the reaction of contemporary porteños as well as our liberal writer to the phenomenon suggests that it is a modern novelty. In “El amor en el parque Rivadavia,” conveying his dismay, Arlt writes: “Si me lo cuentan no lo creo. En serio, no hubiera creído. Si yo no fuera Roberto Arlt, y leyera esta nota, tampoco creería. Y sin embargo es cierto” (*OC* 60). Similarly, in reference to the couples that show up against the prison wall the guard exclaims: “Hay que ser guardiacárcel para ver lo que yo veo desde mi cornisa, entre las dos luces de la tarde. ¡Altro que el Muro de los lamentos, de Jerusalén!” (*TD* 44). As the two theatre crew kiss, we are told that “Todos los pasajeros nos quedamos perplejos, bajo una impresión casi dolorosa” (*SF* 11).

If the public display of affection is gaining popularity in Buenos Aires, its propriety still seems to be questioned by some porteños, especially by the older generation. Arlt revisits this subject in his novel *El amor brujo*. After picking up Irene from Conservatorio Nacional, Balder and Irene enjoy a stroll along one of the downtown streets. Buzzed by the crowd, Balder takes her by the waist and kisses her cheeks. Their public display of affection does not go unnoticed; it catches the attention of both the conservative and the younger passersby: “En un momento la tomó de la cintura y le besó la mejilla, sin ver a los transeúntes que giraban la cabeza, las mujeres honestas que les arrojaban furiosas miradas, los ciudadanos pudibundos que se indignaban contra el Jefe de Policía, ni las colegialas que los seguían con largas miradas” (84-85). The reaction, again, reinforces the notion that such display of affection is a novelty. But not minding the crowd the two lovebirds enjoy an uninterrupted moment of complete privacy in

public: “Como si estuvieran en un desierto, cruzaban impasibles las bocacalles” (85). Veiled by the anonymity the crowd provides, a seventeen year old school girl and a twenty seven year old married man carry on an illicit affair in the heart of downtown Buenos Aires. Thus the city and its streets not only catalyze modern love but also become a stage for modern love.

The traditional gender relations paradigm and its norms are challenged by modern expressions of love. If once such public display of love was unthinkable, it was increasingly becoming more common in Buenos Aires. How do we explain the rise of these new practices—the public embracing, the public kissing, the public caressing of lovers? Foreign influence certainly contributed to it. According to Arlt, kissing and embracing in public have now become common urban practices in Europe. Speaking of Europe, he states: “la libertad en las costumbres que permiten besarse en los lugares públicos, etc., han hecho que lo que podemos llamar ‘las necesidades afectivas’ estén racionalmente calmadas” (VC 239). But again foreign influence alone does not explain the rise of these social practices in Buenos Aires. For a foreign social practice to thrive at home, certain social conditions at home must be met to ensure its success.

What social conditions at home favored the multiplication of the lovers’ caresses in public? While examining the figure of the flâneur, Walter Benjamin observed that with the advent of modernity and the appearance of the boulevards, the flâneur was increasingly feeling at home on the streets, that is the city dwellers’ perception of the street—public space—was shifting: the public space is now perceived as a dwelling place: “The street becomes a dwelling place for the flâneur; he is as much at home among house façades as a citizen is within his four walls. To him, a shiny enameled shop sign is at least as good as a wall ornament as an oil painting is to a bourgeois in his living room” (*The Writer of Modern Life* 68); “If the arcade is the classical form of the *intérieur*—and this is the way the street presents itself to the flâneur—



the department store is the form of the *interieur*'s decay" (85). Walter Benjamin attributes the phenomenon to artificial lighting:

The appearance of the street as an *intérieure* in which the phantasmagoria of the flâneur is concentrated is hard to separate from the gas lighting. The first gas lamps burned in the arcades. The attempt to use them under the open sky was made in Baudelaire's childhood: candelabra-shaped lights were installed on the Place Vendôme. Under Napoleon III, the number of gas lamps in Paris grew rapidly. This way of increasing safety in the city made the crowds feel at home in the open streets even at night, and removed the starry sky from the ambience of the big city more effectively than tall buildings had ever done. (81)

He also attributes the phenomenon to the appearance of the crowd: "The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city beckons to the flâneur as phantasmagoria—now a landscape, now a room" (40). Thus the city, with its artificial lights and its crowd, according to the cultural critic, was creating the illusion of being in private in public spaces. As Buenos Aires was increasingly modernized, Argentine lovers, taking refuge under the dim lights of artificial lights and in the crowd, will also display their affection in public, be it on the street, plaza or coffee shops to the alarm of conservative porteños.

### 3.4. Does Modern Love Have a Chance?

The city along with its crowd, modern public transportations, emerging cultural industries (newspapers and magazines, popular fiction, cinema, radio), increasing commercialization, and women's growing presence in public molded modern sensibilities and changed daily practices, which in turn altered traditional gender relations. Right wing intellectuals, public health

physicians and statesmen, perceiving these emerging sensibilities and practices as a threat to the status quo and its nuclear family, responded with reactionary discourses: they targeted women and called for their return to their traditional role. In this section I will examine how the conservative ideologies are articulated in the everyday life domain as well as how the average porteños reconcile the contradictory discourses proliferating on gender relations.

Although there is a tendency to attribute conservative ideologies and practices to right-wing intellectuals and statesmen, in his *Aguafuertes porteñas*, Arlt, echoing Gramsci's concept of hegemony, does not merely identify the common porteños as victims of conservative messages, but also portrays them as supporters and enforcers of traditional gender relations and its rules. Departing from the concept of hegemony postulated by Gramsci, Jesús Martín-Barbero writes, "[es] posible pensar el proceso de dominación ya no como imposición desde un *exterior* y sin *sujetos*, sino como un proceso en el que una clase hegemoniza en la medida en que representa intereses que también reconocen de alguna manera como suyos las clases subalternas" (86). In his *aguafuertes*, Arlt, in agreement with the Italian thinker, recognizes that dominant ideologies and their practices are not simply imposed from above, but are shared and enforced by the popular sector, even if these ideologies and practices would undermine the interest of the latter, thus identifying a complex cultural dynamic at play when it comes to hegemonic values and ideology. Patriarchy would be a case in point. An overwhelming number of women, Arlt finds, are accomplices of patriarchy, a system that undermines women's rights and freedom. Thus, instead of portraying the average porteño as fighting off conservative discourses disseminated by the elite, Arlt represents the common porteños as divided on the issue of gender relations. While some were adopting a modern concept of gender relations, others remained advocates of traditional gender relations. Thus I will begin this section by identifying who the advocates of

traditional gender relations were and how they disseminated and enforced their message in the suburban everyday life.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault sets out to examine how the modern state subjects its citizens and establish its desired order and proposes that the modern state does so by relying on its instruments of violence and ideology, but also by making use of what he calls the “political technology of the body,” which he sets out to study in this book and defines as following:

This subjection is not only obtained by the instruments of violence or ideology; it can also be direct, physical, pitting force against force, bearing on material elements, and yet without involving violence; it may be calculated, organized, technically thought out; it may be subtle, make use neither of weapons nor of terror and yet remain of a physical order. That is to say, there may be a ‘knowledge’ of the body that is not exactly the science of its functioning, and a mastery of its forces that is more than the ability to conquer them: this knowledge and this mastery constitute what might be called the political technology of the body. Of course, this technology is diffuse, rarely formulated in continuous, systematic discourse; it is often made up of bits and pieces; it implements a disparate set of tools or methods. [. . .] What the apparatuses and institutions operate is, in a sense, a micro-physics of power, whose field of validity is situated in a sense between these great functionings and the bodies themselves with their materiality and their forces.

Now, the study of this micro-physics presupposes that the power exercised on the body is conceived not as a property, but as a strategy, that its effects of

domination are attributed not to ‘appropriation’, but to dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functionings; that one should decipher in it a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess [. . .]. (26)

Because Foucault conceives the art of subjection as power exercised and not as power immanent, the official instruments of punishment and ideology are deemed insufficient in explaining the functioning of power. According to Foucault, in addition to the official instruments of punishment and ideology, “the technology of the body” plays a key role in bringing the modern citizen to compliance, which he defines as “knowledge and mastery” that might fall beyond the strict domains of law and punishment and might not be easily identifiable, but nonetheless are effective in subjecting the modern citizen. It consists of strategies, dispositions, maneuvers, tactics, techniques, functionings which collectively are viewed as expressions of power. Having present Foucault’s definition of “technique of power,” in addition to identifying who the advocates of the traditional messages were among the common porteños, I will also identify strategies and tactics they resorted to in order to enforce their message.

In the aguafuertes, mothers, siblings, community members, such as waiters and prison guards, make up a network of discipline. Arlt represents the Argentine bourgeois overwhelmingly as advocates of traditional gender relations, thus sharing moral values with the ruling class. This assessment of the middle class is shared by Sebreli, who observes that “La clase media ha interiorizado a tal punto los tabúes de la moral burguesa, que acepta y aprueba las mismas leyes que provocan sus frustraciones y su profundo desajuste sexual, del mismo modo que toma partido a favor del sistema económico que la explota” (*Buenos Aires* 77).

Although the 1920's and 1930's is a period of transition, as cultural critics and Arlt himself attest, traditional values still maintain their stronghold in Argentine society. Traditional gender relations rely on domestic education, which teaches girls from young age that their goal in life is marriage, and a system of entrapment that consists of stripping girls from any means of self-sufficiency. In "¡Quiero casarme!," Arlt points out, the concepts that women must marry and have no alternative other than marriage, are taught concepts that he clearly questions by calling them "educación falsa." These false concepts, he tells us, are ingrained at home: "en los países de habla española, las mujeres son criadas con el exclusivo pensamiento de que al llegar a determinada edad 'hay que casarse'" (VC 172); "Este desolador cuadro de vida porteña, se debe, exclusivamente, a la educación falsa que en nuestros hogares reciben las muchachas. Si a la rutina de la vida se puede definir como 'educación' porque, hablando en plata, tal 'educación' no existe. Las chicas crecen; un día se acuerdan de que son mujeres y 'que tienen que casarse'" (175). Girls are groomed to marry since an early age. And this grooming is so widespread and effective in Latin American countries that their girls, internalizing the marriage imperative as their own, make marriage their life mission.

In "Quiero casarme!," Arlt acknowledges that the vice he criticizes women for is not an innate predisposition, as some conservative would argue, but in fact a social symptom. Not by chance he opens "Quiero casarme!," an aguafuerte about the female fixation with marriage, with a reference to the contrasting value systems and lifestyles of Buenos Aires and the modernized cities of the world. While Argentine women raised to marry grow up marriage obsessed, Arlt notes, women of other modern cities exhibit different life values. Sharply contrasting with porteños, modern foreign men and women both work and share an alternative conception of marriage: "En las grandes ciudades de los países civilizados, el matrimonio constituye un

accidente vulgar en la vida de los hombres y mujeres. Y se explica. Hombres y mujeres se ganan la vida y las relaciones entre ambos son en absoluto desinteresadas. Casamiento y divorcio es un suceso tan corriente como aquí beberse un copetín” (171). Thus, the author suggests that a society’s cultural system along with its socioeconomic structure can promote and alter women’s values and behavior patterns.

This idea is revisited in “Lo esencial es casarse,” an aguafuerte written in the format of an interview, where we are introduced to a professional woman who has chosen independence over marriage, twice. In the middle of the interview, the perceptive interviewer catches the woman setting herself apart when speaking of Argentine women as “ellas” and not us:

El que subscribe. –Pero esas mujeres...

REPORTEADA. –No tienen la culpa. Están criadas así. Han visto la vida así.

Desde chicas oyen hablar del matrimonio. Es decir, que para ellas...

EL QUE SUSCRIBE. –¿Por qué dice para ellas?

REPORTEADA. –Yo tengo mi personalidad. Por eso digo “para ellas”. Entre ellas y yo hay alguna diferencia... bueno... como le decía, para estas mujeres criadas con semejante criterio, no puede haber nada más que un final: casarse.

Casarse es resolver el problema económico y otro montón de problemas. (VC 166)

Although the woman does not elaborate on how and why she turned out differently, by attributing her fellow sisters’ obsession with marriage to upbringing, she suggests that her economic independence and freedom of choice—whether to marry or not—are the result of an alternative home education.

Women’s dependence and obsession with marriage are again explained as a social symptom in “Interesantes cartas de mujeres.” Responding to Arlt’s attack on women, the first

reader points out that what he faults women for is no other but a mere result of a system of entrapment designed by men:

Y a todo ¿quién tiene la culpa? Ustedes, ¡sí, ustedes! Cristo dijo: “Creced y multiplicaos”, pero no aclaró previamente que se debía pasar por el Registro Civil. Bromas aparte. Las leyes las han creado ustedes, los hombres, y las mujeres no hacen más que cumplirlas; de manera que ¿de qué se quejan ustedes? [ . . . ]. Sobre la mujer, desde que nace pesan tres cosas: la familia, el concepto moral y la sociedad. Usted no lo negará. Estos tres factores en muchos casos contribuyen a hacer de la mujer una perfecta inútil. Acostumbradas a ser mantenidas y protegidas por sus padres, hermanos o esposos, no hacen nada más que cambiar de dueño, encerrándose en un círculo de falsas obligaciones que dependen del terrible factor económico. (VC 201-02)

It may well be argued that the above comment does not reflect author's point of view as the letter is attributed to a female reader. However, echoing the above comment, Arlt reproduces this argument in *El amor brujo*:

Ellas, en el fondo, eran tan desdichadas como sus esposos. Vivían casi herméticamente enclaustradas en su vida interior a la cual el esposo entraba por excepción.

Estas mujeres honestas (sin dejar de serlo prácticamente) tenían curiosidades sexuales, hambre de aventuras, sed de amor. Llegado el momento, por excepción, sólo una que otra se hubiera apartado de la línea recta.

La conciencia de ellas estaba estructurada por la sociedad que las había deformado en la escuela, y como las hormigas o las abejas que no se niegan al

sacrificio más terrible, satisfacían las exigencias del espíritu grupal. Pertenecían a la generación del año 1900. (57-58)

As such, it can be said that he demonstrates awareness that the behavior he often targets women for is actually created by the social infrastructure.

In addition to education, the Argentine middle class relied on a system of strict confinement and constant supervision. If young single women had to venture outside the domestic fortress, a junior guard was attached, a role that was usually delegated to the younger brother. There were also community members like the neighborhood waiters who would self-task themselves as overseers and enforcers of traditional values and rules. As such, even if a pair of lovers were to escape the highly guarded domestic domain, it had to contend with other social agents that would take on the role of upholders of bourgeois moral values.

In “La madre en el balcón,” Arlt introduces his readers to his young female neighbor with boyfriend and her vigilant mother, who together, he suspects, are scheming to trap the naïve suitor into marriage. What about this mother and daughter duo amuses and catches the attention of our urban anthropologist? First off, the vigilance of the mother. Exercising almost an obsessive vigilance, Arlt informs, this mother does not lose sight of the pair: “La madre vigila este noviazgo con un encarnizamiento pavoroso. Si los novios se dirigen al balcón, ella está allí; si los novios entran, la funesta vieja desaparece. No los pierde de vista, y cuando cruza los brazos sobre la pañoleta y mira a la calle, se intuye que estira la oreja para no perder ni una sola de las palabras que ellos se dicen” (*SF* 29-30). The mother of the girl, with her omnipresence and panoptic view, becomes the enforcer of bourgeois moral values within the domestic domain. If for any reason the mother must give up her post, then the older sister takes over the role: “Si se va la madre, como por juego de mecanismo, entra en escena la hermana” (30). Hence, while the



mother is represented as the chief guardian of bourgeois moral values within the inner sanctuary of the home, siblings are portrayed as accomplices that aid in enforcing these values. In “Se casa... o lo mato!” we are informed of a forced marriage by the brother of the bride, which lands in court and is featured on *El Mundo* a date before the publication of his aguafuerte. According to the author, such a case does not represent an isolated event but a common happening in Buenos Aires: “El caso que acaba de fallar la Cámara Primera, o sea negocio de ‘prepotencia’, es sumamente frecuente en nuestra ciudad. Los damnificados, la mayor parte de las veces, no hablan por vergüenza. Nunca falta un ‘hermano terrible’ en una casa sobre todo si el novio es un ganso y la niña una viva” (VC 183).

In “La madre en el balcón,” the young girlfriend herself is also portrayed as a partner in crime. Arlt notes that unlike the boyfriend, the girl is unaffected by the maternal and sibling supervision thus Arlt surmises that she is in it, not because of love, but to catch a husband for herself: “Pero, reflexionando me he dado cuenta que la madre y la hija son cómplices en este asunto, por que la muchacha no parece mayormente enamorada del tipo. El sujeto debe ser un buen partido, nada más; y entonces, se lo trata con todas las de la ley” (SF 31). The healthy boyfriend, enduring the intense scrutiny like Tantalus—“El novio, que es robusto y vigoroso, debe pasar las de Tántalo” (30)—is in the process of being tamed into marriage: “En síntesis: es una magnífica bestia, que va al matadero, quiero decir, derechamente al Registro Civil” (30); “El buen mozo sonríe con una sonrisa de hombre que ya no da más” (30). By praising the boyfriend’s self-control and denouncing the mother’s implacable policying of the couple, Arlt presents himself as critic of traditional gender relations and its rules: “Observándolo me pregunto cómo es que ese hombre resiste; qué razón metafísica actúa allí, impidiéndole tomar a la vieja por el cuello y tirarla a la calzada” (30); “siento espantosas sensaciones de gritarle alguna cosa a

la vieja desde el balcón. De decirle que no sea criminal” (31). As such, in “La madre en el balcón” the readers are presented with family members forming a network of vigilance and family members scheming to make sure that the young couple does not cross the boundaries of patriarchal rules and ensure that the relationship ends in marriage.

Vigilance is not restricted to the domestic domain, however. Women become subject of vigilance outside the home as well. If within the homes mothers frequently guard the girls, when they step into the public sphere, fathers and little brothers often take over the role of guardians of chastity. In “El acompañante,” Arlt writes about the different styles of guarding adopted by the fathers of girls. Disregarding the girl’s right to privacy and space, Arlt has observed an elderly father closely and religiously hovering over a girl on the street: “Todas las mañanas, al tomar el tranvía, observaba que un viejo tieso, de gran barba blanca, y un ojo conspirando contra el Estado, es decir un viejo bizco, acompañaba a una mocita no mal parecida, la cual mocita caminaba, al lado del anciano beato y severo, con una expresión de aburrimiento incalculable. Esto lo estuve observando durante un año” (*SF* 54). By calling this father “viejo tieso,” “pillete,” “maldito viejo” and referring to his type as “esos bribones cargados de años,” as well as “estos bergantes avaros de inocencia,” he condemns this father and this style of guarding the girls (54). However, Arlt praises the discreet father who tactfully mounts guard from a certain distance: “Así, recuerdo a un viudo, padre de dos lindas muchachas. El tal viudo, jamás acompañaba a sus hijas, pero sea casualidad, o intención, el caso es que siempre lo he encontrado a dos cuerdas de distancia de las mocitas que paseaban sin saber que allá, a doscientos metros un ojo avizor y jovial comprobaba lo que ellas hacían en compañía de sus amigas” (55). Finding his style more respectful of the girls’ right to privacy, the author calls him “padre prudente,” “padre respetable,” and “buen señor” (55).

In addition to the father, the brother at times takes on the role of guardian of the young porteñas. In the same aguafuerte, Arlt also identifies the little brother as a common character that is deployed by mothers to guard the sisters when out and about in the neighborhood on their daily business: “El acompañante que, sin vuelta de hoja, las revienta a las chicas, es el hermanito, ese hermanito que fatalmente cae a la salida del conservatorio, y que, de mal humor, se adjunta a la compañía de mocitas que lo miran de mal talante [ . . . ]”; “El acompañante minúsculo es el dragón más nocivo que tiene que soportar las menores, que caminan a su lado silenciosas, sin dirigirle la palabra, mientras él marcha furioso, buscando de provocarle una riña a la hermana [ . . . ]” (56). Even though younger in age and smaller in physical size, “el hermanito,” “el acompañante minúsculo,” “pulguita,” when it comes to defending family honor, he, much like a “Lazarote” and a “Roldán,” becomes a formidable champion of chastity (56). So effective is he in his role that not even a glance is missed. If a male passerby dares to stare at the sister, he fights back with his “fulminante mirada” (57). Did the sister dare to look at a male passerby? Then she must contend with his temper tantrum on the spot and later, with their parents for he is also an expeditious informant.

Besides immediate family members, we find community members also serving as guardians of the youth by lending a watchful eye and reining it in whenever it is suspected of trespassing traditional gender relations norms. “In guardianes de castidad,” Arlt relates the case of a “friend,” who while out on a date with his girlfriend, takes refuge in the neighborhood coffee shop to enjoy some private moments with his girlfriend. Whenever they are about to get physically affectionate, the waiter, doubling as the traditional moral guard, enters the scene and inserts himself between the two pretending to rearrange the flower bases on the nearby tables: “Cuando separamos las cabezas nos encontramos con una jeta de besugo, napia largota todo un

mozo narizota y púdico que nos contemplaba de reajo, entre semiindignado y pavoroso, en tanto que pretendía acomodar los floreros de una mesa” (*SF* 63-64). The nosy waiter disappears to reappear whenever the two try to get a little intimate: “Nos reímos graciosamente del mozo narices y cuando nos íbamos a dar uno de esos apretones de mano que significaban el sellamiento y estampillado de una amistad dispuesta a resistir cualquier prueba, ¡zas!, de pronto resucita nuevamente el tío rufo husmeando en redor como un podenco, y acomodando otro florero en una mesa” (64).

In face of the proliferation of discourses surrounding gender relationships, how do the average porteños reconcile the often contradictory messages in their everyday lives? Does modern love have a chance in face of such fierce scrutiny and vigilance? To answer these questions, I would like to begin by taking a look at “*Novios en amansadora*,” where Arlt introduces his readers to a nineteen year old young woman who, proving to be a shrewd semiotician, skillfully navigates the contradictory discourses. Fitting the emerging profile of the modern woman, she works and moves around the city somewhat freely. She happens to also be attractive, popular with men (“he tenido más o menos setenta y cinco pretendientes” and confident around them (*VC* 227). To win her over, men deploy their love language (pick-up lines) which she classifies into two types: the friendship and helpless romantic discourses. Perhaps appealing to her liberal side, some have approached her expressing their desire for her friendship— ““Quiero solamente ser amigo suyo. Poder conversar con usted’,” while others, presenting themselves as helpless romantics, have declared themselves “repentinamente enamorado” (228-29). Interestingly, not only does she identify two types of discourses, but she also tailors her response accordingly. To those who approach her using the friendship pick-up line, she serves them a modern, liberal treatment: “A cualquiera que se me declara [querer

solamente conversar] le digo que sí, pero que tengo novio. Y lo cito a un segundo [pretendiente] para que vaya al lugar donde acude el primero. Y me divierto” (228); to the ones that make use of romantic lines, she delivers them a goodie-tissue-girl act: “Yo pongo cara de ingenua; entorno los ojos como si el día que me hablan fuera el primer día que hubiera salido de mi casa para ir a la oficina y no supiera lo que es el mundo” (229). By doing so, she demonstrates fluency in the two main and contradictory discourses around gender relationships proliferating in Buenos Aires and much like a chameleon, she adapts her response accordingly: to the speaker of modern love language, she speaks modern love and to the speaker of traditional love language, she speaks traditional love.

Although she plays along with the men and their act, she is not being played with. She is not fooled by mere discourses. She sees their hidden motive: to win her over. Recognizing the ready-made catchphrases as mere tactics, she does not fall for them: “¡Qué problema, Roberto Arlt, qué problema! Dígame ¿por qué mienten los hombres y tan continuamente?” (229). Then, why does she go along with their games? To have them face their own hypocrisy. “Sabe ahora lo que he resultado?,” she remarks, “Poner a prueba la estupidez de los hombres. En serio. La falta de dignidad de los hombres” (228). To those who have professed wanting friendship only, pretending to buy their story, she agrees to a casual encounter with her male suitors where she has the last laugh for she does not show up alone, we are told, but with another male suitor. While such set up forces the men to face their own lies, she has fun watching them struggle: “Y me divierto” (228). As such, to acquiesce is not necessarily a sign of submission, but in fact revelry in disguise—concept that this section will further explore.

As we have seen, according to Arlt’s aguafuertes, the home of the suburb is a heavily guarded site. However, in “Les presento a mi señora,” even this jealously protected space is not

an impenetrable fortress for a young lady who has fallen head over heels for a married man. Desperate to see her married lover bedridden with bronco-neumonia, a young female reader comes looking for Arlt in his *El Mundo* office and asks for his help: she requests that Arlt pay her ailing lover a visit to his house—where he is currently being nursed by his wife—taking her along as the chronicler’s wife. “La muchacha caviló un minuto, se sonrojó,” Arlt tells us “y finalmente lanzó su proposición: —Usted podría ir a visitarlo, y llevarme a mí, presentándome en casa como si yo fuera su señora” (*LAPRA* 146). Although he is initially dumbfounded by the proposition, Arlt, feeling pity for the love crazed girl with swollen eyes from crying, ends up going along with her “comedia” and playing the part. Pretending to be a couple that is friends of the ailing man, Arlt and the girl together visit the house of the married lover. As the other woman, under normal circumstances, her visit would not be tolerated in his house, especially in the presence of his legitimate wife. However, by resorting to a ruse, she circumvents the odds set against her and not only does she enter the married home but even carries on—albeit briefly—with the affair under the nose of his wife and his brother-in-law.

By disguising the illicit encounter as the familiar social practice of visiting ailing friends, the girl slips into the home of her married lover undetected. The disguise succeeds in fooling the wife and the brother-in-law who, unaware of her true identity and oblivious of the affair, welcome the offender into their home. As Buenos Aires was undergoing rapid modernization and anonymity threatened its neighborhood feel, the old social practice of visiting ailing friends must have provided respite to its inhabitants giving them a sense of continuity in an ever-changing city and helping them affirm old relationships while fostering new ones. However, in the hand of the girl, this social practice becomes a tactical device and the increasing anonymity of the city turns into a platform from where to launch the tactic. It must be noted that the success of the tactic

hinges upon anonymity for it would not work in a village where people know each other. She successfully passes as Arlt's wife because Buenos Aires with its growing population and increasing anonymity allows her to mask her true identity. Obviously anonymity is not a condition created by her, but she recognizes it as the backdrop against which the tactic would yield the desired result and takes advantage of it. The young girl, though as consumer of products of the dominant cultural economy does not set or alter neither the sociocultural moral standards nor the social practices, in this aguafuerte, by "way of using" the old social practice of visiting friends and seizing upon her circumstantial opportunity, she surmounts the sociocultural obstacles set before her and succeeds in seeing her lover.

In *The practice of everyday life*, Michel de Certeau examines how as consumers ordinary men and women subvert the established social order by their "ways of using" or "ways of operating" products of the dominant cultural economy:

More generally, *a way of using* imposed systems constitutes the resistance to the historical law of a state of affairs and its dogmatic legitimations. A practice of the order constructed by others redistributes its space; it creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for maneuvers of unequal forces and for utopian points of reference. That is where the opacity of a "popular" culture could be said to manifest itself—a dark rock that resists all assimilation. What is there called "wisdom" (*sabedoria*) may be defined as stratagem (*trampolinagem*, which a play on words associates with the acrobatics of the mountebank and his art of jumping on the trampoline, *trampolim*) and as "trickery" (*trapaçaria*, ruse, deception in the way one uses or cheats with the terms of social contracts). Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other's game (*jouer/déjouer le jeu de l'autre*) that is, the

space instituted by others, characterize the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. (18; italics in original)

By using products of the dominant cultural economy such as rituals, speech, law, urban space, stories and legends featured on newspapers, TV programs, products purchased in supermarkets in ways foreign to its original purpose, he postulates, the common people deflect or evade the nets of discipline imposed upon them by the elite thus proposing the sphere of the everyday life as the political dimension where the weak may resist the strong.

In addition, in “La alegría del velorio” the suburban funeral becomes a prized opportunity for the youth to sneak off with their partner. “En los velorios suelen ocurrir cosas raras,” Arlt tells us “[m]uchos van al velorio para ver a una nena, invisible en otras circunstancias. Son gente que se pasa deseando que se muera todo el barrio para ver a la novia secuestrada por la familia” (*LAPRA* 213). While mothers temporarily let their guards down as they offer their condolences to the family of the deceased, the youth will seize upon this opportunity to see a girl that is otherwise under strict vigilance. To the scandal of the lady in charge of making coffee, the young couple will settle and cuddle up in the kitchen corner: “Hay allí una oscuridad dudosa; un candelabro que arde de mala manera, una señora desconocida que hierve café, y una pareja que parece que hiciera juegos de prestidigitación” (213). As soon as the first one vanishes, another couple, replacing the former, cozy up in the kitchen. The kitchen aid’s initial thought of alerting the mother of the girl will be interrupted by the shamelessness of the second couple. If the story of the porteño youth getting heated at neighborhood funerals sounded a little outrageous to the serious reader to be true, Arlt ends the *aguafuerte* confessing “Insisto, no he sido el único que a los diez y seis años, estaba deseando que todos los días crepara alguien en el barrio” (214). As in



“Les presento a mi señora,” in this aguafuerte, the youth, by using a social rite in currency for ends foreign to its original purpose, it is able to give its desire an expression. Funerals bring together families, friends and neighbors together. Neighbors will visit the family of the deceased to pay their respect and show solidarity. To the youth, however, the funeral is an opportunity to steal a moment with their partner. This aguafuerte tell us how jealously guarded the young girls are, but also about the creativity of the youth that dodge such vigilance by being both resourceful and opportunistic.

By emptying the social rites out of its original function and scripting into them a new one, the young lady and the youth assert themselves as second hand producers. In a similar fashion, the inventors of “El paraíso de los inventores,” lacking the means to finance their project, turn to what Arlt calls “depósitos de motores inservibles” or “cementerio de automóviles” and repurpose the now defunct auto parts as spare parts for their invention thus not only breathing new life into them but also assigning them a new purpose (VC 75, 76). Such is the case of the farmers who resenting the high rates of the local electric company plot to generate their own electricity with a makeshift invention made out of former auto parts or the man who owning an impoverished canoe dreams of turning it into a fast and powerful car with the help of what he finds in the “cementerio de automóviles” (76). In face of cultural barriers and devoid of their own cultural products to wage war against and overcome these barriers, the young lady and the youth, like the inventores of “El paraíso de los inventores,” use the cultural products but for their own ends. Interestingly, this tactic has also been linked to Arlt the writer, who as a poor second generation immigrant, deprived of formal training and cultural heritage, bypass the traditional way of accessing culture. The unprivileged and eclectic library of the poor, which included the economic translations of Dickens, Joyce, Anatole France, Baudelaire, Dostoyevsky, Proust, and

economic editions of Cervantes, Alemán, Quevedo, but also marginal literature comprised of technical manuals, popular culture and underground writing—dubbed “cultura de retazos” by Beatriz Sarlo—fill this void and fuel his writing (*Una modernidad* 51-56). According to Alan Pauls this concept of repurposing the old or the marginal into something new, which he calls “desvío,” is a leit motif in Arlt’s ouevres: “Mediante ese arte del desvío que recorre como un hilo clandestino toda su obra, Arlt evita plantear la cuestión del nombre en términos de interioridad” (250).

As both the young lady and the youth act out the social ceremonies, these social practices become a mere subterfuge, a fiction. Arlt calls it “comedia.” As fictitious as the “comedia” may be, it renders real results. The notion that fiction can alter reality is a topic that goes beyond these aguafuertes. Piglia has pointed out back in 1984 in an interview originally published in the newspaper *Clarín* that, as a writer deeply concerned with how things work (“leyes de funcionamiento de la sociedad”), Arlt’s work evidence keen observations about the relationship between power and fiction, money and insanity, and truth and complot (28). Then Piglia goes on to say *Los siete locos* “trabaja sobre los mundos posibles: sobre la posibilidad que tiene la ficción de transmutar la realidad. *Los siete locos* cuenta el proyecto del Astrólogo de construir una ficción que actúe y produzca efectos en la realidad” (29-30). “Las ciencias ocultas en la ciudad de Buenos Aires” is another case in point of false doctrine (fiction) influencing people’s beliefs and moving them to actions. As with the astrólogo’s secret society, the theosophical society, armed with deceit and pseudo magic, wins cult following among people throughout multiple continents.

What does the irreverent use of the dominant social products tell us about the users? It speaks of the grassroots social agents’ ability to exercise independent and critical thinking. In

face of contradictory messages on gender relations, Arlt has often portrayed women as either accomplices or victims of the dominant sociocultural system. However, he does also dedicate his *aguafuertes* to singular women who both formulate an alternative concept of female subjectivity and gender relations. As seen in the “Les presento a mi señora,” even if the dominant culture accords different legal and moral standing to marriage and extramarital relationships, the girl obviously does not. By stepping into the home of the married couple, she defies the dominant social norms because, regardless of what they may say regarding her relationship with a married man, in her eyes her feelings are, if not equally, also valid. Similarly, in “La alegría del velorio,” while the parents of the youths, championing for a traditional gender relationship, guard the daughters and closely keep an eye on their courtship, the irreverent youths do not share the same values; they silently defy them by sneaking off behind their back when they identify an opportunity to do so.

In spite of the cultural, economic and legal odds set against women and the traditional messages they have been bombarded with since childhood—to mold to the traditional gender relationships and the traditional gender roles—there are women who are paving the way to alternative female gender roles, and, in doing so, also to alternative gender relationships. In addition to “Les presento a mi señora” and “La alegría del velorio” Arlt introduces us to such women in “¿Existe la felicidad para la mujer que trabaja?” and “Opina una soltera”. In “¿Existe la felicidad para la mujer que trabaja?,” for instance, we meet a twenty four years old “empleada de escritorio” who expresses and asserts her unconventional ideas (*LMBA* 22). She stands her ground and breaks up with her boyfriend when her ideas are not respected: “El no podía respetar determinadas creencias mías. Comprendí que no nos entenderíamos jamás. Terminé fríamente con él” (23). She desires a family but not marriage: “No. No tengo ningún deseo de casarme.

Pero tengo un deseo a veces incongruente. Un hogar, hijos. Una felicidad” (23). What allows her to assert her own opinions and formulate such unconventional concept of “hogar”? From the *aguafuerte*, we learn she enjoys greater freedom than most young single women we have encountered in Arlt’s *aguafuertes*: “Puedo llegar a mi casa a la hora que quiero. Ni mi madre ni mis hermanas me preguntarán dónde he estado ni lo que he hecho” (24). As an “empleada de escritorio” who earns 130 pesos, she also enjoys certain economic independence. But most importantly, she learns not to take what others say (discourse) at face value and to base her decisions from her personal experience and observations. Unlike what she had read, we are told, she finds that solitude was an agonizing experience and that she prefers to be in company of others: “Creía en la soledad. He leído que la soledad permite ordenar nuestros pensamientos, ahondar en el sentido de la vida. Fueron ocho días de desesperación. Es la última vez en mi vida que voy a una isla solitaria. Ahora estoy ahorrando para los próximos ocho días del año que viene, en el mes de enero. Quiero estar cerca del mar. Pero entre la gente. La soledad es un horror” (22-23). By observing women around her and their unhappiness, she questions the status quo: “Observo el espectáculo de las mujeres en redor mío. Ninguna da señales de una auténtica felicidad. ¿Existe la felicidad?” (24). However, she is not immune from social pressure and feelings of uncertainty that comes from both being among the first women who are paving a different path and the economic vulnerability of being an entry level office worker: “Soy libre. Soy libre en la definición externa. Pero en mi interior no soy libre.” (24). Instead of giving in to her circumstances, she presses on, even if at times it feels like treading water.

## Conclusion

Because of his poignant portrayals of the 1920s and 1930s porteños and Buenos Aires, caught in the midst of an accelerated modernization process, Roberto Arlt is credited with being the first modern novelist of Argentina. And by frequently taking the protagonists of the underworld and the negative side effects of modernity as subjects of his writings, he becomes known amongst his readers as one of the most prolific and staunch critics of the country's problematic transition to modernity. Living up to his reputation, in his daily *aguafuertes*, Arlt often registers the job displacement that technological advances are causing among porteños, the ongoing and constant construction zones that liken Buenos Aires to a war zone. Also taking up the social causes that ail his fellow porteños, he denounces public officials' neglect of the marginal neighborhoods as well as of their hospitals and their schools. In face of the increasing socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and sociocultural crises that marked this period, in "¿Para qué sirve el progreso?," Arlt questions the so called progress by contrasting a romanticized version of the past with an increasingly hectic and automated present that threatens to make the porteños a mere accessory of technology. In the past, we are told, meals were savory, life was pleasant and serene, streets were traffic free, people lived in humble yet proper homes that came with a yard that allowed children to be children and neighbors established a relationship with other members of their community. However, in the present, due to the rising living costs, increasing crowded living conditions, and the accelerated lifestyle, according to our chronicler, "la vida es imposible" (OC 193). Thus, he concludes the *aguafuerte* writing:

Puede usted decirme, querido señor, ¿para qué sirve este maldito progreso? Sea sincero. ¿Para qué le sirve este progreso a usted, a su mujer y a sus hijos? ¿Para qué le sirve a la sociedad? ¿El teléfono lo hace más feliz, un aeroplano de

quinientos caballos más moral, una locomotora eléctrica más perfecto, un subterráneo más humano? Si los objetos nombrados no le dan a usted salud, perfección interior, todo ese progreso no vale un pito, ¿me entiende? Los antiguos creían que la ciencia podía hacer feliz al hombre. ¡Qué curioso! Nosotros tenemos, con la ciencia en nuestras manos, que admitir lo siguiente: lo que hace feliz al hombre es la ignorancia. El resto, es música celestial.... (195-96)

Yet in his aguafuertes we also meet an Arlt that places hope in the same forces that are bringing about the socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and sociocultural changes that he often criticizes in his own writings likening him to the nineteenth century European modernists. In his *All that Is Solid Melts into Air*, the cultural critic praises the nineteenth century modernists for expressing what he calls a “dialectical motion” in their works. Reading Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* as a quintessential modernist literature, Berman remarked:

Marx believes that capitalism tends to destroy this mode of experience [the experience of something holy] for everybody: “all that is holy is profaned”; nothing is sacred, no one is untouchable, life becomes thoroughly desanctified. In some ways, Marx knows, this is frightful: modern men and women may well stop at nothing, with no dread to hold them back; free from fear and trembling, they are free to trample down everyone in their way if self-interest drives them to it. But Marx also sees the virtue of a life without auras: it brings about a condition of spiritual equality. Thus the modern bourgeoisie may hold vast material powers over the workers and everybody else, but it will never achieve the spiritual ascendancy that earlier ruling classes could take for granted. For the first time in history, all confront themselves and each other on a single plane of being. (115-16)

According to Berman, this dialectical vision of modernity also permeates the works of Baudelaire. In his reading of “The Eyes of the Poor,” he underscores the dialectic representation of the new Parisian boulevards by the French modernist poet:

But primal scenes, for Baudelaire as later on for Freud, cannot be idyllic. They may contain idyllic, but at the climax of the scene a repressed reality creaks through, a revelation or discovery that takes place: “a new boulevard, still littered with rubble...displayed its unfinished splendors.” Alongside the glitter, the rubble: the ruins of a dozen inner-city neighborhoods—the city’s oldest, darkest, densest, most wretched and most frightening neighborhoods, home to tens of thousands of Parisians—razed to the ground. (152-53)

Thus, as we can see in the above cited passages, for Marx and Baudelaire, modernity was perceived as a contradictory and complex historical process for it caused human despair and increasing economic gap between people but also produced excitement, hope and beauty.

In the *aguafuertes* that I have examined in this dissertation, we also find this contradictory and complex quality in his writing. Arlt is critical about the intense social tensions that Argentine’s transition into modernity is creating; yet in the *aguafuertes* I have examined, Arlt also emerges as a strong advocate of the alternative literature and gender relations models that are born out of the same modernity.

In spite of the fact that many of the *martinfierro* members, including Borges, delved into the market, as noted by the literary critics who have studied this period, expressing hesitancy, keep themselves at a safe distance. In contrast, Arlt, perceiving the market, a system that modernity helped device, as a democratizing agent champions it by fully embracing it. Arlt’s enthusiasm for the market is most manifest in his formula of national literature: literature that is

read by the people, a concept that I attempted to reconstruct from his criticism of the traditional writers and literature in “Sociedad literaria, artículo de museo,” “¿Por qué no se vende el libro argentino” and “La lectora que defiende el libro nacional,” among others. The market, he foresees, will break literature free from its sterile and ossified sanctuary so that it may join communion with people and invigorate the public sphere. The book market is still in its infancy in Argentina as such literature has yet to be read by its people. However, Arlt is hopeful as he detects signs of a budding alternative model rising over the horizon: his readers are receptive to his writing and they also consume foreign classics bypassing national literature, thus proving that the communion he envisions is feasible.

Modernity is altering every day practices and modifying gender relations. The conflict between traditional and emerging gender relation practices are producing a crisis that is lived as a crises, Arlt informed us in “¿Quiero casarme!” and “Se casa...¡o lo mato!” However, this historical process is also setting women free from their homes and letting them into the public sphere. Although there are still many homebound women, as we were told in “La muchacha en el balcón solitario,” women are on their way of gaining their economic and political independence. In “¿Existe la felicidad para la mujer que trabaja?,” Arlt has introduced us to such a woman, who as one of the first women to do so is often afflicted by struggles, including self-doubt. Thus, although Arlt is often portrayed as a misogynist, he often emerges in the examined aguafuertes supporting women’s liberalization.

Moreover, urbanization, increasing secularization, strolling, erotic gazing, alternative models of femininity, social changes brought about by modernity, are also catalyzing modern love, a love that is so new that still lacks a name of its own but often expresses itself on the streets of Buenos Aires as love at first sight. Arlt’s personal, as well as his contemporaries’,



reaction to it and his portrayal of it in his *aguafuertes* such as “El indeciso,” “Don Juan Tenorio,” but also in his *El amor brujo* suggest that what is cliché to us was a novelty to the porteños. If for conservatives it is perceived as a threat to the established social institutions hence nation, for Arlt it is a sign of a welcomed change. Given that *El Mundo* is a newspaper for the entire family, as we have seen in “Los novios no pueden conocerse” or “Si la gente no fuera tan falsa...” his defense and excitement for the emerging gender relations is often cyphered and toned down yet through his criticism of traditional gender relations and defense of judge Lindsey’s and William Russell’s propositions one can identify his position.

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