Fictions of the Bad Life

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The Neo-Naturalist Reinvention of Jewish Argentina in Contemporary Historical Fiction about White Slavery

Seremos una fuerte nación. Por la virtud de esa proceridad militar, nuestros grandes varones serán claros ante los ojos del mundo. Se les inventará, si no existen. También para el pasado habrá premios. Confíemos, lector, en que se acordarán de vos y de mí en ese justo reparto de gloria . . .

—J. L. Borges, “Queja de todo criollo”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

By taking the stated intentions of these historical novels seriously, however—examining how they “rethink” history—I hope to illuminate the way in which they start to make history look surprisingly like a certain kind of science fiction: answering the question “What if?” about a particular moment
of the past, yet without acknowledging having asked the question, and believing themselves to have provided instead the answer to the question “What really happened?” I am interested in the meaning of this unacknowledged question as it can help triangulate both the emergence and reiteration of Jewish-Argentine identity in fiction as well as the putative “origin” of the nearly mythic continuity over time of “Jewish-Argentineity.”

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

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

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

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

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

The Trope of the White Slave

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The accumulation of Naturalist syllogisms, such as that of Raquel Liberman's breasts defining her as Tzvi's mother, parallels the quantitative accumulation of texts published about Raquel Liberman. We can now go back to
the book’s prologue to reinterpret the mysterious reference in the prologue to the real existence of the fictional character—“Liberman did exist, and so did my protagonist, La Polaca” (Schalom 14). The fictional Raquel Liberman is simultaneously a “whole” (of which the newspapers gave “only a few centimeters”) yet also a “part” of the blanca master narrative embodied in the archetype of “la polaca”—and both exist in a metafictionally synecdochical relation with the eponymous novel that contains them. The archetypal blanca—“la polaca”—has become “La Polaca,” a proper name used for the one individual who embodies the blanca. And this synecdoche is not merely a matter of the book’s title or its thematic purview, however: within the novel, other characters habitually refer to Raquel alone as “La Polaca,” despite the abundance of other Jewish-Argentine prostitutes of the Migdal.25

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Los signos degenerativos que lo estigmatizan [al rufián] presentan todas las gradaciones de la vileza. Mercenarios de sus propias mujeres e hijas, se encargan de consagrarl las, despojándolas de su virginidad y regodeán-
dose por la participación activa de aquéllas en los lenocinios. [ . . . ] Sin el menor afecto por nadie, ni siquiera el instinto que la Naturaleza puso hasta en los animales inferiores para sus crías; sin respeto para el pudor de sus ascendientes; impulsados por su perversión a bajas y brutales pasiones, constituye el “spécimen” más denigrante y peligroso de la sociedad. [ . . . ] La muerte del rufián es digno fin de su miserable vida: termina víctima de sus propias lacras, carcomido por el germén que llena los hospicios, las cárcel e y los hospitales.

[The degenerative signs that stigmatize [the pimp] present all gradations of vileness. Mercenaries of their own wives and daughters, they take charge of consecrating them, getting rid of their virginity and delighting in their active participation in the brothels [ . . . ] without the least affection for anybody, not even the instinct that Nature gave even inferior creatures for their young, without respect for the modesty of their ancestors, driven by their perversion to low and brutal passions, they constitute the most degrading and dangerous specimen of society [ . . . ]. The death of the pimp is the appropriate end of his miserable life: he ends up the victim of his own evil, eaten away by the germ that fills the hospices, the jails, and the hospitals.] (24–25)

The Naturalist adjectives creep as naturally into the pages of this chapter as the Biblical categories entered the previous one. While Alsogaray had restrained himself in talking about “el pueblo Hebreo” in the previous section, here he accuses “the” pimp of not only a crime “as ancient as prostitution itself” (20) but—in language straight from the Naturalist tradition—of being worse than the lower animals, guilty of incest and incapable of human feeling: an unnatural and dangerous specimen that degrades the social mixture, and is in turn extinguished by the “germ” it spreads.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(175–76)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Crime of Truth?

I alluded at the start of the chapter to the idea that the publication of new novels of white slavery was dramatized by corroborating items in other media, providing the sense that these novels were part of a cultural “happening,” and—in the measure that they agreed with each other in their presentation of history—adding to the common sense view that they were truthful. In fact, they also allude to each other explicitly. We have mentioned that Glickman speculated in her scholarly work on Liberman’s motives for lying in her testimony (The Jewish White Slave Trade 53); and her hypothesis—that Liberman did so to protect the privacy of her loved ones—became the protagonist’s central motive in Glickman’s play, “Una tal Raquel,” which in turn was based on the letters of Raquel Liberman, which were made available to both Schalom and Glickman by Liberman’s grandchildren but remain unpublished (Glickman, The Jewish White Slave Trade 61). The one primary source of information about Liberman’s life has been accessible only to a couple of scholars, who are also writers of fictions that speculate further about what is unresolved in these documents. This causes a bit of a snowball effect: Uruguayan Yvette Trochon dedicates several pages of her popular history of prostitution in the Río de la Plata to Liberman, in which she cites both Schalom and Glickman. At the end of it, Trochon concludes that Liberman lied “perhaps looking to in this way preserve her privacy and that of her loved ones” (Trochon, Las rutas 325).31 While this is a plausible enough reason to lie—although as I have made clear I think it obfuscates the way in which the blanca myth was mutually beneficial to Alsogaray and Liberman—and I wonder whether Glickman
and Schalom found something to this effect in Liberman’s personal correspondence—it appears that Trochon arrived at this conclusion independently, when in fact she did not.

What might seem like just an unusual flurry of citations in a relatively small cultural hall of mirrors becomes more complicated depending on what exactly gets cited from any of these sources. Argentine writer Ricardo Feierstein, in his *Historia de los judíos argentinos* (2006), tells the Liberman story in the context of Alsogaray and Ernesto Goldar’s “juicios prejuiciosos o una ligereza en las cifras estadísticas que mezclan realidad y fábula, como ha ocurrido desde siempre con este tema en la sociedad argentina [prejudicial judgments or a flippancy in the statistics that mix reality and fable, as has always happened with this topic in Argentine society]” (Feierstein 277). Feierstein attacks the uncritical repetition of statistics, pointing out that Alsogaray’s previously critiqued statistics were later inflated by a factor of ten: from 3,000 prostitutes (Alsogaray 142) they became in more than one later source 30,000 prostitutes (Feierstein 279).

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

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

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

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

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

There is something here that echoes Borges’s “Emma Zunz,” the story of a poor factory worker who happened to be Jewish, who in order to avenge herself within a system that ignored and exploited her—which could not “read” her mistreatment, could not “see” her exploitation—invented a crime that had not happened, gave false testimony, in order to commit a different crime to avenge herself.33 It’s what Josefina Ludmer called, riffing off of Borges’s ending, a “crime of truth” (Ludmer, “Las justicias de Emma” 476): “true in substance,” Borges wrote, if not in its facts—expressing true anger, true outrage, at what was truly unjust treatment and a strong desire for revenge; but in a society inured to such injustice, the only means of communicating the wrongness of it was with the delivery mechanism of myth, writing a fictional story based on an understanding of the audience’s reading habits.34

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

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

The Liberman-Alsogaray story has succeeded—and continues to succeed—in transmitting a consensus about history that masks the very thing its authors hope to discover. Yet perhaps this consensus is spread not so much despite the fact that the authors we have studied desire ardently to reveal the truth—almost begging their readers to remember this “forgotten” story from the past—but because of it. In discussing how new media operate in the production of consensus, Brett Levinson suggest that their consensus does not force forgetting, but on the contrary “demands a certain recall”:

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

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

The Fictional History of Anti-Semitism Outside the Novel

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

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

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

Organized anti-Semitic groups first appeared in 1910, the year of the centennial celebrations of Argentina’s de facto independence. [ . . . ] Usually small in number, these groups occasionally curried some influence in military, clerical, or political circles. [ . . . ] In any case, government-sponsored anti-Semitism has been rare in Argentina. It manifested itself in the limita-
tions imposed on Jewish immigration during the 1930s and 40s and was also noticeable during the years of the brutal military dictatorship that ruled the country between 1976 and 1983. [However], community institutions continued with their normal activities, no anti-Semitic laws were ever instituted, and relations with the State of Israel were excellent. (13)

Lesser and Rein, in the interest of precision, use the example of the dictatorship to point out that even when there was “noticeable” anti-Semitism coming from the government, this was mitigated by certain factors. While I do not take issue with either the fact that there were mitigating factors or what the authors state these factors to be, here or elsewhere, I do take issue with the slipperiness in the language and the categories of thought used to conceive of and articulate Jewish experience, which lead to some troubling reasoning. The metonymic slippage that can result is not the responsibility of any one scholar or group of scholars, and is merely exemplified here. However, as I shall explain, I believe that there is a collective scholarly responsibility to address some of the more unexpected effects of both the “snowballing” around identitary experiences and the linguistic and cognitive slippage it accelerates in order to find a more rigorous way of discussing anti-Semitism.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Glossing Adorno’s critique of Heidegger, contemporary historical fiction made the present into the destiny of the past, thus figuring the revisionist Jewish-Argentine experience as itself a kind of destiny by omitting the state’s role in anti-Semitism (Adorno, Negative Dialectics 130–31). It seems that such a view of transhistorical identity might always fix subjectivity in the ahistorical realm by taking sides retrospectively with historical national powers. Alsogaray is most certainly made into a hero in historical fiction because it makes for a greater storytelling impact; yet Alsogaray also incarnates a noteworthy example of the state’s continuity from Irigoyen to Uriburu, from democracy to the 1930 coup and the first de facto Argentine President. He
figures the triumph of right-wing elements through proper channels at the moment of the first state of exception in the modern era. His presence as a hero can hardly not be read allegorically. In the Liberman story, Jews both retain their exceptionality and are incorporated into a national narrative—and the national narrative is itself allowed to “recover” its Jews, as so much lost patrimony, as though the wound of anti-Semitism had really hurt the institutional apparatus of power more than it had hurt the Jews.