Fictions of the Bad Life
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The Naturalist Prostitute and Her Avatars in Latin American Literature, 1880–2010

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not exist without the support of many friends, colleagues, family members, and mentors over the years.

Thank you to the anonymous reviewers of my manuscript, and to Eugene O'Connor, Malcolm Litchfield, Laurie Avery, and Sandy Crooms at The Ohio State University Press. Thanks to Ed Hatton for copyediting the manuscript and Matthew White for compiling the index.

Thank you to my colleagues and students at Oberlin College for being curious and intelligent interlocutors, generous with their energies, and devoted to teaching and learning as lifelong practices inextricable from the deep currents of social justice. In particular, I want to thank my colleagues in Hispanic Studies—Margaret Boyle, Ana Cara, Eli Cohen, Kim Faber, Sebasti-an Faber, Matt Feinberg, Esmeralda Martínez-Tapia, Patrick O'Connor, Barbara Sawhill, Patty Tovar, and Blanca Villar—for their friendship, guidance, and good humor. I also want to thank William Patrick Day, Sean Decatur, Hsiu-Chuang Deppman, Jed Deppman, Jennifer Fraser, Suzanne Gay, Heather Hogan, Tim Scholl, Steve Volk, and Sandy Zagarell for their advice and support throughout my first two years at Oberlin.

I also want to thank all my former colleagues and students at Washington University in St. Louis and the University of Michigan. I’m grateful to Vincenzo Binetti, Veronica Davidov, Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola, Stephanie Kirk,
Anton Shammas, Ruth Tsoffar, and Gareth Williams for their role as intellectual interlocutors for me during a precarious time, as I moved from institution to institution. I am also very grateful to Elzbieta Sklodowska for reading an early draft of the manuscript, and to Lucille Kerr and Alejandro Meter for their mentorship and for productive conversations around the notion of “Jewish Latin America” as I worked through the material in chapters 3 and 4 of the book.

Thanks to Cristina Moreiras-Menor for her generosity and genius, and for modeling a way of working in the academy with integrity. Thanks to Josefina Ludmer for serving as my dissertation advisor and for the wild joy that lit up the cracks in systems, especially her own.

Thank you to my friends, family, and mentors around the world, and especially to Tara Themis Brown, Jessica Chase-White and Mike White, Naomi Clark, Jeannie, Bruce, Sarah and Michael Coopersmith, The Fab Five, Temim Fruchter, Jennifer Koh, Elijah Oberman, Monica Pierepointe, Mon Sendra, The Shondes, Louisa Solomon, Mark Solomon, Nicole Solomon, Diane Welch, Leonard Welch, and Jason Young. Special thanks to my brilliant, loving, and always well-dressed grandmother, Millie Solomon, my role model in so many things.

Thanks most of all to my husband, Yago Colás.

This book is dedicated in loving memory to my grandfather, Morris Sher Solomon.

Parts of chapters 3 and 4 are revisions of material that appeared originally in my article “Reconsidering Anti-Semitism and White Slavery in Contemporary Historical Fiction about Argentina,” in *Comparative Literature* 63.3 (2011), published by Duke University Press.
THE ANALYTICAL POTENCY of prostitution has to do with how “it”—prostitution—is always bound up with other discourses. It cannot be defined except in relation to and in the terms of philosophy, psychoanalysis, economics, history and—perhaps most obviously—law. Prostitution is included within the discursive purview of any discipline that criminalizes or rationalizes it, or that represents, bemoans, judges or bans it; so it cannot be explained exclusively in relation to any one of these disciplines without conjuring up aspects of the others. While it may be defined temporarily in the language and logic of any of them, such a definition remains context-specific. At the same time, in talking about prostitution any discipline exceeds its own boundaries.

This study defines prostitution as a discourse, focusing first on the way it emerged from other discourses in Latin America and was formalized in relation to Naturalism between 1880–1930, and then on how it has rewritten its own conditions of emergence over the next hundred years. While the literature of prostitution in Latin America is rich and varied, I focus on how particular tropes, narrative techniques and—most of all—characterizations of literary prostitutes have triumphed.

Latin American literature of prostitution during its modern consolidation under Naturalism thematized intersectional colonial anxieties about race,
class, ethnicity and gender and reconfigured them in relation to the nation. Close readings of literary fictions of prostitution from the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries—together with a broader survey of legal, medical and economic writings on prostitution during the time period—show that many elements of the discursive specificity prostitution had acquired from other disciplines endured in literature far beyond their relevance in law or medicine. At the same time, aspects of Naturalism appear unexpectedly in contemporary literature of prostitution, long past the time when such devices were linked to a mimetic representation of reality or to prevailing social views.

The time frame for the solidification of prostitution as a discourse also coincides with an international scandal about prostitution and so-called “white slavery” that rocked Europe and the Americas beginning around 1880. The epicenter of the worldwide prostitution “mafias” was in some real and some imaginary ways Buenos Aires. For this reason, Buenos Aires and, by extension, Argentina, became central to the discourse of prostitution both within Latin America and internationally; and the name “Buenos Aires” came to symbolize prostitution and trafficking, for which Argentine Jews were disproportionately blamed. Contemporary literature of prostitution has taken up the topic of historical “Jewish White Slavery,” mobilizing the Naturalist regime that accompanies prostitution into even the most contemporary literature to rewrite the historical moment of prostitution’s inception as a discourse—in the terms and with the literary tools of that discourse.

To address this complexity, I’ve divided my study into two parts. The first part, comprising Chapters 1 and 2, focuses on a Latin American corpus which explores how, from the 1880s to the 1930s, a set of narrative guidelines and contents are solidified under the aegis of Naturalism in the form of legal, medical and economic discourses that coincided with and participated in the consolidation of the modern states. Despite the explicit thematic engagement with the national in Naturalist texts, the emergent discourse of prostitution is in important ways international. I trace how the legacy of Naturalism is embedded in prostitution as a discourse: it reemerges in later literature, reanimating and deconstructing a literary regime infused with the incipiently national philosophical, legal and economic concerns of the late nineteenth century in a recursive movement.

As a metonym for human trafficking at the time of its consolidation as a modern state, and as home to the greatest twentieth-century example of organized prostitution in America, Argentina merits the attention of the entire second half of the book, which tracks contemporary historical fiction on the topic of Jewish white slavery during the period from 1880–1930 in Buenos Aires, exploring how it was that the ethnically, nationally and geographically
varied practices of prostitution during that time period, as well as the rich literature of the same era, came to be retroactively simplified by way of this minority synecdoche, reducing Latin America to Argentina to Buenos Aires, prostitution to organized Jewish crime, and the prostitute to a resurrected version of the nineteenth-century archetypal “blanca”—a poor, ignorant Eastern European Jewish girl, sold into prostitution under false pretenses and left to a miserable existence in Buenos Aires, only to be rescued by good, upstanding Argentines and, finally, integrated into the nation.

The apparatuses of Naturalism persisted in the discourse of prostitution far beyond the political moment in which they reflected and participated in national bids for power by presenting a representation of social reality. Yet literature also plays with these formulas, relying on their shared conventions in order to disrupt expectations and generate new narrative forms, always in a privileged dialogue with the historical period in which the discourse emerged. For this reason, literary prostitution maps interdisciplinary fantasies of continuity: the illusion that “prostitutes” are a transhistorically fixed identity, composed of clearly delineated subjects who can be recognized by an appearance that metonymically attributes guilt but cannot prove innocence, and the wish for connection with the past via this same tricky equation of identity.

Even though the very term “prostitution” suggests a false transhistorical unity, the same maneuver by which it emerged from in between other discourses can illuminate dynamics of nation and nationalism in literary history. Its emergence is irreducibly ironic: while the solidification of the discourse of prostitution under Naturalism coincided with the apex of organized prostitution in Argentina, the literature remains, during this time period, quite international; though it speaks to national issues it does so in highly homogeneous and European-inflected ways. Long after Argentina’s prostitution mafias were disbanded, the period is rewritten in contemporary literature as part of an explicitly national history.

While in important ways prostitution functions as a discourse—a way of speaking and writing coextensive with a particular body of legal, medical and literary knowledge—even during the time period of its consolidation within Naturalism it characteristically ended up “out of bounds.” By this I mean that prostitution has the signature tendency to jump from discourse to discourse when its “subjects” elude definition. Thus, a hallmark of even quintessential Naturalist literature was how a strict medical “exam” would compensate for the legally ambiguous status of a prostitute, or her physical “excesses” would be punished in the courtroom.

For this reason, while it is useful to treat prostitution as a discourse that emerged historically and to consider that its discursive specificity has
remained consistent enough to be meaningful for the analysis of later texts, I also believe that in order to analyze prostitution over long periods of time it is more accurate to consider prostitution to be metadiscursive—leaping from discourse to discourse, importing and exporting “statements.” In this sense, prostitution is a discourse with a knack for finding aporias in disciplinary thinking, pointing to symptomatic instances where meaning comes to an impasse. This is particularly evident in the contemporary literature of prostitution that reenacts the historical conditions of its own emergence. In the long view, prostitution takes on a Möbius strip-like quality: it emerges from Naturalism in the first period (1880–1930) and then comes to contain Naturalism as a kind of mise en abyme that can be unleashed at any moment from within almost any statement made in the discourse of prostitution.

As prostitution is a discourse made of other discourses, the prostitutes in this study are inherently inter- and metadiscursive. The Latin American literary prostitute is a kind of exquisite corpse from the turn of the twentieth century: the legal profession drew her head, the medical profession her body, and more often than not her soul was a pastiche of moral ideas from these as well as other disciplines such as philosophy and religion, as well as popular culture, journalism and education. The relationship of prostitution to prostitute thus puts prostitution in the role of not only a discourse generating statements about prostitutes, but of a wider symbolic order in which prostitutes are subjects. Thus the persistence of particular characters can be seen most clearly across discourses: the *blanca* who captured international attention in journalism from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s appeared sporadically in literature of the time but became most popular as a literary heroine seventy years later.

Perhaps it’s not surprising that the most universal trait attributed to literary prostitutes by the incipient discourse of prostitution is that of their paradoxical—and therefore duplicitous—character. Prostitution both relies on the category of the legal subject (its legal definition as a crime depends circularly on a definition of the prostitute) and eludes it (the prostitute’s name and identity—and therefore also her voice, the credibility of her testimony and her very subjecthood—are contested). Naturalist literature and the law seek to resolve this duplicity by crystallizing a putative unitary identity that always contains its opposite: the prostitute “is” victim and criminal, powerful and abject, guilty and innocent, diseased and healthy, sinful and pure. Cycles of degeneration and regeneration define “the” Naturalist prostitute; and thus a homespun mis-identification of essence and existence makes her both paradox and originary fault. In this way, the prostitute points the duplicity of our thought itself, allowing us to witness the genesis of contradictions.
Chapter 1 focuses on how prostitution emerged as a discourse in Latin America under Naturalism (1880–1930) in the cross-pollination of law and medicine known as *higienismo*. The chapter shows Naturalism’s dualized prostitutes are prisoners of the Naturalist regime—their names changed and voices mediated, their bodies first occultly powerful and then, inevitably, gruesomely destroyed; yet the same “paradoxical” nature that dooms them all to the same destiny also endows them with the capability of exceeding and undermining the narrative regime that defines them. Naturalist novels of prostitution function as fictional laboratories for social experimentation, in which diverse social “types” interact with explosive results; yet far from a simple litany of prevailing views, the permutating cast of characters in the thick Naturalist novels of prostitution makes apparent the contradictions inherent in *higienismo* by generating—inevitably—exceptions to its laws.

Chapter 2 shows how the prostitute is literarized in the form of “living coin” in Mexican Federico Gamboa’s *Santa* (1902) and Argentine Roberto Arlt’s *Los siete locos* (1929) and *Los lanzallamas* (1931). In these novels, prostitutes demonstrate where economic concepts break down by embodying them *qua* paradoxes. However, the readings of Gamboa and Arlt, respectively, show dramatically different possibilities for what this “living coin” can endure and become: Santa is ultimately cast out of circulation, her body spent and exhausted, while Hipólita escapes with all the money she has made—not by exercising prostitution, but by literally “embodying” *qua* prostitute the chimeric illusion attributed to prostitution: that it can make infinite profits from the total surplus value generated by “living coin.” The contradictions of “living coin” hinge on conflicting ideas about surplus-value as it relates to labor and capital. While Gamboa creates a spunky, undead heroine who speaks from beyond the grave and orders the reader to resuscitate her metatextually, Arlt creates a radical, prostitution-based economics that inverts the Naturalist story arc of foreordained degeneration and death by applying it to everybody but the prostitute, yet simultaneously reinscribes it metatextually as every relationship—including that of the reader to the narrator and “commentator”—is seen to be simultaneously exploiting and exploited, inherently defined by the discourse of prostitution.

Post-1930, prostitution is channeled into different national literary traditions in highly divergent and variegated ways that, starting in the 1990s, redefine the national from an explicitly minority vantage point, retelling the characters and stories of the Naturalist period. Chapter 3 focuses on the contemporary historical novel of prostitution, characterized by the proliferation of versions of the Jewish “white slave” (“*blanca*”) of the 1920s: Myrtha Schalom’s *La polaca. Inmigración, rufianes y esclavas a comienzos del siglo XX*
(2003), Isabel Vincent’s *Bodies and Souls: The Tragic Plight of Three Jewish Women Forced into Prostitution in the Americas* (2005), Elsa Drucaroff’s *El Infierno Prometido: Una prostituta en la Zwi Migdal* (2006), juxtaposed to *Trilogía de la trata de blancas* (1933), the memoir of Julio Alsogaray, a former chief of police. In an intertextual echo chamber, the novels present an apparent consensus about key figures in national history that deviates from historical evidence. They satisfy a fantasy of transhistorical continuity by which both minority and state are legitimated. The repercussions of this rewriting of “Jewish Argentina” extend beyond the borders of the historical novel to resonate with contemporary debates around the meaning of Jewishness and anti-Semitism.

Finally, Chapter 4 focuses on how the historical topic of white slavery is subverted in Argentine Edgardo Cozarinsky’s *El rufián moldavo* (2004). Cozarinsky’s novel denarrativizes the story of white slavery, producing a crisis of meaning, and making impossible any unitary and transhistorical identification of Jewish Argentina. His *blancas* break the rules of Naturalism—committing murders, dying in the middle of a novel and without undue suffering—and yet their multiple contradictions are attributed to broader cultural forces rather than inherent paradox: police corruption, anti-Semitism, sexism. By denaturing the assumptions of Naturalist prostitution, the novel grinds to a halt where it appears that no story can be told about this history; yet it then takes off again in an unexpected direction, creating a metafictional *blanca* who has burst out of Naturalism and now contains Naturalism, and generating the possibility of infinite readings.
Part I

The Metadiscursive Naturalist
Prostitute in Latin America
(1880–1930)
In Latin America, prostitution came to its modern maturity as a discourse under the literary regime of Naturalism and in the aftermath of the political consolidation of the modern states.¹ The literary specificity of prostitution—its images, its language, its favorite metonymies, its clichés and its aesthetics—was solidified during this time and within this literary current and the related political and intellectual movements of the time. Further, elements of this specificity are still conjured up today in putatively new stories of prostitution (to say nothing of the success of period novels on the subject, as we shall see in Chapter 3).

In order to explore prostitution as a discourse, it’s necessary to first provide a sense of how it emerged in literature via other discourses, particularly law and medicine. The passage from unified colonial law to varied modern penal codes left some legal aspects of prostitution unresolved. By examining a broad corpus of Latin American Naturalist novels of prostitution, we can see how Naturalism consolidates particular figures and tropes through which these legal ambiguities manifest: concretely, in the prostitute’s changing name and her perpetually mediated, often inaudible or nonsensical voice.

At the same time, the prostitute’s body is medicalized by Naturalist literary techniques I group under the rubric of “overrepresentation”: the means by which a hyperreal body overcompensates for the mediated voice and uncer-
tain name, creating a vocabulary and a set of procedures into recognizable literary sequences. A reading of Argentine medical doctor Francisco Sicardi’s five-volume *Libro extraño* (1889–1902) points to the way that literature functioned coextensively with the broader politics of *higienismo* [hygienism] in making “overrepresented bodies” into homogeneous units of a total medical-social knowledge—though his protagonic prostitute escapes from the novel’s own categories in a mystical ending that can be read more than one way.

**It’s the Law**

At a minimum, we could say that prostitution in Latin America is always linked to at least three legal moments: it is defined by originary prohibitions and permissions regarding prostitution (the Pentateuch, the Ten Commandments), by the legal foundations of the modern state (Colonial laws, the Constitution), and by the present-day status of prostitution under national and municipal law. In this way, of course, prostitution is also linked to legal history, and to the tendency to narrate legal history as coherent, progressive development.

In fact, the legal history of prostitution in Latin America is—somewhat like the history of Latin American literature itself—both continuous and fragmented, geopolitically and temporally. On the one hand, colonial laws defined enormous geopolitical areas, and this makes it possible to speak of the legal history of prostitution in early Latin America in sweeping terms. Beginning in the sixteenth century, Spanish laws and practices of prostitution were imported to America; and prostitution was generally tolerated under colonial law, as it had been in Europe, as an important matter of public hygiene to be strictly regulated by the municipality. At the same time, post-Independence, the contradictions inherent in colonial law were magnified as nations and municipalities interpreted it in different ways and eventually enacted their own laws regulating, tolerating or abolishing prostitution.

Beginning with the regulations of Felipe II (1572–75), legal prostitutes in the New World were required to be orphans or abandoned by their families. Prostitutes who met this description were not criminals; but women who “chose” to stain the *honra* [honor] of the family name committed a crime. Paradoxically, it was because of this law that the testimony of (legal) prostitutes was inadmissible in court, because they “had no name” and their identity could not be proved. For this reason, in court proceedings from the time, it is typical for prostitutes accused of a crime not to be able to speak in their own defense.
While the activity of prostitution was tolerated and controlled as a matter of social prophylaxis, “excesos [excesses]” were forbidden (Atondo Rodríguez 54). The idea of “excess” was defined in terms of appearance: the most common “excess” for which prostitutes were arrested was that of wearing spectacular finery in public places, and the law specifically forbade the use of dresses with trains and high-heeled shoes (Atondo Rodríguez 71) and the use of makeup (López Austin 278). While the law detailed these few particular “excesses,” in practice the category of “excess” was highly relational, dependent on individual interpretation in accordance with prevailing cultural norms.

The laws about both the name and the appearance of prostitutes served to regulate class stratification. While prostitutes might become rich, they were forbidden to look like “ladies.” At the same time, of course, ladies were forbidden to behave as prostitutes. Female sexuality was thus regulated in accordance with the Church’s prevailing anxieties about improper contact, which in the law varied tacitly but not explicitly according to class and race. At the same time, the relational standard of “excess” made female behavior in effect equivalent with appearance.

By the eighteenth century, the Inquisition had ordained that owning—let alone writing—books about prostitution was equivalent to self-incriminating testimony of “moral turpitude.” The Inquisition’s criminalization of the literature of prostitution in the context of a general tolerance and regulation of the activity of prostitution might seem aberrant, if we do not contextualize it in relation to the legal history of literature itself: Spain had banned novels in all of its American colonies, and Felipe II had established offices of the Inquisition in Mexico and Lima to enforce the strict regulation of printing presses and weed out secular writing from bookstores and libraries, which effectively delayed the development of the novel as a genre in Latin America.6

In the nineteenth century, while colonial law began to give way to national and municipal laws, the same preoccupation with the public sphere, visual “excesses,” mysterious names and silent voices reemerged in the literature of prostitution. After the Reglamentos of Felipe II had long been superseded by national constitutions, the preoccupation with “excesses” remained, inflected now with anxieties about national crisis and disorder. At the same time, this colonial idea developed new facets as it was linked to prevailing ideas of the nineteenth century: the belief that women transmitted venereal diseases (and that men did not) was commonly held by doctors at the apex of their political clout as higienistas in Latin America (1880–1920), and thus the moral-legal category of “virtue” could now also be assessed scientifically. Many higienistas were also legal authorities who had participated in the writing of the national constitutions and agitated for amendments. In this way, the preoccupations
of colonial law became retrofitted in the national law in the fashionable terms of Darwinism and Positivism. While there were widespread experiments with abolishing prostitution during this time, they led eventually back toward legalization, and the debate was reframed in the new language of nationhood and with the conceptual tools of higienismo—but retracing the familiar colonial steps of regulation.

By the turn of the twentieth century, pan-American health initiatives had also made Hygienism—now an international movement—inseparable from hemispheric politics. In 1902, the Oficina Internacional de Salud [International Sanitary Bureau] (OIS) was founded at the Second International Conference of American Republics, held in Mexico City. The OIS would later become the Panamerican Sanitary Bureau (OIP) in 1923, culminating in the Panamerican Health Code (Código Sanitario Panamericano) of 1924. It is now evident that there was a tension within Hygienism itself between the epidemiological need to contain the spread of disease (and therefore to implement an international legal code for the medical regulation of prostitution) and the political and moral pressure to abolish prostitution. Thus, in 1902 the OIP had resolved that each member state would remit detailed statistics on health conditions of international concern in their home countries and the legal-medical apparatus in place to control them. Logically, reports included steps taken to reduce the spread of venereal diseases, and, thus, detailed updates on national legislation and medical practices regulating prostitution.

The spirit of colonial law reemerged in modern cities to criminalize prostitutes for vague “excesses.” Because solicitation, trafficking, pimping, and organizing brothels were illegal, it was easy for a prostitute to exceed the permitted scope of her activities: to draw attention either vocally or visually in public could be construed as promoting and soliciting prostitution; to receive clients or to live with other women could turn a home into a “brothel.” At the same time, these restrictions served to reinscribe prostitutes’ dependence on pimps, prostitution rings, and madams in order to stay afloat.

At the same time that the law was being modernized, the colonial duality of absence and excess—the missing name of the prostitute and the “excessive” body—was reinvigorated in the literature of the late nineteenth century. While we cannot begin to speak of the literature of prostitution without reference to the law, it is not clear that the law of prostitution entirely precedes its literature. More precisely, literature took on the legal preoccupation with prostitution during this time of flux and offered an experimental set of fictional case studies which the law in turn drew upon as a kind of precedent in order to speculate upon that which it could not resolve.
This was able to happen for several interrelated reasons. First of all, the period in question—which has traditionally been regarded as the definitive transition from the vestiges of colonial Spanish order to modern national law—was in fact a much more complicated experiment involving severe fluctuations whereby colonial legal concepts might disappear from the letter of the law only to remain implicit in the practices of institutions that predated the new laws and in the absence of explicit regulation.12

Second, it was common during the period of consolidation of the modern penal codes that literary authors were also doctors of either law or medicine, and might be involved in drafting and/or critiquing legislation, and thus that the same individual might participate in forming the modern discourse of prostitution from within more than one discipline. In this way, Argentine author Manuel Gálvez published his Juris Doctor thesis on prostitution, *La trata de blancas* [*The White Slave Trade*] (1905), at the age of twenty-three; twelve years later he would published the most famous Argentine Naturalist novel of prostitution, *Nacha Regules.*13

Finally, and still more interesting, is the fact that Gálvez drew heavily on fictional literary examples of prostitution in order to make his argument—and he was not at all out of step with the times in doing so.14 A chief source for Gálvez’s thesis was a five-volume novel to which we shall return, called *Libro extraño. Novela médico-social* [*The Strange Book: A Medical-Social Novel*] (1889–1902) by Argentine medical doctor and author Francisco Sicardi.15 Gálvez treats Sicardi’s novel as containing expert truths which can be extracted from their fictional context, and moved seamlessly among disciplinary discourses: medical authority within a novel can be transplanted into a legal argument. The gesture is reminiscent of French theorist Jacques Derrida’s provocative assertion that literature not only “sidesteps existing laws from which, however, it derives protection and receives its conditions of emergence,” but in playing the law “literature passes literature,” and becomes law (“Before the Law” 216).16

And yet, we would also have to say that the law here is becoming literature. In his struggle to define the ineffable identity of the prostitute in distinction to that of women, Gálvez quotes the narrator of second volume of *Libro extraño: “Son cosas: no tienen sexo* [they are things: they are sexless]” (Gálvez, *La trata* 20). Gálvez uses the quote as a way to pinpoint the prostitute’s double victimization as alienated from both society and herself, and in need of protection from the law. The use of the quote models a technique Gálvez would perfect in his later novels *Nacha Regules* and *Historia de arrabal.* He would speak for the mute prostitute, defending her before the law by narrating the law’s blindness to her as a subject *in its own terms.*
At the same time, this quote is only a fragment of a larger image in its original context in Sicardi’s novel. The quote continues:

pero cuando llega el que le hace acordar que es mujer, echa su cabeza hacia atrás con labios trémulos, anhelante todo su cuerpo y se abandona toda entera, humilde sierva que besa las manos que le flagelan y le llenan de sangre el rostro, sacrificada siempre por el dominio del ojo recio y frío del asesino, enamorada del ladrón que usa sortijas de oro y narra el peligro de las hazañas nocturnas.

[but when the one comes who makes her remember that she is a woman, she throws her head back with tremulous lips, all her body desirous and she abandons herself completely, humble servant who kisses the hands that beat her and bloodies her face, always sacrificed by the cold, hard eye of the murderer, in love with the thief who uses gold rings and narrates the danger of nocturnal adventures.] (Sicardi, Libro extraño II: 198)

The overblown contradictions of Sicardi’s prostitute are interpreted and mediated by Gálvez. Thus, just as he speaks for the prostitute, he also gives corrective interpretations of the literary texts he has marshaled into his legal discourse.

While Gálvez would later disavow his thesis, it was not as a poor example of legal scholarship, but as “bad literature” (Guy, Sex and Danger 164). In fact, literature was becoming the primary locus of the discourse of prostitution, providing the law with fictional “case studies” even as the judicial apparatuses inherited from colonial days struggled to put new ideas into practice, unequipped to operate transparently. Thus, the prostitute’s lack of (legally legible) subjecthood was becoming transformed in literature into a central preoccupation with literary subjectivity.

At the same time, Galvez’s interdisciplinary borrowing serves to illustrate how the incipient modern literary institutions, together with the professionalization of writing, occurred in a context in which the Latin American intelligentsias continued to function as cadres—what Josefina Ludmer had called “state coalitions” (Ludmer, “Introducción” 9). In sweeping terms, while the Latin American novel was articulated in relation to nationalism, rather than occurring as the idealized “break” that intellectuals had sought from both the pre-modern legal past and as literary autonomy from the state—a multidisciplinary project allied with political and juridical unification, economic and cultural modernization and the entrance into the world market—the ideal of total modernity had in its very unfeasibility become a founding Latin American definition of the literary.17
Gálvez’s intertextual, literary-legal-medical prostitute—a collage of “expert” citations from other disciplines translated into legal discourse—models how by the turn of the twentieth century it had become inconceivable to articulate a legal argument about prostitution without Naturalism, as both a corpus of “evidence” and—as we shall see—a discursive regime. At the same time, Gálvez’s thesis presents an old problem in the law, which antecedes not only Naturalism but even Colonialism (though the Inquisition is perhaps the clearest example of it): the burden of proof and the way that fault relates to lack. The ambiguity in the legal definition of prostitution does not cause the ambiguity in the identity of the prostitute; rather, the founding ambiguity in any theory of the subject is revealed in the legal ambiguity over the prostitute’s identity. The colonial attitude toward prostitution—which we could summarize as intercourse, yes; discourse, no—is repressed by (and thus contained in inverted form) within prostitution’s emergence as a legal-literary-medical discourse under the aegis of Naturalism.

In this way, the prostitute incarnates the flaw running through the notion of the subject: she cannot be innocent because she isn’t a subject—she is legally incomplete, and this is both her fault and her lack. Ríos de la Torre and Suárez Escobar assert that the term “prostitute” is never defined satisfactorily in the law because “Si se amplía la acepción, muchas seríamos delincuentes, y si se restringe, ¿habría alguna manera de comprobar la falta? [If the meaning is broad, many of us would be criminals, and if it is narrow, how would you prove the crime?]” (146) What kind of “fault” or “crime” can be proved without first being defined? What kind of being at-fault antecedes the definition of the fault itself? While the vast majority of Naturalist prostitutes are worn out and killed in the course of “the life,” and the source of the contradiction attributed to a variation of the feminine enigma, this legal thread running through “paradoxical” prostitutes threatens to unravel the fabric of the law.18

Naturalism and Prostitution

Naturalism is the primary discursive regime of prostitution. And yet Naturalism in Latin America is not much simpler to define than prostitution is. In fact, a traditional definition of Latin American Naturalism is almost identical with that of white slavery: an imported European model that took root in America in 1880 and developed most prolifically in Buenos Aires. As we shall see, the problems of studying Latin American Naturalism are related to those of the legal history of prostitution.

Recent scholarship on Latin American Naturalism has problematized traditional literary histories’ uneasy view on whether or not Naturalism was
“Latin American” by engaging the more complex questions of how Latin American Naturalist novels developed in relation not only to the reception of French Naturalism, but also to the reception of other French movements, Naturalism from other European countries, and as a movement in itself, within individual countries and among novelists and texts in Latin America. At the same time, the periodization of Latin American Naturalism has expanded somewhat in order to take into account the broader relationships defining the continent.

Latin American Naturalism is thus constructed first of all in relation to its geographically discontinuous development—its “intermittence” (Prendes 59), which exists in implicit, theoretical contrast to a legally unified colonial past—such that each country presents a unique “national” relationship to Naturalism. On the other hand, such scholarship seeks to problematize the notion of influence itself which traditionally had replaced the absent Spanish and Portuguese colonial legal order with the “laws” of French Naturalism as the unifying source of influence. By stressing the particularities of national Naturalisms, scholars have been able to problematize views of unidirectional influence, showing that not only was the European influence on Latin American Naturalism not unilaterally French, it was also not unilaterally Naturalist, while detailing hitherto unexamined trajectories of inter-American influence.

Some histories limit Naturalism to literature produced up until 1910 (Schlickers), others continue into the 1920s (Prendes). I have included within the discussion of Naturalism some later works: Manuel Gálvez’s Nacha Regules (1918) and Historia de arrabal (1922), Lorenzo Stanchina’s Tanka Chárowa (1920), César Tiempo’s Versos de una p... (1926) and Nicolás Olivari’s La musa de la mala pata (1926) and El gato escaldado (1929). I chose to define Naturalism as broadly as possible in order to trace the resonances and culminations of Naturalism within the period of 1880–1930 and, ultimately, to account for the way in which Latin American Naturalism has had such a successful afterlife in the discourse of prostitution.

While all Naturalist traditions had a fascination with prostitutes, Latin American Naturalism instantiates a particular problematic of Latin American modernization by proposing in literature scientific answers to the law’s ambiguities—at a moment in which the law had infinite ambition and yet still relied on antiquated means of legislation. If the literary prostitute is an incomplete legal subject, she is a tautologically ideal medical test subject: her body incarnates “social diseases” in a textual laboratory that proves prevailing political views on public health. The prostitute’s body is “overrepresented” in the measure that her voice is unheard. The medical-legal duality running through
the discourse of prostitution allows one disciplinary discourse to remit uncertainty immediately to another, allowing it to be juggled permanently between science and law, with neither owning up to its shortcomings.

Name and voice are dominated by their relationship to legal uncertainty (and the eruption of unresolved problems of colonial law in modernity); the body is dominated by its (circular) relationship to science. However, name, voice and body work together, mediated by the reasonable and objective omniscient narrator, under whose legal-medical expertise the inherently unreliable protagonist is chronicled as a case study, defended as a victim, and embellished with the forensic minutia of an autopsy. The cycles of degeneration and regeneration—the ups and downs of the Naturalist prostitute—are something obscurely attributed to the prostitute's paradoxical identity, yet without committing to any one particular theory. By plotting the discourse of prostitution on its interrelated, metaliterary axes of name, voice and body as it emerges within Naturalism and continues into the present, we can follow the prostitute's “contradictions” to their aporias where texts come apart at the medical-legal seams, disseminating unprotected literature in an higienista's worst nightmare.

**Nombre de guerra**

While modern laws no longer required that prostitutes be “nameless” orphans, the symbolic power of the name continued to link the individual with a family, virtue with honor. Naturalist novels marked the prostitute’s passage into “the bad life” with a change of name. The name change is imbued with a potentially continual transformative power: the old name is taken away from her, but it lingers on a horizon of possibility as something that might be restored to the prostitute (though it is rarely reclaimed by her own direct actions). As we shall see, the ambiguous legal construct of the prostitute’s proper name becomes, under Naturalism, a source of the prostitute’s inevitable duplicity. Her namelessness both precludes the law’s protection and constitutes a form of rebellion against the law.

The dramatic change of name not only transforms the protagonist’s life permanently—calling into question the relationship of cause and effect, signifier and signified—but it also links up the prostitute’s name metatextually with that of her author: many Naturalist writers used pen names to publish their work, while the preferred title for a Naturalist novel of prostitution was often the prostitute’s (real) name. The term *nombre de guerra* (war name; from the French *nom de guerre*), which is used in prostitution instead of the
term for “false name” (pseudonym), interpolates a military register into the
discourse of prostitution, equating the Naturalist prostitute’s name with the
nickname traditionally given to a soldier in the French army.21 Intertextually,
while always invoking colonial legal tradition, the Naturalist name change
adds yet another layer with its preference for new names that are either those
of famous prostitutes from French Naturalist novels, commodities with French
names, or Biblical names. The layers interact in a proliferation of meanings
around the name standing in for the originary notion of what the prostitute is
lacking.

Chilean Augusto Goemine Thomson took his maternal great-grandfather’s
last name, D’Halmar, to publish his first novel, Juana Lucero (1902).22 The
eponymous protagonist changes her name to Nana because there is already a
Juana working at the same brothel, and one of her new colleagues insists that
she ought to choose a name “de novela [like in a novel]” to “evitar trocatintas
[avoid mix-ups].” Of course, trocatintas literally means exchanging (trocarse)
ink (tinta); and this suggests the way that the change of name is a manifesta-
tion of a new reality that requires a change of name because the former name
will no longer signify clearly. In this way, the friend who proudly chose Clo-
rina Donoso as her “de novela” name (“Eat your heart out,” she says) also
had to admit that nobody ever called her anything but “Bibelot”—the “French
name” for the chintzy porcelain knicknacks that they collect with childish
focus (D’Halmar 170).

Of course, Zola’s Nana (1880) was already the most famous prostitute of
all time; yet Juana chooses the name “Nana” for herself in complete ignorance
of the existence of this novel, and thus embarks on an inadvertently borrowed
tragic destiny. Watching enviously as Bibelot prays, she herself feels empty,
and wonders if the holy tabernacle itself could be “empty, and that, behind
the blue layers of ether that the poor call heaven, behind that enormous blue
eye that doesn’t even cry over the ill-fated, nor lights up to console them,
there is nothing there but an infinite and terrifying void [ . . . ]” when Bibelot
announces Juana’s new name in the middle of the Cathedral:

mismo que le dicen
a los niños cuando se pegan. Es una novela en que sale una tipa que hace
mil locuras.

Juana seguía abstraída:
—¿Qué extraño todo lo que pienso . . . ! ¿Quién me dice que soy yo
misma . . . ? No te conozco.
Emergence of the Legal-Medical-Literary Prostitute

19


Juana remained absorbed in thought:

How weird everything I’m thinking . . . ! Who can tell me that I’m myself . . . ? I don’t know you.] (172)

Juana only says vaguely, “Yes, don’t you think?” to the choice of name. Neither she nor Bibelot have any idea what Nana is about or why the name is appropriate.

The obvious allusion to Zola prepares the reader for the narrative arc of the Naturalist prostitute par excellence; and in fact, the reference is horrifying at this point in Juana Lucero, when up until now we have known the protagonist—whose childhood nickname was Purisimita—as the helpless victim of circumstances.²³ It is about halfway through the novel that D’Halmar’s protagonist changes name to that of Zola’s, thus conjuring up the meteoric ascent and horrible decline of the original Nana, who was rocketed to stardom from poor origins, but was cut down at her zenith, instantly wracked with disease, and plummeted to a grotesque death, having lost everything that she accumulated along the way, her decomposing cadaver described in disgusting detail.

The innocent choice of this wildly intertextual name constitutes a mise en abyme of the prostitute’s destiny: a snapshot of what is possible once “the bad life” has begun. In this way, the change of name not only takes away the given name because it “already” belongs to another: to a Juana who became a prostitute sooner, thus instantiating the lack/fault of “Nana’s” new legal existence qua prostitute contemporaneous with her identification as the “new” Juana and therefore the one who must change names. It also already belongs to Zola’s Nana, and also, as Bibelot alluded, to Chilean slang as meaning “boo boo,” a child’s word for a wound.

French theorist Gilles Deleuze wrote of a wound that preceded the self—“My wound existed before me,” he wrote, “I was born to embody it” (Two Regimes 389). Juana’s name changing to Nana seems to mark a wound that has already opened, yet also to deepen it and to identify with it: upon hearing the new name pronounced, she is further alienated from her past (“Who can tell me I’m myself?”) and even from herself (“I don’t know you,” she says to herself). The phonetic similarity of Juana to Na-na is also a simplification, a regression from two phonemes to one, making a name that was contained within the old name, an infantile pronunciation of both “Juana” and “wound.” Bibelot adds the accent to the second syllable as an afterthought—Naná—and
then remembers that it is a name de novela (and therefore suitable), foreshadowing intertextually the catastrophic physical and psychic wounds to come: preceding Juana was Zola’s Nana, a literary wound that precedes her as the lack in the prostitute as subject precedes the prostitute.

Appropriately, at the end of the novel, the young man who had fallen in love with Juana before her transformation into a life of sin comes to the brothel where she works and doesn’t recognize her:

No la conoció desde luego, aunque apenas hiciese tres años que no la viera [ . . . ] no habiendo mejor disfraz que el vicio[,] su máscara, si bien conservaba las líneas, borra el aire, el gesto, la expresión, es decir, lo que el alma le prestaba al rostro, y desfigura, hasta suprimir todo parecido entre la muchacha buena y la prostituta [ . . . ] Juana, de saberlo allí [ . . . ], hubiese sentido vergüenza por su amor: pero Juana estaba muerta y Nana . . . le sonreía.

[He didn’t recognize her at all, although it had only been three years since he had seen her [ . . . ] there being no better disguise than vice[,] her mask, though it still conserved its lines, erased the air, the gesture, the expression, that is to say, what the soul lends to the face, and disfigures, to the point of suppressing any resemblance between the good girl and the prostitute [ . . . ] Juana, knowing that he was there [ . . . ], would have felt shame for her love: but Juana was dead and Nana . . . smiled at him.] (190)

The death of “Juana” and her total replacement with Naná does not happen instantaneously, but rather is enmeshed with her daily experience over three years as the life of Juana is replaced with the new life of the name/wound. While the change of name condemns Juana, it also separates her from the original Nana, and the novel from Zola’s determinism: her destiny is not the “genetic” product of alcoholic generations, but rather a social fall from the fragility of the working poor into destitution.24

All the name changes in our corpus reflect a wound that the characters were “born” to embody; at the same time, as we see with D’Halmar’s Naná, there is an element of choice involved in the name change, generally beyond the agency of the ingénue and attributed to knowing older prostitutes. Thus, the eponymous heroine of Mexican Federico Gamboa’s Santa (1902) keeps her given name, but its meaning is changed as the Madam exclaims, “sólo tu nombre te dará mucho dinero, ya lo creo [your name alone will make you a lot of money, believe me]” (Gamboa 8). However, near the end of her life, Santa
is obligated to give up her name at the nadir of her career when the pragmatic Madam of a fifty-cent brothel says to her, “Well, from now on your name is Loreto.”

In Argentine Eugenio Cambaceres’s *Música Sentimental* (1884), which takes place in Paris, the ex-prostitute who falls in love with the indolent Argentine Pablo is known only as Loulou: “la negra circula con nombre de Loulou, y es hija del azar [the chick goes around using the name Loulou, and she’s a daughter of chance]” (Cambaceres 25). Loulou is contrasted with Blanca, who was meant for a different fate:

"Blanche d’Armagnac" would have immediately evoked Blanche d’Antigny, the famous courtesan who was supposed to have inspired Zola’s Nana. However, unlike Juana’s passive acceptance of the name Naná, “Blanche d’Armagnac” is chosen because it is chicer: an upgrade to match a salary fifty times what the maid earned as “Fanchon.” Fanchon—a name meaning etymologically “from France”—is abandoned in favor of a name that is a double pun: it evokes Nana, but also represents the metonymic movement from a whole to a part: Armagnac, like Antigny, is a region of France; yet the former it is also the name of the oldest brandy in France, thus reader and author laugh at the name White Brandy.

Cambaceres’s first-person narrator tells the story of his shiftless hero—who has “twenty thousand *duros* and a mediocre soul,” and who is destined to “liquidate his capital in the gigantic flesh market of Paris” (3)—interspersed with medical-genetic observations of “the masses” around Loulou, Blanca,
and the aging “Rigolblague,” who now makes people call her “la Señora de Preville.” While Rita Gnutzmann has maintained that the first-person narrator of Música sentimental “dificulta la clasificación de la novela como naturalista [makes it difficult to classify the novel as Naturalist]” (Gnutzmann 114) since he is not an “impassive man of science,” within the discourse of prostitution, the anonymous narrator fulfills the role of mediator and guide, explaining absolutely everything that happens with putative expertise, knowing everyone and their genetic makeup with certainty.27

It is noteworthy that Peruvian Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera, one of very few female Naturalist writers to write a novel of prostitution (Blanca Sol, 1889), featured a protagonist who did not change her name but, according to the analysis of Ana Peluffo, allowed its “tautologically blinding” light to allude to the false sun of gold, representing the materialism of the modern “vile times” alluded to by José Martí” (Peluffo 45).28 Despite the critical tone of the work (subtitled “novela social” to affirm its participation in the broader Latin American Naturalist epistemological project), the author was pilloried for writing a book with a such a sinful air, and rebaptized in the press with the untranslatable “Mierdeces Caballo de Cabrón-erá” making each of her names into a similar-sounding insult (Sánchez 103, cited in Peluffo 39).29

The prostitute’s name is always changed: either the prostitute is given a nom de guerre, or her own name becomes the nom de guerre and thus loses its meaning. The emphasis on the prostitute’s changing name is solidified as a set of tropes during Naturalism, and its familiar permutations are recognizable in later literature of prostitution. For example, in Argentine Luisa Valenzuela’s Hay que sonreír (1966), the experienced prostitute, known as “María Magdalen,” explains the need for a new name to young Clara:

Lindo nombre, pero un poco inapropiado, ¿no? Lo que pasa es que vos sos nueva en este asunto [. . .] Clara [. . .] nombre de monja [. . .] un nombre como ése confunde, ningún tipo se anima a tocar a una mujer que se llame Clara. En cambio mirame a mí, el Cacho me puso María Magdalena. La historia es vieja, una de las putas más importantes del mundo; andaba detrás de Cristo pero el Cristo ni cinco porque era serio.

[Pretty name, but a little inappropriate, don’t you think? You’re new at this [. . .] Clara [. . .] sounds like a nun’s name [. . .] a name like that confuses people, no guy is going to dare touch a woman named Clara. On the other hand look at me, el Cacho named me Mary Magdalene. It’s an old story, one of the most important whores in the world; she was after Christ but Christ
didn’t give her the time of day because he was a serious guy.] (Valenzuela 76, 81)\textsuperscript{30}

The new prostitute remains ignorant of why and how the \textit{nom de guerre} works, and must be named by somebody with experience: in this case, María Magdalena was named by the pimp, Cacho. Similarly, for “Gabriel” in Argentine Claudio Zeiger’s \textit{Nombre de guerra} (1999), choosing the name of an archangel to match his “angel face” was “how it all began” (26).\textsuperscript{31}

On the other hand, Chilean Lucía Guerra’s novel \textit{Muñeca brava} (1993) echoes Federico Gamboa’s \textit{Santa} with a character who keeps her own name—María de las Mercedes—because she’s told to do so, this time by a client, who tells her that “parece el nombre de una virgen allá en España [it sounds like the name of a far away virgin in Spain]” (73).\textsuperscript{32}

The change of name as the definitive instantiation of the change of life is countered by the change of name in response to the body’s decrepitude, as when Gamboa’s Santa was renamed “Loreto” because “what kind of saint would you make!” (Gamboa 328). However, the nicknames chosen in later literature are more literally descriptive of their success or failure. In Chilean Hernán Rivera Letelier’s \textit{La Reina Isabel cantaba rancheras} (1994), in addition to the eponymous “Reina Isabel,” there is la Malanoche [Bad Night], la Poto Malo [Bad Butt], la Chamullo [Scam], la Pan con Queso [Bread and Cheese], la Cama de Piedra [Bed of Stone], la Dos Punto Cuatro [Two Point Four], la Flor Grande [Big Flower], etc.\textsuperscript{33} In Argentine Leónidas Lamborghini’s \textit{Un Amor como pocos} (1995), Madame Lobá meditates that “por algo me llaman también Loba [She-Wolf] sin acento [there’s a reason they also call me Loba without an accent]” (109).\textsuperscript{34}

In Chilean Alberto Fuguet’s \textit{Tinta roja} (1996), the aging prostitute Betsabé Trujillo, is known universally as “La Drácula” and “the nickname destroyed her.” “There are nicknames that have that power. They undermine you completely:

La huevada es que la Trujillo llega a un acuerdo con un cliente, ¿ya? Es la matiné. Poca gente en la sala. Pleno invierno, un frío de los mil demonios. El tipo es un lolo, un colegial del barrio alto, hijo de un conocido empresario. Se lo empieza a chupar. Parece que la Trujillo no estaba bien. Dicen las malas lenguas que estaba dura, llena de pepas. De pronto se oye un grito pavoroso. El colegial comienza a gritar como un becerro cuando lo van a degollar, pero como era una película de terror, nadie se dio cuenta. La Trujillo tenía los dientes muy afilados. Y eran suyos, no falsos. Verdaderos
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colmillos. [ . . . ] Después la muy puta se levantó y le susurró: “Te dijo, lolo, que no acabaras adentro.”

[The story is that la Trujillo had come to an agreement with a client, okay? It’s the matinee. Not many people in the theater. It’s winter, it’s freezing cold. This guy is a kid, a high school student from the rich neighborhood, son of a well-known businessman. She begins to give him head. Apparently, la Trujillo wasn’t feeling well. Rumor has it that she was hopped up on pills. Suddenly there’s a horrific scream. The kid starts screaming like a calf whose throat is about to be cut, but since it was a horror movie, nobody realizes. La Trujillo had very sharp teeth. And they were hers, they weren’t fake. Real fangs. [ . . . ] Then the bitch got up and whispered to him: “I told you, kid, not to come inside.”] (Fuguet, *Tinta roja* 134)³⁵

While the upper-class Chilean fantasy of monstrous uppityness from an aging prostitute, and her corollary “branding” with the nickname that destroys her ability to “*patinar* [work as a prostitute],” *Tinta roja*‘s “Drácula” brings a postmodern literalness to the Naturalist preoccupation with the name as not only marking the prostitute but cataloguing her in an intertextual “registry” that is the literary equivalent of the *Dispensario de Salubridad*.

As a further (and for the moment, final) twist in the postmodern naming of prostitutes, we can return to Guerra’s *Muñeca brava*, in which the protagonist is named Esmeralda, “igualito al famoso barco de la Armada Nacional [just like the famous ship from the National Armada],” but chooses to go by “Alda” because it sounds more exotic (Guerra 21). Following the trope, Alda chooses her name unconscious of its resonance or that of her given name: “Alda” means etymologically both “old” and “rich,” and has a lyric history going back to the *ciclo carolignio* [Charlemagne Cycle] of ballads, and appears as a proper name in later *romances* (Díaz-Mas 181).³⁶ The Esmeralda, on the other hand, was the jewel of the Chilean Navy during the War of the Pacific (1879–1883); but it was also the name of the Chilean navy’s floating torture chamber during the dictatorship of Pinochet.³⁷ The novel ends with Alda sacrificing herself in a heroic attempt to assassinate the Dictator (unnamed, but clearly representing Pinochet). Alda’s name change should therefore be seen in a double national history, accepted and spectral, heroic and ignominious, in the context of the *Esmeralda*’s persistence as a national symbol making ceremonial visits to foreign ports in celebration of one version of Chilean naval history while its use in another version was never officially acknowledged.

The double name’s intertextuality as historical *romance* and romantic his-
tory traces the wound that “preceded” the protagonist back to its obvious origin as an open secret of state. In this way, Naturalism comes full circle with its epistemology of social knowledge to reappropriate the postmodern prostitute as yet again an unconscious messenger of national critique.

**Constructing the Voice that Silences Itself**

The literary prostitute’s voice emerges in Naturalism to constitute an example of what Josefina Ludmer called the literary usos [uses, usages] of popular culture (*El género* 11). In this way, fragments of orality are fashioned into an invented language that comes to signify as “other” within the Naturalist regime. The voice of the prostitute inherits the legal “inaudibility” brought about by namelessness, and while her “overrepresented” body trumps her words, these words are themselves obscured in the narrative by an exaggerated mediation: they are summarized or dismissed out of hand: they don’t make sense on their own.

In Argentine Manuel Gálvez’s classic novel, *Nacha Regules* (1918), this is demonstrated very clearly near the beginning of the book. The main character, Fernando Monsalvat, is constructed as “unusual”—and, in fact, he is the polar opposite of Cambaceres’s nameless narrator in *Música sentimental*: Monsalvat has just returned to Buenos Aires from Europe, feeling completely alone; “Al revés de los jóvenes de su tiempo, apenas conocía a las muchachas ‘de la vida’ [Contrary to the young men of his time, he hardly knew about working girls]” (*Nacha* 16). He meets Nacha Regules in a Buenos Aires cabaret: we witnesses a scene in which Nacha refuses to dance with a man and is roughly reprimanded. He intercedes on her behalf: “Exijo que no le trate mal a esa infeliz [I demand that you not treat this poor thing badly],” to which the patotero [thug] in charge responds by demanding that Nacha answer for herself whether she is happy or not. Of course, put on the spot, with her safety at risk, Nacha has no choice but to lie. But then, “ya lanzada [once she gets going],” she goes on and on:

Hablaba como en el vacío, sin dirigirse a nadie. Hablaba para ella misma, para distraerse con sus propias palabras. No para Monsalvat. Ella deseaba que Monsalvat no la oyese. Parecía una sonámbula. ¡Era un hablar, un hablar...! Monsalvat no la escuchaba. La miraba, y nada más. Bastábale sentir a su lado toda su dulzura. Bastábale la suavidad, el temblor de sus palabras y la melancolía de sus ojos. El tango [que tocaban en el cabaret] les daba a las palabras y a los ojos una ardiente tristeza.
[She spoke as though in a void, without looking at anybody. She talked to herself, to distract herself with her own words. It wasn’t for Monsalvat. She wanted Monsalvat not to hear her. She seemed a sleepwalker. She went on, and on . . .! Monsalvat didn’t listen to her. He watched her, and nothing else. It was enough for him to feel at her side all of her sweetness. The softness was enough for him, the trembling of her words and the melancholy of her eyes. The tango [that was playing in the cabaret] gave her words and her eyes an ardent sadness.] (Nacha 13)

As Nacha speaks “for herself” in public, she seems alienated from herself, “like a sleepwalker,” and we understand that she doesn’t dare to tell the truth. On the other hand, Monsalvat (who is a lawyer) doesn’t listen to her anyway—“it was enough for him” to watch her.

His reaction is completely different when Almicar Torres, a “police doctor,” explains to the young lawyer everything he has learned in writing a book on prostitution. In contrast to Nacha Regules’s nonsensical and unheard monologue, the dialogue between Monsalvat and Torres is precise and erudite, playing out as a kind of intellectual autobiography of Gálvez. When Torres explains to Monsalvat the story of how Nacha Regules became a prostitute, Monsalvat listens with rapt attention, and he is so affected that he begins to see the world as a “sinister star, populated by infamous beings”:

Todo era negro, horriblemente negro; un abismo de perversas sombras. El mismo era un criminal. Había seducido, había comprado caricias con recomendaciones y favores. Comprendía que era un canalla, tal vez como aquel vecino, y como el otro y como todos los hombres que allí estaban y como todos los hombres del mundo. Aquella modistilla que sedujó, aquella obre- rita que fué su amante, ¿serían también rameras, más o menos disimuladas? ¿Y por culpa suya? ¿Se venderían también? ¿Habían perdido todo derecho al aprecio del mundo, todo derecho a ser personas, todo derecho a ser compadecidas? ¿Y por culpa suya? [. . .] Torres habló de las prostitutas vergonzantes, perdidas por el hambre; de aquellas otras, víctimas de la maldad humana y de las preocupaciones morales: del novio que las sedujó y de la feroz moral paterna. Habló luego de las otras, las desdichadas convertidas en cosas, sin personalidad, sin alma, sin libertad. Esclavitud monstruosa.

[Everything was black, horribly black; an abyss of perverse shadows. He himself was a criminal. He had seduced, had bought caresses with recommendations and favors. He understood that he was trash, maybe like his neighbor over here, and like the other one and like all the men who were...]}
there and like all the men in the world. That little seamstress he seduced, that little worker who was his lover, were they whores too, one way or another? And it was his fault? Did they sell themselves too? Had they lost all right to the world’s respect, all right to compassion? And it was his fault? [. . .] Torres spoke of the prostitutes who filled one with shame, lost because of hunger; of those others, victims of human wickedness and moral anxieties: of the boyfriend who seduced them and of ferocious paternal morality. He spoke then of the others, the pathetic ones who had become things, without personality, without soul, without freedom. Monstrous slavery. ([25–26])

Monsalvat is left speechless after Torres’s diatribe. The shocking effect of the doctor’s words, after which Monsalvat no podía hablar, is held up against the negligible effect of Nacha’s voice describing her own experience—so null that the text of it is actually omitted for the readers. In this way, the prostitute’s voice is not only “not her own” (in that it is mediated) but that it is meaningfully absent, significantly impossible, and this absence and impossibility is itself thematized.

The prostitute who attempts and fails to “tell her own story” is a trope that is reiterated within the corpus: in Federico Gamboa’s Santa, on more than one occasion the protagonist attempts to tell her story and the narrator does not repeat it but summarizes it as a string of logical inconsistencies: “rompió a hablar, desvaríos de fiebre, reconstrucciones trágicas de su niñez, trastocamientos de fechas y sucedidos [She suddenly started talking, a feverish delirium, tragic reconstructions of her childhood, mixing up dates and events]” (Gamboa 294). The narrator then reports the counterfactual events faithfully in a list, removed as samples from context of her story:

El Jarameño, en su casita blanca de Chimalistac; Rubio, de alférez de gendarme, queriendo seducirla en la casa de Elvira; Santa, casada con el compañero de sus hermanos en la fábrica de Contreras, el tañedor de guitarra que por ella se perecía cuando ambos eran muy jóvenes.

[El Jarameño, in her little white house in Chimalistac; Rubio, dressed as a police lieutenant, wanting to seduce her at Elvira’s house; Santa, married to the friend of her brothers from Contreras’s factory, the guitar strummer who was crazy about her when they were both young.] (Gamboa 294–95)

Each example reveals that Santa has substituted one character for another in her delirium; recontextualized in the narrator’s enumeration, the units of her speech become specimens that, removed from their context in the story she
was telling, signify her mental incompetence, while alluding vaguely to fears and desires.\textsuperscript{41} In both novels, the protagonist speaks in a way that is unrepresentable: the speech of Nacha and Santa must be mediated by the narrator, translated from nonsense into information about what the character was saying.

Of course, the prostitute's voice is not always inaudible: Santa rails and screams, and Nacha laments. It is not an absolute absence of the voice but rather the mediation of the expository voice: she cannot tell what happened; she cannot explain anything. And yet she can speak lyrically at times, expressing feelings and “in her own words” the impossibility of her situation.

While the novel was the Naturalist genre par excellence, poetry played an important role in constructing the lyric voice of the prostitute—and most particularly the notorious, pseudo-testimonial collection of verse written by Ukrainian-born Argentine César Tiempo (pen name of Israel Zeitlin), \textit{Versos de una . . .} (1926).\textsuperscript{42} Yet Tiempo published the collection under yet a different pseudonym, in order to pose as a made-up prostitute named Clara Beter.\textsuperscript{43} Ironically, Tiempo used this “real” voice in order to talk about the impossibility of speaking—and even of living—as a prostitute. This narrative falsetto, a transvestite voice permitting the narrator to “be” the prostitute, constitutes the flipside of the inaudible voice.

Tiempo's book was a smashing success. Nobody doubted that the poems were written by a prostitute, and Elías Castelnuovo declared it a triumph—under a pseudonym, Roland Chaves—writing in its prologue that it represented “the anguished voice of the brothels”:

\begin{quote}
Ella reivindica con sus versos la infamia de todas las mujeres infames. [ . . . ]
Ella cayó y se levantó y ahora nos cuenta la historia de sus caídas. Cada composición señala una etapa recorrida en el infierno social de su vida pasada. Esta mujer se distingue completamente de las otras mujeres que hacen versos por su espantosa sinceridad.
\end{quote}

What is most amusing about the quote is, of course, the obvious irony of the book's reception: Castelnuovo attributes “shocking sincerity” to Clara Beter's
poems, and *that sincerity* is what distinguishes her from “all the other women poets.”

As the fiction is universally “recognized” as the truth, Castelnuovo asserts that the poet “rose and fell, and now tells us the story of her falls”: the Naturalist story arc. In this way, the lyric voice of “Clara Beter” is “recognizable” because it forms a countertext to the great Naturalist novels: it is read by readers of Naturalism as an exposé or a hidden view of the heroines with which they are already acquainted. This “shocking testimonial” of the behind-the-scenes life of prostitution is made by a lyric “I” that makes explicit the nonsensical or unrepresentable interiority of the prostitute: it performs the prostitute’s inner life in a kind of double imposture, or a confessional drag show performing aloneness, consisting exclusively of a voice-over. And yet even in the lyric genre, as we shall see, the prostitute’s voice can’t be separated from her name and body.

From the very beginning of the book, “Clara” bemoans the impossibility of keeping intact her “heart, sorrows and dreams” without belonging to someone:

Me entrego a todos, mas no soy de nadie;  
Para ganarme el pan vendo mi cuerpo  
¿qué he de vender para guardar intactos  
mi corazón, mis penas y mis sueños?  

[I give myself to everyone, but I belong to no one;  
To earn my bread I sell my body  
What do I have to sell to preserve intact  
My heart, my sorrows and my dreams?] (“Quicio,” in Tiempo, *Versos* 37)

This first poem provides an initial definition of this “shocking sincerity”: unshockingly, corroborating the Naturalist regime of interrelationship of voice, body and name. In giving herself to “everybody,” she is “nobody’s,” which threatens her sense of self implicitly because in belonging to nobody she doesn’t “own” her own heart, sorrows and dreams. Similarly, in “Lo irremediable”:

En una misma pieza  
Un macho y una hembra  
Y el “yo” mujer  
Que no sabe cómo desaparecer
The “yo” is unable to disappear, yet is also dissociated from the “hembra” of the sexual transaction, a disembodied spectral “yo mujer” that remains in limbo in the atmosphere of prostitution, unable to actualize itself and yet stubbornly not “knowing” how to disappear. This “yo mujer” watches over the prostitute, such that she is both alienated from herself and yet watching her own alienation.

At the same time, other poems lament what the prostitute has lost permanently: true love (“Un lejano recuerdo”) and purity (“Ayer y hoy,” “El patio de la infancia,” “Contrición”). “Fatalidad [Misfortune]” lays out the impossibility of the prostitute’s desires:

Sueños, sueños, sueños que se lleva el viento
Implacable y frío de la realidad
—¿tendré hogar, cariño, sosiego algún día?
Y una voz recóndita responde: “jamás”

[Dreams, dreams, dreams gone with the wind,
Implacable and cold, of reality
—will I have a home, affection, peace some day?
And a hidden voice responds: “never”] (Tiempo, Versos 54)

Similarly, “Destino” ends by comparing the prostitute to a year without the promise of spring, condemned to repeat the same story:

Pero yo igual que siempre, sujeta a mi destino
De hallar en cada lecho bocas de precipicios,
¡he de sufrir lo mismo!
¡he de sufrir lo mismo!

[But I the same as always, subject to my destiny
To find in every bed the mouths of precipices,
I must suffer the same!
I must suffer the same!] (Tiempo, Versos 54–55)

The “message” the prostitute conveys in the poems is repeated in the titles, in
the clear expository phrases (“subject to my destiny” “I must suffer the same,” “will I have a home, affection, peace some day?”), and again in the apparently “emotive” repetitions (“sueños, sueños sueños,” “¡he de sufrir lo mismo!/¡he de sufrir lo mismo!”). The verses are so definite, their tone so flat, that they almost read like axioms of the discourse of prostitution rather than expressions of feeling.

In this way, while individual poems leave little room for interpretation, the “message” that the poems as a collection hammer home through—the impossibility of escaping from prostitution as well as the impossibility of even articulating fully the desire to do so before beginning to bemoan its impossibility—can be read as the lyric condensation of the Naturalist story arc in which the prostitute ascends only to fall to her foreordained demise. By removing plot and suspending the motion forward in time (speaking as Clara does in retrospect, as if responding guardedly to police questions on the topic of her subjectivity), the lyric “I” of the prostitute speaks from this eternal present of the prostitute from which “I woman” contemplates what “the female” is doing, understanding that she is doomed, yet unable to stop it. The lyric voice of the prostitute flattens the exciting ups and downs of the Naturalist novel into a bitter, gnomic philosophy of the subject; her lyricism is a litany of bitterness.

The exception to this globalized bitterness—the only possible escape from the foreordained tragedy of the prostitute—is Revolution. Thus, the content of Clara’s “dream” switches abruptly from conventional symbols of women’s satisfaction and fulfillment (home, peace, affection) to a utopian female sisterhood:

Mientras cae la lluvia, yo acaricio mi sueño:
Un día las mujeres serán todas hermanas;
La ramera, la púdica,
La aristócrata altiva y la humilde mucama.
Irían por las calles llevando como emblema
Una sonrisa alegre y una mirada franca,
Y así, sencillamente,
Se ofrecerían a todos los hombres que pasaran.
Ellos se tornarían
Tan buenos como el sol, como el pan, como el agua;
Su dicha cantarían todos los oprimidos
Suavizadas sus manos, sus gestos y sus palabras.
Bajo los cielos limpidos, banderas de alegría,
Desplegados sus paños como alas
Cual si quisieran cobijar a todas
Las mujeres que un día supieron ser humanas
[As the rain falls, I caress my dream:
One day women will all be sisters;
The whore, the chaste,
The proud aristocrat and the humble maid.
They would go through the streets bearing as their standard
A happy smile and a frank gaze,
And thus, simply,
*They would offer themselves to all the men who passed.*
Men would become
As good as the sun, as bread, as water;
All the oppressed would sing in happiness
With softened hands, gestures and words.
Under the clear skies, flags of happiness,
Their handkerchiefs unfolded like wings
As if they wished to shelter all
*The women who, they learned one day, were human/The women who learned one day to be human.*] (Tiempo, Versos 49–50; my emphasis)

The ambiguity of the two italicized verses is key: first, in this utopian feminist sisterhood, *all* women would with the greatest simplicity offer themselves to *all* men. The euphemistic reflexive verb *ofrecerse* [to offer oneself] opens up a metonymic chain of free love that is ambiguous in the measure that the prostitute’s identity is foundationally incomplete.

The vision of female liberation in this poem rather than abolishing prostitution “frees” women by making prostitution “free”: they shall all simply “offer themselves” to all men indiscriminately—and then men will become absolutely delightful, and treat women with gentle protectiveness. The fantasy that if women will simply behave as free prostitutes men will respect them as human beings is an amazing vision, the “shocking sincerity” of which is attributed to the prostitute’s true voice. It simultaneously reifies the misogynistic notion that all women are really prostitutes at the same time that it presupposes and elevates “free” female prostitution (the indiscriminate sexual availability of all women to all men) as the key to social revolution.

Whether the humanity of the prostitute is something that prostitutes learn and therefore “frees” them to offer themselves to men, or something that men learn when prostitution becomes permanently free of charge, hinges on the unstable syntax of the last verse. Of course, in the prostitute’s paradoxical lyric essence, it’s the same thing: there is no “self” that could be extricated from its conditions; the “yo mujer” can do nothing without a change in
circumstances. In this way, while the poem rests on the prostitute’s nonidentity, it can also be read as a transparent allegory of the anarchist agenda in Buenos Aires of twenty years earlier: to free prostitutes by first teaching everyone about the objectification and commodification of women under prostitution and gradually educating prostitutes to take their rightful place in the labor movement. This adds another layer to the relationship of writer, narrator and readers: Tiempo disguises himself as a prostitute in order to “educate the people” about the “true” experience of prostitution.

In fact, there were calls from Boedo writers and artists to find and save Clara Beter. Roberto Arlt proposed setting her up in her brothel in Buenos Aires and using the proceeds to finance a literary prize. César Tiempo had made up an address where she was supposed to live in Rosario to encourage fan mail (Glickman, The Jewish White Slave Trade 36); and Castelnuovo made an expedition to the address Tiempo had invented along with a couple of friends. After they were told that nobody named Clara Beter lived there, they scoured the neighborhood until they accosted a likely prostitute writing a poem and cried “You are Clara Beter!” Amazingly, what they deduced from her reaction was that “the poetess wanted to remain anonymous” (Tiempo “La verdadera historia” 4th para). Erin Graff Zivin has pointed out that this “collective hysteria” over the mysterious existence of the poet-prostitute reveals “the perverse relationship between the imaginary prostitute and her male readership,” “culminating in an unfortunate assault on an innocent woman” (Graff Zivin 103). Yet the levels of simulation involved in this literary “happening” make it clear that there is in fact already a rich literary relationship in place between the Boedo writer-intellectuals and the prostitute, which Clara Beter merely instantiates. The fact that “she” didn’t exist illuminates this relationship, but it doesn’t change it.

As we shall see in the next section, the idea of a “natural” solidarity between the prostitute and young political agitators grew under Naturalism, manifesting all along the spectrum from an idealized alliance to a dystopian vision of total social upheaval carried out by thugs and prostitutes together as lowlifes genetically programmed to wreak havoc.

"Overrepresentation": The Body that Won’t Stop Talking

I have mentioned that the prostitute’s body is “overrepresented”: it speaks for her by overwhelming and contradicting her voice. Under Naturalism, the discourse of prostitution develops a regime of visibility through which the
prostitute is observed in detail and these details constitute evidence of duplicity. At the same time, the contradictions incarnated in the prostitute's overrepresented body create another paradox: as we shall see, the prostitute's body is also the presence of lack, or the materiality of missing.

The most immediately striking contradiction produced by overrepresentation is that of the newly fallen woman's impossible innocence. Santa possessed “una belleza que resultaba más provocativa por una manifiesta y sincera dulzura que se desprendía de su espléndido y semivirginal cuerpo de diecinueve años [a beauty that was more provocative due to a manifest and sincere sweetness that emanated from her splendid and semivirginal nineteen-year-old body]” (Gamboa 9); Naná provokes insolent leers from passersby with “la sonrisa de cortedad de los labios frescos [. . . y] hasta el temblor nervioso que levantaba las cejas, cerca de las sienes lechosas surcada por venitas azules [the courteous smile of the fresh lips [. . . and] even the nervous trembling that raised the eyebrows, near the milky temples crossed with blue veins]” (D’Halmar 167).

In Carne Importada. Costumbres de Buenos Aires (1890), published in Buenos Aires by the Spanish writer López Bago, it is the contradiction between a “visible” innocence and an equally visible hypersexualized body that foreshadows (and, perhaps, causes) the prostitute’s fall: the narrator points out how “la boca, grande y sensual de Agustina [Agustina’s large and sensual mouth]” contrasted provocatively with “lo grave y serio del gesto, la castidad del noble espacio de la frente, y la coloración ruborosa de las mejillas, donde la virginidad se aterciopelaba, todavía en tenue vello [. . .] [the somber and serious gestures, the chastity of the noble height of the forehead, the blushing coloration of the cheeks, where velvety virginity still had a faint fuzz (López Bago 18).]

Whereas the prostitute’s voice cannot tell her own story, the prostitute’s body cannot help but tell everyone who sees her that this is, was, or will be a prostitute. Overrerepresentation thus overrules cause and effect, suspending the forward flow of time in order to be able to “see” the destiny of the prostitute in the innocence of the young girl. In this way, as the changed name and the mediated voice prevent the prostitute from speaking the truth about herself, overrepresentation turns the prostitute de facto into a liar: innocence itself becomes a gesture of seduction when accompanied by hyperbolic descriptions of the body. Clothing, jewelry, and makeup are metonymic signs of duplicity: the same dress that seduces one client was inevitably purchased with the money of another client; the prostitute’s accessories summon and simulate a false desire. In this way, overrepresentation creates and maintains the illusion that the “dishonest” origin of the prostitute’s appearance are visible
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In every scene: and the more lovely and ingenuous she looks, the more duplicity is involved.

In this way, “purity” becomes one more commodifiable quality and therefore one more disguise, necessarily false because it is a moral quality made into an object of exchange. The prostitute’s illegitimate use of her body—a body that is sold and resold (in a culture that talks about sexual “possession”) or rented equally among many (in a culture obsessed with private property)—therefore makes her sexuality into a farse, her desire “by definition” both nonexistent and infinitely indiscriminate at the same time. Overrepresentation replaces desire with perverse simulation. Whereas Juana Lucero became unrecognizable to those who knew her before her transformation, wearing her perversity as a mask (D’Halmar 190), Gamboa’s dramatic take on this idea is to make his protagonist become more radiant, more innocent-looking, even as she is being morally debased: “tan cierto es que las mujeres, por su poderosa facultad de fingir, no pierden jamás ni olvidan los gestos, palabras o actitudes que las favorecen, que Santa recuperó instintivamente sus aires de los buenos tiempos, sus cautivantes aires de sincero candor campesino [because it is certain that women, because of their powerful ability to feign, never lose or forget the gestures, words or attitudes that favor them, Santa recovered instinctively her airs from her good days, her captivating airs of sincere country candor]” (187). This is the sense in which Baudrillard says that the prostitute is “the painted woman”: he refers to the irony of artificial practices, by which a woman can turn her features into “more than a sign,” to incarnate the peaks of sexuality while being absorbed in their simulation: by definition, he insists, the prostitute is perverse, because she simulates being seduced while being categorically incapable of it—because she is always doing the seduction (Seduction 15, 22). Santa in this way seduces herself: through her ability to feign, she “instinctively” recovers her natural, sincere ways, and wears them as a disguise.

This is also what takes place in the scene in which Santa’s brothers abandon her “forever”: having come to the brothel to deliver the news of their mother’s death, the three siblings are initially united, and they cry together holding hands. Yet Santa leaned against the wall “su espalda semidesnuda por el escote del rico vestido, y Fabián y Esteban sus hombros robustos de trabajadores [her seminude back left bare by the fancy dress, and Fabian and Esteban their robust workers’ arms]” (Gamboa 116). Slowly, Esteban calms himself, and takes his hand away from Santa, “obligating Fabián with the movement to do the same.” “Esteban reflexionó en lo que Santa era,—que bien lo publicaban el lujo y la riqueza de su atavío [Estaban reflected on what Santa was,—what the luxury and fanciness of her attire made public].” While their mother
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on her deathbed never cursed Santa and forgave her before dying, "We do damn you!" Esteban shouts at her, as he and his brother leave forever. “Don't look for us or even think about us ever again” (Gamboa 117).

Santa's fancy attire is contrasted with her brothers' “honest” poverty; the fanciness makes them ashamed of her in a way reminiscent of the court proceedings against colonial prostitutes where the very fact of being dressed in fancy clothes was a legal crime as well as morally inappropriate—an attack on the social hierarchy (wearing the signs of a higher class) together with an insufficiently contrite and embarrassed attitude. Santa thus shames her brothers and makes them ashamed of her. In this way, the prostitute's body is made to incarnate the social contradictions around prostitution: if she looks beautiful, the beauty has something diseased in its very attractiveness that provokes rejection from the healthy (and therefore attracts the “weak”); the prostitute's appearance therefore belies her appearance; her beauty belies her beauty.

In the same way, the prostitute in commodifying herself becomes singularly obsessed with commodities—in objectifying herself she becomes exclusively concerned with objects. The luxuries that circularly belie their own illegitimate origin, that “speak” of the woman's prostitution, inevitably lead the prostitute to an insatiable hunger for more (and therefore deeper into depravity). Thus, in Juana Lucero, Adalguisa attempts to convince Juana to abort her baby by resorting to the “infallible” temptation of going shopping (D’Halmar 160): there is a shift in orders when the prostitute “buys into” prostitution as opposed to abjectly dragging herself through it once she has “sold herself.” What we could arguably call the victim of capitalism thus embodies a dystopian materialism wherein one's baby could be reasonably exchanged for going shopping.

However, as we shall see, the literary manifestation of the body and its interiority as “speaking for” the prostitute goes beyond the fated decadence and death of the prostitute's body, her necessary incarnation of “social” diseases in their double sense of epidemic and moral—and actually succeeds in locating the source of national problems in an international erotic history, together with “the persistence of creole pathologies” (Nouzeilles, Ficciones somáticas 226). The representation of vice in the prostitute's body is both transparent and deceiving: old prostitutes necessarily degenerate physically at a steady pace only slightly behind that of their moral debasement, embodying the “reality” of contagion while their value as prostitutes is obliterated. There is a heavy-handed moral suggestion that old prostitutes have lost their sense of shame, which would link their lack of attractiveness to a lack of moral scruples and hence to a lack of suffering. Their bodies are barbarized, their seductive clothing becomes “decadent,” they shuffle around half-dressed:
Ah! The grotesque figure of Pepa, in spite of the long nightgown that covered the flaws of vice and age! Her faded flesh, exuberant in the places men love and squeeze [ . . . ] her enormous belly of an old drinker, her limp, bulging breasts of Galician peasant swayed, swayed disgustingly, with something bestial in their swaying.] (Gamboa 9)

The destroyed body of the prostitute produces disgust and rejection, even horror, exaggerated in the measure that it alludes recursively to a (destroyed) desire that itself “destroyed” that which was desired. In other words, the overrepresented body testifies to its own destruction through corruption: this ruined body is the spectral double of that of the young, nubile prostitute, unshakeable as a shadow; and the bitter, shameless madam reflects the future of her young *pupila* [pupil].

While a few examples suffice to comprehend the repetitive, almost ritualized destruction of the prostitute’s body, it is interesting that only in its destruction does the prostitute’s body “tell the truth.” This “truth” of the racked and ruined body is the “scientific” truth of contagion and death: epidemiological and moral, physical and spiritual. This “scientific knowledge” always trumps the prostitute’s voice, already veiled by her overblown body.

We can see how powerful the regime of overrepresentation is by looking at its juxtaposition to a particular truth, and especially to the truth of love. In Argentine Lorenzo Stanchina’s *Tanka Charowa* (1920), as soon as idealistic young *Boedian* Mario is diagnosed with syphilis, he decides that his beloved Tanka, a poor prostitute, is a liar. “Tanka, su Tanka le había transmitido a sabiendas la monstruosa enfermedad. Porque él estaba convencido que ella la llevaba en la sangre [Tanka, his Tanka had knowingly given him the monstrous disease. Because he was convinced that she carried it in her blood]” (Stanchina 84). Tanka swears to him that it can’t be—she isn’t even sick—; but Mario remits to *higienista* logic and says:

—[ . . . ] ¡No podés negar que sos una p . . . !
Sintió Tanka el brutal dolor del golpe. Sangró el corazón, partido en dos, por el ultraje [ . . . ]
—Tenés razón . . . no podés vivir conmigo. Sos un muchacho decente y yo
[...]. Esperaba esto. ¡Era demasiada felicidad para mí! Yo he nacido para sufrir.

[...]. “You can’t deny that you’re a p...!”

Tanka felt the brutal pain of the blow. Her heart bled, cut in half, by the outrage [...].

“You’re right... you can’t live with me. You’re a decent boy and I [...]

I expected this. It was too much happiness for me! I was born to suffer.” (87)

Overrepresentation is so powerful that it fills in blanks even in its own depictions: the very fact that Tanka “is a p...” means that she has syphilis; once she has syphilis, she is doubly a “p...”; and her voice is contradicted by her body, which is defined circularly as a unit in the social body of disease. While reader and narrator sympathize with Tanka’s plight, it occurs within a regime that renders her body metonymically contagious.48

In this sense, overrepresentation adds layers to the body in an attempt to render the invisible visible, as though under a microscope or an x-ray—but rather than examining the individual, the individual is by definition “symptomatic” of the ailing social body as a whole. In the measure that the attractive prostitute shows no sign of illness, she dishonestly harbors both the “genetic” proclivities that have led her to become a prostitute in the first place and the veneral germs that make her a source of infection.

**Higienismo and the Body**

In order to read more deeply how overrepresentation uses the body against the prostitute’s voice and even her conscious intentions—to explain why Santa’s tears are meaningless because they fall upon a low-cut evening gown and Tanka’s truthful words are drowned out by the accusations of her body—we have to take a closer look at how Naturalism collects and classifies symptoms and specimens in accordance with the medical ideas of higienismo. Higienismo saw illness as a total social phenomenon, linking together all areas of human life and all intellectual disciplines. With the international hegemony of higienismo—as we saw clearly in the activities of the International Sanitary Organization—medicine and law intertwine: doctors write, vote and comment on laws regarding prostitution as a matter of social prophylaxis. At the same time, higienismo reinscribes old views in new terms: as Gabriela Nouzeilles has demonstrated, the foundational fictions of Sarmiento and Alberdi had already created a literature of the nation as a body to be examined, cured
and experimented upon; and *higienismo* took up their metaphors as a mandate with which to not only prevent the spread of disease but to implement programmatically a broad set of practices based on a definition of health that went far beyond what today is considered epidemiology. In the words of Argentine hygienist Eduardo Wilde,

> Nosotros tenemos que entender por salud del pueblo, todo lo que se refiere a su bienestar y este compromete todo lo que contribuye a su comodidad física y moral. Luego las palabras salud del pueblo, quieren decir: instrucción, moralidad, buena alimentación, buen aire, precauciones sanitarias, asistencia pública, beneficencia pública, trabajo y hasta diversiones gratuitas.

[By public health we must understand everything that refers to public welfare and that includes everything that contributes to physical and moral comfort. Thus the words public health mean: instruction, morality, proper diet, clean air, sanitary precautions, public assistance, public charity, work and even free entertainment.] (cited in Nouzeilles, *Ficciones somáticas* 37).

The preoccupation with prostitution that cuts through several emerging disciplines is solidified in the figure of the doctor-writer-lawyer as the prototypical Latin American intellectual at the turn of the twentieth century, for whom the family is the only viable social building block. *Higienismo* conceived of itself in direct relation to the public authority and its prerogatives, with a mission in public health going far beyond the protection from illness and epidemics and encompassing a very particular program of moral “rectitude.”

According to Nouzeilles, Naturalists not only adapted medical ideas and clinical cases to fit political agendas, they also developed clinical procedures as storytelling structures:

> Los naturalistas no se limitaron a tomar ideas de la medicina. [. . .] Etología, diagnosis, tratamiento y prognosis se convirtieron en las secuencias necesarias del diseño narrativo. Los casos se insertaban a su vez en un macrorrelato biológico cuya lógica darwinista seguía los dictados de las leyes de la herencia y la reproducción sexual. Los escritores argentinos, muchos de ellos médicos, superarían a sus antecedentes europeos al exagerar los usos pragmáticos de la literatura hasta colocarla en el límite mismo de su disolución. Alimentada en las mismas fuentes ideológicas que los programas finiseculares de higiene, la ficción estatal naturalista estableció hipótesis de trabajo en cuanto a las condiciones necesarias para obtener—
experimento eugenésico de por medio—la familia nacional, la raza fuerta que hiciera posible una sociedad perfecta. Para lograrlo, la estrategia fundamental del naturalismo fue la producción sistemática de narrativizaciones del cuerpo patologizado.

[The Naturalists didn't limit themselves to taking their ideas from medicine. [. . . ] Etiology, diagnosis, treatment and prognosis become the necessary sequences of narrative design. The cases were inserted into a biological macrostory whose Darwinist logic followed the dictums of the law of heredity and sexual reproduction. The Argentine writers, many of whom were doctors, went beyond their European precursors by exaggerating the pragmatic uses of literature to the very limit of its dissolution. Fed on the same ideological sources as the turn of the century hygiene programs, Naturalist state fiction established working hypotheses on the necessary conditions to obtain—through eugenic experimentation—the national family, the strong race that would make the perfect society possible. To achieve it, the fundamental strategy of Naturalism was the systematic production of narratives of the pathologized body.] (Nouzeilles, Ficciones somáticas 22)

This pathological body becomes the site of higienista prophylaxis: prostitutes, criminals and anarchists are degenerates who degenerate: the cause of their illness is their moral turpitude, and their moral turpitude is an illness. So powerful was the nexus of Naturalism and higienismo that even writers who wished to depart from its ideas about heredity, determinism and social order were obliged to do so in its own terms, and against a tide of text.

The higienista novel par excellence is Dr. Francisco Sicardi’s five-volume delirium, aptly titled Libro extraño (1889–1902), which follows the prostitute through two thousand pages of heavy-handed plot twists in what could be seen as all Zola’s families rolled into one mammoth clan: a prostitute infects various generations of various families, and we get to see the outcome of the experiment in the form of poverty, disease, social unrest and, ultimately, total social revolution. Sicardi’s novel places all of these phenomena within the purview of higienismo; but we can also read his novel “backwards,” to reinscribe higienismo within the discourse of prostitution and see it as the “germ” with which the imaginary became infected at every level.

In the same year that Sicardi published volume V of Libro extraño, the last installment of his novel (Hacia la justicia [1902])—and the International Sanitary Organization was formed—the first general strike took place in Argentina, and the full force of the state descended upon the workers through outright repression and deportation. The authorities legislated the “Ley de
Residencia," which was used against anarchist ringleaders to expel hundreds of militants and foreign-born workers from Argentina. This was the same law that was used to deport pimps and traffickers during the time period, and in fact in 1905, an internal Police report warned that almost every day new anarchist groups appeared “with thundering names befitting their violent mission” made up of “foreign, demagogic, and seditious element that fuel the conflagration they have already provoked by making the apotheosis of crime and prostitution integral parts of human emancipation” (cited in Moya 23). The anarchists, for their part, had addressed the problem of prostitution at their own conference, at the fourth meeting of the Federación Obrera Argentina in 1904, and tended to see the eventual abolition of prostitution as necessary in order to incorporate prostitutes fully into the emancipatory workers’ struggle; the first step was political consciousness of the exploitation and objectification of women under prostitution.

In the novel, an anarchist revolution has been stirred up by criminal and “agitator” Germán Valverde—and joined by the prostitutes under the leadership of Germán's prostitute girlfriend, Goga. While the book is unmatched in its sheer scope and its scientific ambitions (which, in Nouzeilles's terms, took literature “to the limit of its dissolution”), it’s important to stress that Sicardi’s interest was not in documenting anarchist ideas of the time; except in the broadest sense—dissatisfaction with poverty, the elevation of marginal figures and the prostitute as an idealized figure—there are no anarchist ideas in the book. On the contrary, Sicardi’s narrator fleshes out the sensationalist image of the “bomb-throwing anarchist” that was already a trope during Sicardi's time, linked as it was to higienista notions of criminality and social order. In this way, in Libro extraño the anarchist agitators are nihilists, transmitting nonideas: they are not so much the opposite as the negative of the higienistas and positivism. Sicardi’s anarchists are positivist in their nihilist convictions, spreading an antiscience: they are aggressively against everything, affirming nothing; yet they seek to spread these “germs” and infect the whole world. In their fundamental illness, their bodies are equivalent to those of prostitutes in that they circulate spreading disease. By teaming up, the agitator moves the prostitute into hitherto unexplored territories (much as the anarchists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had indeed fantasized), mobilizing the prostitutes and propelling them into the streets.

Argentine positivist writer José Ingenieros was hardly alone in reading Libro extraño as a realistic assessment of psychological “types” that could all be explained within the parameters of medicine. José Ingenieros, who was Sicardi’s student at the Facultad de Medicina, explained this in an essay
he published a year after *Hacia la justicia* came out in a psychiatric journal printed by the national prison system. Dr. Ingenieros treats Sicardi’s novel as though it were a clinical study of prostitutes and anarchists; and he eventually diagnoses Goga and Germán Valverde as engaged in a kind of symbiotic hysteria. Note the circularity by which one medical doctor writes a novel about a strictly fantastical view of anarchism and prostitution and another doctor diagnoses his characters: Goga’s anarchism was merely the “inestabilidad mental de histérica [mental instability of an hysterical]; and her conduct consisted of “fenómenos delirantes que siguen a su agitación mental de la angustiosa hora de las rebeliones [delirious phenomena following her mental agitation at the upsetting time of the rebellions].” Germán, on the other hand, is “una síntesis psicológica, no un tipo psicológico verdadero; es el anarquista como debiera ser, no como es. Más parece símbolo que retrato, encarnación del anarquismo que expresión del anarquista [a psychological synthesis, not a true psychological type; he is the anarchist as he ought to be, not as he is. He seems more a symbol than a portrait, an incarnation of anarchism rather than an expression of the anarchist]” (Ingenieros 1–2).

However, Ingenieros doesn’t stop with diagnosing Sicardi’s characters; in fact, since Germán is actually an “incarnation of anarchism” itself rather than a real anarchist, his psychological profile—together with Ingenieros’s own expertise as both scientist and political barometer, *higienista* on the street, if you will—can be used to assess an entire political movement:

> Y hablo, tocante a esto, con la autoridad que puede darme el conocer personalmente a casi todos los anarquistas que han pisado Buenos Aires, desde los intelectuales Malatesta y Gori hasta la última canalla carcelaria que se titula anarquista. [. . .] Son cuatro tipos diversos de agitadores, de “meneurs,” que sirven de levadura, de fermento para convulsionar la chusma ya predisposta por la ignorancia y la miseria.

[And I speak, with respect to that, with the authority of knowing personally almost all the anarchists who have set foot in Buenos Aires, from the intellectuals Malatesta and Gori to the lowest jail riffraff that calls himself an anarchist. [. . .] There are four diverse types of agitators, of “meneurs” [leaders], who serve as leavening, as ferment to convulse the rabble already predisposed to it by ignorance and poverty.] (3)

The *chusma* [rabble] is stirred up by the “pefect criminal couple”; however, Germán’s sickness is also accelerated by his own crazy ideas: “mientras la sugestión sectaria da vuelcos a su razón, la vida, locamente crapulosa, le
despedaza los pulmones. Una vez llegado a la acción el organismo enfermo le traiciona [as the sectarian persuasiveness knocks over reason, insanely dissolute life tears apart his lungs. In action, the sick organism betrays him]” (Ingenieros 3).

The solution implicit in Ingenieros’s analysis is coherent with the political agenda the higienistas put forward over a period of thirty years: neither Goga nor Germán poses a risk to society, since they are both subject to the very “faltas de una mente histérica: no es firme en el delito, como no sería en la virtud si fuera honesta [defects of a hysterical mind: it isn’t firm in crime, as it wouldn’t be in virtue if it were honest]” (Ingenieros 4; my emphasis). In literature’s laboratory of social prophylaxis, they were dissolute and thus they dissolved; their bodies simply crumbled into nothingness.

In this way, while Sicardi’s triumphant conclusion to the Libro extraño could seem prescient of the political conflicts between anarchists and police of the first decade of the twentieth century, more precisely it was coextensive with the broader higienista apparatus that would shape the discourse about these events. Sicardi’s five-part novel exemplifies how the discourse of prostitution at the turn of the century provided exhaustive fictional evidence that was used to help cast the political conflicts of the early twentieth century in polarizing terms. At the same time, the novel is rich in contradictions that spread back toward the disciplinary fault lines between law and medicine in Latin American Naturalism.

**A Stranger Book: Rereading Libro Extraño**

In *Libro extraño*, no one really wanted a revolution except for the deranged anarchist agitator who drove the bestial masses to mindless destructiveness. While Ingenieros and many of his contemporaries read the novel as a precise document full of medical insights into the psychology of political agitators, it is clear from the beginning that his disinterest in the actual politics of contemporary anarchist movements extended even to the most basic meaning of the word “anarchism,” since he placed the entire revolution under the leadership of one “pathological” personality, Germán Valverde. The revolution failed before it had really begun due to the carefully orchestrated timing of its leader’s death—but also due to its lack of any political content. This failure is, naturally, continuous with the illness within the anarchist agitator himself—anarchism is as “unhygienic” as alcoholism, or prostitution.

In the climactic scene of the novel, the subhuman mob races toward the house of los Méndez, the kind bourgeois family which throughout the saga
The crowd, which has articulated no political demands, is nebulously bloodthirsty and following the agitator Valverde. As they reach the Méndez’s door, Goga throws herself in front of her lover, suddenly wishing to prevent the crowd from surging into the Mendez’s house. Germán orders her to move, insults her, enraged; but Goga holds firm for inarticulable reasons, which we know involve her feeling of loyalty to the Méndez and the kind liberals of the social order. She simply yells, “¡No quiero! ¡No quiero!”:

Entonces hubo como un relámpago. La daga había fulgurado, de arriba abajo, en la mano de Germán. Se sintió un crac. Era la punta que había penetrado en la madera, pasando a través de las costillas de Goga y cuando los otros creyeron que iba a herirla de nuevo, vieron que éste se tambaleaba como un borracho, pálido de cera y que de su boca saltaba una oleada de sangre caliente. El pulmón tuberculoso se había hecho pedazos y había dado en tierra con su cuerpo patibulario. Entonces hubo un agitado remolino; se atropellaron los forajidos los unos sobre los otros; arrojaron las hachas y huyeron en una fuga pavorosa para perderse en las sombras. Y seguían huyendo con una carrera de fantasmas, como flagelados por la lubricidad del delito, mientras los soldados disparaban sus fusiles en las tinieblas.

[Then there was a lightning bolt. The dagger had flashed from top to bottom in the hand of Germán. A crack was heard. It was the tip that had penetrated into the wood, passing through the ribs of Goga and when the others thought that he was going to stab her again, they saw that he was staggering like a drunk, wax-pale and that from his mouth a wave of hot blood came pouring out. His tubercular lung had disintegrated and had taken down the body already sentenced to death. Then there was an agitated whirlpool; the outlaws trampled on each other; they threw their axes and fled in a terrifying flight to lose themselves in the shadows. And they kept on fleeing in a hurdle race, as if they were being beaten by the lewdness of crime, while the soldiers shot their weapons in the darkness.] (Sicardi, *Libro extraño* V: 293)

In an instant, the revolutionary impulse “se desvaneció [disappeared];” Germán Valverde goes down to the ground in what appears to be his death (though this is extended in a hospital scene for another fifty pages); and Goga suffers a slow death as a “martyr” for having defended the Mendez family.

Because the murder-death-revolution ending scene is so overloaded with meaning, the narrator can barely hang onto its mind-bendingly schematic
conclusions and must clarify them over and over again, explaining on into the next chapter—as Germán clings to life in a hospital bed, insulting the nun who prays over him—that Germán simply is his pathology; there is no possible salvation for him. For good measure, after cursing out the nun, Germán gives a deathbed speech:

¡La virtud es una quimera—gritaba—el honor una hipocresía, la mujer es cántaro de lascivia, los chicos recua de bestiales onanismos y el mundo una covacha de vicios puerco! Nosotros somos los doloridos y los libertadores. ¡Maldigamos! Hay que pisotear los tronos destruidos; aventar a la región del no ser a los ejércitos muertos; triturar los dientes y la mueca cadavérica de los reyes desaparecidos; pulverizar cálices, custodias y altares y hacer saltar en el aire templos, monumentos y hogares, con los dioses, ¡que no son sino esfinges y con la historia entera, que no es sino una lúgubre procesión de turpitudes y de delitos!! Somos los doloridos. ¡Maldigamos! ¡Somos los libertadores y los triunfantes! Sobre las ruinas, donde la gangrena hierva, ¡edifiquemos y maldigamos!!

“Virtue is a chimera! he yelled “honor is hypocrisy, woman is the dupe of lasciviousness, kids are a bunch of bestial masturbations and the world is a hovel of fucking vices! We are the victims and the liberators. Let us curse! We must trample on the destroyed thrones, throw the dead armies into nothingness; grind the teeth and the cadaver's face of the vanished kings; pulverize chalices, monstrances and altars and make temples, monuments and homes leap into the air, with the gods, who aren't anything but sphynxes and with all of history that isn't anything but a lugubrious procession of turpitude and crimes!! We are the victims. Let us curse! We are the libera-

Another spurt of hot blood erupts from his mouth to stop him from what “weren't even words, but strident blasphemies”; a diabolical grimace takes over his face; some foam reddens his lips slightly; his pupils dilate, and he dies. Having exhaustively detailed Germán Valverde's trajectories dragging Goga through different social spheres and now to the threshold of death, the narrator turns to an exegesis of the dying Goga's body—she who, in contrast to Valverde, was not a completely pathological being. Rather, her pathology was stimulated by contact with the anarchist. This “incomplete pathology” merits further attention, since it points to a recurring tendency in Libro extraño that mimics higienismo itself: it asserts the nonduality of the physical
and the moral, only to suddenly distinguish them. This opens up a split within
the narrator: his eugenicist optimism about redeeming the “fallen” seems to
contradict his certainty about determinism. By locating the main division of
the physical and the moral within Goga’s body, the narrative logically points
back to the possibility of this in other characters, questioning the absolute
conclusions the narrator has reached about their respective “destinies.”

Goga does not appear until the final tome of the novel, though the prac-
tices of prostitution have been characterized in the sweeping, paradoxical
description Manuel Gálvez had used in his thesis: prostitutes are “things” that
are completely “sexless,” yet can at any moment suddenly come back to life
through love (Sicardi, *Libro extraño* II: 198–99). Yet in addition to a hereditary
“mal [affliction/evil],” the narrator has also offered a view of prostitution in
which his almost hysterical Naturalist drama commingles with a socioeco-
nomic critique similar to that of anarchist writers of the time (Sicardi, *Libro
extraño* IV: 65).56

Goga is described from the first with a binary epithet that parallels the
narrator’s conflicted views: she has a “divino rostro marchito y un esbelto
cuerpo de diosa [lovely faded face and a slender body of a goddess]” (Sicardi,
*Libro extraño* V: 106). She appears in this duality systematically after Germán
Valverde has been reading one of his contaminated anarchist texts. He sees the
“faded face” and the “divine body” for the first time when he has been up all
night reading a book so venemous that the narrator continues seamlessly from
characterizing the book into free indirect discourse continuing the inflamed
ideas of the anarchist:

> El libro de alma ponzoñosa y ruda expresión, en cuyas páginas iban dejando
los ilotas de esta tierra la ira de sus miserias y los crueles propósitos de sus
venganzas, en esa larga y salvaje odisea, por lo mismo que se acerca la hora
de la redención y porque fue verbo, en la aurora del siglo, ¡el respeto por
los derechos del hombre y verbo sangre, religión y Dios conductor ha de ser
en su ocaso el respeto por los derechos del pobre! (95–96)

After eight pages of such musings, Valverde closes the book and looks out
his window. He sees Goga for the first time as she is being strongarmed into
a building by an “elegante calavera de pelo canoso [elegant skull with gray hair].” From this distance, she seemed “una diosa de pálido mármol, con el cabello rubio en desorden [a goddess of pale marble, her blond hair disordered].” When she speaks it is with a “voz sofocada [stifled voice],” imploring him to leave her alone. Her protestations do nothing; her fan breaks in his face. Germán yells from the window to leave her alone, and the man immediately leaves, slamming the door behind him. Goga looks up with her “divino rostro marchito” and thanks Germán for “taking pity on this poor garbage.” “With everyone,” she says, “but never with him! Adiós.” Germán watches her leave, “la mano abierta sobre la pseudohistoria, como si meditara en silencio un renoroso juramento [his hand open upon the pseudohistory, as if he were silently thinking about swearing a rancorous oath]” (106).

At the start of the next chapter, Germán receives a bundle of papers in the form of a lengthy letter from his father, Enrique Valverde, a nihilist doctor, an anti-higienista. This “memoir [memoria]” is dedicated to educating his son to become just like him, who has “respected nothing and forgiven nothing” (107). Germán spends many nights reading it and the narrator excerpts it at length, containing exhaustive evidence from his father’s adventures as a doctor amid vice and sickness that the ideals of women, children, family and marriage are shams: women are lascivious and amoral beings who hate having children and have risked the future generations by leaving them to the unhygienic bodies of servants, spending more than their husbands can earn and condemning the husbands to the bottle. His father exhorts him to learn the importance of making himself feared, and of learning to use weapons. The epistolary memoir contrasts with the papers belonging to the patriarch of the Méndez family, who was, like Sicardi, “médico escritor,” and who has left behind written verses dedicated to his children praising family life (25), and which they go over together right before reading his will (26).

When Germán has finished, he has developed new hatreds, new cruelties (107); he has lost his idealized view of women, and his thoughts turn immediately to Goga:

No había más que sexo y la verdad estaba en esa vagabunda Goga marchita, en la belleza de oro de sus cabellos, en la vida enferma de su boca procaz. Él la veía caminar entre la seda crujiente y fascinadora, hacia los barrios obscuros, letal como una ponzoña, dando su cuerpo a cada paso y arrancando el honor y para el delito a los jóvenes. Era una lasciva cruel, Goga, una hermosa homicida, sin más puñal que el beso interminable, que seca las fuentes de las energías nativas y agosta las savias del bosque en sazón. ¡Oh! Acostarse con ella, sentir el mareo de su piel blanca, echarle los brazos a la cintura, como un par de tenazas y desaparecer después.
Part I. Chapter 1

[There wasn’t anything but sex and the truth was in faded Goga the vagabond, in the golden beauty of her hair, in the sick life of her lewd mouth. He saw her walk amid crinkling and fascinating silk, toward the obscure neighborhoods, lethal as a poison, giving her body at every step and tearing out the honor of young boys for crime. She was a cruel lust, Goga, a beautiful homicide, her only dagger the interminable kiss that dries the sources of native energies and parches the forest in ripeness of its sap. Oh! To sleep with her, to feel the giddiness of her white skin, to throw one’s arms around her waist, like a pair of pliers and disappear afterward.] (123–24)

His mind returns to his father’s “espectro [specter]” in the form of the memoir; the narrative merges into a free indirect discourse from the point of view of this ghost, reporting that there is no way that prostitutes can be reformed, nor can the cycle of crime be broken:

Los lupanares se cierran y vuelve la cárcel a estar llena de locas desarra- padas. ¡Inútil todo! Germinan a lo lejos, retoñan y saltan de nuevo a la luz del sol, brillantes, fascinadores y obscenos y el mundo sigue rodando con las mismas formas y con los mismos estrépitos. ¡Inútil todo! El cuerpo muere por enfermedad y las sociedades por contaminaciones colectivas. Así como hay fuerzas y virtudes inconscientes que empujan a los pueblos a la grandeza, así hay degeneraciones posteriores que los precipitan. No tienen mérito citando ascienden, ni son criminales cuando caen. El instinto produce los dos fenómenos.

[The brothels are closed and jail is filled once again with crazy women in rags. It’s all useless! Far away they germinate, they reappear and spring up again in sunlight, brilliant, fascinating and obscene and the world keeps turning with the same forms and the same noises. It’s all useless! The body dies from illness and the societies from collective contaminations. Thus as there are unconscious forces and virtues that push peoples to greatness, there are also later degenerations that move them. They have no merit in rising, nor are they criminals when they fall. Instinct produces both phenomena.] (142)

Enrique Valverde is something like a nihilist positivist, an antihigienista. Whereas Carlos Méndez in his last will and testament had forgiven every wrong done to him (26), Enrique Valverde had “forgiven nothing”; Valverde believes in the impossibility of progress, and the uselessness of everything, whereas Méndez had remained a believer in both Catholicism and the
nation—because everything he had done for himself as an individual was done in the service of the national future, the splendors of which were not based on a prophetic vision but the profound and logical corollary of the present basis for it (28).

In this way, Germán Valverde’s father leaves a textual legacy that is a countertext not only to Carlos Méndez’s, but to Sicardi’s own as he lays it out in the prologue to *Hacia la justicia*, as dedicated to “los que sufren y delinquin porque son pobres” and containing “las nuevas formas que precipitan al mundo en pos del ideal de justicia y católicos, socialistas y sectarios del anarquismo harán en él el drama doloroso. Es el libro de los cruzados modernos [the new forms that are coming into the world in pursuit of the ideal of justice and Catholics, socialists and anarchist sectarians will make in it their painful drama. It is the book of the modern crusades]” (20). Sicardi’s novel becomes less medical at its conclusion, when the desire to model its own “new form” in the pursuit of justice makes him create a miracle that displaces the genetic-moral genealogy of the entire pentalogy in favor of an unexpected aporia.

And so we return to Goga at the moment of her death, embodying not only the dichotomies of exuberant body and faded face but also those of *higienismo’s* positivist optimism and its determinism. The Méndez family believe in her; she has sacrificed herself to defend their house against the mob, killed by Germán Valverde, who believes in nothing. Angélica Méndez visits her as she lies on her deathbed, where she says things of such great unaccustomed sweetness to Goga that “me lastiman [they hurt me].” At the same time, Goga is once again “sufocándose [suffocating],” yet the descriptions of her during her deathbed conversation are not the hyperbolic details of the dying prostitute’s body that we might expect. Instead, she and Angélica discuss her emotional history: her parents never kissed her when she was young; Germán hurt her because “he was crazy,” Goga says; “because he didn’t know God,” Angélica adds. “He doesn’t know that you don’t hurt people you love.”

As a result of this emotional tumult (which the doctor had told her to avoid), Goga suffers a seizure. Opening her eyes, she begins her own deathbed delirium, brushes aside the medical concerns of mother Dolores and daughter Angélica Méndez alike, who are screaming for the doctor to come, and begins narrating her own broken life story: “Yo no conocía más que sótanos y conventillos . . . [ . . . ] A nosotras nos quiebran el espinazo, sobre el borde de las camas, porque somos lindas y nuestros hombres nos tiran, como carne agusanada, para que todos se la coman . . . [I never knew anything but basements and tenements . . . [ . . . ] They break our spines, on the edge of the beds,
Part I. Chapter 1

because we are pretty and our men throw us, like wormy meat, so that everyone will eat it” (351–52).

Yet when the doctor, Elbio, appears, declaring her case hopeless and ordering her to stop talking, Goga nonetheless enters into a long catechistic dialogue with Dolores, Angélica and Elbio, in what almost appears to be a conversion scene: Angélica tells her the story of Jesus; Goga begs Angélica for forgiveness and to pray to Jesus on her behalf; Angélica teaches Goga how to pray” (366). In contrast with Germán’s violent death on the hospital bed, Goga suffers a “slow, sweet agony until dusk,” after which she is given Extreme Unction, and Angélica puts in front of her a small bronze cross. “El rostro de Goga se transfiguró [Goga's face was transfigured].” Her last words are, “¡Adiós Jesús!” which she pronounces “ya casi sin voz [almost voicelessly]” (369). In the silence that follows, a soft fragrance fills the room, “y el cielo escribía la palabra: ¡paz! con la luz de los astros. [and the sky wrote the word: peace! with the light of the stars]” (370).

Goga’s death contradicts Enrique Valverde’s deterministic pessimism directly. She not only repents of her sins, but dies honored and prayed over by the Méndez family she admired, with hints of saintliness: Goga refers throughout the scene to Angélica as a saint (as does the narrator on p. 359); Angélica repeats to Elbio that Goga martyred herself for them twice. The perfumed air filling the room suggests that Goga herself was a kind of martyr. In the Naturalist equivalent of the sun coming out, on the following page Angélica Méndez gets married to the doctor, Elbio—and lest there be any ambiguity whatsoever, the narrator informs us that the couple knew their union would only be broken by death [371]). With the double death of Valverde and Goga, the ongoing, chronic and collective illness whipped up to a frenzy by their unhealthy pairing quickly fizzles out. Yet the introduction of Goga’s conversion separates them definitively in death, not only because Goga will “be saved” and Germán condemned to the nothingness he and his family spread throughout their lives, but because there has been a change of register, from the medical body to the religious soul. Unlike Germán’s vomiting waves of blood, Goga’s is a slow and sweet agony in which she fades away.

The pairing of prostitute and anarchist in Sicardi goes beyond the literary potentiality of a putative ideological sympathy or criminal attraction between sick bodies: it is a medical model that at once contains and is contained by a Catholic redemption discourse. The narrator can be seen proclaiming determinism for the Valverdes and salvation for Goga. In this way, the prostitute takes a qualitative leap out of positivism by which she eludes the novel’s scientific certainties in a mystical transformation. In the same movement, she reveals the quantum leaps from law to medicine and medicine to literature at points of impasse in higienismo itself.
The contradictory (non)identity of the literary prostitute can illuminate areas of contention in economic thought. Is the prostitute a commodity? A good or a service? A capitalist? A worker? Labor? Exchange-value or exchange itself? To the extent that the prostitute doesn’t fit easily into economic definitions, she suggests ways in which these categories themselves can be elusive. By examining how Marx used literature to exemplify the quasi-metaphysical nature of capital, it becomes clear that the literary is present in the very basic building blocks of economics: key concepts are defined allusively, relying on literary references—which is to say, interpretation—in order to be described. Thinking about the literary prostitute in economic terms illuminates an area of economic thought where rules exist only intertextually, and models are describing fictional worlds.
Three novels of prostitution—and, more precisely, two protagonists—lead us through complicated dramas that plot the outer limits of such contested theories of value. First, Mexican writer Federico Gamboa’s 1902 Naturalist novel, *Santa*—probably the most successful and enduring Naturalist novel of prostitution—proves to be both apogee and aporia of the genre. Its cycles of degeneration and regeneration begin to seem analogous to the ups and downs of market values, as the novel’s stubborn, high-spirited, “indomitable” (yet doomed) protagonist circulates as a kind of living coin that is coveted, hoarded, treasured and spent by characters who attempt to “save” her—using investment strategies.

We shall see that where Gamboa leaves off at the outer limits of Naturalism in the development of the prostitute as “living coin,” Argentine writer Roberto Arlt picks up in his classic novels, *Los siete locos* (1929) and *Los lanzzallamas* (1931). Whereas Santa paid the ultimate price for the contradictions of economic thought—dying when her corporal coin was devalued to the point of worthlessness—Arlt’s “frigid” prostitute, Hipólita, not only survives but flourishes, profiting off of the same contradictions.

Imbecile and mastermind, cashed out and cashing in, fifty-cent trick and high roller, the literary prostitute holds sway by incarnating paradoxical attributes of money, value, time and exchange under capitalism—all the while, of course, attributing the source of the contradictions to her own unfathomable nature.

**Prostitution, Fiction and Economics**

The prostitute “sells herself.” Such a statement is both outlandishly polysemic—thus its enduring literary potentiality—and logically meaningless. Every story (not to say every bone) in our corpus tells us that to become a prostitute is to become “another,” to no longer be what one “was.” And yet the problem with what “every story” tells us is that it rests on the assumption that a human being (such as a prostitute) has an identity the way that a commodity has a value—and that this identity can be exchanged for another or even lost.

What one is one does not possess, and therefore cannot sell. If commodity exchange is taken as the transformation of one object (say cotton) into another (say iron) via the general equivalent, then we might begin to understand why the prostitute cannot sell herself. Whereas the commodity is perfectly exchangeable, we could say that being is perfectly inexchangeable. However, another way to look at this is to say that it would take a special commodity
indeed to embody all the traits of exchangeability yet maintain the ability to be endlessly transformed into other commodities.

Literature thrives on these contradictions, compulsively tallying what is lost (and what is gained) in becoming a prostitute; but this accounting never adds up to a definition of what has changed. At the same time, there are so many *a priori* meanings, innumerable signifying layers accumulated and solidified, that it requires a brutal excavation to get beneath them; and even this archeological approach is illusory, because the transformation is, at bottom, still a matter of language. We can assert that the prostitute “sells her body”; but then it could be argued that she hasn’t sold it at all, because it belongs to her afterwards (to sell again). We can say that she “rents” her body, or the “use” of her body, as though it were a car or a DVD, but this doesn’t account for the change in its “owner’s” “identity.”

In a slightly more sophisticated version, we could pretend, as Marx and Engels did, that prostitution is analogous to the sale of any other form of labor-power in its “self-alienated” condition under capitalism. However, to say that the prostitute sells her “sexual labor-power” merely displaces meaning once more: labor-power produces capital and is absorbed by it; and we cannot locate all of the capital produced by sexual labor-power. Of course, this is true of all labor, but the metaphysical sensation is enhanced by the close relation of “being” and “selling” in prostitution.

It seems that we cannot progress any further in our economic definition of prostitution without “missing the point”—which always remits us to a different field of inquiry (ethics, sociology, politics, law). There is even the sense that to persist in seeking such a “purely economic” definition is itself slightly unethical: for Kathleen Barry, the very terms “sex work” and “sexual labor” imply that sex should be labor; and, on the other hand, proponents of the decriminalization of prostitution are equally hesitant to provide an economic definition of “sex work,” since the way they reappropriate it is by restoring to it an inherent specificity which makes it impossible to condemn de jure. Both of these factions avoid an economic definition in favor of a political-legal one, rooted in a language of the subject of rights.

We intuit that prostitution must “exploit” the prostitute as coarsely as factory-work expresses living labor from its workers; and that, as Marx wrote in *Grundrisse*, the appropriation of her labor by capital must confront her in “a coarsely sensuous form” (703). In other words, we know that the prostitute works. We know that prostitution is an example of exchange. And yet, the “special service that the capitalist expects from labor-power”—the appropriation of surplus-value—is singularly difficult to pin down.
Or, in other words, it is not at all obvious that what is bought is the same as what is sold. The sexual transaction leaves a residue, a sort of surplus of meaning, glistening unappealingly over its participants. As Walter Benjamin suggested, in any definition of prostitution something will be missing and something left over. He joins the chorus attributing the origin of such contradictions to the prostitute. Somewhat frustrated, he reasons:

No girl would choose to become a prostitute if she counted solely on the stipulated payoff from her partner. Even his gratitude, which perhaps results in a small percentage more, would hardly seem to her a sufficient basis. How then, in her unconscious understanding of men, does she calculate? This we cannot comprehend, so long as money is thought of here as only a means of payment or a gift. Certainly the whore's love is for sale. But not her client's shame. The latter seeks some hiding place during this quarter-hour, and finds the most genial: in money. (Benjamin, The Arcades Project 492)

The answer to this apparently straightforward economic question (where is the advantage in prostitution?) must be hidden in something Benjamin cannot perceive: he cannot comprehend the prostitute's “calculation” because it must be based on an “unconscious understanding of men.” As we shall see, it is not only this latest incarnation of feminine enigma—the incomprehensible financial-psychic calculation of the prostitute—which Benjamin's Marxism is, in this particular instance, too dogmatic to explain, but money itself: “so long as [it] is thought of as only a means of payment or a gift.”

For this very reason, it would be entirely wrong to say that the prostitute “eludes” economics. On the contrary, by incarnating its mysteries, the prostitute points to ways in which economic thought itself is elusive.

**Coarse Sensuousness**

Marx himself resorted to literary analogy in order to illustrate what he could not explain in the appropriation of labor-power by capital. It is absorbed “coarsely”: als hätt' es Lieb im Leibe, he says, referring to the fifth scene of Part I of Goethe's Faust, in which “coarse” laborers shout out, *tutti*, a refrain from a song about a poisoned rat who writhes in agony—literally “as though it had love in its breast/body” (*Grundrisse* 704). Goethe's refrain is itself a pun, playing on the similar sound of Lieb(e) and Leib(e), love and body/breast, to suggest that the contortions of agony simulate sexual ecstasy.
Marx's choice of the reference undoubtedly has to do with the way in which its polysemy captures a paradox of capital: capital absorbs labor into itself in a "coarsely sensuous form," as though labor were corporeal and objective (Leib). However, the "dead" or "ex" labor-power that capital assimilates is simultaneously Geist: it is Geist both in the sense that it is "dead" (it no longer has an existence as labor-power, it has been cashed in), but also more specifically because for surplus-value to be produced capital must necessarily incorporate unpaid labor. Thus capital contains more than what it is; and labor haunts capital even as it nourishes it.6

The uncertainty principle of surplus-value, a part of which always "goes missing" even though it is mathematically defined in relation to capital, runs as a fault line through economic thought. Economists can be defined by their take on surplus-value, even as surplus-value destabilizes economics by dividing those who would otherwise be in agreement. Marx himself refined his model in Capital to the idea that it is labor-power that is absorbed by capital, of which labor is its use-value, but there remains the Geist in the machine, that part of labor-power that is not fully assimilated by capital. In 1916, economist Silvio Gesell also used literature to demonstrate his own take on surplus-value in El orden económico natural, arguing that it is not produced by labor, as Marx had asserted, but rather inheres in money itself. In the "Robinsonade"—an exemplary dialogue between Robinson Crusoe and a stranger who is unfamiliar with capitalism—Gesell proposes that money ought to be "freed" from interest through planned devaluation, i.e., by making money itself perishable, like any other good or service (Gesell 163–69).7

Whether interest is considered in Marxian terms as a subset of surplus-value or surplus-value is made a subset of interest (as Gesell and others would have it), the relationship of labor and money in the production of capital presents itself as a riddle of origin. Attempts to "solve" the riddle by choosing either labor or money as the starting point are necessarily sectarian in nature; however, we can dissolve the paradox by showing that one of its preconditions fails to hold (as Gesell's stranger does when he confronts Robinson Crusoe's Marxist assumption about surplus-value, or as Marx himself does when discussing the contradictory functions of money in the Grundrisse [211–13]). Any reappraisal of surplus-value today is based on the understanding that the "preconditions" of economics are, on the contrary, always contingent; and for the theoretical socioeconomic benefits of "free markets" to obtain, there must necessarily be a sociopolitical apparatus to support them.8

Literature, on the other hand, as we have seen in both Marx and Gesell, creates worlds in which contradictory positions are both the case. And
perhaps this is what is meant by the phantasmatic character of capital: having a part that can never be exchanged even as its very identity is predicated on exchangeability.9

Specifically, to return to Marx’s Faustian view of labor, the “coarseness” of capital’s sensuous absorption of labor should be understood in both senses as unrefined—rough, imprecise and consisting of large particles—but also vulgar and indecent. Thus capital’s mechanism is both approximate (and therefore imperfect as a means or receptacle for digesting and assimilating labor) and also somehow morally base. The relationship between these two characteristics of capital’s absorption of labor is implicit at the end of Scene 5 of Faust, as Mephistopheles catalyzes a fluid comparison of becoming-capital and becoming-capitalist, using the laborers’ own coarseness against them. This coarseness, understood as both moral and intellectual baseness and, like that of capital, imperfect absorption, aggravates Mephistopheles precisely because it slows down his lesson plan for Faust, which is to demonstrate, by contrast, “how smooth [the laborers’] life runs away.” Luring them with a “cunning-laid poison” Mephistopheles offers the workers any wine they can imagine, warning them only not to spill. They enjoy their wine, but as Mephistopheles had foreseen (“their bestiality will make a brilliant demonstration”), once they are drunk they spill their wine and hellfire erupts spontaneously at the first drop, and their drunken carousing merges seamlessly into cries of pain and shock.10

The Devil pretends, as a good capitalist, that it is the workers’ clumsiness that causes the hellfire to spring up and burn them to death; in fact, of course, he has been able to orchestrate the entire lesson because he understands it to be the catalytic escape of surplus-value that powers the conversion of labor into capital.

In the ideal world of theoretical capitalism, not a drop of wine would be spilled, and capital would absorb every unit of labor-power; however, there is always that which is lost (or escapes) during exchange, production or consumption: pouring or drinking or toasting, there is always spilled wine, and regardless of where a given economic theory lays the blame for the disappearance of surplus-value—at which specific point it decides to regulate the system: pouring, drinking or toasting—this in itself is never enough to prevent some surplus-value from disappearing, any more than it would be possible to prevent surplus-value from occurring in the first place.

The useful thing about the Devil in illuminating how surplus-value works is that he is a capitalist ab initio, or the first capitalist, because he produces something out of nothing.11 At the same time, the Devil’s superhuman abilities to conjure do not require work and in fact what he produces is not itself “real” (it does not endure in its original form) yet it causes real results.12 The Devil’s
behavior is therefore something like an infallible formula for the production of surplus-value, as it produces something for nothing, and in the Devil's case it doesn't matter whether the surplus-value comes from unpaid labor-power or from already-accumulated capital, because he is sitting on mountains of both and can always make more. What is the Devil if not the prototype of the exploiter of unpaid dead labor-power and, simultaneously, the hoarder of money? He is the apotheosis (or the apodiabolis) of the body and the spirit of capital. Faust's coarse laborers, unlike Gesell's stranger, are immediately determined to take advantage of their unexpected visitors, claiming that they will easily be able to “screw [their secret] out of them” over a glass of wine, and it is their very intention to take something for nothing—to exploit surplus-value—that makes them fall for the Devil's illusions. He counts on their coarseness not only to spill their wine but to assume that they can get the better of him. Both types of coarseness—that of capital's absorbency and its baseness, embodied by Devil and laborers—are necessary to the unhindered flow of capital.

In fact, as the workers become the rats they ridicule, their coarseness becomes equivalent to their identification with capitalism. This coarseness was initially a kind of resistance to the smooth operation of the Devil, since it is their coarse singing that keeps them from paying attention to him. However, when they actually accept his wine—thinking to get the better of him, by getting something for nothing—they are simultaneously identifying with the Devil's capitalism and being captured by it.

Furthermore, the Devil's annoyance can also be seen as that of the capitalist confronted with “wasted time.” As Santiago Colás suggests, Marx's obsession with the “theft of time” implied in surplus-value is taken to its reductio by Antonio Negri as capital's desire to eliminate time entirely:

Time, as every American knows, is money. That is to say, time wasted is money lost. And from the point of view of capital's desire for perfectly smooth circulation all time is wasted. Of course, for capital to eliminate time entirely would be also to eliminate labor, which is the basis of its own functioning. The solution for capital, Negri argues, is a single, abstract time as measure. With this, Negri completes his rendering of Marx's “use-value subsumed into surplus-value” as the “living temporalities of labor subsumed into the abstract measured temporality of capital.” (Colás 5–6)
value (if we believe, like Gesell, that surplus-value inheres in money) nor even embody the surplus-value accumulated in capital from unpaid labor.

The Devil is in one sense a mirage of capital out of time: he is atemporal (eternal), yet he circulates and accrues surplus-value. To take money out of circulation is to commit the error of Marx’s speculator who buries his gold in times in which the social nervus rerum is itself buried, out of time: “the speculative burying of treasure,” Derrida wrote, “inters only a useless metal, deprived of its monetary soul.” To truly attempt to separate money from the present time is to bet on the soul of money (Marx’s Geldseele) as though it could endure entirely separated from its material conditions or body (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 43–48).

This brings us full circle, for whether “coarseness” is attributed to labor or capital, labor-power or money, worker or capitalist, the relation between the two terms is seen in economic thought as immanent, but only immanent to a given something (such as a given dialectic or temporality). And paraphrasing Deleuze and Guattari, we can be sure that this *something* introduces the transcendent. The transcendent may be moral, ethical, legal or political but always implies an outside to the economic, rearing up like a tectonic plate (or, perhaps, in the fictions of prostitution, more like a plateau).

As Marx’s sexually charged metaphors for surplus-value might suggest, the literary prostitute incarnates the tense relationship of labor and capital. In literature, she is present when commonsense notions of circulation, liquidity and value fall apart at moments of crisis, pointing out the exceptions to the rule and the risks inherent in any solution (by embodying crisis, exception and risk). She is *Leib/Lieb*, money/labor-power, “free money”/hoarded *Geld*, surplus-value/interest. Counterfeiting, robbery, hoarding, black and grey markets, shadow economies, slavery, trafficking, poverty and stagnant markets are not merely thematized around her; as paradox, the origin of contradictions is attributed to her; and thus all of these are absorbed (“coarsely”) into her paradoxical nature.

**Magni Nominis Umbra: Federico Gamboa’s Santa**

As we have seen, the prostitute often adopts a *nom de guerre* (or more than one) that replaces her given name. In this way, she is abstracted from the particularities of her life up until this point, taking on both a new particular identity (symbolized by the new name) and also a new general identity: in the exchange of her given name and the erasure of her family identity, the prostitute is now “entitled” to every epithet ever accorded to any prostitute, and
becomes symbolically exchangeable—which is also to say objectively valuable—within the market of prostitution.

_Santa_ brings a new clarity to this analysis of the prostitute’s name by reducing the terms to their lowest common denominator: she does _not_ change her given name (“because your name alone will make you money,” the Madam says [Gamboa 78]).

We can read this zero-degree name change—like the very strength of will with which Santa tries to resist change throughout the novel—as a _reductio_ of the inexorability of exchange itself. While up until now the name change has had moral and even sacrificial overtones, when there is no “new” name in relation to which the original name can be plotted in a two-dimensional line of degeneration—when there is not, in other words, a one-time transformation from one term to another—we can actually trace the prostitute’s “duplicity” more deeply to the paradoxical duality of labor and capital themselves.

The first line of the prologue of Federico Gamboa’s _Santa_ is: “No vayas a creerme santa, porque así me llamé [Don’t go thinking I’m a saint, because [Santa] was my name]” (Gamboa 11). Santa is one of the few prostitutes in the corpus who does not change her name when she becomes a prostitute, and yet her name is central to how she becomes a prostitute. When she enters the brothel for the first time, doña Pepa receives her in still in bed with her last client:

Hasta la cama se acercó Santa, sin ver apenas, guiada por las palabras que oía y no avanzando sino con muchos miramientos y pausas. Chocábale oír, a la vez que las palabras de aquella mujer que aún no conocía, unos ronquidos tenaces de hombre corpulento, que no cesaron ni cuando con las rodillas topó contra el borde de la cama. [ . . . ] —¿y cómo te llamas? [ . . . ] —Me llamo Santa—replicó ésta con la misma mortificación con que poco antes lo había declarado al cochero.

—Eso, eso es, Santa—repitió Pepa, riendo—, ¡mira que tiene gra-

cia! . . . ¡Santa! . . . Sólo tu nombre te dará dinero, ya lo creo; es mucho nombre ese . . . [ . . . ]

Espontánea la risa de Pepa, no ofendió a Santa, antes sonrió en la sombra que la amparaba, habituada de tiempo atrás a que su nombre produjese—a lo menos en los primeros momentos—resultado semejante [ . . . ]

—Pero, niña—exclamó Pepa, que había comenzado a palparla como al des-
cuido—, ¡qué durezas te traes! . . . ¡Si pareces de piedra! . . . ¡Vaya una Santita!

Y sus manos expertas, sus manos de meretriz envejecidas en el oficio, posá-
banse y detenían con complacencias inteligentes en las mórbidas curvas
de la recién llegada, quien se puso en cobro de un salto, con la cara que le ardía y ganas de llorar o de arremeter contra la que se permitía examen tan liviano.

[Hardly able to see anything, Santa approached the bed guided by the words she was hearing and not advancing without a lot of scruples and pauses. She was dismayed to hear along with the words of the still unknown woman the tenacious snoring of a corpulent man, which didn't cease even when her knees hit the edge of the bed [. . .]

“What is your name? [. . .]”

“My name is Santa,” she replied with the same mortification with which she had just told her name to the coachman.

“Great, that’s it, Santa,” repeated Pepa, laughing, “Wow that’s funny! . . . Santa! . . . Your name alone will bring you money, I can see it now; that’s a great name. . . .”

Pepa’s laughter was so spontaneous that it didn’t offend Santa, but rather she smiled in the shadow that protected her, used to how her name produced similar results, at least at first [. . .]

“Girl,” Pepa exclaimed, having begun to feel her up as though by accident, “what firmness! Like stone! Like a real little Saint [effigy]!”

And her expert hands, her madam’s hands grown old in the work, landed and stopped with intelligent pleasure in the morbid curves of the newcomer, who jerked away, face burning and wanting to cry or attack this lady who thought she had the right to inspect her so casually. (78)

Santa is not offended by Pepa’s laughter, because she is used to such responses; she doesn’t understand, yet, that the meaning of her name has changed now: it has now become her trademark, the brand whose integrity she will have to protect by maintaining her resemblance to what it denotes—her durezas, her mórbidas curvas—a living statue, impossibly preserved, impervious to time.

The name memorializes the impossibility of the task. Her anger and sadness arise by being touched casually, which prefigures the moment when Santa does recognize herself as having changed: when she realizes that the word puta—written always as an ellipsis, “. . .”—now applies to her; and this blankness substitutes for her identity as a woman: “No era mujer, no; ¡era una . . .!” (80)

Savoring its Catholic resonances, we repeat that Santa is “saved” from the mala vida three times; and three times her name is replaced with “la palabra de las cuatro letras implacables [the word with four implacable letters],” designated with an ellipsis. This ellipsis is not only a prurient avoidance of the
written word *puta*; it also indicates yet another erasure: she is not even a bad word, but a nonword, a censored word.\(^\text{14}\)

Each “rescue” restores to Santa the correspondence between her name and herself; each time she is “reborn” in love, her name is given back to her, without irony, by her lover. And for each time love turns to betrayal, her “resurrection” is undone; not because she falls again, but because in love she “betrays” her nature as a prostitute, in the double sense of the word: she reveals that she is “really” a prostitute, at the same time that she acts against her own best interests as a prostitute.\(^\text{15}\)

The repeated traumatic “loss” of her name and its replacement with the “palabra horrible,” “la maldición [curse, damnation]” of the vocative ellipsis “de las cuatro letras implacables” endures through Santa’s cycles of degeneration and regeneration. We already know, from the novel’s prologue, that in some sense Santa’s name will only belong to her forever when engraved on her tombstone. In life, as she herself says, “siempre seré una . . .” (Gamboa 304, 150).

And yet the second time Santa is “saved” (and the last time she is “damned”) bears further scrutiny. We remember “El Rubio” from better days when Santa had dismissed his offers to rent her an apartment away from his wife, preferring to wait it out in the brothel and see if she might hit the jackpot. However, after breaking up with El Jarameño—a toreador legion in the brothels for both his generosity and his character—Santa’s name is tarnished and her health deteriorates. She is given an inferior room back at Doña Elvira’s; and long gone are the nights when she was made to feel like an empress presiding over the city. She has begun her final descent toward death, and, “convirtiéndose de la noche a la mañana en dueña y señora de una casita [converted overnight into the mistress and lady of a house], Santa’s “reencarnación inefable a una existencia buena, nueva, insoñada [ineffable renaissance into a good, new, undreamed existence]” (301) barely lasts a month.

Rubio soon tires of his newest possession, and “cada vez que las alas entumecidas y torpes de su alma convaleciente pero en vía de alivio, *[sic]* intentaban volar a la altura, Rubio encargábase de desengancharla en términos rudos [each time that the stiffened and clumsy wings of her slowly recovering soul tried to fly up, Rubio took it upon himself to disillusion her in rude terms]: “Las meretrices no arriban a las tierras de promisión,” Rubio asserts authoritatively, “¡no faltaría más!; las almas de las mujeres perdidas no vuelan porque no poseen alas, son almas ápteras [Courtesans don’t ascend to the promised land, what a ridiculous idea; the souls of lost women don’t rise because they have no wings, they are wingless]” (302).

Rubio’s disillusionment with Santa is not predicated on any obvious betrayal; Santa is (for now) faithful to him, and it is, rather, the reality of his
possession of her as his faithful lover—contrasted with his counterfactual desire to possess exclusively that which “belongs to everyone and no one”—which spoils the fantasy:

En tanto se familiarizaba con la idea de que Santa únicamente a él pertenecía; en tanto apresurábase a raspar con sus besos los vestigios indelebles de los miles y miles que a modo de pedrisca habían flagelado sin agotarla la planta deliciosa de su cuerpo trigueño, voluptuoso, volubido, el amasiato fue llevadero, hasta con cierto picor, que en más apetitoso convertíalo, de besos de otros, de muchos; de caricias ajenas que persistían y le daban a la carne comprada y dócil, [sic] perfecta semejanza con esas monedas que han rodado por mercados y ferias y lucen la huella del sinnúmero de dedos toscos que las oprimieron y para siempre opacaron su brillo original y su limpidez prístina. Pero se percató de que los remedios que vende el burdel son ineficaces, y de que a Santa ni con labios de bronce que en toda una vida se cansaran, le rasparía las entalladuras acumuladas y hondas de las ajenas caricias y de los besos de otros.

[As he got used to the idea that Santa belonged to him alone; and as he hurried to sand down with his kisses the indelible imprints of the thousands and thousands of kisses that had flagellated the delicious plant of her wheat-colored, firm, and voluptuous body like hail, the affair was bearable, even somewhat stimulating, the kisses of others, many others, making him more excited; the foreign caresses that persisted and gave the bought and docile flesh a perfect resemblance to those coins that have rolled through markets and fairs and show the fingerprints of numberless rough fingers that squeezed them and permanently dulled their original shine and their pristine cleanness. But he realized that the medicine sold in the brothel doesn't work, and that even with lips of bronze an entire lifetime wouldn't be enough time to kiss away the deep impressions of the distant caresses and kisses of the others.] (304)

Rubio is both attracted and repulsed by Santa qua coin. With his “hipócrita y falsa moral burguesa” (303), he had fetishized her as a fusion of commodity and coin, value and price; and by taking her out of circulation, he committed the economic error of hoarding. Rubio, like Marx’s speculator, is left holding “inert metal”—the body of money—stripped of its Geldseele.

Gamboa’s narrator is loquacious in his condemnation of Rubio’s “bourgeois” values: he repeats that Rubio never loved Santa, and that his disillusion is not “porque ella era lo que era, sino por haber sido él ligero, indiscreto,
débil [not because she was what she was, but rather because he had been frivolous, indiscreet and weak]” (304); and, the narrator explains, it was because he saw himself as “degraded,” “delinquent,” that Rubio “took pains to denigrate Santa, “en disminuir su propia degradación y delincuencia maltratando y envileciendo a la confidente [diminishing his own degradation and delinquency by mistreating and debasing his confidant]” (304). But Rubio only was able to see his own “degradation and delinquency” when the “codiciada cortesana” “resultó mujer asimismo [the coveted courtesan turned out to be a woman after all]” (304). It is in the mirror of still currency that the capitalist sees himself as a miser, and in getting what he thought he wanted Rubio is forced to confront the fact that he never loved either Santa or his wife, who now appear identical to him (303–5).

Rubio had wanted an impossible exchange: to purchase not the woman who happens to be a prostitute, but her value and her liquidity at once, the (phantasmatic) transference itself by which the prostitute substitutes both for money and for the function of money itself. This is the sense in which Pierre Klossowski proposed that the prostitute (l’esclave industrielle) was simultaneously “the equivalent of wealth and wealth itself.” Echoing Marx on the inseparability of labor and capital, he wrote in La Monnaie Vivante:

[C’est un cercle vicieux: car l’intégrité de la personne n’existe absolument pas ailleurs du point de vue industriel que dans et par le rendement évalu-able en tant que monnaie. [ … ] sa physionomie étant inséparable de son travail [ … ] c’est une distinction spéciuse que celle de la personne et de son activité. La présence corporelle est déjà marchandise, indépendamment et en plus de la marchandise que cette présence contribue à produire.]

[It is a vicious circle: because the integrity of the person doesn’t exist at all beyond the industrial point of view as that which renders her evaluable as money. Her physiognomy being inseparable from her work . . . it is a specious distinction between the person and her activity. The corporal presence is already merchandise, independently and beyond the merchandise that this presence contributes to producing.] (Klossowski 74–75; my translation)16

In other words, Santa already “is” a commodity, her corporal presence is merchandise “independently and beyond” the value her body can generate, marked indelibly so that “not even lips of bronze” could kiss it away. Being a particular kind of commodity that substitutes for the function of money itself, the very property that seduced Rubio and even continued to excite him for a
while after his purchase ("que en más apetitoso convertíalo" [Gamboa 304]) is also the characteristic by which the “integrity of [Santa’s] person” does not exist at all beyond the market. “C’est un cercle vicieux”: Santa does not generate (exchange-)value outside of prostitution, and therefore is not evaluable; Santa qua living coin is not “evaluable” outside of prostitution, and therefore has no value. Money as use-value is a contradiction in terms; Rubio blames Santa. Planting his fortune in the chimeric possession of living coin, he can only contemplate its slow devaluation, and his own tarnished reflection in its manhandled sheen.

Rubio is ashamed of having made Santa his confidante, “[p]orque se lo había dicho todo, según es de rigor en cualquiera [sic] junta sexual, a la que se receta una fidelidad ideal, un interés noble y sin límites, una duración perpetua [because he had told her everything, as is de rigueur in any sexual coupling, to which is prescribed an ideal fidelity, a noble and limitless interest, a perpetual duration]” (306). Each of these characteristics of ideal sexual love is also a condition of ideal capitalistic investment. But neither economy can be maintained except through exchange. And thus the paradox. Rubio is ashamed to have as his “confessor” an ex-prostitute whom he does not love, whom he has seen devalued from the ideal of living coin to a moribund, genetically inferior mettle/metal that nonetheless harbors his darkest secrets. And so he seeks to obliterate her:

—No te envanezcas por los secretos que te he confiado, porque te he dicho lo que a nadie debe decirse; no creas que armada de ellos podrías causarme daño . . . tú no eres peligrosa, ¿quién ha de hacerte caso siendo una . . . ?

La palabra horrible, la afrenta, revoloteaba por los aires. En los muebles, en las paredes, en las lámparas, en la comida, en todas partes Santa veía escrita y sin tartamudeos la leía: la maldición, las cuatro letras implacables.

[“Don’t get conceited about the secrets I’ve told you, because I’ve told you things you shouldn’t say to anybody; don’t think that you could ever use them to harm me . . . you aren’t dangerous, who would believe you being a . . .?”

The horrible word, the insult, fluttering through the air. On the furniture, on the walls, on the lamps, on the food, everywhere Santa saw it written and without hesitation she read it: the curse, the four implacable letters.] (304)

While the body of money was, for Marx, magni nominis umbra—the shadow
of a great name—Santa's name is revoked from her, leaving only an inert body, the mere shadow of living coin.

Emblematically, Santa has also lost both advantages of money over goods: liquidity and lack of carrying costs. She no longer experiences herself as liquid, having been the exclusive property of Rubio: she "now couldn't bear returning to Elvira's, where they couldn't stand her anymore, or to another [brothel] equal or inferior to it, where her fame as a queen was known and would open the door to her, only to be undone once they had her at their mercy" [305]. Similarly, she has lost the illusory "freedom" as money, or what is called the store of value function: "Igual a lo que se pudre o apolilla y que, en un momento dado, nadie puede impedirlo ni nada evitarlo, así fue el descenso de Santa rápido, devastador, tremendo [Just like all that rots or is moth-eaten and after a certain time no one and nothing can prevent it, thus was the descent of Santa quick, devastating, tremendous]" (307).

Santa's body—the "delicious plant of her wheat-colored body" that had endured the "hail" of clients—is now "una ruina" that ends up in "un femeníto burdel de a cincuenta centavos [a sketchy fifty-cent brothel]." The grotesque proprietess, whose decrepit body has already been exposed in lurid detail, spoke "imperiously and laconically":

—¿Cómo te llamas?—preguntó a Santa.
—Santa—repuso ésta.
—Pues desde hoy te llamas Loreto, ¡qué Santa ni qué tales! . . .
Y hasta el nombre encantador se ahogó en la ciénaga.

["What is your name?" she asked Santa.  
"Santa," the latter answered.  
"Well from now on your name is Loreto. What kind of a Santa would you make!"

And the enchanting name itself drowned in the morass. (328)]

The enchanting name does not disappear permanently: Hipólito will "rescue" Santa a third time from the brothel, and bring her home with him; and he calls out her name as she dies. Of course, the name also endures as the title of the book. And yet, while the last pages of the book speak of not only a nurturing mutual love between the "reina" of México and the blind, pock-marked pianist, but even of their "resucitación." Yet in the book's prologue Santa had begged of the reader: "Acógeme tú y resucítame, ¿qué te cuesta? [. . .] En pago—morí muy desvalida y nada legué—, te confesaré mi historia. [Take me in and resuscitate me, what does it cost you? [. . .] In payment—
I died destitute and left nothing—I’ll confess to you my story” (65–66). She is clearly asking to be resuscitated by the reader, demanding to be read in exchange for her confession.

In a way, this is a trick: how can reading Santa’s confession be both what is “purchased” and the means of payment? In what sense is the confession both a form of payment and also a service rendered? How does “the” reader—by extension an infinite number of readers over an unbounded future time period—serve as both confessor and savior, but also perhaps as an ideal client for a prostitute finally unbound by the limits of time, (under)world without end?

There is something about the structure of Gamboa’s novel—framed by a pretend posthumous prologue containing the “confession” of its main character—that bears further scrutiny. It seems that the novel as a whole lies close to the heart of literature’s fascination with prostitution not just as a topic but as an economic *modus operandi*. To appreciate the complexity of this maneuver as it impacts the reading of labor and capital, it’s necessary to revisit the last time Santa is “saved” in the novel by the blind brothel pianist, Hipólito.

Without being “gratuitously” cruel to Hipólito, it’s evident that he knew how to hold out for a bargain. He had listened without comment to Santa fantasizing that Rubio truly loved her, despite the fact that in his near omniscience he knew it was a lie. More importantly, he never told Santa that during most of her convalescence from pneumonia the toreador Jarameño had “heroically” sat beside her, demonstrating a kind of love she did not imagine she deserved (291–96, 298–300). Hipólito insists that he had to make a tremendous effort not to “explode and tell Santa everything she didn’t know,” but he rationalizes it:

Contúvose, sin embargo. Que no supiera lo malo, y así no se le amargaría su existencia próxima; que no supiese lo bueno, y así acabaría por no recordar al torero, quien, al fin y a la postre, si aún no se marchaba para su tierra, marcharseía en breve, y con los años, la distancia y la ausencia, también se le borrarían de la memoria sus aventureros amoríos con una mexicana.

[He contained himself, however. She shouldn’t know the bad things, so they wouldn’t embitter her future; she shouldn’t know the good things, so that in the end she wouldn’t even remember the toreador who eventually would return to his country [Spain] and, with the years, distance and absence would erase his memory of his amorous adventures with a Mexican girl.] (298)
Hipólito's fatalism was self-serving. If Santa had known that el Jarameño had saved her life—that he had vetoed the intimidating Doña Elvira when she had decided it was time to write Santa off and send her to the hospital to die, that he had paid off the Madam for her trouble, that he had tended to Santa throughout her illness by himself—her “fate” might have been considerably different.

Furthermore, after Santa was already mortally ill, devastated by her failing relationship with Rubio, who now despised her, the usually all-knowing Hipólito was suddenly “en absoluto desconocimiento de las infelicidades de Santa, a pesar de que menudeaba sus visitas [in absolute ignorance of Santa's travails, despite his frequent visits]”; and when Santa refused to see a doctor, Hipólito “prescribed” her the moderate use of alcohol—resulting, within one sentence, in raging alcoholism that led to the “excesos” for which Rubio finally kicked her out. The narrator pitilessly informs us that “cuando la expulsó despiadada y brutalmente, Santa estaba borracha [when he expelled her brutally and without pity, Santa was drunk]” (304–5).

Hipólito had long believed that Santa was not capable of loving him, and yet he had waited and hoped for nothing else. Long before, Hipólito had alluded to a “big surprise” that awaited her one day, “[c]uando al fin nos cansemos de aquello [when one day we get tired of all this],” and assuring her that he (unlike Rubio) would give Santa what she was worth, “creáme que se lo daré [believe you me]” (281); but he also says he would rather have his throat cut than reveal the secret to her (282). Of course, the big surprise is that Hipólito is a “capitalist,” and he has a small fortune squirreled away. He has kept this a secret, sparing himself of the possibility that Santa would either use him for his money or reject him regardless of it. Having been repeatedly rejected even as Santa approached her lowest point, ailing in the fifty-cent brothel, Hipólito descends to more and more persistent sexual advances, finally trying to rape her and, when the attempt is thwarted, announcing coldly that he won't come to see her ever again. It is she who calls for him when she is dying, and he takes her home for the price of the balance owed on her room at the fifty-cent brothel.

Santa gives Hipólito the “prueba definitiva” of her love with such a humbled disposition of total self-sacrifice that not only does she swear that she loves him, and the narrator explains that, as a woman who loves, she is “unaware of his deformities”; but we are even subjected to an attempt at love-making during which Santa screams, “dispuesta a sacrificarse [disposed to sacrifice herself],” that she can't go on—“No puedo, Hipo, no puedo . . . ¡mejor mátame! [I can't, Hipo, I can't. . . . It would be better to kill me!]” (346).
Hipólito reveals his secret only as they lie together locked in an embrace of “mutual resignation”:

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Hipólito confesó a Santa un grandísimo secreto: no estaba tan tirado a la calle, era poseedor de más de cuatrocientos pesos economizados.

—¿Qué te creías?—dijo yendo a sacar un envoltorio del colchón de la cama,—¿que yo soy un pordiosero? . . . Te chasqueaste, mi Santa, te chasqueaste, porque soy un capitalista. ¡Cuenta, cuenta el tesoro!

[Hipólito told Santa a huge secret: he wasn’t so hard-up, he had saved up more than four hundred pesos.

“What did you think?” he said, getting an envelope out of the mattress. “That I’m a beggar? You were deceived, my Santa, you were deceived, because I’m a capitalist. Count it, count the treasure!”] (358)

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We can read Hipólito’s “capitalism” as the flipside of Rubio’s commodity fetishism: by refusing to “buy” Santa as Rubio did at the height of her continually adjusted value in the market (thus losing on his investment and blaming the deprecating asset herself), Hipólito gets her rather at her nadir, and thus he is “miraculously” able to restrain his formerly animalistic drives (346) and love her “forever” (at least for the few days that remain of her life).

While Rubio and Hipólito are moved by opposite emotions, beliefs and even ethics in their behavior, their actions are part of the same narrative economics, wherein Santa’s value depends not only on her bodily worth but on an understanding of her inherently monetary soul—ascending morally when her body has been degraded, and degrading itself when her body is universally celebrated. Just as Leib without Seele was for Marx inert metal, a corroded body, Santa’s cycles of physical degeneration and regeneration can be read as hazards of inflation, and her fitful spiritual desires to alternately rise, “volar [fly]” and “acabar[r] de ahogarse [finally hit bottom]” (304, 127) not only as an alternation of contradictory drives but also as her desire to become pure value, not only living coin—at once money and the sign of money—but exchange itself, obliterating in this way not only her dubiously static “self” but even her spectral figure as coin, which summons circulation, “el infinito desfile de clientes, la lluvia de monedas y caricias [the infinite parade of clients, the rain of coins and caresses]” (127).

The desire for Santa to escape from circulation-time is in its most basic version a collective fantasy, which she (as living coin) shares with her “rescuers” (as capitalists). This harks back to Negri’s analysis of capital, in which
he asserted that it was always capital's wish to eliminate time (Colás 5–6), whereas it is the capitalist's fantasy that by taking capital out of time we will be in a different world, one in which “surplus-value no longer requires doing any work” (Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus 492). The difference between Santa's desire and that of her clients might be seen as that of an immanent vs. a transcendent fantasy of escape: capital out of time vs. the “promised land” of capitalism—which at one level is as simple as whether Santa would be allowed in (since, as Rubio told her, prostitutes aren't allowed into the tierras de promisión [302]).

The same gesture of stopping the time of circulation allowed both Rubio's extravagant purchase and Hipólito's bargain, the failed investment and the fleeting love affair. By stingily withholding his secret hoard until he could proudly spread it upon Santa's deathbed with the certainty that she wasn't there for his money (it doesn't seem to bother him that she arrived there only having exhausted every other possibility), Hipólito is able to give himself an instantaneous happiness: in stopping the clock on Santa's circulation, in taking capital out of time, he and she enjoy a dreamy “resuscitation”: “una existencia de ensueño, no vivian, no, ni el uno ni el otro, resucitaban! [a daydream existence, they didn't live, either of them: they were resuscitating!]” (349).

Hipólito and Santa “come back to life” with the foregone conclusion of imminent death, and this instantaneity persists metatextually in the prologue in which a spectral Santa speaks to the readers in the first person from “beyond”—although, true to her fears, it doesn't sound like paradise. Even after death, she says, “ni en la muerte hallé descanso; unos señores médicos despedazaron mi cuerpo, sin aliviarlo, mi pobre cuerpo magullado y marchito por la concupiscencia bestial de toda una metrópoli viciosa [not even in death did I find any peace; some medical gentlemen tore apart my body, without curing it, my poor body beaten and withered by the bestial lust of a whole vicious metropolis]” (66). On the one hand, this is an ultimate form of being “spoken for,” the autopsy rending body from soul in the coin outside of time: the body is taken away to participate in a totalizing scientific knowledge of the body of prostitution, and the soul cannot rest, wandering in search of one more reader to read her story.

However, as the fruit of the only oath fulfilled in the novel—Hipólito's promise to her that she will rest decently in the cemetery under a proper headstone—Santa does at least have her name that she had sold for 50¢ restored to her permanently. It is, paradoxically, in its definitive separation from the body, in its split into the absent, dissected and long decomposed body and the determined, loquacious ghost, that the name of money is restored to the body
which is now not only *magni nominis umbra* but also literally shadow, the shadow cast by the headstone where the body had been before the grave was robbed, and the longer metaphorical shadow of the name itself.

It is significant that Hipólito revealed his secret capitalism in the sentence immediately following Santa’s revelation of how she got her name in the first place: she was born on November 1, All Saints Day (358). A small portion of Hipólito’s capital will be used to buy the headstone where the name—though not the body—will remain. At the same time, the origin of the name shifts the interpretation of the name “Santa” to more properly that of a dead spirit than a saint. In this way, it is quite possible to read *Santa* as a ghost story about money.

Santa’s posthumous resuscitation is the ghost of money out of time, pure exchange, the purchased prostitute, and even the client who will carry her away from all of this—and it is conjured only for the duration of the reading. And then the next reader must come along, and the next, in a “desfile” or “lluvia” of readings which are simultaneously payment and service, client and courtesan, in a mirroring, recursive transaction generated by the paradox of living coin.

### Metastable Madmen

Whereas *Santa* had begun to deconstruct its own Naturalism in the metatextual prologue, ordering readers to pay up front for a service that they themselves are simultaneously performing, Ricardo Piglia noted that Roberto Arlt used his prologue to *Los lanzallamas* to bemoan the difficulty of writing something *now* as a kind of debt on which an imaginary future reader will have pay interest (“Roberto Arlt: Una crítica” 54–55).

“I proudly affirm that writing, for me, is a luxury,” Arlt writes in the prologue:

> I don’t have, like other writers, rent income, time or a sedative government job. [. . .] They say I write badly. It’s possible. In any case, I have no trouble citing numerous people who write well and are only read by polite members of their families. To do style one needs comforts, rents, idle life. [. . .] Style takes time, and if I listened to the advice of my peers I would do what they do: write a book every ten years and then take a ten year vacation for having taken ten years to write a hundred reasonable pages.

On another subject, other people are scandalized by the brutality with which I express certain situations that are perfectly natural to the relationship between the sexes. Then these same pillars of society talked to me of
James Joyce, nearly fainting. That was from the spiritual delight they felt about a certain character from *Ulysses*, a gentleman who happens to have breakfast aromatically basically by breathing through his nose in the bathroom the smell of the excrement he has defecated a minute earlier. [ . . . ]

Really, one doesn't know what to think about people. If they are idiots for real, or if they take to heart the coarse comedy they play at all hours of their days and nights. (285–86)

Interest—and specifically interest as a special case of surplus-value—is the central axis of *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas*. It links together the senses in which Arlt did not have time to “do style” because he was under the gun, unable to get too concerned about the future readers of such “bad” writing. What kind of interest are we paying on Arlt’s debt today as we read *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas*?

Criticism has tended to read Arlt through corrective lenses of intertextuality and allegory. The main characters, after all, are *locos*: they psychosomatize their neuroses or act out of their outright psychotic delusions; and their ideas, feelings and behaviors are symptoms to be analyzed. The critic of Arlt is also a translator, a curator, a selector of passages, of a way through.

However, without minimizing the insanity of Arlt’s characters or denying that his expressionist Buenos Aires maps social commentaries and condemnations, I also believe that the novels need to be read as a textual and metatextual world bound together and even unified by a particular fantasy of surplus-value as interest. Linking together the novels’ plot with its various metanarratives, its characters with the narrator and “Commentator,” is the forcefield of prostitution.

Prostitution is not only a central theme of the two novels, but rather traverses (or, in a more Arltian metaphor, bores through) the textual and the metatextual to link them up into a larger machine: from the vantage point of prostitution, the two novels can be read as functioning in tandem to manufacture meaning. While Piglia had written in 1973 that money was the prime motivator of the textual and the metatextual in Arlt—“financing the adventure” (“Roberto Arlt: Una crítica” 58)—prostitution can show us how the unexplored dimensions of money work together to define the relationship of labor and capital at every level in the novels: it pays for the “Revolution” at the center of the plot (brothels are its patron industry); it provides the secret fantasy of the protagonist, Remo Erdosain; it is only the possible “freedom” postulated for women in the novels as well as the liberation of the select few, who will live by the “exploitation of usury,” escaping permanently from labor as a form of incarceration of people in time.
One of the most striking aspects of Arlt’s characterization—as well as a legitimate problem for the reader’s “interest” in every sense of the word—is how his various protagonists are difficult to separate from the flow of narrative itself: they only fleetingly solidify into individuals before reentering the fluidity of the general medium (“anguish” in the narrator’s vocabulary); and such changing states are not separated from reality by the conventions of inner monologues but rather emerge through regular free indirect discourse (“If they had sent him through the rollers of a laminator,” the narrator says of Erdosain, “his life could be no flatter” [70]).

Yet Arlt’s expressionism doesn’t limit itself to free indirect speech—which occasionally confuses narrator and character, subjective and objective time and perception—but actually creates standardized units of meaning—repeated images, recognizable phrases that break apart from their original context and appear in new permutations—whereby people are experiencing the same things as buildings; bits of scrap metal have the precise hue of a thought, or an eye, and pipes contain in x-ray vision gases of the same color as people’s faces.

The repetition of strange locutions in radically different contexts also links these disparate events together via a spiderweb of almost-invisible, nearly unconscious causality which traces the circulation within the novels at the level of language. I believe that the standardized strangeness of Arlt’s language, the way that adjectives and adjectival clauses reappear autonomous from their original objects, can illuminate the deeper economic structure of the novels as a crystalline metastability wherein the general medium of anguish is at once a kind of alchemical melting pot for characters, relationships, money and manufacturing, but also for the language with which it is all narrated. The migrations of words and phrases from ideas to people to machines to gases reflects a kind of dynamic equilibrium of states without hierarchy within which there is an obsessive preciseness that rather than getting marred by contradiction seems to transcend it entirely, as though phrases and words came together and separated through obscure chemical affinities, which then manifest writ large at the level of the plot: “Copper,” for example, is variously a red, golden, rose or green color; a gas (copper sulfate); a metal; a metal heated to a liquid to be used to electroplate roses (and eventually the cuffs and collars of dress shirts [210]); but which is vulnerable to cyanide, produced in the reaction of heating copper and leaving yellow striations in it [211]); which then forms a new compound (copper cyanate) which in turn will attack liquid nickel (211). Strange synaesthesias result from the recombinations of copper: a “fog of copper” describes of Barsut’s three-day beard (154); Erdosain has the “taste of copper sulfate” in his mouth when he murders La Bizca; the mass production of the *rosa de cobre* (copper-plated rose)
will finance the cúpulas de cobre rosa (rose-copper cupulas) of the Revolution’s new city for Kings (273).

It is not only significant that copper is both raw material and product, but almost as though atoms of copper are themselves circulating and recombining throughout the narrative, part and parcel of the general medium of anguish: “a cloud of poison gas moved itself heavily from one point to another, penetrating walls and crossing through the buildings, without losing its flat and horizontal form; anguish of two dimensions that guillotined the throats and left in them an aftertaste of tears” (11). Characters, objects, relationships, buildings, plans, and ideologies can transmute anywhere they can recombine with other elements. These clouds of metastable compounds both “rain” and “condense” metonymic associations of compounds with the processes by which they are achieved, characters with relationships and the scattershot free-associations of a writer working against the clock.

Similarly, the voice of the Commentator himself changes over the course of the novels, from a fairly confident-sounding third-person omniscient narrator to, abruptly, a first-person narrator halfway through the antepenultimate chapter of Los lanzallamas. The liberation of Arlt’s writing, its ability to exist as a “luxury” without the time it would have taken to “do style,” is in fact a style defined by running out of time. This narrative metastability that is made possible by the unifying force of prostitution as defining surplus value and, therefore, freedom for its practitioners—to say nothing of gases, metals, and liquids and other substances—is akin to the liberation of money proposed by Gesell, which required a time stamp to limit money’s circulation, thus freeing it from inflation and deflation. The narrative as a priori out of time allows for a radical freedom of its constituent elements. Because of this, rather than bringing an economic analysis to bear on prostitution in Arlt, it’s necessary to bring a prostitution-analysis to Arlt’s economics.

Money for Nothing: The Astrologer’s Revolution

The two novels follow the adventures of a motley crew who come together through a shared dislike of labor as well as other more obscure pathological affinities to plan world domination in a suburb of Buenos Aires. The inventor of the conspiracy, The Astrologer, masterminds a vacuous “Revolution” with which to attract just such disaffected locos—“políticos de café [café politicians]” and “filósofos de centros recreativos [rec center philosophers]” (152)—who have a nervous enthusiasm that “well utilized could be the base of a new and powerful movement” (151). Using a small (stolen) investment as
bait to attract new locos, the Revolution will then be a viable business model because instead of paying workers it will enslave locos “as they do in El Gran Chaco,” ringing the grounds with electric fences and beating compliance out of the surly (146).

The main form of income will be brothels, located in “el Campo Chileno,” but there will also be metal refineries, and industrial manufacturing of poison gas and Erdosain’s copper-plated rose. However, he omits any idea of productivity. Nowhere is there an image of labor producing something other than submission in workers. The extraction of metals will be done “by electricity”; “gold processors”; “a five-hundred horsepower turbine”; “The nitric acid will come out of the nitrogen in the atmosphere via a voltaic arc . . .” (147, 151). Manufacturing bypasses workers (with the exception of prostitutes): their labor will existly mainly as a form of imprisonment, and within its “electrified fences” they will be forced to witness atrocities: “terrorizing the weak and inflaming the strong” (151). Workers, then, will function more literally as the base of the Revolution—not just in the occasional Marxist-Leninist spin the Astrologer puts on the discourse, but in a more literal metallurgical sense. The Revolution will be an “amalgam” and the underutilized locos who will be the workers of the Revolution are “like tin geniuses”—“but tin is an energy that properly utilized could be the base of a new and powerful movement” (151).

The Astrologer’s economics is entirely about money: it is a kind of transubstantiation, whereby money is either extracted or refined from raw materials. Because he considers people not as laborers but as stages in the metamorphosis of things and money, his emphasis is—much like Marx’s Mephistopheles—on getting something for nothing—bypassing the category of labor entirely in order to focus on “exploit[ing] usury” (147). To exploit exploitation, the Astrologer focuses on only surplus-value to the exclusion of value, and only surplus-labor to the exclusion of labor. He blurs the orders of quantity and measure, labor and money, money and value, demonstrating a fetish which is also of a different order from those we saw in Santa: rather than fetishizing the commodity (like Rubio) or money abstracted from time (like Hipólito), the Astrologer has a doubly abstract passion for money, not just living coin but autonomous money. The sense of people as literally monetary implies that the Astrologer’s desire to own men’s souls is really also an economic matter: he will marshal armies of coin not to invest them in order to optimize his wealth but because he can, because to dictate the path of money in circulation, to take away its autonomy, is to be a God on earth (141).

We can see ways in which the Astrologer’s economics as a practice is analogous to that of the narrator’s storytelling: in his Revolutionary conspiracy, ideas and individuals become separated from their initial context and recom-
bine with apparent freedom, yet in their very mobility they end up reiterating the central obsessions of the novels by proving that the more things appear to change, the more they stay the same.

The clearest example of this is the novels’ extended subplot involving Remo Erdosain and Gregorio Barsut. Erdosain appears on the first page of the novel as a classic Arlt protagonist faced with a dilemma. He has been accused of stealing money at his low-level job at the sugar company; he is denied his paycheck and given the impossible order to document his innocence by tomorrow at three. Shortly thereafter, he meets the Astrologer, who offers him a kind of freedom: if he will simply join the Astrologer’s total social revolution by participating in the murder of Gregorio Barsut—a hateful man who hoards an undeserved inheritance—then he will have the money to pay back his employers. Erdosain is thus doubly trapped by the illusion of freedom offered by the Astrologer: he is bound to him because the Astrologer knows about his crime at the sugar company and about the crime he will commit; with each move toward freedom, with each helpful nudge from the Astrologer toward autonomy, Erdosain becomes more tightly entwined. This is, after all, the Astrologer’s game: to reveal the monetary soul gleaming within men, the “metaphysical illness” (142) that makes them desire their own enslavement and blindly circulate to accomplish this unconscious goal. By offering “freedom” and encouraging autonomy, seemingly random movements associated only metonymically, tangentially, all lead to Erdosain’s tragic destiny within the Revolution.

The narrator obsessively reiterates the fetishistic qualities of money, particularly its goldenness: “as a consequence of industry” (145) and its ability to dazzle men who are otherwise only moved by “carnage” (93); the “redness” of gold in association with bloodshed but also circulating blood and unity (145, 154, 176–77). These characteristics of gold, though, are also characteristics of copper. The narrator eludes overt symbolism by expressing the money fetishism in an alchemical metonymic chain wherein almost anything can enter the process. At the same time, this almost fractal quality whereby the raw materials of the story are equally everywhere reinforces the idea that we are in a kind of crystalline web without escape, where everything “is” metonymically everything else.

Even Erdosain’s copper rose—the invention he offers to the Revolution—functions as this type of metonymic avatar of Erdosain and any other character: the living rose is converted into a metal one, making “each red petal nearly transparent, and under the metallic coat the nerved form of the natural petal could barely be distinguished” (211). Compare the electroplated flower to Erdosain’s face, wherein “the nerves under the skin of his forehead
are the painful continuation of his thoughts” (332); but his face will eventually become blurred into “an old mustard twilight” at the end of Los lanzallamas, just before he commits the “pointless” murder of La Bizca. In contrast, in the Astrologer we see that “thought works under all the nerves of his rhomboid face” (366).

Gregorio Barsut, in contrast to both Erdosain and the Astrologer, has been defined from the very beginning as coppery-haired money to be rescued from waste: rather than capitalizing on his inheritance, “he spends it little by little” (97). When the conspirators kidnap him, he undergoes a physical transformation making his identification with coin more obvious: his greenish eyes become “discolored” and there is a “fog of copper” on his face (154).

Similarly, when Erdosain asks how they will dispose of Barsut’s body, the Astrologer replies: “Disolviéndolo en ácido nítrico. Tengo tres damajuanas. Pero, hablando de todo un poco, ¿tiene noticias de la rosa de cobre? [Dissolving him in nitric acid. I have three demijohns. But, since we’re chatting, have you heard anything further about the copper rose?]” (279). The Astrologer is recommending the elementary school science experiment by which a copper alloy penny is dissolved in nitric acid, and his association with the copper rose makes it all the more clear that he is viewing Barsut as already coin, a copper alloy to be disposed of in ions and oxide.20

The use of nitric acid is the same that the Astrologer had earlier mentioned as, first of all, free (getting the nitrogen from the air with the aid of an electric arc) and second of all the process by which the Revolution will acquire copper, iron and aluminum (147). This begs the question of how exactly the Astrologer planned to “get” these metals from nitric acid without first starting with their amalgam (such as in the form of a coin).21 In other words, the Astrologer’s economics is really based on turning money into money, and once again he is juggling different orders, not only conflating money and value but also money and gold. He repeats that gold will be both the result of their Industry and also the bait that lures in clients and workers, madmen and prostitutes: and in this he reminds us that labor does not differentiate people in his mind, because consumers and producers are only stages in a form of becoming that is not about the conversion of people into either labor or commodities, but rather what we might call an immanent money-becoming (to emphasize that money is not the fixed result of the process, which has no result). At particularly rhapsodic moments, this is gold-becoming.

Historically, between 1927 and 1929 convertibility between the Peso Moneda Nacional and gold was reestablished in Argentina for the first and last time since 1914.22 This convertibility suggests the proper sense in which the characters in Los siete locos are coin-becoming, a becoming that has no endpoint but rather ranges over money and gold for a brief opportunistic period
of identity between money and gold and does not preclude—as we shall see—other simultaneous becomings. The convertibility of money and gold is a brief interstice in a long period in which economic crises and devaluations eventually led to the replacement of the Peso Moneda Nacional with the peso Ley 18.188, and thus while *Los lanzallamas* has the same view of becoming-coin as *Los siete locos*, its view of coin is less expansive, more medium of exchange and less value in itself. 23

In this way, the passage from *Los siete locos* to *Los lanzallamas* echoes a procedural transition between the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. Money remains the “universal material into which commodities must be dipped, in which they become gilded and silver-plated” but the Marxist order of operations—already short-circuited in *Los siete locos*—is further confused by its practice. Marx had said in *Grundrisse* that the particularity of any exchange-value is based on the amount of labor time contained in it, that the specific quantity (labor) was what translated it to a specific amount of money (price). In this way, labor could be read in the commodity and its sign in price. At the same time, Marx acknowledges the contradictory functions of money, and by the end of Notebook II has stated that “Money in its final, completed character now appears in all directions as a contradiction, a contradiction which dissolves itself, drives towards its own dissolution” (*Grundrisse* 233).

However, in the second chapter of *Capital*, the focus shifts to how socio-economic reality actually functions in the form of money-mediated exchange and how this action is seen to lie beyond the scope of human consciousness. In other words, people make and spend money without understanding what money is; and the focus of *Capital* is therefore scientific rather than historical. In the words of Dieter Wolf,

After having generated money in an unconscious way by a real action, [people] refer to money consciously, knowing that money is immediately exchangeable, that commodities must have a price expressed in the form of money. While aware of all this as the condition for carrying out exchange, they are not aware of what money and price really are, i.e., that price and money are developed forms of value appearing on the surface in forms which are the results of an invisible disguised mediation process. Prices of commodities, and money, are given to the human beings as somewhat different from what they are as the results of the mediation process. (Wolf, paras 5–6)

In both *Los siete* locos and *Los lanzallamas* we see the consequences of the generation of money without understanding the process by which money and value are related. (Thus we have the idea of dissolving coin in nitric oxide
to make money, as well as the sense that gold is a transcendent value. However, it is in *Los siete locos* that the theory of money is developed in all its contradictions; in *Los lanzallamas* the creation of money is suspended and there remains only the process of spending and circulating it. The metaphysical origin of the Revolution's money in the coin-becoming of Barsut is not repeated, even as the other members of the conspiracy themselves remain engaged in an ongoing process of coin-becoming/capitalist-becoming. In Arlt, there is no distinction between surface and depth, there is no disguised mediation process at work but rather all processes of becoming occur in an economy in which everything is surface.

**Prostitution as Surplus-Value, Surplus-Labor**

On the one hand, prostitution is the obvious motor of the Astrologer’s Revolution: prostitution colonies will finance the other industries of the Revolution, managed by Haffner, the so-called Rufián melancólico (Melancholy Pimp), who has been designated as the Gran patriarca prostibulario (Great Patriarch of Prostitution). Yet the implicit ideas about prostitution that give it this central role in both the Revolution and the novels as a whole are worth a closer look. In particular, Hipólita—Arlt’s famous prostitute—has a radically different view of both prostitution and surplus-value. Together, Hipólita and the Melancholy Pimp provide a counterpoint to the Astrologer’s views. The definition of metastable storytelling techniques in the previous sections allows us to see how the novels easily incorporate the contrasting economic views into their own metonymic free market.

Hipólita, while one of the novels’ main conspirators, is not given a title in the Revolution nor a realm over which to rule. In fact, unlike some of the other characters, Hipólita does no work at all over the course of the novel except in scenes which, as we shall see, can be explicated as surplus-labor generating surplus-value on its own behalf. Where the Naturalist prostitute was held apart—idolized and pilloried, queen and slave—Hipólita has observed the anguished reality of life and thus arms herself with a composite kind of expressionist-futurist *Our Bodies, Ourselves* with which she decides to become a prostitute and “thus” free herself from her body and, by extension, labor, forever (223).

While previously employed as a servant, Hipólita had once overheard on the streetcar a conversation in which a man insisted that an intelligent woman, even an ugly one, if she set about selling her favors right would get rich:
“and if she didn’t fall in love with anyone she could be queen of a city. If I had a sister, I’d advise her to do it” (221). Hipólita, thrilled with the idea of becoming a prostitute, spends her whole month’s salary on books about prostitution (a waste, since they turn out to be “stupid, pornographic books” [221]). None of her friends can explain to her exactly how prostitution works, either. Finally, she goes to a lawyer for a proper definition of prostitution, who tells her it is when a woman “performs sexual acts without love and to gain money.” Hipólita reformulates the revelation as follows: “That is, [ . . . ] she liberates herself from her body . . . and she is free” (223). She continues:

“I was happy, never happier than that day. The ‘life’ [prostitution], Erdosain, was that, liberating oneself from one’s body, having the free will to achieve all the things one desired. [ . . . ] Did you ever see a thief in a room full of gold? In that moment I, the servant, was the thief in the room full of gold. And I understood that the world was mine.” (223)

Whereas the Astrologer stands aloof in a society full of men who can by force of mind be easily turned into money, Hipólita feels like a thief in a room already full of gold. Whereas the Astrologer plans to standardize prostitution as an industry (announcing that Erdosain has designed a machine to pinpoint how many clients each prostitute shall service per day for maximum efficiency), Hipólita invokes the potentiality of prostitution as something inherently personal, eluding mass-production and unstandardizable in homogenous blocks of labor. “I had realized,” she says, “from reading novels that men attributed extraordinary amorous facilities to educated women. . . . I mean to say that being cultured was a disguise that increased the value of the merchandise” (223).

It is possible to read Hipólita and the Astrologer as a kind of zero-signifying odd couple: they initially mean to exploit each other, but end up in an alliance in which their differences echo Marx and Gesell on the subject of surplus-value. It is Hipólita’s view of surplus-value inhering in surplus-labor that is actually demonstrated to be true at the level of events in the plot; yet it is true because the Astrologer is able to manipulate all of the other characters so successfully. However, a closer look at the equality of the Astrologer and Hipólita involves a more complicated dynamic passing through the other characters. More precisely, it is because Hipólita is a prostitute that she is privy to (and at the same included within) the real fantasies of men—the same illusions that the Astrologer has decided to invent and mass-produce in order to control men’s souls—that she ends up as the Astrologer’s equal at the
Part I. Chapter 2

conclusion of Los lanzallamas. As we shall see, the economics of the novels is not defined by any one discourse within the novels, but rather inheres in the metastable associativity of the all of the elements within them.

It is in just such a seemingly free-associative scene that Hipólita ends up discovering that Erdosain, as one of her co-conspirators, has a lifelong fantasy of being pitied by a prostitute (215), which then leads to his confessing to her a part of the Astrologer’s conspiracy to which she has not yet been privy: the plan to murder Gregorio Barsut (241). Of course, Erdosain has only told Hipólita this because she has been the sympathetic prostitute of his fantasies, listening to his reports of his unhappiness and finally his confession, and rewards him with an outburst of pity, falling to her feet and announcing: “Sos el hombre más desgraciado de la tierra. ¡Cuánto sufriste, Dios mío! ¡Qué grande es tu alma! [You’re the unluckiest man on earth. How you have suffered, my God! How great is your soul!]” (241). The novels’ Commentator inserts a proleptic footnote here to tell us that this was precisely the moment when Hipólita had conceived of blackmailing the Astrologer with the information Erdosain has just given her—as she would later tell the Astrologer herself (241).

The footnote is a moment out of the time of the main narrative—it occurs near the end of Los siete locos, and yet at the start of Los lanzallamas the Astrologer “already knew” that Hipólita planned to blackmail him, but counters her by revealing the secret information that Barsut was not really dead, thus cementing an alliance between them that will last until the end. At the narrative level, Arlt stops the clock, and in the time of the footnote, Hipólita would tell the Astrologer later that she had planned to blackmail him; yet by the time the conversation takes place with Hipólita, he already knew.

On the one hand, this is definitely the kind of thing that made Arlt angry in the prologue to Los lanzallamas—he didn’t have time to “do style,” or to go over the writing with the fine-tooth comb that readers would be wielding in the future—paying the author’s debts with interest (and to whom?) But from the point of view of Hipólita and the Astrologer’s differing views on capital and surplus value, the accident of the commentator’s version contrasting with the narrator’s is as important as the “accident” by which Hipólita heard the confession in the first place: there is a consistent type of drive, in both places, that leads to an unplanned result, revealing something partially excavated in the deep structure of the novels: Hipólita will circulate learning fantasies and hearing confessions; the Astrologer will know that she will exploit her self-exploitation to the maximum. Arlt’s “commentator” knows already that Hipólita will not checkmate the Astrologer; but neither will he checkmate her. Whether Arlt knew “then” that Barsut wouldn’t be killed or that Hipólita and
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the Astrologer would make off with everybody’s money is irrelevant: within the metatextual combination of main body of the text and footnote on page 241, the Astrologer is instantaneously put into and released from jeopardy. She would tell him. The note both binds the Astrologer and Hipólita by her momentary intention to blackmail one using the other’s secret—and releases them all.

It is the juxtaposition of two times—the time of the main narrative, and the time of the commentator—which permits a meta-confession: the Commentator’s confession of Hipólita’s confession to the Astrologer of her intent to use Erdosain’s confession to blackmail the Astrologer. The meta-confession thus triangulates the relationship of Hipólita and the Astrologer via the Commentator: according to the Commentator, Hipólita does not tell the Commentator directly of either her feelings in the moment of Erdosain’s confession or of her change of heart and alliance with the Astrologer; so the implication is that either the Astrologer told the Commentator what happened—which the Commentator does not report—or else the Commentator is omniscient, and therefore is frequently “lying” about his pedestrian ways of obtaining information through “sources” (such as Erdosain’s “diary” and his interviews with various characters). The Commentator has gone somewhat out of bounds here into reporting unattributed hearsay of the counterfactual: he informs us that while outwardly sympathizing with Erdosain, Hipólita was also planning to use his confession against the Astrologer, but would ultimately decide not to. With this page of the novel, the Commentator effectively brackets all actions in the novel as radically uncertain: they are all potentially known to him yet unreported, yet they are also potentially reported to him by one, or some, or all of the characters (who thus may be betraying each other), yet if this is true the reports are being withheld by the Commentator. The Commentator betrays the reader in either case.

In this way, the confessional loop running through the novel and its footnotes begins to look something like a metatextual Möbius strip. This radical uncertainty is similar to and also created by the movements of the metastable narrative elements: as the red or yellow cubes of whorehouses lead Erdosain to his own house where (associatively) copper-haired Hipólita appears gazing at him through red eyelashes to in the very same scene fulfill his greatest desire and plot to use it against him, so the Commentator uses the same scene as a generator of infinite readings, by invoking the possibility of his own infinite variety of deceptiveness and truthfulness. At the same time, the meta-confession does not become recursive just because of the Commentator’s ambiguous truthfulness, but rather because of the way that it brackets an already recursive episode of prostitution. The uncertainty generated by
the Commentator here functions at the metatextual level as the analog of surplus-value.

The meta-confession, then, reframes the novels as self-similar in their metastability: at the smallest and the largest scale, the narrative modus operandi is surplus-value seeking free association. Characters, metonyms, Commentator and narrator are and are made of interchangeable parts: and the narrative follows an associative assembly line extending the Revolution beyond the plot and into the level of language where everything is subtly mass-produced over time as instantiations of a composite, hybrid, rendered whole. Prostitution is the mode of manufacturing something out of nothing, and converting people into something useful, surpassing the categories of labor-power and work themselves. We can see this clearly in the superficially opposite ideas the Astrologer and Hipólita have about surplus value.

Whereas the only form of labor the Astrologer seems to recognize as such is prostitution—viewing every other human labor as primarily a form of imprisonment and ideological indoctrination—he is obsessed with “extracting” surplus-value as he believes it lies unexploited all around them like veins of gold ore in the ground: other people’s need for illusions—which the Astrologer can speak to gratis (perhaps he has the “time” Arlt bemoans the lack of in his prologue)—illusions for which they will exchange their own freedom. The Astrologer does not view people as living coin in either an instantaneous transsubstantiation or a metaphor but rather as the maximum possible exploitation of a person in his or her potentiality:

I want to take over the soul of all these wretches, give them as an objective for their activities a lie that will make them happy inflating their vanity . . . and these poor devils who abandoned to themselves wouldn’t have stopped being misunderstood, will be the precious material with which we will produce power [potencia]. (155)

The soul of a person is that which can be turned into surplus value—after all, labor can be beaten out of anyone; but to know someone’s unconscious desires is to own their future surplus value. The Revolution will run on souls as manufacturing plants run on electricity.

Yet Hipólita inclines to a more Deleuzian view of surplus-value as inhering in labor rather than in money. Whereas the Astrologer has a categorical blindness or perhaps allergy to the category of labor, Hipólita and the Melancholy Pimp—perhaps because of their choice of profession—seem to concur with Deleuze and Guattari in an ideological insistence of labor as identical to surplus-labor:
Labor and surplus-labor are strictly the same thing; the first term is applied to the quantitative comparison of activities, the second to the monopolistic appropriation of labor by the entrepreneur [. . .]. As we have seen, even when they are distinct and separate, there is no labor that is not predicated on surplus labor. Surplus labor is not what which exceeds labor; on the contrary, labor is that which is subtracted from surplus labor and presupposes it. It is only in this context that one may speak of labor value, and of an evaluation bearing on the quantity of activity in continuous variation. Since it depends on surplus labor and surplus value, entrepreneurial profit is just as much an apparatus of capture as proprietary rent: not only does surplus labor capture labor, and landownership the earth, but labor and surplus labor are the apparatus of capture of activity. (A Thousand Plateaus 442; my emphasis)

Hipólita is privy to Erdosain’s confession, and therefore mobilizes her alliance with the Astrologer as well as the metaconfession of the Commentator because she is capable of surplus-labor without labor. Sneaking into Erdosain’s room in the middle of the night, she exemplifies how the surplus-value that the Astrologer believes to be hidden in men’s monetary souls is not just “extractable” via prostitution, as an ideal industry with which to finance the ideological production of illusions—but rather in prostitution, labor is not only predicated on its exploitation as surplus-labor by the entrepreneur, but takes the entrepreneur automatically to a higher order, making him or her the exploiter not of people, but of exploitation itself.

To exploit exploitation was, we remember, the Astrologer’s ambition for the Revolution: “all the members of the logic/lodge [lógica/logia] will have interest in the businesses. . . . We will exploit usury . . . women, children, workers, the fields and the mad” (147).26 Perhaps this is why the Astrologer holds the Melancholy Pimp in such high esteem, praising his “beautiful soul” for beating women more cruelly than anyone, and believing “not in courage [but . . .] in betrayal” (440). As much as the Astrologer believes firmly in the machine extraction of surplus-labor without labor, he is entranced by the human exploiter of exploitation and intuits that prostitution is not only the ideal industry with which to finance the other industries of the Revolution but is also emblematic of surplus-value without labor.

And yet it is not the great exploiter—the pimp—who demonstrates the maximum abilities of prostitution to exploit exploitation, to harvest surplus-value without labor in the novels, but rather Hipólita herself. Tellingly, the novels invert the Naturalist paradigm, killing off the Melancholy Pimp in a death seen as the inevitable consequence of “the life”: “el que mal anda mal
acaba” [he who lives badly ends badly],” the Astrologer observes, as Erdosain
snickers. Hipólita, far from dying as a result of her body’s abuse and victim-
ization, never suffers any physical harm whatsoever in a novel full of mur-
der and abuse, but survives and thrives. This role-reversal demonstrates how
prostitution functions in the novels as the closest thing to pure convertibility,
pure metonymic freedom, in both the story and its telling.

In fact, the extremity of Haffner’s situation—as idealized exploiter and also
ill-starred victim of his own exploits, killed by an unspecified one of many
men who want revenge—exemplifies how all the characters in Los siete locos
are engaged in multiple and contradictory processes of exploitation: at any
given time, all members of the conspiracy are both being fooled and fooling
others, they are designing the new society and being designed by it, capital-
izing on others’ weaknesses and getting something for nothing while being
made into coin and spent.

In that sense, Hipólita stands alone in her ability to derive surplus-value
autonomously, as an entrepreneur without employees, thereby escaping not
only from labor but also from the consequences of exploitation of others—
revenge, physical harm, jail, death—in which the other characters except the
Astrologer are gradually entangled and, eventually, spent. Whereas hers can
be seen as a self-interested calculation, Erdosain and the pimp are both driven
unconsciously by the very same metastable terms that pushed them to join
up with the Astrologer in the first place. Even the Astrologer himself is beset
by endless associations narrated in free indirect discourse by which his ideas
emerge and define him metonymically. Only Hipólita’s thought is not nar-
rated except by herself, in dialogue. In this sense, the prostitute is the one nar-
native rogue element in the general pattern.

We can see how the exposed thought of Erdosain leads him on a circuit
that passes through Hipólita, and ultimately will lead him to homicide and
suicide. The same angustia with golden and red colors mixes with his initial
guilt: ruminating on the crime he has agreed to commit, he thinks fixedly, “Es
inútil, soy un asesino [it’s useless, I’m a murderer].”27 The narrator continues in
an ambiguous free indirect discourse:

Mas, de pronto, al aparecer el cubo rojo o amarillo de un lenocinio, se dete-
nía, vacilaba un instante bañado por la neblina rojiza o amarillenta [. . .].
Mas su angustia se hacía a cada instante más pesada, como si fuera una
masa de agua, fatigando con una marea la verticalidad de sus miembros. A
pesar de esto, Erdosain se imaginaba que por beneficio de su providencia,
había entrado a un prostíbulo singular. [D]eteniéndose asombrada de un
motivo que sólo él y ella conocían, la ramera exclama:
¡Ah! ¿sos vos? . . . ¡vos! ¡por fin viniste!
Erdosain le respondía:
—Sí . . . soy yo . . . ¡Ah, si supieras cuánto te he buscado!
Mas como esto era imposible que aconteciera, su tristeza rebotaba como pelota de plomo en una muralla de goma. Y bien sabía que siempre sus anhelos de ser súbitamente compadecido, por una ramera desconocida, serían durante el desenvolverse de los días, ineficaces como esa pelota, para horadar la vida espesa.

[But, suddenly, on seeing the red or yellow cube of a brothel, he stopped, vacilating for a moment bathed in the reddish or yellowish fog [. . .]. But his anguish became heavier every second, as if it were a mass of water, tiring the verticality of his body parts with seasickness. Despite this, Erdosain imagined that by great luck he had entered a unique brothel. [S]topping short, marveling for a reason that only he and she knew, the whore exclaimed:

“Ah, it’s you? You?! You’re here at last!”

Erdosain answered her:

“Yes . . . it’s me . . . If you only knew how I’ve looked for you!”

But as it was impossible for this to happen, his sadness bounced like a ball of lead against a rubber wall. And he knew well that his desires of being suddenly pitied by an unknown whore would always be as useless as that ball at boring a hole through his thick life. (215)

However, at that very moment, in despair, Erdosain goes home and curls up quietly in the dark, full of a “childish fear,” and lights a cigarette only to see none other than Hipólita by the light of the match, contemplating him with her “cold and poisonous look” from the room divider (216).

The amazing fact of Hipólita’s appearance in Erdosain’s room seems to have been conjured out of the raw materials of the preceding pages: Erdosain’s anguish had summoned up a fantasy of a red or a yellow cube in which to meet the unknown prostitute who would pity him; returning to the dark, Hipólita appears with uncanny timing to hear Erdosain’s troubles. It is almost as though the language itself of his ruminations has recombined to generate the scene: not only does Hipólita hear his confession, but she gazes at him through her red eyelashes (224) as she shares with him the story of her life. Erdosain is so overwhelmed with guilt about the impending murder and relief at finding himself talking with Hipólita that the only way he can express his gratitude is to say to her, “Mirá, si vos . . . si usted me pidiera ahora que me matara, lo haría encantado [Look, if you . . . ma’am . . . asked me to kill myself right now, I would do it happily]” (224).
Of course, Hipólita doesn’t want him to kill himself. Later on, however, Erdosain’s repetitive fantasies of being pitied lead him metonymically onward into horrifying sexual relations with first Luciana Espila and finally the girl known only as “la Bizca” [cross-eyed]. Remembering the murder of a nobody, as the Commentator refers us to “p. 209 [269] of Los siete locos” [583]), he dissociates into “Erdosain” and “the assassin.” He kills “la Bizca,” for no apparent reason:

Cuatro espaciados toques de bronce se dilatan en la noche concéntricamente, desde la torre de la iglesia de La Piedad. [. . . ] Entra al cuarto de baño y enciende la luz. Frente al lavatorio hay un espejo. El asesino, cerrando los ojos, lo descuelga del clavo. No quiere verse en ningún espejo. Tiene horror de sí mismo. (588)

[Four slow strokes of bronze dilate concentrically in the night, from the tower of the Church of La Piedad. [. . . ] He enters the bathroom and turns on the light. In front of the sink is a mirror. The assassin, closing his eyes, takes it off of the nail. He doesn’t want to see himself in any mirror. He is horrified by himself. (599)

Erdosain’s final crime prefigures his imminent suicide. He starts calling the narrator with the formal Usted, and pale and out of sorts he finally buys a train ticket to Moreno, shooting himself in a car with two other people. When his cadaver is apprehended, that of the “fierce assassin Erdosain,” it has in its pocket “only a card with his name on it and a trivial amount of money.” (597)

Like the pimp Haffner, Erdosain was entirely used up within the huge gestures of the Revolution. Like the commodity expelled from circulation, when the Revolution moves on, its members no longer exist in a moment of self-perpetuating value, but rather as use-value, which is rapidly exhausted in one or two final gestures, which can almost be interpreted as estertos or posthumous twitches after the theft of Erdosain’s Geldseele and before the body realizes that it’s dead.28

While the pairing of Hipólita and Astrologer tends to provoke dialectical interpretations (the frigid prostitute and the eunuch, living coin and capitalist, prostitute and revolutionary), within the fractal metastability of the novels they are more like two series intertwining. When they make off with everyone’s money at the end of Los lanzallamas, the Revolution is transubstantiated into capital, packed up and taken away, deterritorialized along with everybody who had participated in it, just as the Astrologer’s wishful eco-
nomics based entirely on money believed in the ultimate ability of money to “coarsely” absorb life itself.

At the same time, it is Hipólita as prostitute who embodies both the sign of wealth and the irrationality of surplus-value as an expected result of correct choices. First, she embodies the contradiction at the heart of the Astrologer’s plan for the colony of brothels that will be pure surplus-value: by being the (non)object he plans to exploit, she is the hidden human cost of his projected profits, and her engagement with him changes the decisions he makes even as he becomes more and more rigid in his view of himself, splitting off unacceptable, weaker drives from what Nietzsche would call the preponderance (Übergewicht) of stronger ones (or what he himself, in Freudian terms, defines as his ego): in the end, his flight with her—their joint escape, abandoning the Astrologer’s plan and running off together with the money—is nothing if not the recognition that the Astrologer did not know his own desire, but rather was led to it as blindly as any other character in the novels, by the hand of a knowledgeable prostitute.

Second, Hipólita is mapping, qua prostitute, the very social delirium that is not limited to Arlt’s “locos” but on the contrary forms the world around them and continuous with them, and which delirium they attempt to exploit in order to achieve anything but disappointment, disintegration and death. Through Hipólita, we see that it is not irrationality that makes the characters in the novels crazy, but something like an excess of faith in reason, a search for the promised transcendent despite the apparent irrationality and continual disappointment of the world that surrounds them. In this way, it is her role as the prostitute to demonstrate how the desires of the “locos” are congruent with the insanity lying at the heart of political economy, showing that their drives are entirely social, compatible with and inherently part of the political and economic infrastructure.

In other words, by embodying the fantasy of pure surplus-value, Hipólita points out its impossibility. It isn’t that the Astrologer’s calculations that are wrong, but that the axioms he has to work with and his insistence on following them through rationally serves as a reductio ad absurdum of both his fantasy and of economic “rationality” itself. And more importantly, Hipólita reveals that the mechanisms of political economy are libidinal, that any premise of rationality is carved out of the irrational, which surrounds us. She demonstrates the sense in which Deleuze says that everything is rational about capitalism, except capital (Desert Islands 157).
Part II

Minority Metanarratives

White Slavery and the Reinvention of Jewish-Argentine History
(1990–2010)
WE ARE ABOUT TO fast-forward nearly seventy years—past the entire Latin American Boom and some of the most repressive military dictatorships of the continent—in order to juxtapose the emergence of prostitution as a discourse under Naturalism with a successful subgenre of contemporary historical fiction that rewrites this time period. As in all historical fiction, the temporal gap between narrative time and historical time in these texts allows for a selective transhistorical identification between past and present; and the affective relevance of this identification can only be understood in reference to the “missing” years (1930–1990), which are elided in order to make the connection.

This fiction differs in important ways from that of the literary-critical category of the “New Historical Novel” [Nueva novela histórica], to which I shall return shortly. However, two other vectors also define the corpus as part of a distinctive cultural phenomenon. First, its novels bring back Naturalism—but
now wearing the mantle of history. As we know, the Latin American Naturalist novels of prostitution were always discursively coextensive with law and medicine; but today’s historical fiction of white slavery misapprehends what was always a hybrid literary discourse as a unitary regime indistinguishable from History. There are a series of category errors here, not least of which involves the meaning of “History” (to which we shall return shortly); but we can summarize them as a metonymic chain very similar to that operating under higienismo and by which the law student Manuel Gálvez would cite a medical doctor’s novel to define a legal problem. In this way, the novels appropriate the “History” of prostitution by rewriting selected events and characters of national record in ways that “feel” historical principally because they crib from Naturalism’s discourse of prostitution. The novels evince a paradoxical confidence in the irony of historical truth, yet they also get lost in the crystallized forms of dominance within the neo-Naturalist regime they mobilize. In this way, these novels are individually and collectively a hall of mirrors, a recursive mode of writing.

Second, even as contemporary historical fiction embraces aspects of Naturalism as a literary mode (conflating the literary with the “historical”), it eschews the content of capital-H “History” in favor of one particular “forgotten” story of white slavery, which was told principally (though not exclusively) in newspapers, police journals and in a spectacular series of public courtroom trials: Jewish white slavery in Argentina. Contemporary historical fiction would thus seem to privilege Jewish stories of white slavery; yet the very terms with which that is articulated are misleading. We can state with certainty that whereas the discourse of prostitution during its Naturalist emergence up until 1930 approached white slavery as an international phenomenon with local and national consequences, contemporary historical fiction reimagines the time period as the defining moment of the nation—and particularly of Jewish-Argentine identity.

Finally, the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery establishes the recursive potential of minority synecdoches and their ability to time-travel through literature. In the early twentieth century, Jewish-Argentine white slavery became a synecdoche for Argentine white slavery which itself was a signifier of global white slavery. Jewish Argentina thus became the part that represented the whole of global white slavery. The exaggerated role of Jews has proved impossible to redress within the discourse of prostitution, such that historical fiction reinscribes in its milieu, characters, style, and story what it critiques as an idea. In this way, white slavery and Jewish-Argentine identity still exist in a globalizing series of synecdoches: any incidence of prostitution is measured against and potentially interchangeable with the mythic whole;
and Jews are exchangeable with both the partial aspects or appearances of white slavery as well as its globalizing idea.¹

In this way, within the hall of mirrors of contemporary historical fiction of white slavery there are also magic mirrors reflecting back at us a contemporary image of identity, tracing hybrid notions such as Jewish-Argentineity back to a fictional origin point that is “rediscovered” in the familiar territory of national history. Such narratives are full of contradictory longings—to both assert and resolve cultural differences; to postulate a hybrid identity that satisfies all comers; and, most paradoxically, to “restore” Jews to the very national imaginary that had excluded them. One of the most widely circulated stories of Latin American Jewish history over the last twenty years has been that of the white slave trade of the early twentieth century. And yet the consistency of the tale does not spring from an historical continuity of attitudes of, about, and toward Jews in Argentina, but rather tells us about a desire for continuity, belonging and self-sameness over time, on which history is then brought to attend.

In Argentina, a multimedia boom in historical fictions about the so-called Jewish white slave trade of the early twentieth century has created a consensus around a particular set of events which is not sustained by the available evidence about those events, and in fact deviates in consistent ways from the evidence. I refer to the consensus as part of a “cultural” practice of history, for lack of a better term, to suggest the range of its appeal. Traversing newspaper supplements, TV programs, movies and—as we shall see—reaching its most lavish deployment in recent historical fiction, the consensus does not limit itself to any obvious target audience or genre.² The adjective “cultural” is meant to distinguish this way of telling history from the scholarly practices of historical writing, even though this cultural practice of history explicitly, if selectively, “includes” historical scholarship within its purview, while at the same time both blurring the lines between history and fiction and suggesting that by doing so it is part of an implicitly radical project to delegitimize the “official history” of the nation.

In this way, the historical novels of white slavery of the last twenty years are cohesive both within the genre of the historical novel and with a broader web of discourses making up the cultural practice of the history of Jewish white slavery. However, they represent a rupture with the paradigm of the “New Historical Novel,” as it has been developed over the last decades by Daniel Balderston, Seymour Menton and others. While the contemporary historical novels of white slavery certainly do not break with all of the traits attributed to the New Historical Novel as defined by Menton—and in fact they performatively invoke one trait, the impossibility of ascertaining the true
nature of reality or history, in their metatextual prologues—this apparent similarity is misleading.

Whereas Menton’s New Historical Novel distorts history “self-consciously,” “through omissions, exaggerations and anachronisms,” through “the Bakhtinian concepts of the dialogic, the carnivalesque, parody and heteroglossia,” the contemporary historical novels of white slavery have an entirely different feel from those Merton used to bookend the emergence of the New Historical Novel: Alejo Carpentier’s *El reino de este mundo* (1949) and *El arpa y la sombra* (1979). Contemporary historical novels of white slavery do not seek to subordinate the mimetic reconstruction of a historical period to the idea of history’s unknowability; on the contrary, they use the unknowability of history as a free pass to mimetically reconstruct a historical period in line with their own contemporary desires. Instead of parody, boisterous hyperbole and erotic feasts, there is cold prose in the guise of clinical accuracy. In this way, as we shall see, the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery can be seen as both a reductio and a turning away from the New Historical Novel: it embraces an aesthetic of uncertainty *opportunistically*, in order to proclaim that there is no possible truth beyond the satisfyingly subjective “truth” that is “my truth,” “her truth,” “our truth.” Its intertextuality is not occurring diachronically but synchronically with other media that are saying the same things: it defines itself as inherently hybrid—neither fiction nor history, neither scholarly nor lay—and it strives to be on the cusp of a *happening*, attaining critical mass that can be measured in the number of digital references to the topic across genres, media, languages and borders.3

Both the marketing and the theorization of recent historical fiction as a hybrid form seems to suggest that there is some fundamental way in which history itself has failed in Argentina—almost as though the scholarly practices of history were analogous with neoliberal economic measures, and could, in similar fashion, collapse. At the same time, more or less coming to prominence with the economic crisis of 2001, experimental works exploring the limits of biography, documentary and fiction adopted the adjective “*documental*” to suggest a new relationship to both evidence and history.4 The boom in the historical novel throughout Spanish-speaking markets has created a publishing environment favorable to works that claim to rethink history; and in this context there have emerged not only works reinventing literature, film and theater with materials from the past, but also those insisting that they are revealing the hidden truth of the past through fiction.5

By taking the stated intentions of these historical novels seriously, however—examining how they “rethink” history—I hope to illuminate the way in which they start to make history look surprisingly like a certain kind of science fiction: answering the question “What if?” about a particular moment
The Neo-Naturalist Reinvention of Jewish Argentina

of the past, yet without acknowledging having asked the question, and believing themselves to have provided instead the answer to the question “What really happened?” I am interested in the meaning of this unacknowledged question as it can help triangulate both the emergence and reiteration of Jewish-Argentine identity in fiction as well as the putative “origin” of the nearly mythic continuity over time of “Jewish-Argentineity.”

Similarly, the desire to establish a simple transhistorical “Jewish-Argentine identity” through a fantastic identification that skips over one or two problematic generations implies a tacit revision of the absent history between 1930 and 1990, and specifically a revised understanding of anti-Semitism in national history. At the same time, because these fictions are written, published and read in a global market where they are experienced as coextensive with other discursive forms that are readily accessible online in a synchronic intertextuality, their consensus around history is a powerfully plural affective apparatus—nearly a form of virtual reality—that allows readers, writers and critics to see the realities dictated by poetic justice unfold in apparent consensus.6 The feedback loop plays a satisfying image of “us,” restored in the revised historical imaginary to where “we” should have been all along, with only a few simple changes—an understandably powerful fantasy of authorship for minority groups that were not at all in charge of how they were treated during those times. And there is also the sense that Jewish-Argentina could be only one of many such contemporary concepts of identity to be retroactively liberated in the past.

The consensus around the revised history of Jewish white slavery in contemporary historical fiction emerges as a consistent set of narrative tropes, rooted in Naturalism, in which the admixture of history and fiction allows anti-Semitism to be both omnipresent and depoliticized: it is simultaneously minimized in Argentine political history and dramatized as the hobby of eccentric fictional sociopaths. Furthermore, Jews are split into “good” and “bad” elements, with the unmanageable part cast out through a collaboration between “good” Jews and gentiles, consolidating a Jewish-Argentine identity. The portrayal of anti-Semitism in the novels resonates with contemporary cultural debates around historical anti-Semitism—particularly the contested anti-Semitism of the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional [National Reorganization Process], the right-wing dictatorship that governed Argentina from 1976 to 1983.

My motive is not to fixate on the truth value of historical fiction, and certainly it is not to criticize it for being historically inaccurate. On the contrary, because it owes no debt to accuracy except that of creating, with literary tools, the “feel” of history, historical fiction can reveal with greater clarity the slippages between language and meanings that also exist within history as a
particular those that characterized older attempts to write discipline—and particularly those that characterized older attempts to write the history of minority communities in the service of answering a contemporary question, or discovering the roots of a contemporary problem. Historian David Nirenberg’s fundamental study of the persecution of minorities in the Middle Ages defined a key insight into the periodization of minority communities in the service of such a quest for origins: “We need no longer insist on continuities of meaning wherever we find continuities in form, since we can see how the meanings of existing forms are altered by the work that they are asked to do, and by the uses to which they are put” (Nirenberg 6). The contemporary historical fiction of white slavery alters forms to fit and define the contemporary meaning of ethnic-national Jewish-Argentine identity.

Three exemplary recent historical fictions of white slavery—Argentine Myrtha Schalom’s La Polaca. Inmigración, rufianes y esclavas (2003), Argentine Elsa Drucaroff’s El infierno prometido. Una prostituta en la Zwi Migdal (2006) and Luso-Canadian Isabel Vincent’s Bodies and Souls: The Tragic Plight of Three Jewish Women Forced into Prostitution in the Americas (2005)—all drew heavily upon Buenos Aires police chief Julio Alsogaray’s memoir of the white slave trade, Trilogía de la trata de blancas (1933). In fact, the author appears as a character in all three novels, as do other historical figures he depicted. Comparing the novels with Alsogaray’s memoir reveals that contemporary historical fiction reenacts cognitive-literary patterns of the past even in their attempt to ironize or subvert them.

Specifically, anti-Semitism is portrayed in the three novels as having existed “outside” the Argentine state, and this works together poetically and mythically to make possible the fiction of a transhistorically continuous Jewish-Argentine subject as well as a self-similar, tolerant Argentine state and pluralistic society. The mutual legitimization of Jewish-Argentine subject and philo-Semitic Argentine state relies on eliminating particular facts from a narrative of history; but even when it is accurate it employs facts in a misleading way such that they seem to corroborate a contemporary subjective experience. As false as the notion of a continuous Jewish-Argentine subject under a perennially inclusive Argentine state is, the desire for such a relationship—both between the ethnic minority and the state, and between the ethnic minority and itself in national history—is very real.

**The Trope of the White Slave**

Historian Donna Guy has given us a nuanced picture of how from the late nineteenth century through 1930 there was a flourishing sex trade run by
organized crime syndicates throughout the world, and centering in some factual and many imaginary ways on Buenos Aires, and to judge from pamphlets, broadsides and newspapers of the day, its most appealingly scandalous aspect was the trafficking of “blancas”—white European women to be sold into prostitution as “slaves” in the global South. What may be obvious for historians but is conspicuously absent from what the recent cultural practice of this history narrates is the fact that the advent of the term “white slavery” dovetails with abolition throughout the Americas and with the consolidation of the last modern Latin American states, as Spain loses the last of its colonies. The term itself is not easily dissociated from colonial anxieties: when European writers like Victor Hugo began using the term, they were mobilizing the imaginary of centuries of European trafficking and enslavement of Africans to apply it to the situation of European women—white women—when slavery had barely been abolished (Butler, Personal Reminiscences 13). There is, thus, an exchange happening in the term “white slavery”: it crystallizes the ambivalent desires of the moment that the centuries of slavery of Africans at the hands of Europeans—“Black” slavery, which of course required no adjective, no color, to be understood as such—should disappear not only in reality but also in language and in the symbolic imagination. At the same time, it is partly in proximity to prostitution that the ambiguous racial identity of Jewish women begins to be defined as “white.”

In the decades to follow, Jane Addams and other neoabolitionists would draw a moral equivalence between African slaves and “white” prostitutes. In their eyes, prostitution was the evil “twin of slavery, as old and outrageous as slavery itself and even more persistent” (Addams 4). In Argentina, white slavery becomes the rubric under which a palimpsestic map of prostitution and trafficking is drawn and redrawn, with its center remaining, for the time in question, in the “port city of sin,” Buenos Aires. The loose metonymies of the pamphleteers extrapolate the experience of any white woman prostitute to that of being held against her will by racially ambiguous South Americans, thus suggesting that “whites” are now also “slaves,” and furthermore at the hands of “nonwhites.” In this way, “white slavery” not only detracted attention from the massive social inequalities that persisted in the postslavery Americas, but also situated the “improper” desire and demand for prostitution within elite populations “outside,” in an imaginary global south of unrestrained passions.

Notwithstanding the racialized discourse of (neo)abolitionist propaganda, the practices of prostitution were impossible to define in such simple terms: they were multiethnic, multiracial, multilingual, multiclass enterprises. Within this plurality, there was a noteworthy presence of European Orthodox
Jewish men involved in both trafficking and pimping, most sensationally the all-Jewish mafia known first as the Varsovia, and then as the Zvi Migdal. This mafia controlled important sectors of prostitution and trafficking throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century. At times they dominated organized prostitution in particular regions of the capital and other cities, but the syndicate was never as powerful as contemporary detractors imagined.\textsuperscript{13}

Given the inherent limitations of the records available, it is impossible to generalize usefully about prostitution and trafficking along racial and ethnic lines, except to point out that the leadership of crime syndicates tended to coalesce within insular, homogeneous immigrant communities.\textsuperscript{14} Yet responses to organized prostitution converged with eugenicist discourse and fear-mongering about immigration and the labor movement—of all of which Jews formed a significant part both in reality and in the hyperbolic discourses of Argentine anti-Semitism—in order to target Jews disproportionately as having (almost singlehandedly) “imported” prostitution to Argentina.

To conclude this recap, I want to point out what an excellent solution it was to blame the Jews, from the viewpoint of both European and American social elites. While trafficking in women to Argentina is clearly coming from Europe, Europe in its definition of itself remains completely uninvolved. It is the Jews, who in Europe were not, at least \textit{qua} Jews, citizens, who are the authors of this social evil. At the same time, the ambivalent way of relating to Europe which is so present in nineteenth-century literature and crucial to the self-definition of Argentine elites finds a compromise here by which European immigration is both the disease and the cure.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{The Sensational, Never-Before-Seen, True-Life Historical Fiction of White Slavery}

While historians have debunked the notion that prostitution was a “Jewish” enterprise in the Southern Cone in the early twentieth century, the cultural practice of history I want to talk about reinvigorates the category of Jewish white slavery as though much of this historical research had never been done. By claiming to liberate a secret, repressed history of Jewish white slavery, these self-consciously hybrid historical fictions invite us to gaze upon ourselves in the mirror of a shared identity that has just been altered by this revelation, long hidden by “official” history. As such, they help create an origin myth of contemporary Argentine-Jewishness as a good-faith collaboration between Jews and gentiles, Argentines and immigrants, at the height of organized prostitution in the 1920s.
The story of white slavery reinvigorates the imaginary poles in eugenicist social dichotomies—Jew vs. Argentine, foreigner vs. criollo—even as it tells how these extremes were overcome. Playing with stereotypes, the caftenes (Jewish pimps) of the story remain bound to anti-Semitic stereotypes, while Jewish women become abject blancas—racially white European victims of the deceit and violence of Jewish men. Individual Jewish women are then saved by “Argentines,” i.e., non-Jews. The orientalism inherent in fantasies of white men saving women of color from men of color—from their own cultures, so to speak—requires little explanation; but here, what is particularly bizarre about the fantasy is the extreme racial and social mobility evident in the psychological compromise of “splitting” Jews along gender lines. Thus, if some young Jewish men are presented as engaged in unmasking the evil flesh trade, the key to their resistance is their gradual assimilation into Argentine mainstream society. Moreover, because the young rescuers are presented as unambiguously “Argentine” (i.e., non-Jewish), they mobilize the complex legacy of an Argentine fascism hidden under the apparently unproblematic fixity of an exclusive identity, an identity which is not easily defined but which has been often policed throughout national history. At the same time, the Jewish men of the Midgal become the literary repository for anti-Semitic and xenophobic stereotypes, even as the novels boast “Argentine-Jewish” heroines.16

In this “bipolar” narrative, where Jews embody competing stereotypes and only through cultural assimilation do they approach full human beings, historical figures are mixed in with invented characters, while a prologue often explains the groundbreaking, subversive nature of this mixture. Historical figures such as Raquel Liberman and Julio Alsogaray—Jewish prostitute and Anti-Semitic chief of police—are rewritten as the unlikeliest of partners, while fictional characters—sadists and sociopaths—shoulder the responsibility for anti-Semitism. The consensus among the fictions, moreover, makes their allegories of Jewish-Argentineity take on a kind of density and cultural meaning for which no individual author can be held responsible, and which nonetheless participates in a minor way in an “operational whitewash” of the cultural knowledge of history (Williams 277–78).17

Raquel Liberman, the young woman whose testimony was instrumental in taking the Zwi Migdal to court in 1930, is the protagonist of Schalom’s story, and that of Daniel Burman’s forthcoming film version of it, and that of a mushrooming of texts, plays and TV programs over the last two decades. This phenomenon has spread into English-language historical-literary hybrids like Canadian Isabel Vincent’s Body and Souls (2005), the film rights to which have been sold in Israel, Spain, Italy and Poland. Liberman has become the quintessential blanca. She is an innocent, religious, uneducated and shy
Ashkenazy girl living in abject poverty in the shtetl when a well-dressed man appears and offers a dowry to her impoverished parents in exchange for her hand in marriage. Tearfully, the parents accept. Nobody has much of a choice. After a sham religious marriage in a false synagogue, complete with a false ketubah (Jewish marriage contract), she is taken thousands of miles away to a new country where she doesn’t even speak the language. The well-dressed man then introduces her to all his other “wives” and forces her into prostitution.

At least, this is basically the story that Liberman told to Chief of Police Julio Alsogaray in her testimony of 1930. However, everything in Liberman’s testimony was a lie, with the probable exception of the outrage she expressed at her mistreatment. Liberman had in fact immigrated from Poland with her husband; only after he died and Liberman was left to support her two children alone did she turn to prostitution. We know that Liberman tried to leave prostitution on two occasions and then suffered persecution and threats from the Zvi Migdal’s henchmen. In 1930, she denounced them to the authorities. Although it was not uncommon for women to denounce sexual assaults and forced prostitution at the time, complaints by prostitutes—like those of working-class women generally—were usually ignored. Indeed, the organized crime syndicates at the time were so deeply intertwined with the police, politicians and the justice system that a prostitute who went to the police might even face a countersuit or be jailed for any number of presumed violations, or simply ignored (see Guy, Sex 132). However, this blanca narrative interested Alsogaray—a military family oligarch and furibund anti-Semite—when he was finally appointed head of the federal police and given free reign to take “Jewish prostitution” to trial. By this time, even the non-Jewish Argentine moral reform organizations had moved on from the white slavery model as outmoded; and by 1928, the Asociación Nacional Argentina contra la Trata de Blancas had already disbanded, since they could “no longer” find “typical cases” of white slavery (Guy, Sex 126).

However, with the exception of Nora Glickman’s work, not a single one of the fictions that I have read has chosen to focus on the events of Liberman’s life or the trial itself—let alone the constructed nature of Liberman-Alsogaray’s collaborative fiction of Liberman as blanca. On the contrary, these fictions opt instead to tell over and over again different imaginative versions of the story put forward in Liberman’s false testimony: the story of a “typical” blanca. Moreover, despite Glickman’s extensive research into Liberman’s life, her own fictionalized account is anything but exceptional in the way it presents Alsogaray’s sympathetic response to Liberman and refrains from mentioning his notorious anti-Semitism. Before I continue with the dominant
narrative, then, it is only fitting that I turn briefly to Glickman's two works on
the subject, which have been of both scholarly and artistic influence on the
other texts I discuss.

_The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman_
(2000) provides a portrait of Liberman's life as well as the most substantial
compilation of primary sources on Liberman, together with Schalom's; and
most works since have borrowed liberally from one or both.\(^{18}\) _The Jewish
White Slave Trade_ makes it very clear that Liberman lied in her testimony,
speculating that she did so to protect her children's future (53). Glickman also
wrote a play starring Raquel Liberman, “Una tal Raquel” (2000), in which
a posthumous Raquel Liberman tells her unnamed granddaughter that she
had lied to avoid bringing shame upon her children.\(^{19}\) What is particularly
striking, given Glickman's extensive study of Liberman's life, is that her fic-
tionalized account should agree with the others in presenting Alsogaray yet
again as sympathetic to Liberman, and without mentioning his notorious
anti-Semitism.

Chief of Police Julio Alsogaray is frequently portrayed as a hero in these
writings. Given that Alsogaray's own memoir consisted of his “life's mission”
to bring the nefarious Jews to justice, it is strange, to say the least, that in these
stories Alsogaray becomes the liberator of Liberman and her fellow Jewish-
Argentines. Anti-Semitism thus exists in these narratives only in the actions
of fictionalized renegades, exceptions, psychopaths.

In Myrtha Schalom's _La Polaca_ (2003), Elsa Drucaroff's _El infierno pre-
mietido_ (2006) and Isabel Vincent's _Bodies and Souls_ (2005), we shall see in
greater detail how Alsogaray is transformed into a philo-Semitic figure and
Liberman's false testimony is brought to life in alternately clinical and lush
neo-Naturalist prose, all within a web of intertextual relationships among fic-
tional and historical characters in the service of a retroactive _blanca_ myth
that costumes “Jewish-Argentine” heroines in the language and tropes of a
Naturalism that counted few Jews among its cast of characters and fewer as
protagonists.

Myrtha Schalom's book, _La Polaca_. _Inmigrantes, rufianes y esclavas a
comienzos del siglo XX_ [La Polaca: Immigrants, Pimps and Slaves at the Be-
inning of the Twentieth Century] (2003), defines its own philosophy of history
as follows: "A real history becomes a novel when the writer knows that she is
making fiction, and this is what I did": Journalism dedicated only a few cen-
timeters to Raquel Liberman in the police blotters [...] she had been buried
in the folds of disinformation for more than seventy years. However, she did
exist, and so did my protagonist, La Polaca (13–14).\(^{20}\) The weird tautology
at the beginning of the historical novel (or, as Schalom's blog advertises the
book, “historia de novela” [a true story that sounds like/that is as amazing as fiction]) may seem at first to suggest rather cleverly that since the known history is inadequate and misleading, what distinguishes history from fiction is only a lack of self-awareness. However, the assertion that “my protagonist, La Polaca” also existed—requires further explanation.

Schalom’s novel presents a neo-abolitionist fantasy of cooperation among Alsogaray and two idealistic young reporters at the newspaper La Prensa: Marcos Rubinstein, a young, first-generation, nonreligious Jew, and his hastily sketched best friend Eduardo—a “typical” Argentine whose Italian or Spanish descent is blurred together (he is described as “tano o gallego”). Marcos is the first Jew to ever work at La Prensa, and he owes his job to Eduardo. For his first commission, Marcos writes an article about the role of the caftenes (Argentine metonymic slang for Jewish pimps),\(^2\) and Eduardo supports him: “this article could spark interest; mixing politics with corruption and women stirs up morbid curiosity” (34). Marcos’s decision to become a journalist dismays his parents, who naturally want him to be a doctor. Sara, the mother, is an overblown *idishe mame* [Jewish mother].\(^2\) How will she explain to her friends that “the doctor’s sign will never be on the door”? (35) The father, Tzvi, as we have already guessed but will take Marcos another 140 pages—is *tmeim* (“unclean” in Hebrew; used in Yiddish at the time for those involved in pimping or trafficking). He is a member of the very Varsovia Society that will become the most famous prostitution mafia in Latin American history: the Zwi Migdal. When his son announces his decision, Tzvi—just back from one of his shady business trips to Eastern Europe—immediately vows to himself never to travel again. In this sense, Marcos’s decision to strike out away from his parents—on the path which is both that of cultural assimilation and individuation—initiates his father’s process of repentance for his sins.

The other source of Tzvi’s repentance is Raquel Liberman, who reminds him of his mother. When Tzvi first sees Rachel onboard the ship Polonia, he is on his way back from the flesh trade and she is on her way to becoming part of it; and he has a long fantasy sequence in which he remembers the day long ago when he saw his mother in flagrante with a client—although he was too young, then, to realize that she was a prostitute. Attracted by Raquel’s red hair, the same shade as his mother’s, Tzvi initiates a strange love affair with the woman whom he will trick into prostitution and ultimately employ, as a pimp and manager of the *casona* [house], for the next ten years. But we are also to believe that Tzvi and Raquel are also truly in love with each other. There is no risk of oversimplifying Tzvi’s Oedipal complex, since the narrative insists, over and over again, that Rachel is Tzvi’s mother, that the innocent girls of the shtetlach are our mothers and grandmothers, and authorship over their
identity is thus a sort of collective responsibility akin to preserving both their honor and “ours.” Similarly, the name Tzvi is a common variant of “Zvi,” the first name of the Zvi Migdal; and thus both Tzvi and Raquel are self-conscious synecdoches of white slavery as a whole.\(^{23}\)

Meanwhile, Marcos is promoted to a full-time reporter, and is entitled to a byline. However, his father, under pressure from the Varsovia to find out who this pesky journalist is and have him eliminated, strikes a deal with the corrupt and sadistic Judge Zaldívar, to send Marcos away to England to cover the war. And yet, when he returns two years later, his passion for the story he had left behind has only grown—now matched by his mother’s, who has in the meantime become Secretary of the local Jewish women’s organization which is also working to fight the *rufianes* (pimps). As Sara and Marcos each work independently toward exposing the traffickers, the novel deals with the collective burden of guilt through the metanarrative of Marcos’s own struggle with the story as it unfolds. Marcos’s relationship with Raquel Liberman, and his discovery of his own father’s role in the Varsovia Society, parallels that of the investigator-narrator: through his journalism, we get to see not only the birth but the very conception of the modern Jewish-Argentine community in its ambivalent origins, which in *La Polaca* are half criminal and half crime-fighting. But the novel also attempts to “traverse the fundamental fantasy” of the *Colectividad* (self-appellation of the Argentine-Jewish community) wherein anti-Semitism might be a misunderstanding inflamed by the combination of European fascism and the example of a bunch of truly bad Jews, reducible to a series of logical missteps, understandable errors.\(^{24}\)

The literary figure par excellence in the novel is the synecdoche, which links the present to the past by symbolic association in a potentially infinite recursiveness, mobilizing Naturalism’s deterministic teleological narrative structure at a microcosmic level. These synecdoches encapsulate not only Naturalist tropes but whole rough rocks of language. At one level, these novels use Naturalist elements opportunistically, in a pastiche of literary and historical references that resonates with the New Historical Novel and postmodern historiographic metafiction generally. However, these elements also signify in relation to the Naturalist tradition, and they activate some of the cognitive presuppositions and chains of thought that the tradition both purveyed and depended upon in order to have meaning.

The synecdoches are presented in a metonymic chain of association in which each link refers both to some whole that it represents and, simultaneously, to some other part that in turn represents another whole, and so on. Furthermore, this means that every synecdoche exists in a signifying relationship to both something that comes “before” it and something that comes
“after” it: the future and the past. Thus, Raquel’s red hair reminds Tzvi of his mother and therefore that she and by extension all prostitutes “are” our mothers; but it also reminds Tzvi of a particular moment of his mother (in bed with a client), and therefore triggers the disturbing thought that all our mothers are prostitutes. Their meeting occurs on the ship Polonia [Poland], which is coming from Poland, and which brings Raquel from life as a literal polaca [Polish woman] to that of a metonymic polaca [Jewish prostitute in Argentina].

Rather than an intertextuality with Naturalist texts, the novel presents the body of “la polaca”—the blanca—as a synecdoche of the literary corpus of white slavery: each body part remits to the same whole (the blanca myth), while the blanca myth is the organizing structure that attributes meaning to the descriptions. None of this would be possible without implicit reference to the Naturalist overrepresentation of the prostitute’s body. Here, the body of Raquel Liberman functions as a hypertext wherein each body part links to more than one textual reference; and thus through the sheer quantitative accumulation of references, more and more of the outside appears to be drawn into the white slavery narrative.

Tzvi’s mother’s necklace is an example of such synecdochical chain reactions—beginning with the literal chain of the necklace, crafted by Tzvi’s father (nicknamed “The Imperial Jeweler”) to hold an improbable medallion that is easier to analyze than to visualize: a golden rose containing an emerald. Tzvi has already identified Raquel with his mother via her red hair, her destiny as a prostitute, and her face which is so painfully evocative of his mother’s that he tries to erase it (65). Now, as he brings her to the brothel where she is to be enslaved, he inexplicably has brought his mother’s necklace with him (perhaps because nine pages earlier, Raquel’s eyes had reminded him of the necklace’s emerald, and thus of his mother [56]), and then accidentally forgets his briefcase. Raquel finds the medallion and steals it. Not content to leave the meaning of this symbolism implicit, the narrator tells us that Raquel thinks the necklace is “un precio justo [a fair price]” for having been sold into white slavery (64).

Tzvi is shocked to see Raquel wearing his mother’s necklace at her big debut as a prostitute, and accuses her of stealing it, which she admits. Having apparent second thoughts about the fairness of the trade, Raquel says, “Dejame ir y te lo devuelvo [Let me go and I’ll give it back to you].” Tzvi might have considered it, were it not for the corrupt Judge Zaldívar, who has already signed up to be the first to have sex with la nueva; and so Tzvi, although “quebrado por la sorpresa y el coraje de esa mujer [. . .] con la empuñadura del bastón, rasga la enagua de Rojl, que resbala hasta el piso [shocked by the
surprise and the courage of that woman [. . .] with the handle of his walking stick, tears Raquel’s slip, which slides to the floor” (66).

Tzvi’s walking stick tears Raquel’s slip—and send it sliding to the floor—with its handle. It is a ridiculous image, but it is of a kind with the synecdochical thinking defining every aspect of the novel. The stick functions as an extension of Tzvi and of the authority of the mafia; therefore it is imbued with the power to force Raquel against Tzvi’s better judgment to submit to “sexual slavery.” The implausible tearing of the silk slip by the handle, rather than the tip, of the walking stick, and the equally implausible image of the slip falling off in one perfect rip, reiterate the shortcuts that hypertextual narrative mode permits. These short cuts are intelligible in the measure that they are already expected; and they are expected because they corroborate the sexual dynamics and the physical and medical laws of Naturalism, in which prostitutes’ clothing is itself a metonymic extension of the teleological organizing system of higienismo: symptomatic testimony of the foundational disease of the patient and thus also coextensive with the body in its duplicity and its fragility: its power and its weakness. Tzvi can tear off Raquel’s slip with the handle of his walking stick as if it were a tear-away stripper outfit, but he can’t take his necklace back from “irresistible” Raquel.

There is a similarly contorted scene a few pages later, when one of the other prostitutes, Malú, decides to return the stolen necklace to Tzvi:

Las manos de Raquel se adelantan a las de Tzvi: forcejean y el estuche cae al suelo, abriéndose. Ver la joya a sus pies de hombre lo lleva a sus pies de niño, corriendo tras su madre: vamos a casa, Tzvi . . . y siene en su pequeña mano la presión de la mano materna.

Y ahí la tiene a Raquel cuyo escote es terso y luminoso como el de su madre. Se siente perdido en incertidumbres y falsedades [. . .] Quedarse con Raquel significa abrirle la puerta a sus fantasmas.

Malú recoge el colgante y lo pone al cuello de Raquel. Con la rosa labrada en oro entre sus pechos comprende que aprenderá a contar los nudos del piso de pino, cada vez que cruce el salón del brazo de sus clientes.

[Raquel’s hands beat Tzvi’s to it: they struggle and the case falls to the floor and opens up. Seeing the jewel at his man’s feet takes him to his boy’s feet, running after his mother: let’s go home, Tzvi . . . and he feels in his little hand the squeeze of the maternal hand. And here’s Raquel, whose bosom is terse and luminous like his mother’s. He feels lost in uncertainty and falsehoods [. . .] to stay with Raquel means opening up the door to his ghosts. ]
Malú picks up the pendant and holds it up to Raquel's neck. With the rose carved in gold between her breasts, she understands that she will learn to count the knots in the pine floor every time she crosses the floor of the salon on the arm of her clients. (77)

Forced metonymies proliferate in further explanations of Tzvi's identification of Raquel with his mother: the necklace next to men's shoes; men's shoes remind Tzvi of his boyhood shoes; which remind him of running after his mother, which reminds him of her hand squeezing his hand. Now it is the proximity of Raquel—and specifically her bosom—that reminds Tzvi of his mother, and threatens to “open the door to his ghosts” (Schalom 77).

The Naturalist legacy attributes an exaggerated, occult power to the same body that is fated to be destroyed. The power of the prostitute to channel emotions about other women, “embodifying” all of them, becomes hyperbolic here, and almost campy. Not only does Tzvi get hypnotized by Raquel's breasts and their similarity to his mother's—and thus enthralled gives her tacit permission to keep the necklace that only seconds before he was struggling to take away from her—but Raquel herself appears to receive an occult telepathic prostitute-to-prostitute communiqué directly from Tzvi's dead mother via the necklace, as soon as she puts the rose between her breasts: she has a sudden vision of her fate, and knows her own destiny.

The central numeric confusion of “every” and “all,” singular and plural, overextends the necklace's power as a synecdoche even further: Raquel understands instantaneously that “she will learn to count the knots in the pine floor every time she crosses the floor of the salon on the arm of her clients”: the subtle slip from the singular to the plural juxtaposes the archetypal image of the Naturalist prostitute crossing the salon on the arm of her next client with the surreal, synchronic time-lapse image of Raquel escorted simultaneously by all of her clients.

Of course, in many ways the latter image was always implicit in the former, given higienista views of the genotype as a mise en abyme of visible phenotypic features and behaviors. (We can imagine the disappointment when the electron microscope did not reveal the DNA double helix composed of tiny, corseted prostitutes coughing and pushing each other with parasols.) It is, in fact, because of the way that the scene invokes Naturalist tropes that long-ago ideologemes associated with those tropes are conjured up here.

The accumulation of Naturalist syllogisms, such as that of Raquel Liberman's breasts defining her as Tzvi's mother, parallels the quantitative accumulation of texts published about Raquel Liberman. We can now go back to
the book’s prologue to reinterpret the mysterious reference in the prologue to the real existence of the fictional character—“Liberman did exist, and so did my protagonist, La Polaca” (Schalom 14). The fictional Raquel Liberman is simultaneously a “whole” (of which the newspapers gave “only a few centimeters”) yet also a “part” of the blanca master narrative embodied in the archetype of “la polaca”—and both exist in a metafictionally synecdochical relation with the eponymous novel that contains them. The archetypal blanca—“la polaca”—has become “La Polaca,” a proper name used for the one individual who embodies the blanca. And this synecdoche is not merely a matter of the book’s title or its thematic purview, however: within the novel, other characters habitually refer to Raquel alone as “La Polaca,” despite the abundance of other Jewish-Argentine prostitutes of the Migdal.

Continuing the loose relationship of “every” and “all,” while the novel describes trafficking and prostitution as rampant in Argentine life in the 1920s—of which Raquel Liberman is “the” victim—paradoxically, prostitution doesn’t seem have any institutional source or cause, but rather finds its explanation in “the” pathological individual who contaminates the others. The fluctuations of scale are noteworthy: the cause of rampant prostitution and trafficking can be traced to a bad apple; and the results of all of it can be summarized in one archetypal victim.

Similarly, La Polaca relegates not only mafia-run prostitution and trafficking but also anti-Semitism to this same source: the corrupt Judge Zaldívar. There seems to be a consistent relationship between how bad the scapegoat anti-Semite corrupt authority figure is and how good historical characters in the drama can become. The importance of “the anti-Semite” scapegoat character on the frontier between fiction and history becomes clearer by comparing Schalom’s Zaldívar with another fictional judge: the sadistic Judge Leandro Tolosa in Elsa Drucaroff’s El infierno prometido. Una prostituta en la Zwi Migdal [The Promised Hell: A Prostitute in the Zwi Migdal] (2006). Indeed, despite the fact that Drucaroff’s novel is explicitly more antiestablishment than the other texts I survey—it deals with official corruption and one of its main characters is an anarchist hero—the potency of the blanca myth is such that certain of its elements seem immune to the explicit political orientation of Drucaroff’s narrative.

El infierno prometido tells the story of Dina, a young Jewish girl living in broad-strokes Kazrilev, Poland, in the 1920s, who aspires to something more than shtetl life, and is eventually permitted to study at the local high school. Exceptional among her peers, Dina is promptly raped by an ambivalently anti-Semitic schoolmate, Andrei, after she praises an essay he has written about his dog. Dina blames her own ambivalent desires for Andrei and
perceives the entire episode as God’s punishment. Immediately in the next chapter, this tension is resolved when a glamorous stranger appears to ask for Dina’s hand in marriage, and she is shipped off to Buenos Aires to work for her new “husband,” the pimp Grosfeld of the Zvi Migdal. In Buenos Aires, Dina is plunged into abjection, controlled by the prostitution mafia via the madam (Brania, the same name as that of the most notorious madam of the Zvi Migdal, denounced by Liberman). She is then befriended by two clients who work at the newspaper Critica. Much like Marcos and Eduardo, in Schalom’s novel, the two journalists are moved by the plight of the blanca; and one of them, Vittorio, a young, anarchist agitator, will become her lover and ultimately help her to escape from “the life.”

However, first they must contend with the monstrous Judge Tolosa, who, like Schalom’s Zaldívar, is on the Zvi Migdal’s payroll but is even more sadistic: he is obsessed with whipping Dina until she is seriously injured. He also becomes the anti-Semite in the novel, as—yet again—Alsogaray, while peripheral to the story, is portrayed as honest and upstanding, and no mention is made of his generously documented feelings for Jews (or, for that matter, political subversives). Anarchist Vittorio describes him as “an honest police commissioner by the name of Alsogaray who is trying to help but can’t do much. A decent reactionary, there are a few: he won’t take bribes and he’s not with [the Zvi Migdal]” (Drucaroff, El infierno prometido 236–37). Vittorio describes Alsogaray’s repeated attempts to help girls to get out of prostitution, while the Migdal manages to get them back with the help of crooked cops. Anti-Semitism is also notably absent from the good working-class characters of the novel. In fact, playing against the stereotypes of the time, Vittorio, the young anarchist with whom Dina will fall in love, is surprised to hear a Jewish accent coming from the mouth of a madam: “it was weird to hear the same accent of the Socialist linotypists in the mouth of an exploiter” (140).

Judge Tolosa, however, delivers several delirious tirades in which he explains that his mission is to defend the fatherland against the anarcho-syndicalist menace and eventually issues a warrant for the arrest of the protagonist when she escapes from the brothel, calling her an “anarchist activist” and insisting that her “non-Jewish” appearance made her much more “dangerous”:

She doesn’t even have a Jewish face, she even hides her race with those falsely angelic eyes and that small nose, so different from those of her race. . . . A woman like that, on the loose, is a danger for society, a center of infection against which men can’t defend themselves. (233)
Unable to accept what he sees, Tolosa examines Dina’s photograph under a magnifying glass, searching systematically for signs of her “degenerate temperament,” criminal mindset and racial impurity:

The physiognomic traits of the Jew not only failed to expose her race but even concealed maliciously her degenerate temperament. The fleshy mouth was the only thing that revealed that propensity to lustfulness that he knew so well, but her blue eyes, her small breasts, seemed to contradict it. She also didn’t have the averted gaze of potential criminals, but rather looked straight ahead. It was that false gaze that filled Judge Tolosa with rage, there was all the racial cleverness, all the mask. When he found Dina he would have to do something to make the disguise fall, even if it required deforming her face. He would make them see the truth that lived below: the Hebrew serpent curled up, ready to pounce on men. (235; my emphasis)

This scene demonstrates a kind of fascist magical thinking about the object of Tolosa’s obsessive desire: he will remove the mask of innocence (the “non-Jewish appearance” of the blanca), even if to do so he must deform the face. The face—and metonymically “all the racial cleverness” in its gaze—are duplicitous: he must reveal the face beneath the face, the “Hebrew serpent” lurking below “the mask.”

Naturalist overrepresentation made the prostitute a liar by definition: her body and appearance inevitably “lied” because they did not show what she “really” was: she looked like a woman, and she wore many disguises to hide her total moral and medical failure—the best of which was health and beauty. Good looks were, then, only a more elaborate form of dissimulation. Here, Tolosa takes this tautology further, by making the racial physiognomy of the Jew into the categorical dishonesty that conceals “itself”—and therefore conceals the “degenerate temperament” of the prostitute. Thus, in caricaturing the positivism of the time, higienista notions about prostitutes are attributed to Tolosa as being about Jews.

Yet the importance of the monstrous scapegoat Judge—responsible for both anti-Semitism and organized crime—is also intimately linked to the portrayal of Alsogaray and, by extension, Argentine political history. The scapegoat figure allows us to see Alsogaray’s (fictional) open-mindedness as exceptional within his (historical) milieu; yet at the same time that Alsogaray is whitewashed of the views which are in turn ascribed to fictional socio-paths, he also represents the state struggling against corruption, rather than defined by it. There is a sleight of hand by which Alsogaray is both a hero and
a representative government functionary, both uniquely noble and a product of his faith more than his environment: “criado entre prejuicios que olían a iglesia inquisitorial [raised amid prejudices that reeked of the Inquisitorial church],” he is miraculously pro-Jewish, mirroring the attitude of the abolitionist Jewish community: “Él también es un hombre de fe. Por eso, no puede comprender que haya judíos practicantes en la trata de blancas [He too is a man of faith. For this reason, he can’t understand that there could be religious Jews in the white slave trade]” (Schalom 309).

The particular literary technique by which the fictional here inherits the historical—rejecting some parts of it outright, displacing others, and inventing what the story requires—merits a bit more attention. In fact, it is not primarily the account of events from Alsogaray’s memoir that reappears in recent fiction—most of which is either too dry to serve the plot, or too offensive to help idealize Alsogaray—but rather its substantive style: a literary-cognitive pattern relying on the most fluid causality between the part and the whole, all of which hinges on the confusion made possible by the identitary categories of “Jew” and “prostitute,” and which remits to the literary Naturalism that undoubtedly shaped Alsogaray’s views of both.

In Trilogía de la trata de blancas. Rufianes—Policía—Municipalidad [Trilogy of the White Slave Trade: Pimps—Police—City Hall] (1933), Alsogaray attacked the corruption of not only judges but police and other government functionaries, complaining that “La municipalidad parece no tener otra misión que satisfacer cumplidamente los deseos y las exigencias de los rufianes [City Hall appears to have no other mission than to satisfy conscientiously the desires and demands of the pimps]” (Alsogaray 49).26 And yet, at the same time that Alsogaray provided countless examples of systemic incompetence and malfeasance—on the surface of it the opposite of Schalom and Drucaroff’s portrayal of the one villainous judge—he also delighted in describing the moral corruption of the Jewish procurers and traffickers with a metonymic fluidity equal to what Schalom and Drucaroff both apply to their scapegoat judges and attribute to them. In other words, Alsogaray in his own words has a lot in common with the way these sociopathic fictional characters think about both Jews and prostitutes.

By 1933, Naturalism was passé in literature, but it remained intertwined with criminological thought and popular in police writing. The front cover of the “edición económica [economical edition]” of Trilogía (Alsogaray) shows a frightened white woman, voluptuous under a barely sketched dress—or perhaps a nightgown—with plunging neckline and long sleeves. Though in a modern 1930s silhouette with fashionably cropped hair, her pose could have been that of a nineteenth-century blanca. Having discussed the historical
reading of Alsogaray’s memoir, we can now choose to read it anachronically—as the first instance of contemporary historical fiction about white slavery—in order to show a further aspect of the persistence of Naturalist cognitive-literary patterns in contemporary historical fiction about white slavery. Concretely, Alsogaray shows us that Naturalism did not just rear up at the end of the twentieth century as a retro style in a throwback genre, but rather it resurfaced in the literary from other discourses, much as it had done in the late nineteenth century.

Alsogaray begins Chapter 3 of Part One of Trilogía (“El Pueblo Hebreo [the Hebrew People]” with a rich first sentence: “La figura abominable del judío tratante de blancas fué una de mis mayores preocupaciones desde que ingresé a la Policía, a los catorce años, edad en que sólo se reciben impresiones y poco o nada se observa ni asimila [The abominable figure of the Jew white slaver was one of my greatest concerns when I entered the police force at the age of fourteen, an age at which one only gets impressions and little or nothing is observed or assimilated]” (Alsogaray 13; my emphasis). It is amazing to a contemporary reader that Alsogaray joined the police force at the age of fourteen—and this detail alone points out the categorical mismatch of imagining the administration of the Argentine state as self-identical over time. Yet perhaps still more amazing is the obviousness with which Alsogaray views “the abominable figure of the Jew white slaver.” He assumes that this villain is universally known and despised, and although he understands a difference between a fourteen-year-old boy’s experience of knowledge and that of an adult, nothing in the intervening years has altered his certainty that the abominable figure of his fourteen-year-old imagination exists absolutely as he conceived it then, nor that this image—so popular in abolitionist iconography of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—was identical with the Zwi Migdal criminal organization.

This unexamined synecdoche prompts a description of how Alsogaray pursued his (unstated) “purpose”—presumably his purpose was to address his concern with the abominable figure—by studying the “racial composition” of “the Hebrew people,” who cause him confusion by being at once universal and split from themselves:

Para alcanzar mi propósito logré vinculación con las personas más califi-
cadas del movimiento judío en el país, quienes, por su condición social, cultural y pecuniaria, estaban en situación de emitir juicios y observaciones acertadas sobre otras personas de su raza, las cuales provocaban recelos por el éxito inigualable de sus empresas, que les permitían un boato y un desprendimiento insospechados en hijos del pueblo de Israel.
[To achieve my purpose, I formed relationships with the most qualified people of the Jewish movement in the country, who, because of their social, cultural and financial situation, were in a position to issue correct judgments and observations about others of their race who provoked distrust because of the unrivaled success of their businesses, permitting them an ostentation and generosity unexpected in sons of Israel.] (13)

All Jews are part of “the Jewish movement in the country”; yet Alsogaray’s Jewish informants are “the most qualified” to make judgments on those of their fellow Jews who have achieved a non-Jewish level of ostentation and generosity. Through Alsogaray’s authentically stingy Jews, then, he is able to penetrate the history of “that people,” which despite this radical schism belongs to one universal Jewish “personality”:  

En contacto con hombres de sus distintas esferas sociales, he curioseado el complejo de su estructura racial, he tratado de conocer, documentándome, el proceso evolutivo de ese conglomerado que tiene la característica de mantener incólume su personalidad de esencia religiosa, nacional o cultural, y pude apreciar la vitalidad propia, con diferentes grados de adaptación, que es patrimonio exclusivo—casi lo afirmaría—de los judíos de todo el mundo [. . .]. A pesar de las fuertes influencias del ambiente, [. . .] los judíos mantienen caracteres esenciales que ponen un sello inconfundible a su dinámica social e histórica.  

[In contact with men from their different social spheres, I have investigated the complex of their racial structure, I have tried to get to know, through research, the evolutionary process of that conglomerate that has the trait of preserving unscathed its personality in its religious, national or cultural essence, and I was able to appreciate its vitality, with different grades of adaptation, that is exclusive patrimony—I would almost venture to say—of the Jews of all the world. [. . .] Despite strong environmental influences, [. . .] Jews maintain essential characters that put an unmistakeable seal on their social and historical dynamic.]

The Jews are one transhistoric people—Alsogaray explains that all Jews, even the most secular and assimilated, feel compelled to observe their duties to Law of Moses (15) and at least once a year to “afflict their soul and make their passionate offering to Jehovah,” by which Alsogaray presumably refers to Yom Kippur (18).
Yet after this definition of a transhistorical Jewish personality, Alsogaray finds himself stuck with a tricky “evolutionary” explanation of Jewish pimping:

Aquellos que en condiciones de inferioridad orgánica eran incapaces de sobrellevar el embate de su destino, al iniciar en condiciones miserables la emigración hacia países nuevos, fueron perdiendo el resto de su pudor y honestidad, para entregarse al ejercicio de menesteres que la sociedad califica con desprecio y repulsión.

[Those who in conditions of organic inferiority were incapable of enduring the battering of their destiny, embarking in miserable conditions on emigration to new countries, began losing the rest of their shame and honesty, to surrender to the exercise of occupations that society regards with disdain and repulsion.] (17)

Thus, Alsogaray attributes pimping to a failure to accept the difficulties of Jewish destiny, as defined by continual suffering at the hands of a majority population, “such as in the Russia of the czars” (16). Alsogaray has nothing against the Jews—only against those who are not Jewish enough—those whom the colectividad [organized Jewish community] itself rejects. Alsogaray then offers Leviticus 23 as proof that all Jews observe Jewish festivals, thus conflating the prescription for observance with observance itself, and observance of biblical law with secular law-abidingness.

As the origin of contradictions was attributed to the prostitute’s paradoxical nature in Naturalism, so Alsogaray explains the contradictions inherent in his own views by creating a paradoxical “Hebrew people” that is both timelessly long-suffering and upstanding and perilously predisposed to become criminal masterminds at the slightest disobedience of Jewish law. The Second section of “El Pueblo Hebreo” is thus dedicated to “El rufián—Características y filiación [The Pimp—Characteristics and Particulars].” Implicitly Jewish, because of the chapter title, the pimp has no explicitly “Jewish” traits but is narrated as a transhistorical and universal figure, prompting indignant and, at times, lyrical examples of the pimp as a type, intermingled with what might seem to be anecdotes from Alsogaray’s early days as a cop. The language will sound familiar:

Los signos degenerativos que lo estigmatizan [al rufián] presentan todas las gradaciones de la vileza. Mercenarios de sus propias mujeres e hijas, se encargan de consagrarlás, despojándolas de su virginidad y regodeán-
The degenerative signs that stigmatize [the pimp] present all gradations of vileness. Mercenaries of their own wives and daughters, they take charge of consecrating them, getting rid of their virginity and delighting in their active participation in the brothels [. . . ] without the least affection for anybody, not even the instinct that Nature gave even inferior creatures for their young, without respect for the modesty of their ancestors, driven by their perversion to low and brutal passions, they constitute the most degrading and dangerous specimen of society [. . . ]. The death of the pimp is the appropriate end of his miserable life: he ends up the victim of his own evil, eaten away by the germ that fills the hospices, the jails, and the hospitals.] (24–25)

Like the “paradoxical,” transhistorical Jew, Alsogaray’s pimp betrays its Argentine particularity only indirectly and negatively: “Para el especial contextura psiquiátrica del rufián [Given the special make-up of the pimp],” Alsogaray concludes, “no queda otro recurso que eliminarlo mediante su deportación [there is no remedy other than to eliminate him by means of his deportation]” (25). In other words, Alsogaray assumes that the pimp is an immigrant (which would have been a more plausible assumption at the time when he first joined the police, at age fourteen—when his fantasy of the “abominable Jew white slaver” arose). By 1933, both of Alsogaray’s assumptions—the identification of Jews and pimps, and the identification of Jews as foreigners—as stereotypes still further removed from reality, had been assim-
ilated into right-wing fascist and proto-fascist ideology as tropes articulated in Naturalist terms.

In Chapter 3 (“Titulo III: La prostitución explotada”), Alsogaray weaves together this ideologically significant Jew-pimp metonymy most effectively, by juxtaposing an episode he calls “Orgías y fiestas en las sinagogas [Orgies and Parties in the Synagogue]” with a list of sums constituting the gross money made in prostitution and trafficking in Argentina per year (no dates are given). This list supposedly demonstrates that the amount of money made in trafficking by Jews in Argentina is triple that of all other “nationalities” combined (including what Alsogaray calls “Argentine”). We have already seen that Alsogaray’s figures are misleading: like other writers at the time, he relied on sources that overemphasized Jewish participation in prostitution in a way that reflects his biases (See Guy, Sex 124–26). However, it is also important to note the juxtaposition of part and whole here: Alsogaray paints a sensationalistic picture (orgies in the synagogue!) and then “corroborates” it with the objective, “conclusive demonstration of the numbers, which speak with their simple and formidable eloquence” (Alsogaray 142).

Even the greatest “orgy in the synagogue” would not demonstrate anything about the relative earnings of Jews in prostitution as opposed to other groups, nor would the relative earnings of Jews in prostitution affirm the excessiveness of an orgy in the synagogue. Yet before examining the questionable causality implicit in Alsogaray’s argument, we have to deal with the fact that the “orgies” promised in the title never appear: the orgies to which it refer can only be metaphors for overspending, since the only part of the chapter that refers to the synagogue is a brief account of the lavish weddings held there that spare no expense. Alsogaray describes such parties with a lack of detail proportional to his moral indignation, suggesting that while guests of honor included, as he accuses, high-ranking police officers, he himself was probably never invited. “Afianzados por la impunidad, ¿a qué excesos no se entregarían estos miserables? Paseaban su insolencia con desvergüenza y cinismo desconcertantes [. . .]. La iluminación y los adornos de la sinagoga no admitían comparación, por ser los más costosos, y en la misma o en mayor proporción era todo lo relativo al festejo [Secure in their impunity, to what excesses would these miserable people not give themselves over? They showed off their insolence with disconcerting shamelessness and cynicism [. . .]. The lighting and the decoration of the synagogue were without compare, because they were the most expensive, and in the same or greater proportion was everything else related to the celebration]” (141–42).

The metaphor orgies-weddings is based on an equivalence of spending and sex; yet there seems also to be a mixing of metaphors. It is as though,
in a strange transubstantiation, the “overspending” of pimps on weddings is supposed to both prove and be proved by the “fact” that Jews dominate Argentine prostitution. Yet, at the same time, something strange is happening with money itself, which is a signifier of both sex and profligacy as Alsogaray invokes it—as he seems to find even mentioning such figures obscene, investing the columns of numbers at the end of the chapter with a promiscuous meaning, even as he is manipulating his inaccurate statistics such that Jews are accused not only of making three times the money off of prostitution as all others in the country combined, but to do it timelessly, eternally—even in 1933, when the entire point of Alsogaray’s memoir has been to recount the triumphant destruction of the Zwi Migdal and the “abominable Jew white slaver” who, presumably thanks to Alsogaray, no longer exists.

Clearly, Alsogaray attributes any confusion to the foundational duality in Judaism itself. Thus, the pimp is synecdoche of “the Hebrew people” even as the author points out that the majority of Jews abhor prostitution. Because he is reasoning backwards from the racist caricature of “the abominable Jew white slaver” that so interested him at the age of fourteen, Alsogaray offers an opaque explanation, which can nonetheless explain some of his outrage at money itself in Chapter 4:

Aún cuando los integrantes de la colectividad israelita de más elevado nivel intelectual no practican el culto religioso, los judíos no olvidan sus deberes con la ley mosaica. [. . . ] Ante sus obligaciones para con Jehová, olvidan o hacen abstracción de sus inquietudes terrenales, circunstancia que los presenta en una curiosa dualidad. Porque es indudable que la lucha por la vida ofrece a los descendientes de Moisés un sinnúmero de cruentas dificultades.

[Even when the members of the Israeliite collective of the most elevated intellectual level don’t practice the religious faith, the Jews don’t forget their duties to the Law of Moses. [. . . ] Before their obligations to Jehovah, they forget or abstract their terrestrial concerns, a circumstance that reveals them in a curious duality. Because it is undeniable that the struggle for life gives the descendents of Moses an infinite number of bloody difficulties.] (15–16)

Bizarrely, we can read this as voicing a primitive argument for orthodox fundamentalism, cloaked in a vocabulary of Naturalist Darwinism: Jews must obey a literal reading of the Torah lest they succumb to the “germ” of the pimp within. In the free floating causality of Alsogaray’s racial imaginary, by overspending naturally stingy Jews are going against their better (religious)
nature and succumbing to their lower (pimp) nature. It is the “struggle for life” itself—the much-abused Darwinist catchphrase of Naturalism—that has defined the need for Jews to face “bloody difficulties”; and ostentatious, free-spending secular Jews are not only pimps, they are necessarily pimps, because they have reverted to their genetic inferiority.

In this double context, framed anachronistically by contemporary historical fiction and textually by Alsogaray’s racial taxonomy of “Jew pimps,” the small but essential role Raquel Liberman plays in the memoir takes on a greater significance. She appears at the climax of the memoir: “la mujer Raquel Liberman, quien vino a resultar la heroína protagónica del famoso proceso a la Migdal [the woman Raquel Liberman, who ended up as the protagonistic heroine of the famous trial of the Migdal]” (174). At first glance, her story seems to be just a reproduction of her false testimony. In fact, however, the story is mediated by Alsogaray’s own narrative of “el pueblo Hebreo”:

Procedente de Polonia, su país natal, Raquel Liberman llegó al nuestro [ . . . ] ignorando en absoluto los días aciagos que el destino le deparaba. Sus mayores preocupaciones al pisar suelo argentino fueron elaborarse un porvenir económico para afianzar su emancipación de mujer, siguiendo el camino del trabajo y la verdad. Optimismo, juventud y belleza, unidos en cordial abrazo, representaban el único patrimonio de la pobre incauta. La compañera de viaje antes nombrada fingió bien su condición y la Liberman no tardó en caer en sus redes, siendo llevada hacia la senda trágica, que otras recorrieron antes y después, hasta convertirla en esclava de un explotador siniestro.

Con el ingreso al prostíbulo el primer paso estaba dado; pero también el destino le reservaba, por lo visto, una misión desconocida. [ . . . ] Bien merece la pena redimirla de sus errores por el servicio prestado a la buena causa.

[Arriving from Poland, her country of birth, Raquel Liberman arrived in our own [country . . . ] with absolutely no idea of the fateful days that destiny would bring her. Her greatest concerns when she landed on Argentine soil were to develop an economic future to assure her emancipation as a woman, following the path of work and truth. Optimism, youth and beauty, joined in a cordial embrace, were the only patrimony of the poor innocent. The previously mentioned travel companion disguised her condition, and Liberman didn’t take long to fall into her net, being carried away to the tragic path that others traveled before and after, until converting her into the slave of a sinister exploiter.]
With the entrance into the brothel the first step was taken; but destiny still reserved for her, evidently, an unknown mission. [. . . ] It is well worth it to redeem her from her errors for the service rendered to the good cause.

(175–76)

The useful omission of verbs and their subjects allows the reader to assume the blanca sequence of events without asserting them—the reader would never guess, for example, that Liberman was married and going to meet her husband, given that her “greatest concern was to assure her economic future to assure her emancipation as a woman” and “her only patrimony” being “optimism, youth and beauty.” Similarly, “el ingreso al prostíbulo [the entry into the brothel]” would be assumed to have occurred shortly after her voyage as part of the inevitable “tragic path” of which she had become a helpless pawn of the “sinister exploiter,” rather than an entirely unrelated episode, years later.

It is necessary for Alsogaray’s views that Raquel Liberman be an unmarried, innocent and unattached Jewish female, as the polysemy of his last sentence suggests: “It is well worth it to redeem her from her errors for the service rendered to the good cause” (176). Alsogaray is not just “redeeming” Raquel Liberman from the misjudgments made by an innocent blanca; he is redeeming the blanca story itself—cashing in on it in order to elevate his own importance. He wasn’t successful in taking down the powerful, nor in stopping corruption at City Hall “at the highest levels”; he isn’t even able to prove it in his writing, but only to allege it, and mostly without naming anybody (except for the members of the Zwi Migdal, whose names are published in another list at the end of his memoir). He needed the blanca in order to become a hero; he needed Raquel Liberman to be the blanca in order to become the historical-fictional Julio Alsogaray.

At the same time, in Alsogaray’s muddled view on Judaism, Raquel Liberman must be redeemed from her past and remade into a “good” Jew, the image of the Jewish immigrant woman who seeks only to separate entirely from the old world and be emancipated as an Argentine woman. In Alsogaray’s complicated racial calculus, Liberman must be a good Jew before she can become an Argentine; it is beyond him to imagine a good person who happens to be Jewish, or any Jew outside of the dichotomy of good/religiously fearful vs. bad/shameless. Only by remaking Liberman into an ideal example of the docile acceptance of “the Jewish destiny” of suffering was she able to be rescued and assimilated by an idealized Argentina, into the special “mission” that “destiny” had reserved for her. This “destiny” was, in retrospect, the meta-fictional catalyst of an identitary discourse of Jewish Argentina.
An Alternative Argentina

All of these works are rich in both historical and mythical details, and they capitalize on the contrast between the gritty realism of the Buenos Aires underworld and impressionistic old world imagery in creating a virtual Jewish Argentina in between two homelands. The contrast becomes extreme at times. *El infierno prometido* wastes no time in situating its readers in the universal shtetl imaginary: protagonist Dina hears “sweet music, hers, happy and infinitely melancholy at the same time. Without stopping, she looked at the roof of Motl the carpenter’s house. There was the silhouette: Motl and his violin” [14]. While Motl is the tailor rather than the fiddler in *Fiddler on the Roof*, the scene evokes the Broadway musical in a cultural shorthand relying on the same synecdochical associations—and, as we shall see, the same associations reappear (160–62). Similarly, Glickman’s play contains stage directions such as “Jewish music is heard. Actors with long coats of the Jewish-Polish usage enter the scene from all directions. They walk slowly. In a grid. They carry suitcases with which they cover completely the stage with scraps of cloth and earth-toned ribbons (grey, sepia, brown) that suggest images of poverty in the shtetl” (24).27

At the same time, the historical-mythic references in the two ambiguously fictional novels not only attempt to Photoshop picturesque Jews in folkloric regalia into picture postcards of old Palermo; they also have them eat ñoquis and drink mate and sing the national anthem. By juxtaposing synecdoches of old and new worlds, in *La Polaca*, Liberman fantasizes about an integrated life in Argentina:

Las noches se alargan y conceden tiempo a su imaginación para que invente historias que le saquen la angustia que lleva adentro. Entonces, los ñoquis que amasa se transforman en monedas de oro y la máquina Singer es un carro que trae a sus padres, vestidos con ropa de etiqueta como los de la revista *Caras y Caretas*. Y los niños con guardapolvos blancos cantan el Himno Nacional y sonríen junto a los de la criolla Juana.

[The nights get longer and give her imagination time to invent stories that get out the anguish she carries inside. Then, the gnocchi that she kneads change into gold coins and the Singer machine is a carriage that brings her parents, dressed in brand-name clothing like the people in *Caras y Caretas* magazine. And her children with their white aprons sing the national anthem and smile next to those of the criolla [“native” Argentine] Juana.] (Schalom 37)
In her fantasy, Liberman finds Argentine-Jewish identity literally within national symbols of Argentina: the ñoquis that she prepares turn into gold coins, briefly suggesting Hanukkah gelt, before ushering in her parents to America, riding in the Singer sewing machine.

Later in the novel, when Raquel meets Alsogaray for the first time, he casually informs her within the first few minutes of their interview that she can become an Argentine citizen. “¡El comisario le ofrece ser argentina! Recuerda que sus hijos saben cantar el himno y que Josecito, en la escuela, recitó una poesía a la bandera [The police chief is offering her to be Argentine! She remembers that her sons know how to sing the national anthem and that Josecito, in school, recited a poem to the flag]” (222). Alsogaray then presents Liberman with a copy of the Argentine constitution. That night, “[b]efore going to sleep, she reads the national constitution” (224).

Still more of a hybrid is presented in *El infierno prometido*, where Drucaroff’s Vittorio works at *Crítica* alongside yet another journalist, and client of Dina’s, known as “El Loco” Godofredo, but identifiable to any moderately literate Argentine reader as a frighteningly literal caricature of the writer Roberto Arlt. Godofredo was one of Arlt’s middle names; as we saw in the previous chapter, his most iconic work—with which he is often identified—was *Los siete locos* [*The Seven Madmen*] (1929), and other “locos” appear throughout his fiction and drama. At one point, Drucaroff’s “Loco” stumbles to give a false name quickly, and blurts out “Roberto Arteaga,” which Judge Tolosa admires as a “noble name” (*El infierno prometido* 288) in distinction to his true name, which although never revealed is disparaged by the Judge as an “unpronounceable supposedly Prussian name,” behind which could be hiding “not a protestant heretic, but a sly Jew” (257). This has the double effect of creating yet another fantasy narrative of cross-ethnic Argentine collaboration and also a strange revisionism around the personage of Roberto Arlt, “rescuing” him from history by raising him above the occasionally anti-Semitic prejudices of both his era and his oeuvre.

In fact, Dina teaches “El Loco” the error of his ways—by telling him the story of *Fiddler on the Roof*. The narrator’s free indirect discourse allows us to hear Roberto Arlt paraphrase Sholem Aleichem as interpreted by Dina:

> El y sus hijas, él, sus miserias, sus tontas esperanzas y sus hijas. Era una historia dolorosa que no parecía para mujeres, aunque también diferente de otras historias rusas que el Loco tanto disfrutaba. La miseria de Toivie y su familia era infinitamente más atroz que la que él había sufrido o conocido. ¡Y eran judíos! El Loco pensó que tenía que revisar algunas cosas que creía sobre esa raza.
[He and his daughters, he, their destitution, their stupid hopes and his daughters. It was a painful story that didn’t seem like it was for women, although it was also different from other Russian stories that el Loco so enjoyed. The poverty of Tevye and his family was infinitely more atrocious than what he had suffered or known. And they were Jews! El Loco thought that he would have to revise some of the things he believed about that race.] (161)

In an exceptionally literary version of the blanca story, Roberto Arlt himself meets a nice, Jewish prostitute and is cured of his anti-Semitism by hearing stories of Sholem Aleichem and having sex: “No se había dado cuenta de que estaba tan necesitado de alivio sexual [He hadn't realized he was in such need of sexual relief].”29 This is a fantasy about the archetypal self-made Argentine writer sympathizing with the archetypal Jewish prostitute of the Zwi Migdal—the “bad writer” listening to Dina’s “castellano, lleno de errores [Spanish, full of errors]” and a multifaceted fantasy of interethnic influence, whereby Arlt receives from Dina the understanding of prostitution that, according to Lucas Berreuzo, formed the basis for Los siete locos (see Berreuzo). Roberto Arlt thus “saves” the blanca and the Italian-Argentine anarchist, Vittorio, while the contemporary fictional blanca is retrospectively the source of the modern Argentine novel.

While Drucaroff lashes out at political corruption at every level, the real culprits are fictional characters, and Alsogaray’s reign is whitewashed. The most potent representation of the political machine remains that of a sex-crazed Judge mobilizing every resource of the state in order to satisfy a perverse psychosexual desire to inflict pain and punish Jewish women for attracting upstanding gentiles. Despite assertions that corruption is rampant, there isn’t a view of how the collaboration among government, police and pimps was mutually beneficial, rather than the illegal hobby of perverted oligarchs.

Isabel Vincent’s Bodies and Souls tells the largely fictional stories of three “real” Jewish women including Rachel [sic] Liberman. Vincent has her own take on the repression of Liberman’s story:

After the sensationalistic reports of the brothel raids died down, Rachel Liberman simply disappeared from public view. Only one newspaper wrote in depth about the importance of her testimony, but the reporter described her simply as “a woman who led a depraved life.” In the end, that’s all anyone ever really knew about Rachel Liberman, that she was a Jewish prostitute from Poland, that she worked in the down-at-heels brothels in La Boca.
But had the reporters decided to dig deeper, they would have found a completely different story, one that was truly heroic. *Destiny had reserved her for a mission.* (187)

What is this “completely different story”? According to Vincent, it is implicit in “the letters and photographs that exposed the real story about her life,” letters which Vincent then proceeds to analyze: “It’s clear in the first photograph taken of her in Buenos Aires that Rachel Liberman was not the depraved prostitute of the tabloids. [. . . ] If you look closely at that first black-and-white photograph of Rachel in America, there is already a hint of that tenacity and heroism in her expression” (187–88).

Yet the “completely different” and “truly heroic” story of Raquel Liberman hidden from us by a conspiracy of silence turns out to be just another version of the *blanca* narrative—despite the fact that the very letters Vincent “reads” indicate that Liberman in fact, like most women who enter prostitution, chose to become a prostitute because of poverty—and prostitution paid a lot better than the alternatives (Deutsch, *Crossing Borders* 116–17). In an echo of Drucaroff’s Tolosa, scanning the *blanca*’s photograph with his magnifying glass for “proof” of his own racist distortions, the fact that Vincent calls Liberman’s perjured testimony before Alsogaray—that she was a victim of a trafficker searching out women in the old country shtetls, and so the quintessential *blanca*—“the official history” is fascinating. (“[I]n the end Rachel Liberman gave Commissioner Alsogaray everything he wanted, even if it was only the official history” [Bodies and Souls 178].) First, in a book purporting to reveal the “completely different story” from the one that has endured, Vincent presents this part of “the official history” uncontested. Second, the transformation of Liberman’s testimony into the “official history” in Vincent’s text functions as an absolutely amazing analepsis: the fact that Liberman’s testimony became (in, say, the judicial record and newspapers of the day) the “official history” is used retrospectively to defy the forward flow of time and, grammatically, transform Liberman’s testimony in the moment of giving it into “only the official history.”

This maneuver can be summarized in Vincent’s poetic translation of the phrase borrowed almost verbatim from Alsogaray—“*Destiny had reserved her for a mission,*” Vincent writes, having previously attributed the quote to Alsogaray (Vincent 187, 177). Yet you may recall that what Alsogaray actually wrote was: “Con el ingreso al prostíbulo el primer paso estaba dado; pero también el destino le reservaba, por lo visto, una misión desconocida [With the entrance into the brothel the first step was taken; but destiny still reserved
for her, evidently, an unknown mission]” (Alsogaray 175; my emphasis). There is a subtle transformation of Liberman from the indirect to the direct object of the verb “reservar”: Vincent translates the phrase such that Liberman is “reserved”—set apart, designated—for a mission. This is slightly different from the more pedestrian pointAlsogaray makes: that destiny still—at the moment Liberman became a prostitute—had a mission in store for her, and one which she could not then have imagined. In this sense, “destiny” is descriptive (the future that we, in the present, already know), rather than prescriptive. While the translation from Alsogaray to Vincent performs a relatively small adjustment of meaning, by attributing the modified phrase to Alsogaray Vincent transforms his retrospective musing into the prediction of a foreordained future, and history into destiny.

A Crime of Truth?

I alluded at the start of the chapter to the idea that the publication of new novels of white slavery was dramatized by corroborating items in other media, providing the sense that these novels were part of a cultural “happening,” and—in the measure that they agreed with each other in their presentation of history—adding to the common sense view that they were truthful. In fact, they also allude to each other explicitly. We have mentioned that Glickman speculated in her scholarly work on Liberman’s motives for lying in her testimony (The Jewish White Slave Trade 53); and her hypothesis—that Liberman did so to protect the privacy of her loved ones—became the protagonist’s central motive in Glickman’s play, “Una tal Raquel,” which in turn was based on the letters of Raquel Liberman, which were made available to both Schalom and Glickman by Liberman’s grandchildren but remain unpublished (Glickman, The Jewish White Slave Trade 61). The one primary source of information about Liberman’s life has been accessible only to a couple of scholars, who are also writers of fictions that speculate further about what is unresolved in these documents. This causes a bit of a snowball effect: Uruguayan Yvette Trochon dedicates several pages of her popular history of prostitution in the Río de la Plata to Liberman, in which she cites both Schalom and Glickman. At the end of it, Trochon concludes that Liberman lied “perhaps looking to in this way preserve her privacy and that of her loved ones” (Trochon, Las rutas 325). While this is a plausible enough reason to lie—although as I have made clear I think it obfuscates the way in which the blanca myth was mutually beneficial to Alsogaray and Liberman—and I wonder whether Glickman
and Schalom found something to this effect in Liberman’s personal correspondence—it appears that Trochon arrived at this conclusion independently, when in fact she did not.

What might seem like just an unusual flurry of citations in a relatively small cultural hall of mirrors becomes more complicated depending on what exactly gets cited from any of these sources. Argentine writer Ricardo Feierstein, in his *Historia de los judíos argentinos* (2006), tells the Liberman story in the context of Alsogaray and Ernesto Goldar’s “juicios prejuiciosos o una ligereza en las cifras estadísticas que mezclan realidad y fábula, como ha ocurrido desde siempre con este tema en la sociedad argentina [prejudicial judgments or a flippancy in the statistics that mix reality and fable, as has always happened with this topic in Argentine society]” (Feierstein 277).\(^3\)

Feierstein attacks the uncritical repetition of statistics, pointing out that Alsogaray’s previously critiqued statistics were later inflated by a factor of ten: from 3,000 prostitutes (Alsogaray 142) they became in more than one later source 30,000 prostitutes (Feierstein 279).

However, when it comes to the story of Raquel Liberman, Feierstein too makes Liberman a typical *blanca*:

> Apenas adolescentes, sin conocer el idioma ni las costumbres, las jóvenes aldeanas—ingresadas al país sin documentos con la complicidad de funcionarios aduaneros y policiales—se convertían en verdadera “carne de prostíbulo.” [ . . . ] Raquel Liberman, nacida en Lodz, fue una de las tantas víctimas de los explotadores. Engañada por el rufián Jaime Cyssinger con falsas promesas de casamiento, una vez en América terminó recorriendo el trágico camino que hemos descrito.

[Barely adolescents, not knowing the language or the customs, the young villagers—brought into the country without documents through the complicity of customs officials and police—became true “brothel fodder.” [ . . . ] Raquel Liberman, born in Lodz, was one of the countless victims of the exploiters. Deceived by the pimp Jaime Cyssinger with false promises of marriage, once she was in America she ended up following the same tragic path we have described.] (284, 287)

Each of the writers who spreads Liberman’s false testimony is attempting to reveal a hidden truth—so how do so many writers who seem to be genuinely preoccupied with the truth end up repeating the same myth?

Clearly there are elements of Liberman’s false testimony, as well as the false collaboration between Jews and Gentiles, chief of police and prostitute, that strike a chord with our contemporary wish for a past that will echo back to us
and explain who we are today. Liberman gave false testimony, making herself the “blanca” in order to be visible to the police, to get any sympathy from a system that has systematically turned a blind eye to such mistreatment. At the same time, the police decided to use false testimony to make a real injustice visible to a justice system that was complicit with prostitution and profited from its suffering. By whitewashing the fact that Alsogaray hated Jews and that Liberman was lying, the story makes a Hollywood-ready morality tale.

There is something here that echoes Borges’s “Emma Zunz,” the story of a poor factory worker who happened to be Jewish, who in order to avenge herself within a system that ignored and exploited her—which could not “read” her mistreatment, could not “see” her exploitation—invented a crime that had not happened, gave false testimony, in order to commit a different crime to avenge herself. It’s what Josefina Ludmer called, riffing off of Borges’s ending, a “crime of truth” (Ludmer, “Las justicias de Emma” 476): “true in substance,” Borges wrote, if not in its facts—expressing true anger, true outrage, at what was truly unjust treatment and a strong desire for revenge; but in a society inured to such injustice, the only means of communicating the wrongness of it was with the delivery mechanism of myth, writing a fictional story based on an understanding of the audience’s reading habits.

If Liberman and Alsogaray were each, in their own way, knowing participants in a crime of truth in 1930, what does that mean about contemporary desires to perpetuate the cover up? What does it say about contemporary culture that we seem to have an almost limitless thirst for blanca sequels? Finally, how do these questions about our desire connect to fears about anti-Semitism? We might be tempted to imagine that a view of anti-Semitism as merely episodic, along with the revisionist elevation of Alsogaray and the scapegoating of Jewish men in contemporary historical fiction, is itself a product of modern-day anti-Semitism. However, the vast majority of the historical fiction on this topic was written by Jews who position themselves explicitly as Jews in telling this “Jewish-Argentine” story: part confession, part proud survivorhood, and in any case explicitly enlisting in what feels like a partisan fight against anti-Semitism, which is continued in fictionalized form against fictional monsters rather than the men of national history. Such a fairy tale may help to assuage the terror that, at any moment, the rug can be yanked out from under the model minority by the same authority with which that minority was discriminated against institutionally in the past.

At the same time, these emotionally fraught exigencies of national and ethnic identities can overshadow less colorful facts: while these fictions can participate with impunity in a passionate “crime of truth” that creates a myth around Liberman and Alsogaray, the elision of structural anti-Semitism also links back to a popular misreading of the legal history of prostitution.
Although Alsogaray’s trial of the Zvi Migdal was spectacular, all of the defendants were eventually released. More significantly, the trial was used to justify the neocolonial recriminalization of the excesses of prostitution rather than any significant limitation on bordello operations, the practices of pimping or the treatment of prostitutes. The “new” category of crime that was created in the wake of the trial—“scandalous behavior,” with which women would go on to be charged 126 times more frequently than men—was a throwback to the Regulations of Felipe II, putting the onus of prostitution on women by redefining prostitution in terms of its visibility in public spaces.35

The Liberman-Alsogaray story has succeeded—and continues to succeed—in transmitting a consensus about history that masks the very thing its authors hope to discover. Yet perhaps this consensus is spread not so much 

\textit{despite} the fact that the authors we have studied desire ardently to reveal the truth—almost begging their readers to remember this “forgotten” story from the past—but because of it. In discussing how new media operate in the production of consensus, Brett Levinson suggest that their consensus does not force forgetting, but on the contrary “\textit{demands} a certain recall”:

\begin{quote}
What Foucault labels “bourgeois antihistoricism” is not ignorance of the past but the overrepresentation and subsequent overlooking of the division between pasts and presents [ . . . ]. Overexposure \textit{strips} (as one strips a screw by overtwisting it) the relations between narratives: it strips the statement. Indeed, it is that stripping. (Levinson 238)
\end{quote}

In its smooth transhistorical identifications that blur now and then, by which the reader is invited to “see” his or her own reflection in history, it seems that the Liberman-Alsogaray in its irresistible repetitiveness short-circuits history, separating it from time. In the eternal reenactment of the fictive origins of Jewish-Argentineity, the Zvi Migdal eternally enslave 3,000 (or 30,000) women a year, the chief of police listens attentively to a fairy tale that corroborates his adolescent fantasy of the “abominable Jew white slaver,” and a plucky Jewish lady is always testifying against a morally lax pluralistic democracy on the cusp of dictatorship.

\section*{The Fictional History of Anti-Semitism Outside the Novel}

In these texts, anti-Semitism appears not as a structural problem of Argentine life in the 20s and 30s, but as a horrible exception. One might be tempted to 
imagine that the prevalence of this narrative of the exceptionality of anti-Semitism along with the revisionist view of Julio Alsogaray and the concomitant scapegoating of Jewish men as synecdochically pimps or rabbis (occasionally both) is a product of modern-day anti-Semitism. However, there is no such simple answer, as the vast majority of the novels, plays and screenplays offering the secret history of white slavery were written by Jews—Jews who, furthermore, position themselves explicitly as Jews as part of the telling of this “Argentine-Jewish” story.

Furthermore, the view that anti-Semitism is episodic, the product of fringe groups, and not about the state “itself” is often echoed in scholarship. Because this, too, is a subtle point, I want to be clear about my meaning. I do not mean to say that scholars have de-emphasized the importance of anti-Semitism in the Argentine-Jewish experience. To the contrary, many of the pioneers of Latin American Jewish Studies produced extensive studies of anti-Semitism in Latin America; and in fact some scholars have even suggested that an overdeveloped research focus on anti-Semitism may give an exaggerated sense of the impact of anti-Semitism on the daily life of Jews in Latin America (e.g., Lesser and Rein 32). What I want to emphasize is not that anti-Semitism is minimized today, but rather that scholarly histories have tended to either focus on anti-Semitism as coming from institutions predating the consolidation of the modern state (the church, the military), or to put the onus of responsibility outside the structures of state power entirely, focusing on fringe right-wing paramilitary groups. While I do not dispute either the method or the results of these investigations, I notice that a cumulative effect seems to have been, ironically, to give apparent credence to the view we have seen in popular rewriting of history in accordance with the need for a continuous narrative of identity unbroken by epistemic violence.

Just as it is the consensus among them that brings these historical novels beyond their own generic purview, creating a cultural force of gravity that does not belong, as such, to any one historical novel and transcends the historical novel as a genre, there is an effect too of snowballing in scholarship. This view of the state as not “itself” anti-Semitic is so subtle and so prevalent at the same time, that I will cite Lesser and Rein to give you a sense of how it is stated explicitly in current historical scholarship:

Organized anti-Semitic groups first appeared in 1910, the year of the centennial celebrations of Argentina’s de facto independence. [ . . . ] Usually small in number, these groups occasionally curried some influence in military, clerical, or political circles. [ . . . ] In any case, government-sponsored anti-Semitism has been rare in Argentina. It manifested itself in the limi-
Lesser and Rein, in the interest of precision, use the example of the dictatorship to point out that even when there was “noticeable” anti-Semitism coming from the government, this was mitigated by certain factors. While I do not take issue with either the fact that there were mitigating factors or what the authors state these factors to be, here or elsewhere, I do take issue with the slipperiness in the language and the categories of thought used to conceive of and articulate Jewish experience, which lead to some troubling reasoning. The metonymic slippage that can result is not the responsibility of any one scholar or group of scholars, and is merely exemplified here. However, as I shall explain, I believe that there is a collective scholarly responsibility to address some of the more unexpected effects of both the “snowballing” around identitary experiences and the linguistic and cognitive slippage it accelerates in order to find a more rigorous way of discussing anti-Semitism.

No anti-Semitic laws were made by the dictatorship, but the law did not exist as the locus of rights during the dictatorship. There were excellent relations between the Argentine military junta and the Israeli state, but, as evidence has unfortunately demonstrated, this diplomatic relationship had no bearing on the treatment of Jews who were targeted by the dictatorship. \(^{38}\) The implication that we can deduce the situation of Jews in general from that of the organized Jewish community suggests that anti-Semitism is a fractal phenomenon, targeting equally all forms of Jewishness, or perhaps that Jews are themselves a sort of fractal, such that we can deduce that the state is not anti-Semitic because it does not target all Jews equally, but prefers to target those Jews who do not support the state. In other words, because the notion of “the Jews” include the Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations (DAIA), the organized Kehillah or Colectividad, as well as secular Jews who may or may not be affiliated with Jewish organizations, it seems that there is a persistent analytical mistake being made, whereby the state’s being positively disposed toward certain Jewish groups which were willing to make concessions in support of the regime can absolve that regime of anti-Semitism categorically.

There seems to be a problem at work here of names and identity, which goes well beyond any particular instantiation of the question of whether or not anti-Semitism is operant. It seems that the plot has only thickened with the publication in 2007 of the “Report on the situation of the Jewish
detainees-disappeared during the genocide perpetrated in Argentina,” by the DAIA, with the backing of the government Human Rights Secretariat (See Braylan et al). In Human Rights Secretary Eduardo Luis Duhalde’s words at the presentation of the book, “[while] they did not suffer specifically anti-Semitic persecution, Jewish victims suffered especially brutal treatment, and Nazi symbols were used [by the torturers].” In examining the book’s findings, which include details of tortures to which Jews were uniquely subjected, qua Jews, it is difficult to understand why such treatment does not earn the dictatorship the adjective of “anti-Semitic.” “It is clear,” the report reads, “that this [targeting of Jews] was not a particular ‘excess’ committed by some repressors, but rather an institutionalized conception and practice within the security forces in power during those years. [. . . ] This information, repeated in many testimonies, makes clear the existence of a systematic plan aimed to carry out intelligence tasks on Jewish communities and on people of that origin” (Braylan et al. 17).39

What interests are served by believing that the dictatorship was not “itself” anti-Semitic? What is the need for a view of the Argentine state as continuous—through democracy and military rule—in that it does not have and has never had any animus toward Jews “as such”? Or, another way of looking at this, what is the meaning of “anti-Semitism” such that what we read in the DAIA’s report is not an example of it?

I don’t have an answer to these questions, but rather only the proposal to examine anti-Semitism itself more carefully, to come to a more nuanced understanding of how it functions both as a reality and as a conceptual frame. A first stab at this is to consider that the disputed anti-Semitism we read about in the DAIA’s report (and in earlier works such as Jacobo Timmerman’s 1981 memoir, Preso sin nombre, celda sin número [Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number], or CONADEP’s much-read 1984 report, Nunca más [Never Again]) is, rather than exclusively directed at Jews, precisely intersec
tional in character. At the risk of charging through an open door, it seems worth pointing out that racism, fascism and misogyny are inextricably linked together in the clandestine detention centers. It may be that there are biases in our way of apprehending anti-Semitism which make it seem incompatible with other forms of oppression, rather than intersectional with them.40

The second and related suggestion I want to make is that, in the examples we have seen so far, relieving the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional of the adjective “anti-Semitic” requires in some way adopting a the view that Jews are both in reality a homogeneous group and furthermore are rationally apprehended as such by anti-Semites. If we are to deduce that the dictatorship was not properly anti-Semitic from the fact that the dictatorship maintained
a good relationship with the DAIA, we are breaking violently with the discipline of psychology, which maintains that anti-Semitism, like other forms of bigotry, is precisely the rationalization of feelings to give them the semblance of having been caused by external reality. Bigotry never presents itself as being against a particular group for being a particular group, but rather “for” the traits attributed to the group prejudicially (See, e.g., Gilman, *Difference and Pathology* 29).

Of course, the result of this confusion is the “bipolar” notion of minority groups we have seen persist even in the best-intentioned historical retellings, splitting Jews across gender lines in the white slavery narrative, and across some other line—“militant,” “communist,” “violent,” “anti-regime”—in order for the dictatorship to disappear 3,000 Jews for planning occult Zionist takeover of the Patagonia, force them to “Heil Hitler” in detention, paint swastikas on their bodies in order to investigate their role in “worldwide Jewish conspiracies” and believe that all of this had nothing to do with the fact that they were Jews.

It seems to me that a more nuanced view of Jewish identity is interdependent with a more nuanced view of anti-Semitism. It may well be that what is actually at stake in refusing to call the dictatorship anti-Semitic is more than it appears to be—i.e., more than the desire to protect an idea of the Argentine state. I believe that while examining closely some of these attitudes makes them look absurd, as above, they may also include, tacitly, the desire to keep anti-Semitism self-identical with the intellectual concept by which the Holocaust is understood as an absolutely unique event in human history. Could there not then be resistance to the use of the same definition for that which occurred in the Nazi concentration camps and in the Argentine clandestine detention centers—as there is, today, debate over whether it is proper to use the term “concentration camps” to describe the Argentine dictatorship’s detention centers? How might these two pulls in fact be working together?

To return to the less contested corner of historical fiction, I would like to propose that the splitting of Jews into bad, dangerous men and pure, innocent women in the early-twenty-first-century historical novel is inextricable from a revisionist history that relegates anti-Semitism to a fringe phenomenon with no presence in the Argentine state. And what this in turn makes possible, or one might even say marketable, is a particular view of Jewish-Argentineity indissociable from a particular view of the state, through which state and minority mutually absolve each other of the undesirable parts of the past and project for each other an idealized image of the other’s continuity. It can almost be seen as a kind of barter, whereby the state was never anti-Semitic, and Jews were never outside of the nationalist imaginary.
I think that there is a relationship between not seeing anti-Semitism in the actions of the state and the obsessive search for what is constructed as the impossible, “forgotten” history of the Jewish-Argentine past. In other words, the compulsive retelling of the story of Liberman doesn’t merely distract us from what that story isn’t saying: it’s also that it claims to be revealing what it is in fact obscuring, in the very act of “revealing” it. As Susana Rotker put it, what Argentina denies about its origins is a constitutive part of its identity (Cautivas, Olvidos y memoria en la Argentina 40); and, in fact, the “liberation” of Liberman’s “true story” might be seen as a strange flipside of Rotker’s discovery of the disavowed, disappeared white captives erased from national history: whereas Rotker’s postcolonial intervention puts national master narratives into crisis by confronting them with that which they have excluded, in the “truth” of Liberman’s story, the colonial order rears up unexpectedly, transforming the flagrantly anti-Semitic Alsogaray into the rescuer of the Jews from their own uncontrollably backwards elements.41 Could it be that when Naturalism reappeared in the late-twentieth-century historical novel bearing a Jewish-Argentine origin myth, it returned to literature via politics, more specifically from a discourse largely shared by all of the right-wing dictatorships of the period elided in these novels?

In this way, the “splitting” of Jews in this narrative resonates uneasily with the “split” attitude of the dictatorship, whereby conservative social and religious Jewish organizations were relatively protected whereas Jews outside these organizations were disproportionately targeted, and those targeted were disproportionately tortured. Could it not be that a homogenization of Jewish identity was to some extent effected—discursively and physically—by the dictatorship? And yet, it seems that in order to preserve the sense of legitimate continuity of the Argentine state, in order to preserve the continuity of Argentine-Jewishness, and quite possibly in order to preserve the continuity of anti-Semitism, the intersectionality of anti-Jewish oppression seems to render it invisible.

Glossing Adorno’s critique of Heidegger, contemporary historical fiction made the present into the destiny of the past, thus figuring the revisionist Jewish-Argentine experience as itself a kind of destiny by omitting the state’s role in anti-Semitism (Adorno, Negative Dialectics 130–31).42 It seems that such a view of transhistorical identity might always fix subjectivity in the ahistorical realm by taking sides retrospectively with historical national powers. Alsogaray is most certainly made into a hero in historical fiction because it makes for a greater storytelling impact; yet Alsogaray also incarnates a noteworthy example of the state’s continuity from Irigoyen to Uriburu, from democracy to the 1930 coup and the first de facto Argentine President. He
figures the triumph of right-wing elements through proper channels at the moment of the first state of exception in the modern era. His presence as a hero can hardly not be read allegorically. In the Liberman story, Jews both retain their exceptionality and are incorporated into a national narrative—and the national narrative is itself allowed to “recover” its Jews, as so much lost patrimony, as though the wound of anti-Semitism had really hurt the institutional apparatus of power more than it had hurt the Jews.
While much contemporary fiction about prostitution in Argentina has reiterated a consensus around Jewish white slavery by which minority and state mutually legitimize each other’s transhistorical identity, there is also contemporary fiction that addresses the same historical phenomena yet finds in them a perpetual crisis of meaning. Several recent novels dramatize elements of the blanca narrative in ways that resonate with the economic crises of the first decade of the twenty-first century, emphasizing an affinity between the two eras based on rupture rather than continuity.¹

Edgardo Cozarinsky’s 2004 novel, El rufián moldavo [The Moldavian Pimp] goes a step further, breaking paradigmatically with the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery by creating a mode of writing about the same historical events by which the search for an identity puts into crisis the very notion of identity—yet the stories within the novel’s framework also contravene and exceed the narrator’s own ideas about truth, writing and history.² Cozarinsky’s metafictional novel presents history as a centrifugal movement away from destiny: to study history is to turn away from the idea of identity as continuity over time, even though the study of history is motivated by the longing to understand oneself as part of such an identity. In this way, while his novel is driven by a shared desire for roots in the national past (in fact, the protagonist is a half-Jewish student trying to find himself amid his...
research on Argentine Yiddish theater), at every turn satisfaction is deferred; paradoxically, the further the protagonist advances in his investigation of Yiddish theater, the less possible it seems to identify with a shared Argentine-Jewish past. As one source comments disparagingly to him, “Sólo un muchacho que no es judío puede interesarse en esas viejerías [only a boy who isn't Jewish can be interested in those old things]” (40).

Part of the problem is that the Yiddish theater was dominated by the pimps of the Zwi Migdal, such that his investigation is quickly transformed into a study of prostitution. The *blanca* narrative is presented as a *reductio* in an eponymous play within the first part of the novel. The powerful tropes and tacit assumptions of the *blanca* narrative will come to filter the narrator’s historical perspective and serve as the novel’s metafictional motor. While he ironizes the play’s heavy-handed representations, it seems to seep into his mind and create mechanisms by which he judges reality according to the literary and moral standards set by its version of the *blanca* narrative. The *blanca* narrative therefore seems to function almost unconsciously in the back of the narrator’s mind, automatically generating “plausible” interpretations of disparate historical facts in keeping with its master tropes; other times, it makes the narrator doubt stories that deviate from them. By the end of the novel, however, the metafictional treatment of the *blanca* narrative triggers an aporia, whereby the putative truth or falsity of any historical narrative cannot be resolved but can only generate yet another story.

It is worth clarifying, then, that while Cozarinsky’s novel shares with historical fiction a longing to discern the meaning of the present in relation to the past, and specifically to “see” the historic origin point of the still-tentative hybrid “Jewish-Argentine,” he is not writing historical fiction as it has been defined up to this point, either as Menton’s “new historical fiction” or the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery explored in the previous chapter. Cozarinsky’s first-person narrative present remains firmly in the decade of the 2000s: though free indirect discourse allows the historical characters discovered by the narrator’s research to think and speak fluidly, their subjectivity is not created in accordance with the (Naturalist) “feel” of their era, nor is their era recreated through the use of period details. On the contrary, it stands in stark contrast to both the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery and the Naturalist novels of prostitution on which the former drew, in which metafiction had been limited to a prologue framing the fiction to follow. Concretely, the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery had arrogated to itself a putative continuity with the “true spirit” of the period in question, based on the transhistorical Jewish identity that was supposed to have originated during the period and which origin the fiction represents;
and the author’s imagination was then free to fill in the blanks in the historical record—or even change the facts in the record—because of this affinity. In this way, the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery proposed a way of understanding history by which the author connected to the past via a shared identity, and with which the author’s imagination was essentially continuous, itself a “part of” the same history.

In Cozarinsky, on the other hand, the connection with the past is maintained not through identity but rather exclusively through stories. In fact, whereas the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery arrogated to itself the role of inventing the story of the blanca who couldn’t speak for herself, the first line of El rufián moldavo is spoken by an old man who insists that “Los cuentos no se inventan, se heredan [Stories aren’t invented—they’re inherited]”: “Es peligroso inventar cuentos. Si resultan buenos terminan por hacerse realidad, después de un tiempo se trasmiten, y entonces ya no importa si fueron inventados, porque siempre habrá alguien que después los haya vivido [It’s dangerous to invent stories. If they turn out good, they end up becoming reality. After a while they get passed around, and then it doesn’t matter anymore if a story was invented, because there will always be someone who has lived it]” (Cozarinsky 11). Stories are the only connection with the past, and so to invent a story about the past alters the connection between past and present. The speaker is not the protagonist’s real grandfather, the Jewish maternal grandfather who had died when he was eight—“el único, débil lazo, con la tradición judía dentro de una familia totalmente asimilada [the only weak link with Jewish tradition in a totally assimilated family]” (133)—but rather Sami Warschauer, one-time Yiddish theater actor and impresario, but now an old man to whom the nursing home staff refer as just “el abuelo [grandfather].” “I’ll be back to visit him next Sunday,” the narrator tells the nurse, leaving. “Pero murió tres días más tarde y me quedé sin saber tantas cosas [But he died three days later and I was left without knowing so many things]” (12).

From the beginning of the novel, there is thus established an indirect genealogy of the transmission of literature, in an echo of what Ricardo Piglia’s Respiración artificial (1980) had made famous as the notion (put forward by “someone, a Russian critic, the Russian critic Yuri Tynianov”) that “literature evolves from uncle to nephew (and not from parents to children)” (Piglia, Respiración artificial 19). The “abuelo” dies alone in the nursing home, without family; and though the narrator has only visited him on “three or four Sundays,” he agrees to search for the man’s only son, reputed to be in Paris, and inform him of his father’s death and deliver to him the shoebox containing Sami’s few possessions.
Yet the narrator’s desire to connect to the past complicates this simple task. Instead of looking for the man’s real son, the narrator takes on the role himself, going through the man’s possessions, and sublimating his desire for continuity into an aesthetic problem: “me costó asociar al hombre de la fotografía [ . . . ] con el anciano que había visitado tres o cuatro domingos en el Hogar Doctor Mauricio Frenkel gracias al bibliotecario del Instituto que me había orientado [it was hard for me to associate the man in the photograph [ . . . ] with the old man I had visited three or four Sundays in the Doctor Mauricio Frenkel Home thanks to the librarian at the Institute who had given me the tip]” (18). The run-on sentence connects this lonely old man who has just died with his photograph from 1945 via the narrator’s association—and it provides a snapshot of how the narrator’s research functions primarily as a mode of connection. To reunite the son with his father’s photograph—as well as the rest of the shoe box full of old theater programs Sami has left behind—would somehow allow the narrator to vicariously integrate his own Jewish-Argentine history, of which his research has found only indigestible fragments. This quest will take him to the marrow of the matter, the indivisible being without remainder, the bare bones of it, whatever “it” is.

In this sense, Cozarinsky’s protagonist is gripped by a desire similar to that of the narrators of the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery: he wants to get to the bottom of history and find there an image of himself that gives his life meaning. To find Sami Warschauer’s son and return to him the box of faded programs is thus the pretext with which the narrator follows the wandering trail of clues in a research project that becomes a search for himself. Yet in stark contrast to the many iterations of Raquel Liberman and Julio Alsogaray in contemporary historical fiction, the protagonist of Cozarinsky’s quest is a nameless, first-person narrator, a student researching a half-hearted interest in the Yiddish theater who tells us only that he bears a last name “inobjetablemente italiano [unobjectably Italian],” while his mother’s last name was Finkelstein (22). By Argentine convention, the narrator bears publicly only his father’s last name; the loss of the maternal name and family connections define a sense of loss that is the deeper motivation for the narrator’s search. Yet in some sense the search is doomed from the start: he already feels that this loss is irretrievable qua identity: to recover the name as an explanation for his investigation, says the narrator, “would be to appeal to a determinism that I don’t agree with” (22).

Most importantly, however, from his present-day vantage point, Cozarinsky’s protagonist first attempts to author a contemporary historical fiction of white slavery. Upon discovering the facts of the Raquel Liberman case, he says:
[E]stas siluetas y anécdotas sólo me daban un sustento real para otras siluetas y anécdotas, las de esa provincia del show business que me había llevado hasta ellas. En el fondo, me temo, aún era el adolescente que seguía en la calle a desconocidos que le parecían portadores de ficción, para ver adónde iban, con quién se encontraban, dónde vivían [. . .]. No, no era demasiado diferente la imaginación con que, a partir de los retazos que la realidad me entregaba, empezaba a novelar la existencia de personajes sin más base que algunos nombres y fechas, a inventar sus historias a partir de situaciones apenas vislumbradas. . . .

[These silhouettes and anecdotes only gave me a real basis for other silhouettes and anecdotes, those of the same area of show business that had brought me to them. At bottom, I fear, I was still the adolescent who followed strangers in the street who seemed like they were carrying a story, to see where they were going, with whom they were going to meet up, where they lived [. . .]. No, it wasn't completely different, the imagination I used to take scraps thrown to me by reality and novelize the existence of characters with no basis other than names and dates, inventing their histories from situations that could barely be glimpsed.] (Cozarinsky 48)

However, rather than a scrapbook upon which he could draw to substantiate a narrative of how he and his culture got to the present, Cozarinsky’s narrator kept finding sources of fiction in history, giving him the raw material only for narratives that put the order and the meaning of the present into crisis. Rather than contributing to an incomplete historical record, his findings seem to invalidate existing historical narratives.

In its relentless metafiction and its resolute refusal to recreate the “feeling” of the past, *El rufián moldavo* exemplifies certain traits Seymour Menton ascribed to the New Historical Novel; yet the novel itself is told entirely from the vantage point of the present day, an abstract present without the warmth of details, a protagonist without even a name.5 Present and past alike become “denarrativized”: people, places, events and objects that by convention exist and have meaning indissociable from a narrative structure are suddenly stripped of that structure.

The narrator conflates the loss of narrative with the loss of identity: he seems to believe that the ability to narrate was lost collectively sometime in the past. Thus, the channel of historical fiction is blocked to him. Instead, he must try to get back in time before the denarrativizing event, to recover the possibility of narrating. The novel is, in this sense, a meta-narrative of denar-
rativization, and thus a meta-answer to the question Alberto Moreiras had posed in his essay “Infrapolitics and the Thriller”:

If there is a history of literature, is there also a history of denarrativization?
If there is a history of ethics, can there be a history of the suspension of ethics? Or are denarrativization and the suspension of ethics theoretico-practical moments equivalent to the conceptual moment of the subaltern in Gayatri Spivak’s phrase “the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized as logic”? (Moreiras, “Infrapolitics and the Thriller” 36)

Moreiras is asking whether a phenomenon such as denarrativization can be the subject of a narrative. The narrator of El rufián moldavo begins the novel believing that the answer is yes, and that his identity depends on it. However, despite himself, the narrative he produces undermines not only the idea of a transhistorical Jewish-Argentine identity but, in Moreiras’s words, breaks with “all narratives of identity, and with all narratives of difference” (Moreiras, The Exhaustion of Difference 51), producing story after story each of which exceeds and undermines the narrative’s overarching structure.

The narrator cannot narrate what happened to the Yiddish theater in Buenos Aires, or to the kind of people involved with it, or even what role it played in people’s lives—“Qué fue el teatro para quienes vivieron antes que yo? [What was the theater for those who lived before me?]” (Cozarinsky 23), and this desire to know is thwarted by a generalized disinterest in the very categories that define his investigation. There is not only by an absence of organized information—his research doesn’t correspond to a recognized field of inquiry, because it isn’t part of any successful master narrative of identity—but there is also, therefore, a surplus of miscataloged and forgotten papers, whose very material survival seems to be an error. The script of the eponymous play within the novel appears incorrectly archived under the wrong title, its author as anonymous as the novel’s protagonist, who then traces the text through a city of impossible archives whose rubrics hide what they classify. The Instituto de Historia del Teatro [Institute of Theater History] “se me confirmaba como una cripta peligrosa antes que una cueva de imprevisibles tesoros [confirmed itself as more of a dangerous crypt than an unexpected treasure trove]”: “Seguido por sus fantasmas, que rehusaban esfumarse, pasé junto a la sinagoga custodiada por agentes de policía que no disimulaban sus bostezos [. . . ] ¿A quién pertenecía ese libreto extraviado, acaso escondido, en una carpeta ajena? [Followed by its ghosts, who refused to dissolve, I passed by the synagogue guarded by police officers who didn’t hide their
yawns [. . . ] To whom did this wild libretto belong, possibly hidden in the wrong folder?” (Cozarinsky 31).

The miscataloged and unattributed script of “El rufián moldavo” is one of many unidentified, nameless remainders or “remnants” of the past (the narrator often uses this tailoring metaphor) which intrude on the present, revealing its disorder. The eruptions—invisible to the yawning police and indifferent archivists—bring details that do not fit with the a priori notions that guide the narrator’s search, and here it is that the very same story of Jewish white slavery—and concretely the blanca narrative—brings an insurrectionary force against the very possibility of discovering “the untold story” which would give meaning to contemporary Argentine-Jewishness. Every character, every anecdote is resolutely irreducible to any meaning, cannot be flattened into a bigger story, into that form of scholarship that—in fiction, at any rate—is about discovering a beautiful story that explains everything truthfully. At the same time, each of the narrator’s fictionalized historical characters—invented personalities based on putatively real names but only the scantiest details—is absolutely alienated from contemporary views of the past.6

Our nameless hero’s research provides a source of perpetual motion for the plot. As his investigation progresses, the narrator develops a complicated relationship to the historical characters he uncovers: he is looking for himself in history, but he’s not finding himself, nor is he getting closer to the truth of history. Rather, as he interviews people, hoping to learn from them the missing pieces of this past, he turns them into literary characters, imagining their motives and rewriting their stories. At bottom, he is also playing a literary role, as “un detective, a private eye, y como la realidad no me encarga investigaciones peligrosas las busco entre papeles y recuerdos ajenos [a detective, a private eye, and since reality doesn’t send me on any dangerous missions I seek them among papers and distant memories]” (22).7

Among these papers bequeathed indirectly by Sami Warschauer, the “abuelo” of the novel’s opening scene, is a letter from the playwright Theo Auer, né Theófilo Auerbach. Auer, the narrator realizes, is the author of the hitherto anonymous play, “El rufián moldavo,” the controversial story of a Moldavian pimp with a heart of gold. Sami Warschauer had pleaded with the playwright to send him the script, to allow him to revive the “great work of Jewish theater” in the lagging postwar theater milieu, but Auer had refused, insisting that while his famous play about prostitution had exposed the dirty secret of Jewish white slavery as revenge against his community’s participation in prostitution, he now disavowed it, as it had constituted another betrayal by reifying—and perhaps even reactivating—the anti-Semitic stereotype of
what Julio Alsogaray had called “the Jew white slaver” (Alsogaray 149). The outwardly spiraling tension between revenge and betrayal becomes the novel's centrifugal force: the withheld play within the novel also comes to define an intergenerational relationship to history as a series of inherited crimes which are—largely unconsciously—reenacted, avenged and repressed.

In piecing together the fragments of the past, the narrator begins arranging personal anecdotes of discomfort, sacrifice, oppression, strife into a fictional narrative of his own encounter with them, coming up against the limits of narrating the denarrativized. Violence erupts parenthetically, but it has been severed from the master narratives within which it might signify historically. For example, Sami’s father, we are told in parentheses, had ruptured his own right eardrum with a mattress-maker’s needle to avoid conscription in the emperor’s army (58); and this micro vignette is the only trace of the father, like a fossilized footprint in mid-stride that suggests direction and a type of movement but resolves nothing.

Whereas the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery delighted in minutiae—choosing details that expedited the plot and recreated the “flavor” of the era in a way indissociable from its interpretation of history, in El rufián moldavo, these details distract, disrupt and continually disconnect the main plot. They erupt parenthetically at every turn, turning the novel into a tangent-driven antihistory, committed to the specificity of details and therefore to their insolubility within narrative. In fact, the blurtling out of these insoluble pieces of history is the prime mover of the novel, that which initiates and sustains the perpetuum mobile of the journalistic investigation, even as it seems to take narrator and reader farther away from any clear understanding of history in a supersaturated novel overflowing with the past.

This Is Not Raquel Liberman: Blanca Metafiction

In the context of this denarrativizing assemblage of details, the same “story” of Jewish white slavery brings an insurrectionary force against the very conditions of its own narration, and each of the narrator’s fictionalized characters—whether one, two, three or four generations older than he—is equally alienated from any unifying narrative of the past. In this way, their refusal to fit into a unitary narrative can be seen as a potential within denarrativization to not only critique the revisionism of the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery which forcibly “restored” an anachronistically defined Jewish-Argentine identity to the national imaginary, but also to affirm a different affective relationship to history, by which the same unbelonging, nonassimi-
lation of cultural phenomena into national culture by which the narrator’s search stalls at the archives and libraries of the nation thus preserves something that has escaped denarrativization. In being passed over by a modernizing, total narrative, in being left out, these remainders already embody an alternative history from which to think what would otherwise be impossible.

The metafiction of the *blanca* arises in two distinct areas of the novel: in the narrator’s own running piecemeal narrative of his research—particularly in the intertwining stories of Natalia Auerbach and Maxi Warschauer—and in the eponymous play within the novel by Auerbach’s father, the playwright Theo Auer, which is summarized by the narrator as he reads it for the first time in the basement of the Teatro Cervantes, the reading room of the Instituto de Historia del Teatro. In fact, the two areas are linked by Auer’s play, “El rufián moldavo”: the *blanca* narrative unfolds wholesale in the play, and the novel’s narrator, after reading it, internalizes and begins to deploy aspects of its narrative logic. At the same time, all of the novel’s characters act out elements of its various stock roles throughout the novel. As it appears in Cozarinisky’s imaginary play, the story line hits all of the major plot points of the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery; however, the narrator’s report of the play intersperses bits of presentist perspectival irony, and the many fragmentary repetitions and permutations of the play’s contents combine to create the impression of a massive metafictional hologram of the *blanca* which at moments constitutes an apogee of the *blanca* narrative and at others its deconstruction.

The play “El rufián moldavo” supposedly premiered at the Teatro Ombú in 1927 to great acclaim. Act one opens on the shores of the Prut River, in Moldova, where a group of girls laughs and dances while older women set out “las inevitables tortas de amapola y de queso [the inevitable poppyseed cakes and cheesecakes]” (25). A tall, handsome, sad-eyed youth holding a violin declares that he is leaving for America, “pero no es él quien interpreta el solo de violín que desplaza a la orquesta para acompañarlo mientras canta ‘Adiós, amigos, adiós, me voy a América’ [but it isn’t he who interprets the violin solo that takes over from the orchestra to accompany him as he sings, ‘Farewell, friends, farewell, I’m going to America’]” (25). The young girls beg to accompany him, and despite the best attempts of the older women to dissuade them follow him admiringly, “Como un flautista de Hamelin [like the Pied Piper of Hamelin]” (25).

The irony is deepened in the second scene, which echoes the prototypical image of arrival by ship in America, the girls clustered on the deck, scanning the horizon, “hasta que una grita ¿Dónde está la estatua de la libertad?’ [until one cries, ‘Where is the Statue of Liberty?’]:
Un número musical expresa su inquietud, música de ritmo entrecortado y estribillos que se superponen (“¿Dónde estamos? ¿Qué puerto es ése que se asoma a lo lejos?”), hasta que el galán sombrío de la primera escena reaparece, ahora sonriente, entusiasta; ya no tiene en la mano un violín sino un bandoneón, y canta con toda su voz de barítono: “Es otra América, la del Sur, la que vamos a descubrir, y ésta es su música.”

[A musical number expresses her worry, music with an unsteady rhythm and refrains superimposed on each other (“Where are we? What port is that appearing in the distance?”), until the somber heartthrob of the first scene reappears, now smiling, enthusiastic; he no longer has a violin in his hand but a bandoneón, and he sings with all his baritone voice: “It is another America, South America, which we will discover, and this is its music.”] (26)

The script then indicates that he should face away from the public with the bandoneón, “para que no resulte demasiado flagrante la impostura [so that the farce shouldn’t be too flagrant]” as he pretends to play “Re Fa Si,” which is amplified from the orchestra pit (26). Little by little the girls begin to sway to the tango, and the scene ends as they are being taught the first steps “by unknown dancers” (26–27), who return immediately in the next scene where the heartthrob has become the authoritarian pimp he has “really” been all along; one of the young girls is presented “sólo vestida con una camisa transparente [only dressed in a transparent shirt]” before the men, who have changed into pimps at an auction. The young girl’s despair is related in the form of the tango “De mi barrio [From my neighborhood],” to which she changes the words with “lo que el libreto llama ‘oportunas modificaciones’: en lugar de ‘en un convento de monjas me eduqué’ se canta ‘en casa siempre se observó el shabat’ [what the script called ‘opportune modifications’: instead of ‘I was educated by nuns in a convent,’ she sings, ‘in my house we always observed Shabbat’]” (27).

The multilayered farce begins with the pimp who appears as a heartthrob in the shtetl: decontextualized from its usual trappings of poverty and desperation, the archetypal scene of the trafficker who fools the young blanca into believing his promises of marriage becomes a parody in which swooning girls beg to follow him to America. The phantasmic origin of Jewish-Argentina—the arrival by ship, and the concomitant symbolic hybridization (Raquel Liberman cooking ñoquis; her children singing the national anthem [Schalom 37, 222]) becomes a satirical encounter with the “wrong” America: the first sighting of land is of the absence of the Statue of Liberty. The
“music of South America,” the tango, is rewritten to accommodate in the most forced manner the iconic *blanca* narrative.

This parody of hybridization, which Cozarinsky’s narrator initially seemed to find moderately funny, has disturbed him. “Estaba asombrado. No era la primera vez que comprobaba, sin agrado, que se había adherido a mi sensibilidad cierto sentido de lo que es decoroso y lo que no lo es, por más que siempre hubiese procurado mantenérmelo ajeno a lo que hoy suele llamarse ‘política-value correcto’ [I was shocked. It wasn’t the first time that I had proved, unhappily, that a sense of decorum had adhered itself to my sensibility, as much as I had always tried to remain unaffected by what today is called ‘political correctness’]” (28). He forces himself to continue reading the play, hoping that “algo debía decirme este libreto sobre aquel público, sobre la época en que la obra pudo ser aceptada sin embarazo [it should tell me something about that audience, about the time in which the work could have been accepted without embarrassment]” (28).

The play’s second act consists of a tour through the Naturalist cycles of degeneration of one prostitute, the same “desvalida muchacha [helpless girl]” from the pimps’ auction in act one. She is known as “Taube [Paloma]”:

[and her rebellious character gets her expelled very quickly from a luxury establishment in Rosario (inspired by Madame Sapho’s?), where they have rebaptized her Yvette de Montmartre, and to descend to a lesser one in Buenos Aires, at Lavalle and Junín; from there she will end up for a while at the refuge of the punished, in the desolate south of Tres Arroyos, to return to the capital and attempt to kill the sordid madam who rules the new house to which she’s been assigned, on Viamonte Street.] (28)

Taube’s appearance in the play is inextricable from the narrator’s knowledge of the tropes of prostitution: he speculates that the luxury brothel in Rosario is based on Daudet’s *Sapho* (1884); even the polysemic name-change, exemplifying both extremes of social mobility and namelessness, is intertextual, Yvette being one of the cabaret dancers repeatedly painted by Toulouse-
Lautrec, himself an exemplary Montmartre artist, and Montmartre itself a metonym for prostitution in the arts. The recreation of a typical Naturalist rise and descent in the play is thus mediated by the narrator’s erudite reading, suggesting a potentially infinite intertextual web with one parenthetical reference.

In the final act, we understand that Taube’s pimp heartthrob, now known as Méndele, has confessed to Taube’s crime—her failed attempt to murder the madam—and now languishes in jail. A song begins playing, and Taube sings the words “Escucha al corazón / si te sientes perdido, / su voz dirá el camino / hacia la redención [Listen to your heart / if you feel lost, / its voice will tell the path / to salvation]” (29). The rhythm changes to that of a tango, and the bars of Méndele’s jail cell fall down “as if by magic” (29). They dance the tango together, accompanied from a respectful distance by the whole cast, until the curtain falls. A note written in pencil at the end of the script suggests that if an encore is demanded, the cast not repeat this final number, but rather dance “El amanecer [Dawn]” by Firpo.

In all, the nonexistent period piece pulls together all the tropes of white slavery, yet also subverts them in one aporetic plot point: the abject 
blanca kills the madam. The narrator’s reading of the play complicates it still further, interleaving the irony brought by his anachronistic perspective and his knowledge of literature with the anonymous stage directions of a director in 1927—perhaps Theo Auer himself—all of which coexists with the narrator’s unexpectedly old-fashioned prejudices, of which he is a bit ashamed.

The aftershocks of the 
blanca narrative as rendered in the play will shape the narrator’s judgment of what sounds plausible and what doesn’t in the stories of the people he interviews. As the play was mediated by his own “presentist” perspective, so the 
blanca narrative in all its contradictions will intertwine itself with the narrator’s research agenda— influencing his thinking even as he rewrites it, almost like a Möbius strip. This can be analyzed as occurring in three interrelated modes of interpretation and expression, which freely permute among themselves.

First, there are moments in the novel when the 
blanca narrative seems to work transparently, as an automatic narrating machine, stringing together disparate facts almost without the narrator’s explicit engagement; yet even within this mode, the familiar-seeming “blancas” of the novel—Zsuzsa and, briefly, Raquel Liberman—will deviate, much as Taube did in the play, from the master narrative of white slavery, embodying an aporia within the 
blanca narrative logic: they, like the great Naturalist prostitutes, appear contradictory; yet unlike their predecessors, they point out the cultural source of this paradox.
Second, in reaction to the first, easy mode of narrating the *blanca* story, a paranoid mode of reading is triggered, by which the narrator begins to question the truthfulness of history that reads either too much like fiction or not enough like the *blanca* narrative. In particular, he rereads and reinterprets the testimony of Natalia Auerbach—Theo Auer’s daughter—and Maxi Warschauer—Sami’s son. At these moments, it seems that he has come to view both the play and the characters’ memories through the lens of a strict realist-Naturalist regime of representation, whereby stories are judged as “confessions” that either approach or deviate from the truth.

Finally—and especially in the novel’s epilogue—the first two modes are deconstructed on the basis of the original aporia in the *blanca* narrative, cancelled out by a metafictional perspective that makes the truth or falsity of any historical narrative unknowable and lays waste to the realist-Naturalist representational scheme from within its maximal expression in the *blanca*. The novel concludes by allying itself intertextually with a potentially infinite library of stories.

**The First Mode: Blanca 2.0**

The first component of the multifaceted workings of the *blanca* narrative within the narrator’s mind takes the form of what appears at first to simply be a retelling of the *blanca* narrative in the novel; yet it’s necessary to clarify how this narrative—apparently generated automatically with total naturalness—sets the stage for the complication and ultimate deconstruction of the *blanca* narrative. First, consider—by way of comparison—the following two descriptions of the young *blanca* seeing Buenos Aires for the first time. The former is from Myrtha Schalom’s *La Polaca*, a passage indicative of the view of history permeating the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery as it paints a picture of the exhilarating freedom Raquel Liberman feels stepping out of the brothel and onto the streets of Buenos Aires:

Before her eyes the dazzling lights of the bright signs invited her to try Atkinson perfume and Le Sancy loose powder, to drink Cinzano vermouth and smoke Ideales. . . . In front of the Excelsior Theater, the billboard with the face of Theda Bara starring in *A Woman There Was* brings to mind her own image as a femme fatale. (Schalom 185)

By contrast, here is Cozarinsky’s young *blanca*, Zsuzsa:
[The madam] had taken the girls out for a ride through Palermo in an open car; there they had seen orderly gardens, an artificial lake and children dressed in white: visions with which [Zsuzsa] could not establish any sort of relationship, mere moving illustrations, like those in [the magazines] *Caras y Caretas* or *El Hogar*. (Cozarinsky 59)

While Schalom’s Liberman is counterfactually “restored” to the imaginary, as though the absence of poor Jewish prostitutes on the streets of Palermo could be corrected by Photoshopping stock images into the national consciousness, Cozarinsky’s character is not only excluded from the dominant imaginary of 1920s Buenos Aires, but is even excluded from recognizing that she exists in the same reality.

However, the contrasts don’t end there. Cozarinsky’s Zsuzsa quickly dies of tuberculosis, without even knowing “el nombre del mal que pocas semanas después acabará con su vida [the name of the affliction that a few weeks later would end her life]” (62). Her early and unceremonious death is literally unconventional, breaking with the drawn-out suffering that the Naturalist prostitutes perfected, but also—at a more literal level—stopping all actions driven overtly by the *blanca* narrative. But there is also a more radical difference at work: Zsuzsa had already practiced prostitution in the *alte medine* [old country]; she was knowingly prostituted by her parents and so she thus emigrated from a life of prostitution and poverty to a life of prostitution and poverty. With this simple stroke of unspeakable reality, the motor of the *blanca* myth seems to have stalled. Her historically realistic, literally unconventional death is expressed in a sentence that makes Argentina and the *alte medine* analogous in Jewish experience: Zsuzsa dies “en un país que ha cambiado de nombre entre fronteras que han cambiado de lugar [in a country that has changed names between frontiers that have moved]” (70).

The bleak vision is instantiated by the appearance of Zsuzsa’s ghost: “En la niebla fría de junio, que las luces pálidas del alumbrado público vuelven amarillenta, veo aparecer la figura vacilante de una mujer [In the cold mist of June, yellow under the pale electric street lights, I see the flickering figure of a woman]” (66).

Raquel Liberman herself proves disruptive in Cozarinsky, in one long sentence in which the narrator reads:

Sobre Raquel Liberman, a quien pretendieron hacerle creer que sus ahorros se habrían volatilizado en el crash bursátil del ’29 en Wall Street, y ante su incredulidad amenazaron con marcarle la cara, en un primer momento, y con algo peor si insistía, y sobre el juez Rodríguez Ocampo, que la escuchó,
la protegió y llevó ante la Justicia a ciento ocho responsables de la Zwi Migdal que no habían huido inmediatamente del país con los pasaportes que les había vendido el comisario Eduardo Santiago.

[About Raquel Liberman, whom they tried to convince that all her savings had been lost in the Wall Street Crash of 1929, and when she wouldn’t believe them they threatened to slash her face, and something worse if she insisted), and about Judge Rodríguez Ocampo, who heard her and protected her and brought before the Justice 108 leaders of the Zwi Migdal who hadn’t fled immediately from the country with the passports sold to them by Police Commissioner Eduardo Santiago.] (Cozarinsky 47)

Santiago had been the last federal police commissioner under Irigoyen, immediately before Alsogaray was promoted at the time of the coup. In one sentence, Cozarinsky points out matter-of-factly the complicity of the political machine and the police force in organized prostitution at the highest levels which, while it is amply documented in scholarly histories (Trochon, Las rutas 301, 304–7; Guy, Sex and Danger 51; 132) is generally limited to low-level functionaries or elided entirely in the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery.

In this way, Zsuzsa’s early death, Raquel Liberman’s brief cameo and the structural presence of police corruption don’t merely disrupt the Photoshopped vision of historical Jewish-Argentine Buenos Aires through the intrusion of unwelcome historical facts; they also participate in altering the blanca narrative by redirecting the contradictions that Naturalism had attributed to the prostitute’s paradoxical nature back onto the cultures—both in Europe and America—in which prostitution thrived.

**The Second Mode: The Paranoid Reading**

The narrator spends much of the novel in a “paranoid” mode, in which he is prevented from narrating not only by the unassimilability of stories from the past but also because he doubts these stories for evincing either too much or not enough verisimilitude. Most of his paranoia is directed at Maxi Warschauer—son of Sami—and Natalia Auerbach—daughter of Theo Auer. As the blood descendants of the men he has chosen as his surrogate forbears in Jewish-Argentine identity, he is highly skeptical about their ability to provide anything of value, and projects onto them his own desire to write a good fiction.
Our introduction to Maxi occurs sixty pages after the narrator had examined a program from May 1945 for *Revista de la Victoria* [*Victory Revue*] in which Sami appeared with his wife, Perla (originally Perl), with the “bleached hair and eyebrows plucked into perfect arches of any actress of indefinable age” (19). We learn that the Warschauer’s son had been onstage in his mother’s arms during the revue, which itself was part of the attempt by government, businesses and individuals to jump on the bandwagon of Allied victory to participate in a collective erasure of the reality of Argentine fascism, now that the “desenlace de la guerra resultó evidente aun para quienes menos lo deseaba en el seno del gobierno de facto [outcome of the war had become evident even to those who least desired it in the bosom of the de facto government]” (83–84).

Yet the links from *Revista de la Victoria* go farther: Maxi’s birth, which predated the Allied victory in Europe by only two months, was itself Perla’s attempt to erase the memory of her husband’s former girlfriend, Zsuzsa. Convinced that Zsuzsa’s ghost was preventing him from loving her, she decides that the only way to “win” is to have a child (81). The cover-up both of Argentine fascism and of Zsuzsa’s death come together in 1945, when Perla hopes her child has been born into a world where Jews will not be afraid (82). Yet the attempt to erase the past is satirized when the Victory Review itself reveals both a tune composed by a Nazi and a final act copied from a German operetta whose composer had been gassed at Auschwitz only weeks earlier (86). “La ignorancia,” the narrator writes laconically, “Puede ser un refugio benévolo [Ignorance can be a benevolent refuge]” (86).

Yet for Maxi Warschauer, the desire to escape from his origins was redoubled, rather than eliminated, by his parents’ enthusiastic embrace of Argentine identity. “Añoraba esa minúscula parcela de ignorancia treinta y cinco años más tarde [He was nostalgic for that miniscule piece of ignorance thirty-five years later],” when in 1980 he had married a French woman and had a child “que no hablaba ni una palabra de castellano [who didn’t speak a word of Spanish]”: “Satisfecho, Maxi pensaba que después del idisch había logrado borrar un segundo origen; en los viajes profesionales prefería hablar inglés: temía que, de hablar alemán, que conocía mejor, surgiera imperiosa la sombra del idisch, pesadilla de su infancia entre camarines [Satisfied, Maxi thought that after Yiddish he had succeeded in erasing a second origin; on professional trips he preferred to speak English: he feared that, by speaking German, which he knew better, the shadow of Yiddish would rise up imperiously, a nightmare of his childhood spent in dressing rooms]” (91).

What had initially appeared as a one-off, a document that couldn’t be indexed because it belonged to no category, the play “El rufián moldavo” now
becomes the lens through which the narrator reads—and doubts—Maxi’s story. In particular, the narrator is troubled by the way Maxi’s stories provide seemingly endless, intergenerational *mises en abyme*: the shadow of Yiddish over Maxi’s life echoes too neatly the way that the ghost of Zsuzsa shadowed his parents’ lives (“echa[ndo] una sombra sobre el lecho donde Sami y [Perla] ahora dormían sin tocarse [throwing a shadow over the bed where Sami and [Perla] now slept without touching each other]” [79]).

While the *mises en abyme* seem too pat, too literary “in the worst sense of the word” (145), the narrator is also troubled by how Maxi’s story jumbles historical references freely, juxtaposing them in suggestive analogies with no regard for scale or causality, thus preventing a coherent chronological or causal narrative. Thus, for example, the death in Auschwitz of the composer Löhner, the ghost Zsuzsa, the birth of Maxi, the choice of songs for the Victory Review, the pretense of “unanimous” support for the Allied forces in Argentina months before the end of the war, all are presented as indissociable from each other. This continuous net of details in which every element is related tangentially to every other element is the flipside of the pat narratives—a different way of forgetting the big picture, *un*writing rather than *re*writing history.

In this way, the narrator sees his characters as engaged in forgetting both by omission and commission: at the end of his life, Sami Warschauer “había olvidado sus tiempos de bandoneonista y las casas ‘malas’; sólo recordaba su segunda vida, la que Perl le había confeccionado [had forgotten his times as a bandoneón player and the brothels; he only remembered his second life, the one Perl had made up for him]” (92); and, at the end of her life, his own mother “abandonaba mentalmente la identidad de Perl Rust para refugiarse en la de Perla Ritz, *nom de théâtre* que a Maxi le parecía ridículo [mentally abandoned the identity of Perl Rust to take refuge in that of Perla Ritz, the *nom de théâtre* that seemed ridiculous to Maxi]” (88)—though, he acknowledges, it caught on better than his own attempt to adopt a *nom de théâtre*—Andrés Machado—which he supposed conferred on him an evocative “porteña presence” for Parisian audiences (87).

Firmly a Parisian expatriate Argentine, Maxi is afraid to return to Buenos Aires when his company wants to send him there to research a tango compilation, as though his old identity will descend upon him immediately. When a car accident detains him on his way to the airport, he is relieved to postpone the “inevitable decision” to see his father or avoid him:

> elegir convertirse durante unos días en un fantasma más entre tantos otros que inevitablemente vendrían a su encuentro, o enfrentar al anciano des-
conocido [. . . ] [un] interlocutor que le devolvería sin duda la identidad que él se había aplicado durante años a cancelar.

[to choose to become for a few days one more ghost among so many others that he would inevitably meet, or to face the unknown old man [. . . ] [an] interlocutor who would doubtless give him back the identity that for years he had applied himself to cancelling out.] (97)

While Maxi is stalled on the highway by an accident, waiting for something to happen, a young girl appears in the rain and, without thinking, Maxi opens the door for her. Seamlessly, she offers herself to him for thirty euros; seamlessly, he accepts, “excited” by “imágenes de miseria y esclavitud contemporáneas [images of misery and contemporary slavery]” (99). Afterwards, he feels ashamed, telling himself that the girl must at most be sixteen, his own daughter’s age (the girl had told him she was thirteen, but he conveniently rules this out). Unthinking, he hits redial on his cell phone, and is reassured that the emergency vehicles will be there imminently. His “real” life, incompatible with highway-side oral sex with teenagers, seemed suddenly “poca cosa al lado de esa suspensión del tiempo, del lugar, de su identidad penosamente fabricada: un limbo del que había tenido un atisbo, agua en las manos, irrecuperable [no big deal next to that suspension of time, of place, of his arduously fabricated identity: a limbo of which he had had a glimpse, water in his hands, irrecoverable]” (101).

In this limbo, the narrator has glimpsed “esos signos discretos del destino [que] sólo pueden leerse cuando los ilumina el paso del tiempo y ya es tarde para escuchar su advertencia [those discreet signs of destiny that can only be read when the passage of time illuminates them and it is too late to hear their warning].” Maxi finds and murders the girl’s pimp, ends up in jail, and thereby short-circuits both his impending trip to Buenos Aires and his return to an identity he has rejected in favor of the one in Europe he has “arduously fabricated.” Instead, he becomes something else entirely: a murderer, a convict and a prisoner. In acting, he reenacts not only the identity he knew he had rejected, but other layers of an inherited story of which he was not aware. Leaping out of the literary and into the literal, Maxi’s flight from Jewish identity ends up making the symbols, the tropes and the characters of that rejected Jewish culture into reality: he reifies them. By killing the pimp, Maxi unconsciously reenacts Auer’s literary revenge, but he also acts out his father’s unfulfilled fantasy of putting on “El rufián moldavo”—itself a desire to deliver to poetic justice the long-dead pimps responsible for Zsuza’s death.
Yet such displacement is not limited, as we have seen, to any one character. The narrator has been pursuing Maxi in order to return to him the prime mover of his investigation, as though he could also displace his consuming desire to understand, along with the shoebox, onto its legal heir. When the narrator learns that Maxi is in prison for confessing to the murder of a pimp of dubious provenance (one of his passports is Moldavian), he can’t believe it:

La historia me pareció fantasiosa, si no llanamente inventada, literatura en el peor sentido de la palabra, pero si algo he aprendido en estos meses de investigación es a aceptarle a la realidad su tendencia a ignorar esas mismas nociones de verosimilitud que exigimos de la ficción. Creí, sin embargo, reconocer en ese argumento una oscura noción de destino.

[The story seemed imaginative to me, if not simply invented, literature in the worst sense of the word, but if I’ve learned something in these months of investigation it’s to accept from reality its tendency to ignore these same notions of verisimilitude that we demand from fiction. I believed, however, that I had recognized in the plot an obscure notion of destiny.] (145)

Though the narrator believes that Maxi’s confession is literature in the “worst” sense, and completely implausible, at the same time it is this very confession that defines Maxi’s “destiny.”

When he “implausibly” murders the pimp, echoing the action in the play his father had wanted—and failed—to produce, Maxi links himself unconsciously with his parents’ lives even as he is postponing the moment of encounter with his father:

Maxi no podía saber, cómo hubiese podido saber, que al embarcarse en esa historia se estaba reuniendo con otra, la que sus padres le habían callado, que en otro continente y en otro siglo estaba encontrando, adornada por la falaz seducción de lo novelesco, la misma miseria y el mismo comercio que, muy lejos, habían marcado sus propios orígenes. . . .

[Maxi couldn’t have known—How could he have known?—that by embarking on this story he was joining another one, one that his parents had kept from him, that was finding in another continent and another century, adorned with the fallacious seduction of the novelesque, the same misery and the same commerce that, far away, had marked his own origins . . . ] (146)
While Maxi’s “honor crime” redeems the young prostitute from a life bound to a pimp (after she has serviced him), it exposes his family history in crime by unconsciously repeating it. In trying to erase both his Jewishness and his Argentineity, Maxi ends up fulfilling them better than if he had attempted to do so.9

Not only does Maxi thus repeat the plot of Auer’s play, but in doing so he plays all the parts. Like Auer’s Moldavian pimp, Maxi goes to prison to protect a prostitute based only on his confession; yet he also plays the spunky prostitute, murdering the exploiter for trafficking in minors. Yet Maxi is convicted not only of murder, but also of the pimp’s crime: trafficking in minors (144); and thus he also unwittingly takes the fall for the pimp he has murdered. Perhaps it is inevitable that Maxi’s narration of his one-man show should seem implausible to the novel’s narrator; it also is doubted by the police psychiatrist assigned to the case: the dreamlike redux of the plot of “El rufián moldavo” in which Maxi murders a Moldavian pimp is at once too literary and not literary enough. It is an unreadable antinarrative in which Maxi “is” everything he has tried to escape, every role in the allegorical drama of Jewish white slavery.

The implausible confession and the narrator’s doubt form the center of the narrator’s investigation, and Maxi’s unlikely story is mirrored and complemented by the shocking tale of Natalia Auerbach, a difficult old woman initially disinclined to cooperate with the narrator’s investigation. The daughter of the playwright Auer, Natalia has restored her Jewish family name (whereas Maxi fled his), yet it seems to the narrator that she is equally untrustworthy. Suspecting secrets, he has tried to interview Natalia to find out the real deal about “El rufián moldavo.” However, after he has had no success cajoling her, the narrator is even more nonplussed when she unexpectedly gives him a recording of her whole life story. The narrator immediately believes that it—like Maxi’s story—must be a lie:

El relato de Natalia Auerbach, tan conmovedor mientras lo escuchaba, me dejó un regusto ambiguo, como si fuera posible desconfiar de la propia emoción [. . . ]. Me pareció innoble desconfiar de su relato y sin embargo no podía evitar la sensación de asistir a una representación [. . . ]. También me pareció reconocer resabios cinematográficos en las circunstancias del encuentro entre sus padres, tan románticas en medio de un contexto sórdido. (123–24)

[The story of Natalia Auerbach, so moving as I listened to it, left an ambiguous aftertaste, as if it were possible to mistrust one’s own emotion [. . . ]. It
seemed ignoble to distrust her tale, and yet I couldn't avoid the sensation of attending a performance [. . .]. I also seemed to recognize cinemagraphic aftertastes in the circumstances of her parents' meeting, so romantic in the midst of a sordid context.] (123–24)

The narrator immediately suspects that the true story of Natalia’s family **must be that of the prototypical blanca**—which later turns out to be the very plot of her father’s most famous play. What the narrator finds implausible is the too “literary”-sounding truth Auerbach tells him, which is that her mother, Rebeca Durán—like Zsuzsa, like many young European prostitutes throughout the Americas—had already been registered as a prostitute in the Pale of Settlement. The narrator finds more “credible” the familiar story of the **blanca**: Durán’s playwright “husband” must have really been a pimp who abducted Durán against her will.

What Auerbach tells us is not only remarkable because it questions the “believability” of the **blanca** narrative, nor even because it disables the bipolar narrative of Argentine-Jewishness by disrupting the gender binary. In fact, she suggests that the landless condition of the Jews in Eastern Europe meant that registering with the authorities as a prostitute was a popular form of resistance to anti-Semitic restrictions. The yellow passes which were handed out to registered prostitutes allowed them to travel from city to city, without which most Jews—bereft of passports and, therefore, mobility—were relatively unable to move around. This “artifice”—“ardid” is the word Auerbach uses to describe registering as a prostitute—was how young Jewish women were able to escape from their quarantine under the czars. In this way, Natalia’s story is disruptive on many levels: not only does she assert that there was Jewish popular resistance to anti-Semitism other than fleeing to the New World—thus decentering the mythic draw of the Americas for Europe’s hungry and persecuted masses—but also makes registering as prostitutes a form of seizing power, by which young Jewish women were able to travel and become relatively more educated, more cosmopolitan.10

Thinking back on the descriptions of Zsuzsa’s exclusion from cosmopolitan Buenos Aires and Schalom’s Liberman exulting in it, a third way is opened up by Rebeca Durán in St. Petersburg:

Al salir se pasea por la Nevsky Prospekt y observa atisbos de una vida que no es la suya, sin que le inspire envidia ni resentimiento; le basta mirar el curso rápido de las aguas del Molka en tiempo de deshielo para sentir que a los veinte años ya ha vivido más de lo que, dos años atrás, podía esperar en el stetl.
[On leaving, she walks around Nevsky Prospekt and observes the signs of a life that isn’t hers, that inspires neither envy nor resentment; it’s enough to look at the rapid course of the waters of the thawing Molka to feel at twenty years of age that she has already lived more than she could have hoped two years ago in the shtetl.] (117)

Durán is neither assimilated nor abject in her relative marginality: she is irreducible to the concepts of identity discussed so far. Her liberation from the shtetl comes not in America, but in Russia; her husband, the playwright, is a young anarchist rabble-rouser, with whom she discusses socialism and Zionism and whether these two utopias might not be irreconcilable. They are arrested; Rebeca, rather than being imprisoned, is raped; as the soldiers say, referring to her yellow passport, “no whore could want revolution!”

Eventually, having emigrated to Argentina, Durán becomes infuriated with a rabbi who refuses to grant her a divorce, and commits what for the narrator sounds like a highly implausible murder:

[U]n buen día, con el pretexto falso de obtener una anulación religiosa, mi madre fue a visitar al rabino que la había casado. . . . Éste le explicó que dentro de la ley judía no había iniciativa alguna que la esposa pudiese tomar: el trámite para obtener el get sólo podía iniciar lo el marido, y si éste abandonaba a su mujer o moría, ella se convertía en agunah, sin posibilidad de volverse a casar. Mi madre lo escuchó con fingida resignación durante un buen rato; después, en algún punto de la explicación, lo mató.

[One fine day, with the pretext of obtaining a religious annulment, my mother went to visit the rabbi who had married her. . . . He explained to her that in Jewish law there was no provision for the wife to take the initiative: only the husband could initiate the get [divorce], and if he abandoned his wife or he died, she would become an agunah [a woman who is “chained” to her marriage], without the possibility of remarriage. My mother listened to him with feigned resignation for a good while; then, at some point during the explanation, she killed him.] (120)

Reasoning like the soldiers of the old country, the narrator speculates that a prostitute (unlike a pimp) would have no need of such an “audacious gesture” (126); as Natalia recounts the story, it is too literary—just like Maxi’s—and the narrator inevitably begins to imagine that what “really happened” might have been the basis for Auer’s play “El rufián moldavo”: 
¿Hasta qué punto, bajo un trasparente seudónimo como Theo Auer, el padre de Natalia no se había retratado, idealizado, en ese “rufián moldavo” que termina enamorado de su pupila, hasta el punto de asumir el crimen de ésta, y cuyas víctimas hacen cola ante la cárcel para manifestarle su fidelidad?

[Couldn’t it be that Natalia’s father had used the transparent pseudonym Theo Auer to portray himself, idealized, as that “Moldavian pimp” who ends up so in love with his prostitute that he takes responsibility for her crime, and whose victims line up outside the jail to demonstrate their faithfulness to him] (125)

What is missing in Rebeca’s murder of the rabbi is “a motive” for this “crime of honor,” which the narrator quickly projects onto Theo:

Al contar en su comedia musical la usurpación de un crimen ¿no estaría Theo Auer dejando una clave oculta de sus deseos? ¿Sería su hija Natalia la encargada de realizar esa ilusión? El crimen de honor con que Natalia procuraba rendir homenaje a la memoria de sus padres ¿había tenido motivos tan nobles como los declarados? También al preguntarme por las razones posibles de esta adopción de un delito ajeno surgía inmediatamente una respuesta: una prostituta, en cuanto víctima, no necesita de un gesto audaz para merecer simpatía; un rufián, en cambio, es un verdugo, y ese gesto podría redimirlo.

[By telling in his musical comedy the usurpation of a crime, wouldn’t Theo Auer be leaving hidden key to his desires? Would his daughter Natalia be the one charged with realizing this dream? Did the honor crime with which Natalia meant to pay homage to the memory of her parents really have such noble motives? And also when I asked myself for the possible reasons for taking on someone else’s crime an answer immediately came up: a prostitute, implicitly a victim, doesn’t need an audacious gesture to deserve sympathy; a pimp, on the other hand, is an executioner, and that gesture could redeem him.] (126)

In other words, the narrator finds more plausible the plot of “El rufián moldavo” than the confession of Natalia Auerbach. He prefers her father’s play over her testimony as the more likely historical scenario, since (ironically enough) her version of events is “too literary.”
Part II. Chapter 4

It would make sense, the narrator reasons, for a pimp to murder another criminal in order to redeem himself; he is already an “executioner,” is already tmeim, already cast out from the Jewish community. He is spiritually dead and can fulfill the social need of eliminating an evil without risking his own soul. A prostitute, on the other hand, doesn’t need any kind of audacious gesture to deserve sympathy. However, it is the lack of verisimilitude in Natalia’s story that brings the narrator to propose that Auer, the ex-playwright and aging shadkhes [matchmaker] described in Sami Warschauer’s letter, with his faded formal suit and carnation boutonniere, was a pimp: “Con lápiz y papel en mano intenté redistribuir anécdota y personajes, observaciones y motivos en un esquema diferente, posible, acaso verosímil [With pencil and paper I tried to redistribute anecdote and characters, observations and motives, in a way that seemed possible, perhaps credible]” (123–24). Both the problem and the solution, Natalia’s “fiction” and the alternative fiction the narrator invents to explain it, are measured in terms of literary realism.

Like Maxi’s story, Natalia’s is of a “crime of honor”; yet she frames the story of this honor crime itself as the inverse of Maxi’s: as an attempt to expose the “truth” of her parents, rather than to cover it up:

Quiero depositar en usted la verdad: que sepa que fue un delito de honor, que con ese crimen se intentó vengar a innumerables víctimas, liquidar simbólicamente a quienes ensuciaban la reputación de una comunidad que necesitaba, que siempre va a necesitar que sus hijos respeten un sentido de la justicia más exigente que el de los demás. Dentro de unos días me voy a Israel. Quiero terminar allí mi vida de librepensadora, laica, socialista y feminista, peleando contra esos racistas de mierda que hoy usurpan el poder. Puedo adivinar su sonrisa. No se preocupe: estaré vieja y enferma pero no estoy acabada. Si llega a leer en el diario que una vieja loca le pegó un tiro a Sharon, dedíqueme un pensamiento.

[I want to deposit the truth in you: for you to know that it was a crime of honor, that with that crime they attempted to avenge innumerable victims, to symbolically destroy those who sullied the reputation of a community that needed, that always will need its children to respect a sense of justice stricter than that of others. In a few days I’m going to Israel. I want to end there my life as a freethinker, secularist, socialist and feminist, fighting against those fucking racists who have usurped power today. You can imagine my smile. Don’t worry: I may be old and sick but I’m not done. If you happen to read in the newspaper of a crazy old woman who shot Sharon, spare a thought for me.] (121)
With this final statement, Natalia first globalizes her family history to represent that of the Jewish people and then turns it on its head. With their crime, Natalia insists, her parents “attempted to avenge innumerable victims, to symbolically destroy those who sullied the reputation of a community that needed, that always will need its children to respect a sense of justice stricter than that of others” (121). But just as her earlier story of her mother had undermined the \textit{blanca} narrative, in her next breath she now ruptures the tacitly metonymic relationship of Jews to Israel—the mythic narrative of both Jewish transhistorical continuity and of identity with the land of Israel. She creates an analogy in which Czarist Russia ghettoized Jews as Likudnik Israel ghettoizes Palestinians; and this equates to a political stand \textit{contra} not Zionism as such but the triumph of Zionism as ideology: its implicitness, its invisibility, its “postideological” ideological status, its invisibility \textit{qua} ideology and therefore the unconscious acceptance of it as reality.\footnote{11}

The Auer family story thus becomes a counter-myth of resistance and a new model for the narrator of literature: rather than legality or illegality, truth or fiction, the only value against which his narrative can now gain any traction is through discovery of characters’ motives. Unable to reconcile the \textit{remnant} with history—to fit the unwieldy pieces into a smooth narrative—what the narrator proposes instead is a motive. Far from revealing a repressed historical content, a family secret, Natalia Auer’s confession is a family history, that is, a fiction:

\[\text{¿Tenía algún sentido mentir cuando alguien se siente en vísperas de abandonar la vida, y desea confiar a un casi desconocido un secreto de familia?} \]
\[\text{Al mismo tiempo que me hacía esta pregunta se me imponía una respuesta evidente: era el momento, el último posible y sin duda el definitivo, para intentar modificar el pasado, para erigir una estatua, ya lejos de toda verdad bajamente documental, de los padres ausentes. El secreto de familia anunciado, lejos de ser tal, sería sólo una leyenda urdida para permanecer, aunque sólo fuera durante el frágil lapso de mi existencia individual, unos años más de los que ella podía darle; sobre todo con la autoridad que podía prestarle un transmisor al que ningún lazo de sangre unía al personaje cuyo pasado se deseaba honrar o simplemente blanquear, de quien se procuraba legar un monumento verbal. Sí, de pronto sentía disiparse mis últimas dudas: la confesión in extremis de Natalia Auerbach era una ficción que procuraba encubrir el verdadero secreto de familia.} \]

[Did it make any sense to lie when one was about to die and desires to entrust a family secret to a virtual stranger? At the same time that I asked...
myself this question, an obvious answer imposed itself on me: it was the moment, the last possible and doubtless the definitive one, to try to modify the past, to erect a statue, already far from all basely documentary truth, of the absent parents. The promised family secret, far from being that, would be only a legend woven to last, although it were only during the fragile span of my individual existence, some years more than those she could give to it; above all with the authority that it would borrow from a transmitter to whom no blood tie united the character whose past was being honored or simply whitened, of whom she attempted to leave a verbal monument. Yes, suddenly I felt my last doubts dissipate: the deathbed confession of Natalia Auerbach was a fiction that attempted to cover up the real family secret.]

(124–25)

Natalia’s confession retells the story of the Moldavian pimp as family history; but the narrator rereads it as a false confession—as a fiction. However, the narrator’s realization that Natalia has constructed a monument to the fictional version of her parents to cover up the truth does not equate with the positive knowledge of the true family history. Rather, it permits yet another fiction—the one the narrator has just provided.

The intertwined generations of the Warschauers and the Auers seem to embody a Benjaminian apprehension of history not only in spirit but in technique. We jump from Natalia’s narrative to the narrator’s investigation of the Warschauers and back again, trying to figure out where we stand, and this movement from place to place is simultaneously what weaves the novel and what prevents it from revealing the answer to Natalia’s secret, even as the narrator proclaims that he is convinced of it. As Beatriz Sarlo describes it:

En el fragmentarismo de Benjamin, en su reivindicación estética y epistemológica del collage y la cita, no hay simplemente una ruptura aliviada o celebratoria con la totalidad, sino una crisis de la totalidad que, al mismo tiempo, se mantiene como horizonte de las operaciones históricas y críticas. [ . . . ] Diría que en Benjamin hay nostalgia de la totalidad al mismo tiempo que ésta va siendo erosionada en la dimensión estética y en el mundo de la experiencia. Benjamin es un escritor de la crisis, pero no su apologista.
of experience. Benjamin is a writer of crisis, but not its apologist. (Sarlo, “Olvidar a Benjamin” 85–86; emphasis in original)

The fragmentarism of Cozarinsky’s novel is not only a necessary response to history’s exclusions (by reclaiming them, it must renounce a smoothly total history by admitting that which does not fit), but also an aesthetic project in response to that exclusion, by which a totality—even an artistic one—would be tantamount to an apology of crisis, the ontologization of history by which the new historical fiction secures its place in the market and by which model minorities are rewarded by being allowed to choose from among the stereotypes that once defined them.

The narrator struggles to make Rebeca Durán’s story fit into his view of history, only to come to see his own view of history as the problem, his desire to identify with the past, to unleash something within it—an identity, an affinity—that would make sense of the present. Rebeca Durán’s story defies pat categories: it repoliticizes anti-Semitism in its historical context, and brings a certain degree of resistance back into the norm rather than the exception of Jewish life in both old country and new, among men and women—thus blurring the dichotomies at work. Recontextualized, Jewish criminality and prostitution can be understood as part of larger struggles without arrogating to themselves a transhistorical continuity.

The true and implausible story of Rebeca Durán is thus the reverse of Raquel Liberman’s false but believable testimony, and in this way it is an emblem of the work that the novel does with history more generally. At first, the narrator found only things that “didn’t fit” into his project; but eventually it is this misfit evidence that frees him, disrupting the certainties that have held him in place. Similarly, all of the novel’s characters are most imprisoned not in suffering or in struggle but, by contrast, when what they believe themselves to be is so overdetermined that it prevents them from becoming themselves, from expanding in space and time. Cozarinsky, in a Nietzschean vein, makes his protagonist come to see the desire to control the past as that which imprisons him; and, conversely, it is the appreciation that history does not signify in the service of the present order which allows him to become most fully himself.

The Third Mode: The Deconstructive Blanca

While Cozarinsky’s novel has been read together with the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery as retelling what I have called the blanca narrative (Nuriel 106), it should now be clear that this retelling generates a
very different effect. Before demonstrating the full deconstructive potential of the metafictional *blanca*, it’s worth emphasizing that the novel emerges from and dialogues with forms of postmodern cultural production which deliberately undo “every narrative point of reference which could allow for reconstruction of the plot” (Pavis 57). The metafictional motor of the novel, the satirical yet still potent *blanca* narrative of the play within the novel, functions as a mise en abyme of a hopelessly old-fashioned mimetic regime which is itself historical both in content and in staging. This play is a standard against which the novel’s rejection of mimesis can be measured, even as it is simultaneously an interpretive matrix by which the narrator and reader assess fragmentary historical information.

The deconstructive force of the *blanca* narrative as aporia was able to emerge in *El rufián moldavo* because each of its repetitions is linked conscientiously to that which it excludes: each version of the *blanca* myth is compelling—both to teller and listener—yet also inevitably leaves an indivisible remainder, which the narrator meticulously notes. The more iterations of the story, the more leftovers with which to contend. Furthermore, in every process by which a character attempts to become the author of his or her history, there lies a Borgesian “crime of truth.” Natalia Auerbach’s honor crime created a story of an honor crime to avenge an honor crime, and Maxi Warschauer’s honor crime avenged his own crime which he committed in unconscious reenactment of his repressed origins in crime; both of these are also crimes of truth, because they bear an iterative function and trigger an impasse from which truth cannot again be established, yet interpellates its readers and—in the novel—further generations in perpetuating itself as both story and lie. The narrator, then, is himself committing a kind of meta-truth crime, in narrating the denarrativized, fragmentary histories of truth criminals.

The novel’s Benjaminian fragmentarism can (perhaps fittingly) also be understood by inverting one of the philosopher’s more famous aphorisms from *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. In the fifth thesis, Benjamin wrote that “any image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear indefinitely” (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 255). The contemporary historical fiction of white slavery had already displaced the threat from the historical realm into the symbolic by reiterating the mytheme Liberman/Alsogaray as a way of “remembering”; and we can see this taken to a postmodern *reductio* in *El rufián moldavo*, where “every image of the past” that is recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to *reappear* indefinitely. It is the endlessness rather than the end of memory that threatens the narrator’s ability to continue with his project; and he can neither continue writing it—not even a “crónica de la imposibilidad de
conocer la historia [chronicle of the impossibility of knowing the history],” which chronicle might be one way to characterize Piglia’s *Respiracion artificial*—nor can he detach himself from its characters (151).

In the previous chapter, history became *destiny* in the double movement Adorno had critiqued as the “ontologization of history,” which “permits one without a glance to attribute the power of Being to historical powers, and thus to justify submission to historical situations as though it were commanded by Being itself” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 130). Here, by contrast, there is a double movement *away*, a double negation or betrayal of destiny which correlates to denarrativizing the story—erasing any putative certainty that has accumulated up until that point. Every crime is also a “crime of truth,” and the full deconstructive force of the novel built on crimes of truth is only potentiated in its epilogue, when the narrator has already abandoned any attempt to write about any of the characters who have filled the novel. Having already turned away from “history” as coextensive with an antiquatedly mimetic mode of representation, the narrator has also rejected the possibility of writing a novel (142); and now he rejects any possibility of writing about the past—in effect, disavowing the text of *El rufián moldavo* we have just read, just as the fictional playwright Theo Auer had disavowed his eponymous play.

Yet Auer’s disavowal of his play could not erase its meaning or minimize its impact in the past—on the contrary, as we have seen, the honor crime it represented continued to play out into the future; and, similarly, the narrator’s negation of what we have read approaches asymptotically a limit on expression—a negation of a negation—such that he rebounds in each moment of renunciation toward narrative again. In this sense, the novel which had progressively *un*written its historical investigation, turning each clue into a one-off, breaking the rhythm of the story and denarrativizing the possible history of Jewish Argentina to the point that the novel’s narrator gives up on writing anything at all, in the moment of declaring any knowledge of the history of these characters impossible, immediately rebounds into narrative:

A pesar de mi decisión de no escribir la historia, ni siquiera una crónica de la imposibilidad de conocer la historia de los personajes cuya existencia, sentía, había estado espionando, me resultaba difícil desprenderme de ellos. Pensaba que en el Hogar podría haber quedado algún efecto personal de Sami que no interesase a la dirección y yo pudiera hacerle llegar a Maxi.

[In spite of my decision to not write the history, not even a chronicle of the impossibility of knowing the history of the characters on whose existence, I felt, I had been spying, it was difficult for me to detach myself from them. I thought that in the Home some personal effect of Sami’s might have been
left behind that the staff wouldn’t care about and I could get it to Maxi.]
(151)

Having already given up his investigation, it is now in the refusal to write that
the narrator is moved to see if Sami might have left something more behind.
Sami was the first speaker in the novel, and the attempt to restore Sami’s shoe
box of faded papers as sole patrimony to Maxi was the initial plot device that
initiated the whole quest: searching for the play for which Sami and Perla had
appeared photographed in one of these old programs, the narrator was given
instead the mislabeled play “El rufián moldavo.”

The narrator is searching for nothing other than a deus ex machina, a
quintessential return to narrative order by which all will be resolved with
the introduction of some new element—yet this element echoes the very
first “find” with which the novel’s plot began. The rejection of narrative flips
over on itself, and the story starts again. Perhaps it is in this sense that Gilles
Deleuze and Félix Guattari marked the gesture of “double turning-away” as a
definition of “post-signifying Jewish subjectivity”:

It is this double turning-away that draws the positive line of flight. The
prophet is the main figure in this assemblage; he needs a sign to guarantee
the word of God, he is himself marked by a sign indicating the special regime
to which he belongs. [. . . ] Even the prophet [. . . ] is fundamentally a trai-
tor and thus fulfills God’s order better than anyone who remained faithful
could. (Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus 122–23)

To betray the letter of the law fulfills its intention; to demand a special
sign where none is, and to refuse to move forward when necessary is what
unleashes destiny: first by disavowing it, and then by inadvertently fulfilling
it. Cozarinsky’s postmodern narrator must betray the narrative in order to
proceed. Thus, the main body of the novel ends with the narrator’s doubt of
Maxi’s confession and simultaneous hopeful and fearful recognition of it as
destiny: “La historia me pareció fantasiosa, si no llanamente inventada, litera-
tura en el peor sentido de la palabra [. . . ] [The story seemed imaginative to
me, if not simply invented, literature in the worst sense of the word]” (145);
yet at the same time “Creí, sin embargo, reconocer en ese argumento una
oscura noción de destino [I believed, however, that I recognized in that plot
an obscure notion of destiny]” (145):

De pronto, tuve miedo: me vi, en mis aún lejanos y apenas imaginables
cincuenta años, arrojándome con ojos bien abiertos a lo que dicte el deseo,
a quién sabe qué aventuras donde yo sería el único en vislumbrar el exorcismo de apuntes, bibliotecas e insomnios. Miedo, sí, pero también un principio de curiosidad y, ¿me atreveré a admitirlo? de esperanza.

[Suddenly, I was afraid: I saw myself, in my still far-off and hardly imaginable fifties, throwing myself with my eyes open at whatever desire should dictate, at who knows what adventures where I would be the only one to discern the exorcism of notes, libraries and insomnias. Fear, yes, but also a beginning of curiosity and—Will I dare to admit it?—of hope.] (146–47)

The epilogue—the afterword—picks up with this hope of finding, again, the narrative starting point: returning to the retirement home where Sami Warschauer had died. Yet the facility has been closed, and even the bar next door which he had once visited with Sami has “decaído [declined]” (152); and the owner asserts that he too is closing up shop. Even the vacant lot out front has been sold—“Hasta el baldío de enfrente se vendió. Lo compraron los judíos del cementerio, necesitaban ampliarse y lo pagaron bien [The Jews of the cemetery bought it, they needed to expand and they paid well]” (152).

In the epilogue, the Jewish cemetery which has appeared frequently in the novel up until this point assumes greater importance, spilling over into the land it had once proscribed itself as designated for the “impure” pimps and prostitutes. The novel had begun with an epigraph from Alberto Tabbi: “Para hablar con los vivos necesito palabras que los muertos me enseñaron [To speak with the living I need words that the dead taught me]”; and in its first chapter Don Samuel had insisted that the dead can communicate with us in dreams (12). Up until the epilogue, gravestones had seemed to provide the only permanent proof amid conjecture and myth. When Zsuzsa died, her tombstone was inscribed phonetically “Yuya,” without her birthdate or last name—because these were unknown—and the phrase “Dejó a Samuel el 4 de septiembre de 1934 [She left Samuel on September 4, 1934].” The only certainty was the date of death and the location of the grave (72). (And the date of death was, in this case, the birth of the revenant: the beginning of Zsuzsa’s life as a ghost, haunting Sami and Perla and, eventually, the narrator.) Similarly, toward the end of his investigation, the narrator had confirmed his suspicion that Rebeca Durán had been a “real” prostitute by locating her grave in the cementerio de rufianes [pimps’ cemetery] in Granadero Baigorria, with the epitaph “from Constantinople” (132). Yet of Durán, too, the narrator remarks, “no one will ever know her real name” (141).

At the moment of locating Rebeca Durán’s tomb, the narrator had experienced an instantaneous flashback to his Jewish grandfather’s funeral: “En ese
momento recuperé un episodio de mi infancia que hubiese creído olvidado. Tenía ocho años cuando murió mi abuelo materno, el único, débil lazo, con la tradición judía dentro de una familia totalmente asimilada [In that moment I recovered an episode from my childhood that I would have thought forgotten. I was eight years old when my maternal grandfather died, the only—albeit weak link with the Jewish tradition in a completely assimilated family]” (133).

As the young narrator wanders off to look at a row of tombstones facing away from the others, he is yanked back by his mother. When he asked, much later, why some of the tombstones had faced away from the rest of the cemetery, he had been told that they belonged to “people who don’t deserve to be remembered by us” (134). However, the memory of being dragged, “con un violento empujón [with a violent shove]” back to the funeral ceremony—having forgotten himself—brought him face to face with the collective forgetting in the cemetery: “Hoy sé que, en una fecha posterior al entierro de esos desdichados, la colectividad se separaría definitivamente de sus reprobos: para ellos, ni siquiera tumbas de cara a un paredón; cementerios separados, aislados, olvidados [Today I know that, after those unfortunates had been buried, the community would separate itself definitively from its reprobates: for them, not even tombs facing a wall; separate cemeteries, isolated, forgotten]” (134).

The return to the place where the investigation and the novel began triggers another flashback for the narrator: he remembers the unusual marble tabletops from his first visit with Sami Warschauer, “Pero con ese recuerdo reciente llegó también el de un episodio de una novela española leída mucho antes. Me sacudió un brevísimo espasmo, mezcla de miedo e intuición; lo siguió, inmediatamente, otro recuerdo: el rechazo del viejo Warschauer a sentarse ante una mesa, su preferencia por quedarse de pie ante la barra [But with that recent memory came that of an episode read long before in a Spanish novel. The briefest spasm shook me, a mix of fear and intuition; immediately, another memory followed it: the way old Warschauer had refused to sit at a table, his preference to stand at the bar]” (153). The instantaneous associative chain of memory makes the narrator act without thinking, wordlessly lifting up the nearest tabletop, with a strength “of which he wouldn’t have thought himself capable”; and, stupefied, he and the bar’s owner contemplate the Hebrew inscriptions on what are clearly tombstones from the Jewish cemetery.

The sequence of memory that allows the narrator to discover what has been hidden all along in plain sight, the flip side of the visible, is worth pausing over: he first remembers his impression of the bar when he had visited with Sami, how he was left with a “resabio de otra época [“aftertaste of another era”], which memory in turn triggers the memory of “an episode in a Spanish novel” read long before; he then is shaken by a “brevísimo” spasm of fear and
intuition, and then immediately he remembers Warschauer’s refusal to sit at a marble table. The cognitive-emotional process by which the narrator reveals the underside of the mundane is a microcosm of the wandering he has done throughout the novel—and which other characters in the novel had done before him, provoking his skepticism. The novel began with a fleeting impression of another time—a residue, an aftertaste was what started the narrator on his journey from the very same space of encounter with Sami Warschauer; he then went out on an intertextual tangent, reading the play “El rufián moldavo” accidentally—because it was in the wrong folder at the Institute of Theater History—and that contingent, metonymic reading led him to perceive the “other era” metatextually, in the terms of the play’s representational regime. This was followed with the denarrativization of the characters’ stories and the conclusion of the main text with the fear “and hope” with which the narrator determines to stop writing, yet desires to find something else remaining of Sami—the very desire which has led him back to the retirement home, and eventually the bar: back to the beginning.

The investigation followed this wandering path, defined obscurely by the mythic structure of the play “El rufián moldavo” and the narrator’s different modes of reading it. Yet the epilogue condenses this narrative still further, distilling from it a nutshell summary of the novel’s relational components: intertextuality, denarrativization and action link up with each other via metonymic associations. At the same time that this brings closure to one interpretation of the novel’s structure, the reference to “a Spanish novel” explodes outward, inviting infinite associations. We can thus reread the novel not as having woven together disparate stories into a synthetic narrative, but rather as a perpetually denarrativizing framework within which synthetic, autonomous stories wind around each other: where they are combed out, rather than woven together. The perception of moving closer to or farther from some resolution that applies to all of them is a matter of perspective; the narrator’s decision at the end of the novel not to write indicates an ending; yet the epilogue shows that the stories will circulate indefinitely.

At the end of the epilogue, the narrator is awakened from a vivid dream of a young girl in a faraway country, undoubtedly one of the dead spirits “who communicate with us in dreams” (12). She murmurs to him in “un idioma desconocido, palabras cuyo sentido, no sé cómo, entendí [in an unknown language, words whose meaning, I don’t know how, I understood]” (156). He awakens to a violent rainstorm and thinks of the dead in the cemetery of Avellaneda, in a fantastical reunion of the “forbidden” section to which the pimps and prostitutes had been quarantined with the “decent” section of sacred ground in the cemetery of Avellaneda:
Pensé que esa lluvia anegaría también la sección abandonada del cementerio de Avellaneda, su tierra ya removida cuando se arrancaron las lápidas para permitir enterrar allí a nuevos muertos, muertos decentes cuyos nombres podrían ser exhibidos sin vergüenza en flamantes lápidas costosas, muertos que no sabrían que en esa tierra fresca y renovada se reunirían con los restos sin nombre de quienes lo tenían escondido bajo las mesas de un bar, sus rostros lacerados en fotografías de esmalte, si es que éstas no habían sido llanamente arrancadas del mármol reciclado. Estos muertos respetables llegarían sin duda ignorantes de la felicidad que había podido procurar un crimen impune, crimen de puro orgullo, con el que más de setenta años antes una judía anónima y olvidada había soñado lavar el honor de una comunidad que no iba a escapar al común destino argentino de corrupción y silencio, cuyos representantes hallarían nuevas ocasiones de escarnio al preferir los cálculos prudentes de la política a la memoria de sus víctimas.

[I thought that the rain would also flood the abandoned section of the Avellaneda cemetery, its earth already turned up when the headstones were torn out to allow new dead to be buried there, decent dead whose names could be exhibited without shame in costly brand-new headstones, dead who wouldn't know that in that freshly tilled soil they would join the nameless remains of those who had been hidden under the tables of a bar, their lacerated faces in enameled photographs, if they hadn't been completely torn off the recycled marble. These respectable dead would arrive doubtless ignorant of the happiness that an unpunished crime had been able to produce, a crime of pure pride, with which more than seventy years ago an anonymous and forgotten Jewish woman had dreamed of restoring the honor of a community that wasn't going to escape the common Argentine destiny of corruption and silence, whose representatives would find new occasions for shame by preferring the prudent calculations of politics to the memory of their victims.] (156–57)

The dream of the dead girl murmuring words in a foreign language equates with a dead body stripped of a headstone, and by extension to broader practices of disavowal and, eventually, forgetting. In the cemetery, the “unclean” were first segregated from the rest—their memory effaced by stripping away their lacquered photographs, with knives or fire—and then “they” were removed: their bodily remains already gone, their headstones were taken away to make room for new bodies of the “respectable dead.” The unquiet spirits are nameless and faceless, and not even their names can be verified. And yet the literary—“the Spanish novel read long ago”—can erupt in a modest bar
to find by a chain of intertextual free association the very names that have been effaced from narrative. The headstones have been moved, the portraits defaced, but there is writing in stone to disrupt, and thereby denaturalize, the narrative of forgetting.

Even the gravestone robbers are thus incorporated into the novel’s movement, which in turn feeds like a tributary into deeper intertextualities. The episode from the “Spanish novel” can trigger any number of associations, not limited to but clearly evocative of the scene in Camilo José Cela’s *La colmena* (1951) in which the narrator reveals that at Doña Rosa’s café, “where the customers are people who believe that things happen just because, that it isn’t worthwhile to try to change anything,” the marble table tops are old tombstones, on some of which, the narrator remarks, “que todavía guardan las letras, un ciego podría leer, pasando las yemas de los dedos por debajo de la mesa: Aquí yacen los restos mortales de la Señorita Esperanza Redondo, muerta en la flor de la juventud [that still conserve the letters, a blind man could read, moving the pads of his fingertips along the underside of the table: Here lie the mortal remains of Miss Esperanza Redondo, dead in the flower of her youth]” (Cela 23).15 And yet what is still more evocative of the episode Cozarinsky’s narrator remembers from the “Spanish novel” is actually the scene as rewritten by José Luis Dibildos for Mario Camus’s film version of *La colmena* (Spain, 1982).16 Whereas in Cela’s novel the narrator had matter-of-factly told readers where the tables came from, in the film it is discovered by don Ricardo Sorbedo, played by the famous Spanish actor Francisco (“Paco”) Rabal.17

The affinity of *El rufián moldavo* with *La colmena* goes deeper than the borrowed device of tombstone tables, and inheres in what made the trope so effective in the first place: the removed headstone simultaneously disinters the past and reburies it, symbolizing a limit on the ability to articulate loss, or what philosopher Jean-François Lyotard called a *différend*.18 The persistence of engraved names whose headstones have not only been stolen but are then resignified as coextensive with the smooth and pleasant surface of the everyday—not only erasing the particular names from public view but literally covering them up with their own flipside. They of course symbolize the hidden workings of repressive state power in Francoist Spain, yet Cela’s marble tabletops simultaneously *make literal* the way power had long been *symbolized* in dialectical thought as concealing its “hidden underbelly” under false dualities, alternating its polar faces of war/politics; tradition/crisis; civilization/barbarism to prevent glimpsing the whole. The tabletops thus evoke the *différend*, giving us an instantaneous glimpse of what Wendy Brown called the “wounded attachments” that define collective identity in the
wake of repression, the perpetual lack of closure both symbolized and liter-
alized by the grave that is forever open, marked and unmarked, vulnerable, desecrated.19

At the same time, however, the trope is borrowed: the intertextual trans-
mission of the tombstone tabletops from La colmena to El rufián moldavo
means that this symbol of unspeakability was communicated: it was read in a
novel “long ago,” and it was remembered, flashing up as a profoundly histori-
cal analogy in the midst of denarrativization. Thus something ideologically
impossible under Franco was nonetheless written in stone—albeit in a novel
rather than a public monument, and published in Buenos Aires to avoid cen-
sorship. Moreover, when it is cited in yet another novel, the symbol becomes
more objective, weightier still. In citation, the trope becomes strangely more
solid than if it hadn’t been borrowed—because it has been communicated,
and is now part of not only an infinitely associative literary memory but also
a shared jargon potentiating historical thought among a collective of readers.

Denarrativization is thus not the emptying out of historical meaning but,
on the contrary, the cultivation of irreducible singularities. None of the nov-
els’ characters are liberated through the explicit articulation of an historically
recognizable truth; yet they are dreamed in ways that free up associations
among different fictions, creating a relational, intertextual basis for histori-
cal thought, and a roaming metafictional prostitute whose proliferating tales
enact all the contradictions attributed to the literary prostitute. Like Cela’s
tombstone tables, the “implausible” story of the rebel prostitute and the “plau-
sible” tale of the golden-hearted pimp alike will be retold, and in the retell-
ing acquire the gravity and the force of memory, and begin to spin out a new
intertextual world.

At the end of the novel’s epilogue, the narrator no longer dreams of under-
standing how it was for the past; and in his imagination there is no longer a
wall dividing past and present, pure and impure, as he visualizes the Jewish
cemetery flooded with a rain that will mix together the remains without any
reverence for such distinctions. He asks himself, in the last words of the novel,
“cuánta lluvia, cuánta tierra removida, cuántos gusanos serán necesarios para
que de su descomposición surja algo rico y extraño, algo libre de afectos y
agriovs impagos, que ninguna culpa enturbie, que ningún memorial celebre
[how much rain, how much dug-up earth, how many worms will be neces-
sary to make something rich and strange crop up, something free of affec-
tions and unpaid offenses, that no guilt mars, that no memorial celebrates]”
(158). He recognizes that history will never provide either the identity, or the
idealized reflection of himself he has been seeking as an author—and this
recognition allows him to write.20 The fragmentary novel thus allows the his-
torical to emerge and scandalize, confuse and provoke, and yet to remain, in its specificity, unassimilable as an explanation of the present: it both contains and is driven by a metafictional, intertextual prostitute whose multiplicitous, self-contradictory stories exceed the premises of the novel's own framework, suggesting infinite readings, infinite interpretations.
Chapter 1

1. Although prostitution functions as a discourse and I analyze it as such in this chapter, part of its discursive specificity is the way that it jumps from one discourse to another—particularly back to the legal and medical discourses from which it emerged. This happens most notably in defining, classifying and explaining the literary prostitute. For this reason, I think that the most complete and accurate way to view prostitution is as a discourse that is also inherently inter- and metadiscursive.

2. For a discussion of this tendency of legal histories to represent the law as a progressive development, minimizing ruptures, see Farinati 42–44; see Atondo Rodríguez 30–52, for a discussion of how the practices of prostitution were "transplanted" from the metropolis to Mexico in the sixteenth century. One clear continuity is the idea that it is the prostitute's visibility—and hence the visibility of prostitution—that is the problem (D’Halmar 167; Gamboa, Santa 126–27, 256).

3. The abolition of prostitution was not entertained seriously at the time, as the attitude of tolerance as the lesser of two evils extended to Queen Isabel la Católica (Ladero Quesada 252). See Atondo Rodríguez 30–52 for a detailed discussion of how the practices of prostitution were "transplanted" from the metropolis to Mexico in the sixteenth century.

4. While Portuguese laws on prostitution had differed and would again differ from Spanish laws, under the Philippine union (1581–1640) the main trends in prostitution law in America were set by Spanish law and administered by the Inquisition. Spanish law had discounted prostitutes as witnesses implicitly since at least the mid-thirteenth century, when Alfonso X discredited the testimony of anyone "que fuere de mala vida" (Siete Partidas 67).

5. According to Socolow, while there was no clear legal difference under Felipe II among adultery and premarital sex and prostitution—all were lapses in "virtue" that jeopardized family "honor"—in practice this was about regulating the sexuality of the women who belonged to upper-class men. Thus, "there was little direct control over the sexuality of lower-class women" (Socolow 8). Prostitution thus represented the one terrain in which the sexuality of...
working women was directly regulated. The prevailing racism of colonial thought adds another layer to the selective enforcement of sexual norms: sexual “excess” was already attributed to women of color and was used both as grounds to ignore their victimization as prostitutes (Waldron in Levin 168) and as a way of stigmatizing the choice to avoid domestic service or slavery (Socolow 141).

6. Patricia Manning has chronicled the practices of Inquisitorial literary censorship, which were broad and thorough, but eclectic enough to seem incoherent, since any precise explanation of their criteria has been lost (Manning 6). At the same time, it is clear that the Inquisition was not particularly concerned with literature itself until the seventeenth century, at which point it became very concerned with hidden meanings in literary texts (10).

7. Darwinism, Positivism and Higienismo all dovetail in Latin America, where these trends all more or less arrived at once and took off at an accelerated pace, and where national prophylaxis laws and practices came together with Panamerican health initiatives such as the Oficina Sanitaria Internacional and the Unión Panamericana. For a detailed history of this nexus of law, medicine and religion in Chile, see Subercaseaux 203–31; their role in Argentina and Uruguay is also discussed in Guy 1999; 2000 and Trochon 2003; 2006, respectively. See Nouzeilles, *Ficciones somáticas* for her fundamental analysis of how literature of the era thematized higienista preoccupations as an ailing body of the nation. See Salessi, *Médicos maleantes* for the study of higienismo as a nexus of medical, legal and literary discourses targeting homosexuality and how that which it criminalized was also something it disseminated.

8. The arguments over abolition, legalization and regulation continued into the twentieth century. For a thorough periodization of prostitution in Santiago de Chile, see Góngora Escobedo; in Buenos Aires, see Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires* and *White Slavery and Mothers Alive and Dead*; in Montevideo, see Trochon, *Las mercenarias del amor*; for a comparative approach to prostitution in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, see Trochon, *Las rutas de Eros*; in Mexico, see Núñez; Atondo Rodríguez; Ríos de la Torre and Suárez Escobar.

9. This organization is today the Panamerican Health Organization (PAHO), part of the World Health Organization. See Kiernan, “100 años de panamericanismo 1902–2002,” for a history of the organization.

10. Within this overview, the central tension of hygienism between epidemiology and morality played out differently in foreign policy within each bilateral national relationship. For example, in U.S.–Chile relations, the abolition movement was strengthened by the substantive involvement of U.S. physicians as advisors to the Chilean Ministry of Health: a piece of legislation known as the Código Long, named for its author, the U.S. hygienist John Long, came out the year after the Código Panamericano. The Código Long abolished the existing national regulation of prostitution and sought to criminalize the exercise, solicitation and promotion of prostitution (see Góngora Escobedo 276–278 and Pieper-Mooney 34–35). At the same time, Chile's role in the OIS up until the 1920s had been fundamental in developing a modern and unified corpus of national regulations for prostitution in the interest of preventing the spread of diseases.

11. By the second conference of the OIS, in 1905, countries reported on the virtual extermination of syphilis through the quarantine of prostitutes in a so-called Model Hospital (Guatemala); the creation of a new Consejo Nacional de Higiene (National Health Board), moving the health inspections of prostitution from the municipal to the national level (Uruguay) (International Union of American Republics 383, 419–20). Other examples of “vital international health issues” seemed murkier: Venezuela reported exhaustively on the statistics of marriage, including of ethnic and national intermarriage (429); and an exhaustive statistical composite was maintained of not only of infectious diseases but of all diseases and causes of death in the Americas in a bit of a Positivist delirium (for example, ten cases of “non-classified
diseases of female genitals” [437]). Immigration laws and quarantine practices were also discussed (International Sanitary Conference of the American Republics 150).

12. Such a generalization relies on existing legal scholarship that has studied the persistence of colonial views of women and the lower classes in the consolidation of modern Latin American penal codes. Osvaldo Barreneche argues in *Dentro de la ley* (2001) that the “transitional” period in Argentina, between the *Virreinato de la Plata* (1776) and the first modern constitution (1853), is when all of the main features of the modern justice system were formed, which were then unfit for implementing democracy, such that a highly unequal system of punishment replicated colonial practices, blurring the distinctions between colonial and modern law (see Barreneche). This is a growing area of interest within legal studies, producing scholarship that breaks with dominant views of national legal histories. See also Sedeillan (on the development of the municipal penal code in Buenos Aires in the late nineteenth century); León (Chile, 1810–1860).

13. Gálvez, *La trata de blancas*. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.

14. Gálvez also took anecdotes from current newspaper articles; his statistics were taken from the *Dispensario de Salubridad* [so-called Public Health Clinic], which functioned as the registry for prostitutes, keeping track of their medical examinations beginning in 1889. For the checkered history of the practice of registering prostitutes in Buenos Aires, see Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires*; a summary of the statistics Gálvez used can be viewed in *Anuario estadístico de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires* 217.

15. Sicardi, *El libro extraño*. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.


17. Ignacio Sánchez Prado’s 2009 book *Naciones intelectuales: Las fundaciones de la modernidad literaria Mexicana, 1917–1959* argues, in distinction to traditional literary histories, that modern Mexican literature was founded in postrevolutionary articulations of “the Mexican” that both elide and complement the literary and political institutions of the time. See Sánchez Prado.

18. See Butler, *Subjects* for the notion of lack in the history of the subject in relation to Hegel. It is striking how much scholarship is dedicated to treating the prostitute as “marginalized subject” and yet is rooted as it is in the notion of the subject, it reinscribes the same “enigma” of the legal prostitute: a secret that remits to another secret in an unending chain. See Roby for the prostitute as politically challenged subject; see Smyth Anderson and Estes, for whom the insufficiency of the subject to define the prostitute is due to the way society “bars” the prostitute-subject; see Dickenson, who denies that either women or property are objects, yet uses this interesting premise to anchor a moral critique of social practices in which the inflexible category of the subject makes for a “feminist” analysis in which the role of prostitution is to point out the need for women to be fully realized as subjects, and the dangers “when they are not” (yet there is no positive example of women fully actualized in this way).

19. Schlickers provides an exhaustive and rigorous approach to these questions, as well as a chronology of the novels that assesses them thematically and stylistically, from 1880–1910. See also Nouzeilles, *Ficciones somáticas* and Prendes.

20. Among the writers who published their works on prostitution under pseudonyms are César Tiempo, D’Halmar, Fray Mocho, Julián Martel and María Carolina Geel, which enhances the sense that the theme of prostitution is taboo, while it also adds power metatextually to their protagonists’ name changes.

21. See Lepine for the military tradition of the *nom de guerre* in the French Army.

22. D’Halmar. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.

23. *Purisimita* is an affectionate diminutive of the superlative *purísima* (purest) frequently applied to the Virgin Mary.
24. The social intention of the novel and its break with classic determinism was clear in the original title: the book was initially published as *La Lucero (Vicios de Chile)* in 1902; D’Halmar eventually dropped the subtitle and changed the title to *Juana Lucero*.

25. Gamboa, *Santa*. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine. See Chapter 2 for a detailed analysis of Santa’s name.

26. Cambaceres. All citations to the text refer to this edition; all translations are mine.

27. Gnutzmann. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine. As we shall explore in Chapter 2, we can also consider Cambaceres’s first-person narrator as instantiating the metatextual tendency within the discourse of prostitution.

28. Peluffo. The Martinian idea of “tiempos ruines,” to which Peluffo aludes comes from the prologue to Juan Antonio Pérez Bonalde’s *El poema de Nicaragua* (1882), in which Martí contrasts the baseness of modern times with the poetic spirit.

29. Sánchez, *Historia de la literatura peruana*. Peluffo addresses the nicknaming of Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera in the context of professional jealousy and misogyny.

30. Valenzuela. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.

31. Zeiger, *Nombre de guerra*. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.

32. Guerra, *Muñeca brava*. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.

33. Rivera Letelier. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.

34. Lamborghini. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.

35. Fuguet, *Tinta Roja*. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.

36. Díaz-Mas.

37. See Westphal for a history of the torture ship as well as references to the various human rights reports that led to its exposure. For the role of the eponymous ship in the War of the Pacific, see Espinosa.

38. Ludmer, *El género gauchesco*. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.

39. I am invoking Ludmer’s idea of “use” to designate the literary specificity of how the prostitute’s voice is constructed in literature to signify within that literature as “other.” This focus is different from what John Beverley and others began calling “la voz del otro [the voice of the other]” in the early 1990s, which brought postcolonial theory to bear on the literary genre of *testimonio* in order to deconstruct the authority with which first-person narratives of marginalized people can be assessed “objectively” as more or less truthful. Focusing on the “use” of the prostitute’s voice allows us to analyze in literary terms how the voice is manufactured, how it “sounds,” and how this sound and construction functions within the broader discourse of prostitution.

40. Gálvez, *Nacha Regules*. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.

41. See Chapter 2 for a detailed analysis of another attempt Santa makes to tell the story of how she got her name. In this case, the narrator summarizes the sequence of events leading to her baptism in much the same way, removing it from the dialogue she is having and translating it into pure information (Gamboa, *Santa* 358).

42. Tiempo, *Versos de una p...*. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.

43. For an overview of the Clara Beter controversy, see Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman* 34–37; Graff Zivin 101–107; see also Tiempo, “La verdadera historia de Clara Beter.”

44. In fact, Tiempo chose the name “Beter” because it evoked the English word “bitter”—apparently not realizing that it sounded exactly like the word “better” (Tiempo, “La verdadera historia de Clara Beter”). As we shall see, there are important exceptions to the “rule” that the prostitute dies at the end of the Naturalist novel; in fact, Latin American Naturalism (and particularly later Naturalist texts) found many ways out of this, as the inevitable ravages of illness became less central as ideas about the synonymy of moral and physical health were at
times invoked and at other times pushed aside. However, the basic story arc of the Naturalist prostitute involves a rise and a decline.

45. López Bago. López Bago was a well-known Spanish writer who traveled extensively in Latin America and wrote several other novels about prostitution.

46. In later literature, the tropes of the destroyed body remain startlingly similar. In Chilean José Donoso’s *El lugar sin límites* (1966), the madam known as “La Japonesa Grande” is described as “grande y gorda [big and fat]” with “senos pesados como sacos repletos de uva [breasts heavy as sacks full of grapes]” (Donoso 44); the young and ambitious Manuela narrates how she tried to overcome her disgust of La Japonesa in order to inherit the brothel, describing the madam’s body as “desnudo y asqueroso pero caliente [. . . y] en medio de esa carne, la boca de esa mujer que buscaba la mía como busca un cerdo en un barrial [naked and disgusting but warm [. . . and] in the middle of that flesh, the mouth of that woman that sought mine like a pig searches in mud]” (Donoso 102). All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.

47. Stanchina. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.

48. Stanchina shared the attitude toward prostitution of other Boedo writers, which was simultaneously Naturalist and anarcho-idealist: while the sympathies of writers like Stanchina, Tiempo, Castelnuovo, as well as Nicolás Olivari (*La musa de la mala pata* [1926] and *El gato escaldado* [1929]) lay with the prostitute, they assimilated aspects of prevailing higienista views. The belief that prostitutes transmitted venereal diseases to clients—and that men played no part in the spread of disease—was commonly held among the higienista generation.

49. Nouzeilles points out how Sarmiento and Alberdi had proposed a cultural-moral basis for controlling sexuality in the form of the family. This view was, in turn, based on the politics of domination exercised corporally on the “indomitable” bodies of the *gauchos* (Nouzeilles, *Ficciones somáticas* 44). In this way, higienismo is the reemergence of an existing ideological assemblage in new conditions and within a new discipline.

50. Nouzeilles, *Ficciones somáticas*. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.

51. Eduardo Wilde described the far-reaching, expansive nature of this new notion of social health:

> Nosotros tenemos que entender por salud del pueblo, todo lo que se refiere a su bienestar y este compromete todo lo que contribuye a su comodidad física y moral. Luego las palabras salud del pueblo, quieren decir: instrucción, moralidad, buena alimentación, buen aire, precauciones sanitarias, asistencia pública, beneficencia pública, trabajo y hasta diversiones gratuitas. [We must understand public health as everything that refers to their wellbeing and this includes everything that contributes to their physical and moral comfort. So the words public health also mean: instruction, morality, proper nutrition, clean air, sanitary precautions, public assistance, public benefits, work and even free entertainment.]

(Quoted in Nouzeilles, *Ficciones somáticas* 37)

52. By the next decade, the prostitution/anarchism criminal justice imaginary would become an international phenomenon. In 1916, Ernesto J. J. Bott published a conference paper written for the World Purity Federation of La Crosse, Wisconsin, in English in the abolitionist magazine *The Light*; it was reproduced in Spanish for the *Boletín del Museo Social Argentino*. He gave an overview of prostitution in Buenos Aires for an international audience, asserting that the 1913 Ley Palacios was insufficient to prevent the spread of prostitution, and insisting that the legal resources for persecuting traffickers were the same that had been hard-won five years before against the anarchists (“después de dos o tres tentativas de éstos [sic] para
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aterrorizar la población con la explosión de bombas [after two or three attempts they made to terrorize the population setting off bombs”] (Bott 9). See Close for a reading of the tropes of the dangerous, bomb-throwing anarchist and their endurance far beyond their historical referent, at the same time that they erase and replace the presence of actual anarchist movements in the literature of the time, as well as his argument that Arlt enacts “textual anarchy” as aesthetic practice (Close, *La imprenta* 13–43).

53. The link between prostitution and anarchism was, of course, not limited to Argentina. See Hutchinson for a study of anarchist publications on prostitution in Chile during the first decades of the twentieth century; in Mexico, the anarchist movements prior to the Revolution of 1910 cleaved to international ideas that prostitution would “naturally” disappear with socioeconomic equity, whereas after the Revolution prostitutes participated in anarchist-organized demands (José María González cited in Hart 53; Hart 135). For an anthology of early-twentieth-century South American anarchist writings on prostitution, see Andreu et al. 151–58.

54. An elaborate description of the relationship between Germán and Goga and how they become the head of a mass movement of swelling human sickness, only mediated by the novel’s “moderate”—fanatical Catholic Elbio Errécar—can be found in the previous chapter of *Hacia la justicia*:

El alma lóbrega de Germán atizaba las malas pasiones, saltando de taberna en taberna, de mechinal en mechinal, siempre agitado, siempre consejero del delito, mientras Goga, la meretriz, corrompía las muchachas de los talleres. Pero muchas veces se volvía indócil, resistiendo las órdenes del anarquista. Entonces éste la abofeteaba hasta sacarte sangre y cuando ella se quejaba exclamando: «¡Jesús! ¡Jesús! ¡Dolores sálveme!»; Germán la arrastraba de las mechas por el pavimento de ladrillo. Huía ella después, perdiéndose días enteros y vagando por la ciudad como un alma desconsolada. Iba siempre hacia la casa de Méndez. Quería hablar con Dolores; pero cuando llegaba cerca, se la veía retroceder y perderse lejos de nuevo. Volvía a ser una orgiástica; volvía a Germán, hechizada por aquel corazón ponzoñoso. Mientras tanto, éste, en su propaganda, se había encontrado muchas veces con Ricardo. Habían tenido diálogos acerbs. Se arrebataban los prosélitos en esa lucha formidable, en que los católicos aumentaban sus sociedades y se fortalecían con la fe y la riqueza. Entre las dos fuerzas, Elbio Errécar trabajaba para que sus amigos no se afiliasen y una gran masa de obreros lo seguía, seducidos por su honesta palabra y porque preferían no ser sectarios. Eran un enorme grupo de robustos y de sanos, esos vencedores del porvenir. Se llamaban: ¡libres trabajadores! Los socialistas por su parte, se agitaban y se confundían con los de la anarquía, en su lucha contra los católicos. Eran conferencias, reuniones en media calle, protestas, amenazas y un furioso bregar por enfermos, mientras otros arrastraban como podían sus organismos convalecientes, señalados todavía con el livido estigma de la enfermedad pasada, ¡porque María la dulce madre había mitigado sus dolores, acariciando de noche la frente exacerbada por el insomnio y visitándolos en sus delirios, rodeada de luz, entre los cánticos paradisiacos, acompañada por millares de ángeles, volando en largas espirales y susurrando las palabras de la esperanza! Entonces las flores frescas de sus jardines eran para la divina madre, que da pan a los pobres, rociándolas sobre la naturaleza y salud a los chicos enfermos, que ellas cargan en ese momento, para ofrecerlos en su santuario. Así se ven algunos rostros, llenos de costras negruzcas y cicatrices de viruela, pieles manchadas, tumores, infelices que van a pedir paz para sus espasmos histéricos, coreicos que saltan por la calle, con la
cara descompuesta por horribles muecas. Y mientras la peregrinación blanca
marcha entre las avemarías del rosario, entre el perfume de las flores votivas,
todo alrededor se difunde como una hediondez de hospital, como un vaho mal-
sano desprendido del pecho aplastado de los tuberculosos, sucios de sudores,
que arrastran consigo ese calor acre de la cama enferma, donde se condensan
las náuseas y las podredumbres. . . Y se ven caras flacas y amarillas; enormes
vientres de hidrópicos y monstruosas fisonomías de leprosos delirantes; se hue-
len bochornos pecaminosos de ocultas apostasmas y se adivina en las mortales
palideces la ponzoña de las fétidas malezas, que cuajan las ropas y señalan a lo
lejos el camino del sepulcro. Aquí un alucinado, allá un epiléptico, más lejos
un hemipléjico, describiendo curvas para arrastrar su pierna paralítica y algún
aullido entre la monótona letanía, interrumpida a ratos por el patalear de los
atáxicos sobre el piso de madera; el templo y el hospital en marcha, la religión de
los felices y la religión de los desventurados y de los miserables. (204–6)

[Germán’s gloomy soul stoked the base passions, going from tavern to tavern,
from putlock to putlock, always agitated, always crime’s accomplice, while
Goga, the prostitute, corrupted the young girls in the workshops. But often she
became restless, resisting the anarchist’s orders. Then he would beat her until
she bled and when she complained exclaiming “¡Jesús! ¡Jesús! Dolores save me!”
Germán dragged her by her hair along the cobblestones. Then she would flee,
disappearing for whole days and wandering through the city like a tormented
soul. She always went to the Méndez house. She wanted to speak with Dolores;
but when she got close, she could be seen retreating and disappearing again. She
always went back to being a bacchanalian; she went back to Germán, spellbound
by that poisonous heart. In the meantime, he, in his propaganda, had met up
many times with Ricardo. They had had acrid dialogues. They got the converts
worked up in that formidable fight, in which the Catholics increased their
societies and were strengthened by faith and wealth. Between the two forces,
Elbio Errécar worked to keep his friends from joining up and a great mass of
workers followed him, seduced by his honest words and because they preferred
not to be sectarians. They were an enormous group of robust and healthy men,
those winners of the future. They called themselves: free workers! The socialists
for their part got agitated and were confused with the anarchists, in their fight
against the Catholics. They [sic] were conferences, meetings in the middle of the
street, protests, threats and a furious slog by the sick, while others dragged as
their convalescing organisms as they could, still marked with the livid stigma of
the past illness, because María the sweet mother had eased their pains, caressing
their forehead aggravated by insomnia at night and visiting them in their
delirium, surrounded by light, amid celestial song, accompanied by thousands
of angels, flying in long spirals and whispering words of hope! Then the fresh
flowers of their gardens were for the divine mother, who gives bread to the poor,
dew to nature and health to sick children, which they carry in that moment to
offer in her temple. That is how some faces look, full of dirty scabs and smallpox
scars, stained skins, tumors, unhappy ones who are going to ask for peace for
their hysterical spasms, choreics who jump through the street, with their face
distorted by horrible expressions. And while the white pilgrimage marches amid
the Ave Marias of the Rosary, amid the perfume of the votive flowers, everything
around spreads like a hospital stink, like an unhealthy vapor released from the
squashed chest of the tuberculous, dirty from sweats, who drag with them that
acrid heat of the sickbed, where the nausea and the rotting is condensed. . . . And one sees thin and yellow faces; enormous stomachs of those with dropsy and the monstrous physiognomies of delirious lepers; one smells sinful hot breezes of hidden abscesses and one can make out in the mortal paleness the poison of the fetid weeds, that curdle the clothing and let you see from far away the path to the tomb. Here someone hallucinating, there an epileptic, farther off a hemiplegic, tracing curves to drag his paralyzed leg and some howl amid the monotonous litany, interrupted at times by the kicking of those with palsy against the wooden floor; the temple and the hospital on the march, the religion of the happy and the religion of the unfortunate and the miserable.]

55. Ingenieros. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.
56. The narrator offers a complete vision of this contradictory attitude in the following passage:

Y por ahí caminando los traídores a la patria, los ladrones de sus dineros, truhanes de frac que venden sus secretos y contaminan su honra olvidados de las glorias inmaculadas de la tierra donde nacieron –así por treinta dineros como Iscariote sin que sus cuerpos ahorcados y pendientes de un árbol cualquiera se hamaque de aquí para allá con el rostro azulado y los ojos en arco fuera de la órbita sucia la lengua sangrienta mordida entre los dientes. Y todo porque es necesario comer [ . . . ] como esa madre que va por allí, deslizándose a lo largo de las paredes y que acaba de dejar en la cama de un corrompido el cuerpo virginal de su hija. La ha vendido por treinta dineros en vez de enseñarle a trabajar o precipitarse con ella antes bajo las ruedas de una locomotora para que la doble, la quiebre y le triture los huesos y le quite la vida, tirando a los costados el picadillo de sus carnes.

[There go the traitors of the patria, the thieves of their moneys, knaves in tuxedos who sell their secrets and contaminate their honor forgetting the immaculate glories of the land where they were born—so for thirty pieces of silver like Judas Iscariot without their bodies hanged and swinging from any old tree should sway this way and that with the face turned blue and the eyes rolled back in the sockets the dirty, bloodied tongue bitten between the teeth. And all because it’s necessary to eat [ . . . ] like that mother who’s walking over there, slipping along the walls and who just left in the bed of a degenerate the virginal body of her daughter. She has sold her for thirty pieces of silver instead of teaching her to work or throwing herself along with her under the wheels of a locomotive. [ . . . ]

(Sicardi, *Libro Extraño* IV: 65)

Chapter 2

1. Gamboa, *Santa*. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine. *Santa* was also the subject of four films, the first in 1918, and the second the first Mexican film with sound. The novel has had enduring commercial success and evident critical relevance both inside and outside of Mexico, and it has recently been translated into English by John Charles Chasteen. See Gamboa, *Santa: A Novel of Mexico City* ix–xiii for a longer list of Santa’s recent avatars. See also Olea-Franco for the proceedings of the 2003 international colloquium at the Colegio de México in honor of the novel’s centenary, which models a wide range of critical approaches.
2. Arlt, Los siete locos. All citations refer to this edition. All translations are mine.

3. It is well-established in feminist scholarship that Marx’s relegation of women’s work to an anomaly under capitalism is at best inadequate and at worst indicative of a foundational flaw in his economic theory. However, the fact that Marx did consider prostitution “labor” is a less popular point, except to be debunked. See Dickenson for a summary of the chief points of dissatisfaction and of feminist attempts to extend the Marxist notion of “alienation” to women’s domestic and reproductive work—which Marx and Engels did not consider “labor,” a category they reserved for that which produced (exchange-)value but which Dickenson and others wish to claim for women’s domestic work. For Barry, valorizing domestic work as labor is linked to further devaluing prostitution from its already marginal role in Marx.

4. The quotation is translated more poetically as “as though its body were by love possessed” (Grundrisse 704).

5. Meeks traces the dubious morphologies of words denoting the “idea” (or spirit) of love and the “place” (or body) of love date back to the Hebrew of the Solomonic Proverbs, in which one vowel separated the two words. See Proverbs 5:18–20 and 7:18 in particular for examples of punning between “fill of love” and “fill of breast(s).” This was sometimes mistranslated—or deliberately obscured—such as in Luther’s German translation of the Old Testament, which renders all references to “love” and “breast(s)” as “Liebe” (Meeks 952n).

6. Marx distinguishes the exchange-value of labor-power from the (necessarily greater) value of the capital it produces: “The value of labour-power, and the value which that labour-power creates in the labour-process, are two entirely different magnitudes; and this difference of the two values was what the capitalist had in view, when he was purchasing the labour-power [. . . ]. What really influenced him was the specific use-value which this commodity possesses of being a source not only of value, but of more value than it had itself. This is the special service that the capitalist expects from labour-power” (Capital 188).

7. In the quote from Grundrisse in question, Marx is still using the category of “labor” rather than labor-power as that which is sold under capitalism. I have been deliberately substituting the anachronistic ‘labor-power’ at times for the sake of clarity, in order to distinguish it from the sense Marx gives labor elsewhere in Grundrisse: “the living, form-giving fire; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time” (Grundrisse 361).

8. Dogmatic Marxism also grapples with the fact that, today, more money is apparently made “by money” than “by labor” (which phenomenon we often categorize as that of “soft money,” as in the stock market); and some economists have bridged Marx and Gesell by adopting the view that interest, in its broadest definition, is merely a particular case of surplus-value (see, e.g., Beams).

9. Schroeder, in the tradition of Marx and Gesell, creates an economic argument on the basis of literature, arguing that markets themselves are fundamentally libidinal, and using Greek and Roman mythology to illustrate how “romantics” unwittingly mirror “utilitarians” in their assumptions, even as they attempt to critique the consequences of these assumptions (see The Triumph of Venus).

10. The workers’ singing annoyed Mephistopheles enough to transform it into the workers’ destiny, using their own coarseness against them:

If I am right, we heard the sound
Of well-trained voices, singing chorus;
And truly, song must here rebound
Superbly from the arches o’er us. (Goethe, Faust I 76)
The refrain truly “rebounds” upon the workers, as they are animalized, turned into the very rats of their song, writhing in the indiscernibly agonizing and ecstatic, nonverbal death of a coarse beast.

11. This is functionally similar to Gesell’s Robinson Crusoe on the deserted island. The Devil produces wine with no cost, no labor, just as Crusoe’s possessions—while they may have cost him labor in the past—exist as a type of inherited advantage upon the Stranger’s arrival, with which an “economy” exists for the first time on the island.

12. As the scene concludes, the subdued laborers question each other:

   SIEBEL 'Twas all deceit, and lying, false design!
   FROSCH And yet it seemed as I were drinking wine.
   BRANDER But with the grapes how was it, pray?
   ALTMAYER Shall one believe no miracles, just say! (Goethe, Faust I 85)

13. Reflecting on her first obligatory medical exam, Santa has the following associations:

   Como al propio tiempo se le viniese a las mientes el otro calificativo, el que a contar de entonces correspondiéa, cerró más sus ojos, llegó a taparse fuertemente con la mano el oído opuesto al que la almohada resguardaba, recogió las piernas flexionando las rodillas, y, sin embargo, el vocablo vino y le azotó las sienes y el cráneo entero por adentro, le aumentó la jaqueca.
   —No era mujer, no; ¡era una . . . !

   [Since at the same time the other word came to her mind, the one that from then on belonged to her, she shut her eyes more tightly and covered the ear that wasn’t resting on her pillow with her hand and, nonetheless, the word came and it whipped her temples and her whole skull from the inside, and made her headache worse.

   She wasn’t a woman, no; she was a . . . !] (Gamboa, Santa 80)

Of course, the first two times the ellipsis denoting puta appears, Santa calls herself “ . . . ,” recognizing that she has been recognized such. Only “El Rubio” actually calls her a “ . . . ,” the third and final time the “word” appears.

14. In the first edition of Gamboa’s novel, published in 1902, the word “puta” was in fact censored by the prurient censors of the Porfiriato. Subsequent editions reintroduced the word.

15. The original betrayal, of course, is that of Santa’s alférez, who leaves her pregnant and disgraced. But it is, notably, not because of Santa’s dishonor alone that her family disowns her, but because she refuses to betray the man who has betrayed her; and thus she denies her brothers their only possibility for avenging the dishonor she has caused them:

   [N]o le exijiesen pronunciar el nombre de su amante, nunca, averiguáranlo ellos si podían.
   —Aunque me maten, no he de decirlo, ¡no, no y no!

   [They couldn’t make her pronounce the name of her lover, never, find it out themselves if they could.

   “Even if they kill me, I won’t say it, no, no, no!”] (Gamboa, Santa 122)

The chain of events which begins with this refusal to reveal the alférez’s name follows the devaluation of Santa’s own name and culminates in the loss of it.

16. Klossowski. All translations are mine.

17. In Specters of Marx, Derrida emphasized that Marx’s notion of “idealization” always produces ghosts:
Marx always described money, and more precisely the monetary sign, in the figure of appearance or simulacrum, more exactly of the ghost. He not only described them, he also defined them, but the figural presentation of the concept seemed to describe some spectral “thing,” which is to say, “someone.” What is the necessity of this figural presentation? What is its relation to the concept? [ . . . ] The whole movement of idealization (Ideealisierung) that Marx then describes, whether it is a question of money or of ideologemes, is a production of ghosts, illusions, simulacra, appearances, or apparitions. (Derrida, Specters of Marx 55)

18. Piglia, “Roberto Arlt: Una crítica de la economía literaria.” All translations are mine.

19. Compelling readings of the novels have evoked their relationship to the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Fyodor Dostoevsky (Close, La imprenta; González), Simone de Beauvoir and Nomy Arpaly (Garth) and others. Following Piglia, there have also been a series of readings linking the novels’ grotesquery and “bad” writing style to the politico-historical context, which irrigate the novels with a steady stream of references to journalism, science, politics and psychoanalysis of the time period (Piglia, “Roberto Arlt: Una crítica de la economía literaria” 68; Piglia, “Roberto Arlt: La ficción del dinero” 132; Masotta 53–54; Close, La imprenta 13ff; Brown 103–4). Thanks to the varied and rigorous critical bibliography covering the period since the early 1970s and devoted to reclaiming the “bad” writing of these novels through such readings, it is possible to see larger patterns emerge in the novels whereby some of these topoi of Arlt criticism begin to intersect.

20. Nitric acid plus copper gives nitric oxide in an exothermic reaction. The expanding gas displaces water from another flask; when the gas cools, the water is drawn back into the flask, dissolving the nitric oxide and forming a blue solution with the copper ions still there. See “Coin-Operated Red, White, and Blue Fountain.”

21. The Peso Moneda Nacional was in circulation from 1881 to 1969 and during Arlt’s time coins were mostly made of cupro-nickel (25% copper, 75% nickel) with the exception of the 50¢ coin (100% nickel). See Janson.

22. Except, of course, for the Ley de Convertibilidad de 1991, by which then-Minister of Economy Cavallo established the 1:1 convertibility of the peso with the dollar.

23. Of course, “Dios canalla,” the nonexistence of God and the contemplation of Jesus Christ’s likely suicide could be seen as directly related to the 1929 economic crisis, including the devaluation of currency and the nonconvertibility of the peso and gold.

24. This sense is in part supported by the Convertibility Act of 1927, and is at least understandable in Marxist terms, since Marx insists that the price of gold and silver, though first and foremost dependent on the cost of production in its countries of origin, is less bound to production costs than almost any other material, since precious metal is also the sign of wealth and is thus related to the absolute accumulation of wealth at a given time in society.

25. The Commentator is generally not read as omniscient, as he refers explicitly to his “sources” throughout. This, however, does not do away with the metatextual uncertainty, and in fact can complicate it by referring to the Commentator as though he were a real person and unintentionally privileging the more coherent assertions by the Commentator as defining all of his contributions. An editor’s footnote by Ana María Zubieta in the present edition asserts that “El proceso por el cual el Comentador se entera de otros detalles y sucesos que no le cuenta Erdosain revela que realiza una verdadera investigación, que consulta otras voces y luego ordena el material [The process by which the Commentator becomes aware of other details and events that Erdosain doesn’t tell him reveals that he completes a real investigation, that he consults others and then organizes his material]” (308).
26. The error of writing “lógica” instead of “logia” is suggestive of the lodge as self-similar with its ideas.

27. The Commentator later tells us that Haffner, the pimp, believed that Erdosain had an unconfessed crime weighing on him, and for that reason he systematically sought out such degrading states—the Commentator agrees with him (329), and further speculates that Erdosain had unconsciously wished to kill Barsut all along (80).

28. The only other member of the conspiracy who survives the exodus of the revolution itself, the war machine rolling off into the sunset, is Barsut, who is arrested for paying with a phony $50 bill and ends up fleeing along another line of simulation, ultimately hired to film the “fictional version” of the dramatic story that has just finished unfolding.

Chapter 3

1. The “Jewishness” of prostitution in Argentina is seen clearly in the Lunfardo (regional argot) words for pimps. Caftén, pimp, is a synonym of cafishio or proxeneta. It is widely thought to derive from caftán (Yiddish kaftan, cloak) and thought to have referred synecdochically to Jewish pimps, calling them by the word for the long cloaks traditionally worn by Jewish men. Some also ascribe the origin of cafishio to a modification of caftán. Polacas (female Poles), which gives the title to Schalom’s novel, was a common term for Jewish prostitutes. The same is true in Brazilian Portuguese, and a broader study should consider Rio, São Paulo, Pernambuco, Montevideo and other cities among which pimps fled when prosecuted by national authorities in Argentina, together with Buenos Aires and Rosario. However, in contemporary historical fiction of white slavery the archetypal narratives of the blanca play out in national terrain. There are thus parallel fictions about Brazilian Jewish prostitutes from the same period, such as Esther Largman’s Jovens polacas (1993).

2. See, for example, the TV miniseries written by Myrtha Schalom, “Te llamarás Raquel” (1993), which tells the story of Raquel Liberman and her struggle against the most powerful Jewish prostitution mafia in Argentine history, the Zwi Migdal. According to Schalom, Raquel Liberman’s granddaughter contacted her after recognizing a photograph of her grandmother during the program, thus initiating a relationship that contributed to the research that culminated in La Polaca (13). Multiple radio programs have addressed aspects of the Jewish white slave trade (See “Cementerio de Rufianes” and “La Kosher Nostra”).

It is common when talking of contemporary sex trafficking and prostitution in Argentina to make reference to a seamless history of white slavery in the country, “established for more than a century” (see, e.g., “La trata de blancas en la Argentina”). The equation of “white slavery” then and now (and including the use of the term “white slavery” without explanation or qualification) is also evident in the overlapping of historical white slavery with contemporary “white slavery” in TV programming today, such as the based-on-real-events soap opera Vidas robadas [Stolen Lives] (Telefe, 2008), the TV documentary “Esclavas [Slaves]” in the series Humanos en el camino (Telefe, 2007), hosted by Gastón Pauls, as well as the ongoing campaign by Cosmopolitan TV to raise awareness of sex traffic, which began with the premiere of the documentary Mujeres que no callan [Women Who Won’t Keep Silent] (Cosmopolitan, 2008), hosted by acclaimed actress Cecilia Roth.

3. In this way, whereas contemporary historical fiction of white slavery does demonstrate certain of the defining traits of the New Historical Novel—they use famous historical characters as protagonists; they use metafiction (though often constraining it within a prologue); and, as we shall see, they certainly invoke “the impossibility of ascertaining the true nature of reality or history” (Menton, Latin America’s New Historical Novel 23)—they
take these definitions to hitherto unimagined extremes, and thus serve as to demonstrate an unspoken assumption undergirding the New Historical Novel as a critical category: the decision to focus on novels of great critical acclaim without looking explicitly at the consequences of this choice. See Menton, *Latin America’s New Historical Novel*. Menton along with Noé Jitrik, María Cristina Pons and others have studied the emergence of the popularity of the form as it was buoyed by novels that whether pre-Boom, Boom, or post-Boom, share great literary skill and complexity. While as a critical field the New Historical Novel did not limit itself to “great works” it did privilege them, and thus it can be tricky to distinguish works that superficially exhibit the traits of the New Historical Novel—and benefit from its cultural credibility—even as they break radically with the experimental spirit of the genre as defined by Menton. See also Jitrik, “From History to Writing”; Pons, *Memorias del olvido*; Pons, “Neoliberalismo y literatura en Argentina.”

4. The various terms used for admixtures of history and fiction in the last ten years are themselves transgeneric, including those arising first in film (ficción documental and documental de ficción) and then applied metonymically to novels (see, e.g., Zeiger, “Febril, la mirada”). The adjective “documental” is often appended to novels, works of theater, etc.

Of course, documentary itself began as a blend of genres, fusing fact, speculation and poetry in a blend of ethnographic and literary tactics to create a seamless narrative. This can be observed readily in the early examples of Argentine documentary (see, e.g., *El ultimo malón* [The Last Indian Attack] [Alcides Greca, 1917], parts of which can be viewed online, as well as more broadly in the documentary boom worldwide in the 1920s, and persisting into the “docudramas” and historical reenactments of all kinds today. While it exceeds the scope of this study, it seems timely to reconsider the relation between the historical emergence of documentary and that which, today, we qualify (and justify) with the term, and particularly how documentary demonstrates both a desire for a science of truth-telling and practices inseparable from storytelling in all its ambivalence, with a particular style of dealing with what are much older tensions as if they were brand-new problems created by the modern moment.

5. This putative increase in the publishing and consumption of historical novels is hard to define precisely. References to the boom abound in newspaper accounts, tending to suggest that it is just happening now, whereas María Cristina Pons posits a long slow increase from the end of the 1970s throughout Latin America, taking on force during what she terms the political crisis of the 1970s and the economic crisis of the 1980s. (See Pons, “Neoliberalismo y literatura” 10th para.)

6. Of course we must concretize the notion of literary marketplace. For the purposes of this chapter, I limit myself to a handful of texts, and yet in no way is their real production as books circumscribed by the geography of their subject matter. *Bodies and Souls* (2005) was originally published in English by William Morris for HarperCollins in New York (its author is Canadian, of self-proclaimed Portuguese heritage). *La Polaca* (2003) was published in Buenos Aires but Grupo Editorial Norma has offices in 14 countries including the U.S., is partnered with Google Book Search to maximize global web traffic, and distributes Microsoft’s computer and educational software in Colombia, Ecuador, Argentina and several other countries (see “Google Book Search Partner Success Stories” and “Grupo Editorial Norma”). *El infierno prometido* (2006) was published by Editorial Sudamericana, a publishing house associated since its inception in the 1930s with Argentine intellectuals and representative of the first great metropolitan publishers in Latin America but now “overseen” by Random House and now wholly owned by its parent company, media giant Bertelsmann (see “Random House”).

7. See Nirenberg. All citations refer to this edition.
8. Schalom; Drucaroff, *El infierno prometido*; Vincent, *Bodies and Souls*; Alsogaray. All citations refer to these editions; all translations are mine.


10. Hugo wrote in 1870, “The slavery of black women is abolished in America, but the slavery of white women continues in Europe” (Butler, *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade* 13). While information on the history of slavery in Argentina is readily available for anyone who is looking for it specifically, Google searches over time have suggested a flattening out of the meaning of the term “slavery”: in 2006, a search of “Argentina,” “Slave” and “Trade” yielded a top ten in which two referred to contemporary sex trafficking, two to historical white slavery, two to the African slave trade, two to contemporary sweatshop labor conditions, and two to the practice of recruiting soccer players from other countries. In fall 2009, five of the top ten referred to Jewish white slavery (four of which linked to Nora Glickman’s book). In spring 2010, however, three referred to Jewish white slavery (two to Glickman’s book), two to contemporary trafficking, one to contemporary sweatshop labor conditions, and four to historical slavery.

Of course, the importance of this is merely anecdotal (since Google’s results change rapidly and results can always be shifted by modifying the search terms slightly). It should, however, be noted that the importance attributed to the ranking of Google results is that of how popular the sites are—the top-ranked pages are those to which the greatest number of other pages hyperlink, suggesting that in a rather literal way the popular marketing of the white slavery “issue” does displace others. (See Rogers.) However, in Argentina, the conflict about the extent of historical slavery ties into huge variations in the estimates of African ancestry among Argentines today, ranging between 10,000 and 4,000,000, suggesting not only lack of certainty but also symbolic investment in rigid self-identifications. (See Ackerman, Amato and Kingsberg; see also Kaminsky 99–120 for a discussion of the ambivalent erasure of blackness in Argentine national identity.)

11. I am indebted to Sander Gilman’s various studies of the complexity of “whiteness” as it has been applied to Jews over time and interrelated with other fields of study and discourses. See particularly *The Jew’s Body* and *Difference and Pathology*.

12. Records of the ethnic and racial heritage of prostitutes in Argentina during the time are spotty at best. The reason we have as much information as we do is because of municipal laws that required prostitutes in Buenos Aires to register with the police and provide their country of origin (but not race, religion, or other ethnic information). As Guy has noted, these partial statistics were the basis for the stories about white slavery that circulated even in the era, and she traces some of the notions about ethnicity back to the florid interpretations of these numbers (Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires* 7).

13. Most of the derogatory reports about the Zwi Migdal and other Jewish prostitution rings (namely the earlier Varsovia Society and the Asquenasum) came from very few sources, all of which were written with the agenda of “[informing] the Argentine public of the alleged activities of nefarious Jewish pimps whose political and police protectors had allowed them to continue working” (Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires* 124). Julio Alsogaray (1933), Albert Londres (1928), Ernesto Pareja (1937) and Victorio Besserro (1930) all focused their studies on the power of Jewish pimps in Buenos Aires. For example, as Guy points out, [Policeman Ernesto J.] Pareja went so far [in his 1937 book] as to list the nationality and numbers of all registered women [prostitutes] as of December 1934, but he purposely failed to print the Argentine percentage in the chart. “Had he done so, it would have revealed explicitly that although 40 percent (seventy) were Polish, 43.9 percent (seventy-six) were locals. [ . . . ] Pareja and Alsogaray dwelled on the Jewish presence while they ignored incidents such as the 1929 detention of ten white slavers, of whom eight were French and only two were of eastern
European extraction. They never examined scandalous behavior statistics that identified many more Argentine and non-eastern European prostitutes than Jewish women registered at the Dispensario. Instead they, like Londres, tended to emphasize what was important to them” (Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires* 126).

14. It is suggested by police records that both as pimps and as prostitutes “Jews” were often a majority in Buenos Aires. However, as José C. Moya points out, information on religion was not kept, and so what is used to identify these Jews is their “Jewish-sounding” names, with the possibility for error this implies (Moya 43n18). Nonetheless, of 164 pimps in a police file of 1893–94, Moya suggests that no less than 74% and as much as 92% were Jewish (21). Guy, on the other hand, suggests that there were many mediating factors in this “commonsense” contemporary view of Jews as the primary traffickers of women: information on pimps of other backgrounds was “less well reported than on Jewish traffickers” and, quoting Bristow, “We knew most about the Jewish sources of supply because Jewish philanthropy was at the forefront of the efforts against the traffic” (*Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires* 11). Vincent goes one better, insisting that Jews never achieved a monopoly on white slave trade, but that “they were singled out for their participation by anti-Semitic authorities [. . .] in South America, police officials blamed ‘the degenerate Jew for shaming the human race’ by setting up brothels, even though most of the brothels in the region were controlled by French traffickers” (*Bodies and Souls* 31). It’s unclear on what basis Vincent determines that the majority of brothels were run by French traffickers.

15. It is important to historicize the attitudes expressed toward Jews by Sarmiento, e.g., as about America’s relationship with Europe in negotiating power and cultural identity. This permits us to see that Sarmiento may have been fundamentally concerned with his own mythic continuities: a continuous cultural history and the literature that will reify it. Thus, in 1886 Sarmiento articulated his distaste for Jews in terms of their lack of continuity—and his prioritization of national-historical continuity in terms of its opposites, the Jews:

\[E\]l pueblo judío, esparcido por toda la tierra ejerciendo la usura y acumulando millones, rechazando la patria en que nace y muere por un ideal que baña escasamente el Jordán, y a la que no piensan volver jamás. Este sueño, que se perpetúa hace veinte o treinta siglos, pues viene desde el origen de la raza, continua hasta hoy perturbando la economía de las sociedades en que viven, pero de que no forman parte; y ahora mismo, en la bárbara Rusia, como en la ilustrada Prusia, se levanta un grito de repulsión contra este pueblo que se cree escogido y carece del sentimiento humano, el amor al prójimo, el apego a la tierra, el culto del heroísmo, de la virtud, de los grandes hechos donde quiera que se producen.

16. Doris Sommer’s pioneering book, *Foundational Fictions*, was groundbreaking in the study of literature as it related to the myths of nation-state formation. My study is indebted to her notion of alliances among characters as representatives of different demographics
and inherently suspect in the dissemination of such myths. The fantasy of Jewish–Argentine collaboration, in my study, should not therefore be read as a fantasy of infinite ethnic heterogeneity or inclusiveness but, on the contrary, a concession to a specific version of Jewish-Argentineity that does not presuppose—and in fact serves to tacitly discourage—the inclusion of other ethnic groups. Even the racialized term “blanca” should be seen to form half of a binary: Jews both are and are not white, and can become white in given contexts and in others “revert,” nor should the lush literary depiction of Ashkenazic “whiteness” of the modern historical novel be confused with the views at the time, when Jews of distinct provenance (Mizrahim, Sephardim and Ashkenazim) were linked up racially with Muslim, Christian and Jewish Arabs in the negative view of Argentine elites (See Gilman Difference and Pathology 16–35; Klich, “Árabes, judíos y árabes judíos en la Argentina de la primera mitad del novecientos” 38th para.).

17. See Williams.
18. See Glickman, The Jewish White Slave Trade and The Untold Story of Raquel Liberman. All citations refer to this edition.
19. See Glickman, “Una tal Raquel.” All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.
20. See n1 for an explanation of the term “polaca.”
21. See n1.
22. In my discussion of these texts, Yiddish words and phrases are generally spelled as they appear in the novels in question. While there are some conventional differences between how transliteration is done in a Spanish-language vs. an English-language context, (e.g., Yiddish vs. ídishe or ídish), even within the conventional practices of transliteration in a Spanish-language context there remain many variations, and no one standard. Apart from these differences of orthography, however, the integration of Yiddish words and expressions into a Spanish-language text to illustrate the speech patterns of Yiddish-speaking members of previous generations is a technique all of the texts share. In the context of the postulation of a transhistorical Argentine-Jewish identity, it is worth noting that at times this has the effect of making a generation that struggled to learn Spanish sound more like the generation after it. However, this is not always the case, as with Drucaroff’s Dina, who speaks a Spanish with grammatical tics characteristic of Yiddish speakers. Anthropologist Susana Skura’s studies of the uses of Yiddish in various genres of Spanish-language cultural production are fundamental. Skura has tracked the linguistic socialization of Yiddish speakers in Argentina as well as its representations both in early-twentieth-century Yiddish-language and in more recent Spanish-language works. See Skura, “Imágenes del idish en Buenos Aires a comienzos del siglo XX” and “La shikse.”
23. The Zwi Migdal changed its name from the Varsovia [Warsaw] in response to a complaint filed by a Polish envoy in Argentina in 1927 because of the association of Poland with Jewish White Slavery. Zvi Migdal had been the name of one of the original founders of the organization (See Guy, Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires 120–25). Zvi and Zwi were virtually interchangeable spellings in the context of Jewish immigration: the ‘w’ was used in transliterating from Polish, but both “Zwi” and “Zvi” were used interchangeably in Spanish-language Argentine publications, along with the phonetically spelled “Sui.”
24. The Lacanian idea of the fundamental fantasy can be seen as anchoring the view by which not only is the “Jewish subject” held accountable to a very literal view of neurosis, but the community as a whole—including the author/narrator—is seen as engaged in the neurotic quest to “find” their hidden “Jewish truth.” These novels are filled with foreshadowing and objets petits a.
Because Schalom intuits that limiting “the truth” to legal and historical records will be inadequate (if nothing else because these supposedly objective sources are overdetermined by anti-Semitism), the story tacitly supports what Bristow calls the “rationalist fallacy” about racism: the sense that anti-Semitism can be mitigated by improving Jewish behavior and denouncing misbehavior still more vigorously from within the community (Bristow 5). In the epilogue of Schalom’s novel, an extract from Mundo Israelita from the time blames the Jewish community leadership for anti-Semitic reactions (324–25).

25. It should be stressed that, in Spanish, nationalities are not normally capitalized: thus, a reference to either a Polish woman or a Jewish-Argentine prostitute would use the lower-case polaca.

26. Alsogaray. All citations refer to this edition. All translations are mine.

27. Coats of “the Jewish-Polish usage” is a compressed shorthand meant to evoke the types of somber coats worn today by some ultra-Orthodox branches, but understood roughly as “Orthodox, back in the days when most Jews were Orthodox”—certainly it’s not referring to any contemporary Jewish-Polish usage; and a more popular metonymy in Argentina at the time was to call all Eastern European Jews “rusos [Russians]”. Further, in the context of a modern stage direction it has a curious effect, since for the average reader there is no distinctive visual difference between an historical “Jewish-Polish coat” or a “Lithuanian” or “Ukrainian” coat. Rather, it reifies shared cultural knowledge—the metonymy of “Poland” and Jewish white slavery, polaca and prostitute—by transmitting it metonymically as though it were a something visible.

28. Lucas Berruezo points out similarities between Arlt and “el Loco Godofredo,” including the failed marriage of both as well as other clear references to the fact that “el Loco” is clearly supposed to be Arlt “en clave [in code]” (Berruezo 8th para). Berruezo reads El infierno prometido as telling the genesis of los siete locos: Dina, he believes, is the character called Lucién.

29. Remo Erdosain, the protagonist of Los siete locos (1929) and Los lanzallamas (1931), was notoriously troubled about both romantic intimacy and sexual performance with women. As we saw in Chapter 2 from the perspective of the prostitute Hipólita, Erdosain craves boundless, disinterested pity from women. All the women with whom he is involved, however—his ex-wife (Elsa), the woman he murders (La Bizca), as well as the in-between character of Luciana (who aspires to be his wife)—share a desire for love and sexual intimacy which makes him feel inadequate. When Luciana undresses in front of Erdosain, his reaction is horror:

La blancura lechosa de sus amplias caderas colma el cuarto de una grandeza titánica. Erdosain mira sus redondos senos, de pezones rodeados de un halo violeta, y un mechón rubio de cabellos, que escapa de su sexo, entre las rígidas piernas apretadas, y piensa:
—Sólo un gigante podría fecundarla.

[The milky whiteness of her ample hips fills the room with a titanic hugeness. Erdosain looks at her round breasts, of nipples circled by a violet halo, and a blond tress of hairs escaping from her sex, between her pressed-together, rigid legs, and he thinks: “Only a giant could inseminate her.”] (Arlt, Los lanzallamas 494–95)

Earlier, he had compared himself unfavorably to “El Capitán”—his ex-wife’s new lover—calling himself “pathetic” [desgraciado] and “in spite of my age, like a boy [a pesar de mi edad, como un muchacho]” and fantasizing that this is what his soon to be ex-wife and her lover will be thinking of him as they make love (Arlt, Los siete locos 60).
30. See Deutsch, Crossing Borders, Reclaiming a Nation. All citations refer to this edition.
31. See Trochon, Las rutas de Eros. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.
32. See Feierstein. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine. See also Golder, La “mala vida.”
33. Borges. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.
34. See Ludmer, “Las justicias de Emma.” All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.
35. Although Alsogaray’s trial of the Zvi Migdal was spectacular, the legal outcome was the recriminalization of the exercise of prostitution rather than that of bordello operations, resulting in arrests of 2,910 women under the new category of “scandalous behavior,” vs. 23 men (Guy, Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires 130). All but three of 106 defendants being held in 1931 were set free within a matter of days, and all were eventually released (Guy, Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires 129). Yet Feierstein summarizes Raquel Liberman’s testimony as “precipitating the end of the organization” (285), and the context of the impending coup d’état of September 1930 “debe haber posibilitado el reclamo de ‘moraldad y orden’ que permitió actuar al comisario Julio Alsogaray [must have made possible the call for ‘morality and order’ that allowed the commissioner Julio Alsogaray to act]” (286–87).
36. See Lesser and Rein. All citations refer to this edition.
37. In many cases, it may be the exigencies of scholarly rigor—such as, for example, Judith Laikin Elkin’s work on anti-Semitism as it arises in institutional forms that are not properly state forms, and the relatively complex history of the state in any nation that has passed through the stages of colonial development—which seem to give credence to the notion that the state itself is not anti-Semitic. See Elkin, “The Colonial Legacy of Anti-Semitism” and “Anti-Semitism in Argentina.”
38. In fact, the Israeli state maintained not only diplomatic relations with the military dictatorship, but even as Argentine Jews appealed for exile, Israel continued selling arms to the Junta. Should this lead us to believe that the sale of arms to the Junta was also in the best interest of Jews who were imprisoned? See Beit-Hallahmi 102ff.
39. Other witnesses said torturers questioned Jewish detainees “in special interrogations, trying to obtain information about supposed Jewish ‘campaigns,’ such as ‘Plan Andinia’ (an invention of Walter Beveraggi Allende, who imagined the existence of a Jewish plan to occupy the Argentinean Patagonia).” The report continues:

But they not only referred to “imaginary plans,” but also, during the interrogations, it was gathered [sic] information regarding the movements of the Jewish communities, characteristics of their buildings, personnel who worked at them, timetables, ideological trends of each institution. The victims say that the torturers proved to have a surprisingly precise knowledge of some of these issues, and some of them even spoke Hebrew or Yiddish. Sergio Starlik, for example, says, “during the torture session they not only interrogated them in relation to their political ideas, but also in relation to the Jewish community in Argentina. With the information obtained, they made out files where they included names and addresses of citizens of that origin, plans of synagogues, sports clubs, etc.” It is also stated that they were quite precise regarding the movements of some Jewish organizations. (Braylan, Feierstein, et al. 15–16)
40. In my discussion of the intersectional character of oppression, I am indebted to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s foundational work on intersectionality, particularly her pioneering essay “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of
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Color. It should be noted that intersectionality does seem to be taken into account in certain scholarly projects working with issues of cultural patrimony in Argentina intending to “recover the memory” of the dictatorship—almost as if the concrete complexity of archival work brings a more nuanced view of identity as inherently multifaceted and contradictory. See, e.g., Oberti and Skura.

41. Rotker’s seminal study of the hidden story of Argentine white women kidnapped by Indians, Cautivas, resonates in interesting ways with both the history and the historical fictions of white slavery and these echoes merit further study. Rotker relates the negation of the very basis of identity, as it relates a master narrative of Argentine identity, to Lacan’s notion of foreclosure (Rotker, Cautivas 40, 67n11); it is curious to think of how the converse functions in the Liberman story: there is an attempt to reclaim that which has been foreclosed and reintegrate it into the symbolic order, yet this is impossible, and it results in a change not to the symbolic order, but to the facts of the history.

42. Adorno, Negative Dialectics. All citations refer to this edition.

Chapter 4

1. For example, the Argentine writer Tomás Eloy Martínez’s El cantor de tango (2004) features a U.S. graduate student in New York shortly after September 11, 2001, who travels to Buenos Aires and becomes immersed in a labyrinthine search for information about a tango singer which leads him into the prostitution underworld of the 1920s. On the other hand, U.S. novelist Nathan Englander’s The Ministry of Special Cases (2007), focuses on a protagonist who is the son of a Zwi Migdal prostitute, given the name “Kaddish” (the Jewish prayer for the dead), who is entrusted by the Jewish community in Buenos Aires with effacing the names of Jews from gravestones on the “bad side” of the cemetery, lest they suffer greater persecution under the dictatorship.

2. Cozarinsky. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.

3. I have taken the liberty of translating “story” in the singular in the second part of the translation in order to maintain the colloquial tone of the speaker yet convey the meaning clearly (there will always be somebody who has lived it).

4. Piglia, Respiración artificial. All citations refer to this edition. All translations are mine.

5. Cozarinsky’s narrative present is resolutely 2000s, and thus would presumably disqualify it from Menton’s definition of the New Historical Fiction (see Menton, Latin America’s New Historical Novel). However, Menton went on to make an exception for Piglia’s Respiración artificial (1980), despite the fact that the majority of it was situated in the late 1970s. Menton wrote that the reason for the exception to the rule was Piglia’s refusal to recreate the flavor of the past. See Menton, Caminata por la narrativa latinoamericana 779.

6. Gareth Williams, Alberto Moreiras and others have proposed “critical regionalism” as a rubric under which the limits of narratives “not necessarily dominated by the false consciousness of metropolitan discourses of difference and identity” can be explored. El rufián moldá-vo could be analyzed as such an “interrupted and interrupting narrative rendered possible because of denarrativization and exhaustion [that] strives neither to lament nor reconstitute the contours of its lost objects” (Williams 154), yet the novel does not particularly “think and affirm the possibility of negativity within that process of denarrativization”; as we shall see, it rather affirms an affective relationship to an impossible history composed of proliferating, self-contradictory fictions. See also Moreiras, The Exhaustion of Difference 53.

7. The prevalence of journalist-investigator characters in both the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery and Cozarinsky make both superficially similar in structure to
mystery novels, since they share with that genre the external perspective that "makes a mystery a mystery" (Goulet 28). It would seem that the particular function this formal exteriority of perspective serves in historical fiction is at least double: on the one hand, it echoes the relation of the reader to historical material, the distance inherent in the generation gap, thus identifying the narrator with the reader (as it does in the crime novel, creating the reader-detective); on the other hand, it affords the narrator the illusion of objectivity. In Cozarinsky, by contrast, the formal exteriority of perspective doesn't equate to a sense of objectivity, because the empirical evidence always contradicts itself.

8. While Raquel is a "historical" character and Zsuzsa "fictional," Raquel is at every turn exceptional, while Zsuzsa is statistically average. We should remember here that the historical Raquel Liberman died shortly after obtaining her visa to return to Poland, whereas this fact is, at most, a grave epilogue to the unstoppable heroism of her fictional avatars. The fevered Zsuzsa, "de cara hundida y despintada [with her sunken and un-made-up face]," advances without knowing what she seeks (Cozarinsky 66) and the people she passes avert their gaze.

9. The very notion of an "honor crime"—committing a prohibited act in order to revenge another prohibited act—therefore testifies to what Gilles Deleuze called the necessarily double nature of betrayal (Deleuze, Dialogues II 42); according to Jewish law, any transgression of the Torah in a spirit of defiance of God can amount to chillul hashem [profanation of the name]. Furthermore, anything done that exposes disobedience of Torah in front of non-Jews is chillul hashem (Herring). To commit a betrayal also betrays the purpose of the betrayal; to be a true traitor requires also betraying oneself.

10. This also affronts the popular historical-fiction notion of the Old World as an unlimited preserve of misery in which religious traditionalism is the only spot of brightness in Jewish life. Pervasive imagery of the benightedness of Old World life also tends to be copresent with a view of women as monolithically subservient and ignorant—an idea out of step with contemporary histories of the period. In fact, Iris Parush argues that women were far more involved in the spread of Jewish Enlightenment ideas—were much more voracious readers of secular literature, and more commonly breadwinners—in Eastern Europe than has previously been thought. See Parush.

11. Any analogy between Zionism and anti-Semitism is provocative; yet the basis for the analogy rests on the same boundlessness with which Israel exists in metonymic relation to Jews. What Slavoj Žižek, for example, calls "anti-anti-Semitism" ironizes the identification of Jews and the State of Israel by comparing how the deliberate conflation of statehood, nationality, ethnicity and religion within Zionism maps cognitively and ideologically onto anti-Semitism. Žižek takes it a step further by asserting that "today it is the Muslims, not the Jews, who are perceived as a threat and an obstacle to globalization." See The Parallax View, 253–57.

12. Nuriel. All citations refer to this edition.
13. Pavis. All citations refer to this edition.
15. Cela. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.
16. La colmena.
17. In film critic Santos Zunzunegui's words, the effect of this change is to convert the episode "en un mero 'número' interpretativo a cargo de Paco Rabal [into a mere interpretive number by Paco Rabal]" (Zunzunegui 116). We could interpret the shift from the collective perspective of the omniscient narrator to the individual actor as emblematic of a shift in how the collective burden of responsibility for the past is represented. See Zunzunegui. All citations refer to this edition; all translations are mine.
18. Jean-François Lyotard wrote, “I would like to call a differend [différend] the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim. [. . . ] A case of differend between two parties takes place when the regulation of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom” (The Differend 9).

19. See Brown, Wounded Attachments.

20. Critic Idelber Avelar read Ricardo Piglia’s La ciudad ausente (1992) as capturing a paradox by which it is the private language of the characters that establishes the potential to narrate “the memory of the polis” through apocryphal stories (The Untimely Present 135). Similarly, El rufián moldavo not only engages intertextually with what it explicitly references but can also be read in dialogue with the genre of what we could more broadly consider as either metaliterary criticism or metacritical literature: texts that build their worlds out of literary references that in turn make the text communicate larger ideas about literature. See Avelar.


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