Fictions of the Bad Life

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The analytical potency of prostitution has to do with how “it”—prostitution—is always bound up with other discourses. It cannot be defined except in relation to and in the terms of philosophy, psychoanalysis, economics, history and—perhaps most obviously—law. Prostitution is included within the discursive purview of any discipline that criminalizes or rationalizes it, or that represents, bemoans, judges or bans it; so it cannot be explained exclusively in relation to any one of these disciplines without conjuring up aspects of the others. While it may be defined temporarily in the language and logic of any of them, such a definition remains context-specific. At the same time, in talking about prostitution any discipline exceeds its own boundaries.

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

Latin American literature of prostitution during its modern consolidation under Naturalism thematized intersectional colonial anxieties about race,
Introduction

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

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

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

As a metonym for human trafficking at the time of its consolidation as a modern state, and as home to the greatest twentieth-century example of organized prostitution in America, Argentina merits the attention of the entire second half of the book, which tracks contemporary historical fiction on the topic of Jewish white slavery during the period from 1880–1930 in Buenos Aires, exploring how it was that the ethnically, nationally and geographically
Prostitution as a (Meta)Discourse

varied practices of prostitution during that time period, as well as the rich literature of the same era, came to be retroactively simplified by way of this minority synecdoche, reducing Latin America to Argentina to Buenos Aires, prostitution to organized Jewish crime, and the prostitute to a resurrected version of the nineteenth-century archetypal “blanca”—a poor, ignorant Eastern European Jewish girl, sold into prostitution under false pretenses and left to a miserable existence in Buenos Aires, only to be rescued by good, upstanding Argentines and, finally, integrated into the nation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Post-1930, prostitution is channeled into different national literary traditions in highly divergent and variegated ways that, starting in the 1990s, redefine the national from an explicitly minority vantage point, retelling the characters and stories of the Naturalist period. Chapter 3 focuses on the contemporary historical novel of prostitution, characterized by the proliferation of versions of the Jewish “white slave” (“blanca”) of the 1920s: Myrtha Schalom’s La polaca. Inmigración, rufianes y esclavas a comienzos del siglo XX
Introduction

(2003), Isabel Vincent’s *Bodies and Souls: The Tragic Plight of Three Jewish Women Forced into Prostitution in the Americas* (2005), Elsa Drucaroff’s *El Infierno Prometido: Una prostituta en la Zwi Migdal* (2006), juxtaposed to *Trilogía de la trata de blancas* (1933), the memoir of Julio Alsogaray, a former chief of police. In an intertextual echo chamber, the novels present an apparent consensus about key figures in national history that deviates from historical evidence. They satisfy a fantasy of transhistorical continuity by which both minority and state are legitimated. The repercussions of this rewriting of “Jewish Argentina” extend beyond the borders of the historical novel to resonate with contemporary debates around the meaning of Jewishness and anti-Semitism.

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