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4. Mass-Cultural Nation Building

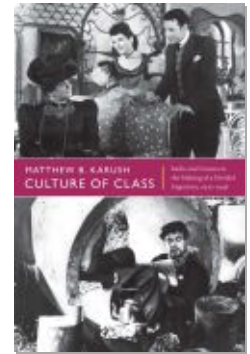
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4 MASS-CULTURAL NATION BUILDING

Argentine mass culture was the object of persistent attacks by those concerned about the spread of bad taste and low morals. Critics bemoaned the popular programming on Radio Belgrano for appealing to the lowest common denominator. They lambasted *Chispazos de Tradición* for its inauthentic gauchos and formulaic romance plots. They accused comedians like Niní Marshall and Luis Sandrini of deforming the Spanish language and denounced tango lyricists for celebrating the immoral behavior and improper slang of criminals and prostitutes. This preoccupation with the content of popular culture was not new. At the turn of the century, the tango's association with illicit sexuality had made it an object of elite scorn and government regulation.¹ But concerns about the allegedly low level of popular culture took on a new urgency with the advent of the radio and the cinema. The new media's unprecedented capacity to cross barriers of distance and class made it a new kind of threat. In Argentina and, in fact, throughout the world, the spread of

mass culture provoked anxiety and inspired diverse campaigns to moralize, elevate, or sanitize the material being broadcast to the masses.

Critics of mass culture quickly recognized the new media's tendency to appeal to plebeian tastes by repackaging popular cultural traditions. Tango music dominated record catalogues and radio lineups, and the biggest stars of the genre quickly crossed over to cinema. Gaucho tales from the old criollo circus were adapted to radio theater. In general, the diverse tradition of popular melodrama put its stamp on virtually every piece of domestic mass culture available to Argentine consumers. And as a result of mass culture's reliance on popular traditions, subversive messages coursed through the films and radio programs of the period. Tango's association with the urban poor and its alleged rejection by snobbish elites were central to its appeal. Film melodramas and comedies encouraged viewers to identify with working-class heroes who refused to conform to dominant moral and aesthetic standards. In short, the critics of mass culture had reason to fear: Argentine radio and cinema had an alarmingly populist cast.

In the 1930s, this fear of mass culture intersected with a larger set of concerns about national identity. In the context of economic crisis, corrupt oligarchic governments, and the rising international legitimacy of anti-liberal, statist ideologies, a new nationalist movement gained influence in Argentina. Combining elements of Italian Fascism with a deep commitment to Catholicism, right-wing nationalists elaborated what Federico Finchelstein calls "clericofascism."² They criticized Argentina's liberal democracy and its economic dependence, and they contributed to a revisionist interpretation of Argentine history that demonized the nation's liberal forefathers, celebrated the Federalist *caudillos* (strongmen) of its rural past, and blamed the country's economic woes on British imperialist exploitation.³ This questioning of Argentina's political and economic traditions was accompanied by a renewed quest to identify and consolidate a national identity that many felt had been lost during the era of massive immigration and liberal subservience to Europe. A series of influential essays on national identity were published in the 1930s, including Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz's *El hombre que está solo y espera* (1931), Ezequiel Martínez Estrada's *Radiografía de la pampa* (1933), and Eduardo Mallea's *Historia de una pasión argentina* (1937).⁴ These texts offered diverse diagnoses of Argentina's problems, but taken together, they revealed a rising tide of nationalist anxiety.

Inevitably, much of this anxiety came to be directed at mass culture. In Martínez Estrada's view, the failure of the state to actively regulate the culture industries meant that Argentine radio and cinema, for all their flaws, accurately reflected the values and tastes of the people: "Instead of the radio forging the consciousness of popular taste among us, the consciousness of popular taste has forged the radio in its own image."⁵ Given their popularity, domestic radio programs and films offered evidence on which to base one's assessment of the nation as well as obvious targets for reformist projects. In this context, then, the frequent campaigns to improve mass culture often formed part of a concerted effort to remake the nation. Cultural critics and producers hoped to use the new media either to help recover and disseminate the national essence or to elevate the nation's cultural level. These efforts took various forms. Some hoped to improve Argentine mass culture by more closely copying North American models, while others saw commercialism itself as debasing and hoped the mass media might preserve and disseminate the uncontaminated culture of the rural "folk." Still others imitated international trends by seeking to elaborate an Argentine high culture that drew on and improved the nation's folk traditions.

These varied attempts at mass-cultural nation building sometimes reinforced the commercial strategies of Argentina's record labels, radio stations, and film studios. The transnational marketplace encouraged local cultural producers to rely on popular culture, but this strategy also potentially limited their reach. Cultural commodities that appealed to popular audiences might alienate wealthier consumers drawn to prestigious foreign imports. Throughout the 1930s, cultural producers actively sought to unify the market, to broaden their audience by competing for these higher-class consumers, even as they held on to their popular base. Some projects aimed at elevating mass culture might also serve this commercial purpose. Nevertheless, both the attempt to consolidate a national identity and the effort to expand the audience for domestic mass culture were undermined by persistent contradictions. In the end, the powerful populist tendencies in Argentine mass culture proved impossible to reconcile with efforts to unify the nation across class lines.

CAN THE TANGO BE IMPROVED?

Record companies, radio programmers, fan magazines, lyricists, and performers all actively positioned the tango as an alternative modernism, just as modern as jazz and yet authentically Argentine. The claim of authenticity, as we have seen, typically invoked the genre's plebeian associations. Stars like Carlos Gardel marketed their rags-to-riches biographies, stressing their working-class origins. The melodramatic stories exhaustively explored in tango lyrics situated the music in the poor *arrabales* of Buenos Aires. Even more basically, tango lyricists signaled their affiliation with the poor through their extensive use of *lunfardo*, the popular porteño slang. The immortal opening line of Pascual Contursi's "Mi noche triste"—"Percanta que me amuraste" ("Woman who left me")—inaugurated tango's self-conscious break with proper Spanish and its explicit affiliation with the popular culture of the urban plebe. Taken to its logical extreme, this populism could even imply a certain class consciousness, an implication visible, for example, in the magazine *La Canción Moderna* during its first year of publication in 1928. That year, the magazine was edited by Dante A. Linyera, a *lunfardo* poet and tango lyricist. In his lyrics, Linyera, like many other tango lyricists, embraced the popular and denigrated the elite.⁶ But in *La Canción Moderna*, Linyera went further, printing the lyrics of the latest tango hits and interviews with tango stars alongside denunciations of the bourgeoisie and celebrations of the working class. The magazine defined itself as "the magazine of the people" and included a regular section called "the voice of the suburbio" which denounced injustice and called for class solidarity. *La Canción Moderna* even printed a special issue for May Day, featuring on its cover a drawing of a protest in the name of "peoples oppressed by capitalism," and including columns on the anarchist heroes Errico Malatesta and Simon Radowsky, as well as poems celebrating the class struggle.⁷ Linyera's articulation of tango with the rhetoric of working-class militancy was unusual, but it reveals the potential for class consciousness in tango's discourse of authenticity.

As tango was appropriated by the new mass media, the genre's plebeian affiliations quickly came to seem problematic. If tango was to appeal to a broad, cross-class audience and if it was to compete with ultra-modern jazz, it needed to be freed from the *arrabales*. Musically, the efforts of New Guard bandleaders like Julio de Caro achieved this pur-

pose by associating tango with the spirit of progress and modernization. But tango lyrics also required transformation; specifically, tango needed aesthetic alternatives to the intensely plebeian language of lyricists like Contursi and Celedonio Flores. In fact, other lyricists did write tangos in a more universal idiom, telling stories about love and betrayal that were less rooted in the social world of the poor. This tendency gained prominence with the emergence of Alfredo Le Pera in 1932 as the screenwriter of Carlos Gardel's films for Paramount. When work began on a follow-up to the enormously successful *Las luces de Buenos Aires*, the screenwriters of that film, Manuel Romero and Luis Bayón Herrera, were unavailable. Their replacement was Le Pera, who, as a translator of subtitles for foreign movies and a former drama critic for various Buenos Aires newspapers, was well suited to the task of packaging Argentine popular culture for an international audience.⁸ Since Paramount marketed Gardel's movies throughout Latin America, the films needed to avoid references that would only be accessible to porteño viewers. Le Pera responded to the challenge by elaborating less localist and less plebeian tango stories. Since Le Pera also wrote the lyrics to many of the tangos Gardel sang on screen, his more universal aesthetic had a major impact on the tango canon. Le Pera compositions like "Volver" (1935) retained tango's melancholy nostalgia and its focus on romantic abandonment, but they spurned lunfardo in favor of a lyrical, more traditionally poetic language:

Yo adivino el parpadeo
de las luces que a lo lejos,
van marcando mi retorno.
Son las mismas que alumbraron,
con sus pálidos reflejos,
hondas horas de dolor.

*I make out the blinking
of the distant lights that
mark my return.
They are the same ones that illuminated
with their pallid reflections
deep hours of pain.*

Given Gardel's stature, imitation was inevitable, and tango lyricists gradually abandoned lunfardo.⁹ Once again, the effort to compete in the transnational marketplace had transformed Argentine popular culture.

The commercial dynamic that encouraged lyricists to abandon lunfardo dovetailed with an ideological campaign aimed at purging tango of its troubling plebeian associations. This campaign was particularly visible in the pages of Argentina's thriving fan magazines. By the mid-1930s, Buenos Aires newsstands featured several magazines that provided coverage of the local radio and cinema as well as of North American music and film. The owner of *La Canción Moderna* was Julio Korn, the son of Jewish Romanian immigrants, who had first distinguished himself as a publisher of sheet music. Following Dante Linyera's brief term as editor, Korn would steer the magazine in a more mainstream direction, renaming it *Radiolandia* in 1934 in order to emphasize its link to the modern mass media. By the 1940s, *Radiolandia* could boast a circulation of 450,000. Nearly as popular was *Sintonía*, owned by Editorial Haynes, the owner of Radio El Mundo, and edited by the journalist Emilio Karstulovic. The radio impresario Jaime Yankelevich was not to be outdone: he founded *Antena* in order to give Radio Belgrano an outlet for free publicity. Closely tied to the radio milieu that they covered, these editors were "outsider" capitalists like those who founded the recording, radio, and film industries. They sought to attract middle-class readers by emulating the high standards of general interest magazines like *Caras y Caretas*, but at the same time, they embraced the aesthetic preferences of the masses and insisted on their popular credentials.¹⁰ The campaign to elevate and improve the tango betrayed these conflicting agendas.

Even after it had moved away from the class consciousness of its early years, *La Canción Moderna* continued to depict itself as an advocate of the popular. For example, it criticized the radio station run by the state oil company, YPF, for playing classical music of interest only to "distinguished girls" while ignoring "the traditionally popular expression of our porteño music."¹¹ But if *La Canción Moderna* continued to defend the tango, it now did so in very different terms. The editorial criticizing YPF did so in the name of "the people" but defined that group not as the poor inhabitants of the suburbios but as "the middle class." Similarly, another editorial defended tango lyrics against elitist critics but began by accepting much of their critique:

We duly recognize that mediocrity has established itself among lyricists, but . . . one cannot base a judgment solely on the bad lyricists. . . .

The great popularity of our tango has attracted good writers, whose signatures are known and valued in the world of theatre and litera-

ture. . . . Vulgarity and *lunfardismo* are being eliminated, honest and intelligent lyricists have stood out, in a word, even simple but delicate poems have been put to music. . . . It is true that there is a great deal that is bad, that there are lyricists whose knowledge of the world comes through a café table or a crime report, but let us recognize that successes are no longer based on the prison, the *mina* [lunfardo for “woman” or “prostitute”] or other terms of that sort, which are invariably mentioned when one wants to disparage our tango, sterilizing in this way the efforts of honest lyricists who struggle to elevate it and most of all to clean it.¹²

La Canción Moderna now celebrated the attempts of lyricists to clean up the tango, to purge it of its immoral subject matter and its plebeian language. As an example of the sort of lyrics the magazine sought to cultivate, the editorial cited “Silencio,” a tango about the horrors of the First World War co-authored by Alfredo Le Pera. Defending “Silencio” against the charge that it represented an attempt to “foreign-ize” the tango, the editorial compared the song to Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, praising it as a work of art with a universal message. *La Canción Moderna* argued that by eliminating “vulgarity and lunfardismo,” lyricists could transform the tango from popular culture into high art. Five years later, the magazine, now named *Radiolandia*, reiterated the point: “The lyricist has a responsibility: to write while trying to improve. Whoever fails to make this effort is acting against popular song.”¹³

Many artists embraced the project of improving the tango with the same enthusiasm as the editors of *La Canción Moderna*. The singer Tania, for example, argued that tango was better in both class and cultural terms than its origins suggested: “The tango has an essence that is superior to the image in which it is always depicted. Even though it may come from the humblest, roughest (*más compadritos*) barrios, it has emotion and universality.”¹⁴ Tania’s comments reveal that for tango, quality and authenticity could often seem mutually exclusive; she argued that the genre had universal cultural value *despite* its roots in the lower-class suburbios, the very roots that gave the music its claim to represent the nation. In this way, the campaign to improve and clean up the tango threatened the authenticity of the music, a contradiction that *Radiolandia* tried hard to resolve. In an editorial entitled “Authenticity and Clarity (Tipicismo y claridad),” the magazine acknowledged that the noble efforts of composers, lyricists, and performers could easily go too far.

There is an obvious desire to elevate the quality of popular music. . . . In the composer who struggles to avoid vulgar modulation and hackneyed forms. In the lyricist who tries to “dignify” himself in the virtuous search for theme and words. And in the performer who in the fulfillment of his difficult task tries new modalities of expression.

All three are efforts worthy of sponsorship within the urban songbook so urgently in need of improvement. But each of the three efforts entails its own danger. The composer on the path to melodic originality can fall—and almost always does—into the well of distortion and falsification (*retorcimiento*). The lyricist choosing words and themes ends up writing pedantic and affected verses. And the performer, exaggerating the originality of his interpretation, helps to strip traditional emotion from popular music.

It is necessary to progress within porteño song. But it is necessary to progress without avoiding the *porteñismo* of song. Progress does not consist in tango lyrics that describe the dramas of princesses, instead of passions illuminated by streetlamps. That is not it. It consists, on the contrary, in finding within those same passions something poetic, or picturesque, or simply moving.¹⁵

Radiolandia, like many other cultural commentators, called for progress, originality, and an improvement in quality but recognized that achieving those ends might come at the cost of abandoning or destroying the popular essence of the tango.

In celebrating the thirteenth anniversary of Radio Belgrano, *Radiolandia* congratulated the station for maintaining its popular orientation even as it achieved progress: “Radio Belgrano progressed within its own spirit. Deepening its efficiency. Improving its quality. But without turning away from the route laid down.”¹⁶ The hope here was that the quality of a cultural product could be clearly distinguished from its content. There were good tangos and bad tangos, just like there were good symphonies and bad symphonies. The trick was to improve the tango without turning it into something else. Similarly, another article argued that singers needed to excel in both their capacity for expression and the quality of their voice. The former was crucial to their *tipicismo*, their ability to achieve tango authenticity, while the latter was more universal. Unfortunately, according to *Radiolandia*, Argentines had tended to overvalue expression, elevating many poor singers to stardom.¹⁷

The distinction between improvements in the quality of tango and the

introduction of inauthenticity was difficult to discern. For example, on the question of lyrics, *Radiolandia* itself wavered between calling for a stop to the use of lunfardo and arguing that the porteño argot constituted a central aspect of tango authenticity and could be reconciled with improvements in quality.¹⁸ Predictably, debates raged in the 1930s over precisely where to draw the line between authenticity and improvement. In a typical letter published in *Sintonía*, one reader criticized Radio Belgrano and its artistic director, Pablo Osvaldo Valle, for emphasizing “quantity and not quality” when selecting performers.¹⁹ But of course, definitions of “quality” varied. While most of *Sintonía*’s letter writers were fans of the tango, some insisted that radio stations like Belgrano could provide “quality” only by incorporating classical music.²⁰ The intellectual Bernardo Kordon wrote to say that tango was in clear decline: “There has certainly been an overproduction of [tango songs], but quality is absent in the majority, and what is worse, they easily provoke ridicule when they are inspired by exotic themes.”²¹ Kordon’s letter brought an angry response from a group of readers who rose to the defense of contemporary tango composers.²² While virtually all letter writers agreed on the need to pursue quality, they disagreed on how to define that concept.

The struggle to reconcile authenticity with quality played out in the context of capitalist mass culture, and many Argentines worried that tango was being warped by those who sought to exploit it for profit. A report in *Sintonía* on Juan de Dios Filiberto depicted the tango composer, musician, and band leader as a tragic figure, at war with modern, market culture: “In a hostile and commercialized environment, he dreams of grand and impossible things. . . . Filiberto directs an orquesta típica with which he is determined to triumph against the commercialization of the tango.” And Filiberto himself echoed these themes in his own comments to the reporter: he longed for the day, he said, “when our song, which is the song of all the multitudes who suffer, of all the pain of the poor, can arise in its fullness, without the burden of those who commercialize it, of those who exploit it.”²³ Tango’s working-class authenticity here stands in opposition to the project of elevating the tango in order to market it to a higher class of consumer.

Many of *Sintonía*’s letter writers agreed. According to one, “The tango is in decline because it is no longer Argentine, it is bastardized, bad, immoral. The tango of today is not art, it is commerce, it is not the expression of our feeling, it is ‘plagiarism.’”²⁴ For this writer, the com-

modification of tango threatened to falsify it, to strip it of its Argentinidad, presumably because foreign elements like saxophones would be included in the pursuit of popularity. But the market cut both ways. Mass cultural capitalism could threaten tango authenticity, but it could also stand in the way of achieving progress and cultural elevation. Arguing that an unfettered market encouraged vulgarity, the magazine *Antena* called on the state to play a more active role in regulating the moral and cultural content of the radio. Specifically, the magazine insisted that the government should establish a set of credentials required of anyone serving as artistic director of a radio station: this position “must not be held by audacious people, semiliterates, and people of strange combinations, as occurs now.” Artistic directors, according to *Antena*, needed cultural preparation in order to distinguish between “the bad, the ordinary, and the good.”²⁵

Likewise, *Sintonía*'s editors also hoped that radio stations would resist the cultural threat posed by commercialism. They denounced advertisers who insisted that “one has to give the public what it asks for,” thereby putting commercial interests ahead of the need to elevate the culture: “Above and beyond the supposed demands of the public is the cultural mission that radio has the obligation to fulfill.” The article complimented Radio El Mundo for having rejected “routine and mediocrity” in favor of “more dignified and pure expressions of art,” and having done so without losing its audience.²⁶ This version of the anti-commercialism argument did not make distinctions between jazz and tango, since both were aggressively and successfully marketed on the radio. Like the letter writer who demanded that Radio Belgrano include classical music, *Sintonía*'s editors explicitly praised the inclusion of “the most elevated musical genres” on the radio, implying that to give the people what they want would be to give in to the hegemony of tango and jazz. But of course a magazine that was itself committed to celebrating these popular genres could only push this argument so far. Congratulating Radio Splendid and Radio Excelsior for elevating their programming, *Sintonía* was careful not to denigrate popular culture: “Those happy initiatives, which were echoed on other stations, are responsible for the continuous contact of our public with the best performers and the greatest authors. We are not referring to this or that genre, but rather to all that is good, whether popular or classical.”²⁷ Here, *Sintonía* embraced the argument that quality could be distinguished from content and that popular music like tango could be

improved without losing its essence. Nevertheless, the idea that radio stations or the state should engage in efforts of cultural improvement suggested that commercial appeal and cultural value tended to move in opposite directions; if left to the market, the radio would be dominated by the mediocre.

Critics seeking to improve the tango found their hero in the modernizing band leader Julio de Caro, and yet his efforts were also controversial. By 1933 de Caro, who had dominated the tango scene in the late 1920s, was intent on enlarging his band in order to create something new: "In the new year, I plan to realize my old dream of a genuinely Argentine symphonic orchestra, which is completely different from the vulgar orquesta típica, since that type of band plays exclusively tangos, while I will interpret a rigorous selection of those, but within a large repertoire of completely symphonic versions of folkloric music, such as *vidalitas*, *estilizadas*, *cañas*, *mediacañas*, *malambos*, etc. . . . It is necessary to raise the moral and spiritual concept of our music. . . . The tango needs to develop in another way, so that it acquires quality (*para que tome categoría*) and establishes itself as an elevated musical expression and so that it is listened to with pleasure even in the circles that are most resistant to our popular music."²⁸ De Caro imagined a large orchestra of the best professional musicians capable of elevating the tango or, as he put it elsewhere, dressing it "in the finery (*ropaje*) it has lacked until now."²⁹ The attempt to create a symphonic tango earned de Caro frequent praise from *Radiolandia*, *Sintonía*, and *Antena*, committed as they were to elevating Argentine popular culture. *Sintonía* labeled him "a tireless tango worker" and congratulated him for refusing to rest on his laurels.

The notion of tango as a folk genre that could form the basis of sophisticated, symphonic music was inspired by international trends. De Caro explicitly compared the project to the work of the Cuban composer Ernesto Lecuona and the Russian bandleader Dajos Bela, both of whom had composed symphonic works on the basis of folk material.³⁰ Jazz, in particular, seemed to offer a clear example of how primitive music could be used as raw material by serious composers. *Sintonía's* jazz writer, León Klimovsky, for example, described jazz as a "rich 'stylization' of the best and most primitive folkloric elements."³¹ And de Caro was not alone in thinking of tango in precisely these terms. In the late 1930s, *Radiolandia* often described tango as "urban folklore" and argued that "folklore . . . is the basis of all the great musical creations of the world."³² Similarly,

Osvaldo Fresedo argued that tango “represents the character of the people” but that it needed to progress “like popular music from all over the world.”³³ Inevitably, de Caro’s pursuit of quality raised the specter of inauthenticity, leading his interviewer to ask whether “modern orchestrations” would rob the tango of its “traditional flavor.” In response, de Caro argued that the fox trot and rumba had both been orchestrated without losing their authenticity.

De Caro’s symphonic tango project appealed on various grounds. Built on the concept of folklore, it promised an escape from the taint of commercialism. Since it echoed international developments, it seemed modern and up-to-date. Most important, though, it offered a way to improve the tango, to raise it up from its embarrassingly plebeian origins without losing its ability to represent Argentine national identity. De Caro’s own background helps explain his interest in this project. Unlike Francisco Canaro and other members of the Old Guard, Julio de Caro could not claim proletarian roots. His father, an Italian immigrant who had been a conservatory professor in Milan and ran his own music school in Buenos Aires, wanted Julio to attend university and become a doctor. When Julio insisted on playing tango professionally, his father threw him out of the house. Perhaps out of a desire to justify his career path, de Caro’s tango ambitions always centered on the pursuit of “quality (*categoría*),” the desire to create “something very special, that would ennoble the tango.”³⁴ In any case, given de Caro’s middle-class upbringing, it is not surprising that he agreed with the many critics who hoped to elevate the tango so that it might serve as a more appropriate national symbol.

Although popular with many critics, de Caro’s efforts at tango renovation provoked bitter opposition as well. This polemic is today typically understood as a debate between traditionalists and evolutionists, and those terms were used at the time.³⁵ But in the 1930s these different approaches to tango were also commonly understood to be about rhythm and melody. In one typical account, *Radiolandia* sorted Radio Belgrano’s extensive lineup of tango bands into two broad categories: “From rhythmic tango to melodic tango, each director imposes a definite personality on his band.” Devotees of symphonic tango, like Roberto Zerrillo, along with other innovators of the New Guard, like Osvaldo Fresedo, were placed in the melodic tango camp, while more traditional practitioners cultivated rhythm.³⁶ De Caro himself shared the notion that tango’s roots lay in its rhythm, which, he argued, should be respected by innovators:

“Each of our tangos should be interpreted according to the rhythm appropriate to its essential modality, but the orchestrations, in general, need the contribution of new harmonies.”³⁷ Melody, harmony, instrumentation: these were the areas where tango could be improved; its essential rhythms had to be respected, lest the music lose its essence.

Even as de Caro pursued his symphonic tango, a traditionalist rhythmic revival was under way. Tango fans who rejected the complex harmonic innovations of the New Guard looked increasingly to the genre’s past. This pursuit of authentic origins yielded a revival of the *milonga*, a music and dance form that preceded tango and that typically featured a faster tempo and greater syncopation. Beginning in the early 1930s, milongas regained their position on porteño dance floors and on the radio, as orquestas típicas increasingly featured them in their repertoires. Much of the impetus for this renaissance came from a series of popular new milongas composed by Sebastián Piana in collaboration with lyricist Homero Manzi. The two Piana-Manzi compositions that launched the movement were “Milonga Sentimental” (1931) and “Milonga del 900” (1933). Both appeared in the film *¡Tango!* (1933), and both were recorded by Carlos Gardel, among many others. Written from a woman’s point of view, “Milonga Sentimental” told a story of lost love in a wistful tone that reinforced the nostalgia implicit in the retrieval of an older musical style. This nostalgic mood was even more firmly established in Manzi’s lyrics for “Milonga del novecientos,” which explicitly evoke the Buenos Aires suburbios of the previous century. The rediscovery of the milonga reflected a yearning for Argentina’s pre-modern, rural past. The milonga, which had long been featured in the repertoire of folksingers, was firmly associated with the rural folk culture of the Pampas.

But even if these rural associations helped produce the nostalgia that Manzi’s lyrics cultivated, the milonga of the 1930s was understood to be a new modernized milonga. From the beginning, fan magazines distinguished between the *milonga pampeana* that formed part of the folk music canon and the *milonga tanguada* (or tangoized milonga) that the orquestas típicas were now playing.³⁸ Similarly, in an interview decades later, Sebastián Piana emphasized the extent of his innovation in transforming the “country milonga,” which he associated with the gauchos and payadores of an earlier era, into the *milonga porteña*: “I needed to make milongas that were different, which these were: they maintained the simplicity of the rhythm but with a more defined musical form, as if they

were tango songs, but without losing the essence of the milonga.”³⁹ As he put it elsewhere, he respected the “rhythmic spirit” of the original milongas while improving their “monotonous” melodies.⁴⁰ Piana saw his own work in much the same terms as Julio de Caro saw the symphonic tango: both sought to introduce melodic or harmonic sophistication to a primitive, rhythmic form.

Milonga’s associations with the Pampas were not the only source of authenticity on which the genre’s new practitioners could draw. The form was also linked to *candombe*, a music and dance style created by Afro-Argentines and their ancestors during the colonial period. The milonga’s African roots may have threatened racist elites for whom the whiteness of Argentine culture was axiomatic, but they were quite helpful to those seeking a primitive music that could serve as the basis for a sophisticated Argentine modernism. Vicente Rossi’s book *Cosas de negros* (1926) was among the first to argue that the choreographic origins of tango and milonga lay in the African derived *candombe*. This idea, widely accepted among scholars today,⁴¹ gained new credence during the 1930s. In *La Historia del Tango*, a lengthy series of lectures given on the radio beginning in 1934 and published two years later, Héctor Bates and Luis J. Bates accepted the notion that the Afro-Argentine *candombe* had given the tango its essential rhythm.⁴² Bernardo Kordon went further in a series of articles he wrote for *Sintonía*, in which he argued that “tango is of pure African origin.” Kordon was convinced that tango and Argentine culture more generally had entered a period of decline under the nefarious influence of jazz, which he saw as a commercial music with no cultural value.⁴³ For him, the recovery of tango’s African roots was a way to shore up the music’s authenticity, its connection to local folk traditions of long standing. By the end of the 1930s, the recovery of the milonga had been explicitly linked to a renewed interest in the Afro-Argentine culture of the previous centuries. In particular, Homero Manzi had begun to write lyrics with explicitly black themes for milongas by Piana and by Lucio Demare: “Pena mulata,” “Negra María,” and “Papá Baltasar,” to name three of the most well known.

In 1941, *Radiolandia* signaled the importance of this trend within Argentine mass culture, declaring that “the *candombe* is reborn within Argentine dance.” Describing the work of Piana, Manzi, Demare, and others, the magazine was enthusiastic about this “process of re-creating the black Río de la Plata”: “We point out these developments with true

joy. It is a way to renovate our songbook and open a path for lyricists and composers that will furnish more than one poetic and musical surprise.”⁴⁴ *Radiolandia* shared Piana’s view of the milonga renaissance: it was an effort to rework and improve material from an older, folkloric, and thus authentic tradition. But milonga’s connection to the candombe and to Afro-Argentine culture more generally functioned as more than just a guarantee of authenticity. It also anchored and explicated the milonga’s reassertion of rhythm. *Radiolandia* situated the new music in the context of an international boom in African-derived musics from Brazil, Cuba, and the United States.⁴⁵ The rise of samba, son, and swing in the 1930s represented a “liberation of the drum” throughout the Americas. Even if most orquestas típicas still generally shunned percussion instruments, the milonga’s quicker tempo and more syncopated rhythm made it a logical choice for bands looking to compete in this new environment.⁴⁶ Like de Caro’s symphonic tango, then, the milonga renaissance responded to international trends; it was another product of the transnational marketplace.

The association between Afro-Argentine culture and the milonga’s accentuated rhythm reveals the racial logic implicit in the tango debates of the day. De Caro’s notion that rhythm provided traditional authenticity while harmony and melody were the natural arenas for innovation and modernization relied on a racial hierarchy that placed primitive Africa below civilized Europe. Nevertheless, proponents of traditionalism were willing to embrace African cultural elements so long as those elements served the purpose of anchoring the tango to the Argentine past. This turn to Afro-Argentine culture was made easier by the fact that it could be depicted as “re-creating” a culture that had “disappeared.” Even though, as “El Negro” Ferreyra’s nickname demonstrates, some Argentines continued to be identified as the descendants of Africans, Argentina’s self-image as a white nation was by now well established.⁴⁷

Within the mass culture of the 1930s, Afro-Argentines figured frequently, most often as symbols of the nation’s authentic past. Radio novelas set in the era of Juan Manuel de Rosas invariably featured black characters and ostensibly Afro-Argentine music. For example, the hugely popular *Bajo la Santa Federación* included several “black songs (*canciones de negros*)” including the “Song of the Candombero.” A melodrama that explored the illicit love affair between the daughter of a wealthy Rosas loyalist and an opponent of the regime, the radio novela’s source of comic

relief was “el negro Domingo,” the family’s frequently drunk household servant. The scripts poked fun at Domingo’s stereotypically black speech patterns—the *r*’s pronounced as *l*’s—as well as his unthinking loyalty to Rosas, but they also allowed him to demonstrate his skill as an improvising singer or payador.⁴⁸ Since the presence of Afro-Argentine servants, their alleged support for Rosas, and their over-representation among payadores were all well known, Domingo lent this historical reconstruction some much-needed realism. Similarly, tango films set in the seedy arrabales of the turn of the century used black extras in the same way they used old-fashioned clothing: as an easy way to provide a “period” feel. The dance scene that opens the film *¡Tango!* features a black woman dancer in the foreground. In her performance of “La morocha” in *Puerta cerrada*, Libertad Lamarque is accompanied not only by a compadrito but also by a couple of Afro-Argentine children playing. In all of these representations, Afro-Argentines were guarantors of authenticity, firmly located in the past. In this context, the blackness of milonga’s roots was reassuring.

The debates over rhythmic authenticity and melodic or harmonic innovation preoccupied intellectuals and tango connoisseurs, but in the second half of the 1930s developments in the marketplace seemed to settle the matter. The impressive popularity of Juan D’Arienzo, whose band became a fixture on Radio El Mundo, signaled the commercial triumph of rhythmic traditionalism. The so-called King of the Beat, D’Arienzo self-consciously recovered an earlier musical style associated with tango’s Old Guard, one that emphasized a simple, rigid rhythm that made it extremely popular among dancers. D’Arienzo’s band played a great many of the older classics of the tango and milonga canon and tended to inspire a happier, more upbeat mood. His success, no doubt, responded to many of the same factors responsible for the milonga renaissance of the same period, even if D’Arienzo did not share Piana’s interest in melodic innovation. D’Arienzo gave fans a respite from the mood of sadness and cynicism that had dominated tango lyrics in the early 1930s. For male listeners, D’Arienzo’s music also offered reassuring gender associations. Many fans interpreted his traditionalist style as a more virile, ruggedly masculine version of the tango. As one letter writer to *Sintonía* explained, the tango was more macho before New Guard “lyricism” had feminized it: “The tango needs to have that somewhat rustic innocence and that straightforward manliness which was the principal characteristic of the

production of years gone by.”⁴⁹ As I have argued, the film *Los tres berretines* (1933) drew a sharp distinction between the frivolous feminine consumerism involved in seeing foreign movies and the productive masculinity of domestic mass culture like tango and soccer. Just as the rise of a national cinema could help Argentine men undo their emasculation, D’Arienzo’s fans saw his traditionalism as an antidote to the New Guard’s sophisticated elaborations, which they heard as overly fancy or even pretty.

The D’Arienzo phenomenon inspired attacks from the partisans of an improved, modernized tango. Referring to D’Arienzo’s popularity, one letter writer in *Sintonía* opined that “the current demands of our public represent a step backward of twenty years in the evolution of our tango.” In the following issue, *Sintonía* printed a rejoinder from one of its contributors, who criticized innovators like Julio de Caro and Osvaldo Fresedo for having pursued “new forms of tango that may have elevated their musical value but have bastardized their meaning.” By contrast, he argued, D’Arienzo was to be complimented for having returned the tango to its “primitive, simple, and genuine paths. He accentuated its rhythm, which had been getting lost among the very musical but not very ‘tangoesque’ harmonies of cornets and saxes, and he achieved the old novelty of playing a true tango.”⁵⁰ This defender of traditionalism accepted the basic association between rhythm and primitive authenticity; he simply argued that the innovations of de Caro and Fresedo had lost that basic rhythmic pulse.

Faced with the success of D’Arienzo, the proponents of improvement reacted defensively. They argued that while tango’s rhythm was to be preserved in order to guarantee the music’s authenticity, it needed to be kept to reasonable limits. De Caro, whose symphonic tango, in the words of *Antena* “did not have the intense impact that in reality the effort deserved,” now sought to inject more rhythm but without going too far: “The restless composer imposes on the band he leads the modality that the public in these times most appreciates, and that is rhythm. . . . He will cultivate rhythm without exaggerations, which are counterproductive, and he will maintain, since everything is compatible, the level he has achieved.”⁵¹ *Antena* depicted de Caro’s newfound respect for rhythm as a necessary concession to popular tastes but insisted that the orchestra leader would restrain rhythm, keeping it within acceptable limits. *Sintonía* was similarly impressed with de Caro’s new effort to balance rhythm and

melody, arguing that he had proven it was possible to improve tango without losing its popularity: “He has made the tango an elevated musical expression without thereby eroding the interest the tango has as dance music.”⁵² Likewise, Osvaldo Fresedo, who continued to pursue innovation through the use of harp and vibraphone and remained a proponent of the “melodic tango,” declared that “to dance is not to allow oneself to be carried away by a rhythm. . . . A poet has said that the tango is danced with the soul. And he is right. For that reason, I try to achieve—with my band—that state of the soul in the dancer, preparing his spirit for the melody.”⁵³ Fresedo may have been more willing than de Caro to resist popular trends, but the two men shared a commitment to moderating and containing tango rhythm. This defensive reaction to D’Arienzo’s popularity reflected more than just the desperation of musicians worried about losing their audience. De Caro and Fresedo retained the enthusiastic support of the fan magazines because they promised to reconcile primitive authenticity with civilized modernity and commercial success with quality.

Efforts to remake the tango so that it might represent an improved national identity were never more than partially successful. Lunfardo words and plebeian references could be purged from lyrics, vocal techniques improved, tango symphonies composed, and folk traditions elevated with the use of sophisticated harmonies and jazz instrumentation. But all of these “improvements” threatened tango’s authentic flavor. Even though improving the tango appealed to many as a way of attracting wealthier consumers, the market seemed to reward the most old-fashioned approaches. Moreover, the most commercially successful forms of tango were inspired not by European high culture or even by modern jazz instrumentation, but by the new emphasis on rhythm visible in the rising popularity of African-derived musical genres throughout the Americas. While this recourse to rhythm smacked of giving in to primitive urges, efforts to improve could easily veer into the terrain of the imitative. Despite the ongoing popularity of jazz in Argentina, many continued to worry that North American influence threatened tango’s purity. The protagonist of Manuel Romero’s nostalgic film *Los muchachos de antes no usaban gomina* (1937) walks out of a fancy upper-class Buenos Aires club, declaring with disgust, “Here even the bandoneones play in English.” The clear implication is that slavish imitation of jazz was part of the elite’s desperate attempt to disown the national culture of the

masses. Despite all of their efforts, none of the many would-be improvers of tango succeeded in reconciling their visions of cultural elevation with tango's plebeian, even populist, authenticity.

LOOKING FOR THE NATION IN THE INTERIOR

Although many of those who sought to improve popular culture were conservatives, condescension toward the cultural practices of the masses crossed political lines. The Argentine Left had a long-standing interest in spreading high culture to the proletariat. The Socialist Party built libraries in which workers could read the classics of world literature, while turn-of-the-century anarchists militated against carnival celebrations, alcohol consumption, and soccer, and replaced popular tango lyrics with more edifying messages.⁵⁴ The leftist artistic and literary movements that emerged in Buenos Aires during the 1920s inherited this distrust of popular culture. The printmakers who formed the so-called *Artistas del Pueblo* studio produced social realist art aimed at eliciting sympathy for the poor and encouraging workers to fight to improve their lives. More famously, the Boedo group of writers practiced a similar form of social realism, influenced by Zola, Tolstoy, and Gorky as well as the Argentine poet Almafuerde. Rejecting the vanguardism of Borges and the other members of the so-called Florida group, Boedo writers like Elías Castelnuovo, Leónidas Barletta, and Alvaro Yunque wrote fiction aimed at raising the consciousness of the working class. For artists and writers like these, popular culture, particularly in its commercialized mass form, represented a dangerous distraction that lured workers away from revolutionary struggle. As the artist Guillermo Facio Hebequer told his friend Enrique Santos Discépolo, "The tango is the opiate of the masses."⁵⁵ There were intellectuals in the 1920s who were drawn to mass culture, such as Enrique González Tuñón, whose stories based on tango lyrics appeared regularly in the popular newspaper *Crítica*, but these writers tended to avoid overtly political messages. González Tuñón sympathized with the milonguitas who chose the life of the cabaret over the soul-killing world of poorly paid factory labor, but he offered no analysis of the causes of such suffering, nor did he suggest any possibility for change.⁵⁶ Leftist intellectuals of the 1920s either disdained mass cultural products as counterproductive escapism, or else they embraced mass culture but avoided politics.

In the 1930s, this began to change. In 1935 a group of young Radical Party members rejected the party leadership's decision to participate in electoral politics. These rebels formed the FORJA (Spanish for "forge," the acronym stood for the Radical-Oriented Force of Argentine Youth) to oppose any collaboration with the fraudulent conservative government. Inspired by the writings of Scalabrini Ortiz on the nefarious role of the British in the Argentine economy, FORJA intellectuals like Arturo Jauretche argued that the nation had been colonized by the forces of foreign capital in alliance with the Argentine oligarchy. They believed that liberal constitutionalism served only to entrench the power of this self-serving elite, and they hoped to replace it with a truly popular democracy modeled on Yrigoyenism and on nineteenth-century federalism.⁵⁷ Perhaps because of their commitment to liberate Argentines from "mental colonialism," some FORJA members recognized the enormous potential of the mass media. In particular, Homero Manzi, one of the group's founders, emerged as an influential tango lyricist and screenwriter as well as a prolific cultural critic during the 1930s.⁵⁸ While Manzi kept overt political messages out of his lyrics and scripts, his cultural production was shaped by a desire to create a new popular nationalism. Like nationalists on the right, Manzi tended to look to rural Argentina as the basis for an authentic Argentine national identity.

Manzi's lyrics and screenplays reflected his desire to produce "a culture of letters for men, not a culture for men of letters." This sentiment betrayed Manzi's populism, but also his desire to improve the quality of popular culture—to raise it to the level of a "culture of letters"—an effort that required a struggle against two forces: the degradation of commercialism and the almost irresistible allure of the foreign. In a series of articles he wrote for the magazine *Micrófono*, Manzi attacked the popular radio novela *Chispazos de Tradición* as superficial and inauthentic. Agreeing with many on the right, he argued that the prominence of low-quality programs of this type demonstrated the need for the state to take over the radio waves.⁵⁹ Manzi believed that the capitalist marketplace posed a general threat to Argentine culture, but as a member of FORJA, he was particularly worried about the pervasiveness of foreign cultural influence. In an article in *Antena* published in 1934, he criticized Gardel for making movies abroad, thereby competing directly with local filmmakers while producing inauthentic films set in a "French pampa." Worst of all

was Gardel's weakness for Alfredo Le Pera, whose uninteresting plots lacked any "nationalist value."⁶⁰ Manzi's hostility to commercialism and to foreign influence shaped his own cultural production. It was apparent, for example, in his long-term collaboration with Sebastián Piana. One of their milongas, "Juan Manuel" (1934), tapped into the popular fad for reconstructions of the Rosas period by evoking the songs of praise sung by blacks loyal to the dictator. On the back of the published sheet music, Manzi and Piana defended the repetition of the phrase *carancuntango* in the chorus by citing Vicente Rossi's book on the Afro-Argentine origins of the tango. But if this amounted to a defense of the song's authenticity, Manzi and Piana also acknowledged that blacks of the Rosas era would have danced a *candombe*, not a milonga. The song, they said, was "a stylization"; they "looked to the past for an inspirational theme in order to fortify the *porteñismo* of our songs, which is so threatened by foreignism (*extranjerismo*)."⁶¹

Manzi's attempts to forge a popular national culture entailed a delicate balancing act. He attacked inauthenticity while embracing "stylization." He decried commercialism but defended the "popular." This ambivalence was particularly apparent in his attitudes toward Gardel, Argentina's biggest mass cultural star. In a radio script from 1938, Manzi described Gardel as the perfect synthesis of immigrant and *criollo*, city and country, and he rested this assessment on the wisdom of popular opinion: "The representative value of an artist is not conferred in the academies nor through the judgment of experts. It is conferred in the assembly of the people." Gardel's popularity, in other words, proved his quality. Yet, just like Julio de Caro, Manzi considered Gardel's repertoire a kind of "folklore" that might serve as "the foundation for the great Argentine music."⁶² Elsewhere, Manzi described Gardel as less profound than a singer like Ignacio Corsini: "There are those like Gabino Ezeiza, Gardel, or Maizani, whose art expresses customs, the external . . . what a man wears on the outside . . . in order to hide his true, interior personality . . . But others, like Betinotti and Corsini, penetrating deeper within the human soul, have learned to say what gestures and pretension hide. To express the anxiety . . . of the man in love. The impression that oppresses the superstitious soul of the *criollo* who crosses the countryside at twilight. The need for companionship that attracts [men] to campfires. Nostalgia for the *barrio*, love of alleyways. The infinite sadness of memory."⁶³

Manzi championed popular culture's capacity to express the deep, emotional truths of a nation, but he worried that an unregulated market would produce more superficial products.

Manzi's own lyrics pursued the goal of authentic nationalist expression by way of elegant poetry, bittersweet nostalgia, and a celebration of masculine toughness.⁶⁴ Like his nemesis, Alfredo Le Pera, Manzi tended to avoid lunfardo, preferring an often erudite vocabulary. Yet unlike Le Pera, Manzi rooted his lyrics in the local world, exploring characters and settings drawn directly from Argentine lore:

Barrio de tango, luna y misterio,
calles lejanas, ¡cómo estarán!

...

Barrio de tango, qué fue de aquella,
Juana, la rubia, que tanto amé.
¡Sabrá que sufro, pensando en ella,
desde la tarde que la dejé!

*Barrio of tango, moon, and mystery,
distant streets, how are they?*

...

*Barrio of tango, what happened to her,
Juana, the blond, whom I loved so much
Does she know that I suffer, thinking of her,
ever since the afternoon I left her!*

In lyrics like this one ("Barrio de tango, 1942), Manzi interweaves tango's classic expression of regret over lost love with a nostalgic longing for the porteño neighborhoods of the past. Similarly, "Milonga del 900" describes the tough knife-wielding man of the suburbio as a relic of an earlier time: "I don't like paved streets / nor do I go for modern life (No me gusta el empedrao / ni me doy con lo moderno)." While the singer describes being abandoned by the woman he loved, he rejects the weepy emotional response of so many other tangos; instead he takes it like a man: "I loved her because I loved her / and so I forgive her. / There's nothing worse than spite / to live embittered." With this tough brand of masculinity, Manzi offered an alternative to the feminized emotionalism elaborated by other lyricists. When Juan D'Arienzo's success in the late 1930s inspired a revival of the older, more primitive tango, Manzi em-

braced the style precisely because he saw it as “happy” and “virile,” in contrast to the “funereal” approach of contemporary tango.⁶⁵ In seeking to recover a virile masculinity, Manzi followed his FORJA colleague Arturo Jauretche, who had ridiculed emasculated tango singers for “crying over their unfortunate loves.”⁶⁶ And like Jauretche, who embraced the tradition of criollismo, Manzi located a more robust masculinity in the rural, pre-modern past: the streets of his Buenos Aires suburbs are unpaved and smell of weeds (“Malena,” 1942), and alongside the omnipresent bandoneón, one hears “toads rumbling in the lagoon” (“Barrio de tango”).⁶⁷ His “country milongas” made this nostalgia for the countryside explicit, in effect relocating tango’s stories of lost love and regret to rural settings:

Llegabas por el sendero,
delantal y trenzas sueltas.
Brillaban tus ojos negros,
claridad de luna llena.

*You used to come by the path,
apron and loose braids.
Your black eyes shone,
light of the full moon.*

(“Milonga triste,” 1936)⁶⁸

Nostalgia, virility, the countryside: these themes came together in Manzi’s cinematic efforts. Manzi had written music for films throughout the 1930s, but his commitment to the cinema grew after 1940 and particularly after he forged a working relationship with a group of film actors and directors who had founded a new studio in 1941. Their company, Artistas Argentinas Asociadas (AAA), aimed to produce higher quality films than those churned out by the dominant Argentine studios. In this, the new company was not unique. That same year, Natalio Botana, the editor of *Crítica*, created the Baires film company in order to produce sophisticated films modeled on foreign cinema, which he hoped might reach an international audience.⁶⁹ But whereas Baires and others aimed to raise the quality of Argentine cinema in order to market it abroad, the AAA group envisioned high-caliber films for the Argentine masses. Moreover, they wanted a truly national cinema, one that embraced local themes instead of recycling the plots of foreign movies. According to the actor Francisco

Petrone, one of the founders of the AAA, the goal was “to make cinema that is truly ours.”⁷⁰ The pursuit of a high-quality, nationalist, commercially viable mass culture perfectly aligned the AAA with the FORJA and with Homero Manzi’s dream of “a culture of letters for men.”⁷¹

As a screenwriter for AAA, Manzi’s unlikely partner was Ulyses Petit de Murat, a former film critic whose denunciations of the poor quality of domestic cinema bore little trace of the popular nationalism of the FORJA. Yet it was Manzi who suggested that the two write a screenplay based on the modernist poet Leopoldo Lugones’s *La guerra gaucha*, a notoriously highbrow collection of twenty-two stories about the battles fought in the northwestern province of Salta during Argentina’s war for independence. During the 1920s, Lugones embraced Mussolini’s Fascism and became one of the key intellectual architects of Argentina’s right-wing, anti-democratic nationalism. But *La guerra gaucha*, written in 1905, belonged to an earlier phase in Lugones’s political trajectory, when the poet was a Socialist looking to ground Argentine national identity in the heroic revolutionary struggle for independence from Spain. In order to construct this national myth, Lugones needed to revise long-standing liberal ideas about rural Argentina, and particularly about the figure of the gaucho. Whereas liberals had long imagined violent gaucho outlaws as the major obstacle to nation formation, Lugones saw the independence war as a crucible that transformed the gauchos into an army capable of forging the nation. Lugones did not celebrate the power and agency of the masses. On the contrary, as Juan Pablo Dabove has argued, the hero in this account is the caudillo Martín Miguel de Güemes, the embodiment of Argentine patriotism, who orients rural violence toward the goal of independence and thereby gives it meaning.⁷² In Güemes and his army, Lugones saw a deeply hierarchical, patriarchal society that he hoped might form a model for contemporary Argentina.⁷³ Indeed, Lugones’s text reduces the rural population to an anonymous mass; each story features different characters, and many of them are not even named. For Petit de Murat, *La guerra gaucha* offered a means to inspire patriotism and to resist the impact of foreign influences on Argentine cinema.⁷⁴ Manzi shared these nationalist aspirations, but he also hoped to democratize and popularize Lugones’s patriotic story. Toward that end, he resisted Petit de Murat’s efforts to include long passages from the original text, arguing that nobody would understand them.⁷⁵

The film version of *La guerra gaucha* (Demare, 1942), by some accounts

the most successful Argentine movie ever, effectively inverted Lugones's elitism.⁷⁶ Instead of a paean to the heroic leader, the film offers a group of noble characters who demonstrate self-sacrifice, integrity, and generosity in the patriotic struggle against Spanish oppression: the sexton who passes messages to the patriot army by ringing the church bell in code, the brave captains who lead the struggle in the face of insurmountable odds, the beautiful woman whose love for a captured Spanish lieutenant converts him to the patriotic cause. By weaving one unified narrative out of just a handful of the many stories in Lugones's text, Manzi and Petit de Murat turned anonymous figures into fully developed characters. Similarly, by replacing the poet's difficult modernist prose with a cinematic style that encouraged audience identification, the filmmakers highlighted the active contribution of the poor to the creation of the Argentine nation. The film's final words describe the independence war as a collective struggle: "Like this they lived, like this they died, the nameless, those who fought the gaucho war." Yet in a sense, the film goes further by replacing the "nameless" with vibrant popular heroes. Nevertheless, the screenwriters' reliance on Lugones's text does at least partly undermine the film's democratic message. In particular, the arrival of Güemes to rescue the gaucho army at the end of the movie implies unmistakably that the people need a powerful leader in order to be effective. This verticalism, so central to Lugones's book, stands in tension with the film's otherwise radically democratic vision.

Apart from its reliance on Lugones, *La guerra gaucha* drew on a long tradition of mass cultural representations of gauchos. As we have seen, the criollo circus and criollista literature of the turn of the century packaged the culture of the Pampas for consumption by the urban masses. During the 1910s, the folk music recordings of Gardel and Corsini and the silent film *Nobleza gaucha* brought criollismo to the new media. In the 1930s, *Chispazos de Tradición* ushered in a series of radio plays set in the Pampas, while Gardel's star turn as a gaucho in *Las luces de Buenos Aires* in 1931 inspired domestic filmmakers. Over the next several years, Argentine studios released dozens of criollista films. These movies, both comic and tragic, partake heavily in the conventions of melodrama: the rural poor are represented as noble, generous, and innocent victims, while the villains are either unsavory urban types or rich landowners. In *Los caranchos de la Florida* (de Zavala, 1938), to cite just one example, the son of a wealthy cattle rancher returns home after completing his education in

Buenos Aires and falls in love with the beautiful daughter of a poor family in town. The hypocritical landowner, who wants the girl for himself, stokes his son's class prejudice in order to convince him that "these people" are beneath him. The film portrays the rural poor in a positive light, but it foregrounds conflict within the family rather than between the classes.⁷⁷

A more incisive, critical approach to the countryside began to appear in the work of the director Mario Soffici, particularly in a series of "social folkloric" films he made between 1937 and 1942. A student of José Agustín Ferreyra, Soffici had directed a handful of forgettable genre films before he began to apply his teacher's social-realist style to stories set in the countryside. Soffici emulated Ferreyra's empathy for the poor as well as his close attention to the details of everyday life, but these films broke new ground by focusing directly on economic exploitation.⁷⁸ *Kilómetro 111* (1938) tells the story of a farming community reduced to poverty by wealthy landowners and the British-owned railroad company. While the film embraces the melodramatic opposition between poor and rich, the conflicts it explores are economic, not romantic: a family cannot afford their son's medical treatment because of the low prices the rich landowners pay for their grain. Moreover, unlike typical melodramas, Soffici's film grants the community significant agency. Farmers protest their mistreatment and pool their resources in order to help out one of their own. As in the comedies of Luis Sandrini, *Kilómetro 111* celebrates above all the solidarity and communal spirit of the poor. Considerably less sanguine is *Prisioneros de la tierra* (1939), Soffici's most successful film and, alongside *La guerra gaucha*, one of the acknowledged masterpieces of Argentine cinema. Here, Soffici deepens his critique of economic exploitation by examining the plight of *yerba mate* workers in the remote Misiones region. As Elina Tranchini argues, the film's hero, Podeley, combines a vision of the rural worker as honest and hardworking with an older celebration of masculine courage and violence, drawn from the criollista stories of gaucho rebels like Juan Moreira.⁷⁹ When Podeley's girlfriend is murdered by her alcoholic father in a fit of delirium tremens, he takes revenge by murdering the German foreman whose vicious brutality has condemned the workers to a life of despair.

Soffici's films were among the first commercially successful mass cultural works to offer a realistic, explicit depiction of inequality in Argentina. Unlike so many melodramatic films and tango songs, they clearly

identified exploitation as the cause of the suffering of the poor. Yet this message was not what earned the films such high praise from critics. Instead, the films were celebrated for having injected authenticity into the domestic cinema. *Sintonía*, for example, praised Soffici's *Viento norte* (1937), *Prisioneros de la tierra*, and *El viejo doctor* (1939), while attacking the bulk of the Argentine film industry for imitating Hollywood: "In order to make a good native film, one must avoid using the false scenery overused on Yankee sets, focusing simply and directly on the social panoramas and typical details of the country. . . . The local cinema faces a difficult challenge. That of competing with the foreign industry and contributing something more than luxurious interiors and the advantages of language. For that we need directors blessed with the broadest vision, who in harmony with skillful camera work and adequate lighting, identify themselves with the goal of creating and sustaining a genuine climate of the country."⁸⁰ What *Sintonía* appreciated in Soffici was neither his positive depiction of the poor—a characteristic of virtually all Argentine movies in this period—nor his critique of exploitation, but rather his ability to combine modern filmmaking technique with an authentic "feel" for the nation. Soffici's focus on rural themes made his films authentic, helping him appeal to his audience's nationalism, rather than their consumerist envy of "luxurious interiors."

Nothing like Soffici's critique of economic exploitation appeared in films set in Buenos Aires. The closest the Argentine cinema got to exploring the plight of the urban proletariat was *Chingolo*, the Sandrini comedy about a hobo who resists being corrupted by a greedy industrialist. But *Chingolo* never enters the factory walls or humanizes the suffering of workers. In this era of rapid industrialization, Soffici's depiction of the brutality of rural labor relations reads less as an indictment of contemporary Argentine society than as an authentic representation of the essence of the nation. *El Mundo's* film reviewer, Calki, praised *Kilómetro 111* as a "truly national" film that exhibits "the thematic orientation that our cinema must take if it wants to come to have its own spirit."⁸¹ Soffici adapted stylistic elements from North American filmmakers like John Ford, but his depiction of rural Argentina also drew on the local, popular cultural tradition of criollismo.⁸² This tradition lent the protagonists of his films a certain familiarity, even as it helped locate his stories in a remote time and place. Like *La guerra gaucha*, Soffici's social-folkloric films provided urban audiences with national prototypes drawn from a

distant Argentina. His films echoed the nostalgia of Homero Manzi's milonga lyrics by dramatizing the struggles of pre-industrial rural people confronting the damaging impact of modernization.

In the same way that Argentina's urban films featured the tango, Soffici used folk music to lend authenticity to his depiction of the Argentine interior. As a result, these films contributed to a veritable folk revival that began to transform the Argentine popular music scene in the late 1930s. In subsequent years, folk music would attain massive popularity and achieve a centrality in Argentine culture that it retained for decades. As Oscar Chamosa has shown, the rising popularity of folk music as well as its status as a symbol of the nation was the result of a multifaceted "folklore movement." Inspired by European folklorists and by early nationalist writers like Ricardo Rojas, academic folklorists began to study the cultures of Argentina's northern provinces in the early decades of the twentieth century. These efforts were sponsored by diverse groups including Argentine educators, who hoped that an appreciation for the folk cultures of the interior would help assimilate the descendants of immigrants, as well as Tucumán sugar mill owners who believed that folklore research would uncover the Spanish roots of local culture and thereby prove the whiteness of Tucumán sugar workers. Beginning in the 1920s, the efforts of folklorists and educators were reinforced by those of mass cultural entrepreneurs, who recognized the potential of a commercialized folk music.⁸³

The success of the criollo circus, criollista pulp fiction, and folk singers like Gardel and Corsini had demonstrated that porteño audiences were attracted to rural culture. These mass cultural commodities repackaged the popular culture of the Pampas region surrounding the capital, but there were also efforts to introduce folk music from the more remote northern provinces. In 1921, Andrés Chazarreta, a composer, musician, and folk song collector from Santiago del Estero, brought his musical troupe to Buenos Aires for a series of performances at the Politeama Theater.⁸⁴ Chazarreta packaged the music to appeal to a nationalist vision of the countryside: his musicians and dancers performed on a set made to look like a traditional patio in Santiago del Estero, complete with an elderly Santiagueño couple who provided local color by passing a *mate* throughout the performance. This stagecraft turned professional performers into folk artists, prized less for their creativity or originality than for their authenticity. *Crítica* raved: "Buenos Aires has never seen any-

thing so completely criollo, so traditionally ours.”⁸⁵ Yet despite many such positive reviews, the commercial appeal of folk music was limited, and the genre achieved only token representation on the early radio. Tango eclipsed folk music in the 1920s because its modern instrumentation and urban associations allowed it to compete more effectively with jazz.

This commercial calculus began to shift in the deeply nationalist atmosphere of the 1930s. The vogue for gaucho radio programs that began with *Chispazos de Tradición* sparked a revival of interest in rural folk music. The Italian-born composer Félix Scolatti Almeyda, who had composed and arranged folk music for the Gardel-Razzano duo, wrote the music for *Chispazos* as well as for several of the historical radio plays of Héctor Blomberg and Carlos Viale Paz. By 1933 Scolatti Almeyda’s “folk orchestra” performed regularly in concert and on the radio.⁸⁶ Meanwhile, the mid-1930s saw the emergence of a new type of radio program built around a narrator who recited criollista verse, with frequent breaks for guitar-based folk music. Perhaps the biggest star to emerge from this type of program was the actor Fernando Ochoa, whose performance on Radio Belgrano was so convincing that one impassioned fan described him as “the greatest gaucho since the times of Juan Moreira!”⁸⁷ Ochoa created several comic characters, including Don Bildigernio, an ancient gaucho prone to confusion, but he was most celebrated for his recitals of gauchesque poetry and his storytelling. In 1941 Radio El Mundo and its national network featured Ochoa’s hit program every Tuesday and Thursday evening in the prime time slot of 8:30. Sponsored by the Bayer company’s pain medicine Cafiaspirina, the program featured scripts by Homero Manzi. Ochoa, like Manzi and Soffici, earned critical acclaim for contributing to a “revalorization” of Argentina’s rural culture by fighting “against indifference and xenophilia, succeeding in demonstrating that in the heart of the country there is a clear accent, a diaphanous melody, equal or superior to that which comes from distant lands overseas.”⁸⁸

Such nationalist sentiments produced a steady stream of complaints about the alleged under-representation of folk music on Argentine radio. For example, *Sintonía*’s folk music columnist, Pancho Lucero, regularly bemoaned the quantity and quality of folk programming on the radio, arguing that the few existing programs tended to promote stereotypical styles that were “made in Buenos Aires.”⁸⁹ In Lucero’s interview with Vice President Ramón Castillo in 1938, both men agreed that radio stations

should actively promote authentic Argentine folk music for nationalist ends. As Lucero put it, folk music represented “the logical and efficient means of identifying our people with the most subtle and diverse forms of their sensibility.”⁹⁰ For many commentators, the music of the rural interior offered a more authentic representation of Argentine national identity than did the tango. Concerned that folk music was “in decline,” *Antena* railed against what it saw as the favorable treatment received by urban musicians: “It has been thought that the only thing we need to worry about as far as Argentine music is concerned is the tango. We, and like us a large sector of the public, enjoy the tango and we concede to it the attention and importance that it truly deserves. But the tango, say what you will, does not define in a clear way our true spirit, but rather responds to a local rationale and can in no way be accepted as a faithful translation of the Argentine modality.”⁹¹ *Antena*, like many other commentators, celebrated rural musical styles not as products of specific provinces or regions, but as symbols of a national spirit that was threatened by urbanization and foreign influence. Yet such observers seemed to exaggerate the sorry state of folk music on the radio. In fact, folk singers were a staple on the Argentine radio throughout the 1930s, even if they failed to dislodge tango and jazz from their position of prominence. A typical daily radio listing from 1933 included four female folk singers, or *estilistas*, a number that had grown to nine by 1937. By this time, several of these singers had become stars, including Martha de los Ríos, Virginia Vera, and Patrocínio Díaz, a Santiagueña who had debuted in Andrés Chazarreta’s troupe. Moreover, the popularity of Ochoa’s program and others like it meant that folk music was well represented around the dial. In 1939 one enthusiastic folk music fan listed sixteen duos, bands, and soloists among his favorite radio performers.⁹² Radio stations claimed to offer the best of both urban and rural music, and station owners like Jaime Yankelevich bragged of their talent-hunting trips to the northern provinces.⁹³

Several factors contributed to the growing presence of folk music on the radio. The decline of agriculture and the intensification of import substitution industrialization during the 1930s provoked significant internal migration, reshaping the porteño radio audience. Between 1937 and 1943, an average of seventy thousand Argentines migrated to greater Buenos Aires each year.⁹⁴ Although this figure would be eclipsed by the massive internal migration of the 1940s, it still represented a significant

number of listeners who may have hoped to find the music of their native regions on the radio. Likewise, the proliferation of radio networks meant that stations based in Buenos Aires were increasingly broadcasting their programs across the country, and folk music may have offered a means of catering to audiences in the interior. But more important than these changes to the composition of the radio audience was the growing nationalist mood. Folk musicians appeared side by side with tango stars in the fan magazines, and the genres overlapped in performers' repertoires, suggesting that many of the same people who embraced Manzi's milongas and D'Arienzo's traditionalist tangos also enjoyed folk music. These musical trends, as well as films like *La guerra gaucha* and *Prisioneros de la tierra*, reveal the growing commercial appeal of Argentina's rural cultures for the country's urban moviegoers and radio listeners.

As part of the larger, mass cultural turn to the countryside, the folk programs on Argentine radio offered listeners a nostalgic view of their nation's pre-modern past. Proponents explicitly described the preservation of folk music as a bulwark against modernity, "the civilization that advances, represented by the locomotive, the automobile and the radio, destroying the past."⁹⁵ Folk music was not immune to the same demands for improvement and innovation that were directed at tango; critics insisted on the need for composers and lyricists in the genre to expand and improve the repertoire.⁹⁶ Yet folk musicians were most often celebrated for their authenticity. One of the leading folk acts of the late 1930s and early 1940s was the Tropilla de Huachi-Pampa, a group from the Andean province of San Juan. The group was led by a former journalist and political activist named Eusebio Dojorti, who wrote and performed under the far more criollo-sounding pseudonym Buenaventura Luna.⁹⁷ Luna was a poet, songwriter, and storyteller who, as the program's narrator, played much the same role as Fernando Ochoa did on his shows. Magazine reports on the Tropilla inevitably emphasized the group's authentic origins, drawing attention, for example, to the way they preserved their rural customs even as their radio careers required them to live in Buenos Aires.⁹⁸ One magazine cover featured a photograph of Luna in the San Juan mountains, dressed in a traditional poncho and tenderly holding a young vicuña.⁹⁹ A typical report celebrated the Tropilla for performing the crucial service of assimilating immigrants by disseminating "authentic nationalism" on the radio.¹⁰⁰

Buenaventura Luna's poetry avoided the critique of exploitation that

characterized the films of Mario Soffici as well as the songs of Héctor Chavero, the Communist activist from Tucumán who, as Atahualpa Yupanqui, would become one of the biggest stars in Argentine folk music in the 1950s and 1960s. Nevertheless, Luna's radio program lovingly depicted the world of the simple gauchos, shepherds, and muleteers of the Argentine northwest. According to magazine reports, the musicians in his group had all worked in these humble professions back in San Juan; their authenticity was partly a matter of class. Like *La guerra gaucha*, Luna's poems frequently celebrated the heroic gauchos who fought for Argentine independence with Güemes or San Martín. But they also described the daily suffering and hardship of the rural poor. In the words of one fan, folk groups like the Tropilla de Huachi-Pampa played music "in which each note is the expression of a thousand sacrifices."¹⁰¹

Like Homero Manzi, Luna associated rural Argentina with manliness. His poetry and lyrics depicted a world of masculine self-sufficiency, in which wandering muleteers traveled the countryside far from their girlfriends. The all-male lineup of the group, as well as its name—*tropilla* is the gaucho term for a team of horses—reinforced this image of masculinity, as did the name of Luna's most popular Radio El Mundo program: "The Muleteers' Campfire." In many of Luna's songs, gauchos and muleteers gathered around a fire to pass the *mate* or wine, to play guitar and to sing, and to offer male companionship and a spirit of solidarity:

Quise armar un fogón allá en la sierra
un fogón que llamara a los andantes
de todos los caminos y las razas,
a juntarse al calor de nuestras brasas
a conversar de cosas trashumantes.

*I wanted to light a campfire up in the mountains
a fire that would call all the wanderers
of all the trails and races,
to come together before the heat of our coals
to talk of migratory things.*¹⁰²

The emphasis on simplicity and genuineness in Luna's lyrics was typical of folk music, which was often represented as an antidote to pretension and materialism. In one interesting layout, the magazine *Antena* featured the folksinger Virginia Vera alongside the tango bandleader Julio de Caro (see



10 Virginia Vera and Julio de Caro, *Antena*, October 28, 1938.

figure 10). While Vera appeared in plain and modest dress, de Caro’s slicked-back hair, bow tie, cuff links, ring, and cigarette signaled urban fanciness. In the text that accompanied her photo, Vera described herself as a simple country girl: “Barbecued meat is one of my greatest weaknesses and I have no trouble admitting it, even though to some people my taste might seem vulgar. . . . Perhaps I exaggerate a little, but between a shop window filled with jewels and a well-provisioned rotisserie, I would stay longer in front of the latter. Those criollos who put sauces on their meat make me laugh, as if our ancestors did that. Salt and . . . thank you. That was the only condiment they used. It is the same with *mate* and crackers. I take the former bitter and I do not mind if the latter are a bit hard. To one who likes the country like I do, comforts and refinements are pure luxury.”¹⁰³ Through the figures of Vera and de Caro, the magazine positioned folk and New Guard tango along an axis of oppositions: rural-urban; traditional-modern; genuine-materialist. By the late

1930s de Caro's sophisticated, modern version of tango stood in contrast to D'Arienzo's rhythmic traditionalism, and this contrast, as we have seen, was often figured in gendered terms. Vera, for her part, subverted gender expectations by choosing meat over jewels and thereby repudiating the feminine consumerism linked to the foppish de Caro. Her disavowal of any interest in jewelry expressed the same gendered prohibition against luxurious display that kept the tango star Azucena Maizani from wearing rings. Folk performers like Luna and Vera offered a wholesome, rural authenticity stripped of any trace of cosmopolitanism or feminine materialism.

From the milongas of Homero Manzi to the films of Mario Soffici and the works of folk artists like Buenaventura Luna, mass cultural representations of rural Argentina offered a national essence uncorrupted by either foreign influence or commercialism and defined in opposition to the pretentious sophistication and materialistic social climbing of the city. This revalorization of rural culture was, in a sense, a riposte to the efforts of Argentina's cultural modernizers. De Caro treated tango as a folk tradition that could provide the basis for a modernized Argentine music, yet his symphonic tango struck many as foreign and overly fancy. But the new vogue for rural traditionalism had its own contradictions. As Virginia Vera's disdain for jewelry suggests, the celebration of rural simplicity posed an implicit criticism of the widespread desire for upward mobility and material comforts. Perhaps more important, by elevating the nation's rural past, these new mass cultural products seemed to get no closer to reconciling Argentine authenticity with modernity.

LA RUBIA DEL CAMINO AND THE FAILURE OF NATIONAL MYTH-MAKING

Both the effort to elevate tango music and the turn toward rural roots constituted attempts to define Argentina's national identity. Yet these efforts tended to reinscribe divisions and therefore to undermine national unity. Stripping the tango of lunfardo lyrics or dressing it up with more sophisticated orchestration might make it a more palatable symbol of the nation, but it also threatened to rob the music of its authenticity by distancing it from its plebeian roots. Similarly, embracing the simple, rustic masculinity of traditional rural folk provided a means to construct a purified national identity, but it also implied a rejection of urban mo-

dernity. The contradictions that undermined these attempts at mass-cultural nation building are particularly apparent in the comic films of Manuel Romero, the most prolific and commercially successful Argentine director and screenwriter of the 1930s.¹⁰⁴ Romero had been a tango lyricist as well as a successful director of the musical variety shows known as the *teatro de revistas* before co-writing the screenplay for Gardel's breakout hit *Las luces de Buenos Aires*. Once the Argentine sound film industry took off, he became the principal director for Lumiton studios, where he churned out dozens of lighthearted, formulaic comedies, including some of Luis Sandrini's and Niní Marshall's biggest hits. In contrast to a committed intellectual like Homero Manzi, Romero had purely commercial goals. Instead of seeking to create a "culture of letters for men," he merely aimed to fill the nation's movie theaters. Yet his films were arguably more subversive than anything Manzi ever produced.

Romero's knack for appealing to popular tastes aroused the concern of those who sought to elevate and improve the Argentine cinema. In fact, his films often provoked exasperation among critics, who were dismayed by the immense popularity of what they considered a lowbrow cinematic style. In a review of the film *Gente bien* (1939), *La Razón's* critic could not hide his condescension as he congratulated Romero for attracting the masses to Argentine cinema: "A few days ago, we referred to Mr. Romero's position in our cinema in order to recognize his contribution to our film industry, as an interpreter of the easy tastes of the masses who attend native films. . . . Although we do not believe that Mr. Romero has attempted anything other than appealing directly to his public, with notes of easy melodrama, in order to tilt the balance in favor of the humble, he has aggressively recharged the depiction of our social circles."¹⁰⁵ That Romero should have provoked such ambivalence among critics anxious to celebrate the progress achieved by the national film industry is, at first blush, paradoxical. As Claudio España has demonstrated, Romero's films typically used happy endings to advance a comforting message of class reconciliation.¹⁰⁶ Yet, as *La Razón's* reviewer made clear, the problem with Romero had to do with his use of melodrama: not only did the director pander to the "easy tastes" of the masses, but he also did so with melodramatic plot elements that championed the poor and denigrated the rich.

Romero's comedies depict the working poor as a dignified, respectable community held together by strong bonds of solidarity and defined in

contrast to the rich. Typically, these films describe this contrast as a question of national identity. That is, the opposition between rich and poor is articulated as an opposition between foreign and national. Romero's movies construct a particular version of the Argentine nation, one that emphasizes conventional morality and conservative values like hard work but also contains a deeply populist message, insofar as it is premised on the exclusion of the rich. The protagonist of *Gente bien* is Elvira, yet another poor girl who is seduced, impregnated, and abandoned by a selfish aristocrat. She is rescued by a group of musicians who give her a home, and since society's prejudice against single mothers prevents her from finding work, they even hire her as a singer. When a judge awards Elvira's child to the wealthy father, the musicians devise a complex scheme that succeeds in restoring the child to Elvira and incorporating her definitively into their community. *Gente bien* offers a stark contrast between the evil rich and the noble poor and locates national authenticity on the poor side of the divide: the musicians prefer to play tangos, but "these days" the wealthy revelers they play for would rather do "gringo" dances like the fox trot. In Romero's films, the poor are not only exemplars of dignity and moral virtue but also the true bearers of Argentine national identity.

In this context, films that tell interclass love stories are particularly interesting. Like the nineteenth-century "foundational fictions" analyzed by Doris Sommer, these films can be read as national romances, efforts to overcome society's divisions by forging a new national family.¹⁰⁷ Many of Romero's comedies include the old melodramatic plot line of the poor girl in love with a wealthy man. But with the release of *La rubia del camino* in 1938, Romero inaugurated a very successful series of films that reversed the typical gender roles of the interclass romance. *La rubia del camino* was followed by *Caprichosa y millonaria* (Discépolo, 1940), *Isabelita* (Romero, 1940), and *Elvira Fernández, vendedora de tienda* (Romero, 1942). Starring Paulina Singerman as a rich young woman who falls in love with a humble working-class man, these films invariably end happily with love and marriage conquering class prejudice (see figure 11). *La rubia del camino* was clearly modeled on Frank Capra's Oscar winner of four years earlier, *It Happened One Night* (1934).¹⁰⁸ In both films, a pampered, rich girl chafes under her father's attempt to control her choice of spouse. She runs away from the family's vacation spot, meets a man of distinctly lower social standing, and travels with him to the big city. They experience a series of



- 11 Paulina Singerman (right) as a spoiled rich girl in *Caprichosa y millonaria*. Courtesy of Museo del Cine Pablo Ducrós Hicken.

adventures and eventually fall in love. Upon arrival in the city, their union is threatened, but in the end, love overcomes all obstacles. Despite these similarities, however, Romero's film is not merely a remake with a little local color. On the contrary, *La rubia del camino* breaks with its Hollywood precursor in several significant ways. As interclass romances, both films seek to reconcile rich and poor. Yet for Romero, working within well-established Argentine cultural conventions, the elite woman and working-class man reflect a series of binary oppositions that are either muted or absent altogether in Capra's film. In this vision, the rich are also foreign, modern, and urban, while the poor are national, traditional, and rural. These oppositions effectively widen the gulf that separates rich and poor, undermining the film's capacity to generate a unifying national myth.

It Happened One Night, one of the earliest "screwball comedies," pro-

motes the ideal of a classless society. As Kristine Karnick and Henry Jenkins have argued, screwball comedies “explicitly posit work and the work ethic as preferable to a class-based system of inherited wealth, power and status.”¹⁰⁹ In these films, the fantasy of interclass romance suggests that class divisions can be overcome, so long as both rich and poor are willing to sacrifice: the rich protagonist must give up her life of privilege in order to struggle alongside the working-class hero, while the working-class character must relinquish his single-minded pursuit of career advancement in order to pursue happiness. In this way, the screwball films exemplified a larger tendency of the Hollywood cinema of these years. The historian Lary May has argued that all the major film genres of the 1930s celebrated an “ethos of interpenetrating opposites.” Film protagonists in this era combined the integrity of the heroic citizen with the traits of previously marginal characters like the fallen woman, the comic, and the gangster. These movies generated a vocabulary with which Americans could imagine a more inclusive and pluralistic nation.¹¹⁰ At the end of *It Happened One Night*, the heiress Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) runs out on her lavish wedding to a wealthy playboy in order to begin a far less luxurious life with the newspaperman Peter Warne (Clark Gable). Peter’s initial interest in Ellie is purely opportunistic. Having recently lost his job, the wisecracking reporter offers to help her get to New York in exchange for an exclusive. In the end, though, he also makes a sacrifice; he gives up the scoop in order to get the girl. Successful couple formation requires that both partners learn from each other in order to form a “union of complementary opposites” that models successful national unification.¹¹¹

By contrast, *La rubia del camino*, with its roots in Argentine popular melodrama, presupposes an unbridgeable, moral chasm between rich and poor. Romero’s film begins with Singerman’s character, Betty, being rude to her servants, playing golf, and snobbishly insulting “the mob (*la chusma*).” Later, when her grandfather instructs her that life is about struggle, she protests: “But I am rich! I don’t have any reason to work, to struggle or to suffer.” Capra’s film pokes fun at Ellie for her sense of entitlement, but it stops short of depicting her as a snob. The contrast between the male protagonists of the two films is even more stark. In Romero’s film, Betty encounters not a self-interested reporter, but a simple truck driver, Julián, whose offer to help is purely altruistic, even if a bit paternalist: he is worried about the harm that may befall a woman

traveling alone to Buenos Aires. Romero's character is both more clearly working-class and more class-conscious; while Peter pokes fun at Ellie for being spoiled and sheltered, Julián goes further, explicitly denouncing the rich in several scenes. In both films, the rich girl initially despises the male lead, but in Ellie's case, this disdain is at least partly justified by Peter's boorishness. Betty, by contrast, ridicules Julián for his cheap cigarettes and his pedestrian taste in music. Not only is the economic and cultural chasm that separates Betty and Julián deeper, but so is the disparity between their moral characters. Whereas neither Peter nor Ellie begins the film as a paragon of virtue, *La rubia del camino* replicates the depiction of class difference typical of Argentine melodrama: in Betty and Julián, we have, yet again, the hateful rich and the noble poor.¹¹²

La rubia del camino relates class differences much more explicitly to the question of national identity. In *It Happened One Night*, Peter teaches Ellie a series of comic lessons about popular culture: how to properly dunk a doughnut, how to give a piggyback ride, how to hitchhike. In adapting this basic plot element, Romero transforms it. Instead of doughnut dunking, Julián teaches Betty how to make *mate*, the popular tea. Unlike doughnuts, *mate* is an instantly legible symbol of national identity, associated with Argentina's rural past and with the gaucho. A lesson in *mate* preparation is a lesson in Argentinidad. Peter's mock seriousness about the art of dunking is meant to poke fun at Ellie for being out of touch with the culture of ordinary people, and she understands that she is being teased. By contrast, Julián's analysis of *mate* symbolism—the bitter tea and the sweet sugar represent the two sides of life—is a sincere lesson in folk wisdom; there is no joke to get. The question of Argentine national identity appears in the film in other ways as well. Betty is not simply rich; as both her name and her blond hair suggest, she is also associated with foreignness. She explains her ignorance about *mate* by noting that she was educated in Europe. Julián, by contrast, is unimpeachably Argentine; he rejects her foreign nickname and insists on calling her by her real name, Isabel, instead.

Julián's worthiness as an embodiment of Argentine national identity is reinforced by his roots in a traditional rural world. Reproducing the country versus city binarism that had played such a central role in domestic cinema since *Nobleza gaucha*, *La rubia del camino* associates Buenos Aires with a modernizing elite caught up in slavish imitation of Europe. Betty, at home in the big city and a fish out of water in the country, is

repeatedly described as a “frivolous and modern girl.” By contrast, the rural interior of the country, represented by Julián, is the locus of Argentine tradition. In this sense, the film fits easily within the larger mass cultural turn to the countryside. Within this logic, class and geography are more important credentials for membership in the nation than even ethnicity. On their trip through the countryside, the couple stops in on some old friends of Julián, including an Italian immigrant and his family. Their rural poverty places them comfortably within the film’s imagined community, despite their immigrant status.

Given that Betty begins *La rubia del camino* as the embodiment of a despicable elite, the film’s happy resolution requires her to experience a profound transformation. She must unlearn her materialism and her class prejudice, adopt the values of solidarity and generosity associated with the poor, and in fact, embrace her Argentine identity. In other words, she must follow Virginia Vera by choosing barbecued meat over precious jewels. Her transformation from “frivolous and modern girl” to noble Argentine woman and worthy spouse for Julián is heavily gendered. In *It Happened One Night*, Ellie’s femininity is both maternal and sexual: she is moved by the sight of an impoverished child, and she successfully hitches a ride by revealing her legs to passing motorists. *La rubia del camino* is quite tame by comparison,¹¹³ and it is Betty’s maternal instinct alone that is the key to her transformation. When the couple arrives at the home of Julián’s Italian friends, the woman is about to give birth without the benefit of medical attention. The previously useless and selfish Betty rises to the occasion, overseeing the delivery and teaching the men the proper way to wrap a baby. Not only does this scene force Julián to revise his view of Betty, it actually initiates her transformation. In the very next scene, she has suddenly lost her condescending attitude toward the popular music on the radio. When they get a flat tire, she offers to help change it, and when Julián is hungry, she offers him *salamines y pan*, just the sort of working-class meal she had earlier disdained. The emergence of Betty’s femininity, her nurturing, maternal instinct, allows her to overcome her shallow arrogance and embrace the music and food of the Argentine masses; gender trumps class, enabling Betty to join the national community. Betty’s sudden transformation into a mother figure betrays the film’s debt to the moral code of melodrama, within which a more assertive, sexual femininity is transgressive and invariably punished. The nature of her transformation reveals what exactly is

wrong with people like Betty: their wealth has corrupted them, perverting their essential (gendered) humanity. In an inversion of Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Romero posits that the rich woman can only discover her true self when she sheds the cultural baggage of wealth under the tutelage of a poor man.

Romero breaks most decisively from Capra's model in the final portion of the film. In *It Happened One Night*, a simple misunderstanding threatens to keep Peter and Ellie apart, but once the confusion is sorted out, nothing stands in the way of their marriage. In *La rubia del camino*, by contrast, class difference remains a powerful obstacle to the formation of the couple. Upon their arrival in Buenos Aires, Betty quickly embarks on an effort to integrate Julián into the materialist and superficial world of Buenos Aires high society, buying him fancy clothes and a manicure. Now it is Julián who is a fish out of water, and he recoils at being treated like a doll. Finally, Julián storms out of town when he suspects Betty of having reunited with her former fiancé. By resisting Betty's efforts to dress him up, Julián retains both his rustic masculinity and his national authenticity. The happy ending is in doubt until Julián drives up to his Italian friends' house and out walks Betty, holding the baby. At this point, hundreds of miles from Buenos Aires and with Betty's maternal instinct restored, the couple's union is definitive. Betty makes interclass romance possible by choosing the authentic Argentine world of the rural poor over the Europeanized, wealthy society of Buenos Aires.

Like those attempts to update the tango without threatening its authenticity, *La rubia del camino* betrays a striking ambivalence about modernity. It is the independence of the "modern girl" that drives the film's plot and enables Betty's transformation. Only by rebelling against her father's authority is she able to escape the morally depraved world of the rich and cross the class line. Romero, in fact, distinguished himself among Argentine filmmakers for his tendency to portray independent women in a positive light.¹¹⁴ The strong-willed Betty certainly resonated with images of "modern women" that circulated globally in the 1920s and 1930s, and one imagines that the women in the audience must have enjoyed Betty's willingness to stand up to her father.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, the film's denouement reinscribes an explicitly anti-modern patriarchy. The reconciliation of Betty and Julián requires not only that she reject her elite urban lifestyle but also that she take on the subordinate feminine role in the couple. In this sense, the movie shares a common gender

dynamic with Capra's film: in both, the capricious independent woman is eventually subordinated to the male. But in the melodramatic universe of the Argentine film, this gendered plot line reinforces the triumph of Argentine national identity over foreignness, of the rural over the urban, of the poor over the rich, as well as of tradition over modernity. Betty replaces her father with an even more traditional patriarch, one who presumably will be able to dominate her more effectively. *La rubia del camino*, thus, tries to have it both ways, celebrating the modern woman as the agent of an essentially anti-modern transformation to national authenticity.

As an interclass national romance, *La rubia del camino* is problematic. Unlike in the Hollywood screwball, the formation of the couple does not entail a union of complementary opposites. On the contrary, while Julián nobly resists Betty's efforts to change him, Betty must forsake her previous life and be reborn as Isabel. This rebirth is even more explicit in *Isabelita* (Romero, 1940), the follow-up to *La rubia del camino*, in which Singerman again plays a wealthy heiress who falls in love with a paragon of working-class virtue, in this case a tango singer. Because he despises the rich, she conceals her true identity from him, calling herself Isabel instead of her much fancier real name, Alcida. In the film's climactic wedding scene, after all obstacles to their interclass marriage have been overcome, Singerman embraces her new identity as Isabel, declaring, "Alcida is dead." While these movies hold out hope for the transformation of rich people, they also suggest that the only Argentina worth building is the one associated with the poor. In this sense, the happy endings in the Romero-Singerman films are unconvincing: only the miraculous transformation—even the metaphorical death—of a rich individual makes interclass romance possible. In the melodramatic world of binary oppositions, the formation of the couple reads less as class reconciliation than as the victory of the poor over the rich. National romance can only be forged, these films suggest, through the negation of elite culture. As Betty—now Isabel—drives off with Julián at the end of *La rubia del camino*, they have not forged a new nation. Rather, Betty has joined an already existing national community, one that for all its solidarity, morality, and authenticity remains locked in poverty and anti-modern stasis. Romero's conservative vision of an Argentina defined by tradition, patriarchy, and the virtue of hard work coexists uneasily with his populist condemnation of the other Argentina, a country dominated by a superficial, selfish, Euro-

peanizing elite. As a result, *La rubia del camino* is unable to generate the sort of unifying national myth produced by *It Happened One Night* and other Hollywood movies of the period.

Throughout the 1930s, Argentine mass culture continually reproduced the same basic divisions in the national community. Rising anxieties about national identity as well as the need to compete for consumers of all classes produced a persistent desire to improve mass culture. This desire was visible in the attempts to clean up tango lyrics, the debates between proponents of rhythm and melody, the efforts to forge a sophisticated national art on the basis of folklore, as well as the turn to the countryside as the locus of national authenticity. These projects foundered on a series of oppositions that proved impossible to reconcile: country versus city, tradition versus modernity, authenticity versus cosmopolitanism. Underlying all these divisions, though, was class. The deep populism of mass cultural commodities, itself a reflection of older Argentine popular culture, tended to block efforts at cultural nation building. Stripping the tango of lunfardo and removing it from the lower-class arrabales might make the music less scandalous, but it also made it less Argentine. Celebrating the simplicity and honesty of rural folk might enable a national identity untainted by immigration or materialism, but it also tended to produce a vindication of the poor and a critique of the elite. Imitating Hollywood's screwball comedies might help Argentine filmmakers create a modern cinema, but to make that style their own, they grafted it with the deeply classist brand of melodrama characteristic of local mass culture. The result was hardly a new language for imagining an inclusive nation; it was a reiteration of the basic divisions that already undermined national unity.

