The Emergence of the Legal–Medical–Literary Prostitute in Latin America

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

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

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

**It’s the Law**

At a minimum, we could say that prostitution in Latin America is always linked to at least three legal moments: it is defined by originary prohibitions and permissions regarding prostitution (the Pentateuch, the Ten Commandments), by the legal foundations of the modern state (Colonial laws, the Constitution), and by the present-day status of prostitution under national and municipal law. In this way, of course, prostitution is also linked to legal history, and to the tendency to narrate legal history as coherent, progressive development.²

In fact, the legal history of prostitution in Latin America is—somewhat like the history of Latin American literature itself—both continuous and fragmented, geopolitically and temporally. On the one hand, colonial laws defined enormous geopolitical areas, and this makes it possible to speak of the legal history of prostitution in early Latin America in sweeping terms. Beginning in the sixteenth century, Spanish laws and practices of prostitution were imported to America; and prostitution was generally tolerated under colonial law, as it had been in Europe, as an important matter of public hygiene to be strictly regulated by the municipality.¹ At the same time, post-Independence, the contradictions inherent in colonial law were magnified as nations and municipalities interpreted it in different ways and eventually enacted their own laws regulating, tolerating or abolishing prostitution.

Beginning with the regulations of Felipe II (1572–75), legal prostitutes in the New World were required to be orphans or abandoned by their families. Prostitutes who met this description were not criminals; but women who “chose” to stain the *honra* [honor] of the family name committed a crime. Paradoxically, it was because of this law that the testimony of (legal) prostitutes was inadmissible in court, because they “had no name” and their identity could not be proved. For this reason, in court proceedings from the time, it is typical for prostitutes accused of a crime not to be able to speak in their own defense.⁴
While the activity of prostitution was tolerated and controlled as a matter of social prophylaxis, “excesos [excesses]” were forbidden (Atondo Rodríguez 54). The idea of “excess” was defined in terms of appearance: the most common “excess” for which prostitutes were arrested was that of wearing spectacular finery in public places, and the law specifically forbade the use of dresses with trains and high-heeled shoes (Atondo Rodríguez 71) and the use of makeup (López Austin 278). While the law detailed these few particular “excesses,” in practice the category of “excess” was highly relational, dependent on individual interpretation in accordance with prevailing cultural norms.

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

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

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

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

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

At the same time that the law was being modernized, the colonial duality of absence and excess—the missing name of the prostitute and the “excessive” body—was reinvigorated in the literature of the late nineteenth century. While we cannot begin to speak of the literature of prostitution without reference to the law, it is not clear that the law of prostitution entirely precedes its literature. More precisely, literature took on the legal preoccupation with prostitution during this time of flux and offered an experimental set of fictional case studies which the law in turn drew upon as a kind of precedent in order to speculate upon that which it could not resolve.
This was able to happen for several interrelated reasons. First of all, the period in question—which has traditionally been regarded as the definitive transition from the vestiges of colonial Spanish order to modern national law—was in fact a much more complicated experiment involving severe fluctuations whereby colonial legal concepts might disappear from the letter of the law only to remain implicit in the practices of institutions that predated the new laws and in the absence of explicit regulation. Second, it was common during the period of consolidation of the modern penal codes that literary authors were also doctors of either law or medicine, and might be involved in drafting and/or critiquing legislation, and thus that the same individual might participate in forming the modern discourse of prostitution from within more than one discipline. In this way, Argentine author Manuel Gálvez published his Juris Doctor thesis on prostitution, _La trata de blancas_ [The White Slave Trade] (1905), at the age of twenty-three; twelve years later he would publish the most famous Argentine Naturalist novel of prostitution, _Nacha Regules_. Finally, and still more interesting, is the fact that Gálvez drew heavily on fictional literary examples of prostitution in order to make his argument—and he was not at all out of step with the times in doing so. A chief source for Gálvez’s thesis was a five-volume novel to which we shall return, called _Libro extraño. Novela médico-social_ [The Strange Book: A Medical-Social Novel] (1889–1902) by Argentine medical doctor and author Francisco Sicardi. Gálvez treats Sicardi’s novel as containing expert truths which can be extracted from their fictional context, and moved seamlessly among disciplinary discourses: medical authority within a novel can be transplanted into a legal argument. The gesture is reminiscent of French theorist Jacques Derrida’s provocative assertion that literature not only “sidesteps existing laws from which, however, it derives protection and receives its conditions of emergence,” but in playing the law “literature passes literature,” and becomes law (“Before the Law” 216). And yet, we would also have to say that the law here is becoming literature. In his struggle to define the ineffable identity of the prostitute in distinction to that of women, Gálvez quotes the narrator of second volume of _Libro extraño_: “Son cosas: no tienen sexo [they are things: they are sexless]” (Gálvez, _La trata_ 20). Gálvez uses the quote as a way to pinpoint the prostitute’s double victimization as alienated from both society and herself, and in need of protection from the law. The use of the quote models a technique Gálvez would perfect in his later novels _Nacha Regules_ and _Historia de arrabal_. He would speak for the mute prostitute, defending her before the law by narrating the law’s blindness to her as a subject _in its own terms_. 
At the same time, this quote is only a fragment of a larger image in its original context in Sicardi's novel. The quote continues:

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Naturalism and Prostitution**

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Nombre de guerra**

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

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

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

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

mismo que le dicen

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

Juana seguía abstraída:

—¿Qué extraño todo lo que pienso . . . ! ¿Quién me dice que soy yo
misma . . . ? No te conozco.
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Juana remained absorbed in thought:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Destinada por dios á cuidar gansos, un buen dia, el diablo la tienta. Tira los
suecos, echa al hombro el lio, deserta el corral y se larga á hacer fortuna á
Paris donde empieza su carrera de criada con el nombre de Fanchon que
le dieron en la pila y treinta francos al mes, la sigue de cocotte, con diez o
quince mil, llamándose Blanche d’Armagnac—es mucho mas chic—y acaba
por morirse averiada y sin un medio en el hospital.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

La huevada es que la Trujillo llega a un acuerdo con un cliente, ¿ya? Es la matiné. Poca gente en la sala. Pleno invierno, un frío de los mil demonios. El tipo es un lolo, un colegial del barrio alto, hijo de un conocido empresario. Se lo empieza a chupar. Parece que la Trujillo no estaba bien. Dicen las malas lenguas que estaba dura, llena de pepas. De pronto se oye un grito pavoroso. El colegial comienza a gritar como un becerro cuando lo van a degollar, pero como era una película de terror, nadie se dio cuenta. La Trujillo tenía los dientes muy afilados. Y eran suyos, no falsos. Verdaderos
[The story is that la Trujillo had come to an agreement with a client, okay? It’s the matinee. Not many people in the theater. It’s winter, it’s freezing cold. This guy is a kid, a high school student from the rich neighborhood, son of a well-known businessman. She begins to give him head. Apparently, la Trujillo wasn’t feeling well. Rumor has it that she was hopped up on pills. Suddenly there’s a horrific scream. The kid starts screaming like a calf whose throat is about to be cut, but since it was a horror movie, nobody realizes. La Trujillo had very sharp teeth. And they were hers, they weren’t fake. Real fangs. [ . . . ] Then the bitch got up and whispered to him: “I told you, kid, not to come inside.”] (Fuguet, Tinta roja 134)

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

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

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

**Constructing the Voice that Silences Itself**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[She revindicates with her verses the infamy of all the infamous women. [. . . ] She fell and she rose and now she tells us the story of her falls. Each composition shows a time period in the social inferno of her past life. This woman distinguishes herself completely from other women who write poetry in her shocking sincerity.] (Tiempo, *Versos* 33)

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

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

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

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

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

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

En una misma pieza
Un macho y una hembra
Y el “yo” mujer
Que no sabe cómo desaparecer
[In the same room  
A male and a female  
And the “I” woman  
That doesn’t know how to disappear.] (Tiempo, Versos 62)

The “yo” is unable to disappear, yet is also dissociated from the “hembra” of the sexual transaction, a disembodied spectral “yo mujer” that remains in limbo in the atmosphere of prostitution, unable to actualize itself and yet stubbornly not “knowing” how to disappear. This “yo mujer” watches over the prostitute, such that she is both alienated from herself and yet watching her own alienation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In this way, while individual poems leave little room for interpretation, the “message” that the poems as a collection hammer home through—the impossibility of escaping from prostitution as well as the impossibility of even articulating fully the desire to do so before beginning to bemoan its impossibility—can be read as the lyric condensation of the Naturalist story arc in which the prostitute ascends only to fall to her foreordained demise. By removing plot and suspending the motion forward in time (speaking as Clara does in retrospect, as if responding guardedly to police questions on the topic of her subjectivity), the lyric “I” of the prostitute speaks from this eternal present of the prostitute from which “I woman” contemplates what “the female” is doing, understanding that she is doomed, yet unable to stop it. The lyric voice of the prostitute flattens the exciting ups and downs of the Naturalist novel into a bitter, gnomic philosophy of the subject; her lyricism is a litany of bitterness.44

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

Mientras cae la lluvia, yo acaricio mi sueño:
Un día las mujeres serán todas hermanas;
La camarera, la púdica,
La aristócrata alta y la humilde mucama.
Irirán por las calles llevando como emblema
Una sonrisa alegre y una mirada franca,
Y así, sencillamente,
Se ofrecerían a todos los hombres que pasaran.
Ellos se tornarían
Tan buenos como el sol, como el pan, como el agua;
Su dicha cantarían todos los oprimidos
Suavizadas sus manos, sus gestos y sus palabras.
Bajo los cielos limpios, banderas de alegría,
Desplegados sus paños como alas
Cual si quisieran cobijar a todas
Las mujeres que un día supieron ser humanas
Part I. Chapter 1

[As the rain falls, I caress my dream:
One day women will all be sisters;
The whore, the chaste,
The proud aristocrat and the humble maid.
They would go through the streets bearing as their standard
A happy smile and a frank gaze,
And thus, simply,
They would offer themselves to all the men who passed.
Men would become
As good as the sun, as bread, as water;
All the oppressed would sing in happiness
With softened hands, gestures and words.
Under the clear skies, flags of happiness,
Their handkerchiefs unfolded like wings
As if they wished to shelter all
The women who, they learned one day, were human/The women who learned one day to be human.] (Tiempo, Versos 49–50; my emphasis)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

However, as we shall see, the literary manifestation of the body and its
interiority as “speaking for” the prostitute goes beyond the fated decadence
and death of the prostitute's body, her necessary incarnation of “social” dis-
eases in their double sense of epidemic and moral—and actually succeeds in
locating the source of national problems in an international erotic history,
together with “the persistence of creole pathologies” (Nouzeilles, Ficciones
somáticas 226). The representation of vice in the prostitute's body is both
transparent and deceiving: old prostitutes necessarily degenerate physically
at a steady pace only slightly behind that of their moral debasement, embody-
ing the “reality” of contagion while their value as prostitutes is obliterated.
There is a heavy-handed moral suggestion that old prostitutes have lost their
sense of shame, which would link their lack of attractiveness to a lack of moral
scruples and hence to a lack of suffering. Their bodies are barbarized, their
seductive clothing becomes “decadent,” they shuffle around half-dressed:
Ah! La grotesca figura de Pepa, a pesar del largo camisón que le cubría los desperfectos del vicio y de los años! Sus carnes marchitas, exuberantes en los sitios que el hombre ama y estruja [ . . . ] su enorme vientre de vieja bebedora, sus lacios senos abultados de campesina gallega oscilaban, oscilaban asquerosamente, con algo de bestial en sus oscilaciones. [ . . . ]

[Ah! The grotesque figure of Pepa, in spite of the long nightgown that covered the flaws of vice and age! Her faded flesh, exuberant in the places men love and squeeze [ . . . ] her enormous belly of an old drinker, her limp, bulging breasts of Galician peasant swayed, swayed disgustingly, with something bestial in their swaying.] (Gamboa 9)

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

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

We can see how powerful the regime of overrepresentation is by looking at its juxtaposition to a particular truth, and especially to the truth of love. In Argentine Lorenzo Stanchina’s *Tanka Charowa* (1920), as soon as idealistic young Boedian Mario is diagnosed with syphilis, he decides that his beloved Tanka, a poor prostitute, is a liar. “Tanka, su Tanka le había transmitido a sabiendas la monstruosa enfermedad. Porque él estaba convencido que ella la llevaba en la sangre [Tanka, his Tanka had knowingly given him the monstrous disease. Because he was convinced that she carried it in her blood]” (Stanchina 84).

Tanka swears to him that it can’t be—she isn’t even sick—; but Mario remits to higienista logic and says:

—[ . . . ] ¡No podés negar que sos una p . . . !
Sintió Tanka el brutal dolor del golpe. Sangró el corazón, partido en dos, por el ultraje [ . . . ]
—Tenés razón . . . no podés vivir conmigo. Sos un muchacho decente y yo
Part I. Chapter 1

[... ] Esperaba esto. ¡Era demasiada felicidad para mí! Yo he nacido para sufrir.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Higienismo and the Body**

In order to read more deeply how overrepresentation uses the body against the prostitute’s voice and even her conscious intentions—to explain why Santa’s tears are meaningless because they fall upon a low-cut evening gown and Tanka’s truthful words are drowned out by the accusations of her body—we have to take a closer look at how Naturalism collects and classifies symptoms and specimens in accordance with the medical ideas of *higienismo*. *Higienismo* saw illness as a total social phenomenon, linking together all areas of human life and all intellectual disciplines. With the international hegemony of *higienismo*—as we saw clearly in the activities of the International Sanitary Organization—medicine and law intertwine: doctors write, vote and comment on laws regarding prostitution as a matter of social prophylaxis. At the same time, *higienismo* reinscribes old views in new terms: as Gabriela Nouzeilles has demonstrated, the foundational fictions of Sarmiento and Alberdi had already created a literature of the nation as a body to be examined, cured
and experimented upon; and *higienismo* took up their metaphors as a mandate with which to not only prevent the spread of disease but to implement programmatically a broad set of practices based on a definition of health that went far beyond what today is considered epidemiology.\(^{49}\) In the words of Argentine hygienist Eduardo Wilde,

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

> [By public health we must understand everything that refers to public welfare and that includes everything that contributes to physical and moral comfort. Thus the words public health mean: instruction, morality, proper diet, clean air, sanitary precautions, public assistance, public charity, work and even free entertainment.] (cited in Nouzeilles, *Ficciones somáticas* 37).\(^{50}\)

The preoccupation with prostitution that cuts through several emerging disciplines is solidified in the figure of the doctor-writer-lawyer as the prototypical Latin American intellectual at the turn of the twentieth century, for whom the family is the only viable social building block. *Higienismo* conceived of itself in direct relation to the public authority and its prerogatives, with a mission in public health going far beyond the protection from illness and epidemics and encompassing a very particular program of moral “rectitude.”\(^{51}\)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Argentine positivist writer José Ingenieros was hardly alone in reading Libro extraño as a realistic assessment of psychological “types” that could all be explained within the parameters of medicine. José Ingenieros, who was Sicardi’s student at the Facultad de Medicina, explained this in an essay
he published a year after *Hacia la justicia* came out in a psychiatric journal printed by the national prison system. Dr. Ingenieros treats Sicardi’s novel as though it were a clinical study of prostitutes and anarchists; and he eventually diagnoses Goga and Germán Valverde as engaged in a kind of symbiotic hysteria. Note the circularity by which one medical doctor writes a novel about a strictly fantastical view of anarchism and prostitution and another doctor diagnoses his characters: Goga’s anarchism was merely the “inestabilidad mental de histérica [mental instability of an hysteric]”; and her conduct consisted of “fenómenos delirantes que siguen a su agitación mental de la angustiosa hora de las rebeliones [delirious phenomena following her mental agitation at the upsetting time of the rebellions].” Germán, on the other hand, is “una síntesis psicológica, no un tipo psicológico verdadero; es el anarquista como debiera ser, no como es. Más parece símbolo que retrato, encarnación del anarquismo que expresión del anarquista [a psychological synthesis, not a true psychological type; he is the anarchist as he ought to be, not as he is. He seems more a symbol than a portrait, an incarnation of anarchism rather than an expression of the anarchist]” (Ingenieros 1–2).\(^{55}\)

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Stranger Book: Rereading Libro Extraño

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Virtue is a chimera! he yelled “honor is hypocrisy, woman is the dupe of
lasciviousness, kids are a bunch of bestial masturbations and the world is a
hovel of fucking vices! We are the victims and the liberators. Let us curse!
We must trample on the destroyed thrones, throw the dead armies into
nothingness; grind the teeth and the cadaver’s face of the vanished kings;
pulverize chalices, monstrances and altars and make temples, monuments
and homes leap into the air, with the gods, who aren’t anything but sphynxes
and with all of history that isn’t anything but a lugubrious procession of
turpitude and crimes!! We are the victims. Let us curse! We are the libera-
tors and the triumphant! On the ruins, where the gangrene boils, we must
build and curse!!” (343)

Another spurt of hot blood erupts from his mouth to stop him from what
“weren’t even words, but strident blasphemies”; a diabolical grimace takes
over his face; some foam reddens his lips slightly; his pupils dilate, and he dies.

Having exhaustively detailed Germán Valverde’s trajectories dragging
Goga through different social spheres and now to the threshold of death, the
narrator turns to an exegesis of the dying Goga’s body—she who, in contrast
to Valverde, was not a completely pathological being. Rather, her pathology
was stimulated by contact with the anarchist. This “incomplete pathology”
merits further attention, since it points to a recurring tendency in Libro
extraño that mimics higienismo itself: it asserts the nonduality of the physical
and the moral, only to suddenly distinguish them. This opens up a split within the narrator: his eugenicist optimism about redeeming the “fallen” seems to contradict his certainty about determinism. By locating the main division of the physical and the moral within Goga’s body, the narrative logically points back to the possibility of this in other characters, questioning the absolute conclusions the narrator has reached about their respective “destinies.”

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

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

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

> The book with a poisonous soul and crude writing, in whose pages the Helots of this earth deposited the ire of their suffering and the cruel purposes of their revenge, in that long and savage odyssey, for the same reason that the hour of redemption draws near and because at the dawn of the century the Word was the respect for the rights of man and blood, religion and God[,] in its dusk it will be the rights of the poor! (95–96)

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

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

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

No había más que sexo y la verdad estaba en esa vagabunda Goga marchita, en la belleza de oro de sus cabellos, en la vida enferma de su boca procaz. Él la veía caminar entre la seda crujiente y fascinadora, hacia los barrios obscuros, letal como una ponzoña, dando su cuerpo a cada paso y arrancando el honor y para el delito a los jóvenes. Era una lasciva cruel, Goga, una hermosa homicida, sin más puñal que el beso interminable, que seca las fuentes de las energías nativas y agosta las savias del bosque en sazón. ¡Oh! Acostarse con ella, sentir el mareo de su piel blanca, echarle los brazos a la cintura, como un par de tenazas y desaparecer después.
[There wasn’t anything but sex and the truth was in faded Goga the vagabond, in the golden beauty of her hair, in the sick life of her lewd mouth. He saw her walk amid crinkling and fascinating silk, toward the obscure neighborhoods, lethal as a poison, giving her body at every step and tearing out the honor of young boys for crime. She was a cruel lust, Goga, a beautiful homicide, her only dagger the interminable kiss that dries the sources of native energies and parches the forest in ripeness of its sap. Oh! To sleep with her, to feel the giddiness of her white skin, to throw one’s arms around her waist, like a pair of pliers and disappear afterward.] (123–24)

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

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

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

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

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

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

As a result of this emotional tumult (which the doctor had told her to
avoid), Goga suffers a seizure. Opening her eyes, she begins her own deathbed
delirium, brushes aside the medical concerns of mother Dolores and daugh-
ter Angélica Méndez alike, who are screaming for the doctor to come, and
begins narrating her own broken life story: “Yo no conocía más que sótanos
y conventillos . . . [ . . . ] A nosotras nos quiebran el espinazo, sobre el borde
de las camas, porque somos lindas y nuestros hombres nos tiran, como carne
agusanada, para que todos se la coman . . . [I never knew anything but base-
ments and tenements . . . [ . . . ] They break our spines, on the edge of the beds,
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because we are pretty and our men throw us, like wormy meat, so that everyone will eat it” (351–52).

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

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

The pairing of prostitute and anarchist in Sicardi goes beyond the literary potentiality of a putative ideological sympathy or criminal attraction between sick bodies: it is a medical model that at once contains and is contained by a Catholic redemption discourse. The narrator can be seen proclaiming determinism for the Valverdes and salvation for Goga. In this way, the prostitute takes a qualitative leap out of positivism by which she eludes the novel’s scientific certainties in a mystical transformation. In the same movement, she reveals the quantum leaps from law to medicine and medicine to literature at points of impasse in higienismo itself.