

Copyright

by

Nicolas Matthew Poppe

2009

**The Dissertation Committee for Nicolas Matthew Poppe Certifies that this is the  
approved version of the following dissertation:**

**Assembling Place: Buenos Aires in Cultural Production (1920-1935)**

**Committee:**

---

Nicolas Shumway, Supervisor

---

Leopoldo Bernucci

---

Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba

---

José Manuel Pereiro Otero

---

Leo Zonn

---

**Assembling Place: Buenos Aires in Cultural Production (1920-1935)**

**by**

**Nicolas Matthew Poppe, M.A., B.A.**

**Dissertation**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**December, 2009**

## **Dedication**

To my family, but most of all to my dear parents

## Acknowledgements

Delineating the influence of the intellectual and personal relationships that helped me realize this project— both mentally as an assemblage of ideas and materially as a text, itself a complex assemblage—is an impossible task. As Borges reminds us in the story “El congreso”, “Las palabras son símbolos que postulan una memoria compartida.” In many ways, this project is the materialization of words and ideas that belong neither to me nor to others.

I would, however, be remiss to not take the opportunity to demonstrate my profound debt to a number of people. Without the support of my dissertation director, Nicolas Shumway, I cannot imagine arriving at the place in which I am today. Additionally, I am deeply grateful to the members of my dissertation committee— Leopoldo Bernucci, Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba, José Manuel Pereiro Otero, and Leo Zonn— for their impact on me. Not only has my thinking been shaped, but so has my trajectory through life. I cannot adequately express my appreciation.

Nor do I feel myself capable of conveying the ways in which others have helped me. To do so, would be overly reductive. Despite this, I would like to show my appreciation to Rocío del Águila, Jutta Albus, Jossianna Arroyo Martínez, Alanna Breen, Pearl Brilmyer, Steve Byrd, Cristina Carrasco, Marcelo Casarin, Leo Chiachio, Lilian Contreras-Silva, Christian Cousins, Lori Czerwionka, Enrique Fierro, Patricia Fischer,

Francisco Foot Hardman, Jorge Garcia, Roy Germano, Karla González, Jacqueline Henkel, Mónica Landro, Jennifer Lang, María Elena Legaz, Naomi Lindstrom, Joseph Mankin, Erica Martínez, Daniel Mellone, Justin Ohrenberger, Dan Olson, Joseph Palis, Roxana Patiño, Joe Pierce, Renata Ponte, Marina Potoplyak, Brian Price, Karyn Rayburn, Paolo Ricci, Laura Rodríguez, César Salgado, Ignacio Sánchez Prado, Miguel Santos Neves, Stephanie Rosen, Jillian Sayre, Ryan Schmitz, Scott Spinks, Mónica Vallin, and Alejandra Zambrano.

Finally, this project would not be what it is without spaces and places. It was inspired by or developed in Austin (Benson Latin American Collection, Caffé Medici, Clarksville, Flightpath Coffeehouse, Green Muse Café, Harry Ransom Collection, Perry-Castañeda Library, Progress Coffee, and Once Over Coffeebar), Boston (Copley Place), Buenos Aires (Café Banderín, Congreso, De la Mancha Libros, El Gato Negro, Florencio, La línea A, and La Puerto Rico), Granville (Denison University, River Road Coffeehouse, and West Maple), México D.F. (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), San Antonio, and Washington (Mount Ranier National Park, Puyallup, and Seattle).

## **Assembling Place: Buenos Aires in Cultural Production (1920-1935)**

Publication No. \_\_\_\_\_

Nicolas Matthew Poppe, PhD

The University of Texas at Austin, 2009

Supervisor: Nicolas Shumway

In works of cultural production, interpretations of the built, natural, and social environment engage a hierarchy of readings of place. Formed by a totality of interpretations—accepted/unaccepted, dominant/subordinate, normal/abnormal, and everything in between—this hierarchy of readings frames place as a social understanding. Interpretations of place, therefore, are social positionings: kinds of individual delineations of the meaning of place as a social understanding. Collectively, these social positionings compose and comprise our understanding of the meaning of a place. In this study, I examine the different ways in which the understanding of Buenos Aires as a place shapes and is shaped by the avant-garde urban *criollismo* of Jorge Luis Borges’ poetry of the 1920s, the five plays of Armando Discépolo’s dramatic genre of the *grotesco criollo*, Robert Arlt’s dark and portentous binary novel *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* (1929/1931), and three early Argentine sound films [*Tango!* (Mogila Barth 1933), *Los tres berretines* (Equipo Lumiton 1933), and *Riachuelo* (Moglia Barth 1934)]. To get at the mechanisms that drive the interaction between these works of cultural production, which are social positionings, and the social understanding of Buenos Aires as a place, I draw

from Manuel De Landa's notions of assemblage theory and non-linear history. Wholes such as *porteño* society of the 1920s and 1930s are assemblages of an almost limitless number of parts whose functions within the greater entity are not always clear. Place, therefore, is an assemblage whose meaning is made up of indeterminable interpretations of space. It is also a non-linear social understanding in that its meaning is irreducible to its components (i.e. social positionings). The mutual interactions and feedback within assemblages such as Buenos Aires are indicative of how meaning is ever changing through processes of destratification, restratification, and stratification in its components, including Borges' early poetry, Discépolo's *grotesco criollo*, Arlt's *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*, and the films *Tango!*, *Los tres berretines*, and *Riachuelo*.



## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Place and Buenos Aires in Argentine Cultural Production (1920-1935) .....	1
Space and Place in Cultural Production.....	3
Place as an Assemblage, a Non-Linear Social Understanding .....	9
Assembling Buenos Aires .....	14
Chapter One .....	21
Dwelling and the Avant-Garde Urban <i>criollismo</i> of Jorge Luis Borges' Early Poetry .....	21
Dwelling: A Metaphysical Sense of Place.....	26
Dwelling and Buenos Aires in Borges' Early Poetry .....	31
<i>Porteño</i> Interiors .....	34
Blurred Spatializations .....	40
Out and About in Buenos Aires.....	44
Dwelling and "La fundación mitológica de Buenos Aires" .....	56
Outside Buenos Aires .....	61
Dwelling in Extra-Spatial Poems .....	62
Mirrored Images: Buenos Aires   Other Places .....	67
Dwelling in Buenos Aires .....	72
Chapter Two .....	75
A Disintegrative Sense of Place: Armando Discépolo's <i>grotesco criollo</i> .....	75
Miguel and the Betweenness of Place in <i>Mateo</i> (1923) .....	80
Saverio and Topophobia in <i>El organito</i> (1925) .....	90
Place Lost: Promise and Failure in <i>Stéfano</i> (1928) .....	100
Home Fragmented: the <i>Conventillo</i> , Place, and Social Mores in <i>Cremona</i> (1932) .....	111
Affective Displacement in <i>Relojero</i> (1934) .....	120
Place, Perception, and Experience in the <i>grotesco criollo</i> .....	128

Chapter Three .....	131
Buenos Aires, Fissured: Place in Arlt's <i>Los siete locos</i> / <i>Los lanzallamas</i> .....	131
The Two Novels of <i>Los siete locos</i> / <i>Los lanzallamas</i> : Erdosain, the Astrologer, and Perspectives of Place .....	137
Erdosain: Projection, Place, and Humiliation .....	140
The Astrologer: Place, Power, and Simulacrum .....	156
Perspectives of Place and the Two Novels of <i>Los siete locos</i> / <i>Los         lanzallamas</i> .....	166
Buenos Aires, Fissured .....	167
Chapter Four .....	170
Siteseeing the Modern Metropolis: Buenos Aires in Early Sound Films.....	170
Siteseeing in <i>Tango!</i> , <i>Los tres berretines</i> , and <i>Riachuelo</i> .....	174
Buenos Aires, donde <i>Tango!</i> nació: The Dawn of the Sound Film .....	177
Public and Private Space in <i>Tango!</i> .....	181
Inside/Outside the Metropolis: From the Margin to the Center to the Margin .....	188
No hay nada como mi barrio .....	191
Ambivalence, Mobility, and Sendentalist Metaphysics in <i>Tango!</i> ...	194
Cinema, Soccer, and Tango in Lumiton's <i>Los tres berretines</i> .....	195
The Spaces and Places of the Three Whims .....	197
Tradition and Modernity: Ideology and Place of the Three Whims ..	198
Metonymy, Siteseeing, and Flânerie in the Title Sequence .....	200
Cinema, Feminine Space, and Mobility.....	203
Spectatorship and the Soccer Stadium.....	208
Eusebio and the Places of Tango Culture .....	211
Modernity and Siteseeing in <i>Los tres berretines</i> .....	214
Berretín and Place in <i>Riachuelo</i> .....	215
The Riachuelo, Berretín, and "La vieja" .....	220
The Neighborhood Cafetín.....	223
The conventillo .....	225

Berretín as the Riachuelo .....	229
Siteseeing and Mobility in <i>Tango!</i> , <i>Los Tres Berretines</i> , and <i>Riachuelo</i> ...	230
Epilogue.....	233
Appendix: Filmography .....	236
Bibliography .....	237
Vita.....	245

## Introduction

### Place and Buenos Aires in Argentine Cultural Production (1920-1935)

Sunshine illuminates an interior space, entering through two large, opened doors. The room, defined as a studio in the title of the piece, is comprised almost entirely of wood and contains a few everyday objects, among which are a table, a mirror, and a bottle. The doors of the well lived-in room open up to the water, where some ships are docked. The sun shines brightly on the ships docked in the waterway. The threshold acts as a physical line delineating the interior and the exterior, and cannot prevent the waterway from entering into the studio, for the windowpanes of the door reflect the world outside. The scene evokes a sensation of experiencing the blurred edge of the nostalgia and comfort of home and the excitement and progress of adventure. Magnified by the juxtaposition of the warm brown tones of the studio and the bright blues, yellows, and whites of the exterior space of the docks, these feelings of home and adventure imbue the spaces Fortunato Lacámara's 1930 painting *Desde mi estudio*.<sup>1</sup> Lacámara, who studied with Alfredo Lazzari in the *Sociedad Unión de la Boca*, spent much of his creative efforts to capturing life in the iconic La Boca neighborhood of Buenos Aires. Forming a part of a series of works, most of which are much more abstract, *Desde mi estudio* represents a space of everyday life in Buenos Aires.

---

<sup>1</sup> The painting is currently part of the collection of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires.

In many ways, Lacámara's dedication to probing the meaning of existence within the urban spaces of Buenos Aires through an aesthetic medium is unexceptional in the 1920s and 1930s. This is not to say, of course, that Lacámara's work does not provide insight into that existence but rather he is one of any number of creators, of cultural producers, during these two decades who represented life in Buenos Aires. Either explicitly or implicitly, the spaces and places of the Argentine capital are explored in work as diverse as the photography of Horacio Coppola to the poetry of Norah Lange. While the specific sites of these works vary, they each capture individual experiences of the spaces and place of Buenos Aires. Lacámara's paintings, for example, depict the waterways, streets, and interior spaces of La Boca. In many ways, this dedication to capturing life in the city is typical of artists, writers, and other cultural producers of the 1920s and 1930s. Not only trying to relate their own perspectives, people like Lacámara aimed to capture a greater experience of their communities.

Although largely forgotten today, Lacámara was one of a countless number of artists and thinkers who explored the textures of Buenos Aires's spaces and places through their work. Documenting life in La Boca, Lacámara's work coalesces physical spatiality and the social practices and understandings tacit within that space. *Desde mi estudio*, consequently, is not a representation of a space but rather of a place. Shifting focus away from space and towards place allows the viewer to move her perception of the painting beyond the narrow spatial limits of the canvas into a broader experience of the built, natural, and social environment. Whether explicitly or implicitly, works of cultural production such as *Desde mi estudio* evince the complex network of relationships

associated with notions of place. At once a social understanding and a social positioning, place is space mediated with value. In what follows, I examine how Buenos Aires is represented as a place in Argentine cultural production of the 1920s and early 1930s.

### **SPACE AND PLACE IN CULTURAL PRODUCTION**

Place is central to our understanding of how we act and interact within the built, natural, and social environment. Whether crossing the street in Buenos Aires, cutting through a corn field in Ohio, or chatting with friends in a café in Austin, place is the context of our everyday lives. Despite this, or perhaps as a consequence of this, place is a not only a highly slippery term that it is used in a variety of ways in everyday language, but it is also a highly technical concept. In English, for example, place can signify anything from a location (e.g. “the chairs are in their place”) to a sense of belonging (e.g. “This is the perfect place for me”).<sup>2</sup> The sheer number of uses of the word “place” in English makes it difficult at times to parse out exactly what the speaker means by implementing the term. Because of its polysemanticity, context is vital to how “place” is understood.

In addition to its quotidian meanings, place is also used to indicate something much more specific and technical, albeit equally difficult to pin down (e.g. the notions of place represented in the works of cultural production examined in this study). As “place” is a term with so many meanings in everyday usage, it is an evasive term with which to

---

<sup>2</sup> For a long discussion of the everyday uses of the word “place” in English, see Cresswell’s *Place: A Short Introduction* (1-2).

work in a technical or a theoretical sense. While the slipperiness of “place” is undoubtedly a source of some confusion and frustration, it also opens vast theoretical spaces from which an understanding of our complex relationships with our environment can be teased out. Although place studies largely arose out of an exploration of the ambiguity of the term in English, as it was the language in which many early theoreticians of the concept worked, other languages also share this blurry geographic understanding.

The squirmy nature of the term “place” in both everyday and technical/ theoretical language is further complicated by its tenuous relationship with another geographical concept, space. In fact, space and place are so interconnected as geographical understandings that they form a complex binary whose tangled relationships are nearly impossible to untwine. For this reason, theoreticians frequently delineate the concepts of space and place in a highly individual manner. For example, in distinguishing social space from the more abstract notion of absolute space, Henri Lefebvre approximates something similar to the broad understanding of place in American geography. Despite this, Lefebvre’s exploration of social space in *The Production of Space* (1974) is carried out in more a distinct way than, to use the example of a classic text in the field of humanistic geography, Edward Relph’s *Place and Placelessness* (1976). Conceptualizations of space and place, therefore, should be contextualized within the particular theoretical framework of their production. Throughout this study the differences between the natures of space and place, some of which are subtle and some of which are much more marked, are explored within the context(s) of the particular

sociocultural situation in which the work(s) were produced. Notions of space and place rise from the works of cultural production, as opposed to being rooted within the texts of theoreticians. Theory is applied only so as to tease out meaning in each work of cultural production.

Notwithstanding the distinctive underlying cultural and historical factors in each text that lend themselves to distinct interpretations of space and place, it is important to establish an initial and working understanding of the two concepts. At its most basic level, space is a much more abstract notion than place. While place is generally considered to be a type of rooted location, space is the abstract stuff that surrounds it. This is not to say, however, that space is necessarily physical. That is, space as a concept is not limited to denoting an empty area between points or objects of varying dimensions but rather is something much more encompassing. Take for example narrative space, which is explored in a later chapter of this study. Narrative space does not physically exist; however, the reader of a short story experiences the abstract stuff that is space. Yi-Fu Tuan, the founder of humanistic geography, distinguishes space from place in the following manner: “The ideas ‘space’ and ‘place’ require each other for definition. [...] we think of space as that which makes it possible for location to be transformed into place” (*Space and Place* 6). Space therefore is the *prima materia* from which place can be created and understood. In cultural production, the limits and meanings of space and place are framed not only by the myriad of circumstances playing a part in the assembling of the work by its creator(s) but also by the complex networks that form its corresponding medium and genre. Consequently, it is important to take into



consideration how taxonomical influences such as medium and genre affect the representation of space and place in a work of cultural production.

Space is central to how places are represented in the works of cultural production examined in this study. The dramatic, filmic, narrative, and poetic spaces of these works of cultural production allow for creation of affective bonds with the built, natural, and social environments represented. That is, the spaces of cultural production open interpretive channels of place. The emotional connections drawn from space are rooted into place by an aggregation of contextual factors, the most influential of which is power. Consequently, place is understood in this study to broadly signify “space invested with meaning in the context of power” (Cresswell, *Place* 12). This working definition allows different kinds of places to be examined within the particular parameters of their creation. To give an example analogous to the works examined in this study: to analyze the Mexico City of Manuel Maples Arce’s *Urbe* (1924) under the same lens as that of Diego Rivera’s mural *Día de los muertos* (1924) would effectively erase the particular generic, historic, sociocultural, etc. conditions of their production. Avant-garde movements in poetry and painting, while certainly drawing from similar theoretical veins, nonetheless were expressed in distinct manners. Similarly, Maples Arce and Rivera shared different relationships with the avant-garde, both European and Latin American. Although these two points are perhaps overly obvious, they demonstrate the multitude of factors that influence how place is rooted within space. Ultimately, the singularity of space must be taken into account to understand the uniqueness of a place.

Because place is the context in which we experience life, it is central to the project of approaching any work of cultural production. To draw meaning, no matter what that meaning may be, from a work of cultural production we must place ourselves within its spaces and places. In James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), for example, the reader must necessarily situate herself within the spaces and places represented in the text. The Dublin of Joyce's 1922 novel offers multiple readings, various possibilities of interpretation, both in regards to place in specific and other notions in general. This is not to say, however, that all interpretations of a text such as *Ulysses* are created equal. Largely as a consequence of how shifting power relationships affect the composition of social understandings, the perceived validity of individual readings changes throughout time. For this reason, the text has been used as a metaphor for how we understand place. Tim Cresswell argues that:

Because places are meaningful and because we always exist and act in places, we are constantly engaged in acts of interpretation. This has led some to talk about places and the landscape as text. Like a book, the landscape is created by authors, and the end product attempts to create certain meanings. But also, like a book, the people who 'read' the landscape and its places can never be forced to read it in only one way. The text is subject to multiple readings despite the fact that some readings are encouraged more than others. We thus can talk of a hierarchy of readings, with favored, normal, accepted readings and discouraged, heretical, abnormal readings— dominant readings and subordinate readings. (*In Place/Out of Place* 13)

Cresswell uses the metaphor of power relationships in textual interpretation in his work *In Place/ Out of Place* to get at how marginalized social groups —graffiti artists in 1970s New York City, hippies converging on Stonehenge in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in the 1980s— transgressed normative

landscape of social understandings. While the places these social groups inhabit are physical, the textual metaphor is clearly applicable to the non-physical spaces and places of works of cultural production such as Joyce's Dublin. Whoever experiences the built, natural, and social environment assembled in a work of cultural production provides an interpretation that is in contact with a hierarchy of readings. The text metaphor provides a heuristic device for reading these situations because the perception of the groups differs according to their relative place within the dynamics of power.

While the text metaphor advances an important theoretical step in allowing for landscape and place, whether physical or otherwise, to be considered as a hierarchy of meanings, it opens the possibility for place to be misunderstood to be a type of uniform totality. In other words, the "reader" runs the risk of approaching the text as if it were a conceptually and ideologically homogenous entity. The New York City tagged by graffiti artists in the 1970s was anything but uniform; cultural, economic, and social differences, not to mention disparities, were so palpable that graffiti was contradictorily accepted as part of the landscape in some parts of the city, while being seen as a discourse of disorder in other more affluent parts. Similarly heterogeneous, the Dublin of *Ulysses* is an assemblage of distinct experiences of the novel's spaces and places. Take for example "The Wandering Rocks" episode. In nineteen narrative vignettes, Joyce leads the reader not only through city streets but also through completely distinct spatial experiences of Dublin. Richard Brown argues that Joyce disables "the divorce between the multifariousness of the city and the containment of the text by providing us with a text that is as multifarious as the city and is uncannily similar to it in many ways" (72).

In this sense, *Ulysses* is a demonstration of how texts do not provide coherent readings of spaces and places but rather they represent deeply embedded ideological contradictions regarding the built, natural, and social environment.

#### **PLACE AS AN ASSEMBLAGE, A NON-LINEAR SOCIAL UNDERSTANDING**

In works of cultural production, interpretations of the built, natural, and social environment engage a hierarchy of readings of place. Formed by a totality of interpretations—accepted/unaccepted, dominant/subordinate, normal/abnormal, and everything in between—this hierarchy of readings frames place as a social understanding. Interpretations of place, therefore, are social positionings: kinds of individual delineations of the meaning of place as a social understanding. Collectively, these social positionings compose and comprise our understanding of the meaning of a place. The works of cultural production examined in this study both shape and are shaped by the understanding of Buenos Aires as a place in the 1920s and 1930s.

To get at the mechanisms that drive this interaction between works of cultural production, which are social positionings, and social understandings I draw from Manuel De Landa's notions of assemblage theory and non-linear history, which in turn are indebted to the thought of Gilles Deleuze. For De Landa, wholes such as a society are assemblages of an almost limitless number of parts whose functions within the greater entity are not always clear. Place, therefore, is an assemblage whose meaning is made up of indeterminable interpretations of space. It is also a non-linear social understanding in that its meaning is irreducible to its components (i.e. social positionings). De Landa defines the concept of nonlinearity as: "*nonlinear*, that is, in which there are strong

mutual interactions (or feedback) between components” (*A Thousand Years* 14). The mutual interactions and feedback within assemblages such as place are indicative of how meaning is ever changing. That is, and De Landa uses each set of terms almost interchangeably, assemblages are in constant processes of coding/decoding, territorialization/deterritorialization, and stratification/restratification/destratification. The signification of an assemblage is in a state of constant flux, at times become more solid and at times becoming less so. In this study, as I argue later, cultural production representing Buenos Aires in the 1920s and 1930s provides a window into these processes of changing meaning. Although talking directly about cities as physical entities, the following assertion by De Landa can be applied to the city as a place in cultural production: “cities appeared not only as structures operating at a certain degree of stratification (with a certain mix of market and command components), but they themselves performed destratifications and restratifications on the flows that traversed them” (*A Thousand Years* 262-263).

Assemblage theory provides what De Landa calls, “a nonreductionist approach, an approach in which every social entity is shown to emerge from the interactions among entities operating at a smaller scale” (*A New Philosophy* 118). Because it provides a theoretical framework within which one can examine the effects of smaller components on a larger social entity, assemblage theory creates space for the type of analysis of works of cultural production done in this study. An individual work of cultural production, for example, is interpreted in assemblage theory as constitutive part of a social understanding rather than a mere representation of that social entity. The assemblage, the social entity,

emerges from the innumerable interactions that engender it. Here, it is important to keep in mind a key consideration regarding the relationship of the assemblage its constitutive parts. Deleuze and Guattari first argue the point in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

The abstract machine is always singular, designated by the proper name of a group or individual, while the assemblage of enunciation is always collective, in the individual as in the group. The Lenin abstract machine, and the Bolshevik collective assemblage... The same goes for literature, for music. There is no primacy of the individual; there is instead an indissolubility of a singular Abstract and a collective Concrete. The abstract machine does not exist independently of the assemblage, any more than the assemblage functions independently of the machine. (100)

A loosely structured, albeit systematic, relationship exists between singularities, what Deleuze and Guattari call abstract machines, and the collective assemblage. The abstract machine is not singular in the sense that it can exist outside of the assemblage but rather is considered as such because it is a unique expression of the assemblage. Take Deleuze and Guattari's example of literature: a poem by Vicente Huidobro is always a singular entity, even though it is part of a number of different collectives (e.g. Chilean literature, metaliterature, poetry, etc.). Similarly, an assemblage such as poetry cannot function without components like "Ars poética." De Landa expands upon this point about the relationship between the assemblage and its parts when he states:

The autonomy of wholes relative to their parts is guaranteed by the fact that they can causally affect those parts in both a limiting and an enabling way, and by the fact that they can interact with each other in a way not reducible to their parts, that is, in such a way that an explanation of the interaction that includes the details of the component parts would be redundant. (*A New Philosophy* 40)

An assemblage cannot be reduced to its component parts. To expand upon the previous example of poetry, it would be reductive and simplistic to argue that the assemblage

exists merely as a function of its parts. While poems such as “Ars poética” are limited by their relationship to poetry (i.e. they must satisfy certain qualifications to be understood to be poetry), poetry as an assemblage cannot be reduced to its parts. It is an entity that exists beyond its parts.

Much like Huidobro’s “Ars poética,” the works of cultural production examined in this study function as parts of larger assemblages. While I take care to contextualize each work within the medium of its production, the central focus of the analysis of these works of cultural production is place. Through an evaluation of individual works, one comes to gain a greater understanding of the assemblage. The experience the Buenos Aires assembled in an early sound film allows the viewer to shape her perception of the city in the early 1930s. Despite this, the viewer must take care not to reduce the individual expression of the city to how Buenos Aires conceptualized as a social understanding at the time, for De Landa argues, “From the point of view of assemblage theory, it is crucial that each type of impression—not only visual, aural, olfactory, and tactile but also the plurality of passions, from pride and humiliation to love and hatred—posses its own singular individuality, that is, that each of these impressions is, as Hume says, ‘an original existence’” (*A New Philosophy* 48). The Buenos Aires of an early sound film, therefore, possesses an original existence that while being informed by and informing the city as an assemblage exists on its own. The meaning endowed upon Buenos Aires in the film is also unique to it. While being an assemblage, a type of collective understanding, place also exists as an individual expression in the work of

cultural production. Ultimately, however, place exists independently of the singular expression.

As an assemblage, the social understanding of place is in flux. Never fixed, assemblages are continually undergoing processes of coding/ decoding, territorialization/ deterritorialization, and stratification/ restratification/ destratification. While these processes are immediately felt through personal experience in the study of contemporary assemblages, their reverberations in the past are often tuned out. That is, the non-fixity of the meaning of assemblages is palpable in the present; in the past, it is much more distant. De Landa argues that, “human history did not follow a straight line, as if everything pointed toward civilized societies as humanity’s ultimate goal. On the contrary, at each bifurcation alternative stable states were possible, and once actualized, they coexisted and interacted with one another” (*A Thousand Years* 16). Set within the context of the sociopolitical uncertainty of the 1920s and 1930s, the works of cultural production discussed in this study concretize processes of stratification/ restratification/ destratification, particularly in the way Buenos Aires was conceptualized as a place.

Marked by a watershed event—the September 6, 1930 coup d’état of the democratically elected Hipólito Yrigoyen—these decades were shrouded in uncertainty. Curiously, the tumultuousness of the time period seems to invite anachronistic reductively. The ability to trace the development of assemblages such Buenos Aires as a place through time often tempts one to reach easy conclusions regarding slippery notions such as progress. As De Landa points out in reference to a passage in *A Thousand Plateaus* (69), “Thus, according to Deleuze and Guattari, in terms of the stratified and the



destratified, human history is not marked by stages of progress but by the coexistence of accumulated materials of diverse kinds, as well as by the process of stratification and destratification that these interacting accumulations undergo” (*A Thousand Years* 268). Instead of attempting to show how the conceptualization of Buenos Aires as a place has progressed from the *gran aldea* of the late nineteenth century to the modern metropolis of the twentieth century, I tease out the ways in which place is stratified/ re-stratified/ destratified in works of cultural production of the 1920s and 1930s through individual analysis. Individual social positionings, these works of cultural production engage Buenos Aires as a social understanding. While these analyses by no means allow for a complete understanding of the meaning of Buenos Aires as a place, they shed some light upon the often shadowy network of assemblages.

#### **ASSEMBLING BUENOS AIRES**

Lacámara’s *Desde mi estudio* is one example of the representation of the spaces and places of everyday life in Buenos Aires in the 1920s and 1930s. While the scope of this study could take into consideration the work of a painter such as Lacámara, it has been limited to the early poetry of Jorge Luis Borges, Armando Discépolo’s dramatic genre of the *grotesco criollo*, Robert Arlt’s binary novel *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*, and three of the earliest Argentine sound films. These specific works of cultural production have been chosen because of the ways in which they implicitly stratify, re-stratify, or destratify the social understanding of place. In each chapter, I examine the distinct ways in which works of cultural production engage the built, natural, and social environment of Buenos Aires in the 1920s and 1930s. It is through an exploration of

these conceptualizations, which are individual social positionings, that I evince a broader social understanding: the assemblage of Buenos Aires as a place.

In the next chapter, I analyze the representation of Buenos Aires in Jorge Luis Borges' early poetry. Publishing three poetic collections in the twenties— *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1922), *Luna de enfrente* (1925), and *Cuaderno San Martín* (1929)—Borges at once subsumes and nullifies the uniqueness of geographic experience. Buenos Aires is a place that is at once unique and no different than any other. Out of the tension of this seemingly contradictory positioning, it becomes apparent that Borges is getting at a different understanding of the experience of geographic situatedness. That is to say, Borges does not necessarily explore the city as a place but rather conceptualizes Buenos Aires, in general, and the *arrabal*, in specific, as something much more metaphysical, a dwelling. In order to flesh out how Borges represents Buenos Aires as a city, I briefly discuss Martin Heidegger's essay "Building Dwelling Thinking" and recent work by Jeff Malpas on dwelling. This look into dwelling studies draws out how Borges reflects a more deeply metaphysical relationship to the built, natural, and social environment, which helps reveal the city dweller's deeply embedded affective connection to Buenos Aires. The *arrabal*, in particular, is of interest because there is often the sense in Borges' early poetry that it the only space which one can only authentically dwell. Because of this, Borges makes efforts, as Hugo Montes argues, not to create the city, as perhaps Huidobro would have done, but to found it. Borges founds the spaces and places of Buenos Aires in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, *Luna de enfrente*, and *Cuaderno San Martín* by appealing to the metaphysical geographical understanding of dwelling.

Shifting from Borges' exploration of a sense of dwelling in Buenos Aires, in chapter two I examine the five plays— *Mateo* (1923); *El organito* (1925), written in collaboration with Enrique Santos Discépolo; *Stéfano* (1928); *Cremona* (1932); and *Relojero* (1935)— of Armando Discépolo's *grotesco criollo*. A theatric genre informed by the *grottesco italiano* and the *sainete*, the *grotesco criollo* manifests a disintegrative sense of place. There is the feeling in the genre, which Discépolo reinforces throughout the plays, that the places the characters inhabit are in decline. Discépolo does not systematize the perception of this disintegration of place but rather is a sensation explicitly and implicitly conveyed in a unique and irreducible way in each of the plays. The *grotesco criollo* therefore is not a codified approach that aims to systematize its characters behavior in and with the environment. It is, as Discépolo argued in a famous interview with *La Nación* given in 1964, a feeling (Sanhueza, *Continuidad* 69). It is for this reason that the characters' relationships to place are so significant in understanding how Buenos Aires is represented in the plays. While the decline of social life in the city is certainly reflected in Discépolo's stage directions, it is felt primarily by the spectator or the reader through the characters' struggles to forge space for themselves within the city. Discépolo's aesthetic and ideological project in the *grotesco criollo* is driven through the characters' perception of place. More specifically, the protagonists' inability to understand the disintegration of place, which provokes their tragicomic failures, frames how the spectator or the reader experiences place in the plays. In *Mateo*, Discépolo explores the betweenness of place of an immigrant family, the Salernos. Miguel, the *pater familias*, especially feels uneasy in Buenos Aires, for he is unable to reconcile his old

world value system with his new world reality. Unlike Miguel's more conventional moral code, the value system of the head of the household in *El organito* exists as a pretext to dominate his family. A kind of logic of disorder, it acts as a mask that covers the character's topophobic relationship with place. In *Stéfano*, the disintegration of place in the play stems from Stéfano's inability to realize the promise of his talent. Moving away from the interior spaces of the family home, the next *grotesco criollo*, *Cremona*, represents splintered perspectives of social life, including that of place, in Buenos Aires. Finally, in *Relojero*, Discépolo examines affective displacement through generations. Collectively, the unique representations of place in the five plays of the *grotesco criollo* allow the spectator/reader to feel textures of the experience of the built, natural, and social environment of 1920s and 1930s Buenos Aires.

While Discépolo's *grotesco criollo* explores the disintegration of affective bonds to place, Roberto Arlt's binary novel *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* portrays the progressive fracturing of social understandings in the Buenos Aires of the late twenties and early thirties. At once attentive to contradictions in the social fabric and reticent to make explicit assessments of them, Arlt ambivalently engages the tension underlying of the breaking apart of social understandings in the binary novel. This ambivalence, the source of the polysemic nature of *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*, manifests itself through the ways in which the characters position themselves in relation to society. It is through social positionings such as that of place that the reader experiences a fissured Buenos Aires. In chapter three, I argue that Arlt reifies these fissures primarily in two characters: the protagonist, Augusto Remo Erdosain, and the leader of a failed social

revolution, the Astrologer. Following Ricardo Piglia's assertion that *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* constitutes two novels, that of Erdosain and that of the Astrologer, I examine the relationship each character shares with the built, natural, and social environment (*Crítica y ficción* 21-22). Through the pair, Arlt articulates the perception and experience of Buenos Aires as a place that is increasingly fissured. Although Erdosain and the Astrologer's distinct conceptualizations of place are both ultimately proven to be untenable, they reveal the shaky ground on which the notion was founded at the time. Representing the latent contradictions of the dominant bourgeois understanding of Buenos Aires, *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* reveals a breaking down of the complex system of human relationships that collectively determine social understandings such as place.

In chapter four, I examine how place is assembled in order to represent a particular spatial experience and perception of Buenos Aires in three of the earliest Argentine sound films: *Tango!* (Moglia Barth 1933), *Los tres berretines* (Equipo Lumiton 1933) and *Riachuelo* (Moglia Barth 1934). In order to approximate these aims, I apply Guilian Bruno's notion of siteseeing to the film. Contrasting the visual connotations of "sightseeing," siteseeing shifts focus onto different experiences of spatiality. Bruno argues that the experience of filmic space is not exclusively visual: it is felt through textures of space that the viewer experiences with all of her senses. Much like the majority of Argentine films produced during the thirties, *Tango!*, *Los tres berretines*, and *Riachuelo* are set in Buenos Aires and portray *porteño* social life. In this chapter I demonstrate how these films represent spatial understandings of Buenos Aires,

focusing primarily on how the films represent mobility through place. First, I examine how dichotomization of specific spatial qualities (authenticity/inauthenticity, public/private, central/marginal) frames the viewer's experience of the Buenos Aires of the musical cavalcade that is *Tango!*. In presenting social life as being split between disparate and incompatible spatial understandings, the film equivocatingly represents the city as being both a cosmopolitan metropolis and a more contemporary version of the *gran aldea*. Second, I argue that in *Los tres berretines* Lumiton attempts to represent the space of the lived experience of the viewer contemporary to the film. Led through places that epitomize three popular passions of the time—cinema, soccer, and tango—the viewer moves through spaces that are both readily identifiable and easily to identify with. Finally, I analyze the representation social life in La Boca through the experiences of the protagonist, Berretín, in *Riachuelo*. Berretín, socially and economically marginalized at the beginning of the film, eventually overcomes adversity with the help of community and bourgeois values. In each of the three films, the viewer is led through different experiences of Buenos Aires as a meaningful location, as a place. Moving through the metropolis like the flâneur, siteseeing as opposed to sightseeing, these films assemble different senses of place.

Through analyzing the ways in which works of different mediums of cultural production imagine affective connections to the built, natural, and social environment, I look at how Buenos Aires was conceptualized as a place in the 1920s and 1930s. Insofar as these works demonstrate unique interpretations of the emotional ties to the city, they represent distinct social positionings *vis-à-vis* Buenos Aires as a social understanding. It

is an assemblage, a complex network comprised by the totality of meaning endowed upon the city within the context of power. Although Buenos Aires as an assemblage is comprised of representations of the city like those examined in this study, it cannot be reduced to them. An assemblage, as De Landa argues, cannot be minimized to a sum of its components; it, on the contrary, is a product of the complex network of relationships of its parts. Because of this, the examinations in this study into how Buenos Aires is assembled in cultural production aim not to definitively describe the influence of these representations in how the city was imagined. Rather, the analysis targets how the assemblage is constantly undergoing processes of stratification, restratification, and destratification in salient works of cultural production. The flux of meaning of Buenos Aires as an assemblage in the 1920s and 1930s is portrayed in these works. It is this flux, which is revealed through a number of distinct manners, which makes Borges' poetry, Discépolo's *grotesco criollo*, Arlt's binary novel, and the early sound films so relevant to the question at hand. Simply, they meaningfully engage Buenos Aires as a place.

## Chapter One

### Dwelling and the Avant-Garde Urban *criollismo* of Jorge Luis Borges' Early Poetry

Returning home to Argentina at the age of twenty-two, Jorge Luis Borges took little time to integrate himself into Buenos Aires' vibrant literary scene.<sup>3</sup> Educated formally in the Collège de Genève and literarily in cafés in Sevilla and Madrid—more specifically, in the *tertulias* of Ramón Cansinos Assens and Ramón Gómez de la Serna—Borges brought back to Buenos Aires knowledge of the European avant-garde movements, especially German Expressionism, and his participation in Ultraism, a poetic offshoot of the Spanish vanguard. His first hand experience with Ultraism and other avant-garde movements facilitated Borges' interaction with a young generation of writers that included Eduardo González Lanuza, Córdoba Iturburu, and Oliverio Girondo. Reacting against the literary establishment of the time, formed on the one hand by the neo-realist and naturalist aesthetics of prose writers such as Manuel Gálvez and, on the other, by the *modernista* aesthetics of poets like Leopoldo Lugones, Borges and his generation sought to create room for themselves by publishing their own literary magazines. Among the fruits of their labor were the mural-magazine *Prisma*, which

---

<sup>3</sup> The Borges family's trip to Europe unexpectedly stretched to over seven years, largely due to the outbreak and aftermath of World War I.



appeared pasted onto the walls of Buenos Aires twice in December 1921 and March 1922; *Proa*, which Borges took over from Macedonio Fernández, an inspirational figure and mentor to the young poet; and *Martín Fierro*, which was published in forty-five editions between February 1924 and November 1927. His participation in these magazines allowed Borges to form an influential friendship with Ricardo Güiraldes, as well as relationships with other young writers of the so-called Florida group like Brandán Caraffa and Leopoldo Marechal.<sup>4</sup> Also, it was in these magazines that Borges would work through an aesthetic dichotomy that is central to his early works: namely, that of the avant-garde and that of *criollismo*.

The titles of the literary magazines in which Borges participated highlight the tension between the avant-garde and *criollismo*. On the one hand, the title of *Prisma* detaches the reader from both the representation of everyday life and the decadent imagery of *modernismo*. Following the lead of European avant-garde movements like Italian futurism, the magazine's name calls attention to form rather than content in that it suggests to the reader an image of the phenomena of light refracting through a prism. The avant-garde is also alluded to explicitly in the title of *Proa*, for the prow is the very front of a boat, the part that cuts through the water. On the other hand, *Martín Fierro*,

---

<sup>4</sup> The Argentine avant-garde is often considered to be split between the Boedo group and the Florida group. While distinguishing individual members of the groups is at times nebulous, particularly in the case of writers like Roberto Arlt and Nicolás Olivari, the group's poetics are quite distinct. The work of the Boedo group— comprised authors such as Léonidas Barletta, Elías Castelnuovo, Roberto Mariani and Álvaro Yunque—is heavily influenced by a strong social consciousness. Consequently, its left-leaning practitioners tended toward social realism. Barletta's *Royal Circo* (1926) is an excellent example. The less overtly political Florida group—including authors like Borges, Girondo, Güiraldes, González Lanuza, and Marechal—was more closely aligned to the European avant-garde. For this reason, its concerns are often more aesthetic and, at least to the group's detractors, elitist. Of the many critical anthologies, articles, and

which was by far the most successful of the three literary magazines, hearkens back to José Hernández's epic poem of the same name. The most famous work of the nineteenth century gauchesque poetry movement, whose exponents straddled both sides of the River Plate, Hernández's *Martín Fierro* was placed in the Argentine literary canon through a series of lectures by Lugones that were later compiled as *El payador* (1912).<sup>5</sup> The magazine's title, consequently, is at once a recollection of and a challenge to the past. It recalls origin and the past, while calling for their reinvention. In this sense, it is not so much avant-garde as it is a kind of *pendant-garde*.

In *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*, Beatriz Sarlo argues that Borges' works of the twenties aim to overcome the limitations of the avant-garde/*criollismo* dichotomy, aptly describing his aesthetics as an "avant-garde urban *criollismo*" (112). This description, juxtaposing two seemingly incongruent aesthetics, begs two questions. First, what exactly was Borges attempting to overcome in his avant-garde urban *criollismo*? In his aesthetic project in the 1920s, Borges rejects both the avant-garde's rigidly urban perspective and clichéd *criollismo*. As he states in the inscription to his work *El tamaño de mi esperanza*, "No quiero ni progresismo ni criollismo en la acepción corriente de esas palabras" (17). Even though Fillipo Tomasso Marinetti was fêted during his 1926 visit to Buenos Aires, even receiving the dedication of a special edition of *Martín Fierro*, Borges never warmed to the dehumanization and interest in technology prevalent to Futurism and other European avant-garde movements. Similarly, he

---

examinations of the two groups, Adolfo Prieto's 1964 work *Antología de Boedo y Florida* is one of the clearest.

criticized *criollismo* as not being applicable to the human condition, albeit for much different reasons. Rafael Olea Franco states:

Borges refuta al criollismo que entonces se practica porque se ha convertido en pose más que en realidad vivida, en nostalgia más que en participación activa; en otras palabras, esa leve apetencia al campo y ese anhelo de sentirse Moreira son, para él, meras caretas o máscaras del criollismo. (109)

*Criollismo*, as Olea Franco argues, had ceased to hold currency within the contemporary situation for Borges.

The second question that Sarlo's description begs: how did Borges endeavor to bridge these distinct aesthetic positions? Borges forges space between these opposing discourses—rootedness to tradition and dynamism of the future—by locating his poetry on the margins. Thematically more *criollo* than avant-garde and aesthetically more avant-garde than *criollo*, Borges' literary corpus of the 1920s is located on the edge of both perspectives. Through these works—formed by the poetry collections *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), *Luna de enfrente* (1925), and *Cuaderno San Martín* (1929), as well as the essay compilations *Inquisiciones* (1925), *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (1926), and *Idioma de los argentinos* (1928)—Borges explores the possibilities of his own version of the avant-garde and *criollismo*.

In this chapter I examine the intersections between Borges' avant-garde urban *criollismo* and geography. More specifically, I analyze the representation of the city of

---

<sup>5</sup> That Borges and his companions named the journal *Martín Fierro* is somewhat ironic, given that Lugones was one of the primary literary figures from which the group sought to distance themselves.

Buenos Aires in Borges' poetry of the twenties.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, I follow Olea Franco's assertion that, "En lo que respecta a su poetización de la ciudad, puede afirmarse que, en términos generales, los dos poemarios publicados por Borges durante la década—*Luna de enfrente* (1925) y *Cuaderno San Martín* (1929)—continúan las líneas trazadas por *Fervor de Buenos Aires*" (132). Almost exclusively the setting of the poems of his early poetry, Buenos Aires is central to the development of Borges' aesthetics. However, in contrast to other works of cultural production that I discuss later in this study, the Buenos Aires of Borges' early poetry is not represented as being a place. That is to say that Borges' relationship to the built, natural, and social environment is not merely one in which value is endowed upon a physical setting, effectively making it a meaningful space, but rather something much more metaphysical. In his poetry collections of the twenties, Borges represents Buenos Aires as a dwelling, an atemporal site of inhabitation. In order to demonstrate this point, I begin by focusing on the notion of dwelling. Having provided an understanding of dwelling that borrows from Heidegger's influential and evocative essay "Building Dwelling Thinking" and some of Jeff Malpas' work, I move to the analysis of the representation of Buenos Aires in Borges' early poetry. In the first section, I show how Borges represents Buenos Aires as a dwelling through his use of interior and exterior spaces. Depicting meaningful places in the *porteño* social imaginary, Borges evokes strong affective bonds to both kinds of space. I then shift in

---

<sup>6</sup> Deciding to focus on a sole medium of cultural production, poetry, has a number of repercussions. Perhaps the most consequential product of this methodology is a narrowed focus. With this focus comes a certain number of limitations, not least of which is not taking into question both the essays of the 1920s and *Evaristo Carriego* (1930). The latter work is of particular importance in the understanding of the early Borges' conceptualization of Buenos Aires as a place.

the second section of my analysis to the examination of images and spaces that depict places outside of Buenos Aires, both in the sense of extra-spatiality— as in the case of “La guitarra” from *Fervor de Buenos Aires*— and in the sense of spatial displacement— as in the case of the poem “Montevideo” from *Luna de enfrente*. Although these poems do not immediately represent Buenos Aires, Borges uses them in an almost Heraclitean sense, for they are at once totally unique and indelible referents to Buenos Aires. Seemingly contradictory, just as his avant-garde urban *criollismo*, Borges reconciles this enigma of singularity and referentiality through appealing to the metaphysical sense of dwelling.

#### **DWELLING: A METAPHYSICAL SENSE OF PLACE**

In contemporary critical theory, dwelling is strongly connected to Heidegger’s late work, especially the essay “Building Dwelling Thinking.” Although much of this line of criticism, as I will later show in using Malpas’ analysis of Wordsworth, does not directly engage Heideggarian thought, his concept of dwelling is nonetheless a kind of spectral presence. Rising out of the concept of being-in, as elaborated in *Being and Time*, dwelling “places the study of person-in-the-world in the context of everyday living” (Seamon, “Review” 421). In this sense, dwelling is the contemporary materialization of a permanent quality of the human condition. Malpas spells out the ramifications of this kind of understanding of place:

The idea of an eternal place or dwelling would require, then, a very different conception of what human dwelling, and human thought and experience, might be. The idea of a place immune to change, immune to decay and disintegration, is the idea of a “place” in which nothing at all

can appear— neither self nor others, neither the things of the world nor even the place itself. (*Place* 191)

Dwelling, therefore, signifies a very different relationship to the environment than place. Place— a space into which meaning has been endowed by an individual or a collective— is distinct from dwelling because it is indelibly tied to the context of time. Conversely, dwelling lies outside the confines of time. Its atemporality, as seen in criticism of Borges' early poetry, could potentially cause dwelling to be considered as anachronistic, perhaps even irrelevant in an increasingly technological world, or it could have been understood as heralding a fuller understanding of the relationship of the individual and her life in the environment.<sup>7</sup> This, undoubtedly, was Borges' aim.

While an in-depth discussion of "Building Dwelling Thinking" is outside of the scope of my analysis of Borges' early poetry, it is nonetheless important to extract Heidegger's notion of dwelling from its usage in everyday language. Dwelling, which often signifies the state of inhabiting a rustic or quaint place in its everyday usage in English—is the basic character of authentic human existence for Heidegger. Insofar as it is always tied to a particular space and place, dwelling is a putting down of roots. Malpas, in *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World*, argues that, "The closeness of dwelling, the idea of dwelling as a putting down of roots and of a 'being-somewhere,' the connection of dwelling with 'homeliness,' are all suggestive of connections with spatiality" (78). Consequently, there seems to be two very different senses of spatiality in Heidegger: one that is concerned with objective space (i.e. the coordinates of one's

location) and one associated with situatedness, which is space normally associated with place. Both senses of spatiality affect the meaning of dwelling. While the concern with objective space and “being-somewhere” is unquestionably important, it is the latter notion of situatedness that is more difficult to approach. That is, to describe Borges’ putting down lyrical roots in Buenos Aires is fairly simple; however, as I attempt to do in this chapter, arriving at a sense of how he represents his situatedness within the Argentine capital through verse is a quite different task.

In order to get at the meaning of these two senses of spatiality in relation to dwelling, Heidegger discusses building and language. He begins “Building Dwelling Thinking” by assessing the relationship between building and dwelling. The primary objective of building is dwelling; however, as in the case of a bridge or soccer stadium, dwelling extends beyond mere building. Malpas explains, “A place in which one can dwell is a place that provides a space in which dwelling can occur— it ‘gives space’ to the possibility of dwelling— and yet a place to dwell must be more than just a ‘space’ alone” (*Place* 22). Heidegger underlines this point by asserting that dwelling is also more than simply being at home.<sup>8</sup> He provides the example of residential buildings, the solution to the housing shortage contemporaneous to the essay’s writing, as proof. While “today’s houses may even be well planned, easy to keep, attractively cheap, open to air, light, and sun” (Heidegger 146), he questions whether they provide the proper

---

<sup>7</sup> Here, I borrow from David Seamon’s 1982 review of Clark’s *The Problem of Fundamental Ontology*, Krell’s *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, and Vycinas’ *Earth and Gods in Environment and Planning A*.

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger’s distinction between dwelling and home distinguishes his notion of place from that of another phenomenologist, Gaston Bachelard.

environment for dwelling. To distinguish between building and dwelling, Heidegger reverts back to language: more specifically, to etymology.<sup>9</sup> Language, the storehouse of knowledge for Heidegger, is the means through which man dwells. After studying the origins and development of some key words (e.g. the Old Saxon *wuon* and the Greek *tikto*), he concludes, “The nature of building is letting dwell. Building accomplishes its nature of raising locations by the joining of their spaces. *Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build*” (160).<sup>10</sup> Heidegger’s example of this point has since become famous: a farmhouse in the Black Forest, built by hand some two hundred and fifty years ago by peasants that have long since been forgotten. The Black Forest farmhouse—either an expression of the authentic ties the peasants shared with their environment or an anachronistic idealization—is the culmination of the relationship between building and dwelling. It is the means through which we express our relationship with the environment: “Building is the productive activity through which humans make a place for themselves in the world and so by means of which their own dwelling is articulated” (Malpas *Heidegger* 271).

While Heidegger’s development of dwelling in “Building Dwelling Thinking” lends itself to the examination of Borges’ early poetry, in this chapter I apply a broader understanding of this attachment to the built, natural, and social environment. Therefore, I do not use “Building Dwelling Thinking” as a theoretical framework through which I

---

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger’s use of etymology is analogous in many ways to Borges’ references to genealogy in his early poetry as both look back to answer questions of how a particular situation developed over time.

<sup>10</sup> Italics original to the quote. Unless otherwise indicated, all other citations will also faithfully refer to the original text.



examine Borges' poetry but rather I apply its sense of dwelling as a lasting, metaphysical bond as a heuristic device that helps tease out Borges' unique understanding of dwelling. The interest in the ontological nature of dwelling that ties Borges and Heidegger together is also shared with other thinkers such as the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth.<sup>11</sup> In fact, insofar as each poet is shaped by the need to find a dwelling-place that would not fade, Wordsworth's understanding of dwelling seems to parallel Borges' representation of a specific type of suburban experience— that of the *arrabal*. Malpas describes Wordsworth's understanding of dwelling in the following way:

The Wordsworthian longing for a secure dwelling-place, one that would not succumb to decay and desertion, is a longing that, while it can be seen to arise out of a keen awareness of the significance of place, also represents an implicit denial of that significance— to seek escape from the transience and fragility of place is to seek escape from place itself. (*Place* 191)

As I will argue in the following sections, this is effectively what Borges does in his early poetry. Like Wordsworth, Borges is at once dedicated to holding up the uniqueness of place and keen to deny its importance. Similar to the perspectives regarding metaphysics that he sketches in the essays “La nadería de la personalidad” and “La encrucijada de Berkeley,” both of which were published in *Inquisiciones* (1925), Borges refutes the idea that places are inherently unique. They are, rather, elements that compose the broader experience of placeness or geographical situatedness. Despite this, as I show throughout this chapter, Borges pays special attention *at times* to representing the unique qualities of

---

<sup>11</sup> This interest in dwelling is perhaps one of the few ties that bond Borges and Heidegger together. In fact, Borges roundly criticizes Heidegger's philosophical achievements. For more, see the “Heidegger” entry in Fishburn and Hughes' *A Dictionary of Borges* (107).

individual places. The tension between these two contrasting understandings of the nature of place is manifested through the development of a sense of dwelling throughout Borges' early poetry.

### **DWELLING AND BUENOS AIRES IN BORGES' EARLY POETRY**

The poem "Patrias," published in *Luna de enfrente*, is a window into how Borges represents Buenos Aires as a dwelling in his early poetry. Although the poem does not explicitly reveal Buenos Aires as its *patria* or homeland, the imagery Borges uses leaves little doubt as to the poem's setting. Olea Franco states, "La visión es clara: el poeta define a la patria por medio de una serie de anhelos expresados desde su voz lírica" (133). Buenos Aires, for the poetic voice, is not the increasingly large buildings of the city center, which gradually shifted from the oligarchy's *petits hôtels* in the Barrio Norte to skyscrapers such as the Comega Building (Joselevich and Doulliet 1931), the Safico Building (Moil 1932), and the twenty-seven story Kavanagh Building (Sánchez, Lagos, and de la Torre 1934), but rather the humble one-story home. Not only is this home unchallenged by larger edifices, it immediately reaches the sky. It effectively borders eternity. The poem reads:

Quiero la casa baja;  
La casa que en seguida llega al cielo,  
La casa que no aguante otros altos que el aire.  
Quiero la casa grande,  
La orillada de un patio  
Con sus leguas de cielo y su jeme de pampa.  
Quiero el tiempo allanado:  
El tiempo hecho plaza,  
No el día picaneado por los relojes yanquis

Sino el día que miden despacito los mates.  
 Quiero la novia clara:  
 Firmeza de la dicha, corazón de la gracia.  
 Quiero su carne nueva que la sombra no apaga.  
 Quiero la novia que sea luego la esposa,  
 Que sienta que las cosas están por el amor,  
 No el amor en las cosas.  
 Quiero casi la gloria:  
 Quiero ver en los otros alargarse mi gesto  
 Como la luna sola que está en muchos espejos.  
 Quiero tener aljibe donde acuden los otros  
 Y que mi agua de cielo les alegre los cántaros  
 Y que alguna muchacha venga a verse en el pozo.  
 Quiero la calle mansa  
 Con las balaustraditas repartiéndose el cielo  
 Y los buenos zaguanes rogados de esperanza.  
 Quiero la casa huraña  
 Que desgarran la puesta del sol y la salida.  
 Quiero esa calle Plaza que me llevó la dicha.  
 (Mientras,... sigan viviéndome  
 La dicha que la Quica tiene en sus ojos grandes  
 Y la guitarra austera de Ricardo Güiraldes). (33-34)<sup>12</sup>

The first three verses in “Patrias” situate the poetic voice’s engagement with the environment. In doing so, Borges anchors the poetic voice’s experience of authentic spatiality in the singular context of the one-story home. Throughout the rest of the poem, the poetic voice shades in the rest of the Buenos Aires, which flows from these verses and further texturizes the notion of *patria*. To do so, the poetic voice enumerates a number of wants, recurrently saying “Quiero” and modifying these desires through the use of the subjunctive mood. The desires of the poetic voice are diverse: a private space

---

<sup>12</sup> As Borges later revised and otherwise manipulated the poems of *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, *Luna de enfrente*, and *Cuaderno San Martín*, all citations of his poetry refer to the first edition. Borges’ revisions of his early poetry is a topic taken up by a number of scholars in diverse contexts. Two important texts are Tommaso Scarano’s *Varianti a stampa nella poesia del primo Borges* (Pisa: Giardini, 1987) and Gloria Videla’s “El sentido de las variantes textuales en dos ediciones de *Fervor de Buenos Aires* de Jorge Luis Borges” (*Revista Chilena de Literatura* 23 (1984): 68-78.

bordering on the vastness of the Pampas (verses four through six), the slowing of time to its traditional Argentine context (verses seven through eleven), love (verses twelve through seventeen and twenty-one through twenty-three), eternal recognition (verses eighteen through twenty), and a boundless street (verses twenty-four through twenty-eight). Finally, the poem voice wishes for the convergence of two spaces, “Quiero esa calle Plaza que me llevó a la dicha” in verse twenty-nine. The convergence of street and plaza represents the breakdown or destruction of the uniqueness of place. The homeland that Borges describes in “Patrias” is not a unique deictic place (i.e. one that is rooted within a particular time and space) but rather it is an atemporal dwelling whose meaning is located in the blurring of its specificity.

In his poetry of the twenties, as exemplified in “Patrias,” Borges represents the spaces and places of Buenos Aires as being geographically and temporally both specific and universal. Borges conflates these seemingly opposing states of being into the singularity of a dwelling. The representation of Buenos Aires, consequently, is at once an approbation and a negation of the significance of dwelling. In this section I explore the contradictory nature of dwelling in the assemblage of interior and exterior spaces in Borges’ early poetry. In order to differentiate the multiple textures urban spatiality in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, *Luna de enfrente*, and *Cuaderno San Martín*, I analyze a number of poems from these works. As many of these poems are at first glance quite similar, close reading unpacks unique shades of dwelling, place, and space that might otherwise be overlooked. These overlooked shades of Buenos Aires, which are often slight variations of recurrent themes, elicit in the reader a sense of dwelling.

### ***Porteño Interiors***

In *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, *Luna de enfrente*, and *Cuaderno San Martín* very few poems are dedicated exclusively to interior spaces. Rather than focus on home as the central place of dwelling, Borges does the opposite: he minimizes the influence of interior space. Although the lack of interior spaces is perhaps a consequence of the increasing brevity of his poetic collections, Borges explores them less and less as the twenties move into the thirties. In those poems that do focus on interior spaces, Borges often does not singularly portray them, choosing rather to present them as spaces moved into. To establish an understanding of Borges' representation of *porteño* interior spaces in his early poetry, I closely examine three poems. Each poem may not exclusively depict an interior space: it may also perhaps show the poetic voice entering a private space. I begin with the evocative "La vuelta." Having recently returned from Europe, "La vuelta" represents Borges' return to his roots: the Palermo of his childhood. In the poem, the poetic voice moves from an exterior space to an interior one. I then analyze another two poems from *Fervor de Buenos Aires*—"Sala vacía" and "Un patio"—both of which depict private spaces. Highly personal, each poem endows space with a kind of atemporal meaning. Juxtaposing the present state of space with its eternal qualities, Borges represents each space as a dwelling. While at times touching upon similar experiences of place, these three poems portray *porteño* interiors as fundamental spaces of dwelling. In many ways, the interior spaces of these poems are almost too personal, too interiorized by the poetic voice, to be the singular place represented.

In “La vuelta” the poetic voice—Borges, one supposes—describes the return to his old home. Rife with nostalgia, the poetic voice finds his childhood home to be at once a site of deeply rooted emotions and one that has since become foreign. This becomes quickly apparent in the first verse:

Después de muchos años de ausencia  
busqué la casa primordial de la infancia  
y aún persevera forastero su ámbito.  
Mis manos han tanteado los árboles  
como quien besa a durmiente  
y he copiado andanzas de antaño  
como quien practica un verso olvidado,  
y advertí al deparramarse la tarde  
la frágil luna nueva  
que se arrimó al amparo benigno  
de la palmera pródigo de hojas excelsas,  
como avecilla que a la nidafa se acoje. (35)

The first three verses demonstrate the poetic voice’s inability to identify himself with his childhood home. In the following nine verses, the poetic voice moves from reliving previous experiences to observing his present situation. Instead of looking back to childhood, the poetic voice shifts to explore his experience of the afternoon. A recurring image in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, the afternoon slipping away into darkness is often used by Borges to attest to his present experiences and thoughts. Emir Rodríguez Monegal describes these walks through Buenos Aires:

The young poet prefers roaming around at sunset, when the bustling modern city begins to be more human. In poem after poem he talks about the square and the trees, the houses and the patios, the fields to which the streets open up. He wanders and meditates, he feels and he dreams, he is overcome by longings and hallucinations. A constant metaphysical quest runs under his wanderings. (176)

Borges underpins this metaphysical quest in “La vuelta” in the second and final stanza. In it, he dichotomizes imagery into eternal and present so as to call attention to their contrasting features. These dichotomies— sky/courtyard, west wind/depth of the street, and new moon/garden—set up conditions that must be fulfilled before the poetic voice recognizes his old home as a dwelling, a “provincia de mi alma.” Below is the stanza:

¡Qué caterva de cielos  
vinculará entre sus paredes el patio,  
cuánto heroico poniente  
militará en la hondura de la calle  
y cuánta quebradiza luna nueva  
infundirá al jardín su dulcedumbre  
antes que llegue a reconocerme la casa  
y torne a ser provincia de mi alma! (35)

Through enumerating the conditions by which he can re-identify himself with his old home, which is magnified by the use of the future tense, the poetic voice distances himself from the possibility. In a later poem, Borges echoes this theme. In “La vuelta a Buenos Aires,” published originally in *Luna de enfrente*, he claims:

En tí, villa de antaño, hoy se lamenta mi soledad pordiosera.  
Arduo silencio brota donde yo puse generosidad de esperar.  
Son forasteros en mi carne los besos y único el viento es abrazador de mi  
—tronco.  
Ya no sabe amor de mi sombra.  
Yo te rezé mis palabras todas, mi patria, y me ves tan aislado como el  
— viento.  
Acaso todos me dejaron para que te quisiese sólo a vos:  
visión de calles doloridas: mi Buenos Aires, mi contemplación, mi  
— vagancia. (24)

In these final seven verses of the poem, the poetic voice subtly laments the inability to return to a comforting and, no doubt, nostalgic past. Leaving behind the light of the past, the poetic voice is left to wander through the painful shadows of the afternoon. In both

“La vuelta” and “La vuelta a Buenos Aires” Borges presents the position that he must not only inhabit Buenos Aires but he must also establish a deeply rooted attachment with the city in order to identify with its geography.

Borges details two significant *porteño* interior spaces in “Sala vacía” and “Un patio” from *Fervor de Buenos Aires*. The living room and the courtyard were two centers around which familial life revolved in the Buenos Aires of the early twentieth century. Borges uses these two spaces and the centrality of their place in *porteño* social life to shade in his landscaping of the relationship between the city-dweller and the geography of Buenos Aires. Most important, however, is how these poems highlight the unique meaning of these places while also implicitly denying that meaning. Rather than only endowing value upon the particularities of these spaces, much like Wordsworth, Borges also subverts their very meaning by universalizing the experience of place. Curiously, in “Sala vacía” and “Un patio” Borges constructs each place as a dwelling through different narrative techniques. That is, he assembles specific and universal images of each place together differently in the two poems.

In the first fifteen verses of “Sala vacía” Borges delineates the poetic voice’s perception of the living room as a place:

Los muebles de caoba perpetúan  
entre la indecisión del brocado  
su tertulia de siempre.  
Los daguerrotipos  
mienten su falsa cercanía  
de vejez enclaustrada en un espejo  
y ante nuestro examen se escurren  
como fechas inútiles  
de aniversarios borrosos.



Con ademán desdibujado  
su casi-voz angustiado  
corre detrás de nuestras almas  
con más de medio siglo de atraso  
y apenas si estará ahora  
en las mañanas iniciales de nuestra infancia. (26)

Immediately establishing the eternal universality of the experience of the living room in the first three verses, Borges effectively refuses to delimit it as a unique place. The experience of the living room here lacks individuality: the *tertulia*, a regularly repeated gathering of people to chat, is the same as always. Similarly, the mahogany furniture that perpetuates in the room and the adornments decorating the wall resemble any number of other homes in the Buenos Aires of the time. The lack of particularity of the experience of the living room, which the poetic voice manifests through rather blasé descriptions of the space, continues uninterrupted until the sixteenth verse:

La actualidad constante  
convigente y sanguínea  
aplaude en el trajín de la calle  
su plenitud irrecusable  
de apoteosis presente  
mientras la luz a puñetazos  
abre un boquete en los cristales  
y humilla las seniles butacas  
y arrincona y ahorca  
la voz lacia  
de los antepasados. (26)

Although Borges shifts the focus of the experience of the family room as an eternal place to one that is present, he undermines the contemporaneousness of the experience through employing contradictions such as “actualidad constante” and “apoteosis presente.” Consequently, one can still hear in the family room languid ancestral voices. These

voices sound out the feeling that the living room is not a place, in the sense of a meaningful location, but rather is something much deep, much more profound.

In “Un patio” Borges begins the poem by immediately portraying an event in the present:

Con la tarde  
se cansaron los dos o tres colores del patio.  
La gran franqueza de la luna llena  
ya no entusiasma su habitual firmamento.  
Hoy que está crespó el cielo  
dirá la agorería que ha muerto un angelito. (22)

The particularity of the present experience is set by temporal demarcation (“la tarde”) and the use of the preterit tense (“se cansaron”). Although this is reinforced in verse five through another reference to a specific time (“Hoy”) and the use of the transitory copulative “está,” the singularity of this experience is made ironic in the following verse through the reference to an oracular prognostication. Furthermore, the tension between irony and everydayness of the experience is further tightened by the reference to the popular saying “ha muerto un angelito.” The uniqueness of the courtyard is then further destabilized, or un-stabilized, in the following verse, “Patio, cielo encauzado” (22). The courtyard is thus universalized as heaven channeled to earth. This image is continued in verses eight through thirteen:

El patio es la ventana  
por donde Dios mira las almas.  
El patio es el declive  
por el cual se derrama el cielo en la casa.  
Serena  
la eternidad espera en la encrucijada de estrellas. (22)

Losing its particularity, the patio becomes a type of portal located in the present that transfers the atemporal perfection of the heavens to Buenos Aires. Of particular importance in these verses is the use of nouns connoting infinitude such as “Dios,” “almas,” “cielo,” and “eternidad.” In the final verses of the poem, “Lindo es vivir en la amistad oscura/ de un zaguán, de un alero y de un aljibe” (22), the poetic voice reveals a longing for place that holds up and denies the courtyard as a meaningful place. Rather, it is a dwelling in which the poetic voice engages a relationship to the built, natural, and social environment that is based on a metaphysical sense of place. Additionally, it is a sense of place deeply rooted in the experience of everyday life, something evidenced through the use of the adjective “lindo”. The use of such colloquialisms lends itself to a perception of place as something familiar.

### **Blurred Spatializations**

While “La vuelta” moves from the outside to the inside in order to highlight the rootedness of the poetic voice to interior space, and “Sala vacía” and “Un patio” emphasize a sense of dwelling within interior places, there are several poems in Borges’ early poetry that blur the distinction between exterior and interior spatiality. Neither located solely in interior or exterior space nor moving through the outside toward the inside or from the inside to the outside, these poems muddy the boundaries between the exterior and the interior. Rather than juxtaposing or even converging notions of space from distinct directions, these poems represent a confluence of spatiality. Exterior space and interior space flow together, mixing into a composite entity whose individual properties are indistinguishable.

One of the clearest examples of how Borges blurs the margins of exterior and interior space is the poem “Cercanías” from *Fervor de Buenos Aires*. Borges obscures the border that separates outside from inside in this poem in a similar way to other poems; however, it is special in that it almost immediately amalgamates the interior to the exterior.<sup>13</sup> The poetic voice begins in “Cercanías” by lauding the area outlying Buenos Aires.

Los patios agarenos  
llenos de ancestralidad y eficacia,  
pues están cimentados  
en las dos cosas más primordiales que existen:  
en la tierra y el cielo. (57)

These suburbs— just outside the center of the metropolis— and the emotions that they evoke take over the poetic voice. In the poem these feelings are linked to specific places; however, the affective bond that ties the poetic voice to the *cercanías* spreads throughout these places. The poetic voice first locates his affective bond to place is in the courtyard. Here, the poetic voice situates the courtyard within the primordality of the earth and the

---

<sup>13</sup> Two additional examples of the blurring together of exterior and interior spatialities are found in “Caminata” and “Vanilocuencia” from *Fervor de Buenos Aires*. I have indicated in italics instances in the two poems in which this is the case:

*La ciudadada está en mí como un poema*  
que aún no he logrado detener en palabras. (“Vanilocuencia” 21)

¿Para qué esta porfí  
de clavar con dolor un claro verso  
de pié como una lanza sobre el tiempo  
*si mi calle, mi casa,*  
*desdeñosas de plácemes verbales,*  
*me gritarán su novedad mañana?* (“Vanilocuencia” 21)

También hay gran silencio en los zaguanes  
por cuya pausa familiarmente tibia  
*aturdió el patio alborotado la calle.* (“Caminata” 48)

sky. Moreover, the poetic voice asserts that in the courtyard, which is described in contrasting terms as being full of ancestrality and efficacy, both earth and sky are cemented. The courtyard, insofar it is the material solidification of earth and sky, entombs their fundamental and atemporal properties. Moving from the courtyard, Borges then presents images of three different spaces.

Las ventanas con reja  
desde la cual la calle  
    vuélvese familiar con una lámpara.  
Las encrucijadas oscuras  
que alancean cuatro infinitas distancias  
    en arrabales hechos de acallamiento y sosiego.  
Las alcobas profundas  
donde arde en quieta llama la caoba  
y el espejo a pesar de resplandores,  
    es una remansada serenidad en la sombra. (57)

The first of these images, found in verses six through eight, ties exterior space (i.e. the street) to interior space (i.e. the familiarity of a lamp) through barred windows. The poetic voice looks from inside to outside, transferring affective bonds from the interior to the exterior. This image, however, is not a shift but rather a blurring of the distinction of the two notions of spatiality. The next image (verses nine through eleven) is darker. The crossroads of the *arrabal*, the point at which two roads intersect, debases the infinitude of space. Giving the false impression of permanence, the poetic voice laments how the crossroads are misunderstood as being a true spatial concretization. In the third image, located in verses twelve through fifteen, the poetic voice shifts from the detachedness of the outside to the highly personal inside. This shift—from street to bedroom—is at once dramatic and subtle. It is dramatic in that these spaces most often are depicted quite

distinctly; however, in “Cercanías” Borges presents them as being only slightly different. The bedroom is represented here affectively through its mahogany and a mirror. Borges juxtaposes the emotions these things evoke: passion and peacefulness.

In the final four verses, which form a type of poetic unit, Borges invokes the *cercanías*, extolling its beauty and professing affection for it:

Las calles que altivece tu hermosura...  
He nombrado los sitios  
donde se desparrama mi ternura  
y el corazón está consigo mismo. (57)

Trailing off into an ellipsis, the first verse intensifies the depiction of beauty of the outlying areas of Buenos Aires. Because it does not conclude in a period, their attractiveness stretches beyond the image of the streets. The final three verses function as a summary of the poem and, consequently, magnify the attachment of the poetic voice to the *cercanías*. After reaffirming that the images of the barred windows, the crossroads, and the bedrooms as sites in which his emotions spill out, Borges emphasizes through redundancy—“consigo mismo”— that his heart is in the *cercanías*. Additionally, he also levels the differences of these spaces, equating them as being parts of a single whole.

As well as representing interior spaces in his early poetry, Borges also obfuscates the poetic emplotment of Buenos Aires. The individual spaces and places that constitute the metropolis are blurred so as to smooth over textures of interior and exterior space into a single conceptual system. That is to say that interior and exterior spaces become part of a broader notion of spatiality in which difference blends into “infinitud”. Borges further explores the commingling of spatial understandings of inside and outside in the numerous

poems representing exterior spaces in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, *Luna de enfrente*, and *Cuaderno San Martín*.

### **Out and About in Buenos Aires**

One of the forty-six poems hurriedly compiled into *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, “Ciudad” is telling of Borges’ representation of exterior space and Buenos Aires in his early poetry.<sup>14</sup> The first ten verses read:

Anuncios luminosos tironeando el cansancio  
Charras algarabías  
Entran a saco en la quietud del alma.  
Colores impetuosos  
escalan las atónitas fachadas.  
De las plazas hendidas  
Rebosan ampliamente las distancias.  
El ocaso arrasado  
que se acurruca tras los arrabales  
es escarnio de sombras despeñadas. (20)

The first verse immediately establishes an understanding of the built, natural, and social environment. Fatigued by the commercialization of modernity, the poetic voice develops this sense of place in the next six verses. The fatigue of the first verse is affirmed in Borges’ contrasting two nouns, both of which are magnified by provocative adjectives. These pairs attack the senses: “charras algarabías”/“la quietud del alma,” “colores impetuosos”/ “las atónitas fachadas,” and “las plazas hendidas”/ “rebosan ampliamente las distancias.” In the next three verses, eight through ten, Borges furthers the attack on the city by presenting two opposing images. In doing so, Borges locates the second image—the afternoon curled up in the *arrabal*—within a subordinate clause that

interrupts the first image—the demolished and mocking afternoon. The subordinate clause here is important in that it provides the space both grammatically and rhetorically for the *arrabal*. That is, there is another possibility. This other possibility heightens the power of the final five verses, which function to confirm Borges’ dispirited view of the city:

Yo atravieso las calles desalmado  
por la insolencia de las luces falsas  
y es tu recuerdo como una ascua viva  
que nunca suelto  
aunque me quema las manos. (20)

Although these verses present the poetic voice as a kind of frustrated *flâneur*, the poetic voice keeps with him the memory of something lost: his *arrabal* or *barrio*, Palermo. As Olea Franco argues, “Para escapar de la desagradable visión [...] el yo lírico realiza un voluntario retiro hacia el barrio” (131). This nostalgia, a feeling that dominates Borges’ early poetry, is not of a place that has been lost but rather for a dwelling that he carries with him.

“Ciudad” is emblematic of Borges’ representation of the exteriors of Buenos Aires because it develops the metaphysical sense of place, one of dwelling, which pervades his early poetry. Established in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, this metaphysical understanding of the built, natural, and social environment is expanded upon in *Luna de enfrente* and *Cuaderno San Martín*. Although there is certainly some development in the spaces and places that he explores in his poetry of the 1920s, the poetics of the early

---

<sup>14</sup> Carlos García’s *El joven Borges poeta* provides an excellent account of the publication of *Fervor de Buenos Aires*.



Borges, as Olea Franco sustains, is fundamentally coherent. Central to this aesthetic unity—as “Ciudad” demonstrates—are three *porteño* spaces: the streets, the *arrabal*, and the downtown. In this section, using select examples, I examine these three spaces and their relationship to dwelling in Borges’ early poetry.

Rafael Borello’s polemical article “El anacrónico Borges de *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923)” raises the point that the central trope of the work is located in the street. While several of Borello’s rationalizations are misguided—immediately coming to mind is the description of the city in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* as an anachronism that, referring the reader to recall the Italian painter Giorgio di Chirico and the *scuola metafisica*, is devoid of humanity—he is quite justified in his argument that the poetic voice feels the streets of Buenos Aires and transfers his metaphysical preoccupations to them. Borello states, “Este es el *Leitmotiv* [sic.] de la obra: *las calles*, que invaden todo el libro. A cada paso aparece la palabra *calles*” (114). His hyperbole aside, the streets are often the means through which the poetic voice explores the city and, consequently, the self in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*. This geographical and psychological exploration continues, albeit to a lesser extent, in *Luna de enfrente*. However, as I demonstrate later, Borges moves onto different themes in *Cuaderno San Martín* in an attempt to engage the relationship between Buenos Aires and the city-dweller.

The street is an important trope in Borges’ early poetry because it provides a space in which he can explore the relationship between the poetic voice—himself—and the built, natural, and social environment. Effectively, the street is the laboratory where Borges performs aesthetic and philosophical experiments. Not only is the street the

setting in which Borges explores the relationship between the *porteño* and the complexities of life in Buenos Aires, but it is also portrayed by Borges as a fundamental part of the self. “Las calles,” the first poem in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, typifies this in its initial two verses: “Las calles de Buenos Aires/ya son la entraña de mi alma” (9). Moving outside, thereby situating the poetic voice in the exterior environment, is typical of Borges’ attempt to explore the interiority of the self. Martínez Cuitiño describes this tendency in Borges’ poetry through a physics metaphor:

Este yo lírico ha practicado un movimiento de expansion, centrífugo [...], para alcanzar el objeto y en un movimiento contrario, centrípeto, podemos decir, se lo ha adentrado hasta volverlo entraña de su alma, lo ha internalizado como si en esta percepción momentánea reiterada el yo vacío se constituyera con ellas. (53)

Similarly, the unknown street in “Calle desconocida” is counter-intuitively recognizable through its semblance to other neighborhood streets. An oxymoron, the individual street is knowable only to the degree in which it is like other streets. This is a theme that is also explored in *Luna de enfrente*. In “Calle con almacén rosao” Borges repeats this metaphysical leveling of the individual street with its larger category:

En esta calle que es cualquiera.  
Aquí otra vez la eventualidá de la pampa en algún horizonte  
I el terreno baldío que se deshace en yuyos y alambres  
I el almacén tan claro como la luna nueva de ayer tarde.  
Es familiar como un recuerdo la esquina  
Con esos largos zócalos y la promesa de un patio  
Piadoso y fácil como un avemaría. (9)<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> As “Calle con almacén rosao” shows, Borges attempts to transliterate the language of the *criollos* in *Luna de enfrente*. For this reason, he attempts to create authentic language through various linguistic phenomena: the phonetic consonantal reduction (“rosao” and “eventualidá” for example), the use of lexicon such as “yuyos,” and orthographical substitution (“I” for “Y”). The language of *Luna de enfrente* consequently mirrors the *criollo* space Borges aims to create.

The street, which could be any street, is already familiar to the poetic voice. Having already been well trained in its spatial choreography, its particular place-ballet, the poetic voice feels comfortable within it. In fact, it would hardly be an overstatement to say that the poetic voice is at home. The poem reiterates these points in its final verses, concluding:

La confesión de mi pobreza:  
No he mirado los ríos ni la mar ni la sierra.  
Pero intimó conmigo la luz de Buenos Aires  
I yo amanso los versos de mi vida y mi muerte  
Con esa luz de calle.  
Calle grande y sufrida,  
Sos el único verso de que sabe mi vida. (9-10)

The existential identification to the street recurs in “Para una calle del oeste.” In the poem, Borges interpolates the self of the poetic voice within a street. The use of the indefinite article here is telling: the annihilation and resurgence of the self at the end of the poem negates individuality as it can happen anywhere. There is the sense that both everything and nothing are one and the same.

While he employs the street in his early poetry primarily as a means to move through or arrive at a place, consequently diminishing the individual street’s ability to affect an emotive bond in the poetic voice and the reader with its geography, Borges uses the suburb and, more specifically, the *arrabal* to demonstrate an authentic, deeply embedded, and unique relationship to the built, natural, and social environment. The *arrabal* in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, *Luna de enfrente*, and *Cuaderno San Martín* is not merely a place with which Borges identifies but rather a dwelling in which Borges is aesthetically and ethically rooted. Borges ties his poetics—an avant-garde urban

*criollismo*—and his ethics—a sense of placed or situated authenticity—in the *arrabal*. Located on the edge, *orilla* being a keyword for Borges at the time, the *arrabal* lies between both the Pampas and the city, both of which I discuss later. Similarly, in Borges’ early poetry the *arrabal* is on the edge of industrial and finance capitalism and the sendentarist metaphysics dominant in the nineteenth century. Situated in between of two dichotomies—city/country and modernity/tradition—that are couched in another—avant-garde/*criollismo*—the suburb and the *arrabal* take on a number of different guises in Borges’ early poetry.

Borges explores a number of different suburbs and suburban experiences in his first three collections of poetry. Although there are innumerable ways to approach taxonomy, as Borges’ 1942 essay “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins” reminds us, I categorize the experiences of these poems according to the place that they represent. The first experiences of the suburb are found in two poems in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*. Both “Barrio reconquistado” and “Arrabal” are similar to poems representing the street in that they describe a walk through an *arrabal*; however, in these poems Borges privileges the atmosphere of the *arrabal* over a broader spatial experience. In “Barrio reconquistado” the poetic voice describes the triumph of neighborhood wayfarers after a storm:

Nadie justipreció la belleza  
de los habituales caminos  
hasta que pavoroso en clamor  
y dolorido en contorsión de mártir  
se derrumbó el complejo cielo verdoso  
en manirroto abatimiento de agua y de sombra. (23)

Instead of focusing on a specific event, in “Arrabal” Borges explores the *arrabal* through the perspective of the poetic voice, who traverses its streets. Borges immediately sets the tone of the poem in the first two verses: “El arrabal es el reflejo/ de la fatiga del viandante” (30). From this point, the poetic voice describes a walk through the streets. The final five verses of the poem are particularly important in Borges’ assembling of the *arrabal*.

y sentí Buenos Aires  
y literaturicé en la hondura del alma  
la viacrucis inmóvil  
de la calle sufrida  
y el caserío sosegado. (30)

This walk demonstrates the poetic voice’s deep attachment to the *arrabal*. Feeling the city throughout his walk, the poetic voice interiorizes the feelings (“sufrida” and “sosegado”) of the places (“calle” and “caserío”) through which he traverses.

The second and third experiences of the suburb are defined geographically. “Tarde cualquiera” from *Luna de enfrente* portrays an afternoon in Banfield, a city on the southern fringes of the *porteño* urban sprawl in 1925. The poem begins:

Esas tardes tan claras en casa de un amigo  
a la vera de Banfield... Hube paz de suburbio:  
Ví la pampa tirada igual que un soguerío  
y el cielo azul y blanco como nueve de Julio. (23)

The tranquility of life on the edge of Banfield is created by the poetic voice through images of a clear afternoon and the powder blue and white sky. These quotidian images are later coupled with unremarkable actions [“Hubo después un piano/La hermana de mi amigo/ dramatizó el borroso sentido de la tarde” (23)]. Although the poetic voice’s

experience of Banfield is undoubtedly ordinary, there is something authentic about it. It is as if the poetic voice is attempting to show how the practice of a specific kind of everyday life can channel authenticity. On the other side of the metropolis, Borges represents in a number of poems— “Villa Urquiza” (*Fervor de Buenos Aires*), “Último sol en Villa Ortúzar” (*Luna de enfrente*), and “Barrio Norte” (*Cuaderno San Martín*) are all examples— a similar experience of place in the northern suburbs of Buenos Aires. Perhaps the clearest example in which Borges attempts to assemble an authentic place, or at the least an authentic sense of place, in the northern suburbs is found in “Arrabal que pesa al campo” from *Cuaderno San Martín*. In order to understand how Borges does this it is important to examine the poem in its entirety:

En Villa Ortúzar  
donde la luna está más sola  
y el deseo varón es triste en la tarde  
hay unos huecos hondos,  
huéspedes del poniente y la pampa.  
En Villa Ortúzar  
hay ponientes que nadie mira  
y fonógrafos que les rezan dolor guarango  
y callejones que son más largos que el tiempo.  
En Villa Ortúzar  
el deseo varón es triste en la tarde  
cuando hay caderas que pasean la vereda  
y risas compadritas.  
En Villa Ortúzar la oración huele a caña fuerte  
Y la desesperación se mira a los charcos.  
En Villa Ortúzar  
no he sabido ningún amor  
pero detrás de una trucada he puesto horas muertas  
y la canto por eso.  
Por eso y porque una luna fué grande. (13-14)

Through the repetition of “En Villa Ortúzar” Borges ingrains the poem’s setting—the northern suburb of Villa Ortúzar— into the reader. Each image that follows the refrain reifies the poem’s setting and, more tellingly, a sense of Villa Ortúzar as a dwelling. Much like Banfield, it is a space on the margins of the Pampas in which the past and present are fused together to form an authentic experience of dwelling.

The fourth experience is an extension of the previous and is generally limited to a specific work. In *Luna de enfrente*, one of the most prevalent leitmotifs of the work is that of the suburban experience as being on the edge of the Pampas. The poems that most explicitly implement this theme are “Al horizonte de un suburbio,” “Dulcia Linquimus Arva,” “Los llanos,” and “El general Quiroga va en coche al muere.” Although these poems are thematically quite similar to the previously discussed “Arrabal en que pesa al campo,” Borges is much less explicit in locating them in specific spaces. In this sense, they exist just outside the rigidly delineated boundaries of time-space. Take for example the final stanza of “Al horizonte de un suburbio”:

Pampa:  
Lisa como una luna, clara como un amparo  
Es tu verdá en el símbolo. Yo se que te desgarran  
Malezas y güellas y el viento hecho picana.  
Pampa sufrida y macha que ya estás en los cielo,  
No se si eres la muerte. Se que estás en mi pecho. (11)

These verses mark the apogee of the poetic voice’s praise of the pampa in the poem. Located on the horizon of an unknown suburb, the pampa is something that can still be felt in a certain sense by the poetic voice despite the fact that he does not inhabit it spatially.

The final suburban experience is also the closest to Borges' heart: Palermo. Palermo, where Borges was raised, is represented in a number of poems: for example, "El jardín botánico" (*Fervor de Buenos Aires*), "A la calle Serrano," "En Villa Álvarez," "Versos de catorce," and "Elegía de los Portones" (all from *Luna de enfrente*). In "A la calle Serrano," the poetic voice laments recent changes to the street, which cuts through Borges' neighborhood of Palermo, and the neighborhoods bordering it:

Calle Serrano.  
Vos ya no sos la misma de cuando el Centenario:  
Antes eras más cielo y hoy sos puras fachadas.  
El cielo estaba en todo:  
En la luz de los charcos  
I en las tapias rosadas.  
Ahora te prestigian  
El barullo caliente de una confitería  
I un aviso punzó como una injuria.  
En la espalda movida de tus italianitas  
No hay una trenza donde ahorcar la tenura...  
He soltao mi vagancia por tu noche guaranga.  
Adentro de un fonógrafo persiste una guitarra  
I el sabor de Palermo se me sube hasta el alma.  
La tienda La Sirena  
Se arrepintió de enseña.  
Antes  
Había un corazón en cada casa:  
El corazón del patio.  
Me acuerdo de una luna grande desde la acera.  
(No sé si era Carriego el que le daba cuerda.)  
Me acuerdo de esas tapias rosadas que alegraban  
I eran como un espejo de la tarde ligera.  
Por ellas el poniente  
Siempre estaba en tu tierra. (27)

Having lost the sky ("Antes eras más cielo y hoy sos puras fachadas") and gained a patisserie ("El barullo caliente de una confitería"), calle Serrano has been negatively transformed by modernization. Despite this, as shown through the use of the thoroughly



Argentine second person informal pronoun “vos” instead of the less *criollo* “tú”, there remains within the street a residue of authentic place.<sup>16</sup> That is to say that not all has been lost on calle Serrano, for something still exists that can be recuperated. This residue of authentic place that Borges represents in “A la calle Serrano” is further developed in another poem of *Cuaderno San Martín*. Olea Franco argues, “El desencanto que la transformación de la calle Serrano provoca en el alma del poeta se potencia [...] debido al carácter emblemático que esta calle adquiere en otra composición de la época: ‘La fundación mitológica de Buenos Aires’, la cual abre *Cuaderno San Martín* (134). The emblematic character of calle Serrano that “La fundación mitológica de Buenos Aires” further develops, as I propose at the conclusion of this section, is dwelling.

As in the case of the poem “Ciudad” from *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, Borges dichotomizes exterior space in his early poetry. While the *arrabal/barrio* is imbued with a sense of authenticity, the *centro* or downtown is represented not only as being fraudulent but also corrupting. Both false and degenerative, the importance of Buenos Aires’ downtown is mitigated in Borges’ early poetry, creating an almost marginalized space. This is evident in the way in which the hustle-bustle of the metropolitan core is represented in the three poetry collections. “El Paseo de Julio” from *Cuaderno San Martín* is perhaps the most salient example of this as it portrays the center as devoid of meaning. The Paseo de Julio, which by the time of publication of the poetry collection had been renamed after the politician Leandro Alem for nearly a decade, was one of the

---

<sup>16</sup> It is useful to note here that Borges mirrors the Buenos Aires of the 1920s in his vacillation between “tú” and “vos” in his early poetry. While, generally speaking, one can see a movement away from the use of

many *porteño* spaces that were affected by a process of modernization that converted Buenos Aires from a humble town into a modern metropolis. A space perverted by modernity, the Paseo de Julio is in many ways the antithesis of the dwelling that the *arrabal* represents for Borges. This is despite, however, the fact that it was a place that was central to the poetics of some of his contemporaries such as Raúl González Tuñón.

“El Paseo de Julio” begins by demonstrating the poetic voice’s disdain for the street “Juro que no por deliberación he vuelto a la calle/ de alta recova repetida como un espejo,/ de parrillas con la trenza de carne de los Corrales,/ de prostitución encubierta por lo más distinto: la música” (49). Coming to the Paseo de Julio on a whim, the poetic voice describes the street as a type of container for baseness. Uncivilized spaces—animal pens, grills selling vulgar food, and brothels hidden by music—typify the Paseo de Julio. Because of this, the poetic voice directly criticizes it: “Puerto mutilado sin mar, encajonada racha salobre,/ resaca que te adheriste a la tierra” (49). The Paseo de Julio is a disfigured port that, despite not having access to the sea, is plagued by a brackish stench. For this reason, the poetic voice continues, “Paseo de Julio,/ aunque recuerdos míos, antiguos hasta la ternura, te saben/ nunca te sentí patria” (49). Even though the poetic voice has had a long relationship with the environment of the Paseo de Julio, he rejects an affective connection to it in the final verse. “Nunca te sentí patria” is in fact the poem’s climax as it provides the condition under which the rest of the poem is read. Having rejected an emotional attachment to place, Borges represents the Paseo de Julio in rather

---

“tú” toward “vos” in Borges’ early poetry, one can find instances of incongruence, a number of which can be found in *Luna de enfrente*.

unpleasant terms. For example, the seventh stanza reads: “Tienes la inocencia terrible/ de la resignación, del amanecer, del conocimiento,/ la del espíritu no purificado, borrado/ por las insistencias del destino/ y que ya blanco de muchas luces, ya nadie,/ sólo codicia lo presente, lo actual, como los hombres viejos” (50). The Paseo de Julio is devoid of humanity as it is obsessed not with the spirit but rather with the future. Outward looking, it is a place, having spurned humanity, that needs salvation as seen in the penultimate stanza: “Atrás de los paredones de mi suburbio, los duros carros/ rezarán con varas en alto a su imposible dios de hierro y de polvo,/ pero, qué dios, qué ídolo, qué veneración la tuya, Paseo de Julio?” (51). This rhetorical question undermines the Paseo de Julio as a place of authenticity. In fact, as the final stanza affirms, it is even bereft of goodness: “Tu vida pacta con la muerte;/ toda felicidad, con sólo existir, te es adversa./ Paseo de Julio: Cielo para los que son del Infierno” (51). Heaven for those from hell: certainly a displacement from the authentic space— Palermo— that opens *Cuaderno San Martín*.

### **Dwelling and “La fundación mitológica de Buenos Aires”**

“La fundación mitológica de Buenos Aires,” the first poem in *Cuaderno San Martín*, is emblematic of Borges’ representation of the built, natural, and social environment in his early poetry.<sup>17</sup> Locating in Buenos Aires value that extends beyond his contemporaneous situation, Borges probes an attachment to space that is not one of place but rather of dwelling. His sense of dwelling, both in “La fundación mitológica de Buenos Aires,” specifically, and his early poetry, generally, not only extends beyond

physical geography but also timespace. That is, Borges' conceptualization of dwelling has roots that stretch beyond the limits of his contemporaneous situation into the past.

"La fundación mitológica de Buenos Aires" both begins and ends with a personal tone. In the first two verses, the poetic voice asks somewhat rhetorically, "¿Y fué por este río de sueñera y de barro/ que las proas vinieron a fundarme la patria" (9). Olea Franco comments that "La interrogación inicial con que el poeta se cuestiona sobre los inicios de ésta [i.e. la ciudad de Buenos Aires] posee un fuerte tono personalista que concuerda con la concepción de la patria como algo propio y exclusivo que elabora en varios poemas de la época" (34). This tone, which continues throughout the poem, culminates in the final verse: "A mí se me hace cuento que empezó Buenos Aires:/ La juzgo tan eterna como el agua y el aire" (11). In the poem, the poetic voice appropriates the notion of *patria*, or homeland, and Buenos Aires, both in the sense of the city existing in physical space and the sense of a confluence of relationships to place. In so doing, the limits of time and space collapse. The convergence of time and space in "La fundación mitológica de Buenos Aires" facilitates Borges' personalization of the city, which, in turn, reflects a deep interiorization of a sense of dwelling.

In the first four stanzas Borges recounts the mythical, and highly personal, founding of Buenos Aires. In doing so, he fuses together time and space, only to ultimately privilege one, space, above the other, time.

¿Y fué por este río de sueñera y de barro

---

<sup>17</sup> "La fundación mitológica de Buenos Aires" was originally published in May 1926 in the literary magazine *Nosotros* (204). The version published in *Cuaderno San Martín* deviates from the original in several verses.

Que las proas vinieron a fundarme la patria?  
Irían a los tumbos los barquitos pintados  
Entre los camalotes de la corriente zaina.

Pensando bien la cosa supondremos que el río  
Era azulejo entonces como oriundo del cielo  
Con su estrellita roja para marcar el sitio  
En que ayunó Juan Díaz y los indios comieron.

Lo cierto es que mil hombres y otros mil arribaron  
Por un mar que tenía cinco lunas de anchura  
Y aun estaba repleto de sirenas y endriagados  
Y de piedras imanes que enloquecen la brújula.

Prendieron unos ranchos trémulos en la costa,  
Durmieron extrañados. Dicen que en el Riachuelo  
Pero son embelecos fraguados en la Boca.  
Fue una manzana entera y en mi barrio: en Palermo. (9-10)

Although the juxtaposition of past and present destabilizes the historicity of the founding of the *patria*, ultimately it is Borges' very personal reimagining of the events leading to the establishment of Buenos Aires that is consequential. Disregarding history, often ironically [for example, the muddied waters of the River Plate being a sky-like blue or, as Sergio Ugalde points out, the reference to Juan Díaz (46)], Borges locates the founding of Buenos Aires in Palermo. This, of course, has no founding in history. "La fundación mitológica de Buenos Aires," in the words of Lelia Madrid:

no se propone reparar la carencia de la historia. En otras palabras, no busca reconstruir la historia para asegurar su sentido o la continuidad del sentido, ergo, su realidad, y de allí, promover el espacio Buenos Aires para insertarlo en lo conocido: establecer su tradición y establecer así su trascendencia. (349)

In the first four stanzas of the poem, Borges does not attempt to provide a revisionist history of the founding of Buenos Aires but rather underlies his personal attachment to the city.

Borges explores an interior topography of the city in “La fundación mitológica de Buenos Aires.” Rather than something historical—a place founded in a particular location on a particular day—or some sort of utopia—an imagined place where everything is perfect—the Buenos Aires of the poem reflects Borges’ interiorization of specific experiences of place. These experiences are emplotted cartographically in the fifth stanza:

Una manzana entera pero en mitá del campo  
presenciada de auroras y lluvias y suestadas.  
La manzana pareja que persiste en mi barrio:  
Guatemala, Serrano, Paraguay y Gurruchaga. (10)

Borges situates the founding of Buenos Aires in Palermo to justify his personal mythology. Olea Franco substantiates this when he asserts, “Sin embargo, no basta con remitir a esa mágica aunque imprecisa geografía, porque para construir el mito es necesario definir y ubicar los orígenes; para ello, el poeta incluye en sus versos el debatido tema de la cultura argentina de dónde se fundó originalmente la ciudad” (135). Because he demolishes the influence of history and, consequently, of time, Borges’ project avoids Romantic discourse centering on the authentic founding of Buenos Aires. Rather, by eschewing historical debates of where the city was founded and settled, Borges locates its origins in his neighborhood of Palermo and, consequently, appeals to the spiritual preexistence of Buenos Aires.

In the following stanzas Borges represents the textures of place of his Buenos Aires, engaging different sensorial experiences in each stanza.

Un almacén rosado como revés de naipe  
Brilló y en la trastienda conversaron un truco;  
El almacén Rosado floreció en un compadre  
Ya patron de la esquina, ya resentido y duro.

El primer organito salvaba el horizonte  
Con su achacoso porte, su habanera y su gringo  
El corralón seguro ya opinaba IRIGOYEN,  
Algún piano mandaba tangos de Saborido.

Una cigarrería sahumó como una rosa  
La nohecita nueva, zalamera y agreste.  
No faltaron zaguanes y novias besadoras.  
Sólo faltó una cosa: la vereda de enfrente. (10-11)

The foundation of the city of Buenos Aires, in these stanzas, is a sensorial experience of atemporal experiences of place rather than something rooted in the particularities of a specific moment in history. Or, perhaps better yet, it is the experience of eternally quotidian practices. In order to flesh this out, Borges employs archetypal images of the city such as the “almacén” and the “compadre” on the streetcorner in the sixth verse. He then shifts in the seventh stanza from a visual experience of Buenos Aires to an auditory one. Here, Borges appeals to “authentic” sounds of Buenos Aires: oscillations of a barrel organ, popular calls for Yrigoyen, and banging out of Saborido’s tangos. In the eighth stanza, Borges completes his sensorial representation of Buenos Aires by capturing its smells, the “cigarrería” and the “nohecita nueva,” and some things one would typically see such as “zaguanes” and “novias besadoras.” The only thing lacking, and the singular

reference to something firmly rooted in the present, is the *vereda de enfrente*, or the sidewalk in front.

In “La fundación mitológica de Buenos Aires” Borges marks a particular way in which the city is inhabited. Inhabiting the built, natural, and social environment of Buenos Aires is conceptualized in the poem as an extension beyond the present. Borges looks to the past, not history, in the attempt to legitimize the ontological authenticity of the city. That is, Borges searches for the metaphysical essence—authenticity—of Buenos Aires, which he represents as located in Palermo. This is apparent in the poem’s final stanza: “A mí se me hace cuento que empezó Buenos Aires:/ La juzgo tan eterna como el agua y el aire” (11). In order to substantiate this point, Borges indelibly links *patria* to a special type of place. As Olea Franco argues, “el poeta se inviste de una legitimidad pura e indiscutible: la continuidad que establece entre la fundación de la patria y su presente lo transporta a un ámbito intemporal y imperecedero” (135). Rooted in a particular type of experience and located in a particular kind of construction in the specific neighborhood of Palermo, Borges’ Buenos Aires is a dwelling.

## **OUTSIDE BUENOS AIRES**

The experience of Buenos Aires as a dwelling in Borges’ early poetry is augmented through the representation of places and practices that are not immediately associated with the representation of the city. Often, as is the case in much of the scholarly work dealing with Borges’ poetry in the 1920s, critics tend to focus narrowly on the representation of physical space. Therefore, the experience of Buenos Aires that Borges develops throughout this period is narrowed to those poems where the poetic



voice engages *porteño* exterior and interior space. Consequently, much of the broader experiences of Buenos Aires (i.e. poems that do not explicitly represent the city) are either regarded as unimportant or forgotten. In this section, I argue that Borges completes his representation of Buenos Aires as a dwelling through widening his understanding of spatial experience. First, I contend that through poems that implement non-spatial imagery, particularly those of *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, Borges extends geographical experience to include things that are not necessarily spatial. Dwelling, for Borges, is not exclusive to the relationship between the individual and the physical environment. Second, through the examination of poems that depict cities other than Buenos Aires, I put forward that Borges' early poetry is marked by a sense of dwelling. Insofar as these poems mirror Borges' representation of Buenos Aires, they reflect the rootedness to the built, natural, and social environment to the Argentine capital. Much like Heidegger's farmhouse in the Black Forest, Borges' experience of spatiality is rooted in a sense of dwelling. More specifically, the aesthetic assemblage he constructs is located within the tranquil houses of the *arrabal*.

### **Dwelling in Extra-Spatial Poems**

Place is something much broader than mere contact with and interaction within the physical geography. Extending beyond the material space of the environment, both built and natural, the experience of place is imbued with complex networks of human interactions and practices. Not only connecting humans through the nexus of their associations and practices, as experienced within a specific location, place also engages the totality of the greater world. The Buenos Aires of Borges' early poetry is reflective

of an experience of dwelling that includes extra-spatial practices and things.<sup>18</sup> This is particularly evident in his first poetic collection. In *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, Borges, as demonstrated in the previous section, represents both interior and exterior *porteño* spaces.

Navarro Vera argues that:

La forma de la ciudad de Borges está hecha de experiencias, de emociones, y de recuerdos de espacios, de esquinas, de pavimentos, de balaustradas, de jardines vislumbrados por encima de un muro, de calles bajo la luz del atardecer; el mejor momento, decía, para mirar la ciudad. La forma de la ciudad de Borges es la del lugar, la calle, la plaza y la arquitectura (el tipo) como elemento construido, y la luz y el cielo como dimensión natural, son la materia con la que Borges construye su ciudad. (135)

While it is certainly the case that in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* Borges assembles his city through the representation and poetic exploration of particular locations, the spaces and places portrayed in the poetic collection are augmented by a number of poems representing experiences outside the city as a space. These poems include “Música patria,” “El truco,” “Hallazgo,” “La guitarra,” “Caña de ámbar”, and “Trofeo.”

In *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, Borges taps into various textures of space to express a multifaceted experience of place. Buenos Aires is not experienced solely through poems that present images of different parts of the city but is it also represented through allusions to the non-visual. In this sense, Borges is evoking a sensorial sense of place that is not entirely dissimilar to the early sound films discussed later in this study. Experienced compositely through the senses, a haptic sense of place recognizes that sites are experienced not exclusively through sight. Place in Borges’ early poetry, especially

---

<sup>18</sup> I implement the word “extra-spatial” to describe that which does not necessarily occupy physical space.

in the context of *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, includes the entirety of spatial experience: “En la poesía de Borges el espacio recibe su esencia del lugar en la medida que reúne en él y confiere pertenencia mutua a todas las cosas que pueden parecer dispersas” (Navarro Vera 136). While Borges’ early poetry often centers on the poetic voice’s encounter with and emotional reaction to physical space, the places he represents are endowed with value that is a continuation of the space of that location. Often, these poems function metonymically, representing facets of *porteño* social life that extend beyond the confines of the thing or social practice they represent. It is useful at this juncture to closely examine one of the aforementioned poems in order to unpack how Borges uses extra-spatial experience to further complete his representation of Buenos Aires in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*.

Along with “Música patria” and “Hallazgo,” “La guitarra” explores the connection between music and geography. In each of these poems, Borges connects the experience of hearing music to both sight, through a spate of images, and affect. The aggregation of these experiences, felt by one or more of the senses, gives meaning to the place represented in the poem. In “La guitarra” this place is defined in the first two verses and expanded upon throughout the rest of the poem:

He mirado la Pampa  
de un patiecito de la calle Sarandí en Buenos Aires  
Cuando entré no la ví  
Estaba acurrucada  
en lo profundo de una brusca guitarra.  
Solo se demelenó  
al entreverar la diestra las cuerdas  
No sé lo que azuzaban;  
a lo mejor fué un triste del Norte

pero ví la Pampa. (36)

Located on what Sarlo calls the edge, Borges situates *his* Buenos Aires on the border of the Pampas. Having set the stage, the poem continues in the third through the fifth verses by providing the poem's action. Instead of seeing the Pampas, as one would expect, the poetic voice experiences place in "La guitarra" through sound produced by the guitar, the *criollo* instrument *par excellence*. The guitar, therefore, is an artifact that not only houses place but also preserves an authentic sense of place. Music liberates the Pampas from the confines of the instrument in verse six. A right-hand then comes down in the following verse to strum the strings of the guitar, which produces a feeling of confused wonder in the verses eight through ten. Having the option of interpreting the stimulation produced in him differently, the poetic voice sees the Pampas.

Through the sound of music, the poetic voice sees place. This is particularly the case in verses eleven through twenty-three:

Ví muchas brazadas de cielo  
sobre un manojito de pasto.  
Ví una loma que arrinconan  
quietas distancias  
mientras leguas y leguas  
caen desde lo alto  
Ví el campo donde cabe  
Dios sin haber de inclinarse,  
ví el único lugar de la tierra  
donde puede caminar Dios a sus anchas.  
Ví la pampa cansada  
que antes horrorizaron los malones  
y hoy apaciguan en quietud maciza las parvas. (36)

In these verses, the poetic voice sees four principal images: armfuls of sky above a handful of grass (verses eleven through twelve), a gentle sloped landscape with a hill

(verses thirteen through sixteen), a stretch of countryside in which God could comfortably walk (verses eighteen through twenty), and a tired Pampas that had once terrorized dubious figures in the nineteenth century and now in the twentieth is a center of farming (verses twenty-one through twenty-three). The succession of these images, fragments of a larger entity, evokes in the reader an expansive view of the Pampas. Rhetorically, Borges uses the “el mismo tipo de repetición anafórica (“*vi*” esto, “*vi*” aquello), que produce la sensación de abarcar la totalidad de esa llanura aparentemente ilimitada que es la pampa argentina” (De Costa, *Humor* 35).<sup>19</sup> The poetic voice reflects upon this totalizing vision in verses twenty-four and twenty-five: “De un tirón ví todo eso/ mientras se desesperaban las cuerdas/ en un compás tan zarandeado como éste” (36-37). Borges explicitly fuses sound and image in these verses. Through hearing the strumming of a guitar, the poetic voice sees the Pampas. Perhaps a sign of Borges’ youthful exuberance, something he would later use to condemn his early poetry, the poetic voice also parenthetically refers to a romantic interest: “(La ví también a ella/ cuyo recuerdo aguarda en toda música.)” (37). In the final four verses, the poetic voice returns to his present situation after having been transported by the strumming of a guitar to the Pampas:

Hasta que en brusco cataclismo  
se allanó la guitarra encabritada  
y estrojome el silencio  
y hurañamente tornó el vivir a estancarse. (37)

---

<sup>19</sup> Italics and parenthesis are original to De Costa.

The final verse critiques the modernity of the Buenos Aires of the time. Life in the city has stagnated and the vitality once present in the Pampas, which the city has since consumed, has stopped flowing. This perspective latently represents a particular understanding of Argentine national identity or *argentinidad* that was prevalent in the 1920s. The city, a Europeanized space replete with immigrants, was considered to be a corrupting force that tainted the authentic spirit of the country. In its final verses, “La guitarra” channels this perspective.

### **Mirrored Images: Buenos Aires | Other Places**

In poems such as “La guitarra” Borges expresses textures of spatiality that are at once extra-spatial and intrinsic to Buenos Aires. Through the representation of disparate social practices, Borges’ extends the poet’s experience of Buenos Aires in these poems beyond the limits of its physical geography. Moving past the limits of a traditional cartographic understanding of the city (that is, the city as purely physical place that can be delineated on a map), Borges’ Buenos Aires encompasses the totality of its experiences. Palermo, the center of Borges’ Buenos Aires, is therefore much more than streets like Serrano and Gurruchaga, it is the lived experience of dwelling within that space. As well as using poems dealing with extra-spatial representations of place, Borges reifies this sense of dwelling in his early poetry in poems that do not directly portray Buenos Aires. More specifically, Borges further develops this sense of dwelling in three poems representing foreign (i.e. non-Argentine) cities: “Benarés” from *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, which represents the central Indian city of Varanasi, as well as “Apuntamiento de

Dakar” and “Montevideo” from *Luna de enfrente*. In this section I examine these three poems using the following assertion by Robbin Fiddian as a point of departure:

It remains true that the majority of poems in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* and *Luna de enfrente* achieve their primary topographical aim through an enumeration of local points of reference, or topoi. Yet, as the examples of ‘Benarés’ and ‘Dakar’ attest, Borges also adopted an alternative and complementary procedure for rendering the spirit of a place, which consisted in the fashioning of interlocking landscapes that act as partial doubles of Buenos Aires. (362)

The interlocking landscapes of Varanasi, Dakar, and Montevideo not only act as partial doubles in the assembling of Borges’ notion of dwelling but rather they work as fragmentary mirrors. Whether through visual or non-visual means, in these three poems Borges presents shards of experience that reflect *porteño* social life in disparate ways. In this sense, Borges uses the three cities as referents to Buenos Aires.

Perhaps the most direct example of Borges’ use of other cities to mirror the experience of dwelling in Buenos Aires is “Montevideo.” In the poem, Borges presents the Uruguayan capital as a window into an earlier version of Buenos Aires.

Mi corazón resbala por la tarde como el cansancio por la piedad de un  
– declive.  
La noche nueva es como un ala sobre tus azoteas.  
Eres remansada y clara en la tarde como el recuerdo de una lisa amistad.  
El cariño brota en tus piedras como un pastito humilde.  
Eres nuestra y fiestera, como la estrella que duplica un bañado.  
Puerta falsa en el tiempo, tus calles miran al pasado más leve.  
Claror de donde la mañana nos llega, sobre la dulce turbiedad de las  
– aguas.  
Antes de iluminar mi celosía su bajo sol bienaventura tus quintas.  
Ciudad que se oye como un verso.  
Calles con luz de patio. (18)

Borges' Montevideo is a distorted mirror into what the city was and still could be. Through the use of disparate images such as "Puerta falsa en el tiempo", "la estrella que duplica un bañado", and "Calles con luz de patio" Borges paradoxically locates the Uruguayan capital in both the past and the present. As Fusaro points out, "Esta anulación provoca la desrealización del objeto textual. Montevideo se vuelve doblemente irreal: por *ser* (no 'parecer') Buenos Aires, y por ser una Buenos Aires del pasado" (Fusaro 45-46). Levelling the reader's experience of temporality, Borges playfully shifts the poem's focus to spatiality. Montevideo at once is and isn't Buenos Aires in the poem. That is, there is the sense that the poetic voice equates Montevideo to Buenos Aires as identical spaces even though the necessary particularities for such a comparison do not exist: "Así Montevideo adquiere un nuevo perfil después de la pérdida de límites que la teñía de irrealidad. Por ser un recuerdo (o Idea), deviene arquetipo y anula en sí el tiempo y el espacio" (Fusaro 46). By negating the boundaries of space and time in "Montevideo," Borges explicitly creates a parallel between two cities and implicitly calls for a flattening of the notion of place. Montevideo and Buenos Aires are not separated by space-time in the poem. Rather, they are parts of a broader geographical experience.

While Borges presents the relatively similar city of Montevideo as a mirrored image of Buenos Aires, he also does so with the indeniably foreign places of Varanasi (i.e. Benarés) and Dakar. Through representing the experience and perception of a largely analogous space in "Montevideo," Borges effectively establishes the standard as to how Buenos Aires relates with non-Argentine and non-*porteño* spaces and place. An analysis of the following fragment of "Benarés" and the entirety of the poem



“Apuntamiento de Dakar” therefore allows for a fuller understanding of how Borges develops other spaces and places.

From “Benarés”:

(Y pensar  
que mientras brujuleo las imágenes  
la ciudad que canto, persiste  
sobre la espalda del mundo  
con sus visiones ineludibles y fijas  
repleta como un sueño  
con agresiones de injuriosa miseria  
con arrabales y cuarteles  
y hombres de labios podridos  
que sienten frío en los dientes.) [45]

“Apuntamiento de Dakar”:

Dakar está en la encrucijada del sol, del desierto y del mar.  
El sol nos tapa el firmamento, el arenal agrava los caminos como fiera en  
– achecho, el mar es un encono.  
He visto un jefe en cuya manta era más ardiente lo azul que en el cielo  
– incendiado.  
La mezquita cerca del biógrafo luce una quieta claridad de plegaria.  
La resolana aleja las chozas, el sol como ladrón escala los muros.  
África tiene la eternidad su destino, donde hay hazañas, reinos, religiones,  
– arduos bosques y espadas.  
Yo he conseguido un atardecer y una aldea. (21)

As these examples show, in the poems Varanasi and Dakar are similar to Buenos Aires only to the extent that they refer to a specific type of being in place. Place, or rather what is significant about place, is therefore something that exists outside of the physical location. In “Benarés” Borges alludes to this spatial understanding in two significant ways. First, he uses language that draws out temporality such as “brujuleo”, “persiste”, and “sueño”. The verbs are particularly important because they frame the reader’s experience of place, one almost of lingering, in the poem. Second, Borges at least

latently refers to Buenos Aires by employing the image of “arrabales”. This is similar to the final verse of “Apuntamiento de Dakar,” in which Borges refers to an afternoon and a town. Most importantly, however, both poems refer to a sense of dwelling in Buenos Aires. Instead of aiming to represent the built, natural, and social environment as a concrete and reproducible entity, Borges focuses on exploring the individual’s metaphysical attachment to place. These poems demonstrate how this feeling of being-in-the-world is privileged to the fidedignous representation of a particular place. Fiddian notes this when she argues that:

It remains true that the majority of poems in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* and *Luna de enfrente* achieve their primary topographical aim through an enumeration of local points of reference, or topoi. Yet, as the examples of ‘Benarés’ and ‘Dakar’ attest, Borges also adopted an alternative and complementary procedure for rendering the spirit of a place, which consisted in the fashioning of interlocking landscapes that act as partial doubles of Buenos Aires. In the case of Benarés, attributes of squalor and exoticism reflect incongruously back onto the city that is the central subject of Borges’ inaugural collection of verse; a couple of years later, an imaginary Dakar casts a reverse shadow onto the poet’s surroundings in Buenos Aires, inducing in him a sense of comparative poverty and the inadequacy of his art. In the overall context of Borges’ output, ‘Benarés’ and ‘Dakar’ are early instances of those unsettling explorations of time, space and identity that will come to typify his mature creative work. (Fiddian 362)

Referring back to Buenos Aires through affective and geographic displacement, Borges’ playful engagement of notions of time, space, and identity in these poems unquestionably has ramifications in the reader’s perception of the lyrical spaces and places of his early poetry. Consequently, space and place is experienced in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, *Luna de enfrente*, and *Cuaderno San Martín* as something different than more conventional understandings of place. These mirrored images of Buenos Aires—Dakar and Varanasi,

not to mention Montevideo— refer to a specific type of inhabiting that Borges presents as being endemic to Buenos Aires—dwelling.

### **DWELLING IN BUENOS AIRES**

Throughout *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, *Luna de enfrente*, and *Cuaderno San Martín* Borges reflects a metaphysical sense of dwelling, which attempts to delve into the individual's deeply embedded affective connection to the built, natural, and social environment. Because of this, Borges at once holds up and negates the uniqueness of place. As I have argued in this chapter, Buenos Aires is a place that is both singularly special and exactly the same as others. The tension between these contradictory perspectives is similar to the line of thought of Borges develops in his metaphysical essays “La nadería de la personalidad” and “La encrucijada de Berkeley.” In his early poetry, dwelling is the means through which Borges is able confront the polemical tension provoked by these two contrasting understandings—uniqueness and sameness—of the nature of place. Buenos Aires is of particular importance in it because there is often the sense in that one can only authentically inhabit in Buenos Aires. While a number of critics have followed this line of thought, Borges' strong connection to his hometown is a part of something larger. Ultimately, the city and all other places are merely elements of the broader experience of geographical situatedness: dwelling.

Shifting the focus away from Borges' representation of urban space toward his inward exploration of the affective connections to the spaces portrayed in an individual poem allows the reader to gain greater insight into the meaning of Buenos Aires, specifically, and place, generally, in his early poetry. Hugo Montes plugs into this line of

thought when he argues that rather than being directed toward creation, as Vicente Huidobro had oriented his avant-garde poetry aesthetic, the aim of Borges' project is foundation. Therefore, the key word for Borges is not "crear" but rather "fundar." Montes states that, "Él funda un Buenos Aires mítico, una luna que aunque vecina— de enfrente— es de todos y es todo. No se desentiende de lo inmediato mas lo trasciende a cada instante. No vive en la alucinación inspiradora del momento, sino en un estado de vigilia que lo hace rozar día a día el misterio" (146). Through the use of allusions to Borges' early poetry, Montes argues that Borges is rooted in the past. Unlike other exponents of European and Latin American avant-garde movements, Borges is little interested in representing modernity in Buenos Aires. Because of this, Buenos Aires is not a space of cultural, economic, and social progress for Borges in his early poetry. It is a place whose current manifestation is a conglomeration of almost infinitely mysterious and indeterminable spatial connections. Most importantly, it is a space whose meaning lies within the individual who inhabits its places. By both holding up the uniqueness of place and keen to deny its importance for the individual, Borges' conceptualization of Buenos Aires, in general, and the *arrabal*, in specific, is much more similar to a Wordsworthian dwelling-place than other representations of place in cultural production of the 1920s.

In his early poetry collections, Borges represents Buenos Aires as an atemporal site of inhabitation. Unlike other works of cultural production of the 1920s, Borges' Buenos Aires is not represented as a place. His relationship to the built, lived, and social environment is not one which privileges the endowment of value upon a physical setting.

Borges makes the spaces and places represented in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, *Luna de enfrente*, and *Cuaderno San Martín* meaningful through his exploration of the metaphysical sense of dwelling.

## Chapter Two

### A Disintegrative Sense of Place: Armando Discépolo's *grotesco criollo*

When the curtains of the Teatro Nacional in Buenos Aires opened on March fourteenth of 1923, Argentine theater changed forever. Taking the stage that night was Pascual Carcavallo's Compañía Nacional, which performed the young playwright Armando Discépolo's three-act work *Mateo*. Not only would the play prove to be a box-office success— just as *El movimiento continuo* (1916), written in collaboration with Rafael José de Rosa and Mario Folco, and *Mustafá* (1921), penned with de Rosa, had been (Sanhueza, *Continuidad* 213)—but *Mateo* would also usher onto the Argentine stage a new aesthetic movement, the *grotesco criollo*. The *grotesco criollo*, or the creole grotesque, is a dramatic genre that has since been explored in varying degrees by contemporaries of Discépolo's such as Roberto Arlt and Juan Carlos Ghiano to a wave of playwrights in the late 1970s and early 1980s like Roberto Cossa, Osvaldo Dragún, and Carlos Gorostiza. Discépolo's work with the genre spanned a little over a decade, during which he wrote five *grotescos*: *Mateo* (1923); *El organito* (1925), written with his brother, Enrique Santos Discépolo; *Stéfano* (1928); *Cremona* (1932); and *Relojero* (1935).<sup>20</sup>

The *grotesco criollo* has by in large been examined critically, both in literary and theater studies, under the lenses of other aesthetic movements. Most commonly, the

---

<sup>20</sup> Although *Cremona* was originally written and produced in 1932, Discépolo revised the play in 1950. The version taken into consideration in this chapter is the 1950 version.

*grotesco criollo* is analyzed in reference to and/or compared with the *grottesco italiano* and the *sainete porteño*. On one hand, the tendency to look at the *grotesco criollo* in relation to the *sainete* goes back to the 1920s and 1930s. Led by playwrights such as Carlos Mauricio Pacheco, Florencio Sánchez, and Alberto Vacarezza, the *sainete* was the dominant genre in Argentine theater during this time. Discépolo, in addition to dabbling in other dramatic genres, wrote a number of *sainetes*. This has led a number of critics to argue that the *grotesco criollo* is best understood as the natural progression of the *sainete*. Perhaps the most notable of these critics is David Viñas, who famously argued that “El grotesco aparece como la interiorización del sainete” (*Grotesco* 13). On the other hand, the analysis of the *grotesco criollo vis-à-vis* the *grottesco italiano* goes nearly as far back. An aesthetic movement in Italian theater, the *grottesco italiano* included Luigi Antonelli, Enrico Cavacchioli, Luigi Chiarelli, and Luigi Pirandello. Although there are a number of critics dating back as far as the 1920s and 1930s that examined the relationship between the two dramatic genres, the most in-depth critical study is Claudia Kaiser-Lenoir’s *El grotesco criollo: estilo teatral de una época*. In it, Kaiser-Lenoir explores the influence of the central dichotomy of the *grottesco italiano*— the mask (i.e. an artifice created to demonstrate compliance with social mores) and the face (i.e. the authentic feelings of the individual)— on the *grotesco criollo*. Finally, there are other aesthetic movements that are often considered to be influential in the development of the *grotesco criollo*. One such example is Ramón de Valle-Inclán’s *esperpento*, another form of the grotesque, which is perhaps best drawn out in his *Luces de bohemia* (1920).

Discépolo, for his part, refused to be drawn into discussions about the influences behind his formulation of the *grotesco criollo*. In an interview he gave to the Buenos Aires newspaper *La Nación* in June of 1964, Discépolo states:

El grotesco no es para mí una fórmula, una receta, sino un concepto, una opinión; no es un menjunge más o menos batido de comedia y drama; de risa y llanto; no es que tome yo un dolor y lo tilde de chistes o a una caricatura le haga verter lágrimas para lograr en una sola obra las dos muecas de la máscara y contentar así en una misma noche a los que van al teatro a reír y a los que van a llorar. Bautizo de «grotescos» a piezas mías porque son grotescas para mí... (Sanhueza, *Continuidad* 69)

That the *grotesco criollo* for Discépolo was not codified or systematized is key to understanding the uniqueness of the spaces and places that he represents and explores in his five *grotescos*. To overemphasize the influence of either dramatic genre— or even worse, to reductively argue that the *grotesco criollo* is derivative of those genres— is to lessen the specificity with which Discépolo implements his aesthetic project. For Discépolo, the *grotesco criollo* is not a formula that can be developed and effectuated but rather it is a feeling. Defined by affect, this conceptualization of the *grotesco criollo* subsequently evades easy categorization of the genre. Although, as I argue later in the chapter, there are a number of commonalities between the *grotescos*, each play represents a specific experience of Buenos Aires. These experiences of the city's spaces and places are tied together by an underlying feeling of the *grotesco*.

Because they center on the experiences of different sectors of *porteño* social life, Discépolo's *grotescos* explore the relationship between humans, both individually and collectively, and the built, natural, and lived environment. Space and place form the context in which the individual experiences of the characters of these plays are rooted. In



Discépolo's *grotescos* a concern for place is not always explicitly central to the plots of the works; however, it underlies the characters' interactions among themselves and their environment. More specifically, his works engage the affective bonds that his characters' create for the physical space in which they are living. This physical space, however, is already ideologically demarcated. In the five *grotescos*, Discépolo's characters are in constant conflict with a dominant sense of place that frames their behavior. As he focuses his concentration on the experiences of lower-class immigrant families, these affective bonds are often in the process of atrophying. Living in conditions that are in both economic and social decline, if not outward decay, Discépolo's characters either reject forming topophilic bonds with place or invert them, effectively forcing them to loath their situation in physical space and society.

In this chapter I examine each of the five works of Discépolo's *grotesco criollo* so as to show how each play reflects a feeling that the bonds tying individuals to the built, natural, and lived environment are breaking down. The disintegrative sense of place created in the *grotesco criollo* reflects the often-precarious situation of the urban lower classes in Argentina during the 1920s and 1930s. This is not to say, however, that they reflect the deterioration of the same sense of place or that they represent this fragmentation in the same way for that matter. Rather, each play portrays the unique disintegration of a particular sense of place, which is most usually experienced by the protagonist. In fact, a central element of the *grotesco criollo* is the inability of the protagonist to come to terms with the reality of his situation. While the cause as to why each protagonist is unable to reconcile perception and reality differs from play to play,

the reader/spectator understands the protagonist's tragic flaw almost immediately. This, in no small part, is due to quickly apprehending that the places in which they live are disintegrating. The perception of place, therefore, is experienced through the tension caused by the characters' affective discord with the reality of their situation. Slowly, each play magnifies this discourse, something that provokes both empathy and laughter in the reader/spectator.

I begin my examination of the *grotesco criollo* by applying J. Nicholas Entrikin's notion of the betweenness of place in the play *Mateo*. In doing so, I show how Miguel is forced into joining his compatriot Severino's illicit activity because he no longer occupies a viable place in the economic system. I then move to *El organito* and a discussion about how the play's characters reject the formation of topophilic bonds. A consequence of Severino's distorted value system, his children come to harbor topophobic feelings, a hatred of place. In *Stéfano*, perhaps the best-known *grotesco*, I examine the eponymous figure's failure. Precipitated by his inability to realize the promise of his once precocious talents, Stéfano is forced to confront the fact that his understanding of his role within the places he inhabits has indeliably changed. Or, more precisely, he realizes that he has become out of tune, both literally and figuratively. I then shift to *Cremona*, a *grotesco* that is quite different from the rest, where I focus on the *conventillo* and fragmentation of the home. Moving from private to public space, *Cremona* shows how loosening affective bonds to place negatively impact a community. I follow this discussion with a look at the final *grotesco*, *Relojero*, focusing on the affective displacement of the play's youth. The tension between the perception of place on the part

of the characters and the experience of that place on the part of reader/spectator comes undone in *Mateo*, *Stéfano*, *El organito*, *Cremona*, and *Relojero*. The individual experiences represented in each play combine to collectively reflect the feeling that place is disintegrating.

### **MIGUEL AND THE BETWEENESS OF PLACE IN *MATEO* (1923)**

*Mateo* marks a shift in Armando Discépolo's aesthetics and theatrical work. In the three years preceding its production, Discépolo had worked in collaboration with de Rosa, putting four works onto the stage: *El clavo de oro* (1920), with Folco as well; *Mustafá*; *El príncipe negro* (1921); and *L'Italia unita* (1922). Although it was fairly typical for Discépolo to coauthor works in the early stages of his career, after 1923 he only collaborated once more with another author (*El organito*). More important than marking a movement towards single authorship, *Mateo* is also notable because it is the first work Discépolo baptizes as a *grotesco criollo*. Consequently, it is often seen as a transitional work that moves from the *sainete* to the *grotesco criollo*. This perspective, which is held by numerous critics, is most clearly indicated in Osvaldo Pellettieri's categorization of the work as a "grotesco asainetado" ("El grotesco criollo" 78). Pellettieri's claim, in specific, and this perspective, in general, seem to purport that the work is either derivative in some sense of the *sainete* or is an immature *grotesco*, thus relegating *Mateo* to being a mere step from previous *sainetes* like *El movimiento continuo* to a second-class play in comparison to "better-crafted" *grotescos*. Instead of examining *Mateo* within the closed system of Discépolo's works, I follow Juan Carlos Ghiano's contextualization of the play within the greater aesthetic climate of Argentine

theater in the early twenties, one marked by a crisis of realism (7).<sup>21</sup> Moving away from an examination of social problems, as heavily influenced by Roberto Payró, Discépolo, along with other renovators of the Argentine stage such as Samuel Eichelbaum and Francisco Defilippis Novoa, moved toward works that delved into moral, observational, and a more explicitly psychological drama.

The plot that Discépolo creates in *Mateo* initially seems to deviate little from the typical *sainete* of the time. Ghiano succinctly describes it in the following manner: “La acción, en Buenos Aires; la escena, dos habitaciones de un conventillo; los personajes, el padre que ve la desintegración de su hogar, la madre sufrida, los hijos incompresivos, los amigos entrometidos y sentenciosos; el lenguaje, popular: elementos todos del sainete” (12). These elements of the *sainete* are present in *Mateo*; however, it differs from the genre because the failure of the protagonist, Miguel Salerno, in the play is at once a source of tragedy and comedy. Within this macabre environment an intense and often uncomfortable laughter is entangled with varying amounts of pain, from dull melancholy to instantaneous heartbreak, to create a network of complex emotions that is inaccessible in the simpler worldview expressed in the *sainete*. Having come to understand the limitations of the *sainete*, Discépolo’s *Mateo* outwardly refracts the interiorization of the immigrant Miguel’s emotions. To return to Viñas, *Mateo* could be considered to be the interiorization of the comic realism, most usually depicting the experiences of immigrants, of the *sainete*.

---

<sup>21</sup> It should come as no surprise that other aesthetic movements arose during this crisis of realism. In poetry and narrative fiction, avant-garde movements such as Ultraísmo and Martinfierrismo reacted against

Kaiser-Lenoir examines the underlying influence of the *grottesco italiano* in *Mateo*. Putting forward that the external expression of the social structure that is imposed on the individual creates a mask— an artifice covering the authentic emotions and thoughts of the face— she proposes that Miguel’s failure at the end of the play is a consequence of the limitations of the mask he creates for himself (65). Kaiser-Lenoir’s argument, while insinuating the dichotomization of internal and exterior space, misses the mark because it overemphasizes the contrast of Miguel’s behavior in those spaces. It is not that Miguel is unable to reconcile his external comportment with his internal feelings, like Luigi Chiarelli’s Count Paolo Grazia in his 1916 work *La maschera e il volto* (*The Mask and the Face*), but rather he is unable to create new bonds with the environment. His inevitable failure in *Mateo* is a consequence of his adherence to an untenable sense of place. Miguel holds to a sense of place, as well as the values engendered by it, rooted in the static, Old World environment in which his father and his grandfather worked as coachmen. Unfortunately for Miguel, his understanding of his role within the sociogeographical context of 1920s Buenos Aires is untenable. For in *Mateo*, something has to give.

The play begins and ends in the humble apartment Miguel shares with his wife, Carmen, his two sons, Carlos and Chichilo, and his daughter, Lucía, in a *conventillo*. The majority of *Mateo* takes place within the confines of the two rooms the five characters share, while the brief second act is the only to occur elsewhere. Unlike in the *sainete*,

---

realists and establishment authors such as Manuel Gálvez. See chapter four, which deals with the poetry of Jorge Luis Borges.

*Mateo* takes place not in the open environment of the patio of the *conventillo* but rather in the claustrophobic environment the family inhabits. In this sense, the representation of the *conventillo* in *Mateo* is less similar to that of the *sainete*, so infused with *costumbrismo* or local color, than that of the positivist descriptions of Eduardo Wilde's *Curso de higiene público* (1885) and Samuel Gache's *Les Longements Ouvriers a Buenos Aires* (1900). Discépolo channels the deplorable environment in which immigrant families lived into his characters' psyches in the *grotesco criollo*. In the case of *Mateo*, María Teresa Sanhueza states:

En *Mateo* se profundiza aún más, el espacio aparece como asfixiante, hay cinco personas viviendo en una pieza, la situación de esas personas es angustiante, el lugar es oscuro y opresor y todo sucede en invierno. El lugar pasa a ser así una extensión de los personajes, demuestra lo que hay en el mundo interior de ellos y también indica una visión pesimista del mundo. (*Continuidad* 271)

The setting in *Mateo* shapes, if not determines, the attitudes and behaviors of the Salerno family. A depressingly enclosed environment, it is much like a cloud that permanently hangs over the characters. Despite this, and in contradiction to later works of Discépolo's *grotesco criollo*, the family continues to be represented as a solid institution: "Las acotaciones muestran a la familia como una institución sólida" (Sanhueza, *Continuidad* 271).

As the stage directions indicate, the apartment reflects the Salerno family's betweenness of place. J. Nicholas Entrikin, in his *The Betweenness of Place: Toward a Geography of Modernity*, argues that an underlying friction exists between the maintenance of traditional values (i.e. rootedness or sedentariness) and the advancement

of modernity (i.e. progress). As Yi-Fu Tuan puts it, “It suggests, among other things, a state of tension, of being neither firmly here nor firmly there” (“Review: Untitled” 85). The Salerno family in general, but Miguel in particular, seems to be neither fully in Buenos Aires nor in Italy. The apartment hypostatizes this betweenness of place of the immigrant family. Take for example the following stage directions:

Sillas de Viena y de paja. Baúles debajo de las camas. Una vieja palangana montada sobre armazón de madera hace de estufa. En el muro derecho cuelgan ropas cubiertas por un paño. Sobre la cama de los viejos un cromo de la Virgen con palmas cruzadas, y una repisa sosteniendo un acordeón. (26)

On the one hand, the apartment is furnished with things from their life in the Old World. On the other, these possessions, perhaps even better described as relics, are deteriorating (one can imagine the trunks), placed in juxtaposition with more plebeian furnishings (such as the Vienna chairs), or cleverly converted into something else (the washbasin). The stage directions indicate that the apartment mirrors the socioeconomic situation of the Salerno family. For this reason, its furnishings are completely mixed-up, arranged in an absolutely jumbled manner.

The apartment also latently represents the tension that the Old World causes in the Miguel’s behavior in the *Mateo*. As Sanhueza puts it,

Es el conjunto de fuera de escena textual cuya función metonímica se presenta por medio de las alusiones, el lenguaje y las palabras de los personajes: Italia y sus recuerdos. En términos geográficos es un espacio previo a la obra por que mantiene vigencia. Volver a Italia es una posibilidad utópica porque la familia ya ha hecho su vida en esa nueva tierra, cuya ambigüedad deítica la presentará siempre como «lo otro», la tierra ansiada pero que le rechaza. (*Continuidad* 275)

In *Mateo*, Italy represents an idealized past that is placed in constant comparison with a difficult present. It is in many ways an irrecupable innocence lost, a spectral presence that haunts Miguel throughout the play. Undoubtedly, Miguel left Italy in search of opportunity; however, his move to Argentina produces an irremediable betweenness of place. This tension—being away from a place where he is at home but in one where he will always be out of place— shapes Miguel’s worldview. Miguel is ultimately unable to reconcile his worldview with the realities of the Argentine immigrant experience. Because of this, Miguel rejects the brute reality of his situation in favor of an idealized and utopian past.

Miguel externalizes the betweenness of place he experiences in his steadfast and foolhardy loyalty to his old horse Mateo, the embodiment of his family tradition of driving horse-drawn carriages. By the 1920s in Buenos Aires, the horse-drawn carriage had become a vestige of a time and place long since past. Miguel, consequently, is represented in *Mateo* as an anachronism by Discépolo. Although he could easily earn more money for his family by becoming a chauffeur, Miguel rejects the automobile out of principle. This is apparent in the following exchange:

Miguel.— [...] ¡Vehículo diabólica, máquina repugnante a la que estoy condenado a ver ir e venir llena de siempre de pasajero con cara de loco, mientras que la corneta, la bocina, lo pito e lo chanco me pífian e déjano sordo.

Carlos.— Es el progreso.

Miguel.— Sí. El progreso de esta época de atropelladores. (35)

Not unlike his broken Spanish, which often is often muddled with Italianisms, Miguel’s value system is out of place in Buenos Aires. This adherence to the principles he learned



as a child in Italy, which Miguel follows even in his efforts as a thief in the second act, endangers the well-being of his family. If he is to provide for his family, driving what Carlos calls a “bolsa de leña” (37), operating a dilapidated coach is certainly not Miguel’s best option. Kaiser-Lenoir describes Miguel’s situation in this way:

No hay ya para comer, pero Miguel sigue aferrado a su coche plaza, consumiéndose en odio contra «la máquina», el automóvil que ha copado las calles y al que él ve no sólo como un asesino sobre ruedas, sino también como aquello que le ha robado el pan de la boca a los suyos. (Kaiser-Lenoir 67)

Despite being contrary to better judgment regarding the difficulty of this reality that his family faces, Miguel chooses to stay loyal to Mateo and, more importantly, to what the equine represents. As he says, “¡Yo voy a morir col látigo a la mano y la galera puesta, como murió me padre, e como murió me abuelo!” (36). This choice precipitates Miguel’s grotesque downfall in the play. He continues to seethe over the iniquitous automobile, unable to sustain his family, hoping that his compatriot Severino will lend him more money so that his family can make ends meet.

In the first act, Miguel arrives home to the *conventillo* to find his family bickering. Tired from a hard, albeit profitless, night of work, Miguel refuses to go to bed because Severino is due to pay the family a visit. Because Miguel only had one client the night before, which left his coach after only a block, and few in the previous nights, he is forced to ask to borrow money from others. His only option, as he describes to Carmen, is Severino. He tells her, “Amigo tengo mucho, pero so toda persona decente: no tiene ninguno un cantavo. Al único que conozco con la bolsa llena es a Severino” (38). If this, coupled with Carmen’s obvious dislike of Severino, is not enough, he is described in the

stage directions in the follow manner: “Es un ‘funebrero’. Levita. Tubo. Plastrón. Afeitado. Pómulos prominentes. Dos grandes surcos hacen un triángulo a su boca de comisuras bajas” (40). Although he is immediately established as a sinister character, Severino progressively reveals more of his shady character to the audience, eventually becoming a kind of “Mefestófele,” as the protagonist puts it, to Miguel’s Faust. This occurs because, much to Miguel’s chagrin, instead of being able to loan the Salerno’s more money, Severino asks for immediate repayment. Miguel is in no financial position to pay back his compatriot, so Severino offers him the opportunity to *entrar*, i.e. to enter into illegal activity. Although Miguel is morally repulsed by the suggestion of entering into Severino’s felonious business, he is left with little choice: “«Entrar», prostituirse, olvidar todos esos principios a partir de los cuales se ha manejado hasta entonces. Y Miguel, empujado por lo que considera su deber de padre (alimentar a los hijos) y a pesar de la repugnancia que la acción le inspira, decide «entrar»” (Kaiser-Lenoir 67). He decides to enter and his fate is set.

Miguel’s failure is set in motion by a robbery that Severino arranges, which takes place on stage in the second act and offstage in the third, as recalled by an anguished Miguel. It is a thoroughly grotesque affair that takes place at two in the morning in the biting cold. In order to muster up the courage to participate, Miguel drinks a bottle of anisette. His drunkenness, combined with anxiety and inexperience, inspires little confidence in El Loro y Narigueta, the two petty thieves Saverino has enlisted to ransack an occupied house. The situation becomes even more grotesque when Miguel, who wants desperately to abandon the project, distorts his value system by paradoxically

inverting it to apply to his illicit activities. That is, he applies the values he brought to driving his coach to crime. According to his logic, Miguel cannot withdraw from the robbery because he had given Severino his word. Kaiser-Lenoir notes that, “Esa honestidad aplicada a la acción delictiva es un anacronismo; una vez más, los principios aplicados a una realidad que los niega” (70). Unfortunately for Miguel— not to mention El Loro and Narigueta—what he believes to be the physical incarnation of his sense of place in fact embodies something quite different: reality. The horse, at the moment of the get-away, obstinately refuses to move. When it finally does move, a chase ensues that culminates in Mateo, previously Miguel’s image of authentic place, being crushed to death in a ditch by the coach he quixotically was forced to carry through the streets of Buenos Aires. Buried in the macabre scene is the coach, as Miguel describes brusquely in the third act, which identifies him as its owner and a participant in the crime. Miguel, unlike Faust, insists on dragging his Mephistopheles down with him, telling Severino that he too will go to prison. As Kaiser-Lenoir argues, “El fracaso final es integral. Su manera de funcionar en el mundo no es viable ni para su salvación personal ni para la de su familia” (71).

Unlike later works of Discépolo’s *grotesco criollo*, *Mateo* ends with a feeling of hope. Carlos, who had previously rejected his father’s pleas to get a job, arrives home to the *conventillo* with news. Interrupting the ridiculous scene of Miguel’s psychological meltdown, which culminates in his twistedly forcing his wife to dance, Carlos throws the doors open and proclaims, “Bien, viejo. Al fin están contentos en esta casa” (60). Dressed as a chauffeur, he tells his parents that he has decided to lend a hand to his

family's difficult situation and work. Miguel, overwhelmed emotionally, feels a burden lifted off his shoulders. His family will not starve while he is in prison. In fact, the family is better off than it was when Miguel was the sole breadwinner, as Carlos brings in twenty pesos on the first night. Carlos' assumption of his father's role as family caregiver represents the arrival of a new dominant sense of place. His son, who eventually reconciles his role within the burgeoning modernity of Buenos Aires, accepts the betweenness of place that paralyzed Miguel. In this sense, "Existe, por lo tanto, correspondencia entre el lugar y los jóvenes. Hay como una mirada benévola que ampara la situación de los jóvenes en la obra" (Sanhueza, *Continuidad* 276). Although his father's fate, being dragged off by policemen after committing an ill-conceived and poorly carried out robbery, is surely grotesque, in Carlos there is the hope that the children of immigrants will integrate into the socioeconomic realities of life in the Argentine capital.

The place that the reader/spectator experiences in *Mateo* is originally centered on Miguel's value system. Although it contradicts empirical reality, it is the canvas on which the play's textures of place are painted. Angela Blanco Amores de Pangella, in her 1961 essay on Discépolo's theater "El grotesco en la Argentina," argues that, "El D. Miguel de Mateo es honrado y trabajador. Vive aferrado a su realidad interior, en permanente oposición a la realidad externa" (164). Unrealistically, Miguel fights to sustain a notion of place that, if it even ever existed in the Buenos Aires in which he lived, has irreversibly changed. His values restrict him from changing his perspective toward how he situates himself within his environment. Miguel longs for something that

has been lost, “El trabajo individual creativo: su coche tirado por el caballo, *dirigido y controlado* por él, es reemplazado por un objeto mecánico, producto de una tecnología alienante y deshumanizada” (Kaiser-Lenoir 71). Technology, for Miguel, dehumanizes and alienates the individual to such an extent that she is unable to reconcile her role within the place she inhabits. Carlos, however, does not assent to the notion that the individual has become merely another cog in the production line of the modern capitalist machine. Rather, he pragmatically accepts the city for what it has become. In becoming a chauffeur he adopts a place for himself and, consequently, for his family in modern Buenos Aires.

#### **SAVERIO AND TOPOPHOBIA IN *EL ORGANITO* (1925)**

While in *Mateo* Discépolo leaves the audience with a feeling of optimism, a glimmer of hope that the fortunes of the Salerno family will improve despite Miguel’s impending imprisonment, in *El organito* that light of promise is extinguished. Taking place in the peripheral suburbs of Buenos Aires, *El organito* represents the farthest margins of *porteño* social life. Primary tenets of the bourgeois value system—the importance of morality, work as a source of honor, and, perhaps most importantly, the family as a harmonious unit—that guide the characters behavior in *Mateo* are abstruse to those of *El organito*.<sup>22</sup> Dealing with the harsh economic realities of the immigrant experience, Saverio, the *pater familias*, creates his own value system in order to survive. Not unlike Monipodio in Cervantes’ *Rinconete y Cortadillo* (1613), Saverio acts as the

---

<sup>22</sup> It is perhaps for this reason Pellettieri argues that *El organito*, along with *Stéfano*, forms part of the *grotesco canónico* (“El grotesco criollo” 78).

chief of a band of rogues who swindle others out of money in a variety of ways.<sup>23</sup> However, unlike the solitary picaresque figure, his band of rogues is comprised of his family—his wife, Anyulina; his brother-in-law, Antonio, who is usually referred to as Mama Mía; his sons, Nicolás and Humberto; and his beautiful daughter, Florinda.<sup>24</sup>

Guided by Saverio's deformed values, the family lives abjectly, both economically and spiritually. Forced to live in a garage designed for horse coaches, the characters in *El organito* are unable to establish affective bonds with the place in which they inhabit and the people with whom they live.<sup>25</sup> As Kaiser-Lenoir points out, “el problema se torna más complejo ya que la naturaleza del trabajo está centrada en la proyección directo de lo afectivo” (84). Because they live off earnings collected by falsely replicating emotions produced by deep misery and poverty, they are unable to outwardly direct their real emotions. Their true emotions are obfuscated by the artifice of their craft. Kaiser-Lenoir continues, “Al ser incapaces de proyectarse afectivamente, el sentimiento verdadero aplastado por el sentimiento comercializado, los hombres han sufrido un proceso de *reducción*” (84). The reduction that Kaiser-Lenoir alludes to extends to their relationship with Buenos Aires, the lived cartography they experience on a daily basis. As a consequence of their simulating profound feelings for financial gain, evincing lament for being imprisoned in the misfortune Buenos Aires has brought upon them, the characters in *El organito* reject forming affiliations to their physical

---

<sup>23</sup> *El organito*, as Kaiser-Lenoir notes (79), shares a number of similarities to the picaresque.

<sup>24</sup> There is no straightforward explanation in *El organito* as to why Antonio is referred to by the female nickname Mama Mía. One can infer, however, given the context of the play that the name reflects the lamentations of his profession. Just as beggars are often referred to as “pordioseros” in Spanish, Mama Mía reflects Antonio's language usage while panhandling.

environment. Thus, the commercialization of their emotions turns their relationship to the physical environment into one of topophobia, a fear of place. Instead of carrying topophilic feelings, Saverio and his family are left loathing its effects on them.

As mentioned in the introduction to the chapter, Discépolo hinges the plots of his *grotescos* on a central figure whose failure, into which a number of people are normally dragged, is predetermined. In the case of *El organito*, Saverio causes his own ruin as well as that of his family. Saverio is concisely described by Kaiser-Lenoir in the following manner:

Saverio explota los sentimientos de bondad y de caridad como instrumentos de ganancia. Ha aprendido a manipular las fibras sentimentales de los otros a la perfección y de esa capacidad se vale para sacarles el dinero y para atraerse su colaboración. Ese cinismo suyo ha surgido de su propia experiencia. Años atrás desalojado de su mísera vivienda se vio obligado a vagar por las calles con su mujer y sus hijos sin que nadie tuviera para con ellos el menor gesto de ayuda. (80)

Deeply affected by an environment that he perceives as rejecting him, one that has forced him onto the street without the slightest sign of charity, Saverio projects his displeasure onto his family and his situation. Displeasure with his situation, which Kaiser-Lenoir adjudges to be the roots of his cynicism, not only leads Saverio to balk strangers out of their money but also engenders the control with which he leads his family. In fact, Saverio takes interest in members of his family only to the extent that they can be financially exploited. This is demonstrated in the calculated way he discards of Mama Mía, who no longer earns as much as he previously had.

---

<sup>25</sup> The garage, Discépolo calls it *la cochera*, was almost certainly used for horses as opposed to cars

Blood, as Saverio calculates, means little in comparison to money. For this reason, he locates his role as *pater familias*, and the power it engenders, not in actually being the father of the family but rather in something quite different. Saverio argues that he is able to control the family because, “Yo soy el patrón del órgano. Cuando hicimo la contrata yo tenía mi clientela; usted no ha tenido más que estirar la mano e dejarse crecer el pelo” (509). The protective role of family head assumed by Miguel in *Mateo*, for example, is abandoned by Saverio in favor of a role more akin to that of an overbearing boss. Always geared toward making money, Saverio asserts his manipulative personality to dominate the others into submission. This is perhaps best exemplified in Anyulina, a wrecked figure who is plagued by alcoholism and depression. Nicolás succinctly describes her pathetic situation: “Está muerta” (520).

If Saverio is the figure around which his family’s ruin is centered, the ground zero of the devastation that he wreaks is their home. It is in many respects the reference point from which the characters’ misdeeds arise. In *El organito*, the family’s home— a dilapidated garage that has been converted into a living space—reflects the disorder that arranges their everyday lives. In order to convey this, Armando and Enrique Santos Discépolo provide a detailed description of the garage, which is the setting for both acts of *El organito*, in the stage directions:

En un suburbio. Cochera ruinoso transformada en habitación. Los dos muros laterales de ladrillo enjalbegado; el izquierdo, tiene, muy alto, una reja acristalada de medio punto; el derecho, un portón en primer término por el que se ve una cocinita debajo del alero y un amplio baldío limitado por fondos de casa. La pared del foro es de tabloncillos verticales; dos que se mueven en el centro hacen de puerta. A poco más de dos metros del piso y apoyando sus patas equidistantes en segundo término, avanza de foro y



en todo su ancho, un altillo que abre en sus tablas un ventanuco y una puerta sin batientes. Se sube a él por empinada escalera sin pasamanos adosada al muro de izquierda. Debajo de esta escalera y hasta el fondo, un viejo trapo oculto a medias por cachivaches hace un cuartucho. Alta cama grande arrimada a la pared de derecha y atrás, en la esquina, un camastro; otra pobre cama a la izquierda del primer término. Cerca de la escalera y como cristalero, una doble pila de cajones. En el centro, mesa de hojas. Sillas desvencijadas y de paja. Ropas colgadas de clavos. Un soporte de hojalata para loros. Jaulas. Baúles. Cajones. Suciedad. Verano. Las dieciocho horas. (493)

These things—bric-a-brac, furniture, and junk—convert what could be an open and inviting room into a suffocating space. In this sense, the garage mirrors the situation of the characters of the play, as each is cluttered by things that they would do well to clear out.

Undoubtedly, Saverio is the central figure of *El organito* and the garage, as the sole setting in the play, is the most important place for the play's characters. The Discépolos situating *El organito* in one place, which is largely a product of one figure, allows the reader/spectator to more easily access the conditions at hand. In the play, Saverio's creation of the squalid environment in which his family lives causes the breaking-up of his family. That is not to say that a kind of environmental determinism governs the actions of the characters in *El organito* (i.e. that the breaking down of familial ties is predestined by life in the garage) but rather the play's setting is the physical manifestation of a fractured family. The family fails to work as a unit because of their inability to gain access into mainstream society. They are out of place in Argentine society. Therefore, the ideal bourgeois family—one that works together guided by family values with ultimate goal of material and, consequentially, spiritual

wealth— is grotesquely replaced by Saverio's imposition of his values upon the family. This perversion of bourgeois values and the breaking down of the family is, as Blanco Amores de Pagella indicates, representative of a greater social phenomenon. She argues that the primary themes of *Mateo*, *Stéfano*, and *Relojero*, as well as *El organito*, “pueden encuadrarse dentro de un tema: la disolución social, a través del núcleo de la familia” (168). *El organito* is not simply relating how Saverio's family inevitably breaks down; it is also a social allegory that examines the collapse and eventual demise of an untenable value system and sense of place.

The first constellation in the universe of *El organito* is comprised of Saverio and Anyulina, the managers of the family. Saverio, as has been previously shown, dominates both his relationship with his wife and the family, effectively ruling the family through fear. Anyulina, who tends to the house, particularly the kitchen, is subservient to her husband's whims. In order to escape the difficult reality of her situation, she resorts to alcohol abuse. The second constellation in the play is that of Saverio and Anyulina's children. The three children are separated by merely three years: Humberto, the youngest, is fifteen; Florinda is seventeen; and Nicolás is eighteen. They are tied together by a strong affinity for one another: Humberto, in fact, once tells his brother, “Si no fuera por vos, ya me hubiera ido de esta casa,” to which Nicolás replies, “Yo también, payasito. Por vos y por Florinda” (508). Despite their ties to one another, Florinda is detached from her brothers as a consequence of her sex. As she is becoming a beautiful woman, Florinda possesses currency in the house that her brothers lack, for Saverio realizes that she, as a bride to a suitor such as Felipe, can help bring him wealth. Felipe,

for his part, is also part of the universe of *El organito*. Along with Mama Mía, Felipe is a distant star who is pulled into the family by a strong gravitational pull, Saverio's greed. However, unlike Mama Mía, who is Anyulina's brother and therefore part of what would have been considered the family nucleus, Felipe is an outsider to the family. He intends, however, to marry into the family, as he is hopelessly in love with Florinda.

Place, the space in which the characters interact and inhabit, both shapes and is shaped by Saverio and his family in *El organito*. More precisely, place distorts and is distorted by the characters in the place. Because of this grotesquely reciprocal relationship, the family becomes dissociated both from the physical environment in which they live and the familial environment in which they interact. This dissociation stems from the characters adherence to Saverio's reactionary value system. Rejecting the dominant bourgeois values of the times, Saverio and his family interiorize their impulses and their emotions. As their ability to express themselves affectively diminishes, the characters sever ties to the environment and themselves. This, ultimately, is what makes *El organito* grotesque:

La situación es grotesca entonces, en cuanto a que el hombre se mueve ciegamente dentro de ella, imposibilitado de comprenderla, y sin embargo, es su prisionero. Lo humano entonces (las emociones, los impulsos, las necesidades íntimas) choca frontalmente contra esta estructura en la que las necesidades son fabricadas y las emociones y los impulsos, controlados y canalizados dentro de una determinada vía, cuando no anulados por completo. Una realidad que deshumaniza y reduce al hombre es entonces una realidad grotesca. (Kaiser-Lenoir 87)

The value system that Saverio creates, which controls his family's interaction both within the family unit and in the public sphere, detaches the characters from their affective

faculties. The characters either totally repress or unhealthily sublimate that which makes them most human: their emotions. Anyulina, for example, clearly demonstrates this in her terse exchanges with Saverio at the end of the second act. Instead of answering in full sentences and constructively adding to the conversation, she speaks as briefly as possible, usually in one or two words, often not answering his questions. For example:

Saverio— [...] ¿Qué mira? ... Parece siempre que le pasara algo. ¿Qué tiene?

Anyulina – Nada.

Saverio – Todo esto será para usted cuando se me seque el brazo. ¡No mérenceno ne una, de limosna!

Anyulina – La sopa... (530).

It is only after Saverio meets his end that Anyulina has the ability to convey her thoughts to her husband. She is able to recover her communicative abilities because her tormentor no longer occupies a position of power. This is coupled, however, with an almost animalistic need for her to show that she now possesses power over him:

Saverio—(*De rodillas.*) ¡Dío! ... ¿E estos son mis hijos?

Anyulina – ¡Sí!

Saverio— ¿Los hijo mío?

Anyulina— ¡Sí! ... (*Zamarreando.*) ¡E Florinda también se ha ido!

Saverio— ¡No! ...

Anyulina – ¡Sí! ... (*Pone su alma en una bofetada.*). (534).

Each of Anyulina's deliberately emphatic responses of "sí" in the scene reflects that she has reclaimed her communicative abilities to some degree; however, she almost completely loses control of her affective faculties. This is clear in the stage directions: the Discépolo brothers employ the verb "zamarrear" to draw attention to the dramatic change in Anyulina's personality. Rather than discussing her emotions with Saverio,

she ferociously attacks him as if she were a wild animal. While her physical aggression toward her husband is initially empowering, she is still detached from her emotions.

A fundamental characteristic of the *grotesco criollo* is the ultimate failure, caused by a fundamental and deep-rooted flaw that is foreseeable, of the protagonist. *El organito* is no exception, as the place that Saverio has molded throughout the play is destroyed. Saverio's and, consequently, his family's downfall is precipitated by his children's dissatisfaction. Humberto and Nicolás, restricted by Saverio's hollow claim that they will have a better future than their current situation, come to realize that possibilities in life are limited. The following exchange exemplifies this:

Saverio— (Empieza a desesperar.) Pero... ¡hijos! ¡Ustedes no me quieren entender!... Yo no entro a la cuestión; se trata de ustedes. Ustedes tienen que ser mejores que yo.

Nicolás— Se asusta. ¿Qué pretende que seamos?

Humberto— ¿Comisarios?

Nicolás— ¿Farmacéuticos?

Humberto— ¿Doctores?

Nicolás— ¿Por dónde se va al trabajo honrado? ¿Engrupiendo con una joroba? ... ¿Viviendo aquí? ... ¡Ya estamos del otro lado! Esta mano de bleque no me la quite nadie. (531-532).

Instead of wanting to preserve the built, natural, and social environment that they inhabit, with which they have formed strong affective bonds, Humberto and Nicolás aim to annihilate place.

Humberto and Nicolás' appetite for destruction, as well as their mother Anyulina's overwhelming animalistic feelings, comes to head in the final scene of *El organito*. The topophobic feelings that dominate the characters' psyches throughout the play violently implode at the end of the play. It is a watershed point where Saverio's

family finally rejects the sense of place that he had imposed upon them. However, the characters are unable to ultimately escape the cruel logic that rules Saverio's world: "Esta es una escena clave: el proceso se repite nuevamente, sólo que ahora todos los participantes conocen perfectamente su lugar dentro del juego" (Kaiser-Lenoir 82). Despite this, they are successful in destroying the mask that their father has created for himself and his family. The sense of place that Saverio creates for himself and later extends to his family is not an attempt to provide a façade, a public mask that covers the private face. In other words, this mask is not a mask in the sense of the *grotesco italiano*, as Kaiser-Lenoir argues, but rather it is a coping mechanism to deal with the harsh realities of everyday life. It is the externalization of Saverio's need to justify the misdeeds he forces upon his family. The rationalization of this behavior convinces Saverio's family, especially his children, to follow their father's lead. They do this, at least in part, because Saverio promises them a better future. The promise of a better future, or the lack thereof, eventually convinces the children to act out against their father: Humberto and Nicolás decide to kill him while Florinda abandons the house for a life of prostitution.

The distorted affective bonds that its characters have to the place they inhabit drive the plot of *El organito*. In its grotesque representation of a particular sector of Buenos Aires, *El organito* acts as a social commentary about the dissolution of society in general and more specifically of the family. It is a microcosm of the disintegration of Argentine society. Saverio, pushed into a marginalized existence by a society that refused him, is unable to create a hospitable environment for his family. Instead, he

constructs a place whose logic is warped so that he may cope with being rejected by society. As in the case of other *grotescos*, this is represented in the stage. Martínez Landa's following quote is applicable to *El organito*:

El grotesco ubica sus obras en un espacio preconfigurado. Este se ha desplazado de los patios de los conventillos utilizados en el sainete a habitaciones o lugares cerrados. Este traslado no es casual, sino que se debe precisamente a la temática de las obras: la misma estrechez de espacios, la falta de claridad indican de un modo visual la carga de dolor y frustración que se cierne sobre los personajes. (9)

Saverio's home reflects the disordered logic interpolated by his family, especially his children. It is a mask that acts as a sense of place that controls not only the behavior of the characters with other people but also their relationships with the environment. Eventually, this sense of place, which is hollow at the center, ultimately causes Saverio's grotesque failure. It implodes, thus leading to the destruction of the family and the death of Saverio at the hands of his two sons.

#### **PLACE LOST: PROMISE AND FAILURE IN *STÉFANO* (1928)**

Place is often defined as a meaningful location in human geography. This perspective is suggested, both explicitly and implicitly, in the work of number of geographers; not the least being John Agnew in his *The United States in the World Economy*. In it, Agnew argues for a tripartite understanding of place as a meaningful location, as he puts forth that the fundamental aspects of place are location (i.e. empirical, physical geographical coordinates), locale (i.e. the material setting for the complex mesh

of social relations), and sense of place (i.e. the affective attachment to place).<sup>26</sup> As I have proposed throughout this chapter, a sense of place is at the root of Discépolo's critical examination of Argentine society in the *grotesco criollo*. This in no small part is due to the fact that in the *grotesco criollo* setting is fixed. The action of the play, therefore, is situated in one place.<sup>27</sup> This effectively limits both location and locale to the setting, which is constructed by Discépolo in the play and on the stage by the director. In many ways this is akin to the scientific method. Having already controlled setting, in the *grotesco criollo* Discépolo experiments with his characters' relationships with the built, natural, and social environment.

*Stéfano*, which arrived on the stage of the Teatro Cómico in Buenos Aires in April of 1928, is the most germane example of Discépolo's development of a sense of place in the play's characters. First performed by the celebrated actor Luis Arata's theater company, the play analyzes Stéfano's reaction to a dramatic shock in his sense of place. In doing so, it challenges the audience and reader's notion of Buenos Aires as a dynamic and modern place. It is the story of the relationship between a musician named Stéfano, whose once precocious talents have long since faded away, and his family. Much like Miguel and Saverio, Stéfano is an Italian immigrant who arrives on the shores of the New World to *hacer la América*. However, unlike the protagonists of *Mateo* and *El organito*, Stéfano arrives in Buenos Aires with the world at his feet. Having completed studies at a

---

<sup>26</sup> This description of Agnew's understanding of place as a meaningful location is indebted to Cresswell's *Place: A Short Introduction* (7-8).

<sup>27</sup> Two examples are Martínez Landa's "Signos secundarios del texto dramático. Su importancia en el grotesco" (1987) and Sanhueza's *Continuidad, transformación y cambio: el grotesco criollo de Armando Discépolo* (2004).



conservatory in his homeland, where he is considered to be nothing less than the next Verdi, Stéfano uproots his parents Alfonso and María Rosa from their land and moves them to Buenos Aires, a dynamic place where fortune is easily made. His fortune, he promises, will be reaped initially from directing operas and then from writing an operatic masterpiece. Upon arriving to Buenos Aires, he marries a beautiful Argentine woman, Margarita, with whom he has three children, Esteban, Neca, and Radamés.

As time progressed, promise gave way to reality and Stéfano is unable to dedicate time to his envisioned masterpiece, forced instead to grind a living through working in a small orchestra. While it provides his family with enough money for sustenance, his position in the orchestra crushes both his creativity and his work ethic. Unfortunately, and tragically for the mouths Stéfano once fed, the former prodigy loses his position in the orchestra. Stéfano's world, and his understanding of his role within it, is further shaken by the revelation that his job was not stolen from him by his protégé Pastore as he initially thought but rather he was fired. Not only does the exposure of the true cause for his dismissal further enervate the already fragile Stéfano, it sets off a course of events that eventually leads him towards his macabre end at the death of the play.

In *Stéfano*, Discépolo creates an environment in which textures of space are conveyed through a plurality of voices. Osvaldo Pellettieri argues that, “En este sentido, Stéfano también es el paradigma del género, cada personaje expresa una tensa polifonía, un áspero mundo de razones que chocan con las de los demás y aún contra las propias” (Pellettieri, “Los cien años” 142). This multiplicity of perspectives, while being symptomatic of the *grotesco criollo* in general, is particularly salient in *Stéfano* because it

signals a change from the centralized point of view of *Mateo* and *El organito*. In the previous *grotescos*, the understanding of the individual characters' role within the bourgeois moral framework was controlled by a dominant figure (i.e. Miguel and Saverio). In *Stéfano*, this authoritative perspective, a guiding light for social comportment, is lost as Discépolo provides often-contradictory interpretations of reality. René de Costa suggests that this shift, which is carried out through the use of dark humor, signals a move away from a realist aesthetics toward one that is more introverted and more symbolic when he states:

Stéfano no es una pieza naturalista en que el autor se contenta con documentar, para aleccionamiento del espectador, el fracaso de un individuo; al contrario, es un moderno grotesco (criollo, por añadidura) que desafía la sensibilidad del público, divirtiéndolo primero (y sólo divirtiéndolo) para luego inquietar. (De Costa, "Stéfano" 91)

In order to challenge the moral sensibilities of the reader/spectator, Discépolo locates the play's action within a specific context, namely the immigrant experience, which is embodied in *Stéfano* by the title character.

The bourgeois ideology that dominated the Argentine social imaginary of the early twentieth century was partially founded on the foundational myth that the individual can rise above the situation in which she was raised. This ideology was perhaps felt strongest by the waves of immigrants who, much like Stéfano, arrived in the country hoping to ascend the social ladder. As Horacio Salas states in his article "La ciudad de Stéfano," "Buenos Aires era una ciudad esperanzada, a cuyo puerto arribaban contingentes con la ilusión de hacer la América" (15). Coupled with the Romantic notion of inherent and transcendental genius— another tenet of this ideology— Stéfano comes

to believe that by simply moving his family to Buenos Aires he will acquire enormous material wealth. With his undeniable natural talent and a little hard work, Stéfano believes that he will succeed and forge a better place for his family in the Americas. In the play, the musical promise that led Stéfano to move to the New World is divulged in two ways. First, through the words of his father, who bitterly complains to Stéfano about how he convinced his parents to move to Argentina in a key episode in the play. He recalls that Stéfano told him, “‘Sí, papá; nu músico chélebre... como Verdi’ [...] ‘Ho ganado una medalla d’oro’... Me la mostraste. La tenimo a la mano... Yoramo todo” (588). He later continues, “‘Mamá... papa... véngano. Véndamo todo. No puedo vivir sen ustede. Quiero apagarle todo lo que han hecho por mé. [...] Empieza la fortuna. Voy a ser direttore a un teatro. Estoy escribiendo l’opera fenómenoale. A Bono Saria yueven esterlina” (589). Stéfano assures his parents, especially his mother, that he is going to make a fortune as a director and compositor. Buenos Aires is, as he says, a place in which British pounds fall from the sky. The musical promise that compelled Stéfano to convince his parents to accompany him in Argentina is also commented upon by a number of other characters in the play, including Stéfano himself. This is best demonstrated in a conversation between Stéfano and Radamés. Even the young Radamés trumps his father’s promise, parroting what he had heard from others. He tells Stéfano, “‘Usté es un gran maestro, papa, yo estoy orgulloso de ser su hijo. Un gran maestro que va a fabricar una gran opera” (592). Stéfano’s contentment at hearing his son’s praise diminishes after he finds out that it was years ago since Margarita told her son of his

promise. Radamés exits, leaving Stéfano to shrink, lowering himself so much so that the table almost hides him.

Early in the play, Stéfano's failure to realize his great promise is established through Alfonso's complaints. Although these grumblings are certainly important in establishing the emotional balance of the play, the reader/spectator is affectively situated by the stage directions, which create a sense of place. As in other works of the *grotesco criollo*, Discépolo uses setting to reflect the relationship his characters share with the physical environment. In *Stéfano*, the play is set in an old house in a poor neighborhood. The house's furnishings are both humble and in a state of decadence; in other words, it is a place abounding with faded elegance. Take for example the description of a corner on the director's left, "Detrás, en el rincón, un antiguo sofá de cuero, amplio, roto, con almohadones casi vacíos" (575). Martínez Landa argues that the setting, as demonstrated in the description of the old leather couch, reveals the reality in which Stéfano's family finds itself:

El ambiente escénico, ya desde el comienzo, se muestra a sí mismo en su verdadera esencia, sin enmascaramientos, contraponiéndose al encubrimiento que los personajes hacen de sus propios dramas y se convierten así en signo del verdadero conflicto de los mismos. (10)

Effectively stripping off the affective veneer glossing the relationships shared between family members, the setting immediately reveals to the reader/spectator the raw emotional content of *Stéfano*.

If the setting provides a sense of Stéfano's failure, it also tacitly reflects the economic realities of his family's existence. The poverty in which Stéfano's family finds

itself, manifested in the setting, is at the root of Stéfano's inability to realize his immense promise. His necessity to make ends meet, even in the most modest of ways, stifles Stéfano's creativity. For the future Verdi, accepting a miserable chair in a small orchestra represents both an act desperation and one of extreme compromise. This compromise, even at the cost of his self-worth, is driven by Stéfano's need to support his family. "La necesidad de trabajar en lo ajeno, forzado por las circunstancias ha matado su talento. Como ser humano, ha sido (en esta frustración de su impulso creador vital) mutilado y negado" (Kaiser-Lenoir 77). Forced to work so hard in a position with little artistic reward, Stéfano's creativity is stunted and his talent is lost to the daily grind of his existence. The spectator/reader encounters in *Stéfano* a protagonist who has been mutilated by his situation.

Stéfano's nadir in the play occurs when he becomes aware of the reasoning behind his dismissal from the orchestra. Initially, after conversing with Vaccaro the French hornist, he blames his misfortune on Pastore, his former protégé who took over his chair. Believing that he has been hoodwinked out of his job, Stéfano relishes the opportunity to confront his ostensibly conniving pupil. This occurs in the final episode of the first act when Stéfano thinks that Pastore is coming by not only to pick up a score that Stéfano had been working on but also out of schadenfreude. In an attempt to counter his possible degradation, he humiliates the ignorant Pastore by rattling off questions the protégé cannot answer correctly. In one instance, Stéfano comically asks, "¿Qué era Mozart? ¿Alemán o polaco?" to which his disciple nervously chooses one of the

incorrect answers, “Polaco” (603).<sup>28</sup> To another question Pastore answers that New York is the capital of the United States. Finally unable to take any more ridicule, Pastore tentatively confronts his mentor. After Stéfano attacks him several times for being an ungrateful, talentless fool, Pastore reveals the real reason Stéfano was fired: he could no longer play his trombone in tune. Stéfano is shattered by the news: “El efecto de la revelación es devastador. Stéfano por primera vez se confiesa a sí mismo lo que jamás antes pudo admitirse: sus posibilidades creativas han muerto hace rato, aplastadas por la necesidad material, por los deberes hacia los suyos” (Kaiser-Lenoir 72). Unable to play his instrument as it should be played, perhaps because of old age, Stéfano is no longer of any use to the orchestra. Becoming aware that he can no longer play in tune, Stéfano finally realizes how his talent has been maimed and how his life is disfigured.

Stéfano’s being out of tune is indicative of a larger problem in the play. Regarding his situation, Dowling states, “[...] desafina; es decir que, simbólicamente, ha perdido la habilidad de comunicarse y, por consiguiente, de funcionar— incluso mediante la orquestación ajena. Con esto Stéfano se pierde totalmente” (59). He has not only lost the ability to stay in tune musically, but he also is unable to harmonize with others as well as he can no longer participate effectively in co-constructive conversations. In a sense, he is out of place both musically and communicatively. Due to his role as the *pater familias*, the grotesque situation in which Stéfano finds himself is also that of his family. Effectively, they too lose the ability to be in tune with both others and their own

---

<sup>28</sup> Mozart, of course, was born in Salzburg and rose to fame in Vienna. Anachronistically he would therefore be Austrian.

situation.<sup>29</sup> Kaiser-Lenoir argues that, “Poco a poco los personajes se van substrayendo al código y se manifiestan como seres cuyos impulsos íntimos y cuyas necesidades de la comunicación afectiva se van reduciendo” (136). Much like Stéfano, his family members slowly lose control of their ability to relate emotionally in a substantive way with other people. The emotional stunting caused by Stéfano’s inability to write the great opera he has promised to produce transfers to the rest of his family.

Stéfano’s sense of place, so out of tune with reality, is passed on to his children.<sup>30</sup> In the play, one notes that “En su hijo Esteban, joven poeta, un segundo Stéfano, se reconoce como él fue al principio, con las mismas esperanzas y los mismos ideales” (Kaiser-Lenoir 73). A conversation between Stéfano and Margarita, which occurs just before Pastore arrives to the family’s home, also demonstrates this situation. In it, two exchanges are particularly telling. In the first, Stéfano tries calming Margarita’s fears after he told her he lost his position in the orchestra. He implicitly attempts to sustain the foundational myth of his promise and talent. She responds by attacking the myth (i.e. that he will write a great opera) that has sustained both Stéfano and his family’s hopes for such a long time:

Stéfano—No se han terminado las orquestas en Buenos Aires.  
Margarita— No lo vas a conseguir.

---

<sup>29</sup> This loss, of which he was totally unconscious but for which he is completely responsible, is what makes Stéfano a grotesque figure. More specifically, it is what makes him a figure of the *grotesco criollo*. Pellettieri argues, “Mientras que el personaje del grotesco italiano oculta su problema vital con un gesto, lo encubre con una máscara, el anti-héroe del grotesco criollo no conoce su problema; es ridículo porque hay una distancia muy grande entre lo que él cree que es y lo que en realidad representa para los demás” (Pellettieri, “Armando Discépolo” 59). His anger toward and humiliation of Pastore is even more ridiculous when the reader/spectator finds out that Stéfano had in fact been out of tune for a while and that his job had previously been saved by his colleagues, including his protégé, before.

<sup>30</sup> In the play, one notes that “En su hijo Esteban, joven poeta, un segundo Stéfano, se reconoce como él fue al principio, con las mismas esperanzas y los mismos ideales” (Kaiser-Lenoir 73).

Stéfano— ¿Por qué?

Margarita— Porque vos no conseguís nada; porque no has conseguido nunca nada; porque vos, lo único que has hecho en tu vida es confiar en todos los que te hunden y perdonar a todos menos a los que te quieren; porque sos siempre el ultimo; porque pudiendo ser el primero sos siempre el ultimo. ¡Con lo que sabés! ... Otro son ricos, famosos, con la mitá de lo que sabés. Es tu falta de carácter y modestia mal entendida lo que nos tiene así. (598-599)

This exchange exemplifies Margarita's disillusionment at her family's situation, which she believes to be a product of Stéfano's creative impotence. She is resigned to the fact that Stéfano will be unable to find a position in a different orchestra, as well as the great promise that guided her family will never happen. This is central to the narrative of the play because it challenges the premise on which Stéfano and his family live their lives. Kaiser-Lenoir argues that, "Sobre todo para quien hizo de los mitos éticos tradicionales la plataforma de su acción; los validó para sí mismo y los convirtió en base para su relación con los otros, éste es un fracaso doble. Toda su familia vive de los mismos mitos que él fabricó para sí" (73). In this sense, the exchange between Stéfano and Margarita demonstrates that she and her family have extinguished the hope that Stéfano's creative brilliance will save them. Their lives have become demythified. This is reinforced in the second telling exchange in the episode. Here, Margarita refuses to listen to Stéfano's promises:

Stéfano— [...] Cálmate Margarita. Tiene razón... tiene razón... (*La acaricia.*) Ma yo te prometo...

Margarita— Dejame.

Stéfano— No. Yo te prometo que... (*Le mete un dedo en un ojo*)

Margarita— ¡Ay!

Stéfano— Perdón.

Margarita— (*Rabiosa*) ¡Ay! (600)

Stéfano, as Elisa Troiani proposes in "*Stéfano: Promises and Other Speech Acts*," has lost communicative power. In fact, as this exchange shows, his ability to communicate



effectively has been completely lost. Margarita refuses to accept any of his promises. Even his gestures have become disfigured; his caress, once having a calming effect on his wife, grotesquely fails when he accidentally pokes her in the eye.

The end of the first act is the culmination of the demythification of Stéfano's promise. The family's sense of place, founded in the foundational myth that Stéfano fabricated and onto which the rest of the family members base their social interaction, is irreparably destabilized. Consequently, it represents the destruction of the code that previously ordered the family's lives:

Esta destrucción implica entonces una pérdida del *orden*. Si su actuación hasta entonces estuvo condicionada por el incentivo del comportamiento social, este substraerse a lo social implica también una renuncia a la coherencia integradora. Incapaz de soportar el desengaño, muere, enganchado a una pata de la mesa, caído en el suelo y balando como una oveja. (Kaiser-Lenoir 73).

The destroyal of this order has great implications in the play. Stéfano's realization, and that of his family, that he will not write the great opera that he has dreamed of for decades causes him to feel out of place in an environment with which he was well acquainted. In fact, the feeling of being out of place provokes him to lose his mind. In the play's epilogue, Stéfano is reduced to a shell of his former self. Drunk, he sings a nursery rhyme to the furniture and plays an imaginary mandoline. Mocking those myths that previously had kept his family together, Stéfano slides further away from rationality, imagining himself to be someone or something else in another reality. Eventually, working himself into a feverish state, he finally burns out. Discépolo describes Stéfano's final words in the following way: "[...] Yo soy una cabra. Me e e... Me e e...Uh... cuánta salsa... Cómo sube... Una

cabra... Qué cosa... M'estoy muriendo... (*Pone la cara en el suelo.*) Me e e... (*Muere.*)” (621). Ridiculously clutching a table, Stéfano dies.<sup>31</sup>

*Stéfano* centers on its characters loss of a sense of place. In the play, the affective attachment the characters share with the place they inhabit is based on the hope of Stéfano's promise. It is the hollow foundation onto which their relationship to the built, natural, and social environment is based. Although they live in the precariousness of poverty, the opera Stéfano will compose is going to lift them out of their situation into another. However, this promise is extinguished when Stéfano loses his position in the orchestra, which previously had provided him both a literal and symbolic place within a harmonious and hierarchical space. Out of tune, perhaps because of old age, Stéfano has allowed years of promise to pass him by. Having finally fully realized that he is a failure, Stéfano loses his mind. Mentally unstable, in the epilogue Stéfano nihilistically attempts to destroy the institution he once headed: the family. To do so, he derides the emotions that tie the family together: “A partir de la burla Stéfano rechaza las propias bases afectivas sobre la que esta institución se apoya: el respeto, el deber y el sacrificio” (Kaiser-Lenoir 75). Stéfano decenters these values—so central to the bourgeois institution of the family— through mocking them. In the end, however, the joke is on Stéfano: he experiences a farcical and macabre death.

### **HOME FRAGMENTED: THE *CONVENTILLO*, PLACE, AND SOCIAL MORES IN *CREMONA* (1932)**

Of the five plays that Discépolo baptized as works of the *grotesco criollo*, *Cremona* is perhaps the most challenging to examine critically. Dramatically different

---

<sup>31</sup> De Costa describes the emotion in the audience that the ridiculousness of the final scene evokes: “Naturalmente se ve ridículo, y es entonces cuando él no puede más y muere; en esta funesta escena final es cuando se le engancha el pie en una pata de la mesa, mientras está muriéndose entre las involuntarias risitas del público. Risitas que pronto se convierten en silencio, el silencio del distanciamiento que preludia nuestra comprensión de la tragedia de ser ordinario” (94).

than other *grotescos*—so much so that Pellettieri fails to categorize it— *Cremona* departs from the others in a number of manners.<sup>32</sup> José Navarrete, for his part, claims that in the play, “Discépolo la fue complejizando desde nuevos enfoques estéticos que, en forma de notas simbólicas, expresionistas, impresionistas, absurdas, etc., están señalando una nueva evolución de su concepción grotesca anterior con aportes que, en nuestra opinión, la enriquecen” (Navarrete 59). This shift in aesthetic focus is immediately apparent in the narrative structure in *Cremona*, which divides the action of the play into six short *luces*, instead of the longer acts preferred in other *grotescos*. The fractioning of the play into smaller narrative units, more like vignettes than acts, is representative of its splintered plot. Instead of being centered on a familial unit like the Salerno family in *Mateo*, the plot in *Cremona* does not relate a single narrative trajectory but rather it examines the splintered social life of a *conventillo*.

The movement away from narrating the struggles of an individual family unit has two important ramifications in the play. First, the sheer number of characters in *Cremona* is staggering in comparison to other *grotescos*. More significant is that the play shifts focus away from more central figures to follow the lives of even the most minor of its characters. Second, Discépolo moves the play from the dark, disquietingly intimate home—a room in a *conventillo* in *Mateo*, a suburban garage in *El organito*, a suburban dump in *Stéfano*, and a humble workshop/home in *Relojero*— to a public space: the patio of Nicola’s *conventillo*. Further highlighting the difference of *Cremona* from other plays

---

<sup>32</sup> In his categorization of Discépolo’s *grotesco criollo* into three phases (the *grotesco asainetado*, the canonical *grotesco*, and the introspective *grotesco*), Pellettieri does not categorize *Cremona*. See both “El

of the *grotesco criollo* is the fact that the play does not focus on the unavoidable failure of a *pater familias*. Discépolo largely steers clear of the tragic figure of the grotesque protagonist for the majority of the play by favoring following the trials and tribulations of other characters. These include two love triangles, which Ordaz argues are more characteristic of the *grotesco italiano* than the *grotesco criollo* (“Acercamientos” 7); the teenage endeavors of two boys, Antoñito and Azafran; and the death of young Greek couple’s child.

The fractured narrative that dominates much of *Cremona* is reflected in its characters’ relationship to the environment. In the play, the *conventillo* is not a progressive space bonding together external and internal immigrants hailing from such diverse places as Italy, Turkey, and Buenos Aires province under an ethos of hard-work and individual sacrifice as it was in the *sainetes* of playwrights like Pacheco, Sánchez, and Vacarezza. Rather, in *Cremona*, the *conventillo* is the entropic center of the social life of a representative cross-section of *porteños*. Moving away from the comic realism and *costumbrismo* of the *sainete*, Discépolo depicts social life in the *conventillo* through both expressionism and realism. Ultimately, he represents the *conventillo* as a place that is governed by social values that are disconnected from socioeconomic reality. Kaiser-Lenoir claims, “En *Cremona* nos encontramos con que ciertas virtudes activas que eran pilares éticos en la tradición occidental cristiana ya no tienen ninguna vigencia a pesar de seguir estructurando esa sociedad a nivel superficial” (101). Discépolo uses three

---

grotesco criollo o la productividad de un género popular en el sistema teatral argentino” and “El grotesco criollo: peculiaridades de un género argentino.”

characters in the play to show that the values that ostensibly structure social life are at best tenuous. To do so he weaves together in the play the social values of Cremona, Emilio, and Nicola. They reflect *porteño* social life in different ways: Cremona acts as a negative image, Emilio embodies the internalization of survival strategies, and Nicola casts its mirror image. The disparity of their perspectives is emblematic of the fragmentation of an ethical pillar of Western tradition, especially that of the bourgeoisie in the beginning of the twentieth century: the familial unit. As the myth of this nucleus disintegrates, slipping away with its sense of place, the comportment of the characters becomes increasingly grotesque. Ultimately, power controls these characters' relationships to one another and the physical environment.

Cremona is a figure whose social values are polemical to the other inhabitants of Nicola's *conventillo*. His understanding of social mores and his individual moral practice are considered to be nonsensical, strange, and otherwise useless by his neighbors. Instead of reacting negatively to the pressures of the environment, Cremona attempts to cope with its inhospitality. However unfair life may be, he believes that people must deal the best they can with their lot in life. This perspective is clear in a conversation with Silvestre, a grey-haired man who constantly is bickering with his wife, in which Cremona claims:

Mire la hormiguita. (*Arrodillado.*) Da gusto ver qué bien carga encima. Sufre el peso de la vida (*Se afiebra.*) sufre quién sabe qué clase de dolores que no son suyos, pero sigue, decidida, cumpliendo su destino. Es que sin saberlo ella misma (*se apaga.*) —díceno—(*sonriente.*) quiere a todas las hormiguitas. Por eso está alegre, por eso no le importa lo que piensan los demás animales. (116)

The bourgeois Christian value system to which Cremona adheres is untenable within the environment where he lives. These values are out of place in the *conventillo*, which Discépolo represents as a kind of storehouse of human misery. The realities of the *conventillo*— where the individual struggles with the difficulties of everyday life, at times having to scratch and claw to survive— are such that Cremona’s neighbors cynically disregard his perspective of the world. While mocking the values for which he stands, there is a sense in Cremona that his neighbors’ reactions are driven by envy. Perhaps the strong reaction to his virtuous conduct is irreverent not because they find him priggish or self-righteous but rather because they are resentful of his ability to maintain his value system. Consequently, Cremona cuts an ambivalent figure for he is represented by Discépolo and regarded by other characters as being at once highly moral, almost sanctimonious, and clownish. A germane example of this first perspective is encountered at the end of the play when Nicola charges, “¡Está copiando a Jesucristo!” (155). Coupled with the symbolism that accompanies Cremona’s messianic, albeit grotesquely so, death, Discépolo paints his protagonist as a highly ethical and righteous individual. On the other hand, such as the episode when he is tricked out of his money by two teenagers, Cremona is also a laughable figure in the play. In this scene, Antoñito and Azafran effectively project the *conventillo*’s conflicting sentiment toward the affable immigrant.

While Antoñito and Azafran ridicule Cremona and his values, they look toward Emilio as a mentor. By placing their trust in Emilio’s advice the two teenagers implicitly express their belief that his value system is the best to cope with their own situations.

Emilio's moral code is highly individual, privileging his personal situation above that of any other person or collective unit. In this sense, Emilio can be considered to be a social Darwinian, although he would surely never know it. Because he presumes that life and success in the *conventillo* is a question of the survival of the fittest, his value system is highly relativistic and extremely place-based. If Cremona's value system manifests bourgeois Christian values that are guided by normative rules and utopic aspirations, Emilio's morals consists of "leyes estructuradas sobre la desconfianza, el oportunismo y la defensa de lo conquistado, leyes que se corroboran en la actuación de los otros personajes del conventillo" (Kaiser-Lenoir 103). Emilio's life as the *guapo*, a daring young man whose aversion to an honest day's work is only matched by his attractiveness, of the *conventillo* appeals to the teenagers' ambitions. Antoñito and Azafran devour Emilio's street-wise advice as they are seduced by his sexual conquests (e.g. the married Cristina), as well as his easy natured banter. Juxtaposed with the bloated principles of the corpulent Cremona, Emilio seems to provide a practical value system.

Nicola provides a third understanding of the relationship between the individual and social values in *Cremona*. At the beginning of the play, Nicola eschews the social mores that guide society because they are not sufficiently modern. This perspective stems from his dysfunctional relationship with his younger wife, thirteen years his junior, whose presence is absent from the play. Although he is the owner of the *conventillo*, Nicola cannot provide enough creature comforts for the materialistic Cecilia, which leads

her to enter into an extramarital affair with Don Carlito.<sup>33</sup> This, perhaps, would not be so central to Nicola's perspective of social values if it were not for the fact the entire *conventillo* knows about Cecilia's indiscretions. In a particularly telling scene in the second *luz*, he tells Cremona, "No comprende nada. ¿Cosa de fundamento? ... Ninguna. Vive atrasada de un siglo, por lo meno. Me desprecian, me insultan, me escupen, porque mi mujer tiene un amante" (126). Instead of outwardly reviling his wife's cheating, Nicola sublimates his emotions and rationalizes her behavior. For Nicola, it is not that Cecilia is transgressing social mores but rather it is that the value system to which others adhere is regressive. Kaiser-Lenoir argues that "Nicola representa al hombre que para sobrevivir tiene que acomodarse a las circunstancias, aunque ese acomodamiento implique una supresión de sus impulsos y sentimientos. Se abre de esta manera un enorme vacío entre el yo profundo y la manifestación social de ese yo" (104-105). The sublimation of the emotional damage caused by his unhealthy relationship with Cecilia fractures his perspective of his relationship with social mores. Outwardly, as demonstrated in his conversation with Cremona, he claims that he accepts his wife's unfaithfulness—it is, in fact, *modern*— while inwardly he is deeply conflicted. This is evident when his fortunes seemingly change.

Nicola's value system shifts again after he appears to have won the lottery. In the aforementioned conversation, he tells Cremona that since meeting Don Carlito he plays the lottery. His only hope to recapture his wife's affection resides on winning a fortune

---

<sup>33</sup> Like Cecilia, Don Carlito is absent from the play. His name suggests youth and wealth through coupling the respectful form of address "Don" with the diminutive "-ito." He is a dentist who worked on Nicola:



through chance. After playing for some time the same number, Cecilia's age, Nicola finds out that the thirty-two has won, garnering the winner ten thousand four hundred thirty two pesos.<sup>34</sup> He reacts swiftly to the news. First, he ends Cecilia's ignominious affair and takes away her freedom, locking her in their apartment. Second, he throws a party to supposedly celebrate his luck. The party is a ruse for his true intent: to insult and humiliate those who had callously mocked him because of his wife's indiscretions. Nicola's reaction to winning the lottery, and consequently putting him back into a position of power, displaces his previous understanding of social values. He quickly forgets about the "modernity" that guided his marriage and the openness it engendered after hitting the jackpot. Rather, he uses money as a means by which to control his wife. Additionally, the jackpot affords Nicola the social currency to disgrace and disparage others in the *conventillo*. It is because of this change that Navarrete considers Nicola in the following manner: "Él es el gran personaje grotesco de la obra, en el sentido de ser aquel a través de quien se evidencia esa tensión entre la 'máscara social' y el 'rostro' individual, aprisionado tras aquella" (62). Nicola's grotesqueness is further amplified by cruel misfortune: having played the same number innumerable times, Nicola forgot to buy a ticket the week it finally hit the jackpot. The ticket he thought won was in fact from the week before. Instead of becoming instantly wealthy, Nicola is humiliated even more than ever. When he realizes this, the embittered owner of the *conventillo* is left little choice

---

"A mí me arrancó dos dientes negros y me puso dos blancos, dos perlas" (127).

<sup>34</sup> To put this into some perspective in the play, Cremona pays Nicola six pesos a month for rent. The jackpot would roughly cover one hundred and forty-five years of Cremona's payments.

than to return back to his previous value system. Cecilia, who one can assume is not content to return to the status quo, leaves Nicola in the final *luz*.

The presentation of these three distinct perspectives of the individual's experience and moral practice *vis-à-vis* social mores in *Cremona* is representative of the play's fragmented narrative. Instead of weaving together threads from each of the *conventillo*'s inhabitants to form a narrative tapestry, Discépolo intertwines their stories in a chaotic knot that ends the play. Navarrete proposes that, "Es como si Discépolo hubiera centralizado la acción en un hecho" (60). Much like when a number of threads inadvertently come to form a knot, this single occurrence is doubly perplexing: the reader/spectator cannot trace back how the different stories became so entangled and she necessarily finds unraveling the threads almost impossible. It is difficult to trace how the characters arrive at Cremona's death. The play's grotesque climax occurs when an outraged mob led by Nicola kills Cremona for helping a neighbor hide the bodies of Emilio and Cristina. Roque, Cristina's husband, avenges his wife's illicit liaison by murdering the lovers. Instead of recognizing the gentle Cremona's misdirected act of charity, the *conventillo* illogically rise up against him, placing blame upon his portly shoulders and brutally beating him to death. Making the scene more macabre is the final line of the play, which reads: "Cremona. – (*Con su cara de llanto. La boca abierta. Sonríe.*) ... Vestre... Nada, hijos, nada... sangre. (*Ya no hay luz.*) (155). Bleeding to death, Cremona attempts to alleviate Antónito and Azafran's worry. All the while, struggling with the agony of knowing his last breath is near, he smiles.

As indicated by the final stage direction “(*Ya no hay luz.*)” light is central to Discépolo’s development of the plot in *Cremona*. Navarrete points out that the stage directions pay attention to the light of day. They read: “Noche de verano” (103), “Una noche oscura” (120), “Ocaso rosado” (130), “En la oscuridad [...]” (139), “No ha amanecido aún” (143), and “Noche muy oscura” (146). Playing with the word “luz,” which in the context of *Cremona* can either refer to light or an act of the play, Navarrete argues that, “Todas estas ‘luces’ responde a una misma paleta baja, sombría, aterradora” (Navarrete 59). This low, somber, frightful palette reflects the fragmentation of place and social mores in the play. The fates of the three primary characters, so tied together, manifest this failure: a mob led by Nicola brutally murders Cremona for concealing Emilio’s death. Cremona’s execution, which ties Emilio’s murder to Nicola’s role in the slaughter, represents the death of the social mores that guided the Argentine society of the time. Kaiser-Lenoir affirms this when she states, “Esta destrucción de Cremona es la destrucción de las virtudes que la sociedad ha tornado inválidas. Una figura como la suya no tiene posibilidades de actuación positiva en una realidad cuyas leyes nada tienen que ver con los principios que se enuncian” (103).

#### **AFFECTIVE DISPLACEMENT IN *RELOJERO* (1934)**

*Relojero*—written in 1933 and produced for the first time in the Teatro San Martín by Luis Arata’s company June 23 the following year— brought an end both to the cycle of works of the *grotesco criollo* and Armando Discépolo’s creative production.<sup>35</sup> Having

---

<sup>35</sup> Osvaldo Pellettieri, in his essay “Los cien años de un inventor: Armando Discépolo”, argues that Discépolo had grown weary of how his *grotescos* were often confused to be more traditional *sainetes*.

already penned over thirty plays, either alone or in collaboration, Discépolo never wrote another one, choosing instead to dedicate his life to directing others' works.<sup>36</sup> It is not for this sole reason, however, that it is a special play within the constellation of the *grotesco criollo*. Unlike other works of the genre, dire economic conditions and poverty do not drive the movement of the plot in *Relojero*. While the inability to feed their families led Miguel to crime in *Mateo* and the title character to waste away his innate talent in *Stéfano*, economic necessity is not a central theme in *Relojero*. Rather, the plot revolves around “un relojero perteneciente a la clase media, un hombre que económicamente no tiene los problemas de sus antecesores” (Sanhueza, “Relojero” 347). Fears dealing with money are not wholly alleviated in *Relojero*, but they are certainly allayed by the family's economic position. Because of this, Discépolo moves a theme that is peripheral in other works of the *grotesco criollo* to the forefront: the gap between generations. Given his tendency to reflect environmental discord in the stage directions, Discépolo's description of the set tellingly reflects this division. The stage is divided in *Relojero* into two sections: the workshop, which houses both physically the clocks Daniel repairs and metaphorically the conservative moral code imparted upon the *relojero* by his parents and relatives, and the rest of the home, which is dominated by the children. This allows for the simultaneous, or nearly simultaneous, representation of the story (Sanhueza,

---

Using reception theory, particularly that of Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss, Pellettieri proposes that the *grotesco criollo* had not yet arrived upon the horizon of expectation of the theatergoing public (143). Also, references to the original text are from: *Obras escogidas: Tomo 3*. Buenos Aires: Jorge Álvarez, 1969.

<sup>36</sup> These included such diverse works as de Filippo's *Inner Voices*, Gogol's *The General Inspector*, Pirandello's *Tonight We Improvise*, and Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (Tálice 37).

*Continuidad* 444) and consequently mirrors the competition, discord, and split between the different experiences and perceptions of each generation.

The bisection of the stage in *Relojero*, cutting Daniel and his family's home into two distinct lived spaces, reflects the tension that the play's characters feel with regard to place. This tension is most explicitly felt not by the immigrant *pater familias*, as had been the case in previous *grotescos*, but rather by his grown children. The children in *Relojero*—the twins Andrés and Lito, short for Danielito, and Nené, short for Irene—struggle to form a meaningful and tangible relationship with place. Despite their youthful dogmatism, especially in the cases of Lito and Nené, they are unable to feel at home in their situations. The children in *Relojero* feel out of place because they are unable to form affective bonds to the environment in which they live. While never explicitly revealed in *Relojero*, the volatile climate of Buenos Aires in the early 1930s—so marked by cultural, political, and social conflict and uncertainty—is undoubtedly felt by the children in the play. Andrés, Lito, and Nené interiorize this out-of-placeness. Their consequent unhappiness is a source of conflict with their elders. Daniel notes this when he states that his parents, “Fueron más felices que nosotros. Vieron cómo los obedecíamos, cómo los imitábamos. En vez los hijos de ahora...” to which his brother Bautista responds, “Parecen ajenos” (636). Bautista and Daniel intuit their children's inability to relate with the built, natural, and social environment and their subsequent feelings of otherness toward place.

The apogee of affective displacement of the younger generation is Nené's suicide in the final act. In a certain sense, the fourth act begins by recalling the first. It is as if

nothing has changed as Lito and Nené are together in the house. Lito is studying, just as in the beginning of the play, but Nené's not playing the piano. This is telling of her mental state, which had been severely damaged due to the end of her relationship with her boyfriend, Gerardo. While undoubtedly a product of failed love, Nené's death at her own hand stems from feelings of being out of place that are rooted in her parents' urgings not to contradict the dominant moral value system by living with a man without getting married and the failure of her own moral system. Along with her relationship, Nené's ideology fails her, leaving her on unstable ground at the end of the play. She ultimately is unable to cope with this affective displacement.

The course of Nené's relationship to Gerardo is mapped out throughout *Relojero*. In the first act of the play Nené argues that because she is a modern woman, who is driven by love and not obligation, she does not need the legal and moral security of a marriage. She tells her father, "Papá, si Gerardo... si ese hombre ha de ser el amor de mi vida, sobra el compromiso que me obligue a amarlo; si no ha de serlo, ¿por qué he de firmar un compromiso que no podré cumplir?" (644). Her belief continues into the second and third acts, in which she is cohabitating with Gerardo. In the second act she exclaims, "¡Ah! ... ¿Cómo se podría explicar lo que siento? Imposible. Me parece que soy gigantesca" (674). In the third act, Irene insinuates that Nené looks as if something is wrong in her relationship when she asks her daughter, "¿Te has disgustado con Gerardo?" (694). Finally, in the fourth act, Gerardo has broken up with Nené through a letter, which Lito reads outloud. Gerardo's mawkish letter breaks off the relationship, but in it he does not take responsibility for his changed feelings. Rather, he ambiguously professes:

Todo es tuyo. Yo me llevo tu perfume y tu mirada inolvidable. Y no pienses que ya tengo otro amor. Tu recuerdo vivo me lo impedirá aún por muchos días. Quisiera que no fuesen tantos para mí. Mañana embarco para Europa. Solo. Condenarme a no verte, estando cerca de ti, sería un dolor inútil, que no quiero padecer. (697)

The pain that drives Nené to commit suicide derives from her disillusionment with a value system that has failed her, i.e. her own, and one that is antiquated, i.e. that of her parents. After Gerardo leaves her, she is left without a place. She takes matters into her own hands. The stage directions read, “*Nené saca de su cartera una cajita. Traga unas píldoras o un polvillo. Se acuesta. El veneno la sienta e instantáneamente la tiende. Acción sencilla*” (712). Thinking that his daughter has gone to sleep, Daniel consoles her, telling her that “*días de primavera vendrán*” (712). It is only after Lito rushes in that Daniel is able to realize what has just happened. He is rendered speechless by the realization that his beautiful daughter has just killed herself. The play ends with a painful groan from Daniel, who cannot stand up. This is notable because, as Sanhueza puts it, “*Los personajes se construyen a partir de su lenguaje, de sus interacciones verbales; cuando crece la tragedia de no poder comunicarse, se produce un efecto grotesco a nivel de lenguaje*” (*Continuidad* 451). The formerly talkative Daniel is reduced to an animalistic grouse.

Nené’s death, caused at least in part by her unwillingness to be helped by her parents, is symptomatic of greater generational discord. Daniel especially feels this friction. The same is true, albeit to a lesser extent, with their mother Irene, who in the play has less direct contact with her children. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the parents are ill equipped to deal with the problems of their children. This is largely a consequence

of their having grown up in a situation completely distinct from the one that their parents had experienced. Unable to relate to Daniel and Irene's experiences, as well as to their own, the three children demonstrate unease within the place they inhabit. Lito evidences the tense relationship he shares with his parents in many of his diatribes. This should be no surprise because, as Sanhueza notes, "Lito es el personaje que más habla, exponiendo sus ideas vanguardistas" (*Continuidad* 447). In one of his many conversations in *Relojero*, Lito tells his father that parents "se condenaron a sacrificios tremendos para sostener conceptos morales que a los hijos no les sirven, ni les servirán" (653). He further heaps scorn on his parents and their system of beliefs when he states, "Los viejos no son conservadores por convicción; lo son por pereza" (701).

Despite his children's largely negative reactions, Daniel passively accepts their rebellion against his older understanding of place and the value system it engenders, at the very least at a conscious level. This contradicts his biting complaints to Bautista about the young generation in the first act. Instead of taking a strong stance against what he believes to be his children's misguided decisions, he reacts with deference. Exemplified in one of the more grotesque scenes of *Relojero*, a salient example is found in the third act. In the scene, Lito describes to Andrés and Daniel something that occurred this morning at the hospital where he volunteers:

Esta mañana, apenas llegué al hospital, antes de ir a la Facultad, ocurrió un caso triste... Triste no es la palabra: un caso. Trajeron de urgencia a un chico de doce años, más o menos. Difteria. Lo sofoca el crup. Daba lástima. Caso perdido si no se intervenía en el acto. Uno de los muchachos..., el más seguro de sí..., el más valiente, se decidió a cortar. (*Andrés presta atención.*) Traqueotomía se llama la operación.



Preparamos todo en tres minutos. (*Ademán de arremangarse.*) Mete el bisturí..., pero el chico en la desesperación de la asfixia, se movió de pronto y... la aorta pasa tan cerca de la region del corte..., se la pinchó. (686-87)

Daniel's initial reaction to his son's macabre story is one of horror. He is shocked that a medical student performed an operation that a skilled doctor should have done. He says, "¡Pero qué salvajada! ¿Cómo se mete un estudiante, un chiquilín, a cortar? ... ¿No había médico de guardia? (687). Daniel's feelings diametrically change when Andrés, undoubtedly using his brotherly intuition, realizes that the young student who wanted to test his merits, but got a bloodbath instead, was Lito. While he initially has difficulty in accepting his son's actions, as shown by his shaking uncontrollably and kneeling to the ground, Daniel gathers himself and rationalizes his son's actions, "Bueno, que... (*Con toda su misericordia.*) Bueno, que... la gente se muere cuando se tiene que morir. Ni un segundo antes, ni un segundo después" (687). Daniel mitigates his original reaction so as to alleviate his discomfort with his son's disturbingly cavalier attitude. He is unable to accept his role in the disfunctionality of his family: "la ruina moral del inmigrante enriquecido, es decir, la pobreza máxima, aquella que no tiene redención, esa que concluye con la derrota del trabajo digno, con la ruina del núcleo familiar, con la extinción de toda forma de amor, respeto y ternura" (Sanhueza, "Relojero" 347). Rather, he feebly clings to the hope that the family's problems will solve themselves.

The understanding of place, and the comfort that it brings, that Daniel and previous generations felt is lost on the younger generation. Although Daniel attempts to ignore that this is the case, it is apparent to the spectator/reader of *Relojero* that Andrés,

Lito, and Nené are coping with their inability to make sense of the places they inhabit. They all react differently to this unstable environment. Andrés, who acts as his father's assistant at the beginning of the play, takes to drinking and going out. Dealing with a state of being that already impairs him, as he is unable to commit to a plan for the future, Andrés tries to remedy his feelings by getting drunk. He attempts to, at best, soothe his anxiety and fears through alcohol or, at worst, escape from demons that haunt him. He eventually finds some semblance of a place for himself at the end of the play, when he falls into an enriching enterprise: capitalism. He sums up his job in the following manner: "Mi negocio es como todos. Se trata de comprar barato y vender caro" (691). Lito and Nené approach soothing their pains through a much different route—they become ideologues whose relativistic views are based on the belief that "Cada ser humano es único, irrepetible y vive la realidad a su manera; condenarlo a la imitación, a partir de reglas e imposiciones de tipo ético es anularlo" (Kaiser-Lenoir 89). They apply this belief to their passions. In Lito's case, he applies this radical individualism to his education as a doctor. Although he sometimes fails due to his unfailing belief in himself, with the child who hemorrhaged to death for example, he is strongly convinced that he will positively affect change in society. It is difficult to determine whether or not his conviction is authentic or an act, as his reaction to Nené's suicide suggests. Nené initially shares her brother's conviction in the individual and modernity, which she applies first to the piano and later in her love life. However, she seeks an escape from her existential hollowness at the end of the play and intentionally overdoses.

The third act of *Relojero* tellingly ends with Daniel. After a symphony of clocks strike midnight in harmony, even ending together, he tells himself, “¡Ah, relojero, relojero, qué bien andan tus relojes! (*Gime*)” (692). This sigh is an admission of his inability to control anything outside his workshop. It is also an acknowledgment that he cannot remedy his children’s troubles. Unable to force the traditional normative value system, that of his parents and their parents, upon Andrés, Lito, and Nené, Daniel is left rationalizing their decisions and pushing them to be modern. Unfortunately, the three children do not create meaningful bonds with their environment. Because of this, they are affectively displaced and effectively out of place. Claudia Kaiser-Lenoir argues that:

La visión total es sumamente nihilista. Si a un orden viejo se hace necesario reemplazarlo por otro más auténtico, más acorde con las aspiraciones del hombre, no hay nada en la condición humana que garantice a este nuevo orden como proveedor de respuestas absolutas y válidas para todos. (95)

Although Kaiser-Lenoir states this in regards to the play’s ethical position, the same could be said for the understanding of a sense of place in *Relojero*. No place exists for Andrés, Lito, and Nené.

#### **PLACE, PERCEPTION, AND EXPERIENCE IN THE *GROTESCO CRIOLLO***

In the five plays of Armando Discépolo’s *grotesco criollo*, place immutably disintegrates. Through examining uniquely *porteño* spaces and place in each play, it becomes evident that Discépolo expresses shadings of broad understanding of the built, lived, and social environment of Buenos Aires in the *grotesco criollo*. In *Mateo*, Discépolo plays with the betweenness of place of the Salerno family. Although the value system of the *pater familias* Miguel fails because it is no longer tenable in the Buenos

Aires of the early 1920s, causing his tragic downfall and imprisonment, the family unit ultimately survives due to Carlos' adaptability. Unfortunately, this is not the case for the complicated family headed by Saverio in *El organito*. Unlike Miguel, Saverio's value system exists only to dominate his family. Interpolated by his children, Saverio's disordered logic acts as a mask that covers the character's topophobic relationship with place. At the end of the play, the characters' unmask their true sense of place, which leads to Saverio's grotesque death at the hands of his two sons. *Stéfano*, Discépolo's next *grotesco*, also ends in the tragicomic death of the protagonist. However, the disintegration of place in the play stems from Stéfano's inability to realize the promise of his talent. When Stéfano is fired from his position in the orchestra, the characters realize the dissonance of their affective attachment to place. Perhaps due to age, Stéfano becomes out of tune both musically and communicatively. His life spins out of control and he dies the macabre final scene of the play. *Cremona* represents a fragmented departure from the previous *grotescos*. Focusing on the tribulations an assorted group of people, *Cremona* represents the *conventillo* as the locus of the disintegration of social life in Buenos Aires. The eponymous character's death, therefore, is almost secondary to the collective failure of the tenants of the *conventillo*. Finally, in *Relojero*, Discépolo examines affective displacement through generations. Reified through the bisection of the stage, play's central tension is located in the inability of Daniel, who like other protagonists of the *grotesco criollo* is an immigrant head of household, to relate to the experiences of his children. Throughout the play, Andrés, Lito, and Nené struggle to form meaningful and substantive relationships to place. Individual analysis of each work of

the *grotesco criollo* allows for the subtle shadings of place inherent to each play to better perceived. Taken collectively, the individual experiences of place in the plays of the *grotesco criollo* come to be representative of how Discépolo understands the individual's relationship to the built, lived, and social environment of 1920s and 1930s Buenos Aires.

## Chapter Three

### Buenos Aires, Fissured: Place in Arlt's *Los siete locos* / *Los lanzallamas*

1929 and 1931 not only mark when a number of highly consequential events happened— the Wall Street Crash of late October 1929 that helped send the global economy into the tailspin that became the Great Depression and the deposal of Hipólito Yrigoyen's democratically elected government by a military coup spearheaded by José Félix Uriburu on September 6, 1930 are two of the most important—in Argentina and the world, but they also frame the publication of Roberto Arlt's binary novel *Los siete locos*/*Los lanzallamas*.<sup>37</sup> Until this point, Arlt's presence in Argentine letters had begun by working as a secretary for Ricardo Güiraldes, a relationship that helped facilitate the eventual publication of *El juguete rabioso* in 1926, and his reputation won as an important *porteño* cultural figure through his hugely popular *aguafuertes porteñas* in the Buenos Aires daily newspaper *El Mundo*. His place as an important and lasting figure in the Argentine cultural imaginary, however, was consolidated by *Los siete locos*/*Los lanzallamas*. Taken up first by critics associated with the literary magazine *Contorno* in the 1950s, the binary novel since has come to occupy a central role within the Argentine

---

<sup>37</sup> The exact nature of the relationship of *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas* is a point of some critical dispute. While a number of critics understand the novel as a kind of diptych (i.e. two parts constituting a singular whole), Carbone rejects this position because of the works' disorienting polysemantic nature. I propose that the novels should be understood as a binary novel. Much like a binary star system, in which two separate stars orbit around a common mass, *Los siete locos*/*Los lanzallamas* explores the same narrative matter.

literary cannon. This, in no small part, is due to the novel's ambivalent exploration of the *porteño* society of the late 1920s, especially those living on its margins. As Pier Armstrong succinctly argues in his article "Discursive Bi-Polarity and Divergence of Critical Responses to Arlt's *Los siete locos*":

The prose work of Roberto Arlt and the author himself have proved to be fascinating objects of interpretation for literary and other critics seeking historical insight into Argentine society of the late 1920s and early 1930s— at the pivotal moment between a strong democratic tradition and the authoritarian regimes which have subsequently become the normative form of social organisation in that country. Notwithstanding the general discredit of biographical analysis and/or historicism in North American literary criticism, Roberto Arlt invites precisely that— socially oriented hermeneutic analysis in terms of both the production and the significance of the work. (89)

Offering a window into the Buenos Aires of the late twenties and early thirties, Arlt's evocative work has generated and will continue to elicit such a large corpus of cultural criticism precisely because it forthrightly engages the Argentine society of the time. Despite this, in doing so, Arlt avoids moralizing the sparks of societal friction that shoot out of the binary novel's narrative. The polysemanticity generated by the combination of these factors make the work ripe for interpretation. Not afraid to expose the latent contradictions of the social fabric, but hesitant to make overt appraisals regarding it, Arlt's work persistently questions the societal, political, and cultural understandings dominant in his time.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> As well as being a force of social critique, Arlt has also gained much attention for the supposed prescient nature of his work. In the context of *Los siete locos/Los lanzallamas*, this perspective largely centers on the prognostications of the Mayor, a man brought in by the Astrólogo who falsely denies his military connections, in the section "La farsa" in the third chapter of *Los siete locos*. The Mayor claims, "Sí, intervendremos nosotros, los militares. Diremos que en vista de la poca capacidad del gobierno para defender las instituciones de la patria, el capital y la familia, nos apoderemos del Estado, proclamando una

In this sense, Arlt can be understood as an unwitting anthropologist of the near. Describing the customs and social practices of the *porteño* society to which he pertained, Arlt's social criticism, both journalistic and novelistic, is invaluable in tracing an understanding of *porteño* social life of the 1920s and 1930s. Always in tune to current events, whether cultural, economic or social, Arlt's work depicts much of the complex landscape of *porteño* social life. This is especially the case in regards to a particular sector of Buenos Aires' populace—the petite bourgeoisie, which is a theme widely rooted in cultural criticism on Arlt. Regardless of ideological orientation, critics such as Diana Guerrero (*Arlt: El habitante solitario*), Raúl Larra (*Roberto Arlt el torturado*), and Beatriz Pastor (*Roberto Arlt y la rebelión alienada*) explore to varying degrees his examination of the petite bourgeoisie in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*. Barbara Koczauer, perhaps the sole Arltian critic to root the work in a separate discursive context, couches the binary novel within debates surrounding the role of Argentine intellectuals in the 1920s in her seminal essay “La rebelión de los intelectuales en *Los siete locos* y *Los lanzallamas*” (Armstrong 92). Nonetheless, each of these critics analyzes the larger issue of the inability of the characters in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* to participate in everyday *porteño* social life. Stunted by economic, physical, psychological, and social forces, the binary novel's characters are estranged from the social class to which they ostensibly belong, the bourgeoisie. Consequently, they are unable to function as “productive” members of society. The alienation and frustration produced by their

---

dictadura transitoria” (207). José Amícola dedicates a chapter entitled “La obra en interrelación con acontecimientos políticos” of his work *Astrología y fascismo en la obra de Roberto Arlt* to the subject.



marginalization effectively forces the novel's characters onto the edge: an edge from which they are unable to coax themselves, an edge condemning them to live liminally.

That the acquaintances and accomplices of the binary novel's protagonist are pushed to the edges of *porteño* society is not solely a result of their being part of the petite bourgeoisie, nor is it uniquely a veiled meta-commentary on the specific dilemma of intellectuals. Rather, it is a product of Arlt's ability to focus the narrative on the muddily complex workings of their particular social context. That is to say that the representation of social life in the novel cannot be reduced to a single debate or facet of the Argentine cultural imaginary of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Rather, it is heedful of what Manuel Delanda refers to as "irreducible social complexity" (*A New Philosophy* 6). Ultimately, the binary novel challenges, engages, and traces the social and the network of its positionings and understandings. In a sense, *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* captures the totality of this specific cultural imaginary without attempting to clearly articulate it, much less with the intention to do so successfully. Because the novel frustrates the reader's ability to assemble coherent meaning, both through narrative structure and techniques, it is a kind of narrative *bicho raro*, a strange novel produced in and depicting an almost alternate reality. This position is most clearly put forth by Claudia Gilman when she argues that the unconventionality of Arlt's novel lies in "la

---

Similarly, Piglia discusses it in "Sobre Roberto Arlt."

hábil manera en que enseña a desconfiar de sí misma, fisurándose hasta un punto en que conspira en contra de su propia inteligibilidad” (77).<sup>39</sup>

The ramifications of the fractured composition of *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* extend beyond the comprehension of its narrative to other facets of meaning in the text. In many ways, the ambivalence that the text endows upon social positionings and understandings obfuscates the reader’s ability to assemble meaning from it. This is particularly the case in the representation of place in the binary novel. The spaces and places that the novel’s characters inhabit and traverse in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* seem to be depicted by Arlt with a certain indifference. The largely urban spaces in which the novel occurs are almost always secondary to the actions and interactions of the novel’s characters. For this reason, place in the work is often represented less as an exterior reality and more as an internal assemblage. However, unlike his predecessor and aesthetic influence Armando Discépolo, Arlt is little interested in directly exploring a sense of place that incorporates affective bonds to the built, natural, and social environment. Rather, he situates place within his characters in such a way that it is almost impossible to extricate its particular meaning from other social understandings. For this reason, one may easily extend Julio Ortega’s assertion that “La ideología de Arlt se elabora y articula a través de las vivencias de los personajes” (Ortega 73) to the representation of place in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*. Instead of explicitly engaging the reader through a mouthpiece such as an active narrative voice, Arlt prefers to present

---

<sup>39</sup> Somewhat tangentially I find it important to engage another aspect of Arltian criticism. In her article, Gilman extends this argument so that she’s able to propose that Arlt effectively creates “una nueva

her with the blurry inner-workings and understandings of many of the binary novel's characters. For this reason, the diverse ways in which Arlt constructs the unique interior landscapes of his individual characters prevents a comprehensive representation of place. Constituted by the fusion of often conflicting perspectives, place in the binary novel is fractured to the point that it does not constitute a singular entity. Whether the location is the *arrabal*, Buenos Aires, or Temperley, place is fissured. Perhaps more ominously, these fissures, which begin as small cracks, rupture into gaping fault lines by the end of *Los lanzallamas*, providing a kind of earthquake in the notion of place.

In this chapter I examine the representation of the Buenos Aires of the late 1920s in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* as an ineluctably fissured place. Following Julio Ortega's assertion that, "La ideología de los personajes, como forma refleja de una relación inconsciente entre el hombre y su mundo, traduce el confucionismo político de la época y la inmovilidad del sistema clasista" (72) I argue that the characters of *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* reflect fissures in the understanding of place latent in the porteño, Argentine, and world social assemblages. Place as a social assemblage is a type of social positioning whose meaning is created by and flows through a complex system of human relationships. In *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*, place is also an interiorization of the buildings, streets, and homes of Buenos Aires, which are laden with innumerable cracks. This is a consequence of a greater fracturing of social understandings and values that once bonded people together. I argue that Arlt locates these fissures in the Argentine society of the late twenties and early thirties within the binary novel's characters. More

specifically, I focus on how a particular social understanding, place, is represented in the relationships and thoughts of two characters: the protagonist, Augusto Remo Erdosain, and the leader of a failed social revolution, the Astrologer. It is through these characters that Arlt most fully develops an articulation of his perception and experience of Buenos Aires as a place.

### **THE TWO NOVELS OF *LOS SIETE LOCOS/ LOS LANZALLAMAS*: ERDOSAIN, THE ASTROLOGER, AND PERSPECTIVES OF PLACE**

In an interview with the journalist Ricardo Kunis originally published in the Buenos Aires newspaper *Clarín*, and later compiled in the book *Crítica y ficción*, Ricardo Piglia argues that *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* is, in fact, a combination of two separate novels: one concentrating on the shady figure of the Astrologer and the other focusing on Erdosain, who is generally considered to be the binary novel's sole protagonist. Piglia argues that:

“Los siete locos” mezcla, de hecho, dos novelas: está la novela de Erdosain y está la novela del Astrólogo. Se podría decir que la de Erdosain es el relato de la queja, el relato del intento de pasar al otro, zafarse de la opacidad turbia de la vida cotidiana. La novela del Astrólogo, que es la obra maestra para mí, trabaja sobre los mundos posibles: sobre la posibilidad que tiene la ficción de transmutar la realidad. (21-22).

Not only does Piglia's insight home in on a key element of the narrative structure of *Los siete locos/Los lanzallamas* (i.e. the swinging back and forth from Erdosain and the Astrologer), but it also reveals the dichotomous nature of the novel's tone. That is, the narrative assemblage that is *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* mixes the personal and interiorized narrative of Erdosain and the exteriorized plans and positionings of the

Astrologer. Arlt integrates the two perspectives into a narrative system, much like a binary star.<sup>40</sup> As Piglia suggests, the novels of Erdosain and the Astrologer appear to form a singularity, even though they are in fact distinct narratives with distinct aesthetic and ideological aims.

Erdosain and the Astrologer are the gravitational forces around which other characters in the novel revolve and, consequently, largely frame the actions and reactions of the assemblage of figures surrounding them. As evidenced by their relationships with the Major or the Lawyer, in the case of the Astrologer, or the Espila family or la Bizca, in the case of Erdosain, the two characters explicitly or implicitly limit the conditions of their interactions with others. This has marked consequences in the representation of place in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*. First, the spaces through which Erdosain and the Astrologer traverse, not to mention those that they inhabit, physically limit the narrative representation of place. The pair delineates the space that the reader experiences in the binary novel. The marginalized spaces frequented by the pair therefore force not only other characters but also the reader into creating liminal places with which it is difficult, if not impossible, to form topophilic bonds. Second, the pair's forceful personalities— Erdosain's manipulative passive aggressiveness and the Astrologer's Nietzschean will to power— restrict others' comportment. For this reason, their already interiorized senses of place are externalized as separate behavioral frames. They effectively set the tone with which other characters engage the built, natural, and

---

<sup>40</sup> In a sense, understanding the novel in such a way anticipates the narrative's end: the death of Erdosain causes the narrative system to collapse unto itself.

social environment. Third, as a consequence of their personalities, the two lack the ability to reach co-constructive understanding with others. Their personalities fix their understandings of social positionings, including that of place. These three consequences in the representation of place dramatically affect the experience of spatiality, both for the characters (Buenos Aires) and the reader (narrative space) in the binary novel. Because Erdosain and the Astrologer exercise such influence on other characters in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* they provide the foundation onto which the novel's narrative construction of Buenos Aires and place is erected, both philosophically— in the way in which each understands his relationship to the built, natural, and social environments— and practically— by the ways in which each behaves in the world.

As place is ultimately a social positioning that is an offshoot of the individual's understanding of her role within the greater social system, the representation of Buenos Aires in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* can only be fleshed out through examining how Erdosain and the Astrologer situate themselves both philosophically and practically in the narrative spaces and places of the novel. The aim of this analysis is to parse out the semantic gravitational forces of the two characters. To do so, I trace their relationships with place from the final chapter of *Los lanzallamas*, an epilogue, back through the binary novel in order to map their conceptualization of Buenos Aires' geography. This movement from narrative present to the past facilitates the ability to zero in on specific aspects of what initially appear to be convoluted social understandings. More specifically, I focus on how the externalization of Erdosain's interior spaces, imbued with humiliation and self-hatred, and the exclusively external projection of hollow internal

convictions of the rhomboidal-faced Astrologer affect the representation of place in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*. Focusing on salient scenes in the novel, I argue that Erdosain and the Astrologer's perceptions of place provide a cartography that delimits the relationships other characters share with place and the reader's experience of it.

### **Erdosain: Projection, Place, and Humiliation**

The narrative of *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* ends just as it begins: focused on Erdosain. First encountering the failed protagonist on his way to a meeting with his employers, from whom he had embezzled the substantial, but ridiculously precise, sum of six hundred pesos and seven cents, the reader follows Erdosain's downward spiral throughout the binary novel, which culminates in his suicide after he has brutally murdered his underage fiancée, la Bizca.<sup>41</sup> Interrupting sexual activity, one of the primary sources of the humiliation that drives him throughout the binary novel, Erdosain ends la Bizca's life by first suffocating her with a pillow and then putting a bullet through her ear. By terminating her, Erdosain claims he has acted as an agent of God's will by punishing his supposed bride-to-be for her prurience: "¿Viste? ... ¿Viste lo que te pasó por andar con la mano en la bragueta de los hombres? Estas son las consecuencias de la mala conducta. Perdiste la virginidad para siempre. ¿Te das cuenta? ¡Perdiste la virginidad! ¿No te da vergüenza? Y ahora Dios te castigó. Sí, Dios, por no hacer caso de los consejos que te daban tus maestros" (385). Curiously, in murdering la Bizca

---

<sup>41</sup> Parenthetically, it's important to note two important motifs of Arlt's reified in Erdosain's relationship with la Bizca. First, as Guerrero indicates (95), Arlt tends to gravitate the sexual desire of his male protagonists toward women who are at once beautiful and hideous. Second, Arlt tends to represents

Erdosain also replicates the story of another failed man, one found in the penultimate section of *Los siete locos*, “El suicida.” Profoundly affected by the man, an embezzler who left his wife and five children for another woman, only to shoot his lover in the ear after forcibly covering her face with a pillow, Erdosain follows in his ignominious footsteps.

After the grisly crime Erdosain remains in a grimy apartment room, which he earlier rented because it had once pertained to his rival Barsut. He later decides to visit the unnamed narrator of *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*, with whom he stays for three days and two nights. There, in darkness, Erdosain recounts his story, which the narrator leads the reader to believe to be the source of a large portion of the material narrated in the binary novel. It cannot, of course, constitute the sole source of information for the narrator, as there is no way Erdosain is privy to the thoughts of other characters in the novel (take for example the chapter section “Haffner cae” in *Los lanzallamas*, which details Haffner’s disoriented thoughts as he lies dying). Eventually, Erdosain leaves the narrator’s house and heads to the train station, where he buys a ticket. Ostensibly traveling to Moreno, the final station on the *Línea del oeste*, the westward bound train route, Erdosain never arrives at his destination. Or, perhaps he does: much like the man in “El suicida,” Erdosain kills himself, taking some artistic license by shooting himself in the chest on a train car instead of taking cyanide in a café.

---

mothers-in-law with vitriolic negativity, as Masotta argues in *Sexo y traición en Roberto Arlt* (89-90, 92, and 96).



By committing suicide, Erdosain perpetrates the ultimate act of destruction, self-negation. No matter how the reader explores the greater psychological problem of suicide in the context of the binary novel's narrative, she understands Erdosain's death as an indication of larger fissures in society underlying the actions of an individual. Erdosain's final action in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* also represents an attempt to negate the dominant bourgeois society and the totality of its social positionings and understandings, which of course includes place. Driven throughout the binary novel by the deep urge to subvert the limits imposed upon him both implicitly and explicitly by society, which he paradoxically has interiorized so fully that he is affectively crippled, Erdosain is able to cure his psychological wounds only by killing himself. Rather than allowing a lifetime of trauma to scar over with the passage of time, Erdosain constantly picks at these wounds throughout the novel as a consequence of two facets of his psychological problems: self-hatred and fascination with humiliation. As Jorge Rivera states, "Acosado por una densa angustia existencial, Erdosain se someterá a lo largo del relato a diversas situaciones humillatorias reales, o fabulará otras, con sentido humillatorio o compensatorio, no menos significativas" (59). Humiliation for Erdosain is a coping mechanism used to manage the affective displacement produced by not being able to fit properly within bourgeois society. For reasons inexplicable to even himself, he is unable to assimilate into a proper bourgeois role, such as an office worker, and is only able to negatively participate in society.

In *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* much of the narrative focuses on the happenings and humiliations of Erdosain. Most usually moving through the spaces and

places of Buenos Aires and the outlying area, Erdosain is infrequently static in the binary novel. It is for this reason that scenes representing the protagonist in the space he inhabits are so important to understand his relationship to social understandings, generally, and place, specifically. In the binary novel Erdosain inhabits two spaces that unsurprisingly correlate with his relationships with women, la Bizca and Elsa. Effectively, Erdosain couples his relationships with spatial fixity. The two unpleasant apartments he separately shares with each woman give the reader insight into the larger question of Erdosain's relationship with place. While his understanding of place, which manifests itself as the externalization of his anguished interior spaces, is ultimately most fully depicted while living at the execrable apartment owned by la Bizca's mother, it is also important to scrutinize the site of his failed relationship with Elsa to better describe how Erdosain arrived at the particularities of his distorted conceptualization of place. Through exploring the sites of his relationship with la Bizca and Elsa, I trace Erdosain's affective distortion, especially through his feelings of humiliation, of the bourgeois social understandings that he has interiorized. In doing so I am able to show how the evolution of his assimilation and comprehension of social positionings has dramatic consequences in the representation of Buenos Aires as a place in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*.

The origins of Erdosain's inability to habituate himself to the constrictions of bourgeois social understandings lie in his youth, which was marked by the impulses of a tyrannical father. Despite this, his distortion of Argentine social understandings is most fully realized in his relationship with la Bizca. Erdosain and la Bizca's brief relationship takes place almost entirely in the context of a run-down *pensión*, a type of rooming house

that appears to offer conditions similar to those of a *conventillo*. The conditions in the *pensión* are not the worst imaginable, in fact many of the residents of Buenos Aires at the time lived in similar if not worse conditions, but they represent much less than was hoped of by a man in Erdosain's situation. Expected to realize the dreams of their parents, to *hacer la América*, the aim of children of immigrant families was social ascension. In this sense, the *pensión* represents a failure for the protagonist.

The first mention of the *pensión* is found in *Los siete locos* as Barsut, not Erdosain, lives in the apartment at this juncture in the narrative. It is described in the following manner: "Este vivía en una pensión de la calle Uruguay, cierto departamento oscuro y sucio ocupado por un fantástico mundo de gente de toda calaña. La patrona de tal antro se dedicaba al espiritismo, tenía una hija bizca y en cuanto a los pagos era inexorable" (Arlt 76). The cartography of the *pensión* is laid out both through the use of descriptive adjectives modifying space and the inhabitants of that space. As a place, therefore, the *pensión* is not merely dark and dirty, but it is also indelibly connected to the assortment of characters that live in it. The description, which is the first in the binary novel that mentions la Bizca and her calculating mother, foreshadows the much longer account of the apartment in *Los lanzallamas*. In this sense, it represents the first shadings of a more comprehensive, and much darker, illustration of the place where Erdosain commits his heinous crime.

While it is depicted several times in *Los lanzallamas*, the *pensión* is perhaps most fully described in the section "Los amores de Erdosain." The following citation provides the clearest representation of the *pensión* throughout the entirety of the novel:

Asqueado, avanza por el corredor del edificio; un túnel abovedado, a cuyos costados se abren rectángulos enrejados de ascensores y puertas que vomitan olores de aguas servidas y polvos de arroz.

En el umbral de un departamento, una prostituta negruzca, con los brazos desnudos y un batán a rayas rojas y blancas, adormece a una criatura. Otra morena, excepcionalmente gorda, con chancletas de madera, rechupa una naranja, y Erdosain se detiene frente a la puerta del ascensor, sucio como una cocina, del que salen un albañil, con un balde cargado de portland, y un jorobadito con una cesta cargada de sifones y botellas vacías.

Los departamentos están separados por tabiques de chapas de hierro. En los ventanillos de las cocinas fronterizas, tendidas hacia los patios, se ven cuerdas arqueadas bajo el peso de ropas húmedas. Delante de todas las puertas, regueros de ceniza y cáscaras de bananas. De los interiores escapan injurias, risas ahogadas, canciones femeninas y broncas de hombres.

Erdosain cavila un instante antes de llamar. ¿Cómo diablos se le ha ocurrido irse a vivir a esa letrina, a la misma pieza que antes ocupaba Barsut?

Detenido junto al vano de la escalera y mirando un patizuelo en la profundidad, se preguntó qué era lo que buscaba en aquella casa terrible, sin sol, sin luz, sin aire, silenciosa al amanecer y retumbante de ruidos de hembras en la noche. Al atardecer, hombres de jetas empolvadas y brazos blancos tomaban mate, sentados en sillitas bajas, en el centro de los patios. (Arlt 204-205)

Arlt's use of visceral imagery and language in the description of the *pensión*, even cinematic at times, incites an affective reaction in the reader that challenges her conceptualization of Buenos Aires as a place. Rather than attracting the reader to inhabit the narrative space of the *pensión*, the description of the place is utterly inhospitable. The negation of the reader's ability to connect with the built, natural, and social environment of the *pensión*, coupled with Erdosain's deep and inexplicable attraction to it, serves a

dual narrative purpose.<sup>42</sup> First, it situates the reader, especially one contemporaneous to the novel's publication, out of place. That is, the harsh environment of the *pensión* does not allow the reader to inhabit its narrative space in an affectively positive sense. Second, it disquietingly presents Erdosain as "in place." The feeling that Erdosain is comfortable in such an inimical place unsettles the reader and provides further shades into Arlt's characterization of the protagonist. This in place/out of place dichotomy is particularly salient in respect to a specific conceptualization of place, home. The most intimate affective connection that human beings share with place, home seems to be unattainable in such conditions. However, the *pensión*, whose description is so incommodious to the reader, provides Erdosain with the place in which he feels most comfortable with himself. Because of this, the initial description of the apartment and Erdosain's relationship with it foreshadow his attempt at negating bourgeois social values by annihilating la Bizca and himself.

The representation of the interior of Erdosain's apartment is incongruous with the various descriptions of the exterior of the *pensión*. This, however, is not a result of the apartment being a comfortable or comforting place for Erdosain but rather because it is

---

<sup>42</sup> No longer having a reason to return to the home he established with Elsa, Erdosain curiously decides to move into the room Barsut previously occupied. This act is notable for a number of reasons. First, it strikes the reader as perplexing as Erdosain had aided in Barsut's kidnapping a mere two days previous and, strangely, because he makes no attempt to hide his whereabouts (*Los lanzallamas* 224). Second, it represents an act of self-humiliation on the part of Erdosain because he takes the place of someone for whom he feels nothing but contempt. Previously believing himself to be better than Barsut at least in part because of his relationship with Elsa and their home, Erdosain degrades himself by occupying his rival's loathsome life. Finally, there seems to be no logical reason why Erdosain would want to live in such an unappealing place. The reader is never presented a window into Erdosain's rationale behind moving into such an abject place; in fact, he appears to be confused as to his motives when he thinks to himself, "Preocupadísimo, miró en redor. El vivía allá. ¡Había alquilado el mismo cuarto que ocupara Barsut! ¿Por qué? ¿Cuándo ejecutó este acto?" (204).

barely described in the binary novel. The apartment, and the lack of details surrounding it, is important to the development of Erdosain as a character in the novel because it allows the reader to peer into Erdosain's mind; it remains as mysterious to the reader as the interior of Erdosain's psyche to other characters in the binary novel. Therefore, it is no surprise that the majority of the descriptions of the apartment in *Los lanzallamas* are marked by nebulosity and/or obfuscation. Take for example the following three descriptions: 1) "A momentos entorna con somnolencia los ojos, se siente tan sensible que, como si se hubiera desdoblado, percibe su cuerpo sentado, recortando la soledad del cuarto, cuyos rincones van oscureciendo grises tonos de agua" (206), 2) "Son las cuatro de la tarde. Erdosain permanece tieso, sentado frente a la mesa. Si fuera posible fotografiarlo, tendríamos una placa con un rostro serio. Es la definición. Erdosain permanece sentado frente a la mesa, en el cuarto vacío, con la lámpara eléctrica encendida sobre su cabeza" (325), and 3) "Una franja de sol y de mañana aclara un instante su oscuridad demencial y las tinieblas del cuarto" (386). Through the use of different kinds of impossible signifiers (i.e. words that do little to specify meaning) such as adjectives like "demencial" and non-specific descriptions of the effects of light in the room, Arlt maintains a resolute vagueness in the representation of the apartment.

The apartment is largely uncharted in the narrative space in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*. It is landscaped in the binary novel in Turnerian sense; instead of depicting spatial particularities, Arlt aims to capture the torrid emotions that surround it through expressive narrative brushstrokes. In the instances in which Arlt provides the reader with details about the apartment, few are provided as to the specificities of the space; however,

Arlt paints the reader's perception of the apartment through textures of space. The two following examples demonstrate this:

El suelo está cubierto de dinero; al golpear con la culata del revólver los paquetes de dinero, los billetes se han desparramado. Erdosain mira estúpidamente ese dinero, y su corazón permanece callado. Apretando los dientes se levanta, camina de un rincón a otro del cuarto. No le preocupa pisotear el dinero. Sus labios se tuercen en una mueca, camina despacio, de una pared a otra, como si estuviera encerrado en un jaulón. (208)

Remo entra a la casa de departamentos. Espera encontrarla a la Bizca en su habitación, pero la muchacha no está. Posiblemente se ha quedado dormida. Ahora, encerrado en su cuarto, le parece distinguir una rata que surge de un rincón. Tras de esa rata, otra y otra. Erdosain soslaya las alimañas grises y sonríe soturno. (305)

In each of these two descriptions, the narrator describes an event that occurs in the apartment—money carelessly spread across the floor and rats scuttling around the room—but fails to particularize the room. Unlike the exterior of the *pensión*, the reader is left with almost no idea of what the apartment actually looks like. Despite this, the reader comes to experience the apartment as a disquieting place through the textures of place provided in the passages. Unsettling to the reader, these repellent experiences of place lend themselves to a particular perception of the apartment.

The juxtaposition of the descriptive representation of the exterior of the *pensión* and the dearth of details regarding the interior of the apartment mirrors Erdosain's difficulty relating to social values and understandings in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*. While Erdosain is unwilling to adhere to the limitations that society imposes upon him, something that is potentially behind his decision to join the Astrologer's revolutionary society, he is unable to come to terms with these restrictions within himself. For

example, his rejection of the bourgeois understanding of the nuclear family contradicts his strange relationship with sex and sexuality. Erdosain's romantic indiscretions, as I will argue shortly, are less explorations of a more open notion of sexuality as they are of attempts to subvert bourgeois values through humiliation. Therefore, it is not as if he wishes to escape the constrictions of an overly limiting society; it is that he himself has been so grotesquely shaped by society that he is unable to participate in it. Erdosain's fondness for humiliation and deep-seated psychological problems, which are manifested through his illicit relationship with la Bizca and his killing of her, are consequences of a distorted hypersocialization. That is to say that Erdosain's behavioral patterns are warped by over interiorizing social norms. Only capable of externalizing his hypersocialization in *Los lanzallamas*, something evidenced in his moving into the grungy *pensión*, the spaces of Erdosain's psyche are left in as a worrying haze as his apartment. Ultimately, his psychoscape is unintelligible to both the protagonist himself and the reader. In this sense, the apartment is where things happen, but not where they exist. They exist within Erdosain himself.

In "Ingenuidad e idiotismo," a section of the second chapter of *Los siete locos*, the narrator provides the reader with insight into understanding Erdosain's motives and personality: "El cronista de esta historia no se atreve a definirlo a Erdosain; tan numerosas fueron las desdichas de su vida, que los desastres que más tarde provocó en compañía del Astrólogo pueden explicarse por los procesos psíquicos sufridos durante su matrimonio" (71). The narrator identifies Erdosain's marriage to Elsa as the primary cause of his psychological difficulties, thus shifting much of the blame of what is to come



onto the nuptial failure. In a broad sense this appears to be the case; however, it is important to clarify the narrator's insight so as to better understand the motivating forces behind Erdosain's strange relationship with Elsa. The narrator's latent misogyny, as reflected by portioning blame upon a largely innocent Elsa, obfuscates the actual reason Erdosain is unable to participate in healthy human relationships: his hypersocialization. In "Ingenuidad e idiotismo" the narrator provides the reader with a number of ways of how Erdosain overextends the limitations of social values and understandings to the point of damaging the possibility of sharing a healthy relationship with Elsa. As Guerrero argues, "Al casarse, el personaje descubre que su ex novia, a quien quería 'pura', immutable y pasiva, es una persona con necesidades que obliga a su marido a satisfacerlas" (79). The root of Erdosain's inability to form a healthy relationship in which he satisfies his wife's needs lies, as I alluded to previously, in his distortion of sexual mores. He tells the narrator:

—Antes de casarme, yo pensaba con horror en la fornicación. En mi concepto, un hombre no se casaba sino para estar siempre junto a su mujer y gozar la alegría de verse a todas horas; y hablarse, quererse con los ojos, con las palabras y las sonrisas. Ciertamente es que yo era joven entonces, pero cuando fui novio de Elsa sentí necesidad de renovar todas estas cosas. (72)

Instead of limiting the notion of a pure intentioned, almost chivalric, love to the beginning of the relationship, Erdosain oddly extends the concept further into marriage. The physical demonstration of affection degrades love, something that becomes clear in the use of the religiously charged term "fornicación." Even more curious is Erdosain's reticence to manifest his love of Elsa in a more innocent manner: "Erdosain jamás besó a

Elsa, porque era feliz dejando que le apretara la garganta el vértigo de quererla y porque además creía que “a una señorita no debe besársela” (72). In a certain sense, it appears that Erdosain channels an Augustinian notion of pure love. Prohibiting both himself and his wife from sexual activity, even those considered to be “normal” within the limitations of the society of the time, Erdosain negates the human need for physical pleasure. He appears to enjoy not indulging in physical pleasure, but seems to take even more pleasure in denying his wife’s need of it. He even refuses to become linguistically intimate with Elsa, having claimed to never use the informal form of address “vos” with his wife, choosing instead to maintain a proper amount of distance by using the formal “usted.” He justifies his strange behavior when he states, “Además yo creía que a una señorita no se la tutea. No se ría. En mi concepto, la «señorita» era la auténtica expresión de pureza, perfección y candidez” (72). By refusing to address his wife informally, to kiss her, and to have sexual intercourse with her, Erdosain hides from truly forming a relationship with Elsa because of his hypersocialization. By extending a particular social understanding—the pure woman—beyond the normal limits of delineated by society, Erdosain futilely attempts to negate that very notion.

In addition to denying Elsa an active, participatory role within their relationship, Erdosain also negates his assumed role within the marriage. Guerrero argues that:

El hombre ve frustrado, así, el papel activo que se había atribuido en el matrimonio frente a su mujer cuya vida se reduciría a admirarlo y esperarlo; su actividad autónoma se transforma en una tarea subordinada a los deseos de su esposa; debe trabajar para ella y cumplir con todas las exigencias impuestas por su presencia concreta. (80)

Erdosain spurns the totality of the social roles assigned to the husband by the Argentine society contemporaneous to the binary novel's plot. Rejecting the role as the provider of emotional, material, and spiritual stability, Erdosain prefers to subject himself and his wife to humiliation after humiliation. The marriage fails because they cannot possibly meet the other's expectations: the socially crippled Erdosain is never the provider Elsa was hoping he would become and Elsa never was able to fully embody the virginal object of Erdosain's desire. The pair's marriage finally comes apart in "El humillado" from *Los siete locos*, the scene in which Erdosain describes to the narrator the former's arrival to his home the night Elsa was leaving him for a Captain named Germán.

Given Arlt's tendency to match exterior reality to the interior workings of his characters, falling at times into something akin to the pathetic fallacy, it is no surprise that the couple's failed relationship is hypostatized in their apartment in *Los siete locos*. The cold and sparse relations that Erdosain and Elsa share in the binary novel are physically represented in the few descriptions of the apartment. This is apparent in one of the longer explorations of the space, not coincidentally located in "El humillado":

A las ocho de la noche llegó a su casa.

El comedor estaba iluminado... Pero expliquémonos —contaba más tarde Erdosain—, mi esposa y yo habíamos sufrido tanta miseria, que el llamado comedor consistía en un cuarto vacío de muebles. La otra pieza hacía de dormitorio. Usted me dirá cómo siendo pobres alquilábamos una casa, pero éste era un antojo de mi esposa, que recordando tiempos mejores, no se avenía a no «tener armado» su hogar.

En el comedor no había más mueble que una mesa de pino. En un rincón colgaban de un alambre nuestras ropas, y otro ángulo estaba ocupado por un baúl con conteras de lata y que producía una sensación de vida nómada que terminaría con un viaje definitivo. Más tarde, cuántas veces he

pensado en 'la sensación de viaje' que aquel baúl barato, estibado en un rincón, lanzaba a mi tristeza de hombre que se sabe al margen de la cárcel. (33)

The scene demonstrates how the apartment mirrors the pair's marriage. A space of which the two could hardly bear the expense, both literally in the monetary sense and figuratively in the emotional sense, the apartment is as empty as Erdosain and Elsa's relationship. Just as the couple share little affection between themselves, the apartment contains but a few shoddy pieces of furniture: a pine table, a wire that held up their clothes, and a trunk. Rather than sharing an intimate apartment that is well furnished, albeit humbly, the two live in a large, bare space in which they are constantly humiliating one another. The apartment quite simply is not a home for Erdosain and Elsa in the Bachelardian sense for it does not house the deeply intimate and personal bond the two ostensibly should share as a married couple in their domestic space. Instead, it is no place for either.

Throughout *Los siete locos*/ *Los lanzallamas* Erdosain's inability to create affective bonds to place is developed by Arlt. Initially presenting itself in his relationship to the apartment he shares with Elsa at the beginning of *Los siete locos*, Erdosain's failure to establish affect bonds to place reaches its climax in the tenebrously vague room of the *pensión*, the setting of his cold-blooded murder of la Bizca. In this sense, the relationship Erdosain shares with place is largely the same in the two settings. Having already possessed a formed notion of place at the beginning of the binary novel, albeit one that he is completely unable to articulate, Erdosain's relationship to the built, natural, and social environment slowly develops throughout the novel. Consequently, Erdosain's experience

of spatiality in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* is a slow exteriorization of an already interiorized understanding of place. Because of this, the reader's interpretation of Erdosain's expandingly negative relationship to the spaces and places of Buenos Aires is increasingly fleshed out as the narrative develops. This, of course, is somewhat paradoxical in the binary novel as there is little substance in the development of Erdosain's conceptualization of his role within place. Rather, the reader is left perceiving shadings of the same theme: that Erdosain feels that "Está absolutamente solo, entre tres mil millones de hombres y en el corazón de una ciudad" (207).

The externalization and concretization of Erdosain's psychoscape, whose hypersocialization causes the protagonist's deep solitude and need for humiliation, not only have deep ramifications in his relationships with other characters but also frame his encounters with place in the binary novel. Place, therefore, is not derived conceptually from the experience of spatial particularities by Erdosain but rather is contextualized within preconceived social understandings. As a social understanding that is necessarily couched in the broader understanding of the social, the greater notion of place structures Erdosain's confrontations with space. In his *In Place/ Out of Place* Tim Cresswell argues that, "Spatial structures structure representations of the world as they are held in a taken-for-granted way. But value and meaning are not inherent in any space or place—indeed they must be created, reproduced, and defended from heresy" (9). Cresswell's assertion is explored in the narrative of *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*. Erdosain's notion of place, which engages individual spaces and places in myriad of ways ranging from creation to defense, structures his conceptualization of the built, natural, and social

environment. Moreover, he is unable or unwilling to question his understanding of place in any meaningful way: it has become a thread in the fabric of his notion of commonsense. The situations he experiences in the apartments he shares with Elsa and la Bizca therefore have already been mentally situated by Erdosain even before they have occurred. Erdosain overlooks that which makes them individual places because he refers all experiences back to his previous experiences. He is therefore unable to escape the behavioral structure he internalized in the past.

Place is inextricably wrapped into a conglomeration of other social understandings for Erdosain. The apartments he shares with la Bizca and Elsa are consequently not physical concretizations of failed relationships; rather, they participate in the failure of the relationships. They are, for Erdosain, sites of humiliation. Following his assertion that “los hombres están tan tristes que tienen necesidad de ser humillados por alguien” (35) it can be argued that Erdosain also believes that humans also need to be humiliated *somewhere*. The *where* is of as much importance as the *whom*; the only thing that really matters is that humans are subjected to humiliation, the only solution to cure human misery. When Erdosain claims, “la horrible miseria está en nosotros, es la miseria de adentro... del alma que nos cala los huesos como la sífilis” (35), he is implicitly presenting a fissured sense of *porteño* social life. Misery seeps through his bones much like syphilis slowly flows through the osseous structure of an infected human body. On a larger scale, this misery also seeps through fissures of the social, contaminating individual positionings of social understandings such as place. This fractured perspective of the social represents one of the gravitational forces around which the binary novel’s narrative revolves. The

other, that of the Astrologer, eschews this perspective of place that embraces liminal space in favor of a different way in which the social is indelibly fissured in late 1920s Buenos Aires. Rather than existing within the cracks of a crumbling social system, the Astrologer believes the notion of social life itself is fissured. Social life, rather than being a contractual relationship of individuals who adhere to normative rules, is a simulacrum shaped by those in control of power to subjugate the weak.

### **The Astrologer: Place, Power, and Simulacrum**

While *Los lanzallamas* ends with a carefully detailed description on the part of the narrator of Erdosain's final hours, which culminates in his grotesque suicide, no such account is provided of the Astrologer and his fate. This is not due, however, to intentional negligence on the part of the unidentified narrator, but rather to the fact that in the narrative the shadowy Astrologer gives the slip to the police, press, and public. Of the few details about which the reader learns is that he takes along with him a woman named Hipólita. Nicknamed la Coja, she is a prostitute who attempted to blackmail him at the beginning of *Los lanzallamas* after Erdosain confided the group's nefarious plans to her at the end of *Los siete locos*. That the reader barely gleans a shred of information about the Astrologer's fate at the end of the novel should come as no surprise, as throughout the novel precious little is known about the figure of the Astrologer: he is a somewhat odd looking man with a rhomboidal face who is castrated.<sup>43</sup> In a report filed in the penultimate section of the novel by a character identified as the Secretary, an

employee of one of Buenos Aires' newspapers, the Astrologer is described as, "[el] agitador y falsificador Alberto Lezin" (390). The reader is left to assume that the Astrologer is described as an agitator due to his group's plans to topple the Argentine government and a counterfeiter as a consequence of the false money that he "returned" to Barsut after the former ended the latter's false imprisonment. Although the reader finally learns the identity of the previously unnamed Astrologer, she learns little more as the narrator is unable to provide any more details of Lezin's fate in the novel's epilogue. The last the reader learns of the Astrologer is that: "Hipólita y el Astrólogo no han sido hallados por la policía. Numerosas veces se anticipó la noticia de que serían detenidos 'de un momento a otro'. Ha pasado ya más de un año y no se ha encontrado el más mínimo indicio que permita sospechar dónde pueden haberse refugiado" (394). The suspense surrounding the Astrologer and his accomplice Hipólita is heightened by the feeling that they could be caught at any moment or, perhaps, never. Sparked by the undetermined fate of the Astrologer, this tension is not dissimilar to the anxiety that Arlt instills in the reader throughout the novel surrounding the origins and convictions of the rhomboidal-faced leader's thoughts and plans.

Never allowing himself to be pinned down, not physically by the police nor ideologically by those who surround him, the Astrologer cuts a thoroughly ambiguous figure in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*. Perhaps more importantly, he is also completely different from any other character in the binary novel:

---

<sup>43</sup> Along with the Lezin/ Lenin wordplay, Arlt also plays with his companion's name: Hipólita is a not very veiled reference to Yrigoyen, while la Coja carries a dual meaning referring to the prostitute's handicap



El Astrólogo (Alberto Lezin) se sale del patrón de los personajes mencionados hasta ahora. Carece de toda preocupación metafísica y sólo se mueve por el anhelo de poder, aunque dice obrar en favor de una sociedad más justa, “comunista” según sus propias palabras. En realidad, no tiene ninguna ideología clara, sino que basa su proyecto en modelos contradictorios, como pueden ser Mussolini, Lenin (*cf.* su nombre) y el Ku Klux Klan. Se inclina indistintamente por la revolución socialista y por la dictadura fascista, igual que se apoya en los anarquistas. (Gnutzmann 131)

The vagueness revolving around the Astrologer is a result of his chameleon-like self-fashioning in the binary novel. Often moving through diverse and contradictory ideologies such as anarchism, communism, and fascism, the Astrologer never situates himself exclusively within one set of beliefs. To do so would be to yield what is in fact most important to the Astrologer—power—to an authority existing outside of himself. Place, the endowment of value upon physical space in the context of power, is dramatically altered as an understanding if affect is extricated from its social formation. If place is determined exclusively by power, as it is by the Astrologer, it can only be understood as a simulacrum created by the powerful to control the weak. Place would therefore become an image created by the strong to subjugate the weak to their will. In order to demonstrate the ramifications of the Astrologer’s ideology, or lack thereof, on his understanding of place in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*, I flesh out the Astrologer’s belief of place as a manifestation of power and examine a key scene in the binary novel: the “Discurso del Astrólogo,” a conversation between Erdosain and the Astrologer in *Los siete locos*. As the scene evinces, the Astrologer packages the built, natural, and social environment as a simulacrum created by a select few who manipulate

---

(“coja,” the noun derived from “cojear”) and her profession (“la coja” from the verb “coger,” to fuck).

the understanding of the overwhelming majority. Buenos Aires, then, is another means according to the Astrologer by which power is exerted and people can be controlled.

The Astrologer's belief that place is a manifestation of power is rooted in a Nietzsche-like conviction of the will to power. This conviction is much commented about in criticism of the binary novel, but the Astrologer refrains from explicitly adhering to an ethical system based on Nietzsche's thought. His own formulation of an ideology of power is developed throughout *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*, with its most clear articulation being found in the section "Discurso del Astrólogo." In this scene, which directly precedes the scene with the Major, the would-be leader of the worldwide revolution details the philosophy behind his plans to Barsut and Erdosain. The fundamental base of his philosophy is that "los hombres de ésta y de todas las generaciones tienen absoluta necesidad de creer en algo" (96). While this may be the case, the Astrologer rejects the notion not only of a normative ethics but also a normative epistemology. Consequently, the something in which people feel obligated to believe is a simulacrum. Instead of relying on an unassailable set of normative guidelines to frame actions, people unknowingly follow a malleable belief system. For the Astrologer, the individual needs not to justify her actions through appealing to ethical principals that uphold those actions nor, and this is perhaps of greater consequence to the development of the narrative of *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*, is she able to appeal to reason to substantiate her understanding of reality.

Ethically and epistemologically, the Astrologer aims to acquire and consolidate power. For this reason, both the characters in the novel and the reader are rendered

unable to fully comprehend the Astrologer's beliefs and plans. Quite simply, there is no belief beyond the will to power. The Astrologer indicates this belief, which recalls both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, when he tells Barsut and Erdosain:

—Cuando converse con un proletario seré rojo. Ahora converso con usted, y a usted le digo: Mi sociedad está inspirada en aquella que a principios del siglo noveno organizó un bandido llamado Abdala-Aben-Maimum. Naturalmente, sin el aspecto industrial que yo filtro en la mía, y que forzosamente garantiza su éxito. Maimum quiso fusionar a los librepensadores, aristócratas y creyentes de dos razas tan distintas como la persa y árabe, en una secta en la que implantó diversos grados de iniciación y misterios. Mentían descaradamente a todo el mundo. A los judíos les prometían la llegada del Mesías, a los cristianos la del Paracleto, a los musulmanes la de Madhi... de tal manera que una turba de gente de las más distintas opiniones, situación social y creencias trabajaban en pro de una obra cuyo verdadero fin era conocido por muy pocos. De esta manera Maimum esperaba llegar a dominar por completo al mundo musulmán. Excuso decirle que los directores del movimiento eran unos cínicos estupendos, que no creían absolutamente en nada. Nosotros les imitaremos. Seremos bolcheviques, católicos, fascistas, ateos, militaristas, en diversos grados de iniciación. (97)

Holding up the cynic Abdula-Aben-Maimum—most likely an invention of the Astrologer's who believed in absolutely nothing—as his model of action, the castrated leader of the revolution appeals for systematic self-fashioning. Believing that self-fashioning and manipulation guarantee power over reality, the Astrologer wants the members of his secret society to adapt to others in order to manipulate the latter's perception of reality convinced that in doing so he will control them.

The Astrologer rests the ability to control perception and, consequently, reality upon an elaborate and ridiculous plan: found an industrial state funded initially by the creation of brothels, to be run by the *Rufián Melancólico* Haffner, and inventions, created by Erdosain. Implementing a programmatic series of terrorist attacks, including the use

of the chemical weapon phosgene, to both interrupt the social system and break the current governmental structure, the Astrologer hopes to fundamentally change the fabric and organization of the social assemblage. This revolution, for the Astrologer, is the beginning of the reign of the Superman. No longer would the strong be dragged down by the weak; a select predisposed few would come to control the masses. He tells Barsut and Erdosain, “Durante algunos decenios el trabajo de los superhombres y de sus servidores se concretará a destruir al hombre de mil formas, hasta agotar el mundo casi... y sólo un resto, un pequeño resto será aislado en algún islote, sobre el que se asentarán las bases de una nueva sociedad” (93). While the ultimate goal of this society is as unknown as the Lezin’s whereabouts at the end of *Los lanzallamas*, the Astrologer aims to systematically destroy human society as understood by his contemporaries. To ring in a new society, he believes in the annihilation of the old, something that can only be done through creating lies to control people. Having been castrated, the Astrologer is the embodiment of the destruction of previous models of experience. Liberated from the volatile impulses of sexual desire, the Astrologer is able to fully focus on what drives him: power.

The innumerable restrictions of bourgeois society, ranging from interpersonal interaction to language usage, which so profoundly affect characters such as Erdosain in the novel, suffocate the ability of the Superman to maximize self-fulfillment. Dragged down by bourgeois society, the rhomboidal-faced agitator resolves to convert industrialism to serve his secret society of the strong. Hoards of weak servants, controlled both explicitly and implicitly through foundational lies by the strong

supermen, would pick apart the social system of the late twenties until a base of a new society could finally be laid. These lies, however, must be so powerful as to control the perceptions of the masses, effectively framing their understanding of reality. In other words, the Astrologer applies practically the lessons learned from Abdala-Aben-Maimum in recruiting members for the secret society that is to enact his revolution. Through the conceptual and physical destruction of sites of ideology, the Astrologer also annihilates the meaning of social understandings such as place. Ideology, or perhaps the lack thereof, structures how we experience and perceive our connections with space and place.

This is implicit in his interaction with the Major in the scene “La farsa” in *Los siete locos* and the Lawyer in “El abogado y el Astrólogo” in *Los lanzallamas*. In each situation, the Astrologer argues that a vital aspect of the revolution is the manipulation of perception, something he personally demonstrates by supposedly molding his behavior according to the person with whom he is speaking throughout the novel, even those with whom he shares closer personal relationships such as Erdosain and Haffner. The reader consequently is left with an assemblage of simulacra that represent the Astrologer’s positionings with different individuals. In “La farsa,” the members of the castrated leader’s secret society meet for the first time at his home in Temperley to discuss the organization of the revolutionary cells. One of the members, an unnamed man of imposing physical stature who is dressed as a major in the military, expounds at length on the possibility of the military’s complicity in their plans. Contending that a sector of the military is dissatisfied with the democratic system, the Major convinces them that

integrating the military into the revolution is a real possibility. This, however, is subverted by an aside with Erdosain, where the Major falsely confesses that he is indeed only playing the role of a Major. Before the others can react, the Astrologer tells them, “¿Se han dado cuenta ahora ustedes del poder de la mentira? [...] Lo he disfrazado a este amigo de militar y ya ustedes mismos creían, a pesar de estar casi en el secreto, que teníamos revolución en el ejército” (108). Although this statement is ultimately revealed to be a lie by a commentator’s note, which informs the reader that the Major was indeed a member of the military, the Astrologer explains to his followers that the Major’s “performance” was a rehearsal for a comedy to be acted in the future. Reality, therefore, is nothing more than a stage on which fictional comedies are produced.

The Astrologer later plays with the notion of reality in a conversation in “El abogado y el Astrólogo.” In this section of *Los lanzallamas*, the Astrologer converses with the Lawyer, a young attorney whose presence in the earlier scene was marked by questioning the Astrologer’s authority. Curiously, the *tête-à-tête* ends after the Lawyer, disgusted by the Astrologer’s graphic description of the revolution’s violence, punches his leader in the face. Perhaps satisfied that this young fellow has exerted his power, the Astrologer leaves.<sup>44</sup> Before this happens, the Astrologer presents to his disciple a key component of his ideology:

Sin embargo, usted admira a Napoleón... Hay que jugar al ajedrez, querido amigo... El ajedrez es el juego maquiavélico por excelencia... Tartkover, un gran jugador, dice que el ajedrecista no debe tener un solo final de juego, sino muchos; que la apertura de una jugada cuanto más confusa y endiablada, más interesante, es decir más útil, porque así

---

<sup>44</sup> The Astrologer details his perspective of the scene to Erdosain later in the novel (292-93).

desconcierta de cien manera al adversario. Tartkover, con su admirable vocabulario de maquiavelista del ajedrez, denomina a este procedimiento: 'elasticidad de juego'. Cuanto más 'elástica' la jugada, mejor; pero como decíamos, el advenimiento de los militares al poder es el summum ideal para los que deseamos el quebrantamiento de la estructura capitalista. Ellos consistuyen intrínsecamente los elementos que pueden despertar la conciencia revolucionaria del pueblo. (243)

Extending the reasoning of this discourse to the previously explored notion of reality, the reader is left with the sense that controlling others' perceptions is a persistent struggle. Or, to couch it into the Astrologer's terms, it is a game in which elasticity is fundamental if one is to be successful. To break the capitalist structure, both economic and social, the participants in the revolution must be flexible. For the communist Lawyer, this elasticity may mean aligning himself with others of very distinct ideologies, for a communist revolution may not be possible without the military's ability to oppress. Returning to the Astrologer's understanding of epistemology and ethics, this elasticity is another element of his rejection of all forms of normativity.

The Astrologer's intentional vacillation between ideologies, which he justifies through the aforementioned ideas (i.e. a performance of a comedy and the elasticity of the game), has dramatic consequences in the representation of place in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*. That is, the affective and epistemological relationship with the *porteño* geography that the Astrologer demonstrates helps shape the reader's perspective of the built, natural, and social environment that she experiences throughout the binary novel. Because the Astrologer adheres to an ideology of power, place as a social positioning becomes an extension of the ability of the strong to control the weak. As social positionings are types of instruments of power, those who control the understanding of

them preside over the great majority of others. Place, therefore, is an important means by which control is exerted. In the industrialized capitalist system of *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*, power is bought, not earned. The Astrologer argues this point when he states:

—Ahora bien, cuando llegué a la conclusion de que Morgan, Rockefeller o Ford eran por el poder que les confería el dinero algo así como dioses, me di cuenta de que la revolución social sería imposible sobre la tierra porque un Rockefeller o un Morgan podía destruir con un solo gesto una raza, como usted en su jardín un nido de hormigas. (92)

Money, the driving force behind the rise of American industrialists, is also the foundation of the Astrologer's revolutionary plan. With the money generated by Haffner's brothels, the secret society would be able to leverage their power to manipulate social understandings.

If the myth of modernity was at least partially driven by the Fords and Morgans of the world, the foundational lies of the Astrologer's revolution hinge on the society's ability to take control of industry. Power over the industrial sector would allow the Astrologer and his movement of the strong to manipulate social positionings so as to placate the masses, which intimates his connection to fascism. Therefore, the Astrologer aims to create notions of the built, natural, and social environment that maximize power and, consequently, wholly disregard the possibility of encountering an authentic understanding of place. This, especially if compared to Borges' exploration of Buenos Aires as a dwelling in his early poetry, is quite significant. Although the Astrologer's understanding of place is largely prospective and wholly unrealized, as the secret society's revolution never comes to fruition, it nonetheless frames the reader's



understanding of Buenos Aires in the binary novel. Buenos Aires is a simulacrum constructed by a mediocre bourgeoisie, which can be developed by the secret society into an anchor of their power.

### **Perspectives of Place and the Two Novels of *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas***

As Piglia noted, the schizophrenic narrative of *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* is driven by two personalities: Erdosain and the Astrologer. Swinging back and forth from Erdosain's "novela de la queja" to the Astrologer's novel, which explores how fiction transmutes reality, the binary novel integrates their distinct perspectives into a singular narrative. Arlt explicitly and implicitly embeds within this narrative innumerable insights into the ways in which different sectors of the Argentine society of the late 1920s positioned their social understandings in relation to society. Through Erdosain and the Astrologer Arlt provides two very different notions of what Buenos Aires means as a place. On one hand, social understandings such as place are not only distorted by Erdosain, as manifested through his deep-seated predilection for humiliation, but they are completely inverted by him at the end of the binary novel. In *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* the reader culls meaning from Erdosain's relationship with the places he inhabits. Both the apartment he shares with Elsa at the beginning of the novel and the site of his ignominious end, the *pensión*, reveal Erdosain's tormented relationship with society and its ramifications in his understanding of place. On the other, the Astrologer negates the ethical and epistemological processes necessary to form affective bonds with the built, natural, and social environment. Place, consequently, is rendered an illusion, an artifice that is a mere creation of power. This perspective of place as a simulacrum of

power is a logical derivative of the Astrologer's political and revolutionary aspirations. *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* therefore hinges its representation of Buenos Aires on two unsuccessful attempts to react against a dominant understanding of place.

Although a number of other characters such as Haffner and Hipólita also provide layers of experience of Buenos Aires as place, Erdosain and the Astrologer's understandings of place are without a doubt the most influential in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*. They form the two gravitational bodies around which the rest of the novel's characters revolve. Limited in their ability to participate in *porteño* social life for distinct reasons, Erdosain and the Astrologer have slipped through the cracks of Buenos Aires. Their relationships with the city's spaces and places, therefore, allow the reader to gain greater insight into the fragmentation of the dominant bourgeois understanding of place.

### **BUENOS AIRES, FISSURED**

Both Erdosain and the Astrologer attempt to destroy place, albeit in different ways. That each is unsuccessful in his attempts is inconsequential in the larger question of the state of Argentine social life in the late 1920s. The binary novel's experience of Buenos Aires as place is therefore constructed of two fractured and fragmentary perspectives. It could be argued that this is another way in which, to return to an idea of Gilman, that the binary novel conspires against its own intelligibility. However, in providing different perspectives of the experience of space and place, Arlt shows how individuals in the Buenos Aires of the late 1920s interpreted place. Because Buenos Aires is the spatial context in which the characters of the binary novel live, interact, and exist— and even more so because it is meaningful to them— they are constantly

interpreting the city. This recalls the following argument by Tim Cresswell cited in the introduction: “Because places are meaningful and because we always exist and act in places, we are constantly engaged in acts of interpretation” (*In Place/Out of Place* 13). Mirroring the hermeneutical process of reading, characters such as Erdosain and the Astrologer read the binary novel’s cityscapes. Their perception of the city frames the reader’s interpretation of spatiality in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*. Insofar as the reader cannot interpret the characters’ experiences of Buenos Aires intelligibly, the representation of place in the binary novel can be likened to the Earth’s crust. Most usually, the Earth appears to maintain a spatial unity despite being constituted by a number of fine layers that are often cracked or broken. Arlt overlaps layers of fissured interpretation of place in *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*. Ultimately, through inward (Erdosain) and outward (the Astrologer) attempts to destroy the dominate bourgeois understanding of place, *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* presents to the reader a representation of Buenos Aires as a place fissured.

*Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas* presents a view of Buenos Aires as a place that is marked by innumerable fissures. The city is not solid entity with which the characters come into contact but rather is presented as a social understanding whose foundation is laid on unstable terrain. It is within the fragmented perspectives of two characters—Erdosain and the Astrologer—that Arlt grounds the feeling that volatile fault lines in Argentina have split open. The two characters’ experiences of the city are not meant to reproduce the lives of the millions of inhabitants of the metropolis: “La novela de Arlt no se puede leer como un documento fidedigno de la realidad sociopolítica y económica de

la Argentina de los años veinte, pero sí refleja sus contradicciones y crisis materiales y espirituales” (Gnutzmann 132). However, as Gnutzman argues, these experiences tune into deeper features of the cultural imaginary that are pathological. The spiritual, social, and material contradictions woven into the fabric of the social are represented in the novel through the ways in which the characters’ position themselves in relation to social understandings. For this reason, the binary novel’s narrative, which persistently spirals toward incomprehensibility, does not aim to faithfully reproduce social understandings such as place. For example, Arlt does not portray the spaces Erdosain inhabits with detail. Instead, through focusing on the protagonist’s emotions within those spaces Arlt captures thick textures of the cityscape through broad and often violent narrative brushstrokes. In doing so, Arlt rejects effectively the attempt to fix place in a manner that is supposedly true to life, as more realist writers such as Manuel Gálvez sought to do. The deeper psychological reactions to social understandings that Arlt explores in the novel allows the reader to experience place through her emotions, as in the case of Erdosain, or the lack thereof, in the case of the Astrologer. In either case, Arlt challenges the bourgeois understanding of the built, natural, and social environment of Buenos Aires.

## Chapter Four

### **Siteseeing the Modern Metropolis: Buenos Aires in Early Sound Films**

The Argentine public's first feature length experience with sound film occurred on June 12th, 1929, when Frank Lloyd's *The Divine Lady* (1929), starring Corinne Griffith, premiered in Buenos Aires at the Grand Splendid Theatre. The film, which lacks dialogue but contains incidental music and a theme song, relied on sound synchronized with discs. It arrived in the Argentine capital two years after the release of the first full-length feature film to implement sound technology, Alan Crosland's *The Jazz Singer* (1927), and a year before the latter film's Argentine premier. Argentines, however, had previously heard snippets of sound as the Phonofilm, a sound camera invented by Lee De Forest, had allowed some famous singers such as Sofía Bozán and José Bohn to simultaneously capture their image and voice.<sup>45</sup> Fearing the loss of important foreign markets like Argentina as a consequence of the increasing availability of sound technology, American studios such as Paramount began producing films in foreign languages at its studios in Hollywood and Joinville, a Parisian suburb (Barnard, *Argentine Cinema* 149). Initially, several of these early films flopped at the Argentine box office because they relied heavily on Central American and Spanish actors. In order to succeed in Argentina, which at the time was one of the largest film markets outside of

the United States and Great Britain, Paramount signed the tango star Carlos Gardel to a multi-film contract. The first of these films, *Las luces de Buenos Aires* (Adelqui Millar 1931), was an unequivocal blockbuster. The financial success of the film, coupled with a decrease in cost in sound production equipment, inspired two sets of Argentine entrepreneurs to found the production companies Argentina Sono Film and Lumiton, the first optical sound studios in Latin America.<sup>46</sup> Producing their first films in 1933—*Tango!* (Moglia Barth) and *Los tres berretines* (Equipo Lumiton) respectively—the companies helped foment Argentine film production, which increased from four films in 1931, to six in 1933, to twenty eight in 1937, and to fifty in 1939 (Barnard, *Argentine Cinema* 148-149).<sup>47</sup> This growth in film production, tempered somewhat by “a market dominated by foreign releases” (Schmitman 30), saw the Argentine film industry become the continent’s largest and most successful. The success of the Argentine film industry in this time hinged on its ability to produce films whose genres, plots, and themes sold well both in the domestic and international markets.

The themes of the majority of sound films in the 1930s were centered on the rising middle class. The Argentine film industry in the 1930s clearly hoped to profit from

---

<sup>45</sup> This camera was similar to later optical sound cameras, but could only film for short durations, usually between three and four minutes (España, “El modelo” 28).

<sup>46</sup> Before Argentina Sono Film and Lumiton’s forays into optical sound, there were other less-successful attempts at sound film. The Argentina Sono Film produced *Muñequitas porteñas* (José Agustín Ferreyra, 1931), which used Vitaphone synchronized discs, is considered by some to be the first Argentine sound film. However, these films are rife with lapses in synchronization and extremely poor sound quality, making it difficult to claim that they are fully sound films.

<sup>47</sup> *Los tres berretines* was directed by a directorial team, Equipo Lumiton, which most likely consisted of John Alton, Lazlo Kisch, Cesar José Guerrico, Enrique Susini, and Luis Romero Carranza. It is important to note that although the original US release title of the film was *The Three Amateurs*, it is more appropriately translated as *The Three Whims*.

providing the bourgeoisie with films tailored to their tastes. Consequently, “Esta burguesía escalonada no tardó en ser motivo de los argumentos cinematográficos que, sin preocupaciones sociologistas, retrataban lo que parecía identificadorio de un modo presente de vivir” (España, “El cine” 57). It was this sense of identification, as España indicates, that the film industry attempted to elicit in the thirties. Optical sound technology allowed the public to not only hear dialogue in the distinctive accent of River Plate Spanish, but it also allowed elements of Argentine culture to be more fully incorporated in its films. These elements of culture, including anything from the influences of immigration in urban centers to vestiges of Argentina’s rural past, facilitated this sense of identification, which helped spur the development of the film industry. Born from it were a number of genres that represented the peculiarities of Argentine social life. Timothy Barnard argues that:

The tango film is the best example of this: it was the largest and most distinctively Argentine genre of the period. It was also very popular abroad, demonstrating that foreign audiences didn’t mind seeing Argentine culture on their movie screens. Sound gave the film industry a new capacity to infuse the country’s vigorous popular culture into its works, creating uniquely Argentine cinema with selling power abroad. (“Popular Cinema” 25)

Due in no small part to its representation of Argentine culture and social life, the tango film became a bankable formula that proved successful both in Argentina and abroad.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Unsurprisingly, *Tango!* is such a film, while *Los tres berretines* and *Riachuelo* incorporate elements from the genre.

Unfortunately, because these genres proved to be successes at the box office the individual films within the genres often proved to be unoriginal.<sup>49</sup>

In reference to Argentine cinema of the thirties, Octavio Getino, argues that “En términos industriales e ideológicos la esencia del proyecto era la misma” (28). The essence of the Argentine cinematic project in the thirties, as revealed through its exportation of tango culture, was to package an easily consumable product with the aid of recent advances in technology. The tango film is such a product, not only because in that its consummately *porteño* subject matter resonated with the city’s 3.5 million inhabitants but also because of its popularity worldwide.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, “Un objetivo del cine del período era la exportación de Buenos Aires como primera capital de habla hispana” (Campodónico et al 12). Buenos Aires itself became a source of raw material for the film industry to refine. More specifically, the Argentine film industry oriented its films to the tastes of the burgeoning *porteño* middle class, its target market. Because of this, early Argentine sound films are rooted in the spaces, places, and values of Buenos Aires’ bourgeoisie.

The Buenos Aires of early Argentine sound film, as represented in films I examine in this chapter, reflects the inculcation of specific social values, particularly those of the middle class. In order to demonstrate this, I examine the representation of place in three of the earliest sound films produced in Argentina: *Tango!*, *Los tres*

---

<sup>49</sup> In his article “Argentine Film from Sound to the Sixties”, Jorge Cosuelo explains that “Early sound cinema in Argentina was fed by the short farce, theatrical reviews, tangos, and the expanding radio network (particularly radio theatre). In contrast to the originality of the late silent film, which had not played safe by using established performers, the first days of sound were peopled by successes from other media” (28).

<sup>50</sup> *Porteño* is the adjective used to describe those who come from Buenos Aires.



*berretines*, and *Riachuelo* (1934).<sup>51</sup> Endowing its spaces and landscapes with value, these early Argentine sound films represent Buenos Aires as a modern metropolis, a center of cultural and economic progress. The spaces of advancement these films represent are not innocent representations of socioeconomic reality of the city, but rather they are assemblages, mediated portrayals advancing ideological conflicts and positions. Jeff Hopkins argues that “The cinematic landscape is not, consequently, a neutral place of entertainment or an objective documentation or mirror of the ‘real,’ but an ideologically charged cultural creation whereby meanings of place and society are made, legitimized, contested, and obscured” (47). The representation of Buenos Aires as a place of opportunity—not only in the sense of economic improvement but also social ascension—advances the ideological positionings of the Argentine film industry.

### **Siteseeing in *Tango!*, *Los tres berretines*, and *Riachuelo***

Much like the majority of Argentine films produced during the thirties, *Tango!*, *Los tres berretines*, and *Riachuelo* are set in Buenos Aires and aim to represent *porteño* social life. In these films the director, or directorial team, assembles place in specific ways so as to represent a particular spatial experience and perception of Buenos Aires. To approximate place as an assemblage in these films, I apply Guiliana Bruno’s notion of siteseeing. Siteseeing is helpful to my analysis of the representation of Buenos Aires as place in these films because it connects space and the metropolis through the trope of mobility, presenting film as a form of *flânerie* (Massey and Lury 231).

---

<sup>51</sup> Along with *Tango!* and *Riachuelo*, *Dancing!* (Moglia Barth 1933) formed part of Argentina Sono Film’s *porteño* trilogy. *Dancing!*, which debuted after *Tango!*, was a commercial and critical flop. It has since

Bruno begins her seminal essay “Site-seeing: Architecture and the Moving Image” almost apologetically as she admits that its title was born of typo. Having originally meant to write “sightseeing”, Bruno wrote “siteseeing”. Despite the unintentional neologism, Bruno states that her linguistic *faux pas* actually advances her theoretical position: “Siteseeing signals a shift in film theory away from its focus on sight towards constructing a theory of site—a cartography, that is, of film's position in the terrain of spatial arts and practices. My erring is ultimately a movement from optic to haptic” (Bruno 9-10). Moving from “sightseeing,” an exclusively visual experience of space, to “siteseeing,” a broader spatial experience that includes touch, Bruno calls for an engaged reinvention of filmic space. This reinvention signals a move away from conceptualizing the experience of filmic space merely through sight in favor of an understanding of it that approaches how the viewer constructs the film’s sites through the totality of her senses.

Bruno argues that this active geography of film is a form of *flânerie*, “a ‘modern’ gaze that wanders through space, fully open to women” (Bruno 11). The *flâneur*, as well as the *flâneuse*, wanders through film just as he or she would stroll through the city. Part of— yet apart from— the city, the *flâneur* actively experiences his journey, whether through the metropolis or film. Bruno further links film and the metropolis when she argues that, just as the flâneur is a product of modernity, film is “a product of the era of the metropolis, expressing an urban viewpoint from the very origin of its history” (11). This urban viewpoint, driven by the market concerns of production companies, affected

the representation of space in early film as it especially addressed urban audiences. Feeding on the urban consciousness and unconscious, this metropolitan perspective, is evident in early Argentine film, especially the sound film. Unsurprisingly, the first words of Argentine sound film were “Buenos Aires” as sung by Azucena Maizani in the film *Tango!*.

Traversing the spaces and places of the metropolis much like the *flâneur*, *Tango!*, *Los tres berretines*, and *Riachuelo* reinvent spatial experiences of the city, leading the viewer through Buenos Aires on a siteseeing tour. Buenos Aires is not only experienced in these films optically, as an object solely experienced through sight, but it is also experienced haptically, through touch and proprioception. Bruno points out that the experience of filmic space is not exclusively visual: it is felt through textures of space that the viewer experiences with all of her senses. Actively engaging herself with the cartography of filmic space, the viewer feels textures of space that guide her reception of the film. In fact, as a medium of cultural production, film is specially privileged to represent our spatial relationships as human beings. As Karen Lury commented in an interview with Doreen Massey in *Screen*, “Precisely because of its mobility, its ability to travel, to make new juxtapositions, new cartographies (as Bruno puts it), film has the potential powerfully to present this other aspect of our spatial world as well” (232). It is therefore through the trope of mobility that I argue that *Tango!*, *Los tres berretines*, and *Riachuelo* represent new spatial understandings of Buenos Aires. As Tim Cresswell reminds us, “Mobility seems self-evident Western modernity. Indeed the word *modern* seems to evoke images of technological mobility— the car, the plane, the spaceship. It

also signifies a world of increased movement on a global scale” (*On the Move* 15). In this sense, mobility is a means of becoming. For this reason— that mobility implies advancement and becoming— the Argentine film industry of the early sound period directed itself towards a type of spatial dynamism. Although this dynamism is at times critiqued, such as in the case of *Tango!*, the film industry of the early sound period guides the viewer through spaces and places that are represented as being progressive. Innovation, or perhaps more appropriately, the feeling of participating in innovation, sells.

#### **BUENOS AIRES, DONDE *TANGO!* NACIÓ: THE DAWN OF THE SOUND FILM**

Premiering in the Cine Real on April 27, 1933 and moving soon after to show simultaneously in numerous other theaters in Buenos Aires and the provinces, *Tango!* marks both a point of culmination and one of departure as it is the final product of the startup phase of Argentina’s first major film studio, Argentina Sono Films, as well as the first film it produced. Despite its numerous firsts— among others, it is the first Argentine film to fully implement sound technology, the first tango film, and Moglia Barth’s first full-length foray into sound—the film has received little critical attention, most usually being eschewed, disparaged [e.g. “El argumento de *Tango!* era sólo una excusa apenas interesante para que los tangos y sus intérpretes tuvieran una dimensión destacada” (España, *Medio* 38)], or lavished with abstract praise [e.g. Domingo Di Núbila calls the film “una suerte de festival de nuestra canción popular” (*Historia* 51)].

*Tango!* is also a monumental film because it helped launch the careers of three of the most important figures of the early post-silent film era: Luis Moglia Barth, Luis

Sandrini and Libertad Lamarque. Moglia Barth, Sandrini, and Lamarque “tardarían muy poco tiempo en convertirse en favoritos del público” (Campodónico et al 83). By the time he directed *Tango!*, Luis Moglia Barth had a wide-range of experiences in cinema. He began his career as a sketch artist for the innovative animator Quirino Cristiani, only to later move into silent films.<sup>52</sup> Moglia Barth then became a type of plot and montage alchemist: editing unpalatable German and European silent films so as to construct them into riveting stories specially designed for Argentine tastes. Not only would he translate and adapt the films’ intertitles to be more closely aligned with Argentine cultural sensibilities but also, in some cases, he would completely change a film’s plot. Di Núbila claims that “Moglia Barth se convirtió en un experto en toda clase de metamorfosis, desde transformar a la amante de un personaje en su hermana” (*Historia* 51). These adaptations gave Moglia Barth practical editing experience, as well as creative freedom to mould a film’s narrative, both of which he would later apply to *Tango!* and the thirteen additional films he directed in the thirties. The film also marks Luis Sandrini’s first feature film. Sandrini, who previously performed in circus and radio, parlayed his comic role of Berretín in *Tango!* into becoming the Argentine film industry’s first bona fide male star.<sup>53</sup> Despite not starring in a silent film, Sandrini is often compared to Charlie Chaplin due to his popularity and his crafting of a unique comic role. Additionally, it is fitting that Libertad Lamarque (Elena) appeared in *Tango!*, the first tango film, as she

---

<sup>52</sup> Quirino Cristiani directed the world’s first full-length animated features: the satires *El apóstol* (1917) and *Sin dejar rastros* (1918), both of which used Hipólito Yrigoyen as a main character. Both films have been lost.

<sup>53</sup> Carlos Gardel’s full-length features were produced and filmed by Les Studio Paramount in Joinville, a Parisian suburb, and Paramount in New York.

became one the genre's most recognizable figures. While certainly not the first Argentine woman to star on screen, Lamarque certainly became its brightest in the 1930s, featuring in such films as *El alma del bandoneón* (Mario Soffici 1935) *Ayúdame a vivir* (José Ferreyra 1936), and *Besos brujos* (José Ferreyra 1937).

In an attempt to counteract the inherent risks of investing a large amount of capital in an unknown product (i.e. the sound film) the executives of Argentina Sono Film, along with the director Moglia Barth, developed a low-risk strategy based on a star system. This strategy was applied throughout the film's evolution—from development to post-production. As a production, *Tango!* mixes relative unknowns, novices, and “stars in the making” like Lamarque and Sandrini with a number of Argentina's most popular singers. Azucena Maizani, whose renditions of “Canción de Buenos Aires” and “Milonga de novecientos” open and close the film, and Mercedes Simone, who sings “Cantando,” are two such tango performers who were established stars before the film opened. The strategy of relying on known commercial successes is also evident in the film's plot. Claudio España argues that “La idea argumental es sencilla, similar a la de cualquier película muda argentina de los años anteriores: el enfrentamiento entre el *barrio* y el *centro* de la ciudad, con una descripción no demasiado nítida del *arrabal*, pero considerado causal de desgracias” (“El modelo” 27).<sup>54</sup> These leitmotifs were also common ground in *sainetes* and neorealist narrative fiction popular during the time. The reliance on proven success—exemplified by the tango performers and the plot— in the film attests to Argentina Sono Film's cautious approach to investing in sound film.

Although entering into uncharted waters, Argentina Sono Film brought along with it well known tools.

One of the tools that Moglia Barth uses to narrate the film's plot is the intertitle. Most usually used in the silent era to further plot development, the intertitle became increasingly less useful with the development of reliable sound technologies. No longer needing to rely on the intertitle to contextualize actors' gestures and augment meaning, plot came to be conveyed through dialogue and sound, as well as image in post-silent films. Despite this, perhaps realizing that film literacy during the silent era was heavily indebted to the intertitle, perhaps unable to move beyond his own past success modifying foreign silent films, Moglia Barth uses intertitles to structure the plot of *Tango!*.<sup>55</sup>

The film's ten intertitles serve several distinct purposes. First, they function diegetically to further the film's plot. For example, the final intertitle, to which I return later, states, "El amor de Tita se reafirma con Alberto y al volver al barrio, es cómo si despertara de un sueño." This intertitle announces the arrival of the protagonist Alberto (Alberto Gómez) in the neighborhood and, somewhat anticlimactically, foreshadows the film's climax—the reunion of Alberto and Tita. Second, the intertitle is used in the film to announce a scene's setting (e.g. the fifth series of intertitles is "La noche," "Letreros

---

<sup>54</sup> The emphasis is España's.

<sup>55</sup> Another aspect of silent film literacy that *Tango!* attempts to exploit, albeit with much less success, is the facial gesture. In order to more explicitly convey facial gestures, perhaps the clearest way of expressing emotion, the silent film relied heavily on makeup. Makeup helped distinguish an actor's lips from the rest of her face through using lipstick and base. Unfortunately, several actors in *Tango!* wore excessive makeup, something obvious in the film. Because of this, several actors were criticized for their perceived lack of photogeneity. This leads Campodónico et al to note, in reference to Libertad Larmaque, "El excesivo maquillaje - proveniente del mudo- y una figura algo más que rolliza, le restaban fresca juvenil" (Campodónico et al 100).

iluminados de New York,” and “Cabarets escarpados de una noche de París.”). Finally, intertitles set the mood of the following scene. One such example is the first series. The initial intertitle demarcates the scene’s setting “Arrabal,” while those that follow it use poetic language to set the mood and a sense of place in the forthcoming scene (“Callejas que se cruzan en un corte aprendido del paso de un malevo, rincón porteño donde el tango reina y es en el silencio de la noche, himno y caricia, llanto y oración”) .

Contextualizing place, the ten intertitles used in *Tango!* divide and link the spaces represented in the film. Ultimately, they function to frame the plot into a series of narrative vignettes, demarcating the scene’s setting as well as providing a place in which the characters may interact. In the following sections I show how the film dichotomizes public and private space, providing the characters with spaces replete with distinct meanings; I then revisit the leitmotif the confrontation between the city’s center (i.e. downtown) and periphery (i.e. the suburban barrio); and finally I argue that Alberto’s assertion that “No hay nada como mi barrio, de aquí no volveré a salir” is ultimately an unsustainable position given the film’s ideological implications.

### **Public and Private Space in *Tango!***

The ways in which space and place are represented in early sound films was greatly affected by the technology available to filmmakers in the early nineteen thirties. Technological and technical limitations restricted how filmmakers captured the *real* and assembled the *reel*. *Tango!* is no exception as Moglia Barth and his production team, using Fox’s Movietone technology, were able to capture at the most eight to ten minutes of film at a time (España, “El modelo” 28). Perhaps even more limiting was the technical



inability to capture audio outside of a soundstage or sound studio; consequently, the majority of *Tango!* was filmed in the Ariel, Biasotti, and Valle soundstages (Di Núbila, *Historia* 53). Because of these restrictions, the spaces represented in the film are usually indoors, although there are a few scenes that take place outside.

The places represented in *Tango!*—equally those public and private—are spaces imbued with meaning. These meanings, however, are assembled in dramatically different manners as the film dichotomizes the significance and implications of public space from those of private spaces. Representing space as being governed by a public/private binary system, the film uses place to determine the characters’ interaction with one another as well as their behavior to the environment. I shed light onto the particular meanings of and differences between private and public space by closely examining several illustrative scenes in the film. In doing so, I use Michael Walzer’s broad understanding of public space. For Walzer:

Public space is space we share with strangers, people who aren’t our relatives, friends, or work associates. It is a space for politics, religion, commerce, sport; space for peaceful coexistence and impersonal encounter; its character expresses and also conditions our public life, civic culture, everyday discourse. (321)

Private space, on the other hand, is an intimate, personal space whose conditions are either actively or passively determined by the individual.

Private space in *Tango!* is representative of themes of return recurrent in Argentine cultural production in the early twentieth century, including “la vuelta al pago” or “return to the place of origin,” “regreso al hogar” or “return home,” and “regreso al nido” or “return to the nest”. These leitmotifs—prevalent in genres as distinct as tango

lyrics and the popular novel—demarcate the possibilities of how private space is portrayed in the film (España, “Modelo” 31). Bound to notions of origin and home, the representation of this space in *Tango!* calls into mind Gaston Bachelard’s assertion that “All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home” (5). *Really* inhabited space for Bachelard, as well as in *Tango!*, is necessarily endowed with the qualities of home or homeness. Home is a source of authenticity. Private space in *Tango!* is represented as an authentic space from which an individual comes and in which she feels at ease or “at home.”

A suggestive scene in the film represents the dual nature of private space. The scene begins after the showing of the first diegetic series of intertitles, the third set in the film, which transpose the following phrases onto a sequence of documentary-like shots of families and children playing, “Barrio/ Rincón donde florecen los recuerdos.../ Tierra del ayer en donde nada cambia/ Lugar bendito donde al volver un día, nos volvemos a encontrar con nuestras almas/ Allí, a su barrio, fiel a su promesa, volvió Tita.” These intertitles illustrate how select public spaces, such as the barrio, are represented as private in *Tango!*. The barrio in the film is a space that is inhabited by a community that ascribes similar value to its surrounding physical environment. Claudio España describes it in the following terms, “En buena medida, el barrio, región blanca en la narración porteña, pasa a ocupar el lugar sacralizado que tenía el campo en las anteriores narrativas con última moraleja” (“El modelo” 30). Its meaning lies outside the state: residing instead in a shared understanding of its built, natural, and environment. I return to this sense of private space shortly.

The intertitles, which foreshadow the film's culmination, eventually give way to a medium shot of Tita, who is standing in a doorway. She immediately begins singing the tango "No salgas de tu barrio," written in 1927 by Enrique Delfino and Rodríguez Bustamante. The song's lyrics reflect Tita's remorse for having left Alberto for Malandra (Juan Sarcione); for example, "No salgas de tu barrio/ sé buena muchachita/ casate con un hombre que sea como vos." Additionally, the song equates physical space with identity as place—the barrio—delineates authentic or proper experience for the *muchachita*. However, the viewer has little time to react to "No salgas de tu barrio," as the film transitions, albeit briefly, into a comic scene that partially alleviates the previous scene's emotion. In the doorway opposite to Tita, the comedic relief Berretín fails in an attempt to flirt with Mecha (Meneca Tailhada). After rejecting Berretín's flatteries, Mecha enters the room and begins to apply lipstick. Tita, having been quiet during the previous shot, laments to Mecha that she was the cause of Alberto's perdition. The physical environment, in this case her home, permits Tita a level of intimacy and comfort not available in public space. Tita feels free to intimately confide in Mecha her profound loyalty to Alberto and her barrio. Mecha then attempts to console Tita by telling her that "Mira, no te dejes de engañar de sentimientos...la vida está allí, entre tangos, copetines y milonga." Hollow advice for a deeply troubling problem, Mecha's consolation seems to little satisfy her friend. Tellingly, Tita is not present in the next scene, a milonga. In this scene, location is used as a metaphor that equates identity with space. Tita is only able to "be herself" within the comfortable confines of private space. It is for this reason she avoids attending the milonga.

If private space in *Tango!* is portrayed as being a home, a space naturally endowed with authenticity, then public space in the film is represented as being uninhabitable. Public space in *Tango!*, which is most usually represented in the film as semi-public space in venues like the transatlantic ship and tango bars, evokes a dichotomy central to Argentine culture: civilization versus barbarism. Sparked by the 1845 publication of *Facundo: civilización y barbarie*, in which Domingo Sarmiento explores notions of civilization and progress in the face of Argentina's natural barbarism. Eventually, the binary system of civilization/barbarism became central to the liberal project of the nineteenth century. While rooted in nineteenth century liberalism, this paradigm has far-reaching implications that continue to this day. In the twenties and thirties, this debate is both engaged explicitly—Ezquiel Martínez Estrada's *Radiografía de la pampa* (1933) is one salient example—and implicitly in Argentine cultural production. *Tango!* is an example of the latter as it ostensibly represents public space as either civilized or barbarous. The civilization/barbarism dichotomy is apparent in the juxtaposition of two scenes representing the tango.

The first takes place in the Riachuelo, an impoverished area rife with crime. Opening with a shot where darkness frames anonymous couples dancing the tango, the scene cuts to Alberto and Berretín walking down an even more poorly lit street, eventually stopping to converse. The film then cuts to a close-up of Tita, who while smoking looks both depressed and detached. This look is repeated in several following shots capturing young, beautiful women with their older and suspicious looking male companions. Repeated, this look of resignation connotes a similar situation, one endemic

to the Riachuelo. Malandra, the man for whom Tita left Alberto, is similarly disengaged from his situation, although for a much different reason for he engages the eyes of the sole unaccompanied woman in the tango bar. The two exchange lustful looks: first told through two medium shots capturing the individuals as well as other patrons in the background, then told through two close-ups of suggestive glances. Malandra gets up to talk to the woman, leaving Tita at the table, alone to look at her nearly empty glass. Coincidentally, just after Tita is left alone, Alberto enters the bar with Berretín. He then approaches Tita, trying to convince her to return to him. Before he is successful, Malandra returns to the table, immediately challenging Alberto's right to talk to Tita by saying, "Oiga mocito, Ud. es bastante atrevido. Cuando esta mujer no era de nadie, le permití que le hablara, pero ya que es mía y que lleva en su corazón la marca de mi pasión y conoce el rigor de mi cariño, le prohíbo hasta que la mire, compadrito." Alberto then tells Malandra that he allowed Tita to leave him to prove the unselfishness of his love, but now he wants her back. Nearly coming to blows in the tango bar, the two go outside to fight for Tita. In the same poorly lit street that Alberto and Berretín had previously traversed, Alberto and Malandra battle for Tita. Alberto eventually stabs Malandra, gravely injuring his adversary.

Later in the film, after having served time in prison for nearly killing Malandra, Alberto sings at a high-class tango bar. Moving from the Riachuelo to a city center dominated by neon lights and cabarets reminiscent of world metropolises like New York and Paris, this nightspot is dramatically different from its predecessor. This shift displaces Alberto from the fringes of society to a highly civilized space. Through a series

of shots, the scene initially establishes the civility and luxuriousness of the place. The scene begins by showing the well-dressed orchestra, consisting of at least three violinists and three bandoneon players perched above the club's main floor. The scene then cuts to a long shot capturing an opulent fountain in the background, elegant men and women dancing the tango in the foreground, and tables with patrons in between them. In one of the few panning shots in the film, the camera then tilts down, showing many more couples dancing. This high-angle shot emphasizes the size of the club, as well as the large quantity of elegant patrons. The club's luxury is further expressed in the next cut, a shot of three women plunging into a swimming pool. The scene's first diegetic shot is next, as Alberto's agent Bonito (Pepe Arias) enjoys conversation with three young women. Leading up to Alberto's performance, the spaces in the previous shots are underlined through a series of similar shots (several pan the dance floor in slightly different ways, another revisits the pool and the bathing beauties, while one more shows Bonito reveling in women's attention). The final shot before Alberto starts singing is a static shot that emphasizes the elegance of the tango bar and concretizes its representation as a civilized place: in it, an ice bucket, a crystal vase with flowers, a bottle of champagne, and an ashtray sit on a table.

The tango bars in these two scenes are emblematic of the dichotomous representation of public space in early twentieth century Argentina. Inheriting Sarmiento's civilization/barbarism binary, *Tango!* latently engages this discourse throughout the film. Each scene, disparate shots assembled together through montage, constructs differing textures of place. The first, located in the marginal space of the

Riachuelo, represents the hole-in-the-wall tango bar as a place of barbarism. The dark streets Alberto and Berretín walk down, the exchange of animalistic looks between Malandra and the single woman, and the suspenseful knife fight portray public space as replete with power, sex, and violence. The second scene, showing Alberto's performance of "Alma de bohemio" (Caruso and Firpo 1928) in an elegant tango bar in the center of Buenos Aires, represents public space as one of civility and affluence. In this scene sophisticated patrons dance and drink champagne, while being entertained by swimmers and a smart tango orchestra. The different textures of place of these two scenes represent another prevalent leitmotif in Argentine cultural production of the twenties and thirties: the confrontation between the city center and the periphery.

### **Inside/Outside the Metropolis: From the Margin to the Center to the Margin**

The civilization versus barbarism discourse has its roots in a broader, and more nebulous, dichotomy of the urban center and its margin. The distinction between center and margin manifests itself through a number of binaries: city/country, downtown/suburb, etc. *Tango!*, for example, is a consummately urban film in which rural space is neither represented nor discussed—it simply does not exist. Despite focusing solely on urban space, Buenos Aires in the film is represented in such a way that its center is portrayed in a dramatically different fashion from its periphery. The ways in which each space is assembled in the film provides the viewer with contrasting textures of place. That is, the viewer experiences place sensorially, feeling each space in a distinct manner. These textures are imbued with ideology as they both explicitly and implicitly frame how the viewer experiences space. The city center, its downtown, is

represented in the previously examined scene that ensues the intertitle “La noche.” Buenos Aires’ downtown, as the film presents it, is affluent, civilized, detached, frivolous, hedonistic, placeless, etc. Marginal textures of place, however, are more complicated, as multiple peripheral spaces are represented in the film (the *arrabal* and the *barrio*). Consequently they are depicted as, among other qualities, authentic, comfortable, dubious, quaint, rough, and violent. Modifying an insight made by Raymond Williams’ in his *The City and the Country*, it is clear in *Tango!* that the contrast of the urban center and its margins is one of the major forms in which the viewer becomes conscious of a central part of the film’s experience and of the crises of its society (289).<sup>56</sup>

Narrative in *Tango!* is structured to lead the viewer through a siteseeing tour of Buenos Aires and tango culture. Beginning in the *arrabal*, it shifts horizontally to the Riachuelo, then moving downtown. From downtown, the film’s site-seeing tour sails abroad, only later returning to its home in the *barrio*. Its narrative trajectory, which clearly follows well tread upon paths of previous works of Argentine cultural production, is experienced spatially by the viewer. Cinematic spatiality, as Guiliana Bruno notes, is experienced much like that of our quotidian lives, “One lives a film as one lives the space that one inhabits: as an everyday passage—tangibly” (20). In the case of *Tango!*, the viewer experiences the film through a procession of images that capture specific spaces on celluloid. The viewer is led through the film’s spaces and narrative at the rate of twenty-four frames per second. These frames guide the viewer, for “film is read as it is traversed, and is readable insofar as it is traversable” (Bruno 15). Sound film can only be fully

---

<sup>56</sup> Williams’ original quote is, “Clearly the contrast of country and city is one of the major forms in which we become conscious of a central part of our experience and of the crises of our society” (289).



experienced through movement: movement of frames, movement of images, movement of sound.

The itinerary of the siteseeing tour that the viewer traverses in *Tango!* is almost immediately fixed in the film. In the first scene, set in the *arrabal*, Alberto and Tita's love affair is disrupted by the shady Malandra. Malandra, whose suggestive name and overbearing nature almost immediately reveal him to be the film's antagonist, engages Tita's attention, causing her to stop entertaining Alberto's affection. Malandra's truncation of Alberto and Tita's relationship is the impetus of the film's journey—the restoration of a paradise lost. Alberto then travels to the Riachuelo, where he first attempts to convince Tita to return to him, only to capitulate to Malandra's challenge to a knife fight. This point marks the pair's nadir: Alberto is sentenced to a term in jail, while Tita repentantly returns to her neighborhood.

After having served his punishment, Alberto meets Bonito, who introduces him to the tango world and acts as his agent. Knowing Alberto is love stricken, Bonito manipulates Alberto into leaving Buenos Aires through a forged letter claiming that Tita is residing in Paris. Bonito hopes to profit, financially and romantically, through his ties to Alberto. The trip to Paris, yet another theme recurrent in Argentine cultural production, brings Alberto the greatest challenge to his love affair with Tita, the tempting Elena. In Paris, Alberto grows closer to the beautiful, talented, and wealthy Elena, eventually coming close to becoming engaged with her. Before Alberto proposes, Berretín tells Alberto that he has located Tita. Feeling as if he has been newly awakened from a dream, Alberto realizes that he is still in love with Tita. In the film's denouement,

Alberto arrives at Tita's apartment after learning that she had returned to their old neighborhood. Unable to deny the love they share for each other, the two begin their relationship anew, restoring paradise lost.

### **No hay nada como mi barrio**

The siteseeing tour through which *Tango!* leads the viewer makes its final stop in the barrio. Previously described in intertitles as a “Lugar bendito donde al volver un día, nos volvemos a encontrar con nuestras almas,” the barrio is a redemptive space that catalyzes Alberto and Tita's reunion and reifies order in the film. If the film's narrative is an attempt to regain a paradise lost, then the characters are required to reestablish a number of conditions before their fall from grace. These conditions constitute a sense of order that is hinged on an understanding of the relationship between the individual and place. The barrio is a privileged space in the film because it is described as being a blessed place where we are able to reencounter our souls. An experience that allows Tita and Alberto to absolve their previous misdeeds, returning to the barrio brings the pair closer to their true selves, which leads them back into each other's arms. Additionally, this reunion—a return to the authenticity that the barrio engenders—is a tacit condemnation of the artificial life of the “civilization” of the modernity of cosmopolitan Buenos Aires and Paris.

The final scene in *Tango!* explicitly represents the reestablishment of order principally through montage and dialogue. The film's denouement is foretold by the contrasting situations in which Elena and Tita perform their final songs of the film. Elena performs a serious tango: screen music conveying her sorrow after Alberto confesses that

he's leaving her.<sup>57</sup> To further emphasize the scene's emotion, Elena collapses after completing the song. The film's score then cuts to Tita's final song. Though ignorant to the impending arrival of Alberto, Tita sings the light "La chiflada." Upon finishing the song, the camera pans from a static shot of Tita sitting down in a chair to the left. Previously unoccupied, this space shows Alberto entering the room. Alberto, as well as the camera, pauses briefly, as if to collect himself before talking to Tita. Collected, the protagonist and the camera then move toward Tita. This jerking panning movement—from left to right to left—disorients the viewer and adds suspense. Alberto, approaching Tita from behind, announces his arrival and the two clutch each other. The emotion of the embrace is intensified through cutting to a close-up of the two joyously embracing, which in turn is deepened by an even closer shot of the two kissing.

After returning from a brief scene of a disparaged Elena, Alberto and Tita are interrupted by Berretín and Bonito. Bonito offers the couple sincere apologies for misleading Alberto abroad and the opportunity for another lucrative tour. Even though they both accept Bonito's apologies, Alberto refuses his offer, preferring to stay at home in his neighborhood. He states, "No hay nada como mi barrio, de aquí no volveré a salir." Alberto chooses to stay in the neighborhood, at Tita's side, because no other place provided him with the feeling of belonging and authenticity that he experiences at home. Alberto reaffirms this when Tita asks him about leaving tango for her. He tells her, "El tango sos vos misma. Nuestro barrio, nuestros amigos. Solamente en el suburbio de

---

<sup>57</sup> Michel Chion defines screen music as "Music that apparently arises from a source in the space/time of the story, diegetic music" (224).

Buenos Aires los tangos tienen alma.” Alberto rejects economic opportunity to reaffirm the authenticity of his craft. Although another tour would provide a financial windfall, doing so would betray his and the tango’s roots in Buenos Aires. Bonito reaffirms this when he states, “Y pensar que en Europa somos aguantados cada marcha japonesa como si fuera tango.” The four then move toward the window, almost nostalgically looking out toward Buenos Aires.

Alberto’s assertion “no hay nada como mi barrio” is emblematic of *criollismo*, a prevalent ideology in the early twentieth century, especially the twenties. Reacting to the increasing influence of immigrants in culture, politics, and society in the early twentieth century, the *criollo* movement in Argentina changed radically from its roots in the nineteenth century. Gloria Videla de Rivero suggests that:

El criollismo tiene sus antecedentes en las tendencias criollistas del siglo XIX, posteriores a las independencias políticas hispanoamericanas relacionados con la dirección del romanticismo que valoriza al «color local» como elemento estético. Ciertamente en un «novomundismo» más amplio, el «neocriollismo» de la década del 20 intenta incorporar a la literatura las peculiaridades nacionales, incluso las urbanas. (226)

The *criollismo* latent in *Tango!*, as well as the poetry of Jorge Luis Borges, is a residue of previous nationalist movements. These movements effectively tie the notion of an authentic national identity, *argentinidad* or Argentineness, to the land.

Criollismo’s rootedness to land is typical of a sedentary metaphysics. In her article “National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees” the anthropologist Lisa Malkki argues that notions of identity rooted in the soil of home are profoundly metaphysical. She states, “this is a

sedentarism that is deeply metaphysical and deeply moral, sinking ‘peoples’ and ‘cultures’ into ‘national soils,’ and the ‘family of nations’ into ‘Mother Earth’ (Malkki 31). As Cresswell explains, “Her argument is that fixed, bounded, and rooted conceptions of culture and identity are linked to particular ways of thinking, which are themselves sedentarist” (Cresswell 27).

*Criollismo*, a sedentarist metaphysics reacting to sociocultural phenomenon such as immigration, shifts in trade policy, and increasing industrialization is a latent presence in the film. Alberto’s “No hay nada como mi barrio, de aquí no volveré a salir” is representative of a tie to the land, in this case his particular suburb of Buenos Aires, is congruous with *criollismo*. However, the Buenos Aires that the film portrays is not consistent with the sociopolitical situation of the 1930s. Much like Borges’ Buenos Aires, which was explored in chapter two, the vision represented in *Tango!* of the Argentine capital is an anachronism. As Mónica Landro, Abel Posadas, and Marta Speroni note in their 2005 work *Cine Sonoro Argentino 1933-1943*, “El guión de Carlos de la Púa y Moglia Barth ofrecía la visión de un Buenos Aires hartó frecuentado por el sainete de las décadas del 10 y del 20” (30). A consequence of Argentina Sono Film’s business strategy of relying on proven success, *Tango!* offers little in regards to artistic innovation as “No hay riesgo aquí: se marcha sobre seguro” (Landro et al 30).

### **Ambivalence, Mobility, and Sedentarist Metaphysics in *Tango!***

*Tango!* leads the viewer on a siteseeing tour: a musical cavalcade moving through Buenos Aires and abroad, following Alberto’s quest to restore his relationship with Tita through a number of places prominent in the Argentine cultural imagination of the early

twentieth century. These places are endowed with binary qualities (e.g. authentic/inauthentic, public/private, central/marginal) represented by a number of cinematic techniques, including camera movement, mise-en-scène, and montage. By dichotomizing the representation of particular places in Buenos Aires, *Tango!* frames the viewer's experience of space in the film and its meaning. This experience, indebted to a type of sedentary metaphysics, privileges fixity above mobility. Much like other cultural production influenced by *criollismo*, the felicity of film's characters is directly tied to their adscription to a fixed notion of place rooted in the abstract concept of home. As Landro, Posadas, and Speroni note, this understanding of place, heavily indebted to previous representations of Buenos Aires in cultural production, is anachronistic. The film's anachronisms underlie the tension between a previous notion of place, *criollismo*, and one contemporaneous with the film, which privileges mobility and modernity. In this sense, the film represents an aestheticized Buenos Aires; Moglia Barth assembles the city to more closely resemble his and Argentina Sono Film's commercial aspirations, as well as their particular ideological positions, than the reality of the Argentine capital in the early thirties.

#### **CINEMA, SOCCER, AND TANGO IN LUMITON'S *LOS TRES BERRETINES***

Three weeks after the release of the first Argentine foray into sound film—Argentina Sono Film's *Tango!*— *Los tres berretines* premiered in the Astor Cinema, located on the Avenida Corrientes, a center of culture and nightlife in the Buenos Aires of the 1930s. The film's premier marked the first production of another

studio, Lumiton. Lumiton was born from a group of men experienced in radio who possessed a collective interest in exploring the creative possibilities of mixing sound and image in the sound film: “César José Guerrico, Enrique Telémaco Susini, Luis Romero Carranza, Ignacio Gómez y Miguel Mugica (por muchos llamados ‘los locos de la azotea’) decidieron experimentar en el campo del sonido y la imagen (Lumiton = lumi: luz y ton: sonido) (Fabbro 222). Having acquired a Bell and Howell, an American optical sound camera, Lumiton rounded out its production team by hiring a pair of local experts, set designer Ricardo J. Conord and sound engineer Raúl Orazábal Quintana, and two experienced Hungarian filmmakers, editor Lazlo Kisch and cinematographer John Alton. By December 21, 1932, the Lumiton had been inaugurated, as the local magazine *Heraldo del Cinematografista* announced the arrival of the new studio. Less than half a year later, *Los tres berretines*, or *The Three Whims*, was released.

The film, which “técnicamente llamó la atención porque su sonido se entendía y su fotografía era nítida” (Di Núblia, *La época* 76), is a dramatically different type of film than *Tango!* despite being heavily influenced by American and European films, including Spanish language productions like Carlos Gardel’s *Las luces de Buenos Aires*. *Los tres berretines* differs from its predecessor in that it privileges narrative (both in sound and image), “no apuesta tanto a fotografiar un cantante sino a narrar una historia” (Landro et al 31), over its soundtrack. While *Tango!* primarily relies on singers, as opposed to plot, to drive its musical cavalcade, the plot of *Los tres berretines* centers on familial conflict. As a consequence of the mundanity of its plot, which occurs in everyday places, *Los tres berretines* “deja abierto al sonido un abanico de posibilidades” (Landro et al 32). Sound

is not only used as a means through which popular music could be more easily diffused to a larger public in the film but rather it is explored within a broader spectrum of contexts and places.

### **The Spaces and Places of the Three Whims**

Much of *Los tres berretines* revolves around the Sequeiros family's experiences with the film's three *berretines* or whims. Imbued with meaning stemming from shared understandings of place, the film's representation of the cinema, the soccer stadium, and those of tango culture capture spaces and places well known in the *porteño* social imaginary. In this sense the spaces and places of the film—stops on the siteseeing tour—of these typically *porteño* passions are presented as archetypes. That is, the sites of the three whims are assembled by Equipo Lumiton so as to be both *readily identifiable* and *easy to identify with* for the viewer in the 1930s. To demonstrate the duality of the use of identity by Equipo Lumiton, I first scrutinize the relationship between ideology and place in *Los tres berretines*. Having established a link between the values of the rising Argentine middle-class and the film, I then examine the distinct manners in which *Los tres berretines* represents distinct places in Buenos Aires, moving first in the title sequence through the city's streets, later moving to the cinema, the soccer stadium, and the spaces of tango culture. In doing so, I focus on how the directorial team uses external shots as metonymic fragments to convey a larger, haptic, experience of cinematic space and the ways character types, the starving poet in the Café Tren for example, are exploited in shots filmed on soundstages. These metonymic fragments and character types are intentionally emblematic of bourgeois Buenos Aires as Lumiton aimed to



recreate the places of this particular sector of the *porteño* population, its target market. In this sense, audience members are ego-tourists who are led on a siteseeing tour of themselves.

### **Tradition and Modernity: Ideology and Place of the Three Whims**

There is a clear link between the burgeoning bourgeoisie and the themes of many early Argentine sound films. Eschewing realist modes of cinematic representation, films in the early sound period depicting the rising middle class often attempted to recreate situations with which its members could readily identify themselves. *Los tres berretines* is no exception. Take for example the Sequieros family, around whom the film centers. The family is marked by strong Spanish influence, as both the *pater familias*, don Manuel Sequieros (Luis Arata), and the grandparents, don Manuel's in-laws (Héctor Quintanilla and Dolores Dardés), speak with distinctively Peninsular accents. Its Argentine members also shape family dynamics, as don Manuel's wife (Benita Puértolas) and the pair's children Lorenzo (played by a real soccer player, Miguel Ángel Lauri of Estudiantes de la Plata), Eduardo (Florindo Ferrario), Elena (Malena Bravo), and Eusebio (Luis Sandrini) are uniquely *porteño*.<sup>58</sup> The two sides of the family converge in don Manuel's comfortable home, the center of their familial interaction, which was made possible by his profitable hardware store.

The central tension of *Los tres berretines* resides in understandings of place. On the one hand, the immigrant father foresees a potential dissolution of the family nucleus rising from his grown children's dedication to frivolous activities. Only Eduardo's work

as an architect wins the approval of don Manuel, as he takes a dim view on Lorenzo's profession as a soccer player, Elena's passion for going to the movies, and Eusebio's dream to be a successful tango composer. Don Manuel views the places of these three popular passions— the soccer stadium, the cinema, and the tango bar—as being professionally unviable. The three are wasting their time dedicating themselves to the film's three whims: in don Manuel's worldview, working in the hardware store would better suit Lorenzo and Eusebio, while Elena would do better to look for an appropriate husband. Despite this, Lorenzo, Elena, and Eusebio forge their way through this perceived frivolity to pursue their chosen interests. Ultimately, the family is brought back together through Eusebio's resourcefulness and Lorenzo's success on the soccer pitch.

*Los tres berretines* is a film heavily influenced by a bourgeois ideology that champions hard work, ingenuity, and perseverance. This ideology, as España argues, facilitates the three brothers' success in the film:

Con su filosofía de 'ganarle a la vida', *Los tres berretines* retrata la heroicidad burguesa: cada personaje triunfa por su esfuerzo y por la confianza que pone en sí mismo. Eusebio [...] sobresale como compositor de tangos; Cacho [i.e. Lorenzo], como jugador de fútbol, y Eduardo [...] como profesional arquitecto y en el amor con la chica (Luisa Vehil) a quien persigue hasta un camarote de barco, en un perfecto 'salvamento de último momento'. Las victorias a largo plazo del héroe pequeño-burgués. (43)

The brothers' individual successes in *Los tres berretines* lie in their ability to flourish within the context of place. Sensing that their immigrant father's notion of place, static and unadventurous, no longer is tenable in their contemporary socioeconomic climate,

---

<sup>58</sup> Neither the grandparents nor don Manuel's wife have names in the film.

the three reject the opportunity to take over the family business in favor of pursuing their own paths. As exemplified by Lorenzo, Eduardo, and Eusebio's individual successes in the film, *Los tres berretines* portrays the heroism of the bourgeoisie.

### **Metonymy, Siteseeing, and Flânerie in the Title Sequence**

The siteseeing tour on which *Los tres berretines* leads the viewer begins with the title sequence—a moving postcard that represents Buenos Aires through an assemblage of metonymic fragments. These fragments, exterior shots assembled by the directorial team to create a narrative trajectory, orient the viewer's understanding of Buenos Aires as a place. This, at least in part, is due to technological limitations that prevented Equipo Lumiton from capturing sound in their exterior shots. Limited to a soundtrack recorded in a studio, exterior shots in the film act as frames that mark scenes filmed on a soundstage. Something similar, albeit caused by economic rather than technological concerns, occurs in contemporary television production. In their article “Metonymy and the Metropolis: Television Show Settings and the Image of New York,” William Sadler and Ekaterina Haskins analyze city images portrayed in popular television shows set but not filmed in the Big Apple. Proposing that fragments of the city (e.g. Tom's Restaurant or “Monk's” in *Seinfeld*) metonymically represent the city, Sadler and Haskins show how specific places come to represent the entire city much like a postcard.

The metonymic nature of the title sequence frames the viewer's experience of the cinematic landscape of *Los tres berretines*. Leading the viewer through Buenos Aires, cutting its way through streets crowded by pedestrians and automobiles, the title

sequence is emblematic of early Argentine sound film's representation of Buenos Aires as a modern metropolis. Textures of Buenos Aires—a feeling for its spaces and places—are immediately signaled in the film's title design, initially appearing in white block Art Deco lettering on a black field which then fades into being superimposed on a shot of a *porteño* street corner. Adding further textures is the sequence's soundtrack, a Duke Ellington song, which not only serves as a metaphor for the urban symphony of everyday life, encompassing anything from car horns to trolley bells, as Landro et al argue, but also ties Buenos Aires to a hot commodity in the world's cultural market, American jazz (103). Although it has little, if anything, to do with the film's plot, Ellington's song helps portray Buenos Aires as cosmopolitan, a metropolis in tune with the latest popular music from around the world (Landro et al 34). The soundtrack, which continues until the end of the title sequence, accompanies the shot of the street corner. Barely lasting two seconds, it shows a car rounding a corner as a multitude of pedestrians tread the city's sidewalks and cross its streets. The next two shots, as brief as their predecessor, also implement the technique of superimposing credits with a city scene, something that is continued throughout the title sequence. These shots ambivalently capture scenes typical of the city: buses following their routes and smartly dressed men and women traversing the pavement. Insofar as they capture everyday people doing everyday things, these initial three scenes recall the Lumières' actualities, short observational films documenting everyday life that exposed audiences throughout the world to far-off peoples and places.

The static, observational narrative of the title sequence up to this point is broken as the next shot begins a journey through the streets of Buenos Aires that will lead the viewer both from the city center to the suburbs and from the title sequence to the film's

first diegetic scene. This journey, which also provides space for the rest of the film's credits, is assembled through a series of mobile shots that either recreate movement through panning the camera or were filmed while moving. The spaces represented in this excursion through the Argentine capital are typical, if not stereotypical: city streets occupied by automobiles and people, often cut into by streetcar rails and lined with streetlamps; palm tree laden parks and inhabited public spaces; imposing edifices and monuments; trees overhanging suburban streets; and children playing soccer not far from a humble suburban street corner. The shot of this street corner, whose awning reads "El monito: bazar y ferretería," fades into the first narrative scene of the film.

The title sequence of *Los tres berretines* establishes how the viewer experiences the spaces and places represented in the film. Walking the streets of the metropolis like the *flâneur*, it guides the viewer through Buenos Aires. A gentleman stroller of the streets—the verb *flâner* literally means "to stroll" in French—the *flâneur* is a critical observer of the modern city. Both *part of* and *apart from* the streets he observes and walks through, the *flâneur* rises out of cultural criticism and production of nineteenth-century France by figures such as Charles Baudelaire. *Flânerie*, the act of strolling, signified objective observation for Baudelaire and his contemporaries, a type of early urban anthropology. This analytical perspective, which at once was a lifestyle, was later taken up in Walter Benjamin's critical theory, which is contemporaneous to *Los tres berretines*. Benjamin suggests that the *flâneur* is representative of the modern human

condition as he both examines and interiorizes the urban setting through which he walks.<sup>59</sup>

Equipo Lumiton leads the viewer through Buenos Aires in *Los tres berretines* in a similar fashion to the strolling of the *flâneur*. The viewer's *flânerie* in the title sequence establishes the film's sense of place: Buenos Aires as a modern cosmopolitan center. Tim Cresswell that argues that "The *flâneur*— a figure free to stroll freely along Paris' new boulevards— has become a central figure in discussions of modernity and mobility" (18-19). Modernity, as represented in the figure of the *flâneur*, is synonymous with mobility; something exemplified by the sense that what is most mobile is also what is most modern (e.g. the ultramodern and ultramobile "jet-set"). Cresswell states, "It is clear [...] that mobility is central to what it is to be modern. A modern citizen is, among other things, a mobile citizen" (20). Mobility, or the lack thereof, is central to the plot of *Los tres berretines*. The ability to move, both socially and spatially, is also a cause of concern as it is "a human practice that threatens to undo many of the achievements of modern rationality and ordering" (20).

### **Cinema, Feminine Space, and Mobility**

Of the sites of the film's typically *porteño* three whims, the cinema is the least explored as it is narrowly portrayed as a source of complaint for the male characters, especially the *pater familias* Manuel Sequieros, and a space of refuge and escapism for the three generations of women in the house—the grandmother, the mother, and the

---

<sup>59</sup> The urban setting—originally Paris but later any metropolis—is both an exterior and an interior space for the *flâneur*. Benjamin states, "Landscape—that, in fact, is what Paris becomes for the *flâneur*. Or, more precisely: the city splits for him into its dialectical poles. It opens up to him as a landscape, even as it

daughter Elena. In order to demonstrate this cultural phenomenon, which was widespread in early twentieth-century Buenos Aires, the film engages the question of women going to the cinema. Through the use of metonymic external shots and character types, moviegoing is ostensibly represented as superficial, a waste of both time and money. The superficiality of moviegoing extends to the manner in which *Los tres berretines* utilizes its female characters. Serving as little more than background, women are not endowed with the same dynamism as men in the film. Elena, for example, lacks the mobility afforded to her brothers. As a consequence of her immobility, Elena, as well as her mother and grandmother, are condemned to a state of inertia.

The female characters' passion for the cinema is representative of a pervasive cultural phenomenon contemporary to the film, as a sizable portion of the audience for early Argentine sound films was comprised of women. The Latin American film historian Timothy Barnard notes that

In an age before television, when movie theaters were showing very long programs (four or five films for one very low admission price), Argentine women made film-going a regular social activity. A number of genres developed in order to service this market, especially comedies and dramas that featured women in lead roles. (27)

In response to the demands of the marketplace, films focusing on the lives of women became increasingly important, and lucrative, for studios such as Argentina Sono Film and Lumiton. *Los tres berretines* is representative of the genesis of these genres, though it by no means focuses on women to the same extent as later films such as *Mujeres que trabajan* (*Women Who Work*, Manuel Romero, 1938), *La que no perdonó* (*She Who Did*

---

closes around him as a room" (417). The metropolis is experienced as an exterior-interior duality: it is an observable exterior landscape that is interiorized by the *flâneur*.

*Not Forgive*, José A. Ferreyra, 1938), and *La ley que olvidaron* (*The Law They Forgot*, José A. Ferreyra, 1937).<sup>60</sup> In the case of *Los tres berretines*, the attempt to mirror the popularity of this social activity causes the film's female characters to be represented as character types. That is, as a consequence of their embodiment of this social activity, the grandmother, mother, and daughter are one-dimensional characters that develop little, if at all, during the course of the film.

Before the cinema is visited in the film as a physical site, Manuel and his father-in-law disparage the women's leisure activity. In doing so, this scene shapes the viewer's perception of this popular passion throughout the rest of the film. The scene begins when Manuel, after arriving home from work to a nearly empty house, complains to his father-in-law that, "Desde las dos de la tarde que están en ese maldito cine." From this point until the end of the conversation, the two men share complaints typical to their positions. They grumble that the women neglect their duties by going to the cinema, leaving the affairs of the house in decadence while enjoying their trivial interests. More shockingly for them is that the women denigrate their own situations as a consequence of watching romantic and overly idyllic features. Manuel feels that the women callously disregard

---

<sup>60</sup> In fact, this subject is ubiquitous in works of cultural production of the time period. For example, Roberto Arlt's *aguafuerte* "El cine y las costumbres," published in the Buenos Aires daily newspaper *El mundo* in 1931, complains that films are overly sentimental and directed toward women. It is presented as a conversation between an unknown woman and Arlt. It begins:

Señora— Usted, Arlt, ¿va al cine?

Arlt— Rarísima vez.

Señora— ¿Por qué no va?

Arlt— Me aburren las cintas de amor.

Señora— Hacer unos días leí una estadística en un diario de la mañana. ¿Sabe cuántos cines hay en este país? Dos mil doscientos cines.

Arlt— ¡Diablo! ¿Y trabajan todos?

Señora— Y todos hacer pasar cintas de amor.

Arlt— Efectivamente. Es la gran mercadería. (79)



what he has provided for the family, choosing instead to laud and yearn for the spectacle they experienced. Manuel's son Eduardo provides a more subdued perspective to the men's complaints, after arriving in the middle of the conversation. Representative of a newer generation, Eduardo understands his elders' position, but thinks they are overreacting. Eventually, this scene cuts to the only representation of the cinema as a site in the film.

Beginning with an external shot that captures a large sign while panning down, the scene's structure is representative of the use of external shots in the film. The bright sign indicates that it is the Cine Astor, an important theater where a number of films, including Carlos Gardel's *Las luces de Buenos Aires* (1931) and *Los tres berretines*, premiered. The scene continues panning down, eventually stopping to show a mass of patrons milling under the impressive sign. These external shots frame the scene, allowing the following shot to exploit the textures of place, the touch of haptic space, elicited through the metonymic use of the Astor's sign. Representing a typically *porteño* cinema as well as a particular space, the Astor sign calls into mind the broader notion of the moviegoing experience. This experience is further elaborated upon later in the scene as it cuts to a medium shot, filmed in a sound studio, that shows a conversation between Señora Sequeros, her mother, her daughter Elena, and their histrionic friend Pocholo (Homero Cárpena) outside the theater.<sup>61</sup> This conversation mirrors the quintessential experience of discussing a film after watching it. Adding to the perceived ephemeral

---

<sup>61</sup> Technological and technical limitations restricted how Lumiton captured sound in *Los tres berretines* as the directorial team were limited by the technical inability to capture audio outside of a soundstage or sound studio. Because of these restrictions, the spaces represented in the film are usually indoors, although

nature of moviegoing, the characters briefly discuss the film, leading them to decide to eat dinner at the Sequieros house so that they can return to watch the feature again. In it, each character speaks according his or her character type: Señora Sequieros talks superficially about the film and, later, her husband's perceived love of canned food; the grandmother lauds one of the film's actors; Pocholo, whose implied homosexuality is expressed through his mannerisms and speech pattern, proposes that they return after a light dinner ("Yo con una aspirina y un sandwich, tengo suficiente"); and the young Elena listens to the others speak.

As Lindsey Moore shows in the context of Iranian cinema, women are often used aesthetically in film (10). Instead of functioning as characters in their own right, women frequently operate as an environmentally charged background. This is the case in *Los tres berretines* as women are represented in a much different manner than men. The film's female characters, as well as the homosexual Pocholo, are much less developed than their direct counterparts (e.g. heterosexual males in *Los tres berretines*). Elena and Señora Sequieros are the best examples of this phenomenon in the film. Conspicuously less present in the film than her three brothers, the character of Elena plays a dual role. Her first role is to be an aesthetic object— attractive to both sexes in a non-threatening way. Her second role is to act as a civilizing agent, able to mollify her male counterparts in moments of rashness. Her mother, however, is the most successful at this, as she is able to convince Manuel to reverse his previous decision to not allow the women to return to the cinema. Using the ruse of their thirtieth anniversary as a means by which to

---

there are a few scenes that take place outside. Besides background or white noise, sound in the film was recorded in a sound studio.

manipulate him, Señora Sequieros persuades her husband that going to the movies is indeed not as a frivolous activity as he once thought.

The aforementioned scene begins when Elena, cooking eggs in the kitchen with her mother, complains that it has been months since they last went to the movies. More tellingly, she protests that they have been condemned to the kitchen since Manuel forbade them from going to the cinema. She says, “Parece mentira, y después hablan de los esclavos, estamos condenadas a vivir en la cocina. Hace meses que no vamos al cine.” Although Manuel considers going to the movies as frivolous an activity as playing soccer or composing tangos, Elena does not have the freedom of mobility of her brothers. Mobility, as Tim Cresswell points out throughout *On the Move*, is not accessible to everyone, as it often excludes women, the poor, certain ethnicities, and other marginalized people. Janet Wolff, for her part, critiques the use of words connoting ungrounded and unbounded movement, arguing that the “suggestion of free and equal mobility is itself a deception, since we all don't have the same access to the road” (235). In the film, Elena is precluded from much of the dynamism of place available to her brothers as a consequence of the androcentric society of her time, which limited her mobility.

### **Spectatorship and the Soccer Stadium**

While Elena is condemned to help her mother around the house, Lorenzo pays no heed to his father's wishes to work in the family's hardware store, choosing instead to

continue playing soccer.<sup>62</sup> This decision, meant to exclude the son from the family's activities, backfires for Manuel, as the rest of the family continue to follow Lorenzo's mercurial rise to fame. Despite this, Manuel clandestinely follows his son's success in the papers. Lorenzo's choice of profession, derided by his father as ephemeral, leads to a temporary estrangement in the relationship between father and son that, after being rectified, also helps to resolve several of the film's other conflicts. By leading his team to victory in the penultimate scene of *Los tres berretines*, Lorenzo wins his father's approval, as well as a contract to design the team's new stadium for his brother Eduardo. As Carlos Maranghello comments, "el triunfo deportivo del hijo futbolista reúne nuevamente a la familia" (42).

Several brief scenes that show the other characters leaving to go watch the game precede Lorenzo's triumph on the soccer pitch. In the first scene, the grandparents, Señora Sequeros, and Elena leave the Sequeros house to go to the game.<sup>63</sup> Before heading out the door, Manuel's father-in-law converses with him about the big game. Slipping for the first time, Manuel reveals that he has indeed been following his son's success, although it is not enough to convince him to go to the game. Manuel then sidetracks his father-in-law, comically reproaching the elderly man for attempting to bring a slingshot, a brick, a bottle, and a horseshoe to throw at the opposing team and fans during the game. Señora Sequeros then enters the room to tell her father that they are waiting for him. After his father-in-law leaves, Manuel briefly sits down and looks at the paper, only to resolutely rise to say, "Yo no aguanto más." The film then cuts to

---

<sup>62</sup> It is useful to note that the film shows little of Lorenzo's life outside of the soccer stadium.

Eduardo, who is packing his bag, unable to pay the rent at his apartment. Eusebio abruptly arrives and, while stuttering, requests that his brother follow him.

Fading into a wide shot that pans across the packed stadium, the film transitions into its climax, Lorenzo's soccer match. To emphasize this, it cuts to consecutive shots of the players (one close-up, one long shot) leaving the tunnel, running onto the field, prepared for the kick-off. The action in the stadium is temporarily put on hold, as the scene moves to Manuel, who is running after a bus, presumably, to go to the game. The directorial team of Equipo Lumiton uses this technique, shifting from the soccer stadium and game to members of Lorenzo's family, to heighten suspense and to reinforce the togetherness of the Sequeros family.

The film then continues with a series of seven shots, accompanied by a single soundtrack of crowd noise. These shots are representative of how montage is used to place the viewer in the soccer stadium. The first three—a panning shot that establishes an expansive horizontal space, a static shot showing a tightly-packed stand, and a static shot of the players on the field surrounded by the immense stadium—frame the scene's action, which begins in the fourth shot. Having established an initial understanding of the experience of an important soccer match through the documentary-like representation of the stadium, the film shows the game's long awaited kick-off. After this diegetic shot, the scene alternates between shots reinforcing place—the fifth, a pan of the crowd, and seventh, a static long-shot—and a shot that continues the scene's narrative, the soccer game. Assembled together, these short fragments orient the viewer and provide her with

---

<sup>63</sup> The stadium is undoubtedly represented as a masculine space in the film. Much like in film, women only participate in the spectacle as non-participating spectators.

a tangible texture of space, effectively positioning her understanding of place and contextualizing it in the film's narrative. They function metonymically, teasing out the personal or shared experience of the spectacle of attending an important soccer match.

### **Eusebio and the Places of Tango Culture**

Unlike the previous whims, whose locations were fixed in specific locations (i.e. in the cinema and the soccer stadium), tango is represented as much more itinerant in *Los tres berretines*. This is due in large part to the nearly always present Eusebio.<sup>64</sup> The only character in the film to move freely between the spaces his family members inhabit, Eusebio carries his obsession with tango with him throughout the film. The representation of the sites of tango as places is markedly different from the way in which the cinema and soccer stadium are constructed by the directorial team. Instead of relying on metonymic external shots to frame the viewer's experience of cinematic space, place is represented in these scenes primarily through mise-en-scène and the use of character types. Two are particularly salient: both portray Eusebio in direct contact with tango culture. In the first of these two scenes, Eusebio goes to a friend's bohemian apartment so that his tango may be performed. Unfortunately, the tango is a failure, causing him to go to a café to finish it in the second scene. Beginning with an external shot following Eusebio into the Café Tren, this scene portrays the composition of Eusebio's tango "Araca la cana."

---

<sup>64</sup> Although many critics have equated Luis Sandrini's character of Eusebio in *Los tres berretines* with the Berretín character he plays in *Tango!* and *Riachuelo*, Eusebio is quite distinct from Berretín: "Berretín, el apelativo que recibe en TANGO!!! y RIACHUELO, se distingue por su orfandad, su analfabetismo, su tartamudeo y su candidez, al menos a partir de su película consagratoria" (Campodónico et al 83-84). Caps original to the quote.

Walking up poorly lit flights of stairs, Eusebio passes a dejected man steadying himself with a mop and a hurried gentleman descending the staircase. Eusebio ascends the stairs, moving presumably toward the source of the scene's soundtrack, the song "Ventanita Florida" (Enrique Delfino and Luis César Amadori). Eusebio pauses before entering the apartment, allowing the song's melancholy tone and disillusioned lyrics to further establish textures of place. This shot focuses on the floor, capturing the shadow of the stair's handrail and Eusebio's feet, which move with the beat. He then enters the apartment, where a number of young men are circled around the humble room listening to the song. Eusebio then sits down and attentively takes in the two performers' guitars and harmony. The camera settles in this moment on a shot of him straddling a chair backwards, leaning on the chair back toward a table, where a well-burned candle in a wine bottle, a kettle, and an ashtray are resting. This shot, lasting twelve seconds, emphasizes both Eusebio's passion for music and the trappings of the bohemian apartment. Briefly shifting to the two performers, the scene returns to Eusebio, who maintains his posture from the previous shot. The song ends and Eusebio stammers, "Ma-macanudo." One of the performers then asks Eusebio if he brought his song. He then hands the composition, which had just been scored for the piano by an Italian at the Conservatorio Golfo di Salerno, to a man sitting at the piano. The light, allegro piece quickly raises the eyebrows of the men surrounding the piano, eventually leading the pianist to stop and ask, "¿Pero qué diablo es esto?" Eusebio, exasperated, complains that what the pianist played (i.e. the piece scored by the Italian) was not his tango. Eusebio's friend then tells him that there is only one man who can help him score his tango, the pianist at the café.

Later in the film, after borrowing some money from his father, Eusebio takes his friend's advice and heads to the café to compose his tango. The scene begins with one of the few external diegetic shots in *Los tres berretines*. As a consequence of its specificity, interpolating Eusebio into a sidewalk outside a particular café, this external shot functions differently than those used to orient the viewer in the cinema and the soccer stadium. A handheld shot— a type of early attempt at a steadicam technique— follows Eusebio into a Café Tren, a *cafetín*, a kind of tango bar/coffeehouse. Accompanied by a studio-recorded soundtrack of a newsy calling out papers' names and prices, a horn, and unattributable whistling, this shot shows Eusebio entering the café. The scene then moves from an external to an interior shot as Eusebio crosses the threshold into the café. The expansiveness of the mise-en-scène captures very few distinguishing features of the café. Because of this, the scene's textures of place are assembled more through the use of character types than through its setting. The best example of this in the scene is the figure of the impoverished poet, who composes lyrics to Eusebio's song for a *café con leche*. Recalling Carlos Riga, the protagonist of Manuel Gálvez's novel *El mal metafísico* (1916), the poet cuts a pathetic figure. He is first shown looking dispiritedly down at the cigarette in his hand, hair disheveled, and clothes tattered. He agrees to write lyrics to Eusebio's tango. The poet's first draft, which includes somber verses he reads dolefully such as, "Tristezas funeras/ los grillos me oprimen/ y unos ojos negros ya no me redimen," is nearly immediately rejected by Eusebio. The poet agrees to write "versos pedestres" after Eusebio takes the *café con leche* away from him. The result is "Araca la cana," whose lyrics are laden with words and phrases from *lunfardo*.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Lunfardo is an argot of Spanish endemic to the Río de la Plata region that rose out of the waves of



Eusebio, content with the newly penned lyrics, passes the *café con leche* back to the poet who, in a shot that zooms from a medium shot to a close-up, devours the bread accompanying his coffee, into which he spoons heaps of sugar.

In these two scenes representing tango, the directorial team use *mise-en-scène* and character types to assemble textures of place. *Mise-en-scène* is used in the first scene by Equipo Lumiton to represent a typical site of tango music: a bachelor pad used by a large group of friends as a space to listen, compose, and experiment with tango music. The apartment itself is utilitarian: a barely decorated—a sole poster adorns the wall—single room that is furnished modestly. The expressiveness and freedom afforded by the creative process of composing tango music, emphasized by its juxtaposition with the austere apartment, takes precedence for these men above bourgeois comforts. The second scene, on the other hand, relies on the viewer's identification with a number of character types to establish an active, as well as haptic, engagement with cinematic landscape. Instead of relying on the representation of physical space to represent the Café Tren as a place, the viewer gains a feeling for the *cafetín* through the use of archetypes.

### **Modernity and Siteseeing in *Los tres berretines***

Much like the *flâneur*, *Los tres berretines* observes and reinvents spatial experiences of the metropolis, leading the viewer on a siteseeing tour through Buenos Aires. These scenes, framed largely by external shots that function metonymically,

---

immigration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first verse of “Araca la cana” implements a number of *lunfardo* words and phrases: “¡Araca la cana!/Ya estoy engriyao/Un par de ojos negros me han engayolao./Ojazos profundos, oscuros y bravos./tajantes y fieros hieren al mirar./con brillos de acero que van a matar./De miedo al mirarlos el cuor me ha fayao./¡Araca la cana! ya estoy engriyao.”

position the viewer within, to return to Bruno, “the terrain of spatial arts and practices” (10). Positioning the viewer within the cartography it constructs, *Los tres berretines* not only positions the viewer’s understanding of Buenos Aires as a place, but also orients how the viewer experiences and approximates the social life of its inhabitants. More so, the viewer charges the viewed space as an experienced space. That is to say that places in *Los tres berretines* are not voyeuristically experienced through sight but rather they are experienced as sites. Bruno points out, “Film and the city share a dimension of living that Italians call *vissuto*, that is, the space of one’s lived experiences. They are about lived space, and the fantasy of habitable places. They are both inhabited sites, and spaces for inhabitation, narrativized by motion” (Bruno 20). The inhabited sites that *Los tres berretines* traverses on the film’s—the cinema, the soccer stadium, and those of tango culture—are spaces of everyday life that the audience contemporaneous to its production experienced. Additionally, these places are experienced as meaningful sites by the viewer. Assembling these sites through diverse narrative techniques (use of archetypes, metonymy, mise-en-scène, montage, etc.), Equipo Lumiton leads the viewer through spaces of everyday *porteño* life, guiding her on a siteseeing tour of the modern metropolis of Buenos Aires.

#### **BERRETÍN AND PLACE IN *RIACHUELO***

Domingo Di Núbila notes that, for Argentina Sono Film, “*Riachuelo* marcó la feliz culminación de su trilogía porteña, completada por *Tango!* y *Dancing*” (Di Núbila, *La época* 89). In these three films, Argentina Sono Film exported the notion of Buenos Aires as the center of Hispanic culture (Campodónico et al 12). Packaging the city not

only as a place but also as a culture was integral to the marketing strategies and narrative of these films. Despite this, *Riachuelo*, which premiered just over a year after *Tango!* first arrived in Argentine cinemas, is a dramatically different film than its predecessors. Perhaps smarting from the commercial failure and overwhelmingly negative critical reception of *Dancing!*, Argentina Sono Film invested more attention into the development of the film's narrative as it moved away from structuring the film around musical numbers. Also—and in this sense *Riachuelo* is also more similar to *Los tres berretines* than previous Argentina Sono Film productions—the film represents not the spaces and places of Argentine high society but rather those of the working classes. This, exemplified in the commercial failure of *Dancing!* and the success of *Los tres berretines*, is perhaps in response to the fact that demand for locally produced films was primarily from the bourgeoisie and the lower classes. Referring to the film industry in Argentina and Mexico, Jorge Schmitman states, “What were the social and cultural bases of the demand for national films? In both countries the more affluent sectors of society preferred the products of the advanced capitalist countries’ cultural industries, part of a generalized preference for foreign manufactured products” (28). Because of this, Argentina Sono Film moved away from narratives about the upper echelons of Argentine society to ones more palatable to their primary audience, the lower and middle classes.

Much like *Los tres berretines*, which represents a typical middle class *porteño* family, *Riachuelo* portrays the story of an identifiable figure that inhabits a well-known area of the city. Berretín, played again by Luis Sandrini, is a stuttering good-for-nothing

in the film.<sup>66</sup> Ricardo Manetti cynically comments that “El tartamudo de Sandrini era un tipo igual a la clase de público que iba a verlo” (167). Additionally, the film is set in a place that would have been not only well known to the audience but was also homologous to a number of other areas of Buenos Aires and Argentina. The title indicates the film’s setting: the Riachuelo or “Little River,” the common moniker of the Matanza River. The mouth (“la boca” in Spanish) of Matanza River, lends the name to the neighborhood bordering its northern banks, La Boca. It is this place, with all the colorful local characters and spaces it evokes, where *Riachuelo* is set.

After a brief title sequence, *Riachuelo* begins with a shot of the Nicolás Avellaneda bridge. An iconic image until this day in Argentina, the use of the image of the Avellaneda bridge immediately orients the action of the film. A series of external shots follow, implementing a variety of camera techniques, all of which portray the Riachuelo as a busy commercial waterway. The film then transitions into its first diegetic scene by moving from the title song “Riachuelo” to the playful “Berretín” (Edgardo Donati and Máximo Orsi wrote both songs). Showing a cautious Berretín checking to make sure a policeman has rounded the corner, the scene shows the protagonist leaving a dilapidated tugboat. Hopping off the run-against ship, the scene continues by showing Berretín crossing train tracks on his way into a neighborhood in La Boca, currently

---

<sup>66</sup> Campodónico et al argue that anywhere on the street one could find a Berretín, or an earlier radio version of the character named Cachuso. The character was honed by Sandrini to be easily accessible to his audience: “¿De adónde sacó Sandrini a Berretín? Podría sugerirse que posee algunas características de Chaplin, teniendo en cuenta los recursos mímicos que aprendiera en el circo” (84).

known as barrio Quinquela Martín, where the majority of the film is set.<sup>67</sup> In La Boca, Berretín runs into a number of immigrants speaking different languages while walking through the neighborhood's streets, taking the opportunity to steal an Italian gentleman's watch. At this point in the film, as this scene shows, Berretín makes his living through petty theft, facilitated by his deft use of an umbrella. Scuttling off to the neighborhood *cafetín* before the Italian notices his watch is missing, Berretín enjoys a performance by Anita (María E. Gamas), with whom he is enamored. Joined by Rosa (Margarita Solá), they decide that Berretín will accompany the women home. On the way home, Carancho (Joaquín Pérez Bilbao) and a thug (Juan Sarcione) threaten Anita and Rosa. Fortunately for Berretín, an unknown man appears and defends the women. Berretín befriends this man, who the viewer later learns is Remanso (Alfredo Camiña), and introduces him to "La vieja", his tugboat.<sup>68</sup> On "La vieja", Remanso tells Berretín that he is looking to make an honest living so that he may start a new life. The next day, Remanso leaves a note telling Berretín that he went to the shipyard to go to work. Berretín, for his part, spends the day "working" with his umbrella. While walking around the city, a beautiful woman helps the illiterate Berretín read Remanso's letter. In the highly sentimental scene, Berretín follows the woman, watching her get into a boat that rows off before he is able to talk to her.

---

<sup>67</sup> The neighborhood is named after Benito Quinquela Martín (1890-1977), the Argentine painter most well known for his works depicting La Boca and the Riachuelo.

<sup>68</sup> Berretín tells Remanso he wants to introduce him to his "vieja," a typical Argentine colloquialism meaning "mother." The joke centers in the fact that the old lady is not his mother but rather his boat.

Later, Berretín runs into a proud Remanso in the *cafetín*, who brags about earning his first honest wages. Unimpressed with Remanso's haul, Berretín shows his friend a wallet he stole earlier in the day. Remanso reads Berretín a letter he found in the wallet and insists that the two return it to its rightful owner. The pair then head to an address they found in the wallet. At the address, a humble *conventillo*, a remorseful Berretín returns the wallet to Juanita (Maruja Pibernat), who coincidentally is the beautiful woman he met earlier. Berretín, realizing that his dishonest actions have adversely affected Juanita, decides to straighten out his life and throws his umbrella into the Riachuelo. The next day, Berretín gets a job at the shipyard, where both Remanso and Juanita work. Now having a steady stream of income, Remanso convinces Berretín to move out of "La vieja" into, not coincidentally, a room in the *conventillo* where Juanita lives. Although Berretín is initially hesitant out of guilt for his previous actions, he eventually capitulates. Berretín and Remanso continue their routine, which is later interrupted when they find Rosa, who has fainted. At this point, two couples form: Berretín/ Juanita and Remanso/Rosa. The harmony of the couples is broken when Carancho, angry that Rosa has spurned his attention, robs the shipyard and frames Remanso. The police quickly arrest Remanso. Berretín, evading capture, goes to the *cafetín* where he trips into discovering the truth about Carancho's heist. Luckily for all, Carancho's gang begins to fight amongst themselves, allowing Berretín to knock several of them out so that he can alert the police to their misdeeds. Evolving throughout the film, Berretín "se convertirá en héroe por azar—deuda con el cine mudo norteamericano—, en el final de esta película" (Campodónico et al 84). The police, now having all the necessary evidence to

arrest Carancho, free Remanso. Berretín then rejects Anita, who is attracted by his heroism, and marries Juanita. As a reward for finding the true criminals, the delighted shipyard owner then promises to refurbish “La vieja” so that Berretín and Remanso can work tugging boats in the Riachuelo. The film’s final scene shows the happy couples navigating the Riachuelo in the newly restored tugboat, renamed the “Juanita”.

The viewer follows Berretín through *Riachuelo*, traversing the cinematic space of La Boca. Moving with, instead of following, the stuttering protagonist through a number of distinctive places within La Boca, the viewer is forced to actively engage the film’s cinematic cartography. Much like an itinerary, the film relies on the viewer to complete the spatial course it maps. Returning to Bruno, “Speaking of siteseeing implies that, because of the film’s spatio-corporeal kinetics, the spectator is a voyageur rather than a voyeur” (Bruno 10). A active traveler instead of a passive watcher, I argue in the following sections that the viewer is induced to participate in the construction of its cinematic landscape in *Riachuelo*. In doing so, I focus on three specific places that are central to the film’s narrative: the Riachuelo, the *cafetín*, and the *conventillo*.

### **The Riachuelo, Berretín, and “La vieja”**

In *Riachuelo*, the film’s setting is clearly demarcated and emplotted in the title sequence. Presenting an assemblage of fragmentary external shots presenting the banks and the waterways of the Riachuelo, the film’s title sequence immediately orients the viewer’s experience of place. It uses the pastiche of these metonymic shots to create the illusion of an excursion through the area surrounding the Matanza River. In doing so, the title sequence features the Nicolás Avellaneda Bridge, an impressive mass of steel that

straddles the river's banks. The film then reinforces the representation of La Boca as a center of industry and commerce by showing ships steaming down the waterway, countless docked vessels, men perched on a steel bridge welding, and workers laboring in a shipyard. Consequently, by the time the viewer arrives at the first diegetic scene she is already familiar with the film's setting, much like in *Los tres berretines*. In both talkies, the viewer applies her experience of the places represented in the title sequence to her subsequent understanding of cinematic spatiality.

From the first narrative scene onward, the Riachuelo is almost exclusively experienced through the perspective of Berretín. Having grown up and been educated in the streets just off the banks of the river, the film's faltering protagonist is the ideal guide to lead the viewer through the film's cinematic landscapes. Berretín's adeptness in surviving on the margins of society is evidence to a deep understanding of place. In fact, Berretín interiorizes the workings of place to such an extent in the film that he is initially represented as an embodiment of the Riachuelo. That is, he is portrayed as having internalized the choreography of this particular, to borrow a term from David Seamon, place-ballet. Until he is able to break the conditionings of that particular place-ballet, which he achieves by the end of the film, Berretín's picaresque comportment is emblematic of everyday life in the Riachuelo.

A germane example of Berretín's ties to the Riachuelo and place is "La vieja." The viewer first learns of "La vieja" after Remanso saves Anita and Rosa, who are being accompanied home by the protagonist, from the threat of Carancho. Berretín, eager to befriend his helpful acquaintance, asks Remanso where he is going. As it is late,



Remanso tells Berretín he doesn't have a place to stay. Berretín then tells his new friend, "Y entonces véngase para mi vieja." Remanso, knowing that a stranger will most likely not be welcome at this time of night in the Riachuelo, asks Berretín how his mother (i.e. "la vieja") would react to the situation. Amused, Berretín replies that she will not say anything, as she is mute. The scene then fades into the next shot, displacing the film's narrative into an interior space resembling a bedroom. In this scene both Remanso and the viewer learn that "La vieja" is in fact the tugboat from which Berretín is seen leaving in the first scene. He explains, "Este remolcador era de mi viejo. Él, le decía 'mi vieja'. Yo me críe aquí y ahora es mi vieja." Berretín personifies the dilapidated tugboat as a mother figure.

Berretín reveals to Remanso in this scene that he never met his mother and also implies through the use of the imperfect past tense (i.e. "decía) that his father is dead. An orphan, without any other familial ties in the film, "La vieja" is all that is left of Berretín's family. Although his personification of the tugboat as a mother figure is done to some comic effect, and perhaps should not be interpreted literally, it is clear that "La vieja" is emotionally significant to Berretín, as it effectively becomes his family. He is forced by circumstance to ascribe the emotional connection he would direct toward his family to a place. In this sense, the ramshackle tugboat not only represents the disintegration of Berretín's family and his financial incapacity, but it also illustrates the influence of his ties to the Riachuelo as a place in his upbringing. His formative years were spent traversing the neighborhood's streets, passing through its space, moving along the banks of its waterways. His upbringing as an orphan is both marginal and collective,

as suggested by his lack of a given name. Raised by the community, Berretín returned home everyday to the care of his mother, “La vieja.”

Berretín’s relationship with “La vieja” can also be understood to be a tacit critique of capitalism, in a broad sense, and the Argentine economic system, in a narrow sense. The tugboat and Berretín suffer from the same condition: both have run aground and seemingly have little chance to be repaired. Existing on the fringes of the economic system, Berretín alone does not possess the wherewithal to fix “La vieja” and, consequently, himself. It is only with outside influence, not innocently provided by the reformed *criollo* Remanso and the benevolent business owner at the end of the film, that “La vieja” is restored to navigability. The previously marginalized Berretín, as the final scene shows, is thus able to participate in the Argentine economic system. He has become a useful citizen.

### **The Neighborhood Cafetín**

Much like “La vieja,” Berretín’s run-aground home on the shores of the Riachuelo, the neighborhood *cafetín* is an important space in the development of the film’s narrative. In *Riachuelo*, two scenes are set in the *cafetín*. They are diegetically significant because they bookend Berretín’s transformation from petty criminal into an honest and hardworking citizen. The first of these scenes shows Berretín sneak a few drinks from other patrons’ beers and pawn the pocket watch he stole earlier from the Italian immigrant.<sup>69</sup> The second scene depicts Berretín’s stumbling into the fortuitous

---

<sup>69</sup> This scene is an example of one of the many technical advances that Argentina Sono Film integrated into *Riachuelo*. The editing technique of a lap-dissolve, in this case from a shot of the Avellaneda bridge to a

discovery of the details of Carancho's heist. The *cafetín* is represented in the film as more than an extension of the neighborhood's streets: it is the center of its social activity, a place where its inhabitants and visitors alike congregate and fraternize. Mixing together a variety of people represented as archetypes (e.g. the local strongman, the sailor, the bartender, etc.), the *cafetín* adds further textures of space to the representation of the Riachuelo as a place.

In the film, Moglia Barth constructs the representation of the *cafetín* so as to maximize the viewer's ability to identify it as a place. In order to accomplish this he assembles together the multitudinous elements of *mise-en-scène*; including, but not limited to, the set, props, actors, costumes, and character movements. In an almost utilitarian way Moglia Barth aims to represent the *cafetín* in each of the two scenes effectively and efficiently through placing various elements of *mise-en-scène* in front of the camera. Because of this, the set noticeably lacks nuance. In these scenes, Moglia Barth relies on far from subtle staging components such as the use of character types whose actions and dress are comically stereotypical, lighting that illuminates the smoke in the room, and conspicuous props like the large glass beer steins. Instead of relying on *mise-en-scène*, Moglia Barth entrusts Luis Sandrini's character of Berretín to project the ordinariness of place. For example, Berretín helps convey the *cafetín*'s seediness in the first scene. After descending stairs into the *cafetín*, Berretín surveys the room. He weaves his way through the room pretending to look for something under the full tables.

---

picture of the bridge hanging on the café's wall, was not used in *Tango!*. Although *Dancing!* is lost, its similarity to *Tango!* and the bad press surrounding the technical quality of the film would seem to suggest

This strategy proves lucky for Berretín as he tricks a table of men, whose attire clearly defines them as sailors, into helping him. While the sailors look below the table, Berretín quenches his thirst, taking a large gulp from one of the sailors' beers. He then walks over to a cashier's window where he haggles with a mustached pawnbroker. Sandrini's use of facial gestures intensifies the placing of the *cafetín* in this exchange. Upon handing the gold pocket watch to the pawnbroker, he takes a vigilant glance over his shoulder. The normally wide-eyed Berretín narrows his gaze, his usual affable look replaced by suspicion and turpitude. He quickly does a double take to insure that the coast is indeed clear.

In each of the two scenes, Berretín leads the viewer through the neighborhood *cafetín*, guiding her through its spaces and orienting her understanding of its meaning and relationships. Because of this, Moglia Barth again constructs the scenes' mise-en-scène around Berretín, focusing attention on creating textures of place through his contact with setting and other characters. The neighborhood *cafetín*, as evinced by the stuttering protagonist, is a microcosm of La Boca: it is a place where locals, most of whom ironically are foreigners, meet and interact. Much like the rest of the Riachuelo, the *cafetín* is on the fringes of order and good society.

### **The conventillo**

The film's portrayal of life in the *conventillo*—a place already visited in the previous chapter in the context of Armando Discépolo's *grotescos*— is representative of its importance in Argentine society and the greater cultural imaginary of the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Originally designed to accommodate a single family in a two-story rectangular house with a Spanish patio, Buenos Aires' *conventillos* eventually became slums that often housed scores of people. Poverty drove hoards of people into living in undesirable conditions: "Low wages compelled many working-class families in Buenos Aires to reside in the infamously congested *conventillo* tenements, some of which were a century old" (Rock 236). These decrepit structures, which Eduardo Wilde called *casas omnibus* in his positivist study *Curso de higiene pública* (1883), not only housed a quarter to a third of those residing in the center of Buenos Aires but also came to define the living conditions in other forms of housing (boardinghouses, small apartments, narrow two-story houses, etc.) for the urban underprivileged masses (Scobie 146-147).

Despite the harsh realities of life in the *conventillo* in the early twentieth century, Moglia Barth and Argentina Sono Film aestheticize the space in *Riachuelo*. Cleaned-up in order to be more easily consumed by the public, *Riachuelo* shied away from realist or naturalist modes of representation of the *conventillo* apparent in other works of cultural production, such as Eugenio Cambaceres' novel *En la sangre* (1887), Roberto Mariani's short story collection *Cuentos de la oficina* (1925), and Alberto Vacarezza's *sainete Tu cuna fue un conventillo* (1920), among others. This, of course, is not to mention how distinct *Riachuelo* assembles the *conventillo* in comparison to its representation in Armando Discépolo's *grotesco criollo*. In the film, the *conventillo* is portrayed as being clean, safe, and *not* overcrowded. It is as if, even though the set is undoubtedly constructed to appear like those dubious tenements that were undoubtedly well known to

the film's audience, the *conventillo* in *Riachuelo* is not actually a *conventillo* at all. For example, in one scene the *conventillo*'s caretaker, a Galician immigrant named Don José, attempts to argue this point with two policemen who come to arrest the framed Remanso. After the policemen inquire as to who is the *conventillo*'s caretaker, he tells them, "Este no es un conventillo señor, esta es una casa de familia. Son varias las familias que viven acá dentro." Don José's assertion that the building is family-friendly is supported not only by a lack of the dubious figures prevalent in realist and naturalist representations of the *conventillo* but also by the presence of ethnic minorities and women. However, these marginalized sectors of Argentine society do not function as active agents in *Riachuelo*. Instead of affecting the film's narrative, the main function of ethnic minorities and women in the film is aesthetic. Their presence in the cleaned-up "family house" furthers the idealized representation of the *conventillo*.

The film's final scene is also its catharsis. It follows a series of scenes in which Berretín saves the day: he leads the police to Carancho and his gang, exonerates Remanso, and helps return the stolen money to the owner of the shipyard. Berretín's ultimate rewards— a newly renovated "La vieja" and a wedding to Juanita—move him closer to Argentine society. His demarginalization is facilitated by place. That is, as Berretín's interaction with his built, natural, and physical environment evolves during the course of the film. He changes. A subtle, albeit effective way Moglia Barth foreshadows and conveys Berretín's conversion into an honest citizen is through the use of music. Often forgotten in cinematic criticism, as Michel Chion argues in *Audio-Vision*, sound is used in film to evoke emotive connection to the narrative, sometimes in contradiction to

the images on screen. In the case of *Riachuelo*, Berretín's entrance into the community of the *conventillo* is catalyzed by the extradiegetic music that follows Juanita (39). The music, used by Moglia Barth to follow Juanita, allows Berretín to abandon the isolation of his marginalization. It is only at the end of the film, in the wedding scene, that Moglia Barth marries music and image. Landro explains this synchresis, a term taken from Chion's work, at the end of the film:

La música y lo visual se unen- SÍNCRESIS- hacia el final, en la secuencia de la boda. Los invitados cantan con tonada propia, para que el narratorio diferencie las diversas nacionalidades. Se corona de esta forma la síncrexis: cada personaje con su traje típico oficia de ícono de extranjero estereotipado. Este ícono llegaba de la época de esplendor del sainete. Desde la perspectiva sonora, RIACHUELO mantiene la visión idílica de una comunidad en la que la gente es feliz, sin innovar con respeto al viejo teatro de los años 20. Esta idea de la convivencia pacífica en el conventillo, está dada porque coexisten razas diversas a las que la cámara les concede los planos correspondientes. Ya en TANGO!!! había un patio de conventillo propio del viejo sainete donde se bailaba y se cantaba. Lo diferencia de RIACHUELO el primitivo uso de los códigos cinematográficos para los números que allí se ofrecen. (Landro 39)

Moglia Barth implements synchresis, the unity of image and sound, to maintain the vision of the *conventillo* as a solid and happy community that was prevalent in comic *sainetes* of the twenties.<sup>70</sup> In the wedding scene, the accents of foreigners in the *conventillo* (e.g. a middle-aged Jewish man) are joined to their dress (e.g. the Jew's thick beard and small round glasses). Consequently, Moglia Barth presents a syncretic stereotype, one where image and sound are united to present readily identifiable character types to the viewer.

---

<sup>70</sup> This type of the *sainete* was the dramatic genre against which Discépolo reacts in his *grotesco criollo*.

### **Berretín as the Riachuelo**

*Riachuelo* is a film that not only centers its plot on the travails of its protagonist, but rather it shadows Berretín throughout as he navigates the spaces and places of La Boca. The viewer does not merely watch Berretín throughout the course of the films but rather she travels with him in his evolution from a petty street criminal into a working family man. Being led through La Boca through the eyes of Berretín, the viewer experiences the built, natural, and social environment the protagonist inhabits. In this sense, the spaces and places that Berretín experiences in *Riachuelo* are represented allegorically. Much like Berretín early in the film, La Boca is represented in the film as a place on the wrong track. Just as the stuttering hero is not necessarily an ignominious figure, the undesirable qualities of La Boca are represented in the film as consequences of its location on the margins of Argentine society. Despite this, La Boca can develop into a reputable place if its inhabitants follow Berretín's example and adopt bourgeois values such as dedication, hard work, and honesty.

The allegorical message of *Riachuelo* is carried out by following the development of Berretín's behavior in specific spaces. Moglia Barth assembles sequences in the film that highlight the change in Berretín's behavior *vis-à-vis* place. In the case of the previously seedy *cafetín*, it is the means by which Berretín discovers Carancho's crime. Instead of manipulating the marginal space that the space affords him, Berretín leads the police, representatives of the state, into the *cafetín*. Meanwhile, as Don José tells these same policemen, the film's *conventillo* is not on the extremities of society but rather it is a place that upholds values. Finally, as a reward for his discovery, Berretín's tugboat is



restored. Previously run aground and in a state of complete disrepair, “La vieja” is rechristened at the end of the film as the “Juanita.” This shift—moving from the ironical “La vieja,” which highlighted Berretín’s abandonment, to the celebratory “Juanita,” which places him as the head of a household—underlies the film’s central message.

#### **SITSEEEING AND MOBILITY IN *TANGO!*, *LOS TRES BERRETINES*, AND *RIACHUELO***

*Tango!*, *Los tres berretines*, and *Riachuelo* lead the viewer on a siteseeing tour of the Buenos Aires of the early 1930s. Insofar as the viewer is a voyageur as opposed to a voyeur, the cinematic experience of place extends beyond mere visual reception. Rather, the viewer encounters spatiality in these films haptically, experiencing the films’ places using the totality of her senses. While the viewer cannot, for example, literally feel the effects of Malandra’s icy glance in *Tango!* or smell the coffee Eusebio offers the starving poet in *Los tres berretines*, emotions are undoubtedly evoked in her by watching these films. That is to say that the textures of place evinced in these films allow the viewer to assemble an experience of place using the entirety of her senses. The production companies that developed these pictures aimed to create easily identifiable textures of space in an attempt to replicate the everyday life of their target market. The sense of place that the viewer gleans from *Tango!* and *Riachuelo*, in the case of Argentina Sono Film, and *Los tres berretines*, in the case of Lumiton, allow her to become an ego-tourist. Effectively, she takes a siteseeing tour of her own life.

While the specific ideological content of the films differ, Argentina Sono Film and Lumiton directed the films toward mass consumption. Lacking marketing strategies

such as the focus group, the production companies oriented their films toward their consumers, something demonstrated in Argentina Sono Film's shift away from the glamour of *Dancing!* toward the more familiar *Riachuelo*. Ultimately, the spaces and places that these films represent are repackaged and aestheticized so as to make the *real* more attractive through the reel. Hopkins argues, "The screen image is the premier component of the cinematic landscape because it is the projected photograph that provides the basic structure, the initial focal point, for the construction of ideas, values, and shared experiences by the audience" (51). The image, in the broader sense of the word, of Buenos Aires that these films portray is centered on the viewer's ability to identify with it. Consequently, it is torn between opposing tenants of the bourgeois value system: the stability of the family nucleus and the importance of mobility. While the importance of the stability of the familial nucleus is fairly clear conceptually, "Mobility, in human life, is not a local or specific condition. To talk of the social construction of mobility, or the production of mobility, is not to say that mobility itself has somehow been invented and can be made to disappear" (Cresswell, *On the Move* 22). In the context of Argentine film during the early sound period, mobility signifies the movement away from a value system engendered by the sedentary and largely agricultural economic model of the nineteenth century toward one more in tune with the modern global capitalist system. However, as Cresswell notes in *On the Move*, mobility is assumed to be a threat to "the rooted, moral, authentic existence of place" (30). In addition to be put forward by numerous, and often contradictory, thinkers such as T.S. Eliot, Raymond Williams, Heidegger, Richard Hoggart, and the Chicago School of Anthropology, the

notion of mobility as a threat to the fabric of society is also apparent in *Tango!*, *Los tres berretines*, and *Riachuelo*. In each of the three films, albeit to varying degrees, the dynamism that mobility provides at some point in time polemicizes the family as a harmonious unit. However, given that broken homes make for an empty box office, the family unit is restored in *Tango!*, *Los tres berretines*, and *Riachuelo* and bourgeois values prevail.

## Epilogue

A thought experiment: as opposed to returning from Europe in 1922, what if Jorge Luis Borges arrived today in Buenos Aires? Certain historical accommodations would, of course, have to be made to create an analogous situation: for instance, the young Jorge Luis would most likely disembark from an airplane at Ezeiza instead of taking his first step onto *tierras argentinas* from a transatlantic ocean liner. Similarly, in order to roughly maintain the seven-year duration of his travels abroad, the Borges family would have had to stay in Europe due to crisis such as the 2001 economic meltdown, as opposed to the outbreak of World War I. Jorge Luis also would have had to participate in a nascent aesthetic movement while living in Spain. Would it matter if he weren't into literature?

While this somewhat ridiculous thought experiment ultimately breaks down due to insurmountable changes in the way we live our lives today in comparison to 1922, we can definitively draw one conclusion: the Buenos Aires that twenty-first century Jorge Luis would encounter upon arriving from Europe would be indelibly different from the city he knew before leaving. Even with modern technology such as the Internet, which ostensibly reduces the distance between places, Jorge Luis could not possibly keep up with the changes in the built, natural, and social environment of his hometown. In this sense, we can imagine our hypothetical Jorge Luis reacting quite similarly to the real Jorge Luis Borges upon seeing waves of new immigrants in the city: only in the twenty-first century the immigrants would most likely be of Bolivian or Korean origin as

opposed to Italian or Eastern European extraction. And, if his reaction to the tango in the 1920s were to be any indication, Jorge Luis would also wince upon hearing the rhythms of a *cumbia* and, perhaps by extension, would most certainly dismiss the writings of Washington Cucurto. On the other hand, perhaps Jorge Luis would be excited to finally be able to visit the MALBA (Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires) for the first time.

Despite these changes to the fabric of the built, natural, and social environment of Buenos Aires, our hypothetical Jorge Luis Borges would still be familiar with much of the city. For instance, if he were so inclined, he could travel to what is known as the “Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires,” the block where the four streets of Guatemala; Serrano, which has since been renamed in honor of Borges; Paraguay; and Gurruchaga meet in Palermo. The block, which has changed with time, is still more or less the same as it was a decade ago even though the conceptualization of Buenos Aires as a place has changed during the course of the duration of our thought experiment, Jorge Luis would nonetheless be relatively familiar with how the city is understood as an assemblage. As De Landa reminds us, “We live in a world populated by structures—a complex mixture of geological, biological, social, and linguistic constructions that are nothing but accumulations of materials shaped and hardened by history” (*A Thousand Years* 25).

Among the materials composing Buenos Aires as an assemblage that have been accumulated, shaped, and hardened by history are the texts examined in this study. That is, these works of cultural production have come to shape the way in which the city is conceptualized, not only in the time period immediately surrounding their original

premier or publication, but also to this very day. This is not to say, however, that they are integral parts of how we currently envision Buenos Aires but rather they are influential components in how we understand our affective bonds as a place. For this reason, the analyses of Borges' early poetry, Discépolo's *grotesco criollo*, Arlt's binary novel *Los siete locos/ Los lanzallamas*, and the early sound films *Tango!*, *Los tres berretines*, and *Riachuelo* in this study aimed to demonstrate how Buenos Aires is assembled as a social understanding. As opposed to sketching out the concept of place elucidated by each work, the specific processes through which authors represent Buenos Aires as place are teased out, following De Landa's assertion that, "analysis in assemblage theory is not conceptual but causal, concerned with the discovery of the *actual mechanisms* operating at a given social scale" (*A New Philosophy* 31). Through revealing actual mechanisms operating Buenos Aires as an assemblage, the works of cultural production I examine in this study give insight into the complex relationship *porteños* had to place in the 1920s and 1930s.

## Appendix: Filmography

*El alma del bandoneón.* Dir. Mario Soffici. Perf. Libertad Lamarque, Santiago Arrieta, and Domingo Sapelli. Argentina Sono Film, 1935. Film.

*Ayúdame a vivir.* Dir. José Ferreyra. Perf. Libertad Lamarque and Floren Delbene. SIDE, 1936. Film.

*Besos brujos.* Dir. José Ferreyra. Perf. Libertad Lamarque and Floren Delbene. SIDE, 1937. Film.

*Dancing!* Dir. Luis Moglia Barth. Perf. Amanda Ledesma, Arturo García Buhr, and Rosa Catá. Argentina Sono Film, 1933. Film.

*The Divine Lady.* Dir. Frank Lloyd. Perf. Corinne Griffith, Victor Varconi, H.B. Warner, and Ian Keith. First National Pictures, 1929. Film.

*The Jazz Singer.* Dir. Alan Crosland. Perf. Al Jolson, May McAvoy, and Warner Oland. Warner Brothers, 1927. Film.

*La ley que olvidaron.* Dir. José A. Ferreyra. Perf. Libertad Lamarque, Santiago Arrieta, and Hermania Franco. SIDE, 1937. Film.

*La que no perdonó.* Dir. José A. Ferreyra. Perf. Elsa O'Connor, Mario Danesi, José Olarra. SIDE, 1938. Film.

*Las luces de Buenos Aires.* Dir. Adelqui Millar. Perf. Carlos Gardel, Sofia Bozán, and Gloria Guzmán. Les Studios Paramount, 1931. Film.

*Mujeres que trabajan.* Dir. Manuel Romero. Perf. Mecha Ortiz, Pepita Serrador, and Niní Marshall. Lumiton, 1938. Film.

*Tango!* Dir. Luis Moglia Barth. Perf. Libertad Lamarque and Tita Merello. Argentina Sono Film, 1933. Film.

*Los tres berretines.* Dir. Equipo Lumiton. Perf. Luis Sandrini, Luis Arata, and Luisa Vehil. Lumiton, 1933. Film.

*Riachuelo.* Dir. Luis Moglia Barth. Perf. Luis Sandrini, Margarita Sola, and Alfredo Camiña. Argentina Sono Film, 1934. Film.

## Bibliography

- Aitken, Stuart and Leo Zonn. *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film*. Lanham M.D.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994. Print.
- Agnew, John. *The United States in the World Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987. Print.
- Amícola, José. *Astrología y fascismo en la obra de Arlt*. Buenos Aires: Weimar, 1984. Print.
- Arlt, Roberto. *Los siete locos. Los lanzallamas*. Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1978. Print.
- . *Notas sobre el cinematógrafo*. Buenos Aires: Simurg, 1997. Print.
- Armstrong, Pier. "Discursive Bi-Polarity and Divergence of Critical Responses to Arlt's *Los siete locos*." *Neophilologus* 78 (1994): 89-98. Print.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994. Print.
- Barnard, Tim. "Popular Cinema and Populist Politics." *Argentine Cinema*. Ed. Tim Barnard. Toronto: Nightwood, 1986. Print.
- , ed. *Argentine Cinema*. Toronto: Nightwood, 1986. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999. Print.
- Blanco Amores de Pagella, Angela. "El grotesco en la Argentina." *Universidad* 49 (1961): 167-74. Print.
- Bordwell, David. "Camera Movement and Cinematic Space." *Ciné-Tracts*. 1.2 (1977): 19-25. Print.
- Borello, Rafael. "El anacrónico Borges de *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923)." *Río de la Plata* 4-5-6 (1992): 111-121. Print.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Cuaderno San Martín*. Buenos Aires: Proa, 1929. Print.
- . *Fervor de Buenos Aires*. Buenos Aires: Serrantes, 1923. Print.



- . *Luna de enfrente*. Buenos Aires: Proa, 1925. Print.
- . *El tamaño de mi esperanza*. Madrid: Alianza, 2005. Print.
- Brown, Richard. "Time, Space and the City in 'Wandering Rocks.'" *Joyce's "Wandering Rocks."* Eds. Andrew Gibson and Steven Morrison. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002. Print.
- Bruno, Guiliana. "Site-seeing: Architecture and the Moving Image." *Wide Angle* 19.4 (1997): 8-24. Print.
- Cambaceres, Eugenio. *En la sangre*. Buenos Aires: Stockcero, 2006. Print.
- Campodónico, Raúl et al. *Cine Sonoro Argentino 1933-1943*. Vol. 2. Buenos Aires: El Calafate, 2006. Print.
- Carbone, Rocco. *Los siete locos: grotesco y subversión*. Buenos Aires: Facultad de filosofía y letras, 2006. Print.
- Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. Print.
- Cosuelo, Jorge. "Argentine Cinema from Sound to the Sixties." *The Garden of Forking Paths: Argentine Cinema*. Eds. John King and Nissa Torrents. London: British Film Institute, 1988. Print.
- Cresswell, Tim. *In Place/ Out of Place: Geography/ Ideology, and Transgression*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996. Print.
- . *On the Move*. London: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- . *Place: A Short Introduction*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 2004. Print.
- De Costa, René. *El humor en Borges*. Madrid: Cátedra, 1999. Print.
- . "Stéfano: el humor negro en el grotesco criollo." *Texto Crítico* 10:4 (1978): 86-94.
- De Landa, Manuel. *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. London: Continuum, 2006. Print.
- . *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*. New York: Zone Books, 2009. Print. Print.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2007. Print.
- Discépolo, Armando. *Giácomo / Babilonia / Cremona*. Buenos Aires: Talía, 1970. Print.

- . *Mateo; Stéfano*. Buenos Aires: Kapelusz, 1976. Print.
- . *Obras escogidas: Tomo 2*. Buenos Aires: Jorge Álvarez, 1969. Print.
- . *Obras escogidas: Tomo 3*. Buenos Aires: Jorge Álvarez, 1969. Print.
- Di Núbilo, Domingo. *Historia del cine argentino*. Buenos Aires, Cruz de Malta, 1959. Print.
- Dowling, Lee. "El problema de la comunicación en Stéfano de Armando Discépolo." *Latin American Theater Review* 13.2 (1980): 57-63. Print.
- Entrikin, J. Nicholas. *The Betweenness of Place: Toward a Geography of Modernity*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 1991. Print.
- España, Claudio. "El cine sonoro y su expansión." *Historia del cine argentino*. Ed. Claudio España. Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1992. Print.
- . "El modelo institucional: formas de representación en la edad de oro." Ed. Claudio España. *Cine argentino Industria y clasicismo 1933/1956*. Vol 1. Buenos Aires: Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 2000. Print.
- . *Medio siglo de cine*. Buenos Aires: Abril, 1984. Print.
- Favor, Gabriela. "Lumiton: el berretín del cine." Ed. Claudio España. *Cine argentino Industria y clasicismo 1933/1956*. Vol 1. Buenos Aires: Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 2000. 222-46. Print.
- Fiddian, Robbin. "Buenos Aires and Benares: Interlocking Landscapes in the Early Poetry of Jorge Luis Borges." *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* LXXXII 3-4 (2005): 353-62. Print.
- Fishburn, Evelyn and Psiche Hughes. *A Dictionary of Borges*. London: Duckworth, 1990. Print.
- Fusaro, Mariana. "Los 'Yo' de Borges en *Luna de enfrente*." *Letras* 29-30 (1994): 41-49. Print.
- Gálvez, Manuel. *El mal metafísico*. Buenos Aires: Espasa-Calpe, 1962. Print.
- Getino, Octavio. *Cine argentino: entre lo posible y lo deseable*. Buenos Aires: Ciccus, 2005. Print.
- Ghiano, Juan Carlos. "Los grotescos de Armando Discépolo." *Mateo, Stéfano, Relojero*. Buenos Aires: Losange, 1958. 5-16. Print.

- Gilman, Claudia. "Los siete locos de Arlt, novela sospechosa." *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* Supp. 11 (1993): 77-94. Print.
- Gnutzmann, Rita. "Los siete locos y Los lanzallamas en la renovación literaria de los años veinte." *Texto Crítico* 2.3 (1996): 125-141. Print.
- Guerrero, Diana. *Arlt: El habitante solitario*. Buenos Aires: Catálogos, 1986. Print.
- Harbord, Janet. *The Evolution of Film: Rethinking Film Studies*. Cambridge: Polity, 2007. Print.
- Heidegger, Martin. "Building Dwelling Thinking." *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971. Print.
- Henderson, Brian. "The Long Take." *Film Comment* 7.2 (1971): 6-11. Print.
- Hernández, José. *Martín Fierro*. Nanterre, Francia: Allca XX, Université Paris X, 2001. Print.
- Hopkins, Jeff. "Mapping of Cinematic Places: Icons, Ideology, and the Power of (Mis)representation." *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film*. Eds. Stuart Aitken and Leo Zonn. Lanham M.D.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994. Print.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. New York: Penguin, 2000. Print.
- Kaiser-Lenoir, Claudia. *El grotesco criollo: estilo teatral de una época*. Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1977. Print.
- Koczauer, Barbara. "La rebelión de los intelectuales en *Los siete locos* y *Los lanzallamas*." *Homenaje a Alejandro Losada*. Ed. José Morales Saravia. Lima: Latinoamericana, 1986. Print.
- Larra, Raúl. *Roberto Arlt el torturado*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Anfora, 1986. Print.
- Landro, Mónica, Abel Posadas and Marta Speroni. *Cine Sonoro Argentino 1933-1943*. Vol. 1. Buenos Aires: El Calafate, 2005. Print.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993. Print.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991. Print.
- López, Lucio. *La gran aldea*. Buenos Aires: Abril, 1983. Print.

- Madrid, Lelia. “‘Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires’ o la utopía de la historia.” *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 69: 347-56. Print.
- Malkki, Lisa. “National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees.” *Cultural Anthropology* 7.1 (1992): 24-44. Print.
- Malpas, Jeff. *Heidegger’s Topology: Being, Place, World*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006. Print.
- . *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print.
- Manetti, Ricardo. “Argentina Sono Film: Más estrellas que el cielo.” Ed. Claudio España. *Cine argentino Industria y clasicismo 1933/1956*. Vol 1. Buenos Aires: Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 2000. 162-219. Print.
- Maranghello, César. “Cine y estado: del proyecto conservador a la difusión Peronista.” *Cine argentino industria y clasicismo 1933/1956*. Ed. Claudio España. Vol. 2. Buenos Aires: Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 2000. Print.
- Mariani, Roberto. *Cuentos de la oficina*. Buenos Aires: Ameghino, 1998. Print.
- Martínez Cuitiño, Luis. “Los Borges del *Fervor*.” *Letras* 19-20 (1988-1989): 51-68.
- Martínez Estrada, Ezquiél. *Radiografía de la pampa*. Nanterre, France: Archivos, 1991.
- Martínez Landa, Lidia. “Signos secundarios del texto dramático. Su importancia en el grotesco.” *Cuartas Jornadas Nacionales de Investigación Teatral*. Buenos Aires: ACITA, 1987. 9-13. Print.
- Masotta, Óscar. *Sexo y traición en Roberto Arlt*. Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia, 2008. Print.
- Massey, Doreen and Karen Lury. “Making Connections.” *Screen* 40.3 (1999): 229-38. Print.
- Monegal, Emir Rodríguez. *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography*. New York: Dutton, 1978. Print.
- Montes, Hugo. “Borges y la poesía de la vanguardia.” *Estudios filológicos* 14 (1979): 139-47. Print.

- Moore, Lindsey. "Women in a Widening Frame: (Cross-)Cultural Projection, Spectatorship, and Iranian Cinema." *Camera Obscura: Journal of Feminism and Film Theory* 20.2 (2005): 1-33. Print.
- Murch, Walter. Forward. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. By Michel Chion. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. Print.
- Navarrete, José. "Cremona: más allá de la estética grotesca." *Cuartas Jornadas Nacionales de Investigación Teatral*. Buenos Aires: ACITA, 1987. 58-64. Print.
- Navarro Vera, José Ramón. "El Buenos Aires de Borges: Paisaje interior versus paisaje construido." *Escrituras de la ciudad*. Ed. Carlos Rovira. Madrid: Palas Atenea, 1999. 129-41. Print.
- Olea Franco, Rafael. *El otro Borges. El primer Borges*. Buenos Aires: Fundación de cultural económica, 1993. Print.
- Ordaz, Luis. "Acercamientos y diferencias de los 'grotesco criollos' de Armando Discépolo con los 'grotescos' pirandellianos." *Cuartas Jornadas Nacionales de Investigación Teatral*. Buenos Aires: ACITA, 1987. 3-8. Print.
- . "Frustraciones y fracasos del período inmigratorio en los «grotescos criollos» de Armando Discépolo." *Espacio de crítica e investigación teatral* 3.5 (1989): 43-51. Print.
- Ortega, Julio. "La visión del mundo de Arlt: *Los siete locos* / *Los lanzallamas*." *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* Supp. 11 (1993): 71-6. Print.
- Pastor, Beatriz. *Roberto Arlt y la rebelión alienada*. Gaithersburg, MD: Hispamérica, 1980. Print.
- Pellettieri, Osvaldo. "Armando Discépolo: entre el grotesco italiano y el grotesco criollo." *Latin American Theater Review* 22.1 (1988): 55-71. Print.
- . "El grotesco criollo o la productividad de un género popular en el sistema teatral argentino." *Espacio de crítica e investigación teatral* 5.9 (1991): 77-84. Print.
- . "Los cien años de un inventor: Armando Discépolo." *Gestos* 5.3 (1988): 141-44. Print.
- Piglia, Ricardo. "Sobre Roberto Arlt." *Crítica y ficción*. Santa Fe: Imprenta Universidad Nacional del Litoral, 1986. 19-26. Print.
- Relph, Edward. *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion, 1976. Print.

- Rivera, Jorge. *Roberto Arlt: Los siete locos*. Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1986. Print.
- Rock, David. *Argentina 1516-1987: from Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987. Print.
- Sadler, William and Ekaterina Haskins. "Metonymy and the Metropolis: Television Show Settings and the Image of New York." *Journal of Communicative Inquiry* 29.3 (2005): 195-216. Print.
- Salas, Horacio. "La ciudad de Stéfano." *Teatro: Revista del Teatro San Martín* 6:25 (1986): 14-17. Print.
- Sanhueza, María Teresa. *Continuidad, transformación y cambio: el grotesco criollo de Armando Discépolo*. Buenos Aires: Nueva generación, 2004. Print.
- . "Relojero de Armando Discépolo: la culminación del grotesco criollo." *Crisis, apocalipsis y utopías. Fines de siglo en la Literatura Latinoamericana. Actas del XXXII Congreso Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana*. Santiago: Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2000. 346-351. Print.
- Sarlo, Beatriz. *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*. London: Verso, 2006. Print.
- Seamon, David. "Review: Heidegger, Environment, and Dwelling." *Environment and Planning A* 14 (1982): 419-423. Print.
- Sarmiento, Domingo. *Facundo. Civilización y barbarie*. Madrid: Cátedra, 2003. Print.
- Schmitman, Jorge. *Film Industries in Latin America: Dependency and Development*. Norwood, NJ: ALEX, 1984. Print.
- Scobie, James. *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870-1910*. New York: Oxford UP, 1974. Print.
- Troiani, Elisa. "Stéfano: Promises and Other Speech Acts." *Things Done with Words: Speech Acts in Hispanic Drama*. Ed. Elías Rivers. Newark: Juan de la Cuesta, 1986. 85-98. Print.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. "Review: Untitled." *Geographical Review* 82.1 (1992): 85-86. Print.
- . *Space and Place*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005. Print.
- Ugalde, Sergio. "Mito e historia: la poetización de Buenos Aires en el primer Borges." *Fervor crítico por Borges*. Ed. Rafael Olea Franco. México D.F.: El Colegio de México, 2006. 32-56. Print.

Vacarezza, Alberto. *Tu cuna fue un conventillo. Teatro/Alberto Vacarezza*. Ed. Osvaldo Pellettieri. Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1993. Print.

Viñas, David. *Grotesco, inmigración y fracaso*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1973.

Walzer, Michael. "Pleasures and Costs of Urbanity". *Metropolis: Center and Symbol of Our Times*. Ed. Philip Kasinitz. New York: New York UP, 1995. 320-330. Print.

Wilde, Eduardo. *Curso de higiene público*. Buenos Aires: Casavalle, 1885. Print.

Wolff, Janet. "On the Road Again: Metaphors of Travel in Cultural Criticism." *Cultural Studies* 6.3 (1992): 224-39. Print.

## **Vita**

Nicolas Matthew Poppe was born in 1980. Raised in San Antonio, Texas, he earned his Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy and Spanish from Hendrix College. While completing course requirements for the degree of Master in Arts in Spanish at the University of Texas at Austin, which he completed in 2005, he took courses at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba in Córdoba, Argentina.

Address: [poppe@mail.utexas.edu](mailto:poppe@mail.utexas.edu)

This dissertation was typed by the author.