



PROJECT MUSE®

3. Repackaging Popular Melodrama

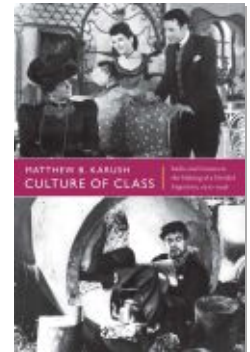
Published by

Karush, Matthew B.

Culture of Class: Radio and Cinema in the Making of a Divided Argentina, 1920-1946.

1 ed. Duke University Press, 2012.

Project MUSE. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book.64090>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/64090>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-18 20:28 GMT)

3 REPACKAGING POPULAR MELODRAMA

Melodrama, more than any other cultural mode, shaped the form and content of Argentine mass culture in the 1920s and 1930s. Producers working in the new media repackaged local traditions in order to offer consumers the Argentine authenticity they could not get from Hollywood or jazz. And when these producers looked to popular culture, what they found was deeply melodramatic. From the late nineteenth century on, the stylistic, formal, and thematic conventions of melodrama were visible on the porteño stage, in popular poetry, in the criollo circuses, and in pulp fiction. As a result, melodrama was omnipresent in the mass culture of this period. Both its aesthetic of emotional excess and its Manichean vision of a society divided between rich and poor were visible in every medium and in almost every genre. Melodramatic mass culture disseminated an image of a rigidly stratified Argentina that contrasted sharply with the complex and fluid class structure of the porteño barrios.

Of course, the influence and popularity of melodrama in Argentina is but one instance of a much

larger, in fact global, phenomenon. As Peter Brooks revealed more than thirty years ago, melodrama first emerged in Europe in the wake of the French Revolution. According to Brooks, this new mode became a “central fact of the modern sensibility” because it posited a system of meaning—a vision of good and evil—at a time when religion had begun to lose its power and “the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics [had] been violently thrown into question.”¹ Expanding on this analysis, scholars have examined the particular appeal of melodrama for working-class audiences in nineteenth-century Europe and North America. In the context of modernization, industrialization, and the rise of market culture, melodrama neatly expressed the anxieties and fears of poor people confronting a brutal and often unpredictable capitalist system, even as it offered these audiences the promise that moral order could be restored. In melodramas, good people endured tragedy, but in the end the villain usually paid a price. Crucially, this retribution was the result of fate, rather than of any action taken by the suffering protagonist. In this way, melodrama dramatized workers’ feelings of radical disempowerment even as it reassured them that in a harsh modern world, some form of cosmic justice still functioned.² Seen in this light, the dominant message of melodrama was conservative; its reassurances and its moralism praised conventional virtue and self-abnegation, not assertiveness and political action.

Within Latin America, where melodrama has retained its cultural centrality from the theater and serialized fiction of the nineteenth century to the era of radio plays and early cinema right through the advent of the telenovela, most scholars have emphasized this conservatism. They have stressed melodrama’s tendency to divert attention away from exploitation and oppression based on class, race, or gender. As Jesús Martín-Barbero describes early Latin American cinema, “The melodrama made it possible for film to . . . dissolve tragedy in a pool of tears, depoliticizing the social contradictions of daily life.”³ Likewise, scholars have drawn attention to melodrama’s power to reconcile subordinate groups to a profoundly unequal society. According to Carlos Monsiváis, Mexican melodrama offered its audiences an “aesthetic of consolation,” in which suffering is rewarded with a sense of belonging and with a certain dignity and beauty. Melodramatic stories taught lessons in how to survive by adapting to conventional morality.⁴ In Latin America as elsewhere, these lessons were particularly confining for women, who were typically relegated to the role of victim.

This conservatism was undeniably present in Argentina's melodramatic mass culture. Tango lyrics, radio plays, and movies were often imbued with a spirit of fatalistic resignation; these texts gave their protagonists little hope of challenging their victimization. Yet Argentine melodrama disseminated subversive messages as well. As in the United States, the melodramatic mode was stigmatized by elites and intellectuals as a lowbrow form designed to appeal to the base instincts of the masses. This condescension toward plebeian tastes produced distinction and legitimized social hierarchy,⁵ but it also provoked, on the part of melodrama's fans, a critique of snobbery and a tendency to wear an affiliation with popular culture as a badge of honor. And this effect was heightened in Argentina, where the only alternative to locally produced, melodramatic mass culture was often a foreign import. Moreover, even if melodrama's fatalistic ethos encouraged audiences to accept the status quo, that same conformism contradicted one of the dominant discourses of Argentine society: namely, the pursuit of upward mobility. While barrio associations, magazines, and advertisements counseled self-improvement as a realistic path to a higher standard of living, melodramatic stories premised on the eternal, unbridgeable chasm between rich and poor suggested the futility of such endeavors. In their work on Hollywood melodramas, feminist film theorists have emphasized the "radical ambiguity" at the heart of these movies. While the rules of the genre require moral resolution in the form of the ultimate punishment of transgression, the aesthetic excess of melodramatic films and their success at eliciting identification with female victims enable and encourage alternative, and even subversive, readings. As Linda Williams puts it, "The female hero often accepts a fate that the audience at least partially questions."⁶ In Argentina, the counter-hegemonic potential of melodrama was heightened by its insistently classist orientation. The visceral anti-elitism of Argentine melodrama often spoke much louder than any lessons about the need to submit to conventional morality and social hierarchy.

THE VARIETIES OF POPULAR MELODRAMA: THEATER, MUSIC, LITERATURE

Long before the advent of the radio and the cinema, melodrama was a staple of Argentina's popular theater. Although the nation's theater history stretches back to the colonial period, 1884 often appears as a founda-

tional moment. That year, the Podestá brothers included in their criollo circus a pantomime version of Eduardo Gutiérrez's gaucho tale *Juan Moreira*. Quickly given a script, the play evolved in order to please its growing audience. In keeping with the carnivalesque atmosphere of the circus, the Podestás included musical and dance performances and frequently incorporated the audience into the action. Perhaps most famously, an improvised exchange with an Italian-born member of the circus crew led to the creation of Cocoliche, an Italian whose comic efforts to act and speak like a gaucho made him a stock character in popular theater. But alongside these innovations, the stage version of *Juan Moreira* also incorporated a melodramatic subplot; in addition to Moreira's violent rebellion, viewers were now treated to a sentimental dramatization of his separation from wife and child.⁷

Criollista dramas like *Juan Moreira* were one of two main antecedents for the new brand of popular theater that emerged in turn-of-the-century Buenos Aires; the other was the popular theater of Spain. During the 1890s, porteño theaters were dominated by Spanish troupes performing various genres, but especially the zarzuela, a sort of light opera in which musical and spoken scenes alternated.⁸ Spanish popular theater had its own melodramatic tradition; both the zarzuela and the one-act play known as the sainete typically told stories of impossible love featuring evil villains and resolutions in which destiny rewarded the good and punished the bad. In addition to this melodramatic orientation, Spanish zarzuelas and sainetes adapted the nineteenth-century literary tradition of *costumbrismo*, which sought to depict the everyday customs and mannerisms of local people. The result was what Osvaldo Pellettieri describes as a parody or "carnivalization" of the form as playwrights livened up their works with formulaic, stereotyped caricatures of well-known social types. After 1910, when Argentine authors secured the rights to a percentage of the gross receipts generated by each performance, domestic theater production increased rapidly. The resulting genres, of which the sainete criollo was perhaps the most popular, represented reworkings of Spanish forms. The sainete criollo injected the carnivalesque atmosphere of the circus into the theater—many circus troupes, including the Podestá brothers, had begun performing plays in theaters in the 1890s—and it deepened the parody of *costumbrismo* already visible in Spanish plays. Argentine sainetes featured not just Italian Cocoliches, but many other stereotyped representations mocking both immigrants and criollos. The

domestic sainete combined this satiric style of comedy with more somber moments focused increasingly on the personal struggle of the protagonist, a feature that distanced it from its Spanish antecedent while deepening its reliance on melodrama.⁹ The resulting form—a tragicomic hybrid—was extremely popular. By 1928 Buenos Aires had some forty-three theaters with an average of seven hundred seats each; in 1925 some 6.9 million theater tickets were sold in the city.¹⁰ And while a more serious theatrical tradition existed as well, it was the sainetes and similar “light” fare that drew the biggest crowds.

Both the criollo circus and the Spanish popular theater had included musical performances, and as plays written and performed by Argentines came to predominate in porteño theaters, Argentine music and dance genres necessarily replaced Spanish forms. The Podestás’ *Juan Moreira* had featured a milonga, the antecedent to the tango, among other rural dances, but sainetes were set in Buenos Aires and required an urban music. During the 1910s, just as foreign recording companies were bringing the orquestas típicas into the studio, the tango quickly gained a starring role in the sainete criollo. The partnership between tango and sainete, as well as the eventual appropriation of both forms by the new mass media, enshrined one particular melodramatic narrative as the paradigmatic Argentine story. Nearly omnipresent by the 1920s, this was the story of the innocent, young girl who leaves her simple, safe life in the barrios for the temptations of downtown, where she is inevitably ruined.

This particular take on the fallen-woman theme emerged first in popular poetry, another arena of cultural production that drew heavily on melodrama. In the late nineteenth century, Argentina’s anarchist and socialist circles produced poetry that described the horrors of class exploitation with intense imagery. Perhaps most widely read among the working class was the poet Pedro Palacios, who published under the pseudonym Almafuerite. Almafuerite denounced the immorality of the new industrial order, referring in one poem to working women “straining their lungs like a bloody blasphemy that explodes” and to “the open, insolent, triumphant chuckle” of the rich laughing at the poor.¹¹ Among Almafuerite’s disciples was Evaristo Carriego, who would become the great poet of the porteño barrios. Carriego’s poems described the city’s outlying neighborhoods as a picturesque refuge peopled by familiar figures—the organ grinder, the blind man, the godmother, the drunk husband—and associated with the security of home. While he retained Almafuerite’s

sympathies for the poor, Carriego's tone was less angry, and his emphasis was not on exploitation, so much as on the sadness and humility of barrio residents. In 1910 Carriego published "La costurerita que dió aquel mal paso" (The little seamstress who stumbled). In this, his most famous and influential poem, and in several others, Carriego explored the story of a humble, naïve girl from the barrios who is tempted by the bright lights of the city and ends up destroyed by prostitution and tuberculosis. Carriego's tale, with its implicit critique of a woman's striving for upward mobility as well as its opposition between the innocence and goodness of the barrio and the morally dangerous world of downtown, provided a whole generation of tango lyricists and playwrights with their most familiar material. The melodramatic tale of the *costurerita*, typically referred to in tango songs as a *milonguita*, or cabaret girl, would recur in hundreds of songs and plays.¹²

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, tango was still primarily an instrumental dance music, although the so-called Old Guard did produce some songs with lyrics. These typically featured a male narrator who boasted of his bravery, his quickness to violence, his skill at dancing, and his ability to attract women. The aggressive male bravado of songs like "El porteño" (Villoldo, 1903) reflect the tango's debt to criollista tales of violent rebels like Juan Moreira as well as to the tradition of the payadores. But the boom in tango song, whose beginning is often dated to Gardel's recording of Pascual Contursi's "Mi noche triste" in 1917, ushered in a major transformation in the poetry and thematic content of tango lyrics. The advent of the phonograph and the radio helped turn the tango into a music for listening, thereby accentuating the importance of the lyrics. At the same time, the new form of tango song was also a product of the alliance forged between tango and sainete. "Mi noche triste" was included in the 1918 production of *Los dientes del perro*, a sainete written by Alberto Weisbach and José González Castillo, the lyricist and playwright who had encouraged Max Glücksmann to record Gardel the previous year. In the play, which told the story of a transgressive love affair between a cabaret singer and a young man from a wealthy family, the actress Manolita Poli sang "Mi noche triste" as part of a cabaret scene. The performance helped make the play a huge hit: it ran for more than five hundred nights and inspired a sequel, which itself became one of the most popular plays of the season in 1919.¹³

Success bred imitation, and the sainete and tango lyric continued to develop symbiotically. Tangos that proved themselves before a theatrical audience were recorded by Gardel and other singers. They then inspired new sainetes. Samuel Linnig's tango, "Milonguita," written for his sainete *Delikatessen Haus* (1920), revisited the melodrama of the barrio girl attracted to the cabarets of downtown. Two years later, he turned the lyric of "Milonguita" into a new sainete with the same name, for which he wrote another tango, "Melenita de Oro," covering very similar terrain.¹⁴ Contursi's follow-up to "Mi noche triste" was "Flor de fango," another tango on the milonguita theme, which in 1919 became the second tango Gardel recorded. That same year, the song was included in Alberto Novión's *El cabaret de Montmartre*, the most performed play of 1919, and its fourth line, "Tu cuna fue un conventillo" (Your cradle was a tenement) became the title of Alberto Vaccarezza's hit sainete of 1920.¹⁵ That play's winning formula—its combination of melodrama and the humor of stereotypes, its heavy use of lunfardo, its focus on the romantic lives of the urban poor, and its inclusion of tango songs—inspired dozens of copies; Vaccarezza himself wrote some 120 plays that made it to the porteño stage.¹⁶ By this point, the cabaret was, by far, the most common setting for sainetes and other plays, and the tango was never absent. Linnig, Vaccarezza, González Castillo, and others wrote both plays and tango lyrics, many revisiting the story of the milonguita.

The transformation of tango lyrics from bravado to melodrama, which accompanied the music's new prominence in porteño popular theater, has inspired a great deal of commentary. Most famously, Jorge Luis Borges denounced the lyricists of the 1920s for having abandoned the early tango's virility, its cult of courage, and its expression of "the belief that a fight may be a celebration." In his reading of Evaristo Carriego's poetry, Borges preferred the violent tough guys of the barrio to the seamstress who stumbles, and he extended this preference to the tango. For Borges, the brave *compadritos* (urban toughs) of early tango songs were the descendants of the gaucho rebels of criollista literature, models of masculine honor and bravery, if not necessarily intelligence. By contrast, "the later tango is like a resentful person who indulges in loud self-pity while shamelessly rejoicing at the misfortunes of others." Purging the tango of violence made it respectable, he argued, but at the cost of incorporating "a streak of vulgarity, an unwholesomeness of which the tango of the knife and the brothel never even dreamed."¹⁷ If, for Borges, the later tango's

unwholesomeness has to do with the emasculation of its protagonists, its vulgarity was at least partly the result of its commercialization on a mass scale. Many scholars have followed Borges's lead, linking the rise of tango's new protagonist, who, in Eduardo Romano's words, "exchanges the provocative snub for a sentimental lament," to the music's new audience in the barrios. As Romano argues, the consumers of mass culture listened to music not in brothels and seedy dance halls, but in respectable homes. These listeners required a more decent music.¹⁸

The rise of the new tango lyrics clearly exemplifies the familiar process whereby commercial culture depoliticizes the popular traditions that provide its raw material.¹⁹ Just as the Podestás' melodramatic-comic *Juan Moreira* was better suited to drawing a cross-class audience to the criollo circus than Gutiérrez's more anti-authoritarian original, Carriego's nostalgic, picturesque depictions of the porteño poor offered a more viable model for tango lyricists than the harsh class discourse of Almafuerte. Seeking to attract the broadest audience possible, recording companies and theater troupes were understandably more enthusiastic about love stories than they were about celebrations of violent rebellion or denunciations of exploitation on the factory floor. Yet the tango's marriage to melodrama was not merely a turn to respectability. If melodrama is a particularly compelling genre for workers experiencing the dislocations of modernization, then the tango lyric's transformation must have been crucial to the genre's success as an alternative modernism. The tango's urbanity as well as its openness to new instrumentation allowed it to compete effectively with jazz by embodying an authentic, yet modernizing national identity. The melodramatic bent of the new lyrics fit this purpose as well, by neatly expressing many of the anxieties of the working poor, especially men. Barrio associations and advertisers promised upward mobility for those willing to pursue education and self-improvement, but for men who often experienced competitive capitalism as unfair and arbitrary, these promises could seem empty. Melodramatic tango lyrics offered a clear contrast: they described a world in which the rich had all sorts of advantages and the poor suffered the consequences. Tango lyrics expressed a working-class male perspective while providing the compensatory comfort of simple moral judgment.

In the most typical tango lyrics written after 1917, a *compadrito*, or "whiny ruffian," to borrow Marta Savigliano's apt phrase, complains about being abandoned by a girl from his neighborhood.²⁰ It is from his

vantage point that tangos describe the perilous journey of innocent girls from the barrio to the immoral cabarets of downtown. As Contursi puts it in “Flor de Fango” (“Gutter Flower,” 1917):

Mina que te manyo de hace rato,
perdoname si te bato
de que yo te vi nacer.
Tu cuna fue un conventillo
alumbrao a querosén.
Justo a los catorce abrilés
te entregaste a la farra,
las delicias del gotán.
Te gustaban las alhajas,
los vestidos a la moda
y las farras de champán.

*Woman whom I've understood for a long time
forgive me if I tell you
that I saw you born.
Your cradle was a tenement
lit by a kerosene lamp.
At fourteen
you gave yourself to partying,
the indulgences of tango.
You liked jewelry,
fashionable clothing
and champagne parties.²¹*

In tangos like this one, the male singer blames the woman for allowing herself to be seduced. In “Margot” (Flores, 1919), the accusation is even more explicit:

. . . no fue un guapo haragán ni prepotente,
ni un cafishio de averías el que al vicio te largó;
vos rodaste por tu culpa, y no fue inocentemente:
¡berretines de bacana que tenías en la mente
desde el día en que un magnate cajetilla te afiló!
. . .
Si hasta el nombre te has cambiado como ha cambiado tu suerte:
ya no sos mi Margarita ¡ahora te llaman Margot!

*. . . it was not a handsome or arrogant layabout,
nor an immoral pimp who delivered you to vice;
it was your fault you rolled over, and not innocently:
the impulses of a rich girl you had in mind
since the day a millionaire dandy courted you!*

. . .

*You have even changed your name, just as your luck has changed:
you're no longer my Margarita, now they call you Margot!*

In “Pompas de jabón” (“Soap Bubbles,” Cadícamo, 1925), the singer sees a girl from his barrio riding in the car of a *bacán*, or big shot, and warns her that her luxurious lifestyle will not last long; when her beauty fades, she’ll be abandoned and forced to beg in order to survive. Here is the *schadenfreude* that so offended Borges; the singer may have lost his woman, but he gets the last laugh when she ends up old and alone.

Not all tango lyrics were so nasty. Samuel Linnig’s “Milonguita,” which provided the tango’s fallen woman with her most familiar name, treats her as a victim: “Men have treated you badly / and today you would give your soul / to dress in percale.” The reference to the cheap fabric of a humble woman’s dress alludes ironically to the milonguita’s material aspirations, but the singer remains sympathetic. In “Mano Cruel” (“Cruel Hand,” Tagini, 1929), blame falls squarely on the male seducer: “That man who offered you riches lied / with a cruel hand he abused your grace and your virtue.” Still, the current of misogyny that runs through these lyrics is unmistakable. As the historian Donna Guy argues, these songs “berated women for the desire for conspicuous consumption that allowed men to lead them into lives of degradation.”²² For having dreamed of escaping the drab world of the barrio and enjoying the excitement and luxury of the cabaret, the milonguita pays a high price: prostitution, tuberculosis, abandonment. This misogyny expresses the anxieties of men facing a modern world that threatened their patriarchal privileges. The milonguita melodrama was invariably set in a cabaret, but metaphorically, it likely spoke to other concerns as well. In Buenos Aires of the 1920s, it was not just the sinful cabaret that lured women away from the home; the presence of women in the workforce also threatened to undermine traditional gender roles. Unsurprisingly, then, the new tango lyrics express a “doubting masculinity”; no longer so quick to violence, the *compadrito* is now at least as likely to cry over his lost love as he is to challenge the man who stole her away.²³ But even if revenge fantasies were less common, melo-

drama offered other compensations: by dispensing moral judgment and poetic justice, tango helped assuage masculine anxieties.

As melodramatic texts, tango lyrics were essentially fatalistic. They counseled resignation, implying that any effort to challenge one's fate was futile. As Diego Armus observes of Carriego's little seamstress, her story "lacks suspense: her descent is predetermined."²⁴ And this applies as well to the milonguita, who is doomed from the moment she aspires to a different life. In "No salgas de tu barrio" ("Don't Leave Your Barrio," Rodríguez Bustamante, 1928), a female singer cautions a young girl to accept her station in life:

Como vos, yo, muchachita
era linda y era buena,
era humilde y trabajaba
como vos en un taller;
dejé al novio que me amaba
con respeto y con ternura,
por un niño engominado
que me trajo al cabaret.

*Like you, little girl, I
was beautiful and good
I was humble and worked
like you in a workshop;
I left the boyfriend who loved me
with respect and with tenderness
for a hair-creamed boy
who brought me to the cabaret.*²⁵

This fatalistic message was not aimed exclusively at women. Tango lyricists often ridiculed men as well for the crime of social striving. "Niño bien" ("Rich Kid," Fontaina and Soliño, 1927) scolds a boy from the barrios for smoking English tobacco and claiming to be from a good family, when he was really born in a poor barrio with "a pretty cloudy pedigree." Likewise, "Mala entraña" ("Bad Guts," Flores, 1928) expresses disdain for a man who puts on airs:

Mezcla rara de magnate
nacido en el sabalaje,

...

¡Compadrito de mi esquina,
que sólo cambió de traje!

*Strange mix of millionaire
Born in the mob*

...
...

*Ruffian of my corner
Who only changed suits!*

Tango's critique of social climbing was not applied equally across gender lines; male strivers were criticized, but unlike the milonguitas abandoned in old age, men typically got away with it. Nevertheless, within the world constructed by tango lyrics, social striving amounted to fakery and inauthenticity, pretending to be something one was not.

By replacing the rebellious, violent heroes of criollista tales and early tango lyrics with whiny compadritos more likely to cry than to fight, tango lyrics certainly offered a safer product, more appropriate for a mass cultural industry intent on attracting a cross-class audience. But the fatalism of tango was not necessarily conservative. The tango's insistence on the immorality and dangerousness of social mobility offered a powerful critique of one of the most prominent discourses in Argentine society, the notion that through hard work, one might improve oneself and attain a better life. According to the tango, not only is the milonguita doomed, but the entire notion of self-improvement is morally suspect. Lyricists could be quite blunt in debunking the promises of upward mobility. "Mentiras criollas" (Arona, 1929) provides a long list of "lies" that Argentines are asked to believe: that girls kiss you out of love, but also that your boss will give you a raise if you work hard and that you can learn to be a musician or a doctor through a correspondence course.²⁶ One of the greatest tango lyricists, and undoubtedly the most cynical, was Enrique Santos Discépolo. His tango "Cambalache" (1935) compares the modern world to a pawnshop in which the beautiful and valuable share equal billing with the ugly and worthless:

Es lo mismo el que labura
noche y día, como un buey
que el que vive de los otros,
que el que mata, que el que cura,
o está fuera de la ley.

*He who works
day and night like an ox
is the same as he who lives off of others
or kills, or cures the sick
or is an outlaw.*

Discépolo's outlook may be bleaker than that of most tango lyricists, but his diagnosis of society fits comfortably within tango's fatalistic tradition. Rather than a world in which anyone who works hard can get ahead, this is one that rewards thievery and punishes the good. Moreover, even if Discépolo unsettles the melodramatic notion of poetic justice, he certainly does uphold the idea that our lives are governed more by fate than by our own actions.

Despite this insistent fatalism, the marketing of tango singers often did appeal to the fantasy of striking it rich. The public image of Carlos Gardel is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon. Although Gardel sometimes appeared in gaucho attire, his most typical costume was an elegant smoking jacket. The image of tango singers in black tie was, in fact, part of the effort to market the music as an alternative modernism. In 1920s Buenos Aires, jazz was associated with elegance, sophistication, and the high life; in order to compete, tango needed to be dressed up. But more than an assertion of pedigree, the smoking jacket was a symbol of upward mobility. Gardel's lower-class origins were a major component of his image, reinforced by his nickname, "el morocho del Abasto," which referred to his dark hair and eyes as well as to his roots in a humble neighborhood of Buenos Aires. Gardel in black tie was then the quintessential poor kid made good. As Marta Savigliano has argued, this rags-to-riches story was a crucial element of his appeal. In the film *El día que me quieras* (1935), Gardel plays a wealthy young man in love with a lower-class dancer. The plot gave him ample opportunity to dress in black tie, giving Gardel's fans the vicarious thrill of seeing a humble kid like them play the role of an aristocrat.²⁷ Tango lyricists undercut this message at every turn, even using the symbols of tango's social ascent in order to express the genre's essential fatalism. Thus in Celedonio Flores's "Viejo Smocking [*sic*]" (1930), a lonely, impoverished old man sings to the tuxedo he wore when he was a young gigolo: "You'll see that one of these days, I'll use you as a pillow, and thrown down on the bed, I'll let myself die." Still, even if the tango's cynicism spoke louder than its promise of upward mobility, Gardel's omnipresent smok-

ing jacket allowed the music's fans to indulge their dreams of acquiring wealth and status.

Gardel was hardly the only poor boy made good in tango.²⁸ Humble origins were a key component of the tango image. A report on the composer and bandleader Francisco Canaro in the fan magazine *Sintonía* exemplifies the strategy. The article describes Canaro's childhood in the working-class dockside neighborhood of La Boca and rehearses the familiar story of tango's rise to social acceptance. After achieving popularity in La Boca and in other humble Buenos Aires neighborhoods, Canaro got his big break when his orchestra was invited to play at the home of the aristocratic Señora de Gainza Paz. But according to the reporter, Canaro's legitimacy comes not from his acceptance by the elite but from his lower-class origins: "He represents the emotional superstructure of that human, grey, humble and combative belt that encircles our capital city. . . . Francisco Canaro is the product of a blind determinism, the one chosen by destiny to act as an authentic representative of the social environment where he spent his youth."²⁹ *Sintonía* struck a similar chord in a report on the tango composer and band leader Juan de Dios Filiberto.³⁰ Visiting Filiberto in La Boca, the reporter depicts the musician as both a product and a symbol of his working-class milieu. As reporter and subject enjoy an evening stroll along the port, they see "tired workers" returning from the factories and, as if to establish Filiberto's popularity among this crowd, they encounter a child singing "Caminito" and a man whistling "Malevaje," two of his most famous compositions.

As these reports suggest, tango's proponents emphasized the music's connection to poor Argentines even as they celebrated its acceptance by the national and international elite. Wishing Carlos Gardel well on the eve of one of his many European tours, the magazine *La Canción Moderna* reminded the star not only of his own plebeian origins but of the tango's roots in working-class neighborhoods: "Tango, tell the traveler who now carries you on the wings of his triumphs . . . tell him that the suburbio gave to you as well a big bunch of love and sadness. Tell him not to abandon you because you never abandoned him. . . . Tell him that there in the sad shadow of a proletarian tenement, one night the little seamstress who vomited blood gave you your first note in the rattle of a tragic cough; that you found in the sobbing complaint of the poor woman battered by her drunk husband another motive for your harmony."³¹ Invoking Carriego's tubercular seamstress, the magazine located tango's birth in a scene of

proletarian suffering, offering this creation myth as proof not only of the purity and nobility of the music, but also of its authentic Argentinidad.³² This article reveals the melodramatic logic of the tango. Tango lyrics, after all, were premised on a Manichean vision of society, in which the innocent, humble barrios stood in opposition to the morally debased downtown world of fancy cabarets. The milonguita was often blamed for her own downfall, but her journey downtown was usually inspired by the seductive promises of some wealthy villain. Tango stars tantalized their fans with stories of rapid social ascent, but a close connection to the noble world of working-class tenements and suffering seamstresses was crucial to their image. By stressing proletarian origins even as it encouraged strike-it-rich fantasies, this marketing strategy expressed an ambivalence about the working-class desire for upward mobility.

Alberto de Zavalia's film *La vida de Carlos Gardel* (1939) builds its fictionalized account of the singer's life around precisely this ambivalence. As I described, critics lauded the film for avoiding the world of compadritos and milonguitas in favor of a wholesome vision of the working-class barrio. Yet this sanitized story still foregrounds the divide between rich and poor. In fact, the movie reimagines Gardel's life as a struggle between the pursuit of upward mobility and the moral imperative of loyalty to one's social class. Early in the film, Gardel, played by Hugo del Carril, a tango singer then emerging as Argentina's most popular leading man, asserts his class pride: "We may be poor, but we have dignity." Later, though, with his judgment clouded by ambition, he falls for a wealthy socialite who can advance his career, and he rejects the true love of his life, a poor but virtuous girl from his barrio. Although he soon comes to his senses, his fame and a series of melodramatic accidents conspire to keep the lovers apart, until both die and are finally united in the afterlife. *La vida de Carlos Gardel*, like the marketing of tango more generally, offers Gardel's lower-class fans the fantasy of wealth, but it suggests that achieving that dream constitutes a betrayal of one's social class and results inevitably in suffering.

This cautionary tale about the dangers of upward mobility reflects the deep classism of tango melodrama. Tango lyrics offered a fundamental critique of the rich and an endorsement of values associated with the working class. In their rejection of social striving, lyricists foresaw a distinctly moral peril. Celedonio Flores concludes "Mala entraña," for example, by passing harsh judgment on the would-be millionaire:

Se murió tu pobre madre,
y en el mármol de tu frente
ni una sombra, ni una arruga
que deschavara, elocuente,
que tu vieja no fue un perro,
y que vos sabés sentir.

*Your poor mother died
and on the marble of your forehead
not a shadow, not a wrinkle
that might eloquently reveal
that your mother was not a dog
and that you know how to feel.*

Here, upward mobility is a perversion that destroys basic human values. Beyond the love of one's mother, the moral values that tango lyricists held in highest esteem were solidarity and generosity. In "Yira . . . yira" (1930), Discépolo described his bleak vision of the modern world by insisting on the absence of these sentiments: "never expect any help, nor a hand, nor a favor." "Mano a mano" (Flores, 1920) revisits the perennial theme of the milonguita, but instead of taking pleasure in the suffering of the woman who left him for the bright lights of downtown, the singer concludes by offering her solace:

si precisás una ayuda, si te hace falta un consejo,
acordáte de este amigo que ha de jugarse el pellejo
p'ayudarte en lo que pueda cuando llegue la ocasión.

*if you require some help or need some advice,
remember me as a friend who will risk his skin
to help you anyway he can, when the time comes.*

The singer's claim to the moral high ground results from his unselfishness, which sets him apart from the world of rich kids and aristocratic playboys, who care only about their own pleasure.

Tango's class consciousness varied with the lyricist. Celedonio Flores, for example, was far more likely than Discépolo to exalt the poor at the expense of the rich. Similarly, not all tango singers presented themselves as the defenders of the poor. The prominence of socially conscious lyrics in the repertoire of Agustín Magaldi was unusual enough to earn him the

nickname “the singer of the destitute” (*el cantor de los desamparados*).³³ Even the most explicitly classist of tangos remained skeptical of any effort to challenge the status quo. The tango scholar Blas Matamoro recognizes that the lyrics of the Golden Age describe a rigid social structure in which upward mobility is impossible, and he acknowledges the genre’s anti-elitism. Nevertheless, he argues that tango’s fundamentally passive response to the fact of inequality, its deep fatalism, facilitated the hegemony of the Argentine oligarchy, who ceded cultural recognition to the poor but monopolized political and economic power for themselves.³⁴ Yet tango songs, like other melodramatic texts, were ideologically multivalent. While they modeled a cynical, embittered sense of resignation, they also accepted as a given the moral superiority and national authenticity of the poor. They offered the poor more than just cultural recognition; they encouraged listeners to identify themselves in opposition to the rich.

The tango envisioned class conflict primarily as a competition over women. The lyrics expressed a poor man’s anxiety about his ability to keep the woman he loves away from a rich suitor. In this way, tango offered male listeners an emotional outlet as well as the pleasures of melodrama’s moral judgments. Similarly, it expressed the audience’s skepticism about the possibility of upward mobility, even as it indulged fantasies of overnight wealth. But what did tango offer women? The vast majority of tango lyrics were written by men, a fact that helps explain the genre’s tendency toward misogyny. Within tango lyrics, women played only a small number of roles. Most often, they were humble girls from the barrios whose moral virtue was threatened by the seductions of the cabaret. Nevertheless, if women were not prominent among tango lyricists, they gained a great deal of visibility as singers. Manolita Poli, the actress who debuted Contursi’s “Mi noche triste” on stage in 1918, was one of many female performers who sang tango in the porteño theater. By 1923 Victor had recorded Rosita Quiroga, a major star for the label throughout the rest of the decade. Azucena Maizani, discovered by Francisco Canaro in 1920, debuted on stage in 1923 and made her first recordings for Odeon the following year. Her frequent appearances on the radio, on stage, and on tours throughout the country and beyond helped make her the female counterpart of Carlos Gardel. The success of Quiroga and Maizani paved the way for Mercedes Simone, Ada Falcón, Sofía Bozán, and Libertad

Lamarque, among others. By the end of the 1920s, female tango singers were a major part of the entertainment landscape.³⁵

The emergence of these stars gave rise to what Anahí Viladrich has called “female transvestism,” the phenomenon of women singing lyrics written to be sung by a man.³⁶ Typically, female singers did not alter the gender of the lyrics; they simply ignored the dissonance between lyrics and performance. Maizani literalized this transvestism by frequently performing in men’s clothing (see figure 6). Still, even this practice cannot be considered an attempt at passing, since Maizani’s soprano was unmistakably feminine. The film *¡Tango!* (1933) ends with the singer, dressed as a prototypical, male compadrito, singing “Milonga del 900” (Manzi, 1933). Maizani was not a character in the film; she appears in this scene as a symbol of the tango itself, using hypermasculine imagery to tell the story of a man who cannot forget the woman who has left him: “The guitars playing their song say her name to me, as do the streets of my barrio and the blade of my knife.” According to the film and theater director Luis César Amadori, Maizani enjoyed dressing as a man so much that she came up with the idea of performing a tango dressed as a soccer player. He was only able to dissuade her by encouraging her to debut Discépolo’s “Esta noche me emborracho” (“Tonight I get drunk,” 1928) instead. With Maizani on more familiar masculine turf, her performance of Discépolo’s tale of a man driven to ruin by a woman helped launch the composer’s career.³⁷ Maizani’s enthusiasm for transvestism reveals how confining tango’s gender code was: in order to represent the tango and to avoid the role of passive victim, female singers needed to sing as men.

If “Milonga del 900” and “Esta noche me emborracho” gave Maizani the chance to speak as a man, her performance of gauchesque tangos like “Amigazo” allowed her to go one step further by performing masculine violence. More typically, though, Maizani’s repertoire emphasized male vulnerability. In “Llévate todo” (Sciammarella, 1928), a man begs his friend not to steal his lover, while in “Malevaje” (Discépolo, 1928) a tough guy bemoans how his love for a woman has made him timid and fearful: “Tell me, for God’s sake, what you have given me that I am so changed, I don’t know who I am any more.” Applying a woman’s voice to tangos like these underscored the feminization already implicit in the lyrics. In her own most famous composition, “Pero yo sé” (1928), Maizani avoids revealing the gender of the singer, while focusing instead on the emotional life of the male object of the singer’s attention. Addressing a wealthy



6 Azucena Maizani in masculine attire. Courtesy of Archivo General de la Nación.

playboy who appears to enjoy a carefree lifestyle, the singer reveals his secret: “But I know that inside you pine for a love, that you are trying to forget by going through so many women.” It was the prominence of this sort of lyric in the tango repertoire, lyrics that either exemplified or described male vulnerability and emotionalism, that created space for female singing stars.

Tango’s validation of male emotion was directly linked to its class message. Celedonio Flores’s attack on the upwardly mobile subject of “Mala Entraña” for failing to feel emotion at the death of his own mother reflected a sentiment typical of many tangos sung by women. “Muchacho” (1924), a tango Flores wrote especially for Rosita Quiroga, denounces a rich man for his lack of true emotion, implying that this failing makes him unworthy of the tango: “Your soul does not cry when you hear a bandoneón.”³⁸ Within the melodramatic world constructed by tango lyr-

ics and particularly those sung by women singers, the capacity to feel and express sadness was a key component of working-class masculinity, part of what made them morally superior to the rich.

If tango's female stars helped disseminate this particular notion of masculine, working-class emotionalism, they also expressed the genre's contradictory combination of the fantasy of easy wealth and the denunciation of social striving. Like their male counterparts, female singers were celebrated in the press for having risen from humble origins. One magazine story showed Maizani wearing a luxurious fur coat as she walked through the working-class neighborhood of La Boca, but it insisted that she was one of the people. Shaking the singer's hand at the end of the interview, the reporter comments: "A small hand without jewelry. Prettier for that. The hand of a *muchacha criolla* (native girl)."³⁹ Maizani's female fans were excited to see their favorite singer wearing such a lovely coat, but they also needed to be reassured that she had not abandoned them in her quest for material success. Just as tango lyrics punished women more harshly for the sin of social striving than they did men, tango fans seem to have held female stars to a higher standard of class solidarity. In a letter to *Sintonía*, a "woman worker" denounces the arrogance of an unnamed female "star" who refused to sign a photograph the writer had sent her. The writer claims to have known the star when they worked side by side in a bag factory, but now that good fortune has lifted her out of the working class, the star has turned her back on her community: "Who do you think has elevated you to the place you occupy? We have, Madam, the members of that anonymous mass, the humble people of this nation, to which you also once belonged when you were not yet the shining 'star' you are today. . . . Your impoverished co-workers are too far beneath you for you to descend to them."⁴⁰ Female tango singers embodied the fantasy of an escape from drudgery, but the melodramatic logic of tango required that they retain their allegiance to the poor.

Tango was not the only melodramatic form available to female audiences in this period. Even as Gardel and Maizani were dominating the radio, the so-called weekly novels disseminated in newspapers and aimed explicitly at women readers enjoyed immense popularity. Although equally melodramatic, this serial romance literature envisioned a different social world. Like the milonguitas of the tango, the heroines of the weekly novels were *bellas pobres*, beautiful girls from poor families in the barrios. But instead of pursuing upward mobility in the exciting, immoral

world of the downtown cabaret, these girls hoped only to marry the men of their dreams, often men of higher social status. Whereas tango's love affairs were invariably illegitimate and fleeting, the weekly novels endorsed the bourgeois ideal of marriage and the constitution of a family as the route to happiness.⁴¹ Moreover, if the tango envisioned loving, generous, and emotionally vulnerable men abandoned by women who crave upward mobility, the weekly novels featured women who pursue true love in the face of social obstacles and men who are unwilling to make that sacrifice.⁴² Yet if the genres' gender judgments were mirror images, they shared a common vision of social class. As melodramatic narratives, both the tango and the weekly romance novel unfolded in a world in which the poor were generous and good, while the rich were selfish and frivolous.⁴³ Similarly, the weekly novels shared the tango's conformism. Although both happy and tragic endings were possible, the weekly novels as a whole observed the rule that, as Beatriz Sarlo has put it, "love is *not* stronger than social barriers."⁴⁴ Like other forms of melodrama, both genres discouraged any attempt to transform the social order. They portrayed the division between rich and poor not so much as a class conflict, but as an immutable, inevitable backdrop for tales of romance, transgression, punishment, and, occasionally, redemption. Together, these genres constituted a rich tradition of popular melodrama with an established audience among both men and women. It is hardly surprising, then, that when Argentina's sound film revolution began in 1933, its producers drew their subject matter overwhelmingly from this tradition.

FILM MELODRAMA: JOSÉ AGUSTÍN FERREYRA AND LIBERTAD LAMARQUE

The centrality of melodrama in the Argentine cinema of the 1930s was overdetermined. Not only were Argentine popular music, theater, and literature saturated with melodrama, but also Hollywood cinema itself was born with "melodramatic predispositions."⁴⁵ Given Hollywood's status as a model for imitation and competition, this orientation inevitably influenced Argentine filmmakers. Yet competition with Hollywood had an ambivalent effect on them. Hollywood influence reinforced the Argentine cinema's melodramatic impulses, but it also reshaped them. Seeking to modernize their offerings in order to compete with the sophisticated imports from the North, Argentine filmmakers developed a melodramatic

language that combined the tropes of tango songs and weekly novels and pushed them in new directions. The alternative modernism they produced positioned the local cinema to compete with Hollywood, even as it reinforced the subversive messages of Argentina's popular melodramatic tradition.

The transformation of popular melodrama is particularly visible in the work of José Agustín Ferreyra, a director whose career spanned the silent and sound eras. Born in the Buenos Aires barrio of Constitución to a white father and an Afro-Argentine mother, "El Negro" Ferreyra, as he was known, grew up in a family of modest means. Largely self-taught, he worked as a theatrical set designer before producing his first film in 1917. He was an avid fan of Buenos Aires's bohemian nightlife and of the tango in particular, and his films betrayed that influence. As Ferreyra explained in an article published in 1921, he saw the cinema as "the art that is most accessible to easy and quick comprehension," a democratic vision that inspired a straightforward, "urban realist" style.⁴⁶ His silent movies as well as his first few sound films depicted the lives of working-class Argentines with extraordinary detail and sympathy. In his article, Ferreyra complained that the Argentine cinema was being unjustly ignored in favor of films from the United States. This analysis proved overly pessimistic, since the introduction of sound film in the early 1930s would spark a revival of the domestic cinema. Still, the massive appeal of Hollywood film created a marketplace that favored some styles of filmmaking over others. As local studios began to produce films on an industrial scale, Ferreyra found himself increasingly out of step and unable to pursue his distinctive style of filmmaking.

The titles of many of Ferreyra's silent films, including *La melenita de oro* (1923), *La muchacha del arrabal* (1922), *Mi último tango* (1925), *El organito de la tarde* (1925), and *La costurerita que dió aquel mal paso* (1926), reveal their reliance on melodramatic narratives taken directly from tango lyrics or from Carriego's poetry. Some of these films were based on specific tangos; others inspired the composition of new tangos, occasionally with lyrics by Ferreyra himself, to be played alongside the film. Ferreyra drew on other elements of popular culture as well. He adopted the sainete's comic use of ethnic stereotypes in several films, and he also appropriated the thematic content of the weekly novels. In *Perdón, viejita* (1927), he told the story of a bella pobre who is in love with a noble, hardworking man. Their marital union is threatened, however, when the

man's mother becomes convinced that the girl has stolen her jewelry. His film *Muñequitos porteños* (1931) was Argentina's first sound film, although its use of recorded discs was quickly surpassed by the optical sound technology introduced two years later in *¡Tango!* and *Los tres berretines*. The film's story about an Italian immigrant woman and her alcoholic father gave Ferreyra ample room to display his trademark sympathy for the poor.

Ferreyra immediately realized that the new technology would enable Argentine cinema to compete for the domestic market, but he did not see the need to adapt either his business practices or his cinematic style to the new context. Uninterested in affiliating with either Sono Film or Lumiton, he continued to raise funds on an ad hoc basis in order to finance his films independently. This financial independence went along with a resistance to industrial work discipline. According to Floren Delbene, the male lead in several of Ferreyra's films, the director avoided following a screenplay, preferring to improvise instead.⁴⁷ Between 1933 and 1935, Ferreyra made three films which largely reproduced the thematic and stylistic approaches he had pursued in the silent era. *Calles de Buenos Aires* (1934), for example, includes the now stereotypical poor young woman seduced by the temptations of downtown. She loses her love interest, an honest and noble tango singer, to a hardworking woman who resists temptation, accepts her poverty, and remains in the barrio. The story thus combines the weekly romance novel's conformist emphasis on marriage with tango's misogynistic depiction of the milonguita. It takes tango's vision of working-class masculine goodness and emotional sincerity and embodies it in the person of a tango singer. The film also featured Ferreyra's loving depictions of daily life in the humble barrios of Buenos Aires: children playing soccer, men and women engaged in mundane chores.

In *Puente Alsina* (1935), Ferreyra pursues similar themes without the tango setting. The film opens with a vivid depiction of workers building a new bridge over the Riachuelo River in Buenos Aires. In addition to long shots of the work site as a whole, there are close-ups of calloused hands, of men wiping the sweat from their brows, of workers pulling, digging, and hammering. Into this visceral scene of labor, Ferreyra inserts a conventional melodramatic plot: Lidia, the privileged daughter of the chief engineer on the project, rejects the wealthy fiancé chosen for her by her father and falls in love with Edmundo, one of the workers. As Lidia

walks across the work site in the opening scene, Ferreyra announces the film's melodramatic theme by contrasting her fancy dress, white gloves, and elegant gait with the stooped shoulders and drab clothing of the workers. Later, once Edmundo and Lidia are romantically involved, several comic scenes emphasize the social gulf that separates them. When she is shocked by his rustic bathroom, he rigs up a makeshift shower for her. With a quizzical look, she responds "very interesting." Lidia's fiancé has Edmundo falsely arrested, but in the end the truth comes out. The couple's reconciliation is made possible when Lidia's father realizes that the "real gentleman" is Edmundo, "the honest worker." Despite its overt sympathy for the working class, *Puente Alsina* is hardly a subversive film. Edmundo proves his virtue in part by talking his fellow workers out of an illicit strike. Moreover, by vesting the ultimate power of judgment in the person of Lidia's father, the film stops well short of subverting hierarchy. Nevertheless, what *Puente Alsina* does do is argue for the dignity and goodness of working-class men. Edmundo's virtues—his honesty and diligence—raise him above the moral level of Lidia's rich fiancé. In this way, Ferreyra's early sound films reproduced the essential class message of popular melodrama; like tango lyrics and romance novels, these movies relied on a stark opposition between the noble poor and the immoral rich.

Puente Alsina represents a brief moment at the beginning of the sound era when the cinematic representation of manual laborers was possible; by 1936 the rise of a more profitable film industry had made those sorts of representations increasingly rare. That year, Ferreyra's career took a sharp turn when he began a series of three films for the SIDE company. Founded by a young inventor named Alfredo Murúa, SIDE had rented its services as a studio and laboratory to Sono Film and to independent producers like Ferreyra. In 1936 Murúa decided that SIDE would make its own films and seek a place in the domestic market alongside Lumiton and Sono Film.⁴⁸ Among the company's first projects was a tango film modeled on Gardel's movies and starring Libertad Lamarque. By this time, Lamarque was easily tango's biggest female star. She had debuted on the Buenos Aires stage and on the radio in 1926, and had been under contract with RCA Victor ever since. In 1931, after a successful run in Alberto Vaccarezza's sainete *El conventillo de la Paloma*, she won a contest organized by the municipal government of Buenos Aires and was declared the

“Queen of Tango.”⁴⁹ Over the next few years, frequent tours and recordings, as well as regular performances on Radio Splendid and Radio Belgrano, made her a household name. Lamarque had a singing part in *¡Tango!*, and she starred in *Alma de bandoneón* (Soffici, 1935), a mediocre Sono Film product in which she played an aspiring tango singer. Nevertheless, she had yet to translate her success on the radio into movie stardom. Murúa’s idea was to replicate Carlos Gardel’s winning formula. Gardel had followed *Las luces de Buenos Aires* with a string of hits for Paramount—*Melodía del arrabal* (Gasnier, 1933), *Cuesta abajo* (Gasnier, 1934), *El tango en Broadway* (Gasnier, 1934), *El día que me quieras* (Reinhardt, 1935)—until a plane crash ended his life in June 1935. These movies gave Gardel ample opportunity to show off both his singing voice and his winning personality. Lamarque’s films for SIDE would enable her to step into the void left by Gardel’s death.

Murúa’s idea originally involved a screenplay written by the playwright and tango lyricist José González Castillo, but Lamarque rejected it because she thought the character she was to play, a woman who goes to jail for murdering a man, “did not suit” her personality. She then wrote a new script herself, taking the opportunity to craft her own image. Uninterested in reproducing either the transvestism of Azucena Maizani or the role of a tough-talking milonguita, Lamarque self-consciously aimed to construct a more conventionally feminine role for herself. She recognized that she could probably not attain international stardom playing the sort of “coarse, common (*arrabalera*)” character she had been embarrassed to play in *El conventillo de la Paloma*.⁵⁰ The film, called *Ayúdame a vivir* (1936), borrowed heavily from the conventional melodrama of the weekly romance novel. Lamarque plays a middle-class woman doubly victimized, first by her husband’s infidelity and second, when she is wrongly accused of killing her husband’s mistress. In order to take full advantage of Lamarque’s star power, the film included several scenes in which she suddenly interrupts the action by singing a tango, communicating with the other characters through the lyrics. This formula, labeled a “tango opera” by the film historian Domingo Di Núbila, would be employed again in the next two films Lamarque made with Ferreyra for SIDE: *Besos brujos* (1937) and *La ley que olvidaron* (1938).⁵¹ These movies were perfect vehicles for Lamarque because they enabled her to free herself from tango stereotypes, in much the same way as Gardel had

done. She could be a tango-singing melodramatic heroine without locking herself into the role of the milonguita. In a tango opera, Lamarque's character sang tangos not because she lived in a gritty arrabal or prostituted herself at a cabaret, but simply because Lamarque herself was a tango star. Playing on this movie-star logic, Lamarque's character announces one of her songs in *Ayúdame a vivir* by bragging "Libertad Lamarque . . . bah! I sing better than her."

For Ferreyra, who agreed to direct *Ayúdame a vivir* after Mario Soffici had rejected the tango opera conceit, the Lamarque trilogy represented the abandonment of his realist depiction of lower-class, urban life in favor of stories set among the bourgeoisie. Modern art deco living rooms and rural exteriors replaced the conventillo patios and barrio street scenes of his early films. What remained, though, was popular melodrama's class message. Muted in *Ayúdame a vivir*, this message was explicit in *La ley que olvidaron*, for which Lamarque accepted González Castillo's polemical screenplay. Lamarque plays María, a humble servant of a wealthy family who agrees to raise the love child of the family's spoiled daughter, so that the daughter's "honor" might remain intact. Central to the film is the familiar melodramatic opposition between the moral poor and the immoral rich: whereas María loves the child as if she were her own, her employers think only of appearances, ruthlessly separating the two as soon as the child's mother is respectably married. Ferreyra underscores the class divide in the opening scene, which juxtaposes images of the humble women of María's barrio with the wealthy women at her workplace. Later, he accomplishes the same juxtaposition by dissolving from a champagne bucket to a wash bucket. Lamarque's positioning on the lower, and therefore morally superior, side of this simple class divide makes her an object of audience identification. Like the other tango operas, this film is a long way from stories of violent compadritos or milonguitas condemned to prostitution, but it retained popular melodrama's affiliation with the poor and condemnation of the rich.

The *SIDE* trilogy was enormously popular throughout Latin America and turned Lamarque into Argentina's biggest box-office attraction. She now commanded a salary that the upstart company could not afford, and she signed with Sono Film. Although *SIDE* had played a key role in opening foreign markets for Argentine cinema, the company was unable to capitalize on its own success. The popularity of these movies outside

of Argentina was largely due to the transformation of Ferreyra's film-making. By abandoning urban realism, he was able to fashion a more universally accessible brand of melodrama that did not rely on viewers' familiarity with the world of porteño barrios. Moreover, by imitating the stylistic and technical attributes of Gardel's films, Ferreyra attracted viewers who were accustomed to Hollywood movies. Yet *SIDE* was forced to achieve modern results with backward technology. The Hollywood style relied on extensive cutting in order to deliver a seamless narrative, but *SIDE* could not afford a Moviola, the modern machine that enabled an editor to view the film while editing. The result was a tremendous waste of time and money. Unable to produce films rapidly, *SIDE* remained financially fragile, vulnerable to any box-office setbacks.⁵² And once Lamarque had left, Murúa's company was unable to reproduce its earlier success. Ferreyra continued to make films for *SIDE*, but without Lamarque's star power he did not produce another hit. By 1941, the year of his final film, he had been eclipsed by directors whose style better suited a young film industry locked in competition with Hollywood.

After leaving *SIDE*, Lamarque increased her box-office appeal by continuing to trade on her tango stardom. In *Madreselva* (Amadori, 1938), her first movie for Sono Film, she plays Blanca, a young woman who sings in her father's humble puppet show. She meets and falls in love with a movie star named Mario, played by Hugo del Carril. A series of misunderstandings drives Mario into the arms of Blanca's sister, while Blanca leaves Argentina for Europe and a career as an international opera star. When the misunderstandings are sorted out, the path is clear for Mario and Blanca to marry, but having promised her father that she would look after her sister's happiness, Blanca does the honorable thing and accepts a life of lonely stardom. *Madreselva* enacts one of the central themes of tango lyrics: the warning against upward mobility. Although she pursues wealth and fame, Blanca avoids the fate of a milonguita by retaining the moral fiber that results from her humble upbringing. However, she does so at the cost of her happiness. The film's title comes from a tango whose lyrics were written seven years earlier by Luis César Amadori, the director of the film. The song, which Lamarque sings twice in the movie, offers a classic bit of tango cynicism that neatly encapsulates Blanca's predicament: "I've learned that one must fake it in order to live decently." Amadori reiterates the idea of fakery throughout: in Blanca's marionettes, in

Blanca's first meeting with Mario, when he arrives in her father's bar still dressed in the tough-guy costume he was wearing in his current film. Blanca's acceptance of her fate is the exception that proves the rule: upward mobility entails pretending to be something one is not and, at least for women, leads inevitably to moral disaster.

The opera storyline represented something of a departure for Lamarque, who was more often cast as a tango singer. She had played this role in both *Alma de bandoneón* and *Besos brujos*, and she would return to it in *Puerta cerrada* (Saslavsky, 1939) and *Yo conocí a esa mujer* (Borcosque, 1942). In all of these films, tango functioned as the prime mover of melodramatic narrative: Lamarque's character falls in love with a wealthy suitor, but his elitist family blocks the romance because they consider tango singers disreputable. In a sense, casting Lamarque as a tango singer achieved the same purpose as the tango opera format: it gave her a reason to sing tangos without requiring that the film be set in a seedy arrabal. More important, though, was the class message of these films. By the 1930s, tango had long since achieved broad cross-class acceptance. No longer relegated to the slums, tango was danced in fancy cabarets and savored by elites, including President Marcelo T. de Alvear (1922–28) himself.⁵³ Moreover, the transformation of tango lyrics had made the music suitable for domestic consumption by decent families. Nevertheless, as Diana Paladino points out, the domestic cinema continued to depict tango as a popular genre rejected by snobbish elites.⁵⁴ In Lamarque's movies, tango served to locate the protagonist on the noble and popular side of the class divide and to facilitate audience identification. Melodramatic logic dictated that Lamarque be punished for the transgressive act of singing tango, but surely that judgment was not shared by audience members, who were drawn to Lamarque's early movies precisely by the star power she had earned as a tango singer. Tango was not merely a popular musical genre; it was a powerful symbol of Argentina. Playing the part of a tango singer, Lamarque represented her popular audience in terms of both class and national identity. For that audience, her victimization at the hands of condescending rich people could not be experienced as a legitimate punishment for some real transgression, but only as classist persecution.

In *Puerta cerrada*, Lamarque plays Nina Miranda, a tango singer who sacrifices her career in order to marry a rich man whose family disapproves of her occupation (see figure 7). When her self-serving brother

tricks her into believing that her husband has abandoned her, she decides to return to the stage in order to support her child. Briefly unsure about whether to challenge propriety by singing a tango, she turns to her brother who reassures her: “Decency does not reside in singing a waltz instead of a tango.” Thus heartened, she performs a stirring rendition of the classic early tango, “La morocha,” whose lyrics by Angel Villoldo emphasize the national authenticity of the performance:

Soy la morocha argentina
la que no siente pesares
y alegre pasa la vida
con sus cantares.
Soy la gentil compañera
del noble gaucho porteño,
la que conserva el cariño
para su dueño.
Yo soy la morocha
de mirar ardiente,
la que en su alma siente
el fuego de amor.
Soy la que al criollito
más noble y valiente
ama con ardor.

*I am the Argentine brunette
the one who feels no sorrow
and happily passes through life
with her songs.*

*I am the gentle companion
of the noble porteño gaucho,
the one who saves her affection
for her master.*

*I am the brunette
of the burning gaze,
the one who feels in her soul
the fire of love.*

*I am the one who loves the
most noble and valiant criollito
with ardor.*



7 Libertad Lamarque as the tango star Nina Miranda with her lover (Agustin Irusta) and his disapproving aunt (Angelina Pagano) in *Puerta cerrada*. Courtesy of Archivo General de la Nación.

Although Villoldo underscores both the singer's submissiveness and her passionate sensuality, Nina's performance highlights the latter. The gaucho of the lyrics is not present on stage, and when she stops singing to execute a few tango steps, she treats her male partner as a prop. As she sings the final verse, the camera zooms into a tight close-up. She smiles, seductively stretching out the first syllables—"Yo soy . . ."—and as the orchestra waits for her to continue, she inserts a spoken word that does not figure in the original lyric: *pimpollo*, meaning "flower bud" or, in lunfardo, the popular slang of Buenos Aires, "beautiful, young woman."⁵⁵ This scene, whose lighthearted sexiness contrasts markedly with the somber, melodramatic tone that characterizes the bulk of the film, harnesses Lamarque's star power, enabling the audience to identify with Nina not simply as a passive melodramatic victim, but as the proud bearer of an authentic and exciting popular culture. Nina's association

with this particular version of tango heightens the film's critique of the hypocritical and moralistic elite whose disdain for the genre (along with her brother's selfishness) causes her downfall.

Since Lamarque's films displace class conflict from collective struggles over exploitation to individual battles over marriage choice, they can be considered conservative. In Silvia Oroz's words, these films, like film melodramas throughout Latin America, "point out social inequality, not to modify it, but to *humanize* it."⁵⁶ But melodrama's truly subversive potential is realized when the pleasure and power of the transgression outweigh the ultimate moral resolution that upholds the dominant ideology. In *Puerta cerrada*, elite prejudice against the tango leads to a misunderstanding that results in the accidental death of Nina's husband and the wrongful incarceration of Nina herself. Given the strength of the audience's identification with Nina on the level of both class and national identity, her punishment reads not only as personally unjust, but also as an elitist attack on the Argentine people. Even in gender terms, this punishment is suspect. The ending of the film, in which Nina sacrifices herself in order to save her son, seems to uphold her husband's insistence that she give up her career in order to be a wife and mother. But for an audience that has delighted in Libertad Lamarque's performance of "La morocha," this patriarchal lesson is, to say the least, difficult to accept. Although *Puerta cerrada* was likely influenced by the Hollywood melodrama *Stella Dallas* (Vidor, 1937),⁵⁷ the contrast between the films is instructive. In both, the protagonist's frustrated dreams of upward mobility are eventually realized by the child that had been taken from her. But *Stella Dallas* spends much of the film striving ridiculously for upper-class status, and her downfall reads as punishment for this transgression. By contrast, Nina Miranda is never an object of ridicule for the audience; she is punished merely for being a tango singer, for representing, in other words, Argentine popular culture.

Striving to compete with Hollywood, Argentine filmmakers reshaped popular melodrama. Tango's extreme cynicism as well as its celebration of illegitimate romance were jettisoned in favor of the more conventional, marriage-focused narratives of weekly novels and radio plays. Likewise, the urban poor became less visible on Argentine movie screens. "El Negro" Ferreyra, whose sympathetic depictions of barrio life went hand in hand with his passion for the tango, abandoned this trademark style in favor of tango operas set in bourgeois homes. Reshaping melo-

drama along these lines facilitated the local movie industry's efforts to compete with Hollywood by harmonizing cinematic modernism with local authenticity: art deco interiors could coexist with the tango. Yet tango provided these films with more than just local color. Film melodrama, including Lamarque's output for SIDE and Sono Film, retained the essential premise of the popular traditions it inherited: a strict opposition between the noble poor and the hateful rich. Lamarque's glamorous star power, as well as the fancy interiors that served as backdrop, likely appealed to audiences' fantasies of upward mobility. Yet at the same time, her association with the tango served a classically populist function: by presenting popular culture as oppositional to the dominant class, these films enabled a critique of patriarchal and antinationalist elitism.⁵⁸ Pushed and pulled by the conflicting pressures of the transnational marketplace, Argentina's cinematic melodramas were fundamentally ambivalent, offering viewers both conformism and populism.

THE POPULIST-MELODRAMATIC COMEDY: LUIS SANDRINI AND NINÍ MARSHALL

The populist undercurrent in Lamarque's film melodramas reverberated with more explicitly subversive expressions that coursed through Argentine mass culture in this period. Soccer, for example, carried a powerful, populist charge. The sport's tendency to disrupt propriety and respectability was captured in one of the urban chronicles, or *aguafuertes porteños*, that Roberto Arlt wrote for the newspaper *El Mundo*. In this column, published in 1929, Arlt describes a game between Argentina and Uruguay. While he notes the Argentine victory, Arlt is more impressed with the unrestrained enthusiasm of the fans: they cheer and applaud thunderously; they climb onto the roof of a nearby building to get a view; they throw rotten oranges at their rivals' supporters; and they even urinate from the top of the stadium.⁵⁹ If Arlt presents soccer as a site of carnivalesque transgression, other accounts stress the sport's anti-elitist meanings. For José Gabriel, a sports columnist for the popular paper *Crítica*, soccer could help forge a national community that excludes the rich. One of his columns addresses an imaginary "señor muy aseñorado," whose chauffeured car passes by the stadium just as a match between Argentina and a visiting team from Scotland is ending. The rich man is bewildered as a crowd of thirty thousand fans pour into the street, block-

ing his passage. He is entirely unaware of even the presence of a soccer field there, let alone of its significance. The columnist fills him in and goes on to explain just how important soccer and other mass cultural events can be: "Soccer and cinema are the great spectacles of our days. If you do not want to recognize it, so much the worse for you." More than just the setting for a game, the stadium contains "the agglomeration of the happiness of a people."⁶⁰ Even though by the late 1920s, soccer already had a cross-class audience, José Gabriel identifies the sport's fans in opposition to a scornful and condescending elite. This populist image of soccer, and of mass culture in general, found expression in *Los tres berretines*, in which the sons' mass cultural pursuits triumph over their father's commitment to education and respectability. The film comedies of the 1930s would mine this populist vein extensively, combining it with the Manichean social vision of melodrama to produce a hybrid that challenged dominant values even more directly than Lamarque's films.

The film scholar Pascual Quinziano has argued that the hybrid character of Argentine comedies makes these movies more conservative than their Hollywood counterparts. For Quinziano, Argentine film comedy represents an "impure genre" in which melodrama's inevitable restoration of the moral order limits the potential for comic subversion.⁶¹ But while Quinziano is correct to emphasize the presence of melodramatic elements in the comedies of the 1930s, this "impurity" does not necessarily prevent the films from challenging the status quo. By appropriating a melodramatic vision of society, these comedies, like Lamarque's films, compel identification with the poor, while condemning the hypocrisy and mean-spiritedness of the rich. Equally important, the comic elements in these movies often undermine the neat, moral resolutions offered by melodrama. This tension is particularly apparent in the films of Luis Sandrini and Nini Marshall, the two biggest comic stars to emerge in this period. Cast in the role of providing comic relief to melodramatic love stories involving other characters, both Sandrini and Marshall subverted this hierarchy by stealing the spotlight with comic personas modeled on typical characters they observed on the streets of Buenos Aires. These characters stand outside the moral universe of melodrama and import a current of more transgressive populism into their films.

Luis Sandrini was an accomplished circus performer and stage actor who in 1932 was performing in the hit play *Los tres berretines*. Sandrini's performance as Eusebio, the brother who dreams of hitting it big as a

tango composer, was so popular that the Lumiton producers adapted the script to afford him a bigger role in the film version. Sandrini modeled his performance on a neighborhood personality from La Paternal, the barrio where he lived. The barrio was (and still is) home to the soccer team Argentinos Juniors, and a group of fans would gather on the sidewalk near Sandrini's house to discuss the games. One member of this group drew Sandrini's attention because of his persistent stutter. In *Los tres berretines*, Sandrini imitated and embellished this form of speech to great comic effect, and he went on to play the same character in dozens of subsequent films.⁶² To the stuttering, he added a series of character traits, including an amiable laziness, a rejection of respectability, and a tendency toward altruism, creating a somewhat Chaplinesque everyman at once ridiculous and heroic. Although tango would not play a central role in Sandrini's oeuvre, his character's association with the genre in *Los tres berretines* helped establish his connection to popular culture, in much the same way as it did for Lamarque. Similarly, Sandrini's character, presumably like his model in La Paternal, used an extremely colloquial and local vocabulary that identified him instantly with the popular classes of Buenos Aires.

Sandrini's next film, the box-office hit *Riachuelo* (Moglia Barth, 1934), was set in La Boca and belongs, with Ferreyra's *Puente Alsina*, to the small group of early sound films whose main characters were urban proletarians. Sandrini plays a happy-go-lucky pickpocket named Berretín (presumably to remind audiences of his earlier role) who meets Remanso, a recently released convict intent on living an honest life. Berretín offers Remanso the "thieving umbrella" that he uses to hide the watches and wallets he steals, but Remanso refuses, explaining that he wants to work "honorably." Remanso convinces Berretín to return the money he has stolen from a poor man, and when this act of conscience is rewarded with a kiss from a pretty girl, Berretín decides to give up his life of crime and become an honest worker. The film's climax comes when Berretín catches the neighborhood gangster in the act of robbing the shipyard where he works and delivers him to the police. In the end, Remanso and Berretín both get the girl; a double wedding ends the film. On its surface, *Riachuelo* offers a heavy-handed moral lesson about the virtues of hard work and honesty. By taking a job, Berretín enters a respectable, decent working-class community: the manager of the conventillo where he and Remanso rent rooms insists that the property is a *casa de familia*. Moreover, Ber-

retín's honesty pays dividends. The factory manager rewards him with enough money to get married and to fix the boat on which he had been living. Nevertheless, Sandrini's comic presence in the film subverts this message. Berretín's "thieving umbrella" is part of his comic persona; it hardly disqualifies him from gaining the audience's sympathy.⁶³ Even after his conversion, Berretín remains a far less compelling model of diligence and honesty. In fact, he explicitly resists the discipline of the workplace: in a recurring gag he drops his tools and walks away the instant he hears the bell signaling the end of the shift. As in virtually every other movie Sandrini would make, his character undermines the moral lesson of the melodramatic plot. The character of Remanso is a familiar type: an honest, diligent worker, nearly identical to the character of Edmundo in *Puente Alsina*. And *Riachuelo* shares with *Puente Alsina* its defense of working-class virtue. Yet in a comic twist on the embittered cynicism of tango lyrics, Sandrini's performance encourages the audience to laugh at the notion that hard work and honesty can lead to upward mobility.

Following *Riachuelo*, Sandrini made a series of films that repackaged this simple comic formula. Since the local film industry had abandoned its focus on urban manual laborers, Sandrini would not reprise his role as a dockworker. Nevertheless, his comedies continued to play out against the backdrop of a society divided between the noble poor and the hateful rich. In these films, Sandrini's characters were always situated clearly on the lower end of this melodramatic class divide. In *El cañonero de Giles* (Romero, 1937), he is a small-town rube with an unlikely talent: every time he hears a dog bark, he unleashes a powerful kick capable of rocketing a soccer ball past any goalkeeper. Recruited to play for a major team in the capital, he resists the discipline of athletic training: "I'm a football player, not a showgirl," he says, when the coach asks him to do leg lifts. Manipulated by the hypocritical and greedy team owners, he is initially seduced by the party life of the big city, until he recovers his values and wins back his small-town girlfriend. In *Don Quijote del Altillio* (Romero, 1936), Sandrini plays an unemployed layabout in love with Urbana, a girl who is seduced by her boss in the office where she works. Here again, Sandrini's character resists the idea of hard work and happily resorts to theft in order to acquire the ingredients for a birthday party he wants to throw for Urbana. Meanwhile, desperate to escape her poverty, Urbana convinces herself that her boss means well and enters a relationship with

him. When she discovers that her boss is married, Urbana finally realizes that it is Sandrini's character who actually deserves her love.

These films revisit the central theme of tango melodrama: the young man or woman seduced by the promise of wealth into abandoning the simple but moral life of the *barrio*. They mine the melodramatic opposition between rich and poor for its comic potential. Thus, every movie has its fish-out-of-water scenes, in which Sandrini's character is thrust into the company of the wealthy and fails to fit in. In *El canillita y la dama* (Amadori, 1938), Sandrini plays Cachuso, a poor newspaper vendor who pretends to be the long-lost son of a wealthy industrialist. After falling for Martha, the industrialist's daughter, he helps her run away to avoid being forced to marry the unscrupulous man her father has selected for her. The comic culture clash between rich and poor plays out largely on the level of language. Cachuso's colloquial vocabulary, his use of the term *viejo* (old man), for example, instead of *papá* (father) clashes with the formal language of the wealthy characters. At one point, he struggles to find the proper form of the second person singular pronoun, starting with the colloquial Argentine *vos*, then trying the more universal *tú*, before opting for the formal *usted*.

The subversive potential of Sandrini's lazy but good-hearted simpleton is most fully realized in *Chingolo* (Demare, 1940). Sandrini plays the title character, a hobo who makes a comic philosophy out of his refusal to work (see figure 8). Preferring to steal chickens, he and his two friends take offense when a rich man offers to pay them to change his car's flat tire. When he rescues the son of a wealthy family who had fallen into the river, Chingolo gets his chance to try life on the other side of the class divide. Chingolo proves his essential moral rectitude by refusing a monetary reward from the boy's family: "One does not charge for such things." Impressed, the boy's mother awards Chingolo the annual prize of the women's charity association she heads. Intent on transforming him into a "respectable man (*hombre de bien*)," she has him cleaned and dressed up, and she gets him a non-taxing managerial job in her husband's canned peach factory. At first Chingolo resists these changes because they offend both his anarchic spirit and his sense of morality. Speaking into the boss's dictation machine he orders that the excess fruit be given to the poor, rather than thrown out—an act of goodwill rejected by his employer on the grounds that keeping people hungry is part of business.

Eventually, Chingolo is corrupted by his new surroundings. He has his



8 Luis Sandrini as the hobo Chingolo in the film of the same name. Courtesy of Museo del Cine Pablo Ducrós Hicken.

friends pretend to get sick from a competitor's peaches, thereby boosting his sponsor's business and successfully currying favor. He then conceives of a machine that will allow the boss to increase profits by firing many of his workers. In the end, though, Chingolo repudiates the immorality of the rich, rejects his new life, and returns to his hobo ways. The catalyst of this moral reawakening comes from a subplot lifted directly from Argentine melodrama. Chingolo is enamored of Elvira, the nanny for the boy who nearly drowns at the beginning of the film. Unfortunately, she is in love with Eduardo, the family's eldest son, a typical *niño bien*, or spoiled, lazy rich kid. Elvira, despite her poor romantic judgment, is the film's most consistent moral voice. Impressed with Chingolo's virtue at first, she scolds him for helping enrich the factory owner at the expense of poor workers. When Elvira gets pregnant, and Eduardo and his parents refuse to recognize the child, Chingolo recovers his sense of morality. He offers to give the child his own last name in return for a small fortune, which he then gives to Elvira so that she can pay for the child's education. This act returns Chingolo to the virtuous side of the class divide, but it does not get him the girl. Eduardo, inspired by Chingolo's example, comes

to his senses, asks for Elvira's forgiveness, and promises to marry her and recognize the child. In the last scene, Chingolo and his friends hop a train; he misses Elvira, but he is happy to have returned to the life of a hobo.

Chingolo's ending dilutes the movie's subversive message. Not only is Chingolo content with life on the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, but the interclass marriage of Eduardo and Elvira presents a hopeful model of class reconciliation, implying that the fundamental class divide depicted throughout the film can in fact be bridged. In this sense, *Chingolo* seems to substantiate Quinziano's argument that melodramatic elements work to contain the subversive potential of comedy. Yet the film's ending feels false. Eduardo is a one-dimensional character whose last-minute conversion is implausible to say the least. Moreover, class reconciliation and the restoration of moral order is only possible at the level of subplot. Chingolo cannot be incorporated into the dominant Argentine society, and his critique of hypocrisy, capitalist exploitation, and inequality remains uncontested. While Sandrini's films adopt melodrama's vision of society as hopelessly divided between good and evil, poor and rich, they do not embrace melodrama's moralism. On the contrary, Sandrini's character represents an alternative morality, within which the solidarity between poor people, their essential generosity, is a much more important value than either hard work or obeying the law. Chingolo's essential moral goodness derives from his rejection of capitalist greed and is not threatened by his tendency to steal wallets from rich people, to dine on stolen chickens, or to refuse work. In the end, he confirms his morality through an act of selfless generosity toward a fellow poor person.⁶⁴

The film reviewer for the conservative newspaper *La Nación* expressed concern about the message of Sandrini's films: "With that character of contradictory moral profile, [Sandrini] exploits with ease his particular brand of popular humor."⁶⁵ As the reviewer implied, these films pose a critique of the dominant moral code by compelling audience identification with Sandrini's character. Yet at the same time, the movies seek to impose conformist, melodramatic resolutions. This ambiguity reflects the conflicting commercial pressures faced by an Argentine film industry locked into competition with Hollywood. Like Lamarque's films, Sandrini's fish-out-of-water comedies gave audiences the visual pleasures of lavish interiors and luxurious lifestyles. Nevertheless, the ability of audiences to identify with the characters depicted by both Lamarque and Sandrini depended upon their being firmly situated on the economically

inferior but morally superior side of the class divide. In other words, Argentine melodrama demanded a certain class consciousness on the part of viewers. The transgressive populism of Sandrini's comic persona pushed these films even further, undermining the conventional moralism of their melodramatic endings. In this alternative moral universe, theft is excusable if its victims are wealthy; idleness is liberating; exploitation and greed are the worst sins; and selfless sacrifice for a fellow poor person is the noblest calling.

Sandrini's ability to step outside of melodrama's strict moral code owed something to his gender. Unlike so many melodramatic heroines, his characters are not inevitably punished for their sins. Chingolo might not get the girl, but he proves clever enough to outmaneuver the rich and powerful. By contrast, Lamarque's characters do not typically achieve this level of agency; they either give up their dreams of upward mobility or reconcile themselves to a life of unhappiness. Nevertheless, at least one female actress did manage to circumvent melodrama's harsh gender codes. During the 1930s, Niní Marshall emerged as a radio and film performer with a comedic style that proved enormously popular: by the end of the decade, she was as big a star as Sandrini or Lamarque. Marshall's performances were open to a range of different readings. Her comic personae could be enjoyed as snobbish caricatures of the uncultured masses, yet they also offered a populist anti-elitism every bit as powerful as Sandrini's.

Born Marina Esther Traverso, Marshall was the daughter of Spanish immigrants and grew up in relative comfort in the Buenos Aires neighborhood of San Telmo. Marshall emerged first on the radio, where she created a series of memorable characters that she later brought to the screen. She got her first break when she was cast as Cándida, a Spanish maid, on a Radio Municipal program. In 1937 Pablo Osvaldo Valle, the program director of Radio El Mundo, gave Marshall her own program, allowing her to write the script herself.⁶⁶ Although Marshall claimed to have modeled Cándida on the maid who worked in her own childhood home, the Spanish domestic had long been a stock character on the porteño stage. In *sainetes*, Spanish maids were ridiculed for their uneducated form of speech, their smelly food, their stupidity, and often their promiscuity, but they were typically portrayed as loyal servants, a reassuring depiction for well-to-do theatergoers.⁶⁷ In Marshall's version, the Spanish maid remained an object of ridicule, but one who often got

the last laugh. In one script, she argues with the program host, insisting that Christopher Columbus was Spanish and that it was the Spanish who civilized the Argentines: “If it weren’t for the *Gallegos* [Galicians, but in Argentina, a name for all Spaniards] you would be walking around naked . . . you indecent, shameless person!” When the host angrily responds that he is no Indian, Cándida teasingly imagines him wearing ostrich feathers, except that she mispronounces *avestruz*, the Spanish word for ostrich, as *vistruz*. Her host corrects her, but she insists, “I know very well what *vistruz* is and what *avestruz* is.”

HOST: *Vistruz* isn’t anything!!!

CÁNDIDA: I know that too! Hah! A coat with four feathers from a *vistruz*, which were the only birds that existed here, since we imported all the others.

HOST: (*angry*) The birds that you imported, were *pájaros de cuenta* (criminals)!!!

CÁNDIDA: The *pájaros de cuenta* were products of cross-breeding, my lord!!!⁶⁸

Here, Cándida’s dimwittedness and lack of education serve as effective weapons against her condescending interlocutor. She subverts hierarchy by identifying herself with the civilizer and him with the savage, while her persistent misunderstandings and her attitude of superiority drive him to exasperation.

Marshall’s version of the Spanish maid had much in common with another one from the same period: Ramona, the character created by the cartoonist Lino Palacio. In this comic strip, which first appeared in 1930 but achieved enduring success in the 1940s, the maid’s obtuseness tends to enact revenge on her social superiors. When Ramona’s employers leave for the evening, they tell her not to open the door because there are thieves in the neighborhood. Following this instruction literally, she refuses to let them in when they return later that night. In another strip, Ramona mails a letter for her boss even though it has yet to be addressed. When confronted, she explains that she figured her employer had left the envelope blank because she didn’t want her maid to know who the recipient was. Ramona may be dumb, but it is generally her employers who suffer the consequences of her mistakes. Much of the pleasure of the strip comes from this revenge of the weak against the strong.⁶⁹ Marshall’s Cándida had a similar, anti-elitist appeal; her ignorance provoked laugh-

ter, but her ability to frustrate and ridicule those who considered themselves superior to her was just as enjoyable.

When *Cándida* was first brought to the screen in Luis Bayón Herrera's *Cándida* (1939), she had to be inserted into a more developed plot. Alongside the comic mispronunciations and confusions of the radio program, *Cándida* now played a role in a conventional story involving a widower who marries a materialistic, pretentious, and self-centered woman. Outraged by the maid's tendency to speak her mind, the new wife fires *Cándida* and then proceeds to drive her husband into bankruptcy. In the end, the selfless *Cándida* secretly uses the money she has been saving for her own wedding in order to rescue her former employer. The cinematic version of *Cándida* retains the ignorance and stubbornness of the radio character but now also exhibits the essential goodness and generosity that Argentine movies tended to attribute to the poor. The result is a revival of the old prototype of the loyal servant and, in general, a far less subversive performance. In the end, the new wife is rehabilitated and rejects her earlier selfishness, while *Cándida*'s generosity is rewarded. She and her boyfriend are able to marry and start a life together. But despite this moralistic and conformist resolution, what makes the character compelling is her deep sense of pride. Reprising her old joke from the radio, she teaches her employer's son that before "we Gallegos" came, "you" were all Indians, running around naked. Likewise, her dismissal results from her insistence on standing up to her employer's wife; she has her own ideas about how to serve food and how to dress, and she refuses to submit to the rich woman's authority.

Cándida's pride is analogous to a Libertad Lamarque character's insistence on singing tango despite the disapproval of her social superiors or to the refusal of Luis Sandrini's Chingolo to trade in his hobo lifestyle for the trappings of wealth. This same attitude—what critic Abel Posadas calls "class pride"—is also characteristic of Catita, the most popular of Marshall's radio and film characters.⁷⁰ Marshall modeled Catita on the young women who used to wait outside the radio station hoping to get an autograph from Juan Carlos Thorry, a movie actor who played the role of the host on the *Cándida* program. As Marshall recalled years later, these women were "gossips, busybodies, and meddlers [who] dressed with bad taste, almost extravagantly. They represented a social stratum, the product of the tenements (*conventillos e inquilinatos*) that existed in that period."⁷¹ In addition to their pushiness, what drew Marshall's attention

was their form of speech, which included idiosyncratic pronunciations as well as a host of distinctive phrases, many of Italian origin. Marshall's condescension toward the "Catitas" is not surprising. Before beginning her own radio career, she had written a column in the fan magazine *Sintonía* in which she had criticized the incorrect pronunciations of a soccer player interviewed on the radio and frequently mocked the bad taste on display in programs like *Chispazos de Tradición*.⁷² In the character of Catita, she had simply picked a new target for this sort of ridicule. Like Cándida, Catita was a caricature that poked fun at a recognizable social type. Emilio Córdoba, the owner of La Piedad department store and the program's sponsor, initially balked at the idea of associating his store with Marshall's new character, arguing that his customers were just like Catita and would take offense. Since the show was an overnight sensation and La Piedad's sales immediately increased, Marshall concluded that the store's customers must not have seen themselves in the character, "a very logical reaction of 'the Catitas.'" ⁷³ While there may be some truth to Marshall's assessment, many of Catita's fans likely responded to the character's intense self-esteem and the implicit populism it entailed. In other words, Catita's unapologetic class pride and her rejection of elite preferences and judgments may well have had an impact that Marshall herself did not intend.

After her triumphant appearance on the radio in 1937, Catita made her cinematic debut the following year in Manuel Romero's film for Lumiton, *Mujeres que trabajan* (*Women Who Work*). The film tells the story of Ana María, a wealthy, young woman who loses her fortune and her social standing when her father is unable to pay his debts and commits suicide. Rejected by her hypocritical friends and by her fiancé's aristocratic family, Ana María is rescued by her loyal chauffeur, who invites her to take a room where he lives, a boarding house that is also home to a group of female department store clerks, including Catita. Over the course of the film, Ana María is transformed by her contact with these "women who work." She takes a job at the store, develops good work habits and even a sense of solidarity, coming to the aid of one of her co-workers, who has been seduced and abandoned by the store's wealthy owner. Though the focus on women in the workplace represented an important challenge to the dominant cinematic practice of the day, the film's melodramatic structure and romantic plot are thoroughly conventional. In heavy-handed fashion, Romero juxtaposes the hypocritical superficiality of the rich with the

generous nobility of the poor. Ana María overcomes her earlier arrogance and is welcomed into the community of working women. In the end, she is reunited with her fiancé, and they decide to marry over the objections of his family. As he puts it, they will now live together as “a woman who works and a man who works.”

While Catita plays a marginal role in the melodrama, she is the central engine of comedy in the film. Marshall steals every scene she is in, deploying all of the comic devices she developed for the radio: rapid-fire speech, a squeaky, high-pitched voice, a tendency to run words together, and a grab bag of uncultured catch phrases. Catita is unabashedly envious of the rich and longs to find a husband who can support her materialistic aspirations. Wearing an ostentatious fur stole, she is the embodiment of the *guaranga*, the pretentious, inelegant social striver who preoccupied intellectuals of the period. In fact, when Lorenzo, the chauffeur, declares his love for Catita, the landlady asks, “Isn’t she a bit *guaranga* for you?” His response—that he is attracted to the “contrast” she presents with the “high society” people he drives around all day—reveals the secret of Catita’s comic appeal. As Posadas points out, most characters in the Argentine cinema of the 1930s speak in an exceptionally mannered style, using a formal vocabulary rarely heard in everyday speech. In this context, Catita’s use of language had an explosive impact.⁷⁴ Catita explicitly rejects the standards of her social superiors; her distinctive speech patterns reflect not just ignorance, as in the case of Cándida, but a self-conscious rejection of elite aesthetic standards. When Lorenzo insists that she return the Venus de Milo replica she has stolen from the home of the wealthy villain, she responds that she doesn’t want it anyway, since “this piece of junk is broken.” Among the group of women employees in the film is a tie-wearing Communist, whom the film ridicules as sexually frustrated. In contrast to that character’s Marxist pronouncements, Catita’s aspirations—marriage, luxury, comfort—are entirely conventional. Nevertheless, her style, coupled with her complete lack of embarrassment, represents a powerful subversion of hierarchy.

Following the success of *Mujeres que trabajan*, Lumiton made a series of Catita vehicles. While these films continued the formula of combining a melodramatic love story with Marshall’s special brand of humor, they moved Catita to center stage. In *Divorcio en Montevideo* (Romero, 1939), Catita and her friend, Adriana, are manicurists who listen to radio soap operas and fantasize about marrying millionaires (see figure 9). A rich



9 Nini Marshall as Catita in *Divorcio en Montevideo*. Courtesy of Museo del Cine Pablo Ducrós Hicken.

man named Claudio offers to pay Adriana to marry and then quickly divorce him so that he can collect an inheritance. She accepts in order to pay for an operation for her sick father. After an improvised trip to Paris, Claudio falls in love with Adriana, and his friend falls for Catita. As in *Mujeres que trabajan*, Catita's inelegant, materialistic pushiness plays out against the backdrop of a melodramatic culture clash between rich and poor. She gets drunk in public, wears gaudy dresses, and complains about all the "foreigners" in Paris. Adriana proves her worthiness by refusing the money that Claudio offers her, but Catita subverts this moralistic lesson. Angry at her friend for not taking the money she has earned, Catita steals the wedding ring that Adriana asks her to return to Claudio. Catita is loyal to her friend throughout the film, even giving Adriana the stolen ring as a memento of her love for Claudio. Nevertheless, if Adriana

is the prototypical good girl from the barrios, who acts selflessly and morally and is rewarded when Claudio finally comes to his senses, Catita rejects this melodramatic logic. She takes what she can and never doubts that she deserves her share of the good life.

Catita's aggressive materialism was particularly striking coming from a woman. As we have seen, the tango repertoire was filled with stories of young women seeking upward mobility in downtown cabarets. These milonguitas were almost invariably doomed in the long run. Similarly, Libertad Lamarque's characters rarely escaped the punitive logic of melodrama. Of course, Niní Marshall's films typically did include melodramatic victims, women for whom the only hope of upward mobility was to marry a rich man. Marshall's characters, especially Catita, escaped this fate partly because Marshall did not play the romantic lead. Marshall and the directors with whom she worked essentially invented a new genre, in which her comedy stole the spotlight from a conventional melodramatic plot. Catita, in other words, was the friend of the melodramatic heroine and, as such, she was not subject to the same strict gender code.

Evidence suggests that Catita's popularity crossed class lines.⁷⁵ The reviewer for the elite newspaper *La Prensa* described the "guffaws" Marshall's performance inspired when *Mujeres que trabajan* opened at the downtown Cine-Teatro Monumental.⁷⁶ While the critic praised her "picaresque modalities" and "sparks of playful popular ingenuity," one imagines the well-to-do, opening night audience laughing primarily at Catita and her ridiculous attempts at style. But Catita's primary audience was in the barrios. Marshall performed with Thorry on Radio El Mundo four nights a week, twice as Cándida and twice as Catita. Following the program, they performed live shows in movie theaters throughout the city. According to Marshall, they appeared in every barrio in the city, always leading with Catita and almost always filling the house. Later, they toured the interior of the country.⁷⁷ The letters section of the fan magazine *Sintonía* provides some insight into the various types of connection Marshall forged with her fans. When Marshall was criticized, it was most often for "deforming" the Spanish language, popularizing and legitimizing mispronunciations and other vulgarities. In response, one reader praised Marshall's intelligence, arguing that she had perfectly captured a "type of woman of whom there are thousands in our metropolis." This reader implicitly emphasized the cultural distance that separated Catita from himself as well as from Marshall. He celebrated the actress as a

caricaturist who poked fun at people who deserved to be teased.⁷⁸ Similarly, another reader argued that Marshall actually improved people's speech by making thousands of real-life "Catitas" aware that they were speaking incorrectly.⁷⁹ But other readers praised Marshall in very different terms. One letter writer from the remote province of Formosa on the Paraguayan border enthusiastically defended her against critics: "Niní Marshall is, currently, the number ONE comic actress (like that, in capital letters) in radio and cinema. For those of us who live in Formosa, as for all the 'normal' inhabitants of the country, it is a delight to hear her." The writer signaled her identification with Catita, in particular, by signing off with one of the character's signature phrases, *as noche*, a truncated version of *buenas noches*.⁸⁰ The writer's use of Catita's own words as well as the sense of community affiliation implicit in the letter suggest that many non-elite fans identified directly with Catita's aggressive class pride; they were laughing *with* her, not just *at* her.

Both Luis Sandrini and Niní Marshall combined melodrama with a more transgressive populism in order to fashion a subversive brand of comedy. Both actors created characters of humble origins who lived in a society starkly divided between the rich and the poor. The essential goodness and generosity of these characters contrasted with the pettiness and cruelty of the rich. Like the melodrama of the tango, the weekly novel, the radio soap opera, and the Libertad Lamarque film, these comedies dramatized the anxieties faced by poor people living in a rapidly modernizing capitalist society, even as their happy endings supplied a satisfying poetic justice. Yet Argentina's populist-melodramatic comedies provided other satisfactions as well. Sandrini and Marshall undermined conventional moralism by creating characters that refuse to conform to the strict rules of melodrama. Within the melodramatic universe, goodness involved a fatalistic acceptance of one's lot in life and an avoidance of unseemly social striving, yet both Sandrini's character and Catita are openly envious of the luxuries enjoyed by the wealthy; both even resort to theft. Likewise, Sandrini's trademark aversion to hard work and Catita's pushiness challenged accepted norms of behavior. These characters prove their goodness through acts of solidarity and generosity, even as they refuse to acquiesce to the aesthetic, behavioral, and ethical demands of the wealthy. The barrio residents who made up the bulk of the audience for domestic movies must have enjoyed these characters' explicit affiliation with popular styles and practices.

Throughout the 1930s, commercial and ideological pressures pushed many Argentine filmmakers away from this sort of populism. As we have seen, José Agustín Ferreyra abandoned his sympathetic depictions of the urban working class and began producing tango operas. By the end of the decade, this conservative tendency had deepened. In an effort to attract more elite moviegoers, the studios released a steady stream of so-called white telephone films set in the luxurious homes of the bourgeoisie. These films, clearly influenced by Hollywood and other foreign models, catered to the audience's desire to indulge vicariously in the swank lifestyles of the rich.⁸¹

Nevertheless, populism persisted. Even the most benign “white telephone” comedies often trafficked in the class messages of melodrama. *Los martes orquídeas* (Múgica, 1941) tells the story of a lonely girl, played by Mirtha Legrand, who is unable to attract boyfriends like her sisters. Her wealthy father seeks to comfort her by inventing a secret admirer and eventually hires an unemployed young man to play the part. In the end, the deception is revealed, but by then the actor has fallen in love with the girl, and the two happily plan to marry. The movie's populist subtext echoes the working-class pride that was so central to the films of Sandrini and Marshall. The wealthy father is certain that his daughter will reject her suitor once she learns that he is unemployed, has an Italian surname, and lives in a humble pension. But the girl, a dreamer who writes love poetry and reads romantic fiction, does not share her father's class prejudice. She immediately accepts the young man, in his words, “as I am.” The man's comic attempts to act the part of a wealthy suitor—wearing fancy clothes, riding horses, attending frivolous parties—were unnecessary. *Sonñar no cuesta nada* (Amadori, 1941), another of Mirtha Legrand's early films, offers an even more explicit populism. Here, Legrand plays a poor girl who gets to experience how the other half lives when she is mistaken for the daughter of a wealthy family (played by Mirtha's real-life twin, Silvia). Once again, the positioning of Legrand's character as an outsider who does not belong in the world of the rich guarantees her innocence and virtue: among other accomplishments, she teaches the spoiled son of the family to appreciate the opportunities his class position affords him. The director, Luis César Amadori, had perfected the depiction of upper-class luxury in films like *Madreselva* and *El canillita y la dama*. Amadori's frequent set designer, Raúl Soldi, recalled that he used to keep a high-class nightclub and a mansion with a grand staircase ready, since the

director's films always required such fancy settings.⁸² Yet even as they played to the popular desire to experience the good life, films like *Soñar no cuesta nada* reinforced the idea that we, the poor, are morally superior to them, the rich.⁸³ They appealed simultaneously to class pride and class envy, encouraging viewers to look down on the rich even as they fantasized about being rich.

The mass cultural melodrama of the 1920s and 1930s represented an alternative modernism, but as the variety of fan responses to Catita suggest, it offered different things to different audiences. For many, including those who may have aspired to a middle-class lifestyle, the new radio programs and sound movies provided a respectable, safe, and sanitized version of authentic Argentine culture. They could enjoy music and cinema that was rooted in the local context but was just as modern, or at least almost as modern, as those imported from the North. And they could indulge their fantasies of striking it rich. For others, though, melodrama offered a way of processing the dislocations of modernity in class terms, constructing a group identity around certain values associated with the poor, including solidarity, loyalty, and the capacity to express true emotion. By expressing suspicions about motivations that conflict with those values, such as the pursuit of upward mobility, melodrama represented a counter-discourse that pushed back against the appeals of advertisers and barrio associations. In its most subversive incarnations, mass cultural melodrama was packaged with a populist condemnation of the Argentine elite.