Title
Social Anxiety, The Capitalist Industry of Sexual Labor and Gender in Early Twentieth Century Argentina: Between Determinist Narratives of Prostitution and the Power of Rewriting Narratives—and Lives

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A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Spanish.

by

Leticia Lizeth Trevino

2018
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS


by

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Master of Arts in Spanish
University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Adriana J Bergero, Chair

This work explores the intersection of capitalism, nationhood, and female sexuality in late 19th and early 20th century Argentine discourses of prostitution. It traces how the female labor force in the first wave of industrialization, specifically how sexual labor, underlines male state insecurities at the turn of the century. It analyzes how cultural texts create narratives that dialogue with and contribute to the dehumanizing cultural imaginary surrounding the prostitute. Finally, it proposes a counternarrative using the life of Raquel Liberman as a contradiction to that cultural imaginary.
The thesis of Leticia Lizeth Trevino is approved.

John C. Dagenais

Maria Teresa de Zubiaurre

Adriana J Bergero, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2018
DEDICATION

To my parents, without your working overtime, without your hundreds of sacrifices, and without your constant encouragement, I wouldn’t have gotten this far.

To every teacher that always believed I could do great things and went the extra mile to insure I had the best education.
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INTRODUCTION

“Identity is a social construction, a creation, a system of interpretation or representation that is produced through the word, through images, through the repetition of collective rituals.”

—Susana Rotker

I. The Project: Theoretical Approach and Personal Contribution

I begin my thesis with a quote from literature professor and essayist Susana Rotker because I believe that she very neatly sums up the focus of this project. The focus is the social construction of systems of representation, looking specifically at Argentine narratives in the late 19th and early 20th century that contribute to the cultural imaginary surrounding the female prostitute. I really heavily on Stoker’s definition of identity and Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci’s definition of cultural hegemony as a framework for the interpretation of the cultural imaginary. The texts I primarily look at represent institutions of cultural power that are agents in the construction of the narrative of female sexual labor. Michel Foucault defined new technologies as institutions that “[regulate] the conduct of individuals and populations…[and] constitute distinct and specific modalities for the exercise of power” (Bennett 89-90). His focus was that of prison and hospitals. Sociologist Tony Bennett applies this definition to the museum, I would like to intercede that the archive functions in the same manner. Cultural texts with the backing of cultural institutions create an archive that builds narratives of regulation. I explore the creation of the prostitution archive and the cultural capital it has in the production of a cultural imaginary. I explore the limitations and judgements it places on the female sex worker and propose an alternate narrative that humanizes this subject.

Scholars such as Mirta Zaida Lobato and Donna Guy have done extensive research on female labor and the role of prostitution in Argentina. Lobato documents the trials of factory
work and the politics of domesticity versus labor in the role of women in Argentine society. Guy specifically looks at the history of prostitution and the role of the prostitute in Argentine politics of regulation. I use their research as a point of departure in that their work contextualizes key moments of my analysis of the cultural texts. My contribution to the field is a highly interdisciplinary approach in which I draw on different theoretical frameworks for an intersectional approach to the varied texts and formats of cultural texts under analysis. In this project I focus heavily on the close reading of exemplary texts including sociological and economic studies, paintings, photographs, films, documentaries, novels, and letters. Lobato and Guy take on a heavily historical approach of analysis. Although I rely heavily on the historical context to orient the works, I focus more on narrative as construction of the cultural imaginary and a reflection of societal values. Furthermore, I was inspired by Myrtha Schalom’s book *La Polaca* (2003). Her use of critical fabulation in constructing the narrative of Raquel Liberman’s life functions as a counter-narrative to the narratives of prostitution at the turn of the century. The construction of my biography of Raquel’s life is guided by a close reading of her letters and photographs and how her narrative is riddled with contradictions that function as a means of humanizing the prostitute.

*Plan of Action*

As female sexual labor would suggest this project requires an investigation into the dialectics of both female labor and the female body as it interacts with sexuality. Chapter 1 (The Feminine Threat: Female Bodies & Male State Insecurities in the First Wave of Industrialization) is separated into two sections. The first focuses on a government solicited socio-economic study conducted by Juan Bialet Massé in 1904. Bialet Massé greatly elaborated the role of women in society and in production—women’s work is found in domesticity and sexual reproduction
within the framework of marriage. He signals to a third sex as a deviant subsect of the female population that ultimate rejects traditional gendered laboral roles. The second section is an analysis of the novel *Historia de arrabal* by Manuel Gálvez and the film *Naked Tango* directed by Leonard Schrader in response to Bialet Massé’s definition of the third sex. The fictional texts draw on *femme fatale* and tango imagery to construct a narrative of death by unregulated female sexuality.

Chapter 2 (Prostitutes as Transnational Subjects: Humanizing Their Narrative Through the Life of Raquel Liberman) is divided into three section. The first section mirrors the structure of the first chapter—economic studies by Bialet Massé, *le Journal des Économistes*, and Antonio Samper provide a histo-cultural contextualization of nation building and the narratives of difference and Otherhood which is followed by an analysis of the satirical vignette about the ghetto titled “El Barrio de las Ranas” by R.I. Ortiz and a review of the novel and film in the context of Otherhood and deviance. Throughout both chapters there is an analysis of symbolism and terminology that point to contamination as a social anxiety. The second chapter delves more deeply into categorizations of contamination and defines the threat of the prostitute as a vehicle of contamination. The second section focuses on how you identify the prostitute through a narrative of visual cues that further constructs the cultural imaginary. And finally, this thesis ends with a focus on Raquel Liberman as a strong female figure that breaks down the cultural imaginary by contradicting the rigid framework of the prostitute proposed by the texts previously analyzed. Throughout this project I delineate the ways capitalism drives the commodification of the body and how the female both serves as a tool of production and a space for the construction of the nation.
II. Vehicle of Contamination: *La Cautiva*

Although the focus of this study is the prostitute at the turn of the 19th/20th century, it is important to note that she is an iteration of a long history of biopolitics and female subversion that has characterized a process of Otherhood in Argentina. The positionality of women in Argentine politics can be summed in Foucault’s elaboration on biopolitics: “We are, then, in a power that has taken control of both the body and life or that has, if you like, taken control of life in general – with the body as one pole and the population as the other.” (253) Women, working women, and more specifically sexual workers have bodies that are subject to intersecting power systems. Control is the operative word here. Regulation of culture and societal propriety can be mapped out on the bodies of women. But to fully understand the iteration of the prostitute as a vehicle of contamination, it is important to look at Argentina’s first iteration of a woman-threat within the cultural history of the country: *la cautiva* [the captive woman].

In this section of my study I intend to exemplify why, the female character of the *cautiva* in the 19th century symbolically functions in the same role as the prostitute of the 20th century—vehicle of contamination. She was the border/bridge/connection between the indigenous tribes in rurality and civilized society in urbanity. Many narratives in both Argentine literature and Southern Cone paintings express the precarious position of the *cautiva* and her story as a manifestation of the fears of exogamy and xenophobic anxieties in a time of intended state regulation of the sexuality and the private space in response to the threat of *mestizaje*. The story of the *cautiva* is simple in its telling: she is a white woman from the Nord-Patagonian border lines of the national state that is captured by an Indigenous tribe and as a result, touched by barbarity, contaminated and then unable to rejoin society. Let’s take Ángel Della Valle’s painting “La vuelta del malón” [The return of the Indian raid] (1892) currently hanging in the
Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes [National Museum of Fine Arts of Argentina] in Buenos Aires. It was painted for the explicit purpose of being exhibited in the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago titled “World’s Columbian Fair” in celebration of the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ arrival in the new world. In the words of the curator Laura Malosetti Costa the painting was “celebrada como la ‘primera obra de arte genuinamente nacional’” [celebrated as the “first work of art genuinely nationalist”] (par 1). The description of this painting as a form of genuine nationalism reflects a significant contemplation of national identity in the construction of the other.

**Fig. 1.** Native American raiding party. Argentina. Valle, Ángel Della. *La vuelta del malón*. 1892, oil on canvas, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires.

The painting depicts a raiding party returned—the men carry objects of the Nation State/Argentine civilization, holding their spears in triumph. The faces of the men riding are almost indistinguishable from each other, each a copy of the other. Through a colonizing/colonized lens, Indigenous people are not distinguishable, one is unable to stand apart
from the other. The marginalized subject is fungible. If one subject is the same as the other therein lies an objectifying agenda, a deconstruction of personhood. Looking at the man with the cautiva in his arms the tightness found around his jaw mirrors that of the horse he rides with its lips pulled back from its teeth in duress. In multiple pairings, man and animal mirror each other with a parallel positioning of the faces that adds to the undertone of dehumanization in the case of the indigenous man—he and animal are one in the same. Upon close inspection of the stolen objects they carry there’s a briefcase and religious objects like a crucifix and thurible (an incense burner that dangles from chains and swings from a priest’s hand). The crucifix is held in the same manner as the spears, a reverse conquest in which the Indigenous tribe conquers the religious missionary.

It is worth noting that the thurible is being swung around like a weapon in direct contradiction to its original purpose of purification of space. The cautiva is depicted as a traditional European—always young—beauty with fair hair of a light brown shade and a light complexion of white-European roots. She is placed leaning on her captor, her face pale, her chest exposed, her feet crossed and barefoot, with only a gold necklace with a crucifix. The crucifix on her neck harks to the other religious objects in the painting, if they were repurposed so too will she. Her exposed body conveys the idea of violation and exposure to the Indigenous, she is not the women she was before the raid. Her feet being the biggest indicator of this fact, they are bare like the feet of the members of the raid, whether or not by choice she has begun to adopt the habits of the indigenous tribe.

Della Valle’s painting comes two decades after La Conquista del Desierto [The Conquest of the Desert], a military campaign to establish control over Nord-Patagonia in order to defeat Indigenous resistance as much as to prevent Chilean state’s attempts to incorporate Argentine
Patagonia to its territorial domain. The official military and cultural policies from both sides of the borders resulted in a double genocide of native tribes for the economic control of their lands. Again, returning to the idea of a genuine nationalism, the establishment of an Argentine identity stemmed in contradiction to the 19th century Other, the indigenous man. “La vuelta del malón,” provides the most cleanly constructed image of the enemy that most threatens Argentine society, the enemy that spurred the great conquest of the country’s history. During a session of congress in 1878, a representative speaks out about the conflict that Argentina is being consumed by:

Hemos sido pródigos de nuestro dinero y de nuestra sangre en las luchas sostenidas para constituirnos y no se explica cómo hemos permanecido tanto tiempo en perpetua alarma y zozobra, viendo arrasar nuestra campaña, destruir nuestra riqueza, incendar poblaciones y hasta sitiar ciudades en la parte Sur de nuestra República, sin apresurarnos a extirpar el mal de raíz y destruir esos nidos de bandoleros que incuba y mantiene el desierto.

[We have been prodigal with our money and our blood in the sustained battles to constitute ourselves and it is inexplicable how we have remained for so long in perpetual alarm and anxiety, seeing the devastation of our countryside, the destruction of our riches, the burning down of villages and even the siege of cities in the south of our Republic, without hurrying along the eradication of the bad from its roots and destroying those nests of bandits that brews in and maintains the desert.] (Congreso Nacional 683)

The Conquest of the Desert became a fight and defense of Argentine sovereignty over the lands the Argentine state claimed it owned. The fight with the Indigenous tribes has had devastating effects. The ending of his argument calls for the an eradication from the roots and places the indigenous person as a bandit and threat to society, forcibly transported by the Army to the first
Argentine concentration camp (Martín García Island), coerced to work in the economic industrial system of the *estancias* or taken to the city as domestic servants within the residual structures of slavery. This reflection on the Indigenous threat is manifested in Della Valle’s painting. Those bandits that the congressman calls out are running through the desert with their women and their goods. Notably, the Indigenous threat is found in the desert, outside of urbanity and, implicitly implied, outside of civilization and modernity. Outside a space of industrialization produced to house a genetically diverse spectrum of cultures and social interactions.

The Indigenous man might be defined as the prime enemy of the state, but I would like to point out that the *cautiva* represents the major threat in these transitional changes. As per the state, the solution to the Indigenous “problem” was carried out based on two different approaches: genocide or assimilation of the Indigenous demography as labor force. However, the “problem” posed by what the *cautiva* represents is much more complex. Within the framework of an eminently eugenic State, she is the vehicle of reproduction in all its forms—biological, political, moral, and economic. Susana Rotker notes: “The captive woman captures the precarious possessions of the fathers of the nation: if a woman was an extension of the family, how could a white male face these women who were potential vehicles of the foundation of new mestizo hegemonies? (153)” The woman is reduced to a means of production in society and is therefore a vulnerable clog in the greater social machine. In this section of my analysis of *La Cautiva* I will exemplify to what extent a cultural text states this thesis according to which if she is exposed to indigeneity then she can pass on that contamination to her children, resulting in a contamination of civilized society, in the growth of a *mestizo* population. I propose that the *cautiva* in her exposure to indigeneity becomes Other in a State based on “Identidad versus Diferencia” and not “Identity en la Diferencia.”
Nowhere is this more clear than in Esteban Echeverría’s canonical epic poem “La Cautiva”. Along with Facundo. Civilización y barbarie, Amalía, El matadero it is a landmark text of a prolific production of political essays and fictional work by the Generación del ’37/Generación Romántica [Generation of ’37/Romantic Generation] composed by Juan Bautista Alberdi, Juan María Gutiérrez, Vicente Fidel López, José Esteban Antonio Echeverría, José Mármol and plastic artists such as Johann Moritz Rugendas. They became the cultural agents of the State and their cultural work represents the first discourse of Argentina’s modern nationalism.

As a seminal text in Argentine literature La Cautiva explores the exposure to barbarity as otherness, detailing the different ways in which she is transformed into the Other. The argumentation of the cautiva as unsalvageable is most clearly exhibited in two stanzas, both in the third part titled “El Puñal” [The Dagger]. In her escape from the camp, the cautiva implacably exterminates her abductors:

Ella va, y aun de su sombra, [She goes, even from her shadow.]
como el criminal, se asombra; [like a criminal, she is astonished;]
alza, inclina la cabeza; [she lifts, inclines her head;]
pero en un cráneo tropieza, [but she trips over a cranium,]
y queda al punto mortal. [and finds herself at a standstill.]
Un cuerpo gruñe y resuella, [A body growls and pants,]
y se revuelve; mas ella [and it tosses; but she]
cobra espíritu y coraje, [gathers spirit and courageous rage,]
y en el pecho del salvaje [and in the chest of the savage]
clava el agudo puñal. [stabs the sharp dagger.]
The Indigenous bodies are described with animalistic qualities (e.g. gruñe, resuella). The “savage” becomes her mirror, indicated first by her comparison to a criminal and second by her act of murder. This animalistic body that is described in the stanza instead reflects what she has become, she is the savage capable with enough physical strength to commit murders. She kills her abductors to save her lover and try to escape back to civilization. Her lover, a soldier of the great conquest, passes judgement as an extension of that civilization, he says:

Del salvaje la torpeza [From the savage, the fall]
habrá ajado la pureza [would have tattered the purity]
de tu honor, y mancillado [of your honor, and tarnished]
tu cuerpo santificadño [your sanctified body]
por mi cariño y tu amor; [by my affection and your love;]
Ya no me es dado quererte. [I can no longer love you.]

(Echevarría 65, Part III, Stanza 20)

The man is horrified that she has transformed into someone else. The sanctified body and her name María alludes to the Virgin Mary and underlines the role of women as mother and means of reproduction. That she has been sullied by her contact with indigeneity is never more clear than in this stanza. Underlying the dynamic of the cautiva transformed and the soldier is that he is without power and does not hold the role of protector and warrior. Essentially, he is emasculated by her prowess. Rotker highlights, “it matters that she has suddenly lost her identity (guardian angel, good angel), that she has become unrecognizable, unlabelable, that she no longer adequately fills her role” (92). I propose that the threat of the cautiva is twofold: she is the
vehicle of contamination (the Other) and she undermines traditional gender roles. She cannot be
allowed to return to society and so it comes as no surprise that in the end she dies.

**Fig. 2.** Woman begging outside a door, men stare. Uruguay. Blanes, Juan Manuel. *La vuelta de la
Cautiva*. 1830-1901, oil on cardboard, Location unknown.

To best illustrate this point, we look to Uruguayan painter Juan Manuel Blanes and his
painting “*La vuelta de la cautiva*” [The return of the captured woman]. The *cautiva* lies on the
floor begging at the door of what we assume is her previous home, a spectacle to other residents
of the *fortín*. I would note that the first audience who witness the return of the *cautiva* to her
home is conformed entirely by males. This painting depicts a crucial plot point in the story of
any *cautiva*: that she cannot return and even if she does she cannot be reabsorbed into society.
Again, the *cautiva* is depicted as a white Anglo-European beauty with bare feet with loosely
draped fabric as clothing. In combination with the *cautiva* in Della Valle’s painting she also
shows signs of a cultural violation. Her body gestures to the pain of return, looking up in supplication her cries fall on deaf ears. For preservation, civilized society must reject her.

La Cautiva and the narratives of the Argentine Nord-Patagonian border need to be read taking into account the process of Nation building within the framework of Modernity. Based on Political Science sources, I will now analyze the sequence of historical consecutive crisis concerning La Cautiva and the body of narrations of prostitution. Following Italian politologists Norberto Bobbio and Nicola Matteucci’s Diccionario de Política (2001). There are three crisis pertinent to history building. The first is a crisis of Penetration and Integration. It deals with the penetration of an entire physical territory, the control of that national territory, military penetration and domination, and the construction of national maps—that at the same time are geographic and cognitive maps of the new nation. They establish internal borders that won’t surpass geographic mapping. The second crisis, the crisis of Identity and Legitimation deals with the formulation of ideological foundations and a conglomeration of unifying laws (constitution) through which citizens come to obey a centralized authority that emanates from a state model. This leads to an acceptance that these laws are not only just but also unyielding and unquestionably positive. This crisis is resolved by linking the State with the notion of un-questionability: they represent a verticalist dimension of society, the relation between citizens and authority, and are challenges to a nature eminently cultural. It is therefore a crucial role of culture to produce narratives and imaginaries in which identity and positionality is defined—establishing the differences between actors and defiers, defenders and attackers, victims and aggressors. Defining social actors the national narrative feeds a logical discourse to the Nation and furnishes the national scene. The third crisis analyzed by Bobbio and Matteucci is the crisis of Participation which takes place with the widening of the political and social spectrum of the actor. These new demographic
actors are emergent groups and have not previously been represented by traditional political representation. They acquire such a visibility that the State has to acknowledge their presence either by including them within structures of positive integration or by monitoring them or placing them within a logic of exclusion. These actors represent social phenomena which are unprecedented and would eventually lead to their claim for political an expansion of their rights. (Bobbio and Matteucci 1040)

The prostitute, like the *cautiva*, is the second iteration of the threat of the female body. At the end of the 19th century and into the 20th century, she is the wandering contamination of the iconic space of formal civilization, the urban space of Buenos Aires, and antagonizes a sanitized social scenario geographically and culturally away from the border and its dramas of social deviation. The *Cautiva* in the 19th century became a central figure of biological ignominy and social abjection within the imaginaries of social contention during the territorialization and identity crisis of the modern State. I turn now to the figure of the female prostitute as central to the early 20th Century and her placement as a mobile transnational subject within the urban space. I will discuss how her representation in different narratives is built on the gendered tensions increased by the implementation of an industrialized city, an iconic nationalism built on an Othering of cultural deviance, and the overarching impact of capitalism.
CHAPTER 1
THE FEMININE THREAT: FEMALE BODIES & MALE STATE INSECURITIES IN THE FIRST WAVE OF INDUSTRIALIZATION

I. Female Bodies, the Labor Force and a Feminine Sexuality

This first section of the chapter will explore how women’s entrance into the labor force and their involvement in sexual labor was seen as a threat to the male state. This section is divided into three subsections: 1) how women’s labor presented a threat, 2) how Bialet Massé defined the threat as a third sex, and 3) how the third sex draws from femme fatale imagery and ultimately threatened state regulation of gender roles.

Women and the Labor Force

The turn of the century, marked by the first wave of industrialization, predictably prompted a series of dramatic changes: there was a monumental and unprecedented increase of global immigration in the city and women started to join the workforce in the formal job market, particularly factories and sweatshops. In 1904, the Argentine government commissioned a study of the working classes written by Juan Bialet Massé. He was a doctor, lawyer, and politician; involved in government through his medical treatment of future president Roque Sáenz Peña and his eventual position as councilor and mayor of Córdoba. I mention his profession because the positionality of the author within a eugenic state inevitably impacts the way the study must be read. In being part of the country's political and professional elite, he held a position of influence not just in government but in the medical/cultural construction of hegemonic representation of
the working classes. His was not a study by an unnamed government official, placed on a shelf to
gather dust, and forgotten.

One of the primary threats to society, identified by Bialet Massé, is the positionality of
women in society, specifically looking at their roles in the labor force as opposed to domesticity.
In his study, Bialet Massé reflects on women’s labor force: “Donde el alma duele es al estudiar el
trabajo de la mujer.” [It hurts the soul to study the work of women.] (1: 201) Here, Bialet Massé
calls on the affection of pain and pity to express what he sees as the dramatic dissonance that
women labor force produces, promptly denoting it as a negative and subalternizing aspect of the
industrialized age. In this study, women’s labor is primarily documented as that of the
seamstress; he describes the needlework industry with:

Han llegado al estado de miseria presente de una manera insensible. Se pagaban 3 pesos
por la docena de chalecos; se abre un nuevo registro, y dicen que sólo paga 2.80, porque
como empieza y no tiene clientela tiene que ensayar; como hay más costureras que
costura, aceptan; inmediatamente los demás registros bajan el precio. . .con el cual no hay
alimentación racional posible para la mujer.

[They have reached a state of misery through a senseless method. You used to pay 3
pesos per dozen blazers; a new business opens up, and they say you only have to pay
2.80, because they’re starting out and don’t have a clientele to try out; as there are more
seamstresses than needlework, they accept the price; immediately the other businesses
also lower their prices. . . with which there is no reasonable salary possible for women]

(1: 201)

Embedded in this description of the needlework industry I notice two interacting critiques. The
most apparent of the two is the description of a competitive market (a defining trait of
capitalism) and price wars that lead to “no reasonable salary”. Implicit in this framing of unreasonability is that workers are complicit in the devaluation of their work in order to maintain a share of the market. A job that was valued at 3 pesos can go as low as “1.80” (1: 201) leading to the “state of misery” that Bialet Massé describes. Whether intentional or not, Bialet Massé critiques the very system of industrial capitalism which is based on competitive pricing.

His second critique lays the blame for participation in this economic competition on the increase of women accessing the labor force, as he states in “como hay más costureras que costura”. The “they” he refers to are the women that have joined the labor force, it is because more of them have joined and opened businesses that we see a depreciation for the value of their work. Notably, the critique is focused on the increase of women willing to work and does not negate at all that women should work. I believe that implied in this reasoning is that there is an adequate number of women workers but that the number (never mentioned) should not be surpassed.

Although Bialet Massé might appear to accept a limited woman labor force, he later clarifies the only “exceptional” nature situations in which this is acceptable:

El trabajo de la mujer no puede, pues, admitirse sino por las fatalidades del destino: en la viuda sin amparo, en la mujer soltera que no tiene familia que la socorra, o en el trabajo de eso que se llama el tercer sexo . . . Ese tercer sexo se compone de las mujeres que quedan sin hombre con quien aparejarse, por efecto de las emigraciones a las colonias o a países extraños . . . de las que, por efecto de una moral extraviada, han renunciado o las han renunciado al matrimonio, y que llegan en su delirio hasta la castración.

[Women’s work cannot be accepted unless as a result of the misfortunes of destiny: in a widow without refuge, in the single woman without family to help her, or in the case of
that which is called the third sex . . . This third sex is made up of women who remain 
without mates due emigration to the colonies; or who, due to deviant morals, have 
renounced or are renouncing marriage, and who in their delirium go as far as castration.]
(2: 361)

A female labor force is only justified in circumstances of absolute necessity: “widow without 
refuge, in the single woman without family”. Bialet Massé defines this necessity through an 
independence imposed by circumstance, really due to her exclusion from the heteronormative, 
the lack of male relative for women to rely on. It is only the dire situation of being “alone” that 
requires a woman work for a living. The last condition that explains women joining the labor 
force is a classification crucial to the topics of this study: that of a “third sex”. The third sex 
manifests in two scenarios. The first, in accordance with the previous two examples is borne 
from a missing male figure and a happenstantial independence. The logic is clear to Bialet 
Massé—women only occupy a space in the labor force when men are no longer there to provide 
for the family unit, underlying traditional gender roles in the process.

The second manifestation of the third sex is one borne of “deviance” in which “due to 
deviant morals, [women] have renounced marriage”. Deviance in and of itself communicates a 
moral judgement one that categorizes the subject within a framework of mental instability and 
aberrance. As the Argentine gender study practitioner Jorge Salessi rightfully notes, “What 
defined deviation, or the ‘immoral,’ was either the independence from men gained by women 
who worked for wages; the circumstantial absence of a man; or the voluntary and conscious 
rejection of the traditional marriage that established the division of labor as well as the roles and 
hierarchies of ‘feminine’ women and ‘masculine’ men” (340). Marriage and the traditional 
family unit is the framework for capitalist heteronormative/normalecy—a man and a woman have
children and the man provides for the family until which time his son goes into the labor force and his daughter marries. The aberrance is the woman that chooses not to fall within this framework. Embedded in this argumentation is a rationalization of symbolic positionality—the tension that Bialet Massé points to is rooted in the dynamics of a space within vs outside of the framework. The third sex rejects this space of interiority/domesticity, rejects a positionality within the accepted framework. This rejection by the third sex deconstructs the gender division of labor and is termed deviant.

*The Third Sex*

The extent of the third sex “delirium” Bialet Massé defines in terms of “castration”. The castration is two-fold as it intertwines debates of productivity and gender roles. Castration here should be read as putting a stop to human (re)production—women cannot conceive without sperm, children will not be borne. As French sociologist and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard has said: “If...the *ends* of production collapses, then the respect due to the means of production also collapses, and the machines appear as their true end, as direct and immediate operational signs of the social relation to death on which capital is nourished” (35). In stopping the system of reproduction the third sex introduces not only a social death but rather a capitalistic death. Again, I point towards Bialet Massé’s framing—his contextualizing women’s work as the result of misfortunes needs to be examined. In the original Spanish, “fatalidades” although conveying the meaning of misfortunes makes reference to fatality or death, made explicit by the mention of a widow. That Bialet Massé simply frames women’s work as a result of death denotes the third sex as the harbinger of tragedy, that the increase of a woman labor force rather than a part of an industrial modernity foretells a social and economic necrosis.
The idea of an independent woman as a means of castration, the sexual incapacitation of man, the core of the gender obsession of the Nineteenth century, reveals politically male anxieties of a possible new world order. This new world order emasculates: “Esa restricción inmoral, deja a la mujer en la libertad de ir al taller y de tomar ocupaciones de hombre, mientras que entre nosotros hay matrimonio que tiene seis y ocho hijos . . . No arranquemos de la frente de la mujer argentina esa corona de gloria.” [That immoral restriction, leave women with the freedom to go to the studio and take up men’s work, while we have marriages with six and eight children . . . Let’s not strip the Argentinian woman of her crown of glory.] (Bialet Massé 2: 361) This cultural strategist notes that not only are women entering the labor force but also they are occupying ‘masculine’ jobs, taking what belongs to men. This idea of labor belonging to a gender introduces the rhetoric of rights. Men have the right to those positions and women do not, and that’s why women are described ‘taking’ them. The third sex threatens men in that she steals their jobs but also rejects marriage, a legally recognized system of reproduction; as a result, men are castrated on two fronts—the biological and the economic.

Bialet Massé presents an alternative to the third sex—the mother; praising the abundance of children of “marriages with six and eight...and even twenty” (2: 361). He calls out to a social ‘we’ in “Let’s not strip...her crown of glory”. He calls upon the collective to regulate the woman and her labor, here he posits that the valid form of labor for the woman is child production and (compulsive) maternity. That this maternal profession is characterized by a “crown of glory” sanctifies the mother figure and makes allusion to the Virgin Mary, whose foremost known for her role as the mother of Christ. It cements the woman’s profession and destiny as mother and means of reproduction.
Interwoven in the argument of gender division of labor is the division of space that I touched on briefly when discussing the marriage framework. The idea of labor as belonging innately to men distinguishes the space of existence of the two genders: the woman’s is inside the house while the man’s is outside in society. As Kerstin Shands notes, “Rest and passivity have been linked to femininity in Western culture while movement has been aligned with masculinity and change. Change is frequently masculinized, while stasis is feminine.” (4) Here is the crux of the matter—that women have stepped out of the matrimonial framework, are finding professions outside of motherhood, and are changing the social order. If women are stepping out of the static home, they are also subverting the notion of social space and social mobility. Change is now feminized.

The gendered definition of cultural spaces also brings up the function of interiority and exteriority mapped out in interactions between the genders and also mapped out on the female body itself. Bialet Massé himself frames the valuation of women, “Si el industrial emplea a la mujer, es preciso que la tome con sus calidades naturales, con las necesidades que nacen de su organismo y que pague su trabajo por lo que vale.” [If an industrial employs a woman, it’s necessary that he take into consideration her natural qualities, with the needs that are born of her organism and that he pay her for what her job is worth.](2: 361) The emphasis on “natural qualities” further build on the female body as a means of production. Bialet Massé extends his understanding of women’s positionality: if before, women are to find the social space within the home and within matrimony, they are to find their (re)productive space within themselves. This ‘within’ constructs the ‘feminine interior’ in which women may find their value to society (read: to the capitalist system). Bialet Massé underlines the dialectic that women find value within themselves, in their uterus, in reproduction, inside the house, in motherhood while their
counterparts may find value in their jobs, their actions and interactions, their development outside of the house, outside of the self. The third sex unravels this hierarchy of positionality in which women cannot inhabit an exterior space and participate in the agency of change—it occupies the masculine productive space that inhabits the labor force and public space.

If the economic valuation of a woman is found in her nature, in her body, then she functions as both producer and product and can therefore really only rely on her body as a means of social stability and significance. Sexual labor becomes the only means by which women can exist and are valued in society. Her only exchange value. For Bialet Massé that sexual labor manifests itself in motherhood. He, however, considers the positionality of women in the labor force, that the “industrial...take into consideration her natural qualities, with the needs that are born of her organism and that he pay her for what her job is worth” (Bialet Massé 2: 361). Within this created rationality, it would therefore stand to reason that woman’s agency is found in her reproductive ability and sexuality. If the woman is not performing that sexual labor within the home as a mother, then this logic would suggest that in the exterior space she would still be performing a sexual labor. Is there any difference between the sexual role performed in the exterior public spaces and the interior spaces of domesticity? In an urban space, the sexual labor performed in the exterior space is done by prostitutes. Prostitution as a career would seemingly take advantage of woman’s only object of value: her body. In complete agreement with Elaine Showalter, “Simply to invoke anatomy risks a return to the crude essentialism, the phallic and ovarian theories of art, that oppressed women in the past.” (“Feminist Criticism” 187)

Bialet Massé contributed to build a conditional existence for the social development of the working woman during a period of industrialization. His study attempts to decipher this track of progress and in so doing cements his rationale in an essentialist argument. As Erika Bornay
notes, “Para muchos, contemplar a la mujer fuera de su papel maternal y conyugal se tradujo en miedo y ansiedad.” [For many, contemplation of the woman outside of her maternal and conjugal roles turned into fear and anxiety.] (16) He reduces women to their vaginas, ovaries, and uteri therefore limiting their contributions in an industrializing society to those professions that take advantage of the body. His logic of the female body becomes the oppressive force; his study reactionary to changes induced by industrialization.

The Woman/Prostitute and State Regulation

This politics of regulation in Bialet Massé’s work follows a tradition that had been building throughout the 19th century and persisted in the 20th century. Women’s iconography centered on a growing preoccupation with female sexuality visible in the obsession with the *femme fatale* and her talent of luring, competing and defeating men. Bram Dijkstra notes that “Most of the popular fin-de-siècle painters offered analogous visual admonitions to woman not to peek into the mirror of self without the tempering supervision of a man to guide her. Only a truly perverse woman—a lamia, she who was the very incarnation of the temptress, the snake of forbidden knowledge—could dare do so.” (138) Dijkstra makes reference to the visual. I argue that as with painting, narrative also paints images and develops iconography that ultimately contribute to a global cultural imaginary (more on this to follow). For Bialet Massé, and ultimately for the male-state, the third sex was that lamia that Dijkstra mentions (138). The third sex, a woman outside the patriarchal framework, has looked into the mirror of self without male supervision. Female sexualities alternative to marriage or controlled female sexuality was seen as an act of subversion when not regulated by the state and by the social conventions of the private. Jorge Salessi in his study “The Argentine Dissemination of Homosexuality, 1890-1914” explores
the threat of a feminine sexuality. In analyzing Victor Mercante’s sociological study into “El fetiquismo y eluranismo femenino en los internados educativos” [Feminine fetishism and uranism\(^1\) in boarding schools] (1905) he notes that Mercante “appropriated the tedious commonplaces of Latin American modernismo then in vogue to describe woman—her body transformed into an *objet d’art*, but which might be difficult to control or might disturb a social.” (Salessi 341) This idea of the feminine as *objet d’art* employs a frame of reference in which women are tools and subject to the male gaze. Again, the noted concern with the female body and feminine sexuality is regulation. It would seem that the only context in which femininity does not pose a threat is when directed by the male-state.

And here I see a kink in the construction of a cultural imaginary relating to the prostitute—she is not always the villain. In fact, the prostitute as a tool of the state is perhaps a righting of the wrongs that are perceived by those of a like mind as Bialet Massé—“state-regulated heterosexual prostitution was a measure conceived as a defense against the proliferation of homosexual relations” (Salessi 349). Prostitutes were used a state-regulatory tool of sexuality and gender. What then becomes of the cultural imaginary when prostitute is not a tool of the state, when she behaves like the third sex and exists outside of the framework, or borders, imposed on her? Prostitution in Argentina may have been legal and medically regulated (starting in Buenos Aires in 1875), however, the prostitute as a street walker posed a great threat in that, like the third sex, she maneuvered in an exterior space in as much as she circulated around the city. Again we see the tensions of interiority and exteriority, passivity and motion.

The state-regulated bordello functions as a space of interiority, in which the prostitute serves a political and social purpose. However, on the streets or in the illegal bordello, she is

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\(^1\) Uranism: homosexuality
deviant and a threat to society. “Foreign prostitutes and pimps were already ensconced in Buenos Aires by the 1860s” (Guy 14) and at the start of the 20th century this particular industry was dominated by women from diverse backgrounds. With the increase of venereal diseases at the turn of the century and an overall fear of feminine liberty, the mobile prostitute was framed as a contaminant:

Throughout Argentina prostitution control was symbolically associated with fear of disease and the more general issue of what to do about the potentially revolutionary working classes—the ‘problema social’ . . . In modernizing Argentine cities, the plight of the woman who flaunted herself and sold her body—along with those who might—haunted the politically powerful and attracted extensive discussion. (Guy 75)

Increased by the flow of global migration, prostitution became the Argentine city’s greatest threat. The cultural imaginary of the time often constructed her image as a physically mobile creature, a carrier of disease, a deviant and subversive contaminant. Ultimately, the threat of prostitution stems from her ability to be corrupted and to corrupt others. We see this construction in the following section where I explore the symbols and imagery used in two cultural texts that serve as evidence for this perceived threat of the prostitute.

II. Building Consensus in Argentine Cultural Imaginaries: Narratives of Prostitutes and the Mapping of Emotional Geographies in Buenos Aires

The following section of this chapter is dedicated to the analysis of two narratives: a novel by Manuel Gálvez titled Historia de arrabal that came out in 1922 and a American-Argentine drama film from 1990 titled Naked Tango by the North American director and screenwriter Leonard Schrader. In Historia de arrabal, Linda or Rosalinda is a factory worker in
a frigorifico (meat processing industrial plant) in Buenos Aires. She is raped and kidnapped by her step-brother, Chino, who eventually forces her into sex work and becomes her pimp. On the other hand, the film *Naked Tango* is also set in the 1920s and tells the story of Stephanie Torres (Mathilda May), a newlywed on her way to Argentina with her husband, a judge from Buenos Aires. After a brief marital spat Stephanie runs out onto the deck of the boat and sees a woman undress and jump off to her death. In order to get back at her husband she decides to switch clothes with the woman and make him think she’s dead. Amongst the mystery woman’s belongings she finds a diary explaining that Alba is on her way to be a mail-order bride for a nice Jewish man in Argentina. Stephanie decides to take her ruse one step further and impersonates her. The rest of the movie explores the underground world of the infamous international sex trafficking organization Zwi Migdal, based in the city of Rosario, Argentina and her imprisonment into prostitution.

Both works cover the lives of women that are forced into prostitution, notably both cases of prostitution function outside of the law and represent unregulated sexual labor. These narratives serve two functions—both a reflection of and contribution to the cultural imaginary of prostitution at the start of the 20th century. An intersection of factors construct the image of the prostitute in the cultural imaginary; they include unregulated female sexuality, industrialization, agency, immigration, contamination and death. I believe that the deliberate choice of a late 20th century film reflects the sexual labor and human trafficking in the early 20th century and shows the perseverance of essentialism and objectification in women iconography that persists until the end of the century. Despite the time period under analysis, treatment of women’s liberation and a female sexuality far extend the parameters of this study. The following sections work as evidence of this image construction.
The Femme Fatale

As previously mentioned, the *femme fatale* imagery is very potent in the 19th century and bleeds into the 20th century. Both the novel and the film superimpose *femme fatale* iconographic structures on their protagonists. Looking first at the presentation and description of Linda in *Historia de arrabal* she is overwhelmingly described in association with the color red and communicates the idea of tainted innocence. “Rosalinda, bonita y nueva . . . Cuando Linda caminaba, sus caderas se movían muellemente de un lado al otro, pero sin exceso; y a su paso por las calles, iba quedando detrás de ella una estela de pensamiento voluptuosos” [Rosalinda, pretty and new. . . When Linda walked, her hips moved softly from side to side, but without excess; and at her pace through the streets, she left behind her in her wake voluptuous thoughts] (Gálvez 6). First, is the priming of Linda as an innocent, the use of “bonita” as a descriptor for beauty instead of *guapa, hermosa, atractiva, bella* prompts the understanding that she is young as the connotation of pretty understands a nonsexualization. Doubly, her name Linda also the adjective *linda* is with connotations of cute or sweet—an infantilized beauty. She is “nueva” implying the idea of her body untouched. Despite this framing of innocence, her body is sexualized with “her hips mov[ing] softly” and leaving behind “voluptuous thoughts”. Even in her innocence she is sexual. However, this sexuality is perceived through a male gaze, literally pointed out in the novel with “notaba los ojos de los hombres sobre su rostro y su cuerpo” [she noticed the eyes of men roaming her face and body] (Gálvez 6). Linda is the *femme fatale*, although seemingly innocent her body calls to men and leaves them lingering on her form. The idea of Linda’s body as sexual awakening prompts her objectification and existence as
sexualized object, she ceases to exist as solely a character with agency but is an image constructed through the male gaze.

Her sexual awakening is further documented in association with the color red. Linda with “su boca, expresiva, roja, quemante, de labios carnosos . . . la cara ardiendo, los ojos como fuego y la piel rosa. Y con su traje bermejo y aquellos golpes sangrientos de la cinta y el clavel” [her mouth, expressive, red, burning, with thick lips . . . the burning face, the eyes like fire and the skin pink. And with her auburn outfit and those bleeding blows of a belt and carnation] (Gálvez 15). Where before her hips swayed “softly...but without excess” exemplifying a subdued although potent sexuality this next description throws Linda into the fray of sex. Her mouth and lips are bright red, burning, and thick, her eyes and face are also described in terms of flame presumably alluding to the flame of passion or a simmering sexuality underneath. This hypersexual description breaks up her body into dynamic visual shots, pornographic in nature. Like a pornographic video her body is dissected into a collection of sexual parts. Her body dressed in red brings to mind the Art Nouveau painting of Charles Hermans “Circe, The Temptress” (1881).
Fig. 3. Women in a red dress. Belgium. Hermans, Charles. *Circe, The Temptress*. 1881, oil on canvas, Location unknown.

Circe, noted by Ancor Montaner Cabrera as one of the major figures of the *femme fatale*\(^2\), is dressed in red with a voluptuous body, lips taintred red standing out in a shadowed face she looks directly, piercingly and daringly at her spectator. She is the temptress that directly engages with the male gaze. Linda’s red dress also catches the eye of the narrator describing her allure as violent in the “bleeding blows” of her red outfit. Although her body is described as “nueva” [new] denoting purity, this color association preemptively clues in the reader to her future downfall. The association between Linda and the color red, and especially blood is incontestable. Although in this take Linda’s red is in accordance with her burgeoning sexuality, the implication

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\(^2\) Ancor Montaner Cabrera was a student in la Facultat de Belles Arts de Sant Carles en la Universitat Politècnica de València. He created a collection of paintings of different femme fatales based on an investigation into her iconography in the 19th and 20 century titled “La Figura de la femme fatale clásica en la pintura de los siglos XIX y XX”.

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is that her sexuality will take a moral turn, the red belies the supposed innocence with which she is first described.

The sexualization of the color red is already within the cultural imaginary; since the Victorian period and well into the present, let’s not forget the many red light districts throughout the world, most notably De Wallen (The redlight district of Amsterdam). The novel doesn’t fail to remind the reader of this collective knowledge: “el fanal sangriento El Farol Rojo derramaba su luz trágica sobre la calle y las vecinas casas” [the bleeding beacon The Red Lantern spilled its tragic light over the street and the neighboring houses] (Gálvez 53). The bordello is the other red space in the novel other than Linda’s body and it is not a coincidence. The parallelism established in color coding Linda and the bordello as red predicts her entrance into prostitution. That the brothel spills its light onto the surrounding houses communicates the idea of deregulation and contamination. This brothel is disrupting the borders of the space it occupies, its lights literally color its surrounding area. This disruption of space further plays with social anxieties of the time—the ghetto cannot be contained and the prostitute will stretch her limbs further than her designated space, her brothel is not static.

After being forced into prostitution, Linda is an active participant in her degenerate life: “arreglábase cuanto podía, pintábase los ojos y la boca, y en las calles exageraba sus habituales procedimientos para interesar y ser seguida” [she would dress up as much as she was able, she would make up her eyes and mouth, and on the street, she would exaggerate her movements in order to interest and be followed] (Gálvez 61). Again, where before her hips swayed “softly...but without excess” and then her body was an erotic pornographic map, now her innocence is nonexistent and she highlights her “natural qualities,” her sexuality. Before where she “notaba los ojos de los hombres sobre su rostro y su cuerpo...haciéndola alejarse temerosamente de los
grupos” [she noticed the eye’s of men roaming her face and body...it made her fearfully distance herself from those groups] (Gálvez 6) she now “exaggerate[s] her movements in order to interest and be followed.” Linda’s transformation is complete—from shy, inexperienced woman that turned away from a male gaze she is now complicit in trying to get men’s attention. She plays into the commerce of her own body. Her purchase of curated outfits and the application of her makeup points to the capitalistic industry of women’s beauty, the dressing up of the female body to service the male gaze. Linda doubly functions as consumer of goods and as a product herself.

Although Stephanie’s story is written at the end of the century, the perception of her deliberate sexual performance also frames her as deviant. After the beginning blue credits scene, *Naked Tango* transitions to a ship scene in which the spectator is first introduced to Stephanie and her husband. The camera pans to a painting of a passenger ship and a server dressed in a formal tux surrounded by impressively dressed people.

Fig. 4. Hallway with chandeliers and formally dressed people. Screenshot of *Naked Tango* 00:02:33.

Looking at the formal and luxurious forms of dress of the characters and the attention to detail of the architecture with the crystal chandeliers and crown molding the audience is able to deduce that this part of the ship is reserved to the rich and powerful. The camera focuses on the ballroom
and specifically a couple composed of a beautiful young woman and an older gentlemen, the
dance of the evening: tango.

Fig. 5. Stephanie dances with Judge Torres. Screenshot of *Naked Tango* 00:03:01.

This tango dance between Stephanie and her husband colors our perception of her for the rest of
the film: as the song comes to an end and her partner dips her, she lifts her leg high in the air
exposing the slit in her dress and the top of her sheer thigh-high stockings (*Naked Tango*
00:03:04-00:03:10). Her left leg is fully exposed and she smiles over her shoulder at the crowd.
This feeding off of being watched pinpoints her knowledge of her own sexuality and the eyes
that gaze upon her. The spectators seem to be facing the couple and the applause seems partially
intended for their performance and not just the band.
Judge Torres appears upset, he takes her back to the table, with his arm on her lower back.

Stephanie: Why do we have to stop?

Judge Torres: Because.

Stephanie: But I need practice. If I embarrass you in front of your friends I’ll never be able to make-

Judge Torres (interrupts): Don’t worry. You are getting better every day...Finish your dessert, Stephanie.

(Naked Tango 00:03:12-00:03:30)

 Afterwards they sit down to their table and Judge Torres frowns at her.
Fig. 7. Judge Torres is angry. Screenshot of *Naked Tango* 00:03:27.

This is the first conversation between these two characters and interaction outside of the tango they just danced. Stephanie’s question and his dismissive response and later interruption reveals a lot about the dynamics of their marriage. Stephanie is infantilized, her question implicating that she must have permission to dance, that her husband doesn’t actually give her a reason for stopping implicates his unquestionable authority, replying with just “Because” and also commanding her to eat her food places him in a parental role. That he interrupts Stephanie implies that he really does not care to hear what she says. It brings up the question of positionality for Stephanie in this marriage. If her thoughts aren’t taken seriously and she is talked down to as a child then she functions as a trophy wife on the arm of her husband. Equivalent to throwing a tantrum Stephanie flirts with the waiter.

Stephanie (looking at the waiter): Or maybe he’ll dance with me, can you tango?

Waiter: Sorry, the best Valentino on board is your father.

Stephanie (chuckles): He’s not my father, he’s my husband.

(*Naked Tango* 00:03:31-00:03:39)
The age difference is notable between this married couple and the dynamic of the communication also presents parental-child relationship that even the waiter had picked up on. That Stephanie is so much younger and functions as a decorative piece colors marriage as a form of prostitution. There’s a capitalistic enterprise in Stephanie selling herself to her much older husband and into marriage. Her dramatic end to the dance with her husband gives her performance an element of sexualized spectacle, further emphasized when she pulls the waiter into a dance. The judge gets up from the table and says across the room:

    Judge Torres: Leave the poor man alone, Stephanie. (Smiling, Judge Torres grabs her arm then whispers to her in anger) Stop making a scene. You’re acting worse than a whore.

(Naked Tango 00:03:53-00:04:02)

Fig. 8. Judge Torres is mad at Stephanie, grabs arm. Screenshot of Naked Tango 00:03:59.

I believe that the denigration of Stephanie to whore is first implied by her husband and from this moment on, her moral standing is questioned. Taking cues from their interactions in this scene, “acting like a whore” implies two things. The first, Stephanie is attention seeking, she has flaunted her body to dinner guests and this scene plays with the idea of voyeurism in that she fetishly enjoys being a spectacle. The second, is that she has defied the male authority. In terms
of regulation, Judge Torres is her regulator and she danced with the waiter to defy him. That her husband is a Judge symbolically implies that he functions as an extension of the state. She cannot be regulated and for that reason she is a whore.

The second crucial moment in the development of Stephanie as a figure of prostitution is after she has arrived in Buenos Aires and has met Alba’s fiancé. When she first meets Zico she smiles up at him from beneath her lashes (an act of flirtation):

Zico: I’m your husband, I hope I’m not a disappointment.

Stephanie-Alba: You don’t look like a man that needs to be married by mail.

Zico: We all do here. There’s only one woman for every fifty men in this country.

(*Naked Tango 00:10:23-00:10:36*)

**Fig. 9.** Stephanie has flirty smile. Screenshot of *Naked Tango* 00:10:28.

In this interaction three things are highlighted. The first, Stephanie finds Zico attractive whereas with the descriptions of Linda we rarely see her own expression of her sexuality, in the film it is blatant. This distinction could be due to the form itself that in *Naked Tango* someone has to act Stephanie and so she is a figure onto herself and that in *Historia de arrabal* Linda is always perceived through someone else’s lens (usually the narrator’s who let the audience inherit his
own). The second revelation is that Alba is a mail-order bride—the very fact pointing to a commerce of female bodies. Although this commerce is legitimized through the institution of marriage it does not negate that Alba is selling her body.

The third point, I believe is a reflection on the state of gender dynamics in Argentina, one that Jorge Salessi points out, “At the turn of the century male foreigners between the ages of twenty and forty were a large and highly visible part of the population of Buenos Aires” (348). Women are commodities because they are rare and wanted. Leading up to that moment, Stephanie is being heckled by a large group of men through a gate. She is the body that is objectified—with so few women the implication is that almost any woman will do.

**Fig. 10.** Men through a gate. Screenshot of *Naked Tango* 00:10:04.

Throughout her interaction with Zico, before she realizes who he is and what she’s gotten herself into, she flirts with him. Of note in this part of the film is Stephanie’s reasoning for waiting to give up the ruse: “I had no intention of going this far. I had to tell the truth soon, but I had never seen a Jewish wedding… and a Jewish wedding night” (*Naked Tango* 00:14:25-00:14:36). Her comment constructs two perceptions of Stephanie, the first being that she has little regard for the sanctity of marriage as she does not take a religious ceremony seriously and
is about to cheat on her husband. The second is that she is looking forward to having sex with Zico, further emphasizing her “promiscuity,” according to the logic the film intends to establish.

Fig. 11. Stephanie in lingerie on bed. Screenshot of Naked Tango 00:17:31.

On Alba’s wedding night she is dressed in some white lingerie and smiles at Zico from across the room, clearly comfortable in her own sexuality. Again she gives Zico a coy smile.

Zico: Tell me, Alba, I need to know...(he starts unlacing her lingerie) Do you want to make me happy?

Stephanie-Alba (whispers): Yes.

(Naked Tango 00:17:57-00:18:11)

Fig. 12. Zico kisses Stephanie. Screenshot of Naked Tango 00:18:12.
Zico (breathes out): Oh, Alba, you’re wonderful. (his hand moves between her thighs)

Alba: Zico, do you love me?

Zico: I love you Alba, I would do anything to make you happy. Would you do anything to make me happy?

(Stephanie contemplates with a smile)

Zico: Would you? Anything? I can’t hear you. Tell me. (He says smiling, his hand moves further up her in between her thighs)

(They both lay on the bed)

Stephanie: (whispers) Maybe.

Zico: Will you do anything to make me happy? Come on. You promise?

Alba: (whispers) I promise.

(Naked Tango 00:18:12-00:19:00)

Fig. 13. Zico and Stephanie on the bed. Screenshot of Naked Tango 00:18:54.

Stephanie participates in this negotiation of sex with her fake husband. Zico asks if she wants to make him happy and she responds with yes on two separate occasions. This sets up the idea of Alba being in sexual service to him, little does she know exactly what that entails. Throughout this scene there are string instruments playing that set the mood of anticipation and trepidation. The sound continues even after Zico leaves the bed implying that what the music anticipates isn’t
Stephanie’s sexual climax that moments before was anticipated but rather whatever Zico is going to bring. Zico stages the wedding night. Stephanie’s body is posed and Zico asks her to remain in that position, a body language that communicates a willing sexuality: her body open and her chest is posed higher than her lower body accentuating her breasts.

**Fig. 14.** Stephanie laying back on the bed. Screenshot of *Naked Tango* 00:19:05.

Zico: Stay just like that, I’ll be right back.

Stephanie: Where are you going?

Zico: I forgot something, to make it perfect. (Zico opens the door and in walks Bertoni the Jeweler. Stephanie sits up in bed.) You remember our jeweler Mr. Bertoni.

Stephanie: What?!

Zico: The way to make me happy is to make him happy.

(*Naked Tango* 00:19:06-00:19:32)
Stephanie: But you’re my husband.

Zico: Yes, and you swore to obey me.

Stephanie: Why?

Zico: This isn’t Europe. We’re a lot more modern here. [emphasis added]

(Naked Tango 00:19:33-00:19:47)

In the shift to Modern ethical and moral values, new rules defined the industry of prostitution—it is naturalized as another offering of the global market. Meaning, the commerce of the body is natural. Zico sold Alba’s ‘virginal’ wedding night to Bertoni the Jeweler, he’s actually a pimp and the mail-order bride is a ruse for a human trafficking ring. Stephanie’s night of promiscuity devolves into the prostitution of her body. I would like to underline the irony in this scene: Stephanie lies about her identity and in turn her new husband, Zico, is a greater lie. She says “But you’re my husband” when she attempts to negate that he would pass her off to another man; the framing of this moment is ironic because she herself did not respect the sanctity of her own marriage. In Zico’s dialogue with obedience the audience is privy to the implication—had Stephanie obeyed her own husband, she would not be exposed to the violence of selling her body. If her husband is state regulation then the movie documents the results of defying that
regulation—sexual and physical abuse. Although Zico jokes that Argentina’s modern culture is what allows for a man to share his wife, the underlying idea is still there: Modernity is a space where deviance can exist. The market offers became normalized. Stephanie has become the whore that her husband warned her about because she revels in her own sexuality and because, like Bialet Massé’s third sex, tries to exist outside of a framework of regulation.

*Tango*

Of note is the omnipresence of tango dance and tango music throughout the film. Tango functions as a framework for understanding the film and the Stephanie-Alba character. Pablo Vila notes that “El tango nació en los suburbios de Buenos Aires a finales del siglo XIX, en estrecha relación con la pobreza urbana, tanto nativa como inmigrante, pero también con la delincuencia y la prostitución.” [Tango was born in the slums of Buenos Aires at the end of the 19th century, in close relation to urban poverty, equally native and immigrant, but also with delinquency and prostitution.] (73). Tango is borne of the intersections of race, poverty, and sexuality looked at throughout this project in the Othered space that is the arrabal. *Naked Tango* presents the work of the Zwi Migdal, a Jewish mafia group known for their human trafficking, and frames the romantic interaction between Stephanie-Alba and Cholo in tango. One of the overarching plots and arguably the main plot of the film is the Alba-Cholo relationship. Through tango Stephanie’s transformation into Alba is complete and her decline into the immoral is cemented.

Let us review the very beginning of the film: The film opens with movie credits and a scene with lighting done in shades of blue, seemingly unrelated to the film, a clip of an old film. A couple dances the tango and a man sitting on the sidelines, captivated, gets up from his seat
and intercepts them. He enters into a brawl with the dancing man, wins, steals the woman, and finishes the dance off with a kiss.

**Fig. 16.** Opening credits tango scene. Screenshot of *Naked Tango* 00:01:37.

This opening scene is quite representative of the entire film, Stephanie finds herself in positions of possession first as the young bride to a quite older judge, then as Alba the bride and eventual whore of Zico (the brothel owner), and lastly dance partner to Cholo (tango dancer and killer). The introductory blue scene foreshadows the ultimate powerlessness role of the woman in these situations but also her eventual domination and love with the tango dancer.

The first moment of tango in the plot of the film is the one and only dance Stephanie has with her husband. Revisiting the end of that scene reveals the importance of understanding tango in order to understand the heterosexual interactions between Stephanie and men in the film.
Judge Torres: Stop making a scene. You’re acting worse than a whore.

Stephanie: What’s wrong I’m just doing your damn tango.

Judge Torres: You don’t know what tango is. I don’t want you doing it with other men. Ever. Not even as a joke.

(Naked Tango 00:03:58-00:03:14)

First and foremost, the Judge reveals the duplicity in meaning for the tango (“You don’t know what tango is.”) —tango is not just a dance. There are multiple markers in this moment that explain different levels by which we must understand tango: “making a scene,” “whore,” “don’t want you doing it with other men.” In this scene, we undoubtedly see Judge Torres alluding to the historical and social contextualization of tango. Popular in tango is the image of the woman, often expressed through the milongera. Noemí Ulla reflecting on various tango music points out, “La gran mayoría de los letristas comparten la visión de un futuro nefasto para las mujeres del cabaret” [The great majority of songwriters share the vision of a disastrous future for the women of the cabaret.] (37). Women in tango are doomed to a social death. Stephanie as the woman “making a scene” or comparably ‘putting on a show’ is the woman of the cabaret. The
milonguera imagery in tango is often defined as “una mujer de barrio que se traslada al centro seducida por un hombre, tratando de superar su nivel económico anterior” [a woman from the slums that moves to the center seduced by a man, trying to surpass her previous economic level] (Ulla 36). Stephanie, differs from this imagery in that she is not the one being seduced but rather is a seducer. Additionally, Stephanie already belongs to the upper class, tango is not her break from poverty. Then, in this context, what kind of a milonguera is she? Carlos Mina notes that there is another framing for the women of tango, “Encontramos una oposición central... la madre y las ‘otras mujeres’. El lugar de la madre es el hogar y el de las otras mujeres, los salones bailables, el cabaret, el ‘centro’ o simplemente la calle.” [We find a central opposition...the mother and the ‘other women’. The place of the mother is the home and for the other women, dance halls, cabaret, the ‘center’ or simple the street.] (80). Mina points out something that we’ve already seen in Bialet Massé, that for women there are only two roles—that of mother and whore. Sexual labor dominates her placement in society. The reason Judge Torres doesn’t want Stephanie dancing with other men is that tango functions as a double entendre, tango is sex. Tango within the space of sanctified marriage is appropriate, but tango with another man is the whoring of the female body.

The next tango moment in the film is right after Stephanie admits to wanting to experience a Jewish wedding night. Tango music starts to play in the courtyard right outside her window, she is entranced by the performance.
Fig. 18. Men dance tango in blue light. Screenshot of Naked Tango 00:15:13.

Again, knowing that tango is associated with a sense of sexual intimacy her spectatorship of the tango performance functions on the level of voyeurism. It isn’t until shortly after that the viewer realizes that one of the dancers in the courtyard is Cholo—tango dancer, killer, and sexual/love interest for Stephanie-Alba. Before being officially introduced in the film Cholo makes two brief cameos: when Zico shows Alba the Jewish quarter (Naked Tango 00:14:21) and the late-night tango that mesmerized Alba (Naked Tango 00:15:13). Cholo is introduced when Bertoni the Jeweler is stabbed, he is sent to kill Alba to hide the evidence of Bertoni’s death. However, when Cholo goes to meet her the interaction develops differently. Alba is backed up in a corner with two knives and Cholo begins what can only be described as a stalking of his prey.
However, as he stalks her the camera pans to his feet, showing what one can assume are tango steps, similar to the steps seen earlier in the tango scene in the courtyard. He gets ahold of her by making her drop the weapons and holding her up by her crotch. The placement of Alba’s hands (one extended and one around his neck) mimic a dancer’s form.

She begs for her life and he doesn’t kill her. Here is the symbolic start to a dance performed by Cholo and Alba that ostensibly lasts for the remainder of the film. Notably, in the end it is Cholo and not Zico that captures Stephanie and forces her into a life of prostitution, essentially leaving her to live as Alba.
After an escape attempt is made and she is returned to the brothel Cholo blindfolds her and starts dancing with her, this is their first formal dance. They are bathed in blue light as they dance, harking back to the beginning of the film. The blue tango scenes throughout the film show a progression of influence that Cholo, and more importantly, tango culture have over Stephanie. When she tangoes it isn’t just Cholo that is bathed in blue, Stephanie also becomes incorporated into his world. It is necessary to point out that in many of the blue scenes, Stephanie’s face and oftentimes her body are obscured. More often than not it is Cholo’s profile that finds itself in the spotlight. The blue scenes would then serve to highlight Cholo as the primary influencer in Stephanie’s life.

**Fig. 22.** Cholo-Alba first dance. Screenshot of *Naked Tango* 00:37:35.

**Fig. 23.** Cholo-Alba first dance. Screenshot of *Naked Tango* 00:38:26.

Stephanie pushes herself up against Cholo and asks for his help. This body language communicates a sense of sexual exchange: her body for her freedom. He rips the front of her dress and there is little to no protest from Stephanie-Alba until she realizes that Cholo has placed her on the desk for Zico to rape her.

**Stephanie:** No! NO! Why?

**Cholo:** If you run away again, I’ll kill you.

**Stephanie:** I hate you! Why do you want me to hate you? (Cholo moves to go away and Stephanie pulls him back to her.) Don’t leave me! Tell him to stop.
(Cholo leaves and Stephanie bends over enduring the rest of her rape.)

(Naked Tango 00:39:00-00:39:34)

Fig. 24. Stephanie-Alba is raped. Screenshot of Naked Tango 00:39:25.

Fig. 25. Stephanie-Alba is raped. Screenshot of Naked Tango 00:39:35.

She tells Cholo to make him stop and asks him why he’s making her hate him. This implies that she doesn’t hate him and reveals further her infatuation with this tango dancer. When Carlos Mina talks about the women of tango finding their place on the streets (i.e. in prostitution), there is no clearer scene in the film than this one. Stephanie is offering to sell her body to Cholo, and for engaging in the dance with him she finds herself raped by the pimp Zico, her marriage into prostitution finally consummated.

The most explicit moment of Stephanie’s prostitution is the scene that begins with her in Zico’s bed.

Fig. 26. Stephanie-Alba has sex with Zico. Screenshot of Naked Tango 00:46:01.

Fig. 27. Stephanie-Alba has sex with Zico. Screenshot of Naked Tango 00:46:42.
Stephanie: Can I go now?
Zico: Just shut up.
Stephanie: Cholo wouldn’t be such a baby.
Zico: How do you know? You don’t even know what he is.
Stephanie: Really? What is he?
Zico: Just get away from me. Go downstairs, find somebody to dance with.
Stephanie: Cholo told me to never dance with anyone else.
Zico: Did he tell you never to fuck anyone else? I know he didn’t. So go down there and make some money. Earn your keep.
Stephanie: Does he work for you?
Zico: Just go downstairs and dance alone.
Stephanie: Not ‘til you tell me what he is.
Zico: Look, the more you know tango the more you know Cholo.
Stephanie: How long have you known him?

(Naked Tango 00:46:23-00:47:30)
Stephanie seems comfortable with her exposed body (she doesn’t try to cover up) and with the situation of whoring herself (she casually asks to leave after she’s had sex). In this scene her preoccupation with Cholo seems obsessive. Although he hasn’t slept with her she tells Zico that Cholo doesn’t want her dancing with anyone else. This parallels what her husband had told her before, some innate sexual exchange in dancing tango, and although Cholo doesn’t seem concerned with other men possessing her bed, on the dance floor he is the only man to own her body. That Cholo can only be understood through tango implies that the only realm in which Stephanie can interact with Cholo is through tango, within that socio-cultural framework she is a
whore, she is Alba. So it stands to reason that in her continued obsession with Cholo the only place for her socially is as a prostitute.

Cholo barges in and pulls her from the bed mostly naked (with the exception of her stockings) and again they dance tango bathed in blue. The intimacy of this scene is reinforced in that during both tango dances the band was blindfolded and the dancing takes place behind closed doors in the dark. This moment belongs to the two of them.

Stephanie: Is dancing bad?

Cholo: Never.

Stephanie: Why?

Cholo: Listen to the music.

Stephanie: Just tell me why.

Cholo: Just listen. The answer is in the music.

Stephanie: I hear it saying, “Love me Cholo.” Please. Tell Zico to go.

(Naked Tango 00:48:19-00:49:09)

**Fig. 28.** Stephanie-Alba dances naked with Cholo. Screenshot of *Naked Tango* 00:48:39.
As they dance Stephanie asks him to love her, trying to entice him to sex. Again, Stephanie offers her body to Cholo, this established pattern further underlines the sexual exchange that exists within tango. Furthermore, Stephanie has nothing to gain from this sexual interaction. Where before she was trying to get Cholo to grant her freedom, in this sexual exchange she already knows that Cholo will not free her. Cholo kicks out Zico and the musicians and he angrily throws her on the bed.

**Fig. 29.** Cholo puts Stephanie-Alba on bed. Screenshot of *Naked Tango* 00:49:58.

Cholo: Is that what you want? You don’t know what sex really is.

Stephanie: I don’t know what sex with you is.

Cholo: Yes, you do. All sex is the same. It just leaves you more sad. The beauty you’re born with doesn’t count. The only thing that counts is the beauty you make. 

(*Naked Tango* 00:49:32-00:50:03)

In this entire scene, Alba remains exposed and throughout the film it’s usually the female body that finds itself exposed—this drives the notion that female body only functions as sexual object. Alba’s obsession with Cholo and being intimate with him increases this construction of her as sex-obsessed making her place in a whore house appear reasonable within the film’s logic. That
Cholo distinguished between the types of sexual encounters and the types of sex implies that tango is the sex of creation, they make something beautiful when they dance together, whereas the sex of the flesh is superficial. The idea that physical intercourse is something that produces that sadness, that is lacking, plays into the idea that the sexuality of sex is not the only one. In this film, it is an inner sexuality that is demonstrated through tango and creative expression that poses the real threat, as tango highlights Stephanie’s inner sexuality more so than any other act of sex in the film. If tango reveals Stephanie’s true beauty, her inner sexuality, then it categorizes her identity further as a whore, as she is slated to be defined as a part of the “other women” (Mina 80) that Carlos Mina talks about.

In *Naked Tango*, the most climatic tango scene takes place in a frigorífico. After Stephanie tries to sleep with Cholo, he takes her outside of the brothel and to a meat processing plant, where her symbolic moral deterioration develops most.

**Fig. 30.** Dangling meat. Screenshot of *Naked Tango* 00:57:14.

**Fig. 31.** Shoes in blood. Screenshot of *Naked Tango* 00:54:15.

They pull up to an abandoned factory with animal carcases dangling on hooks. As they dance, Cholo guides Stephanie into the bleeding tracks and their shoes are coated in blood. Bloody feet imply bloody footprints, they can track that blood wherever they dance to. The dance becomes unsanitary not just because of the venue but in literally getting their feet dirty. After leaving the trench of blood their tango dance is bathed in red light.
Part of their dance is framed by empty meat hooks, the implication being that they too can find
their carcasses put on display—the prostitute is just another piece of meat in the era of
industrialization. Interspersed in this scene are cut-away scenes in which Zico is at a body
auction, being threatened by the Zwi Migdal that want Stephanie dead. This idea of transaction is
juxtaposed to the dance in the warehouse—Alba participates in this sexual depravity manifested
in dancing tango in blood in exchange for a closer emotional-sexual intimacy with Cholo.
Furthermore, the hooks foreshadow the assassins sent to kill her.

Throughout most of the film, the scenes are bathed in darkness. There are no lights in the
frigorífico other than the red light that bathes their bodies. Neither Stephanie nor Cholo talk
throughout their dance, their communication solely coming from the interaction between their
two bodies. Cholo offers Stephanie a blade, and although as a viewer we know this is her
opportunity to escape, she engages in a dance of blades.
Fig. 34. Tango with blades. Screenshot of Naked Tango 00:56:40.

The only other time there was a dance of blades was at the beginning of the film when Alba is mesmerized by a tango dance amongst men out in the courtyard. Here, Stephanie is on equal footing with Cholo, both hold a blade to the other’s neck. In previous dances, Cholo has used Stephanie’s body for dance, she was much like a prop in his performance. Now though, instead of being lead by Cholo, the dynamic of the dance has changed Stephanie is now accomplice in the dance. Within the film, the frigorífico and darkness are spaces of feminine sexuality and opportunities for the moral decline of the woman. Stephanie in this scene has reached her lowest moral point in that she becomes a partner to violence, comfortable with being bathed in blood and it reveals a depravity in her character.

What then, does tango mean for Linda en Historia de arrabal? There is one scene in the novel that interacts with this dance symbolism. The one and only scene in which a tango plays is when Linda finally falls into the clutches of el Chino. Tango in Linda’s world is what leads to her life as a fallen woman:

Mientras, de la guitarra y el bandoneón surgían las frases compadronas de un tango. Era una música sensual, canallesca, arrabalera, mezcla de insolencia y bajeza, de tiesura y
voluptuosidad, de tristeza secular y alegría burda de prostíbulo, música que hablaba en lengua de argot y de prisiones, y que hacía pensar en escenas de mala vida, en ambientes de bajo fondo poblados por siluetas de crimen...frente a ella había aparecido el Chino...Y ya no tuvo conciencia de nada, sino de que ese hombre la había hecho suya y la dominaba y de que ella no podía sino obedecerle. Envuelta por los brazos del Chino, se dejó llevar al medio del patio y bailó y bailó durante largo tiempo, mecánicamente, sin saber lo que hacía ni por qué lo hacía.

[Meanwhile, from the guitar and accordion surged compadron\(^3\) lines of a tango. It was a sensual music, despicable, of the ghetto, a mix of insolence and vile deed, of stiffness and voluptuousness, of a secular sadness and a rough joy from the brothel, a music that speaks in a language of argot and from prisons, and that made you think of scenes from the bad life, in the milieu of the underworld populated by the silhouettes of crime...Chino had appeared in front of her...And she no longer was conscious of anything, except that that man had made her his and he dominated her and that she could do nothing but obey him. Wrapped in the arms of Chino, she let him take her to the middle of the patio and she danced and she danced a long time, mechanically, without knowing what she was doing nor why she was doing it.] (Galvez 35-6)

Like Stephanie is mesmerized by Cholo, Linda is controlled by el Chino. Although tango does not take on a central role in Historia de arrabal this scene echos the foreshadowing in Naked Tango. First looking at the tango in the novel, it is denoted by a list of negativity or ‘badness’. The tango becomes the defining sound for the “ghetto” and the terminology of “despicable,” “insolence and vile deed,” “prison,” and “the underworld” underlines the “crime” and colors the

\(^3\) Compadron is the adjective for compadrito. The compadrito is a term used in Argentina and Uruguay, given to members of the population that represent a youth from the slums, like a gaucho of the urban space.
*arrabal* in criminality. As criminality is built, so too is sexuality. The “stiffness and voluptuousness” creates an innuendo referring less to the music and more to the dancing bodies described as erections pressing against hourglass figures, and the “rough joy from the brothel” references the sexually violent pleasures in prostitution.

Linda has entered the world of tango in which “Los hombres reaccionaba como si, aparentemente, cada uno tuviera en su interior dos arquetipos de mujer: por un lado, *la santa*, lugar ocupado por al imagen de la madre, y, por otro, las otras mujeres, las de afuera, las de la calle, constituidas en su imaginario como *las putas*” [The men reacted as if, seemingly, each one had internalized two archetypes for women: on the one hand, *the saint*, a position occupied by the image of the mother, and, on the other hand, the other women, those from outside, those from the streets, constituted in their imaginary as *the whores*] (Mina 80). Linda is a border subject—she straddles the border between saint and whore. As we saw in the subsection of the *femme fatale* Linda is, at the beginning, predominantly categorized by her purity and innocence. That she dances this tango with Chino further underlines her fall from that pedestal, her movement across the border from saint to whore. That “she danced and danced for a long time” presents the passage of time that cannot be quantified, Linda is falling deeper into the positionality as a whore without cognizance of her fall. She expresses as much, that she knows not “what she was doing nor why she was doing it” meaning that Linda’s consciousness ceases to exist in those moments of sexual interaction with Chino. Like Stephanie, the dance takes over her body, highlighting an innate sexuality and reinforcing the fears of Bial et Massé and the male-state—that an unregulated feminine sexuality leads to a woman’s downfall; women cannot be trusted with their own bodies.
Death by Prostitution

Both protagonists in Historia de arrabal and Naked Tango die in the end—Stephanie is shot and Linda’s consciousness disappears. In the previous sections we’ve explored how both women have been painted as femme fatales and tango has documented their fall in morality. This last section explores how the narrative frame of both works constructs a plot that must lead to the death of the women protagonists.

First, I will explore the eventual death of Stephanie and how it is prompted by the intersections of violence and feminine sexual deviance. Stephanie’s sexuality is thoroughly analyzed in the subsections of the femme fatale, tango, and the frigorifico what this section will do is pull moments from those sections and dissect them with the thematic of death. Looking back to the very premise of the film, Stephanie’s joke on her husband stems from taking advantage of Alba’s suicide. Stephanie’s disregard for Alba’s life already prompts a questioning of her morality, that is reinforced throughout the film. If you look at Alba’s wedding night, right as Stephanie stabs Bertoni the Jeweler, her face is filled with rage.

**Fig. 35.** Stephanie stabs Bertoni. Screenshot from Naked Tango 00:21:35.
There’s a tension in her hands, her mouth is taught possibly because of clenched teeth, her nostrils are flared, and her eyebrows are raised moving towards each other in a frown. In this scene, her ploy to get the knife seems the logical choice in order to get out, however, instead of stabbing in fear or self defense, she is angry, taking her role as *femme fatale* quite literally. Arguably, we could also read this facial expression as desperation, however, she stabs Bertoni a second time, below shows her expression right before that moment.

**Fig. 36.** Stephanie stabs Bertoni. Screenshot from *Naked Tango* 00:21:38.

Again, her jaw muscles are drawn taught, there’s a slight flaring of the nostrils, and her gaze remains fixed to Bertoni who is off-screen. She is determined to stab again. If you think about the layout of the room, she is right in front of the dresser, with a clear shot to the door. In terms of fight or flight, instinct would have had her running towards the door. Instead she stabs him again and sequesters herself in a corner. This partial-second glimpse of Stephanie’s expression presents the viewer with the knowledge that she is capable of violence.
As the jeweler stumbles towards the door, Stephanie glances down at her body covered in his blood. This moment is when she registers her shock, it isn’t until then that she realizes she stabbed a man. The red stains her white trousseau, a symbolic moral staining. This break in personality convey a duality to Stephanie-Alba. Throughout my analysis, I have used those names interchangeably because of this duality, once Stephanie takes on Alba’s identity she is never fully Stephanie and never fully Alba, but rather a combination of both.

The idea of duality is doubly repeated in the scene. In the first picture, Stephanie-Alba’s hand is pulled back in preparation for a lunge. When Zico comes to the room to kill Alba, Stephanie-
Alba is poised to stab again and she ends up cutting Zico. Zico drops the knife he is holding. In the next image, Alba picks up Zico’s knife and catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Her face is in shock, reflecting her previous surprise when she notices the blood on her outfit. Again there is this vacillation between the killer and the victim. When Cholo enters the room in order to kill her because Zico couldn’t, Stephanie-Alba is once again poised in the corner with her knives. She is prepared to fight, and more importantly prepared to kill. Although shock could justify why she doesn’t flee the room, the abundance of rage-filled expressions, blood, and aggression on the part of Stephanie implies a preparedness for this violence.

**Fig. 40.** Stephanie holds both knives. Screenshot from *Naked Tango* 00:23:36.

**Fig. 41.** Stephanie in cab between Bertoni and Cholo. Screenshot from *Naked Tango* 00:25:30.

This scene ends with getting rid of the body; Stephanie is placed in-between the dead jeweler and Cholo—symbolically, the protagonist finds herself enveloped in death and sexual temptation. In her hands is a bottle of liquor pointing towards two things: 1) that she most likely wants to forget what has just happened and wishes to accomplish that by drowning herself in alcohol, and 2) she further adds to her image of indulging in vice. As she drinks, she never hesitates or has a physical reaction to the liquor which points to abundant experience in taking liquor straight. Dressed similarly to Cholo, even though in this scene it is used as a disguise, it implies her eventual position as his partner in crime. The scene of Stephanie-Alba and Cholo’s first
encounter denotes her capability of violence and predicts a depraved relationship that develops between the two.

Once in the actual brothel, Stephanie-Alba’s transformation into a prostitute is significant. Firstly, it is Cholo that directs her transformation. Cholo explains to the man cutting her hair, “Make these point forward, like daggers.” Cholo has recognized her propensity for violence and is grooming her outer appearance to reflect that.

**Fig. 42.** Stephanie gets a haircut. Screenshot from *Naked Tango* 00:28:51.

He singles her out which Flora (another prostitute) notes with, “Why is Cholo so interested in her?” (*Naked Tango* 00:30:06-00:30:08). Cholo’s connection to Stephanie-Alba is indisputable. Stephanie-Alba’s transformation into a prostitute is well documented through the camera lens. First, the audience sees a faraway shot of her looking into the mirror. Then it closes in on her body: She smooths out her clothes and primp, implying a comfortably with her new costume. The camera then slowly pans from her feet to a side profile of her face.
The female body parts that are most often sexualized are highlighted. Her thighs are exposed with high slits, bringing to memory the spectacle she made on the boat with her husband. Her hands slowly work the stocking up her leg, re-emphasizing her sexuality and readiness to engage in sexual activity. The camera then pans to her chest where she fixes her breasts within the top. In this slow exploration of the body, the audience becomes a voyeur of Stephanie-Alba’s sexuality. She then turns her head, facing the camera, looking directly at her audience, engaging in this sexual display. Her background is bathed in red throughout this moment implying that the
red that stained her white dress has spread to envelope the entirety of her. She is surrounded by violence and is a participant in this space.

**Fig. 49.** Scene transition. Screenshot from *Naked Tango* 00:30:38.

As the scene transitions to Bertoni the Jeweler’s funeral her new face fades as a vision of the Virgin Mary surrounded by prayer candles comes on screen. The juxtaposition of these two images further highlights the immense opposition between the imagery—in no way can Stephanie-Alba pass for a saint, she is the antithesis to Mary.

To be fair, Alba does attempt to escape her fate in the brothel. She jumps out a window using sheets as a rope, and approaches two police officers for help.

**Fig. 50.** Stephanie talks to police. Screenshot from *Naked Tango* 00:34:39.

**Fig. 51.** Police bring Stephanie back to the brothel. Screenshot from *Naked Tango* 00:35:54.
However, the film clearly sets up their stance to this possibility of freedom. Alba is brought back and the police officers are paid by Zico and the whorehouse for their help. This scene denotes a corrupted authority one that is in league with the underworld. For Stephanie-Alba, there is no escape from this life once you enter and the resources she looks for are nullified. The prostitute in this film cannot appeal to the legal system for help, she is an Other, a sub-citizen.

After Alba and Cholo’s dance in the frigorífico, the Italians attack them hoping to kill Alba. Cholo manages to lock one of the men’s head in his car window and he runs the other one over. After establishing that Zico was the one that betrayed them, he releases the trapped man and turns the car around. The man he ran over starts to get up and load his gun.

Stephanie: Let’s go!

Cholo: Not yet (while looking at one of the mobsters).

Stephanie (turns towards the man with the gun): Kill him! (the guy shoots at them) KILL HIM!

(Naked Tango 00:58:07-00:58:20)

Fig. 52. Stephanie wants to kill the Italians. Screenshot from Naked Tango 00:58:20.
She incites Cholo to kill, thus participating in the decision to commit murder. Like their earlier car scene predicted, Stephanie-Alba is now Cholo’s accomplice. Where before her stabbing men could have been framed as self-defense and self-preservation, this attack of the Italian mobsters is unnecessary—they’re in a car and can drive away. As the scene in the frigorífico symbolically showed her moral decline, this following scene confirms it. As Cholo and Alba drive away scenes come into focus of her kissing Cholo and working her hand up to his crotch—she has become aroused from violence.

Fig. 53. Stephanie-Alba touches Cholo’s crotch. Screenshot from *Naked Tango* 00:58:34.

Fig. 54. Seat of glass. Screenshot from *Naked Tango* 00:58:57.

Cholo stops the car and takes her violently on broken glass that is strewn across the car seat. He then slows down the pace of their sex, implying a level of intimacy. She participates willingly and it is this willing participation in sex and violence that serves as her culmination in depravity.

Stephanie eventually manages to get away from the brothel when she escapes with Cholo and then abandons him to be taken by the police. She is reunited with her husband. Even though Stephanie pretends that she doesn’t remember what happened during her separation and hopes to continue her life the way it was, she is unable to escape the underworld. Cholo finds her and pretends to be a tango instructor and it is in their blue-lit dance that the audience witnesses that Stephanie cannot forget her existence as Alba. The blue light has followed her into the world she had outside of the brothel—it is not something she can escape.
Stephanie: Never come back. My house and my husband are my happiness now. You don’t belong here. Ever.

Cholo (removes wig from Stephanie, revealing her black hair): It doesn’t matter what husband you belong to...the real you, belongs to me. Forever.

(Naked Tango 01:09:02-01:09:36)

Cholo in removing the wig (a wig that was bought by the Judge to try and return her image to Stephanie’s prior look) is reminding Stephanie of her alter ego, in a way returning her to the double identity. Although at first Stephanie tells Cholo to leave, she ends up reinforcing his perception that they are meant to be when she protects his identity as her tango instructor. As they dance, Stephanie reflects on her feelings for him:

Stephanie: This can’t be love, it hurts too much.

[...]

Stephanie: And tell me you don’t love me. (Cholo shakes his head.) Say it! Say, “I don’t love you Alba.” (Stephanie removes his jacket and they dance tango.)

(Naked Tango 01:10:38-01:11:23)

The phrasing of the first statement is structured so that the viewer understands that she is trying to convince herself that she doesn’t love Cholo. The second statement is prompted because she
cannot convince herself so she asks him to do it. Note, that she refers to herself as Alba in this statement. She recognizes herself as the mail-order-bride-turned-prostitute. Later that evening, long after Cholo has been run out of her husband’s house, Stephanie-Alba reflects on her identity.

Stephanie: Cholo has torn my soul. I don’t know if I’m Stephanie or Alba.

*(Naked Tango 01:15:27-01:15:36)*

**Fig. 57.** Stephanie is confused about her identity. Screenshot from *Naked Tango* 01:15:37.

The protagonist in the final moments of the movie acknowledges her double identity and her vacillation between the two. She is a border subject. Is she the wife of a prestigious man of society or is she the whore that is sexually aroused by violence? That Cholo impacts her soul implies that her life as a whore is not one she can escape, it is embedded deep within her identity.

The end of the film presents the idea of redemption as futile. Stephanie returns to the frigorífico, further highlighting that space as the defining moment in her life as Alba. Her character cannot escape the contamination of that space. As she leaves the warehouse, she is kidnapped by Zico, and returned to the emptied brothel (alluding to the judicial prosecution of the Zwi Migdal). Stephanie is held for ransom until her husband arrives with the money. The
Judge wants to know who raped his wife and then tango music begins to play, announcing the arrival of Cholo (whom Zico blames for the rape). Stephanie runs out to meet him while the Judge and Zico follow.

Judge Torres: Stephanie step back. Stephanie come here. (She looks at Cholo.)

Stephanie! Come Here!

Cholo (gestures with his fingers for her to come to him): Hurry.

(Naked Tango 1:21:57-1:22:09)

**Fig. 58.** Stephanie-Alba in between Judge and Cholo. Screenshot from Naked Tango 01:22:12.

**Fig. 59.** Stephanie shot in the back. Screenshot from Naked Tango 01:22:16.

Stephanie’s position in this scene places her right in between Cholo and her husband. This is the climatic moment in the film in which Stephanie must decide which identity she chooses. Once Cholo tells her to hurry, Stephanie looks back at her husband one last time and runs towards Cholo. The Judge shoots his gun, hitting her in the back. The Judge shoots Cholo, Cholo throws his knife into the Judge’s throat, causing another shot to hit Stephanie. Stephanie’s choice of the Alba identity and presumably a life with Cholo leads to her fatal injuries. The destiny of the unregulated woman is death.

Alba: Don’t let me die alone.

Cholo: I’ll never leave you.

Alba: Let me die dancing in your arms.
(Naked Tango 01:22:48-1:23:20)

Alba’s last act is to request a dance with Cholo. In doing this she fully embraces the underworld that tango is connected to and her attraction/love of Cholo. She no longer is Stephanie and is finding her final resting place dancing in a whorehouse.

**Fig. 60.** Cholo carries Alba. Screenshot from *Naked Tango* 01:23:47.

**Fig. 61.** Alba-Cholo last tango. Screenshot from *Naked Tango* 01:24:15.

Cholo carries Alba out onto the dance floor where they have their last tango. Policemen come into the brothel and shoot multiple rounds into their bodies, forcing Cholo to fall. His last act is to hold up Alba, body exposed and bathed in blood.

**Fig. 62.** Alba lifted up in blood. Screenshot from *Naked Tango* 01:25:46.
The movie ends with an aerial view of their bodies bathed in red light. This is the last image of the film before it fades to black and the credits roll. In the rolling credits, the protagonist’s name is set as “Alba/Stephanie”. Alba is placed first I believe for two reasons: 1) Stephanie functioned as Alba for most of the film, and 2) in the end, Alba was the identity that she chose. Ultimately, it is this return to the brothel and the choice of the tango that cements Stephanie’s fate in death.

Lastly, I will explore Linda’s metaphoric death in the novel, looking primarily at her loss of consciousness. Linda’s dehumanization stems from her interactions with el Chino and the hold his eyes have over her. The first description of el Chino supplants his status as antagonist and villain:

Tenía el color oscuro, las cejas espesas y negras, las pestañas negras también...Los ojos, muy adentrados y renegridos, penetrantes y escrutadores, miraban a veces torcidamente, y entonces lo blanco de los ojos, en medio de la negrura de la piel, de los cabellos y de las cejas, daba al rostro del malevo siniestro aspecto.

[His color was dark, his brows thick and black, his eyelashes also black...His eyes, set deep with an intense black color, penetrating and searching, sometimes watched crookedly, and so the whites of the eyes, amongst the black of the skin, hair and eyebrows, gave the thug’s profile a sinister quality.] (Gálvez 7)

El Chino’s character is submerged in darkness. His description relies heavily on systemic colorism. His dark skin and dark hair denote race, possibly of afro-latino or indigenous origin, and plays with the cultural imaginary of nationhood established in the 19th century. El Chino’s description within the Argentine histo-sociocultural context of delineating race places him in the position of the threatening Other. His societal threat is cemented in the constant reference to him as the malevo [thug] and the framing of him as “sinister”. The narrative focuses immensely on
his eyes, foreshadowing their importance in the plot. This foreshadowing is emphasized when Linda describes her first reaction to Chino: “el relativo olvido de sus desgracias, se trocaron en abatimiento y en pavor apenas sintió sobre sus rostro los ojos de aquel hombre” [almost forgetting her misfortunes, was swapped for dejection and terror having just felt the eyes of that man on her body] (Gálvez 7). Chino’s eyes represent a violent male gaze that violates the female body, specifically Linda’s body. That his eyes “penetrate” alludes to a very pointed sexual penetration. Linda previously described the male gaze as “roaming her face and body...it made her fearfully distance herself from those groups” (Gálvez 6) —she might have feared other men, but el Chino’s gaze sparked “terror” implying that although men as a whole pose a threat, it is el Chino that poses the greatest threat (he might succeed in raping where others would fail).

Linda is raped by el Chino. El Chino’s penetrative gaze goes through the ritual of rape before he physically assaults her:

El malevo había clavado los ojos en los de Linda y parecía como que quisiera penetrarla. Ella resistió un momento aquella mirada dominadora, negra, brutal, aquella mirada que golpeaba en sus ojos femeninos como una cosa material, que penetraba en su rostro como dos cortafierros, que tenía un no sabía ella qué de incomprehensible, de fatal, de espantosamente perturbador.

[The thug had riveted his eyes on Linda’s and appeared as if he wanted to penetrate her. She resisted for a moment that dominating, black, brutal gaze, that gaze that hit upon her feminine eyes like a physical thing, that penetrated her profile like two cutspikes, that had a something she incomprehensible that she didn’t know, something fatal, frighteningly disturbing.] (Gálvez 19)
Again, el Chino is portrayed with a lens of criminality. His gaze is violent in its penetration with descriptors such as “dominating” and “brutal”. Once again, the repetitive link between el Chino and blackness, in conjunction with violent descriptors allies darkness with violence. The penetration feels like a beating with the verb “hit” being used and the simile of his eyes and cortafierros. The cutspike is a tool used with a hammer to cut metal sheets, alluding to Chino’s eyes being similar to a tool of industrial manufacturing. Again Linda’s fright is always described in association with el Chino and his eyes. There is a repetitive almost cyclical nature to the description of el Chino and his eyes—always there’s his portrayal as a criminal, a penetration tinged with violence, and Linda’s fear. Here though, his gaze is “fatal,” prompting the foreshadowing of Linda’s death.

El Chino physically rapes her continuously; after the first time Linda no longer resists. She describes her lack of resistance as a result of el Chino’s eyes:

Rosalinda sentía entonces que aquellos ojos se internaban a través de los suyos hasta lo hondo de su alma; que se apoderaban de todo lo que ella tenía en espíritu y corazón...Y en esos momentos se volvía inconsciente. Perdía todo movimiento y se quedaba como un ser pasivo, sin personalidad; como un ente sin voluntad ni alma...los ojos del malevo la vencían...No tenía consciencia de ser libre ni de ser una persona; y se entregó como si no fuese ella misma, como una cosa cualquiera, un objeto material cuyo dueño no era ella.

[Rosalinda then felt that those eyes that penetrated through her own reached until the greatest depths of her soul; that they took over everything she had in her spirit and heart...And in those moments she became unconscious. She lost all mobility and she remained passive, without personality; like a body without will or soul...the thug’s eyes vanquished her...She had no awareness of being free or of being a person; and she gave
herself as if she wasn’t herself, as if she was an unremarkable thing, an material object whose owner was not her.] (Gálvez 22-3)

This is the end of Rosalinda. Linda describes for the reader her loss of self by becoming a possession of el Chino. First, Linda describes el Chino taking possession of her soul—the male gaze has dominated an interior space, the feminine space. She then systematically describes an alienation of the self from the body: she’s “passive, without personality,” there’s “no awareness”, she’s observing her body from outside her body in that “she gave herself as if she wasn’t herself.” Although rape is traumatic, el Chino’s eyes are the perpetrators of this dehumanization, they have “vanquished her”. Her personhood is completely destroyed in that she has no agency (“will”) and even the feminist reading is obvious when the character herself describes becoming an object (“she was an unremarkable thing, a material object whose owner was not her”). The combination of the alienation and dehumanization of the self and the objectification of the body is what produces Linda’s symbolic death. She defines her state as “a body without will or soul”; she no longer has a personhood. Her following plotline must be framed in those terms in order to understand the her murder of Daniel (looked at in detail in the next chapter). She becomes an extension of el Chino, living as a tool for him to use, completely without agency.

The film and novel develop throughout their storylines the image of women already ruined and who, ultimately, through their own actions find themselves in a violent space. Stephanie’s constant promiscuity and Linda’s sexualized body cement their positionality as sexual objects; the texts dehumanize these subjects. Tango, as a means of contamination, further categorizes them as fallen women. Within the rationale of these cultural texts, the act of dancing becomes evidence of self-destructive agency—both Stephanie and Linda participated in the dance by choice. The symbolic use of color in both the novel and the film signal moments of
transformation for these women. In the end, both women’s stories conclude in death: In the framework of Bialet Massé, they cannot find a place in society and so, as the third sex, they must cease to exist.
CHAPTER 2
PROSTITUTES AS TRANSNATIONAL SUBJECTS: HUMANIZING THEIR NARRATIVE
IN THE LIFE OF RAQUEL LIBERMAN

In the previous chapter I traced how the female labor force, specifically sexual labor, underlined male state insecurities at the turn of the century. I also explored how cultural texts like *Historia de arrabal* and *Naked Tango* functioned as evidence of a cultural imaginary that dehumanized and reduced women to a vehicle of contamination. In this chapter, I will look at how the definition and identification of Otherhood relies on dialogues of contamination and contributes to the dehumanization of the transnational prostitute. I propose that humanizing the prostitute is an act of academic activism and combats the stereotypes within the cultural imaginary that limit her narrative. I use the narrative of Raquel Liberman’s life to model an alternative approach to story construction and propose a complex, intersectional, and humanizing approach to these marginalized subjects.

I. Borders of Emotional Geographies & The Othered Space

*Dialogues of Nationhood*

I would like to turn now to the other major threat identified by Bialet Massé in his *Informe sobre el Estado de las Clases Obreras en el Interior de la República* (1904): the foreigner. In the very first chapter of the first of three volumes, he claims that:

- después de las numerosas observaciones que acabo de hacer en todas las provincias,
- después de que la totalidad de los patrones á quienes he consultado me lo han
confirmado, afirmo con toda convicción: <<Uno de los errores más trascendentales en que han incurrido los hombres de gobierno de la República Argentina, ha sido preocuparse exclusivamente de atraer el capital extranjero, rodearlo de toda especie de franquicias, privilegios y garantías, y de traer inmigración ultramarina, sin fijarse sino en el número, y no en su calidad, su raza, su aptitud y adaptación, menospreciando al capital criollo y descuidando al trabajador nativo, que es insuperable en el medio.>>

[after just finishing numerous observations in every province, after every boss that I consulted confirmed what I suspected, I affirm with complete conviction: <<One of the most transcendental errors which government men of the Argentine Republic have incurred, has been to be exclusively concerned with attracting foreign capital, surrounding it with every sort of exemption, privilege and guarantee, and bringing overseas immigration, looking rather at the number and not their quality, their race, their aptitude and adaptation, undervaluing the creole capital and neglecting native labor, which is an insuperable means of production.>>](1: 2)

The great error that affects the Argentine Republic can be broken down into two tenets: the favoring of foreign capital and the presence of foreign bodies. Foremost is the framing of this statement: Bialet Massé places this assertion at the very beginning of his study in reflection of “observations in every province,” functioning as a representation of a problem that affects the country as a whole, hence, formalizing and mapping the idea of the “nation”. This preoccupation with the foreign is a national concern not just a local one limited to the boundaries of its capital, Buenos Aires. He contextualizes the issue as “one of the most transcendental errors” — the error transcends the simple issues he is about to present; that, underlying this problem is a greater conflict. Bialet Massé as spokesperson of “every boss/owner” in the country critiques the
favoritism shown foreign investors as the government’s exclusive concern. The foreigner, the Other, is given advantages in business, in the capitalist structure, implying a lack or disproportionate opportunity available to domestic investors, perhaps the very bosses/owners that Bialet Massé spoke to.

Bialet Massé’s passage establishes from the very beginning of his study a distinct preoccupation with the impact of the foreign on the native: the foreign is the Other that takes away capitalistic opportunity from the native laborer. He does not contemplate a system of coexistence but instead recycles the pattern of national identity as antagonized by difference, as observed in the State management of the crisis of penetration and integration concerning the Indigenous population in the 19th century. He sets up his argument in terms of an either/or scenario built on Othering, pointing to foreigners as being given all advantage and as a result the Argentine-born population becomes disenfranchised and disadvantaged. The report lays blame on one group and calls “los hombres de gobierno” [government men] to action. This invitation to federal intervention plants the idea of government as political, judicial, and economic regulator and the only agency allowed to categorize for the whole of Argentine social life. The rejection of the foreign and the focus on the racialization of immigrants, the drawing of nationalist maps, points to a building xenophobia in the country, inherited from the Sarmientian discourses on barbarism in the 19th century.

In 1892, the *Journal des Économistes* in Paris published a short literature review of an economic study done by Antonio Samper, a Colombian expatriate living in Buenos Aires:

On trouve dans cet opuscule des renseignements sur les causes du progrès de l’Argentine, sur l’immigration, sur le pays et les habitants, sur le commerce et la vie de famille, sur la politique et principalement sur la crise que traverse cette république.
Malgré la gravité de cette crise, M. Antonio Samper estime qu’il y a du patriotisme dans l’Argentine, que le pays possède encore du crédit et de la vigueur, et qu’il parviendra à surmonter les difficultés présentes pourvu que l’on s’occupe de réduire autant que possible les charges qui pèsent actuellement sur la population.

[One finds in this opuscule information about the causes of progress in Argentina, about immigration, about the country and its inhabitants, about commerce and the life of the family, about politics and principally about the crisis that traverses this republic. Despite the gravity of this crisis, Mr. Antonio Samper reckons that there is a patriotism in Argentina, that the country still possesses credibility and strength, and it will overcome the current difficulties provided it will deal with reducing the loads that weigh currently on the population as much as possible.] (Notices 307)

I mention this literature review for two reasons. The first is that this review serves as an index for the major points of national concern that we see in Argentina. The intersection of perceived threats involves progress, immigration, the dialogue between country and inhabitants, and commerce and family structure. If we unpack each part of this intersection there is a theme or movement that I have already explored in this project. Progress during this time most often denotes the process of industrialization. Immigration is the concern for the foreign Other. The dialogue between country and inhabitants refers to the hierarchies of social power seen in the narratives of the ghetto. Lastly, my entire first chapter explored the impacts of redefining the gender roles of labor. In addition, this index not only reflects Argentine concerns but rather global concerns for this historical moment. The introduction of this journal mentions support for an understanding of “des Conditions du travail dans les pays étrangers, autrement dit, de la condition d’ouvriers dans les divers pays” [the conditions of labor in foreign countries, in other
words, the condition of workers in various countries] (Notices 3). In looking at various countries throughout the world this Parisian journal implies that the concerns of the Argentine Republic are transnational in nature. The review categorizes the tension in the country as a crisis; the potency of this word dialogues with social anxiety that can be seen in the various different texts throughout this project. This framing paired with the summary of Sampers work conveys a global concern about the movement of foreign workers. My foray into the complexities of female sexual labor in Argentina functions as a subset of that overarching concern.

Looking closely at the economic study done by Samper, I would like to highlight the construction of social boundaries that ultimately reflect the cultural imaginary of the nation:

Hay muchos parques, y éstos tienen arbustos y árboles pequeños y asientos gratis; pero los ocupan y ocuparán siempre los inmigrantes recién llegados que esperan colocación; de manera que las personas aseadas o delicadas, no pueden frecuentar esos lugares. Hay, sin embargo, uno en el extremo Norte de la ciudad, Palermo, que es extenso y bello, que sirve de recreo a personas acomodadas, pero por su distancia no lo pueden visitar a menudo las personas de pequeños recursos pecuniarios.

[There are many parks, and these have small bushes and trees and free seating; but they are occupied and will always be occupied by immigrants recently arrived that await a job; so that cleanly or delicate people, cannot frequent those places. There is, however, one in the far northern part of the city, Palermo, that is vast and beautiful, that serves as an escape for well-to-do people, but because of the distance people with small pecuniary resources cannot visit often.] (63)

Analyzing the park is important because by definition a city park is a public space, presumably accessible to all inhabitants of the city. However, Samper’s observations contradict that
definition of public space and limit accessibility. This public space is socially self-regulated and Samper observes a pattern of nationhood and class status in this practice. The first level of regulation is a self-imposed separation in that “cleanly or delicate people, cannot frequent those places.” The implication is that those people do not feel comfortable going to a park occupied by immigrants. The Othering of the foreigner is therefore established. Samper denotes these self-regulating people as cleanly or delicate, which sets up a dichotomy in which immigrants, or the people that associate with them, are unclean and used to physical labor. It is only those people that self-regulate that are able to keep themselves away from the unclean, or contaminated, part of society implying that there are people that do not self-regulate, that do not separate themselves from the Other but rather become a part of that unclean mass of people. This separation between the cleanly and delicate native and the immigrant with unclean Argentine associates draws a border around this public space. The border functions on two levels: in the physical realm in outlining this contaminated public space and in the symbolic realm in the act of social segregation.

Contextualizing this observation, it is necessary to point out that most immigrants at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century came from working or poorer socio-economic classes. They inhabited the ghettos, like El Barrio de las Ranas [The Neighborhood of the Frogs] (analyzed in the next subsection). Palermo is a park free of the immigrant population but it is notably a park where “well-to-do people” visit, that people with less financial means find difficult to go because of distance further helps to visually map the city of Buenos Aires. The city is mapped through socio-economic regulation. Those with money are separated from the poor space, the immigrant space, the Othered space. Samper notes that the physical distance is what impedes poorer people from attending the park, but rather it is a perceived social distance
that establishes Palermo as a park for the rich. Samper identifies the Other, and marks the
Othered space as mapped out by the existence of that Other.

Narrating Otherhood

As part of the Modernization process and the proliferation of media and new channels of
popular printed venues and new audiences within the public sphere (Habermas 191), at the turn
of the 20th century, in 1904, a new Argentine popular periodical was founded. P.B.T. specialized
in new genres and discursive formats, like humor gráfico—using vignettes, comic strips,
historiettes and others as forms of political satire, providing a means of cultural commentary on
the rapidly transforming demographic and cultural scenario brought by Modernization. In the
January 1907 issue they published a vignette titled “El Barrio de las Ranas” [The Neighborhood
of the Frogs]. The vignette narrates an exploration of P.B.T. journalists into, by their accounts, a
rather unsavory neighborhood in the city. The narration begins with a visit by a journalist of the
P.B.T. to the local police station to ask for help for an excursion into the Barrio de las Ranas:
“hemos venido a rogarle nos haga un favor de concedernos un agente para que nos oriente y nos
proteja. No crea usted que tenemos miedo, pero…” [we’ve come to beg for the favor of granting
us an officer to orient and protect us. Don’t think we’re afraid, but…](Ortiz 79) From the
beginning, this particular space to be surveyed is catalogued as a threat—the familiarity that the
police force has with this neighborhood as well as the need the journalists see for their
protection, introduces an element of criminality and contradicts the denial of fear. Whatever the
Barrio de las Ranas may be, it is for certain an unsafe space that demands caution and a level of
wariness. As the journalists leave with their guard, the commissioner reminds them, “Y no dejen
de decir todo lo malo que pueden del arrabal ranero, ¿eh?” [And don’t forget to mention all the
The police commissioner is asking a rhetorical question, the onomatopoeic “eh” implies an expected agreement from the narrator. He presupposes the findings of their exploration, noting that an authoritative power has already passed judgement on this ghetto. That only bad things are going to be observed further underlines the criminality of this space and its inhabitants. Throughout this interaction one thing is very much overlooked: the dynamics of observance. In this interaction between journalist and police not once is the inhabitant of the ghetto consulted or asked for consent in this exploration of their space. This exploration is almost an unethical biological or sociological study in which those living in the ghetto must function as an objectified subject of an intrusive gaze—both the space and its inhabitants are without agency in the telling of their own story.

The beginning of this vignette sets up the antagonistic yet correlative relationship between, urban space, cultural geographies, the system in power and the Othered subject—a signature of the urban space. The urban theorist and Harvard professor Neil Brenner orients critical urban theory as a framework that “emphasizes the politically and ideologically mediated, socially contested and therefore malleable character of urban space—that is, its continual (re)construction as a site, medium and outcome of historically specific relations of social power. . .thus grounded on an antagonistic relationship” (198). In this case, I gather that it is the relationship between the observer (the journalist) and the observed (inhabitants of el Barrio de las Ranas) within the specific historical context of Buenos Aires at the turn of the century. The narration in criminalizing the inhabitants establishes an Other cemented in the dialogue of an us versus them. Criminalizing poverty, the working class and marginality. There is a deliberate effort in mapping the urban space and segregating its inhabitants, however, the modern city, one that is influenced by industrialization, does not have fixed borders. In Brenner’s words it is a
space of continual (re)construction. Within this framework of antagonism and unevenness as the definition of meanings among urban spatial categories, Émile Durkheim’s mechanical solidarity, or a solidarity of resemblance, cannot be reached, supporting cultural anthropologists Peter Nas and Pierpaolo de Giosa’s conclusion that “social cohesion is often still based on a similar perception of crisis: a decrease in solidarity, the disintegration of communities and social exclusion” (284). Looking at the *Journal des Économistes*, alongside Bialet Massé and Samper, we see that the categorization as crisis stems from intersecting social tensions that ultimately point towards the permeability of social borders.

Social exclusion would define par excellence the Argentine nation and map emotional geographies at the borders of the urban and the rural in the 19th century and moving into the 20th century—the borders that would define the ghetto as the Othered urban space. In the words of American anthropologist and cross-cultural researcher Edward T. Hall, “Our concept of space makes use of the edges of things. If there aren’t any edges we make them by creating artificial lines” (203). In the case of “El Barrio de las Ranas” this difference, or Otherhood, is marked by an artificial narrative.

Notably the description of the physical space provides a coherent view of the social fears and anxieties that the 20th century inherited from the 19th century—the invasion of the Other in the urban space: “tiene algo de barranca y algo de pantano y en la cual se desenvuelve un paisaje extraño, un panorama exóticamente pintoresco y triste, mezcla de toldería indígena y de covachería bohemia” [it has something of a ravine and something of a swamp and in which a strange landscape unravels, a panorama exotically odd and sad, a mixture of indigenous shanties and bohemian sheds] (Ortiz 80). This ghetto described as outside of the normal, the formal city, the use of strange is deliberate in that *extraño* in its Spanish context also denotes *extranjero*.
[stranger or foreigner] and paired with the exotic and the odd it functions to alienate the ghetto from the urban space, and denotes the residents with a foreignness. Formal modernity creates urban borders of exclusion. Using “indigenous” as a descriptor for the “shanties” elaborates the othering of the ghetto; the main Other in Argentina in the 19th century was the indigenous person, the original Argentine barbarian. The space itself is described in terms of “barranca” [ravine] and “pantano” [swamp] visually situating the ghetto in a wild rural environment, further delineating the urban border. A ravine or swamp are homes for animals, presumably not a space for humans of modernity.

As the narration of the vignette continues the observations of the ghetto would not disappoint the expectations of the police commissioner. It is described with adjectives such as “grotesca” [grotesque] and “bárbaro” [barbaric] (Ortiz 80). The ghetto, although physically a part of the city, is lacking characteristics of formal urbanity and the narration further builds the negative/polarized/antagonistic relation of the ghetto with the Other. That “barbarism” is found so closely tied to this urban space implies a heavy dehumanization of its residents and also in the Argentine context a futility to revindication and salvation as was the dialogue regarding indigenous communities throughout the 19th century and that still persists today. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento in his canonical text *Facundo: Civilización y Barbarie* (1845) notes that “the need to maintain a dignified appearance, which is felt in the cities, is not felt there...a frugality of pleasures quickly brings with it all the exterior aspects of barbarity” (54). The idea of a dignified appearance defined by “articles of luxury...and riches” (Sarmiento 54) dialogues with a capitalism driven materialism as a defining trait of a “civilized” society. The cities house this driven materialism and the “exterior” space, found in the rural, found in the “frugality of pleasures” (specifically material pleasures), denotes “barbarity.” The French marxist philosopher
Henri Lefebvre on his reflection of industrialization and urbanization argues that the social production of space is implicit in capitalism (or in other words, capitalism is embodied by the social production of space): “(Social) space is a (social) product… the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power; yet that, as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it.” (26)

Barbarity, and by extension barbarism, then denotes a lack of economic means and/or preoccupation with the material. These characteristics go hand in hand with the ghetto, whose inhabitants by definition come from a lower socioeconomic status. In “El Barrio de las Ranas,” the preoccupation with the “shanties” and “sheds” (Ortiz 80) also exemplifies that poverty is a reflection of the “barbaric”. As Samper notes, economic class serves a means of segregation (63). Where La Conquista del Desierto served as a genocide of indigenous tribes in the mid 19th century, it is the factory worker, that lives in the ghetto/arrabal, that serves as the vulnerable population at the turn of the century. Jean Baudrillard notes that “there is no division of labor at all: the production of the body, the production of death, the production of signs and the production of commodities—these are only modalities of one and the same system. (118)” As I articulated in the first chapter, female labor is perceived to lead to an economic necrosis. Yet in this context, modernity itself as it imposes industrialization develops a system of death in which the laborer, or as Baudrillard puts it “the production of the body,” is exhausted and exploited to the point of death. Industrialization is the economic dimension of modernization, and especially at the turn of the century is used as a distinguishing factor between civilized (read: eurocentric/neocolonialist/urban modern culture) Argentine society and the indigenous population (living primarily in a pre-modern culture of rural spaces).
Sarmiento sums up the conflict in one line: “That is the point: to be or not to be *savages* (35).” The social production of this ghetto space is closely tied to a reflection of its inhabitants. The relationship becomes reciprocal in that the person no longer functions as an individual and instead is representative of the ghetto, and the space is representative of all who dwell inside it:

En toda aquella sentina llamada barrio de las Ranas no hay un detalle, ni una nota, ni un tipo que no sea de una innobleza nauseabunda, y todo aquél que visite el sitio por la vez primera debe ponerse ácido fénico en el pañuelo y hielo en el espíritu. Porque aquello infecciona todo, la pituitaria y el alma…

[In that entire cesspool called the neighborhood of the Frogs there’s not one detail, not one note, not one person that isn’t of a nauseating ignobility, and all who visit the site for the first time should wear phenol on their handkerchief and ice on the spirit. Because that infects everything, the pituitary and the soul…] (Ortiz 81)

This quote is embedded within an urban culture saturated with fears of new plagues and lurking possibilities of “infection”, which were triggered by the rapid urban development of the city and the abrupt increase of its population. The ghetto as not only a spatial pariah in urbanity but rather a contaminant and its people as infectious diseases reinforces the othering of the poor and foreign and draws attention to the idea of proximity. The American sociologist Richard Sennett in his study *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* notes that “Infection and seduction are inseparable…the Ghetto represented something like an urban condom. (237)” Using Sennett’s metaphor, the underlying fear stems from the knowledge that this condom is perforated. In other words, the ghetto cannot be isolated or contained. This infection requires direct contact and those that visit this space should go prepared to fend off contamination, the implication being that the citizen is powerless and has little choice in their infection but must
take preventative measures to impede contamination. Proximity of contamination elicits a politics of regulation or as Michel Foucault would say, a biopolitics: “Biopolitics deals with the population, with the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power’s problem” (245). The ghetto as part of the city proves an even greater threat as a result of that proximity; the only solution being to establish distance—first by distinguishing the clear parameters of this space and second by Othering its population so that they cannot freely walk within society.

Now would be a good time to return to the idea of satire that colors this narration. As a satire the vignette delves into the urban emotional geographies at the turn of the century and pinpoints the intersecting political anxieties of the time regarding race, morality, immigration, biology, and economics. This narration is perhaps a ridiculed exaggeration because the journal subscribes to the assumption that the ghetto is contained, that its inhabitants cannot easily cross the border, and so the threat that haunts civilized Argentine society is a non-threat. However, what happens if it is not contained? If there’s a transnational inhabitant that can cross borders, that could be a very real threat?

For the narrator, as an agent of urban discrimination, there is one character that stands out—the prostitute: “imagináos que estas desgraciadas limitan sus exigencias hasta a una moneda de veinte centavos…” [imagine that these wretched women limit their requests to a coin of twenty cents] (81). The only profession mentioned in the ghetto is that of sexual labor. The prostitute defined as desgraciada already places a moral judgement on the female sex worker, that she would sell herself for only twenty cents further underlines her social placement. The ghetto’s prostitute sells herself for so little because she is worth so little. From the point of view of the confining function of the urban ghetto, by definition, the street walker is not limited to a
space, she is subversive because she cannot be contained. The prostitute is representative of not just venereal disease but rather the possibility of contaminating the city, its citizens, and the morality with the Other. As a result, she who moves around the city physically and works on every level and in every sphere of society, poses the greatest social risk. Here I repeat the quotation by Donna Guy:

> Throughout Argentina prostitution control was symbolically associated with fear of disease and the more general issue of what to do about the potentially revolutionary working classes—the ‘problema social’ . . . In modernizing Argentine cities, the plight of the woman who flaunted herself and sold her body—along with those who might—haunted the politically powerful and attracted extensive discussion. (Guy 75)

Underlying the intersections of conflict in this vignette and the overarching social anxieties at the turn of the century is capitalism. The prostitute-as-contaminant placed within the greater socio-economic system is a commodity of an industrialization—although an ancient profession, in the urban space at the turn of the century her place in the cultural imaginary is as a byproduct of the increase of the women’s labor force and a declining morality from the restructuring of gender roles. Homi K. Bhabha notes “that the 'uneven development' of capitalism inscribes both progression and regression, political rationality and irrationality in the very genetic code of the nation. This is a structural fact to which there are no exceptions” (2). The very space that “El Barrio de las Ranas” constructs interplays with these dichotomies of capitalism; and the prostitute is a dehumanized figure that is defined by a capitalistic system and therefore reduced to sexual product.
Narrating Contamination

The female prostitute is positioned in an intersectional identity of deviance—existing within the ghetto (the socio-economic other), often being an immigrant (the national other), and being a woman (the sexual deviant and laboral other). In both *Historia de arrabal* and *Naked Tango*, I will highlight the intersection of industrialization, contamination, and the sexual female body. She is a transnational subject that crosses the spatial borders of society and the city, and in so doing is a vehicle of contamination. The female body can be contaminated and is contaminating; this duality cements the identity of the prostitute. Contamination is constructed through color symbolism. In both texts, there’s a very cognizant usage of darkness and the frigorífico as a space for industrialization and a physical and implied moral pollution of the city and its inhabitants. Looking at paintings and photographs from the early 20th century there is a distinct imagery of the industrialized urban space as polluted.

The first image is a painting done by Argentinian artist Pío Collivadino titled “El Barrio de la Quema (1930)” [The Neighborhood of the Burning (1930)]. The neighborhood depicted in this painting is a section of the city known as Parque Patricios in which trash was burned in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, hence the title of the painting. It is also a neighborhood known for the butchering of cattle for its meat and the location of El Barrio de las Ranas. This section of the city was occupied by inns and brothels, further contextualizing the emphasis of the prostitute at the end of the vignette. Looking at the painting, there’s a quality of grime to the painting. The landscape is darkened by the smoke coming from the factory, and the streets are littered with soot. The homes in the painting are leaning and the multiple colors on their roofs depict a patchwork job of construction denoting the low socio-economic class of its inhabitants. With the title’s reference to burning trash, the imagined smell of the area is another sensory level to the piece. All of which visually reinforces the vignette of “El Barrio de las Ranas” and conveys a
suffocating pollution and possibility of contamination, most visible in the second image. The second image is a photograph of Buenos Aires titled “Humo en la ciudad” [Smoke in the city] (1950). This picture shows the thin layer of smoke, soot, and grime that is a blanket over the city. In this photograph there is no space untouched by polluting industrialization.

The first chapter in Historia de arrabal prepares the aesthetic frame of the novel through sensory descriptions that invoke a revulsion towards the ghetto and industrialization. Researcher in human geography Paul Rodaway posits that, “sensuous experience and understanding is grounded in previous experience and expectation, each dependent on sensual and sensory capacities and educational training and cultural conditioning” (5). Gálvez’s novel uses the sensuous experience to build an emotional geography, it uses pointed vocabulary to build a cultural imaginary surrounding the interaction between industrialization and the city. The narrator opens the novel by describing the environment with “cuyo suelo negreaba de polvo de carbon” [whose floor turns black with carbon dust] (Gálvez 5). The carbon dust is a footprint of industrialization, leaving its tracks on the city, denoting the space as urban through this pollution. This is a literary representation of Collivadino’s dirty streets in his painting. In the novel, the dust comes from a frigorífico that processed beef, one of the first major factories in the industrialized port city of Buenos Aires, located off of the El Rio de la Matanza [The Slaughter River].
Above we see a picture of this building taken in 1938. What is notable is the use of the verb *negrear* [turn black, or go black](Gálvez 5)—this filth, this blackness of the city is active in its contamination. The floor isn’t just dark it has blackened, with the passage of time the darkness (the filth) has accumulated. Already with this first use of black in the novel we see a correlation between industrialization and a resulting polluted space. Industry literally leaves its mark of filth on the city. Industry therefore enacts its agency on the city, it becomes a character in and of itself. The concept of blackening also functions on a medical level—when the body darkens it indicates a corporal decomposition and in medicine if a limb turns black the only hope for recovery is amputation. Contamination can be physically recognized in this darkening city space. Taking a look at another picture of the river from that same year we see that both banks are lined with factories and smoke, equally dumping pollutants into Buenos Aires’ main water supply.
The factory itself does not escape critique; the industrial space has “Un fuerte olor, que provenía principalmente de las huellas sangrientas, surgía de la aglomeración de aquellos hombres y se mezclaba a las emanaciones del río” [A strong odor, that principally came from the bleeding tracks, surged from the crowd of those men and it mixed with the river’s discharge] (Gálvez 5). Odor, as a gas continuously expands until it fills its container, if it is not contained then it will freely travel and in this context functions as a threat of airborne contamination of the urban space. In L.H. Stallings black feminist work Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures, she posits that “smell express[es] interiority...beyond the limits of what it means to be socially fabricated” (14) Stallings makes reference to smell in terms of the human body,
however I’m applying this conceptualization to a construction of a space-body. What I mean by this space-body is that the factory worker functions in a metonymy with the frigorífico. The strong, revolting odor that comes from the factory also comes from its workers, from “the crowd of those men” (Gálvez 5) that spend countless hours enveloped by the smell. Smell as a reflection on the interior implies a moral judgement on the person for their contaminant scent. The frigorífico disrupts the city doubly, industrialization contaminates both space and bodies. The source of the strong odor comes from “the bleeding tracks” (Gálvez 5) and establishes a strong correlation between a body, the factory, and contamination. Blood as a contaminant preys upon the idea of disease and the river as the city’s main water source is very pointedly chosen in that the disease is transferable to all of Buenos Aires. This focus on water, as human sustenance, as contaminated prompts a glance at the faucet, a reflection on the bath and cooking water. Whether or not you are a factory worker, the very aspect of living in the city sets you up to be at risk for this contamination. Industry pollutes both air and water, leaving the subject in an inescapable space in this modernized city. Blood as contaminant and the blood of the populace contaminated sets up the body as the vehicle of disease.

Linda works in the frigorífico and reflects the intersection of contamination, industry, and the female body. The female workers in the factory are described with “Sus vestidos, algunos de colores vivos, ponían pequeñas manchas vibrantes y cálidas sobre la sinfonía en blanco y negro de las paredes y del carbón” [Their dresses, some in bright colors, place small vibrant and warm stains over the symphony in white and black of the walls and carbon] (Gálvez 5). The dresses of the women going into the factory are described as [vibrant and warm stains]. Where these dresses made with vibrant colors should disrupt the somber narration, they actually add to the idea of filth with denoting the women as “stains”. The warmth of these women-stains dialogue
with Linda’s description of burning sexuality; making reference to women’s sexual labor. As Argentinian historian Mirta Zaida Lobato sums up:

La integración de las mujeres a las fábricas...mezclaban su propia experiencia como mujeres trabajadoras y las imágenes que construían alrededor del ideal maternal, la familia y el hogar como centrales en la vida femenina. La cuestión familiar- como un objeto problemático que convocaba al conocimiento científico y a la intervención moral - se encontraba en la base de la empresa transformadora del país

[The integration of women in the factories...mixed their own experience as working women with the images that were constructed relating to a maternal ideal, the family and the home as centerpoints in the feminine life. The family question—as a problematic objective that calls on scientific knowledge and a moral intervention—finds itself as the base of a transformative enterprise for the country] (145)

The working woman is a stain on society because she functions as the threatening third sex that disrupts what is considered a ‘feminine’ way of living. The narration constructs the woman as a threat to the city’s moral sphere. Her rejection of the home-space and entrance into the factory space is in itself an aberration. Linda falls within this category of third sex and feminine deviant.

In *Naked Tango*, the frigorífico also functions as a key space of contamination for Stephanie (as we saw in the analysis of the tango in Chapter 1). The film is almost entirely shot at night, constructing a space of darkness for the prostitute (sexual labor) and criminality. In two key scenes in the film (tango in the frigorífico and the last tango), Stephanie and Cholo are bathed in a red light and literally covered in blood. Again we see the idea of the body, blood, and implied contamination.
As I’ve explored previously, the red tango in the film in which Cholo and Stephanie dance in the frigorífico completely incorporates Stephanie into a position as Cholo’s partner and equal. Unlike other tango scenes, Stephanie’s profile is clear and equally as visible as Cholo’s. She is not a side-character being introduced into a life of vice but rather she is a protagonist in this Othered space. She equal participates in this dance of blood. Within the framework of the film she voluntarily dirties herself with blood, she embraces the positionality as a contaminant. Her final tango and death, is appropriately bathed in red for the blood that overflows from her bullet wounds but also because the film has constructed a narrative in which prostituted sexuality can only lead to the brutalization and death of the prostitute. Stephanie in the end is embraced by blood and destruction driven by a space of industrialization and sexual labor.
The Prostitute as a Transnational Subject

The prostitute serves as a transnational subject that is mobile between a formal society and the Othered space. Prostitutes by definition work in a labour of physical contact, and produce this very tactile and real cultural/national confrontation. This positioning as vehicle of contamination, in addition to her objectification as sexual object and tool, dehumanizes the prostitute. She serves as a symbol of the dangers of Modernity. In the novel and film we see the most clear fear of contamination cemented in the death of men that interact with prostitutes.

In Historia de arrabal, although Daniel Forti is Linda’s first love and tries to save her from el Chino and a life of prostitution she kills him. “Rosalinda, vacilante, como sonámbula, lo abrazó. Daniel la abrazó también...Y bruscamente sintió el puñal en el pecho y un chorro de sangre” [Rosalinda, unsteady, like a sleepwalker, hugged him. Daniel hugged her back...And sharply felt the knife in his chest and a stream of blood] (Gálvez 84-6) Daniel does not see his death coming. Although she holds the knife in her hands he opens his arms and hugs her back only to be surprised (represented in sudden sharp feeling of the knife). A couple of things are communicated in this exchange: 1) The prostitute cannot be saved, 2) Interaction with her, even if its well-meaning, can only lead to death. In Naked Tango, Cholo’s death is not shocking as in using the rationale of the film Cholo was part of the Buenos Aires underworld and had too many enemies to survive. It is the Judge’s death that serves as a source of warning. Judge Torres in the ending scene, like Daniel, attempts to save Stephanie from the brothel. However, in the exchange between him and Stephanie, she turns away from him and runs towards Cholo. Stephanie chooses the life of the underworld. Judge Torres shoots her and then Cholo’s knife lodges itself in the Judge’s throat. Again, like Daniel, Judge Torres is fated to death by association. Furthermore, as a symbol of the state, the Judge’s death at the cause of his wife’s lover
communicates that the nation-state is unsafe when women are not regulated. The unregulated commerce of the female body is a threat to a male nation-state.

II. Performing Prostitution: Identification of the Threat

Up until now we have looked at how different texts signal, outline, and define the existence of the Other. The prostitute as mobile transnational subject reflects the intersectional tensions at the turn of the century. If she can contaminate, the logic would suggest avoiding her. Now, how do you identify the threat? By this I mean, how do you identify the her? How does she distinguish herself from other women? The commerce of female sexual labor is practiced and identified through social cues found in visual positioning. Prostitution is a performance. Just as Judith Butler explains:

To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman,’ to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (522)

In the first chapter we saw how fictional texts cue the reader through body language that both Stephanie and Linda are destined to a life of prostitution—Linda first innocently sways her hips then as a prostitute provocatively does the same and Stephanie’s body is of constant focus in the film. Each of these women become a prostitute. Again this idea of the female body as marker of identity and as narrative form is highlighted. Now, though, let us look at nonfictional women. Women that existed during that time and inhabited the brothel space, women that were a part of that threatening Othered population.
When thinking of prostitutes at the turn of the century there are two photography collections in the Americas that come to mind: E.J. Bellocq’s “Storyville Portraits” collection and the Oaxacan government’s registration of prostitutes during the Profiriato often referred to as “Las prostitutas del Profiriato”. These two collections are markers of drastically different visualizations of the prostitute. Bellocq’s collection focuses primarily on a brothel in the Storyville neighborhood of New Orleans at the beginning of the 20th century and reproduces the narratives we have seen until now.

Bellocq’s photographs are highly curated and by that I mean that the women in his photographs are posed, whether by the women themselves or the photographer is unknown. The naming of the collection also points to that control of space—a portrait is by definition staged and posed to best reflect the subject. In the first picture, the woman is slightly exposed in the shoulders and left torso, leaving one to deduce that should the angle have been slightly different there would be a view of her sideboob. The shirt, or dress, is the length that the garment’s definition is in question giving the viewer ample view of her striped stockings. Her legs are crossed, shoulders relaxed, and she’s glancing at the glass she’s holding, with a bottle of liquor on the table next to her (the liquor label facing camera). She’s in a state of undress, a presumed intimate moment. That staged intimacy colors much of Bellocq’s collection, underlining the sexual character of their labor. The explicit presentation of alcohol implicating indulgences in vice, that a bottle is a
present denotes that more than one drink can and most likely was taken. This image depicts a more relaxed sexuality, with no tension shown on the body. The second image is a more accurate representation of the rest of Bellocq’s collection in which most of the women are completely nude. The second woman is smiling, while looking directly into the camera. At face value both of these images show flirty women. The first image shows the woman holding up a glass, but the placement of her arm indicates that she is not leaning on the chair for support, her mouth is set in a slight frown. The second woman is posed rather awkwardly—her body is facing right however her shoulders and face are angled towards the camera, one elbow is superficially resting on a window sill. Her body is more tense than the first photograph probably from maintaining her pose. Her face depicts a slight smile less credible because of the lack of a duchenne marker, which would also raise the cheek muscle and provide some wrinkling around the eyes. Her knees are completely straightened out which is not typically how people stand indicating the tension of her pose and the strain it would place on her lower back. Although posed, Bellocq’s images do provide information as to the preconceived image of the prostitute but also the underlying labor of these women in these photographs.
This third woman is lying naked on a loveseat or small couch, her arms straight down by her sides. Her body is rigid with tension displayed in her right shoulder due to the awkward placement of her arm. Her neck shows strain although her expression is deadpan, eyes focused towards camera. Her left foot is completely twisted making the bottom of the foot face towards the ceiling. Out of Bellocq’s collection this one stood out as the model’s depicted sexuality was in the background as the positioning of this body alluded more to that of a corpse. Her deadpan expression combined with a body that looks to have been dropped on a sofa add to this effect. Even Bellocq’s photography manages to highlight what the fictional narratives already had fate for their protagonists. Building on Bellocq’s use of intimacy, in this picture sex and death are intimately entangled. Notably, the women in Bellocq’s collection do not have names. They are fungible products within the commerce of sexual labor.
The portraits of prostitutes in Oaxaca, Mexico are different in that they function as forms of identification and were used to legally and medically regulate prostitution.

**Fig. 70.** Oaxacan prostitute registry. Web. 5 May 2018. [http://www.meridadeyucatan.com/registros-del-oficio-mas-antiguo-del-mundo/]. Digital Image.

The pictures show women with high collars and combed back hair, small hoop earrings or a necklace as their adornment. The majority of these pictures have the subject looking off to the side, not directly engaging with the camera. None of them smile as is typical photography and

**Fig. 71.** Oaxacan prostitute registry. Web. 5 May 2018. [http://www.meridadeyucatan.com/registros-del-oficio-mas-antiguo-del-mundo/]. Digital Image.
portrait procedure for the time. These portraits are just that, pictures of typical women of the time. Without deliberate curating there is no way to know the profession of the women in the photograph. Bellocq’s subjects looked directly at camera acknowledging the viewer and in turn acknowledging the act of voyeurism that exists in seeing them in a state of deshabille. The Oaxacan women differ mainly because these images served as means of identification and were held in municipal records offices; visual representations of sex will not be a part of this collection. Notably, these women are identified, their names are documented because they are regulated by the state. Despite the record of their identities and some general information such as a home address there is no information about their lives other than their profession.

Prostitution as a profession is violently taxing on those that perform the sexual labor. Both collections of photographs are violent in their erasure of the lives of these women. Like the fictional texts that have been analyzed, there is a clear absence of her story. The women subjects in both the fictional texts and photographical pictures produce an archive that does not acknowledge the complex lives that these women have lived. All of these women are subjects that are used for a purpose outside of their own storytelling. Although these texts point to a level of agency in the women that ‘choose’ this profession, they do not have that same agency in narrative. That is why it is important to look beyond the images that are presented and instead delve into the intersections of identity and conflicts in the lives of these women in order to reconstruct the archive.
III. Raquel Liberman: Complex Human Being

*Humanizing the Prostitute*

I want to start off with two quotes that I hope explain how invaluable it is to include Raquel’s story within the framework of this project. The first is by Édouard Glissant. In his book *Poetics of Relation* he states:

The theory of difference is invaluable. It has allowed us to struggle against the reductive thought produced... This theory has also made it possible to take in, perhaps, not their existence but at least the rightful entitlement to recognition of the minorities swarming throughout the world and the defense of their status. (189)

The second is by Gloria Anzaldúa in her monumental work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*:

*En unas pocas centurias*, the future will belong to the *mestiza*. Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave—*la mestiza* creates a new consciousness. (102)

Both Glissant and Anzaldúa point to complexity as a means of combating oppression and paradigms of power that reduce marginalized peoples to their state of Otherhood. The act of othering is an essentialist project that reduces identities to a few mostly negative characteristics. The texts under discussion throughout this project have played into the construction of harmful paradigms that alienate an oppressed group of women. The value of Raquel Liberman’s story is that she defies many of conceptualizations of the prostitute, she exists as a paradox for her time.
Her story embraces difference and her story is one the borderlands. With Raquel’s story I argue for the production of more complex stories that delve into and reveal the struggles of those living in the Other spaces of society. Raquel’s story is the one that should be written about and filmed. She is complex and contradictory and human. She is an immigrant, poor, a dedicated wife and mother, working woman, prostitute, activist, and survivor.

The Story of Raquel Liberman

Raquel Liberman was a Polish prostitute in Buenos Aires in the 1920s and 30s whose testimony against one of the largest human-trafficking rings in Argentina dismantles the Zwi Migdal. Raquel’s story begins with her separation from her husband, Yaacov Ferber, in 1921. Yaacov moves to Buenos Aires to join his sister Helke and her family, hoping to establish a better life for his wife and children as many Jewish families were facing antisemitism and poverty in Europe and the New World still held promise. Raquel and Yaacov exchange letters throughout their separation until he sends her tickets to join him in 1922 (Glickman 133-135). However, a few months after Raquel’s arrival her husband dies from an unidentified illness. Helke, unbeknownst to Raquel, was a member of the Zwi Migdal and she encourages her to go to Buenos Aires and meet with a man that can help her find a seamstress job as she already had some experience (Raquel). Raquel leaves her children with a neighbor and moves to the capital. It is unsure whether she is forced into prostitution or decides that it is her best option for the sake of her children but she starts working in 1924 (Glickman 52).

After a four years in service she saves up enough money to pay for her freedom and opens an antique shop. The Zwi Migdal saw her independence as a threat to their power and they send Salomón Korn to seduce her and marry her, effectively taking away her money and
independence (Raquel). She is once again imprisoned in the brothel, but it isn’t until they threaten her children that she decides to go to the authorities. In 1929 she approaches the Commissar-Inspector of the federal police, Julio Alsogaray, who had been working on a case against the Zwi Migdal for years. Raquel’s testimony provides enough information to finally present a case to Judge Manuel Rodriguez Ocampo. Ocampo orders a mass arrest and seizure of documentation that reveals the extent of the organization and their corruption of local and federal officials. Raquel Liberman’s case put an end to the Zwi Migdal and imprisoned most of the heads of their organization (Raquel). Throughout the case she does not mention her children, making sure to exclude them from any repercussions. In 1935, after too few years of freedom, Raquel dies of thyroid cancer (Glickman 58).

*The Jewish Quarter & the Zwi Migdal*

In *Naked Tango* there is a scene in which Zico goes to a slave auction. The focus of that scene is Zico in negotiations with the mob interspersed with scenes of Cholo and Alba’s dance in the frigorifico; this predictably takes the cinematic focus away from the ring of human trafficking and a violent reality for many women in Argentina.

Fig. 72. Human Trafficking. Screenshot from *Naked Tango* 00:51:35.

Mobster: Look we just want to make money. (*Naked Tango* 00:51:33-00:51:36)
In the scene, a woman is placed on a small platform, she’s turned around and her skirt is lifted to show her bottom. At the very beginning of the scene in the background is a banner with the star of David; the mobsters are also wearing yarmulke, or a brimless hat customary of the Orthodox Jewish religion. Putting clues together, there was only one Jewish human trafficking ring in Buenos Aires at the time: the Zwi Migdal.

Buenos Aires, as has been described, was high segregated and regulated in terms of determinant space. There was a prominent Jewish community in the city and therefore a Jewish Quarter. The Jewish community turned its back on the Zwi Migdal and their human trafficking ring afraid of how their work would reflect on their community (Cementerio de rufianes par 1). They established a cemetery dedicated titled “El Cementerio de rufianes y prostitutas” [The Cemetery of Ruffians and Prostitutes] in which they could separate, even in death, the deviant members of society. What this points to is a profound judgement of the prostitute. Although it was known that these women were forced into their profession by the Zwi Migdal, they were still ostracized for their enslavement. This cemetery is by far the clearest example of victim-blaming, and stands as a monument to rape and human trafficking culture. The victims of the Zwi Migdal through the eyes of the Jewish community were equally to blame for their fate and therefore lie next to them even after death. It is a reproduction of the violence they experienced in that even in death they could not escape. The reality back then is that there was no escape for any of them, at least not until the Zwi Migdal came crashing down.

*Getting to Know Raquel: Humanizing the Narrative*

I take inspiration from Myrtha Schalom’s book *La Polaca* (2003), in which she details the life of Raquel and reconstructs her story so that it is not forgotten. The following are
combination of analysis and critical fabulation\textsuperscript{4}, adding to Raquel’s legacy in the aim to demonstrate the complexity of a story. Raquel’s story makes a case for the bravery she had to have had in order to survive everything she went through. The sheer strength necessary to denounce the Zwi Migdal, especially when they had corrupted much of the police force and had officials in their pocket is insurmountable. However, other than the power she holds as the key testimony in the Zwi Migdal case, there is much more that can be learned about the woman she was if you look at her letters and pictures and use them as pieces in a puzzle.

The epistolary\textsuperscript{5} documentation of her life is one of the most intimate approximations we can reach of Raquel. The good majority of correspondence that remains is during the period of time that she was in Poland waiting for her husband to save enough money to send for her and their children. Her love of her husband and of her family is almost immediately apparent in the first letter. She addresses it “My dear husband” (Glickman 95) and directly addresses her dear husband throughout the letter. She describes her impatience to hear from him: “I am writing to you . . . so you know, my dear husband, that I don’t want to wait until I receive your letter from Argentina. I write to you in the meanwhile, since my time here, without you becomes too long” (Glickman 95). Her husband hasn’t even arrived at the new country and already Raquel reaches out to him. Her letter becomes a romantic gesture in missing him. Her insecurity in their separation is highlighted at the end of the letter: “I don’t have to tell it to you nor to repeat it to you, since you are a faithful husband and I am a faithful wife to hurry your papers and see what you can do so we can reunite soon” (Glickman 95). Already we see this dissatisfaction with

\textsuperscript{4} For more information read “Venus in Two Acts” by Saidiya Hartman.

\textsuperscript{5} Most of the letters were originally written in Yiddish with a few written in Spanish. Pictures of the letters and their translations can be found in Nora Glickman’s book \textit{The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman} (91-156).
having her family separated and great anticipation of living with her family in Argentina. Her
desperation grows throughout the correspondence as she is feeling less and less welcome as she
stays with family members.

In a letter to her husband she addresses her sister-in-law: “Dear Helke . . . I believe you
will be the messenger of our salvation . . . You are the one who will help put an end to our
suffering . . . With your husband and mine together, I hope you can take us away from here”
(Glickman 135). Raquel thinks that with help from her sister-in-law her family will be reunited
and they will be able to create a better life for themselves. These correspondences work to
elaborate an even more tragic view of her story. Raquel so believed that her greatest suffering
came from the separation of her family and that Argentina held all the promise of reunion with
the love of her life and a better life. Nothing could be more tragic than having your husband die
so shortly after the long-awaited reunion and the betrayal of your sister-in-law when family
should have been her system of support. She finds herself in a foreign country, widowed and
alone, with two young boys depending on her to provide for them.

Her love of her children is just as apparent as her love for her husband. Throughout her
letters she makes constant reference to them and worries about their health and how much they
miss their father. When she reaches out to Helke she expresses “You are the one that will
help . . . my children to get an education and be happy” (Glickman 135). As a part of a better life,
Raquel envisions happiness and opportunity for her children. In one of her last letters to Yaacov
before traveling to Argentina she says. “My two lovely and adored children and I will be patient
because we know what a splendid future brightens our eyes and renews our strength, to
withstand everything else more easily” (Glickman 143). It is easy to see that Raquel takes her
strength from her children and not that farfetched to assume that separating from them when she
has to go work in Buenos Aires must have been a very difficult task. After the trial, Raquel remains separated from her children just in case the Zwi Migdal would like to take retribution for her testimony and writes to her friend about the welfare of the children. She responds with “Your children are very well. They behave and study very well” (Glickman 149). Despite the difficulties she still manages to provide her children with the opportunities she so wished them to have when she dreamt about their life in Argentina.

Below are two pictures from when Raquel still lived in Poland. The facial markers and body positioning is especially important when comparing them to later pictures of her.

**Fig. 73.** Raquel with short hair, 1918. Schalom, Myrtha. *La Polaca*, Grupo Editorial Norma, 2003, pp. 176.


Raquel in both pictures has no wrinkle lines or marked tension in the face. Her shoulders are relaxed and she has nearly perfect posture. The slight upturn of the ends of the lips and mild
creases around the eyes demonstrates a faint smile which for portraiture of the time is appropriate. She is a young and beautiful woman. Like Linda and Stephanie, the body serves as map and reflection of your life. Less than a decade later you can see stark changes in Raquel.


This photograph of Raquel Liberman on shallow read encourages the idea of the femme fatale. She’s wearing this luxurious long coat, her makeup is on thick and her hair is coiffed. She is playing the game so to speak in her attempts to lure men with the presentation of her body. However, through thorough inspection this image is an image of a stark contrasts. The first is the physical space: she appears to be in the middle of nowhere, somewhere in the countryside, far from the urban space; for sure, she’s no longer in Buenos Aires and in a more rural space. She seems out of place not just in terms of space but in time, the contrast is that much more intense between her and the surroundings because of her night attire in the light of day. This displacement of subject from an understood space provides a level of dissonance in the piece.
This woman with her heavy makeup and luxurious fur coat has a designated city space in the red light district where she comes out at night—this is the urban setting associated with her sex work. This tension between person and place dialogues with the intersectional ideas of class and space and pushes at the stereotyping of the prostitute’s space. Although there is a perceived idea of luxury with the fur coat her too heavy make-up and swollen feet in too-small of shoes indicate a not so luxurious life. Here is another example of how the prostitute functions as a contact zone between socio-economic strata. These small details indicate to the reader that she is not a courtesan, a prostitute whose mobility is not question as it is her right as a member of the upper class of prostitution serving a similar upper class of society. Raquel Liberman is not afforded the luxury of that social standing and so her perceived displacement is an affront. Her position of prostitute instead of courtesan restricts her space to the red light district at night and it is this perceived space with this odd backdrop that constructs the dissonance in the piece. She in some ways is violating the neat square box that society has designated as her space. She is subversive and therefore an accomplice in creating that dissonance. Furthermore, her primping constructs her as an active participant in consumer culture and in her own development as a commodity and object of consumption. For all intents and purposes she is the disruptive femme fatale. This is how she is villainized.

However, up until now the focus has been solely on things outside of herself—the space, her make-up. All these things are secondary to her as a person. Looking at her purposefully the image shows a significantly older Raquel than her 27 years would suggest. Both her eyes and cheeks are sunken in, and wrinkles (or worry marks) have formed around the mouth, eyes and brow-line which is in stark contrast to the earlier images of her. There is a defined tightness around her mouth that was not there while her husband was still alive. It is very apparent that
Raquel finds herself dealing a great deal of tension that is represented on her body. Her body functions as a reflection of the self and as a source of mapping one’s life. Her body language also speaks volumes to how she is. Her body is closed off, caving into itself with crossed arms. This stance expresses defensiveness, social anxiety, or a symbolic means of self-protection. Her hands are hidden which demonstrates a need to hide a part of herself. Her left eye is slightly swollen and stands askew in her gaze, which could point to physical abuse hidden underneath the makeup. The makeup functions as a mask for her profession. Her swollen feet in too-tight shoes look painful and indicate an amount of work being done on her body—she does not have the luxury of sitting down all day. Raquel’s body speaks so much more strongly than the cultural imaginary that is constructed as an overlay of this image. Raquel is uncomfortable in this photograph, she is not taking ownership of this life, her body underneath the makeup and the clothes speaks more to what she is experiencing than this posed image does.
Both of these images were taken in the same year although we can deduce on different days due to the changed hairdo and different shoes. They robe Raquel wears is odd for the time period in that it is in the style of a wrap. Presumably this fashion design makes for easier disrobement, again her clothing denoting her profession. Raquel maintains an occultation of her right hand and obstructs part of her body with the lamp post, continuing this message of discomfort with herself or her situation. The near perfect posture she had in Poland is no longer visible, possibly due to the decade of emotional and physical pain and labor. The second photograph has a much starker facial expression than the first. The frown lines are deeper and her eyebrows burrow in concern or anger. The year these photographs are taken is the year
preceding her testimony and the take-down of the Zwi Migdal. If you look at her facial and body language consecutively since the picture of Raquel in a fur coat, there is a narrative of accumulating pain. Her sitting image in her robe contrasts starkly to her sitting with a rose. She’s sustaining her body weight with the back of her chair and she’s looking intently at camera, there’s a great deal more tension in this sitting image. Furthermore although her face is the most intense it has been, her body language communicates a greater level of confidence and defiance. Her posture is open, her hands exposed. Instead of bracing herself on a pole, she is holding herself straight with the chair. The slight crossing of her legs does communicate a slight hesitancy. Could this moment be after she’s made her decision to denounce the Zwi Migdal?


As I said before, aside from her husband the other loves of her life were her children. Depicted above are two family portraits after her denunciation of the Zwi Migdal. Although the second image is not dated, based on the facial structures of the boys, they appear to be slightly older than the image taken in 1933. What is most remarkable is that Raquel is smiling in both of these photographs, not just the smallest twinge of joy appropriate for the time, but a true bright smile. I focus on the smile because in previous photographs her mouth and facial expression best communicated affect and are the closest approximations to understanding what Raquel experienced. Her wrinkles are significantly less pronounced in these two images in comparison to when she was a prostitute. In both of her pictures her body language is open and she is reaching for her children. This act of touch conveys a profound sense of love. She has been through horrendous pain and suffering to give her children a better life and she is holding them. It is also a reminder that Raquel values her motherhood. Motherhood and prostitution is often not considered with a great deal of thought and it is obvious that the texts we’ve seen have placed motherhood outside of prostitution. However, Raquel breaks with that separation—she is a dedicated mother that provided her children with the best possible life given her limitations. This tactile reminder in both of the images sheds the preconceived notions of motherhood. These last two images of Raquel brings us back to the beginning two pictures the pearls in first image and the pose on the arm of the chair in the second image hark back to her picture of the rose, although with more wrinkles. She’s reached a happier point in her life, her wrinkles serve as a testament to the time and the hardships that have passed.

Raquel dies of cancer two years later. However, her story is not over if scholars provide alternative narratives to dominant tropes. In the telling of her story and those of other women like her, the Raquel Libermans of the world, despite the dehumanizing narrative of
contamination, embody the complexity of a subject that vacillates between all of the perceived roles of women in society.
CONCLUSION

Upon self-reflection, philosopher Drew Leder notes: “My awareness of my body is a profoundly social thing, arising out of experiences of the corporeality of other people and of their gaze directed back upon me” (92). This omnipresent gaze found outside of the self constructs awareness of the body. In the case of this study, the awareness of the female body draws upon a variety of cultural texts that construct borders of existence, defining clear roles for a woman within a formal society and for one that inhabits the Othered space. Sociological and economic texts by Bialet Massé, Samper, and le Journal des Économistes define the role of women as a means of (re)production within the domestic space and segregate the urban space via dialectics of Otherhood in the foreign versus the nation. These strictly defined roles and social borders function as evidence of attempted regulation by the nation state.

The threat of women in the construction of the nation exists in the perception of them as vehicles of contamination. The cultural imaginary of the mobile prostitute constructs her identity as a transnational subject—both explicitly as an immigrant and implicitly as a subject that crosses the borders of the ghetto; the prostitute is threatening because she is a means of coming in contact with the Other. Exemplified in “El Barrio de las Ranas,” the Other is an identity tied closed to criminality, foreignness and infection. Linda in Historia de arrabal and Stephanie in Naked Tango demonstrate the threat of unregulated female sexuality, in which the woman is contaminated and can contaminate. In both fictional stories the intersection of unregulated female sexuality, spaces of industrialization, and the criminality of the ghetto lead to the violent deaths of both the female protagonists and their male companions. This cements the crisis of Identity and Legitimation (Bobbio and Matteucci) which prompts narratives that construct identity and positionality within the nation.
These cultural narratives come together to dehumanize the prostitute—as a vehicle of contamination she is an unregulated sexual object that closes the proximity to the Other. She is either a tool of the state or a threat to the nation. I use Raquel Liberman’s life as a counternarrative. Raquel is a wife, mother, woman and prostitute. She has a complex history filled with contradictions that tear down the borders of propriety and deviance. She is a transnational subject that travels between the modes of motherhood and sexual labor, witness and criminal, survivor and victim. She straddles the social border. I advocate for more counter narratives, hopefully ones that come from the women themselves. The most just form of identification is self-identification, similarly a self-narrative in the context of prostitution complicates male-state drive cultural imaginary and produces a more comprehensive narrative. In cases like Raquel’s, in which the subject is no longer living to share their story, it is the scholar’s responsibility to cement their narrative in as many personal objects and representations that can be found. Raquel’s freedom from sexual slavery, although brief, requires a celebration for the immense struggles she had to overcome.

For the sake of symmetry, I would like to end my conclusion with a quote that I believe conveys this message: “When women are spoken for and do not speak for themselves, such dramas of liberation become only the open scenes of the next drama of confinement” (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 250).
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