A close reading of the writings of key figures in the Argentine state technocracy between 1890 and 1914 shows the consistent preoccupation of these writers with the study and definition of medicolegal categories of homosexuality, uranism, sexual inversion, and pederasty. These studies, I suggest, reflected more than a longing for stricter border controls around the definitions of nationality and class. During a period of pervasive cultural, political, and economic insecurity created by the process of immigration and modernization, these longings became especially intense regarding issues of sex and gender.

Reconstructing the historicity, conditions of emergence, and ideological contingencies of these medicolegal categories of analysis, in this essay I explore the conceptual phenomena denoted by different categories of this sexual science, noting connotations, contradictions, and incoherences. Following some of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s ideas about the turn-of-the-century crisis of homosexual/heterosexual definition, I will call this development and dissemination of a homophobic ideology “homosexual panic” when it is directed against men.1 I am aware of the risks of a mechanical transference of theories from one cultural context to another. However, while research on the construction of homosexuality in Latin America has been scarce, much of the published research on the history of homosexuality in the United States and Europe has focused on the same historical period as that examined here. Thus, while reconstructing the sociopolitical conditions of the emergence of the definitions of same-sex behavior in


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Argentina, I have found it very useful to compare the Argentine taxonomic elaboration with contemporary developments studied by George Chauncey, Jr.\(^2\) Like Chauncey's work, this essay suggests that the homophobia disseminated by the texts I explore is a reaction to the ever-increasing access to the paid work force of women who were often the main economic support of the family; the organization of a women's movement within the new and powerful Argentine labor movement; and the glaring visibility of a diverse homosexual subculture thriving in a city with a large proportion of young males without traditional family ties.

However, as we will see in the texts of the Argentine positivist technocrats, the "broad shift in conceptualization" is different from the change Chauncey notes between the conceptions and definitions of sexual inversion and homosexuality.\(^3\) The understanding of this difference is crucial, I believe, for the understanding of Argentine, and perhaps Latin American, definitions and conceptions of sexual deviance.

Let me briefly reconstruct a historical context. The 1880 declaration of Buenos Aires as the capital city and federal district of the Argentine republic marks the end of the domestic quarrels between local chieftains and the beginning of the great immigration that, between 1880 and 1914, transformed Argentina and created a new culture. Although smaller in absolute numbers than the immigration reaching the United States earlier in the century, relative to the native population the immigration to Argentina was by far larger. Most of these immigrants, unable to become small farm owners due to the latifundia structure of land tenure, established themselves in one of two coastal cities, Buenos Aires and Rosario, to work in the growing urban industries and commercial ventures. By 1900 the immigration that had been imagined by the Argentine ideologues of the mid-nineteenth century as suburban and white (preferably Anglo-Saxon) had in reality become an immigration of large and visible groups of foreigners, mainly Italians and Spaniards, many of whom were young males without traditional family ties and often from the poorest areas of their home countries.

Out of this immigration grew a new Argentine middle class that forced the redefinition and rearrangement of the previous class structure. At the same time, the concentration of most workers in Buenos Aires during the first decade of the twentieth century allowed a new Argentine labor movement to develop and challenge the hegemony of the patrician landowning class, which until then had kept a tight grip on power, by fair means or, more often, foul. By the 1900s Buenos Aires had become the major port


\(^3\)Ibid.
and a city of immigrants; farmers had become urban dwellers and laborers, in many cases seasoned by the class struggles of the old country. The immigration that had provided the labor necessary for the integration of Argentina into the Eurocentric blueprint of progress, modernization, and internationalism was now a foreign force living within its national borders and capable of striking against and paralyzing the meat and grain export economy that continued to enrich the landowning class.

At this point Argentina not only had to be imagined again—it had to be recreated. Its national icons, songs, anthems, colors, images, and guiding fictions had to be mass-produced and distributed among all cultural groups and social classes. These cultural productions carefully targeted the children of the immigrant, the first generation of Argentines who, in order to be trained and inducted into the imagined national community, had to be separated from the “foreign” parents. A positivist technocracy of state officials, physicians, psychiatrists, lawyers, criminologists, educators, writers, and politicians, subservient to the patrician landowning class, took charge of this re-imagination, mass production, and distribution.4 By examining their works in this context, this essay is also a reflection on a specific instance of the crossings between definitions of sexualities and a pernicious brand of turn-of-the-century Argentine nationalism.

THE THIRD SEX AND FEMININE URANISM

Juan Bialet-Massé’s 1904 study of El estado de las clases obreras argentinas a comienzos de siglo (The state of the Argentine working classes at the beginning of the century), undertaken by order of President Julio Roca, was a preliminary investigation into a first national labor law. With this measure the government hoped to control the new Argentine labor movement that had emerged, organized, and demanded participation in the country’s political decision-making. In Bialet-Massé’s text, the “third sex” was the term used to characterize women who were beginning to work for wages and play an important role in the development of the Argentine labor movement.

In his study Bialet-Massé first worried that “women among us are competing too well with men in professions and offices that until now were traditionally reserved for men; the country’s free institutions are not hindering them in any way.” Claiming that “women’s work must not be allowed unless fate absolutely demands it” (overlooking the unpaid work

4For a broader discussion of what positivism means in Latin American and Argentine thought and policy (the romantic, libertarian fantasies it rejects, the racism it legitimates, and the “modernization” it promises), see Leopoldo Zea, Pensamiento positivista latinoamericano (Mexico City, 1980).
they traditionally performed at home), he warned that women working for wages became "that thing called the third sex, which in London alone has more than 300,000 representatives, and in Europe more than 3,000,000, and which has appeared in the United States as an invasion, and which happily still has none amongst us, save some affiliated individuals. This third sex is made up of women who remain without mates due to emigration to the colonies; or who, due to deviant morals, have renounced or are renouncing marriage."\(^5\) Here, Bialet-Massé used the definition of sexual inversion—third sex, intermediate sex, or sexuelle Zwischenstufen—proposed by Karl Ulrichs in writings published between 1860 and 1879. In Bialet-Massé's text, however, the "incorrect" sexual object choice—homosexuality as we understand it today—was not the central feature of inversion. What defined deviation, or the "immoral," was either the independence from men gained by women who worked for wages; the circumstantial absence of a man; or the voluntary and conscious rejection of the traditional marriage that established the division of labor as well as the roles and hierarchies of "féminine" women and "masculine" men.

In early twentieth-century Argentina, women who earned their own living were subversive because, making themselves economically independent from men, they refused to accept the roles of wives and prolific mothers, pillars of the project of modernization and immigration through whom the class in power sought to create the new "Argentine race." On the same page where he warned about the "invasion" of the third sex, Bialet-Massé defined the role of women:

Woman's mission, as far as each sex has a part in the perpetuation of the species, is maternity, [and] the raising and education of children; in women's wombs lie the strength and greatness of nations. . . . Among us there are marriages that have six or eight children; . . . twelve or more are not rare, and up to twenty children born of one mother, and cases are known of twenty-five children in one home. Let us not snatch this crown of glory from the Argentine woman's brow.\(^6\)

The third sex, therefore, was the sexual category used to name—and thereby contain and control—the woman who emancipated herself economically from men.

Furthermore, in Bialet-Massé's text the third sex was said to have in-

\(^5\)Juan Bialet-Massé, *El estado de las clases obreras argentinas a comienzos de siglo* (1904; rpt. Córdoba, 1968), pp. 424, 426 (emphasis mine). All translations in this essay are my own unless otherwise indicated. I wish to thank Elizabeth Sayre, Patrick O'Conner, Sylvia Molloy, and Nicolas Shumway for their help with the translation of Spanish texts.

\(^6\)Ibid., p. 426.
vaded Europe and the United States. In the terminology of Argentine positivism, invasion was synonymous with infection; the two words were used interchangeably. Thus the third sex was an infection threatening the health of growing national bodies. Moreover, Bialet-Massé denoted members of the third sex as affiliated—by which he meant associated with the labor movement—and this, he said, posed a very specific threat: “When women take part in a social movement, its triumph is assured. . . . When two hundred women go to a meeting, there are two thousand that stay at home, but they will be told what happened at the meeting, and their propaganda will be as effective as that of those going out in the streets.” All women thus were part of a network whose direct or indirect involvement in labor movements threatened the very fabric of society. Bialet-Massé’s study promoted a prophylaxis that would arrest the external invasion of third-sex women threatening the national health; a text by Victor Mercante complemented this strategy by advocating measures to halt the spread of an infection of “feminine uranism” inside the national borders.

Victor Mercante portrayed this infection as an epidemic in an article published in 1905 in the Archivos de Psiquiatría y Criminología, entitled “El fetiquismo y el uranismo femenino en los internados educativos.” Mercante was a pedagogue and an important official of the state educational bureaucracy. He specialized in women’s education and child criminology and was the director of the Escuela Normal de Mercedes, one of the most important training institutions for teachers; he was also an inspector for the Consejo Nacional de Educación and a professor of pedagogy in the Universidad de la Plata.

As a pedagogue, Mercante described the general features of women: “Woman’s soul is the unsettling soul of mystery, said an outstanding and unknown writer [most likely himself], a capricious and disturbing flower that keeps in its petals and its calyx the seeds of delusions.” Here he appropriated the tedious commonplaces of Latin American modernismo then in vogue to describe woman—her body transformed into an objet d’art, but which might be difficult to control or might disturb a social order. In the soul of this woman-receptacle were kept, although in a latent state, the “seeds” of the sickness that threatened to spread throughout society.

As a scientist confronted with the seemingly fragile and dangerous test tube, Mercante asked himself fearfully, “What will come forth when the chrysalis that absorbs our attention breaks: Manon, Lucretia, or Messalina?

7 For uses of invasión and infección, see “Defensa sanitaria marítima contra las enfermedades exóticas viajeras,” Anales del Departamento Nacional de Higiene, vol. 8 (Buenos Aires, 1898), p. 307; Bialet-Massé, pp. 151–52.
How many poisoned existences, how many destinies cut short, how much bitterness, how many tears, how much tragic desperation will this nubile existence in bloom leave behind!” Thus Mercante, through the “objective” lens of positivist observation, began to construct an entire history within a framework of three treacherous women: Manon, the stereotypical prostitute of the nineteenth-century opera, the rebel; Lucretia, the Renaissance poisoner, the woman who competed in men’s power games; and Messalina, the adulterous Roman matron, the woman who appropriated for herself the prerogatives of the double standard. The “poisoned,” “tragic,” or “bitter” life narratives of these women—generally created and repeated by male writers, male historians, and male teachers—were the cautionary models imagined by this educator for his adolescent pupils. Mercante was especially concerned over the dissemination—and control—of new fictions or narratives, “oral dissertations” and “illustrative inscriptions” that might serve as alternative models to that of the obedient wife and prolific mother.9

As an educational bureaucrat, Mercante declared, “I was able to verify that in boarding schools passive uranism constitutes an epidemic.” His observations were of a single institution, “boarding school X . . . a school of higher education, where girls from ten to twenty-two years old study.” Assigning responsibility for spreading the disease through the whole educational system, Mercante said that his findings included “both private and state schools,” yet later he criticized one specific type of private school—that “with a conventual regimen,” or nuns’ school. This was the ideal medium for the propagation of “feminine uranism” threatening the national educational system.10

Describing this specific medium, while adding a new definition to the taxonomy of homosexuality growing out of these Argentine texts, Mercante claimed that “feminine homosexuality is not usually impulsive; rather there is a morbid predisposition toward contemplation and romanticism, with a possible mystical leaning. Here its relationship is with the cloister. The cult of Mary’s recluses is a psychopathic syndrome in which women’s love has undergone an inversion, but within an attitude that is completely passive, ecstatic.” In Argentina in 1905, during a transition in the elaboration of a taxonomy of sexual deviations, the definition of sexual inversion coexisted with the definition of homosexuality. However, in Mercante’s conception, as in Bialet-Massé’s, what defined sexual deviance was not so

9Mercante, pp. 22, 25. For a discussion on the importance of new fictions and narratives in women’s education, see Carolyn Heilbrun, Writing a Woman’s Life (New York, 1988), p. 37.
10Mercante, p. 25.
much the incorrect sexual object choice as the absence of a correct sexual object.¹¹

In Mercante’s article, women who as adolescents began to reject the role defined for them and who instead associated with other women were described as “mystics”; since the sixteenth century in Latin America, convents had provided a space in which women could develop models of lives different from that of the wife and mother, although still remaining within a patriarchal power structure. Furthermore, private nuns’ schools, usually associated with convents, were not as easily controlled as public ones. Mercante insisted that “the phenomenon [of feminine uranism] manifests itself, curiously, in those cloister-like schools where the women teachers give frequent dissertations on the cult of women saints with illustrative inscriptions on the blackboards.” These were the dangerous alternative models: oral dissertations and written inscriptions constituted the “narratives or texts . . . by which women might assume power” over their own lives.¹²

Mercante represented the vigilant male-run national educational system, and his article reflected the tensions between a state male bureaucracy and a remote, elusive private school where women lived, studied, and worked. The persistence of gender markers in the Romance languages permitted the Argentine pedagogue to stress that students, teachers, and administrators in these schools were women, and he repeatedly criticized their incredulity and lack of vigilance, which allowed the epidemic to spread: “Through dissimulation it usually escapes the perspicacious observation of the headmistresses.” Mercante noted that it was during breaks between classes that “the sickness becomes most evident.” It appeared, for example, in “furtive kisses [that] seal incubated moments of faith and hope,” and “the women teachers, in effect, were leaving the courtyards in order to devote themselves to the tasks of the moment. They were not aware that the calm of these idle beings could only be fictitious.”¹³

Mercante proposed measures to halt the spread of the infection: that the most basic expressions of affection, “kissing, embracing, and the quiet and dual life,” be prohibited. He also suggested that “dissertations” and “illustrative inscriptions” be replaced by “various comforting and attractive lessons on scientific topics; that the imagination not be injured by narrating grandiloquent events, and ones of a strong mystical tone on the ascetic life.”¹⁴

¹¹Ibid. (emphasis mine). Chauncey notes that “during the transition in medical thinking . . . some doctors, as one would expect, used the terms [homosexuality and sexual inversion] interchangeably” (p. 124).
¹²Mercante, p. 25; Heilbrun, p. 17.
¹³Mercante, pp. 25, 26.
¹⁴Ibid., pp. 23, 25.
In feminine, passive uranism, as defined by Mercante, we begin to see the significance of the distinction between passive and active roles in the Argentine taxonomy of sexual deviance. As Chauncey notes, the distinction between passive and active originally pertained to notions of sex between males—doctors and criminologists in the United States and in Argentina made a clear differentiation between insertive (active) and receptive (passive) roles—but was later applied to relationships between women. This distinction was important in Mercante’s article. In spite of the feminine characterization that he gave to this homosexuality of the inverted but passive woman, he nevertheless identified an active and a passive element in uranistic adolescent girls. He defined the pairs of girls who met between classes as

beloveds that talk about their matters. Notwithstanding the spiritual and feminine character of the relationship, one element is active, and the other passive. The pairing off occurs between two structures that are different from the point of view of morality. One, preeminently suggestive, commands, oversees, cares for, offers, gives, disposes, describes the present, imagines the future, resolves difficulties, and vitalizes her companion. The other obeys, accepts, resigns herself, avoids displeasing her beau, and exalts her emotions with sweet words and promises full of feeling and submission.

In this pair, the passive adolescent was homosexual because another woman was her sexual or affective object choice, not because she had inverted the feminine role prescribed for her. The active woman was the invert, the transgressor, and the source of the infection.15

Mercante stated that “the psychopathology appears isolated in girls over fifteen, usually hysterics,” whereas the passive adolescent was the “imitative” one induced to join the “cult” by the active adolescent. He alleged that “the ones who came into the establishment for the first time were neophytes. The available active principal without a girlfriend would begin the conquest with her eyes, later by drawing near and finally with an offer. . . . Affections increase; the ‘imitative’ woman adapts herself, and the neophyte changes civil status.”16

The anxiety over these “psychopathological,” “hysterical,” vitalizing young women expressed the patriarchal landowning class’s fear of the women who, in the first decade of the twentieth century, were highly visible in the public demonstrations of large, new labor unions. These were the “suggestive” women who, when the domestic “infection” was represented as an invasion threatening the national borders from outside, were

15Chauncey, p. 127; Mercante, pp. 25, 26.
16Mercante, pp. 25, 26.
identified as foreign agents of perturbation. Their activism disturbed Bialet-Massé, who wrote that “the women who enter this route are clearly anarchists and exalted anarchists at that; some of them are noted for their oratorical faculties. In Rosario there is a young woman endowed with energetic and dominating speech who sways the multitudes”—a good example of the Argentine fear of the power of women’s discourse, as well as the fear of revolt, in this case by the Argentine labor movement.17

The two decades between 1890 and 1910 were foundational, and particularly violent, in the history of this movement. During the 1890s, in Leopoldo Rodríguez’s words, “the workers’ movement was made up mostly of foreigners. In those years, well-known anarchist leaders arrived in Argentina and collaborated in the organization of syndicates” with “a notable increase in workers’ agitation.” The Argentine government reacted by delegating to employers and police officials the responsibility for containing, channeling, and derailing the demonstrations of discontent. In the next decade, however, the situation became much more serious. In 1902 Argentina saw the first general strike in its history. At this point, government reaction started to be institutionalized, and National Law 4144 was passed; known as “the law of residency,” it authorized the expulsion of any foreigner whose conduct threatened security or disturbed public order. In 1910 the Social Defense Law was passed, a new measure intended to repress the leaders—the so-called external agitators—who were helping to organize and were often the visible faces of large, popular movements. Between 1902 and 1910, a state of siege was imposed five times, for a total of eighteen months, as a preventive measure against workers’ demonstrations. Rodríguez pointed out that “in this decade of anti-labor violence, it was a rare strike or demonstration that did not end with police or military intervention and the death of militants. The height of the agitation took place in 1909 and 1910.”18

This was the epidemic—the social “perturbation” that propagates itself. To contain it, the doctors, lawyers, hygienists, criminologists, and educators worked on two fronts, fighting the foreign invasion of women activists and defending society against the internal infection of feminine uranism, the passive followers. In Las multitudes argentinas (The Argentine multitudes), the first sociological study of post-immigration Argentina (published in 1899), José María Ramos Mejía, an influential mentor of a gener-


18 Leopoldo Rodríguez, Inmigración, nacionalismo y fuerzas armadas (Mexico City, 1986), pp. 112, 86.
ation of state technocrats, defined the characteristics of “the [feminine] multitudes” and their “seductive” leaders and spokespersons, while he imagined and described a dynamic between the groups and their leaders.

The spokespersons of large popular groups, wrote Ramos Mejía, were “the dominant forces of the multitudes, those that, having risen out of them or not, have qualities of a certain order that have permitted them to dominate, direct, and sometimes transform those same multitudes.” Ramos Mejía described the archetypal leader with erotic powers: “They have a peculiar aura full of carnal exhalations that irresistibly seduce the imagination and the always agitated senses of women. . . . The same thing happens with the masses, who have more or less the same deficiencies as women.” In Ramos Mejía’s analysis, the Latin American predecessors of these leaders were “that abundant swarm of sorcerers, astrologers, judges, necromancers, almost all natives [who] while they were telling love stories were casting their spells, enchantments, and ‘erotic circles,’ [and] in their charms mixed incitements to disobedience, and tended to awaken in the plebeians a prophetic feeling of strength.” In the first decade of the twentieth century, when power relations “inverted,” when the Argentine labor movement organized and met in celebrations and union demonstrations, Mercante’s homophobic ideology was meant to control and prevent what Ramos Mejía called “the woman of the multitude [who,] associated with the [feminine] mob, impresses it with a terrible force, because in such circumstances, she more quickly than man loses all the sweet and kind instincts that are the tonic of her soul. These women harangue the crowd and inflame it with their unexpected imprecations, in the plaza, in the street, even in the pulpit of the church.” By likening both the crowd (having “more or less the same deficiencies as women”) and the powerful, active figure who stimulated the crowd with women, Ramos Mejía thus instilled in the concept of a social and economic transformation an element of the “cloister-like,”uranistic “epidemic” described by Mercante.19

**SEXUAL INVERSION**

Complementing his notion of the woman/crowd, José María Ramos Mejía in *Las multitudes argentinas* defined an aesthetic of all the new Argentine social classes, homologizing it with the sensibility of a sexual invert. It is important to point out that his ideas, disseminated through prolific writings and from key positions in the state bureaucracy of the time, became models for sociopolitical analysis and for the official ideology of the modern Argentine state. Ramos Mejía was the founder and first president of

the Círculo Médico Argentino in 1875, founder and first director of the Asistencia Pública in 1882, founder and first professor of the chair of nervous and mental illness at the Universidad de Buenos Aires in 1887, president of the Departamento Nacional de Higiene in 1892, and president of the Consejo Nacional de Educación in 1908. A psychiatrist, hygienist, and pedagogue, in the words of Hugo Vezzetti, he represented “the modern incarnation of the moralist and a paradigm of the ruler” in post-immigration Argentina.20

Central to Ramos Mejía’s work was the use of sexual inversion as the model for establishing a categorical difference between the patrician landowning class and the new social classes and cultural groups that emerged from immigration. In Las multitudes argentinas, Ramos Mejía described the guarango (the uncouth) as one of the models, or types, characteristic of different categories of phrenology—and the most representative of the new upper, middle, and lower classes of the society of Buenos Aires. Despite his variations, the guarango was always an urban dweller, a member of “the multitude” of the modern metropolis. As Manuel Bejarano explains in his study of the immigrants’ patterns of settlement in Argentina at the turn of the century, “in cities, in actuality, the highest socioeconomic levels, with the exception of the traditional elite, were effectively reached by immigrants.” Thus, although a city dweller in D. F. Sarmiento’s mid-nineteenth-century conception represented the prototype of the “civilized man,” by the end of the century, as immigrants filled the city, the urban dweller became the “degenerate.” Therefore, the countryside and its inhabitants, Sarmiento’s “barbarism,” became the zone that defined and represented the power of the landowning class and was (re)conceived as the repository of the “real” sacred national values.21

Ramos Mejía defines the patrician class by its difference: “[It is] made up of cultured fathers and noble lineages refined by good living and by constant correction . . . all this which has slowly been filling the soul with the voluptuous perfume of ideals and ambitions that are chères au coeur, que mon esprit rêvait, and which hides itself, with virile decency, in the modest penumbra of the ancestral home.” French, the language of one of the main European cultural models, was used to define the traditional patrician class by association. This “virile” class was in contrast with the new society of inverted guarangos described on the following page:

The guarango represents one of those vertebrates that sociologists of the future will seek with curiosity in years to come in order to estab-

lish the succession of types in our evolution. He is an invert of the arts and resembles inverts of the sexual instinct who reveal their dubious potency through an irritable manifestation of their appetites. He needs brilliant color and shrill music, as he needs the erotic stimulus of the intense scents of the body; he likes bizarre and tasteless combinations of things, like the sexual invert of warped attitudes and obscure procedures, to satisfy the special idiosyncrasies of his sensibility.

After describing the customs of the sexual invert *guarango*, Ramos Mejía concluded: “What ideas a *guarango* has in terms of taste and art, only an invert can imagine.”

Ramos Mejía’s identification of inversion with the aesthetic of the Buenos Aires urban dweller is similar to Chauncey’s definition of inversion as “a broad range of deviant gender behavior of which homosexual desire was only a logical but indistinct aspect.” However, Ramos Mejía’s inversion, in this particularly convulsive moment in Argentine social history, also denoted the incorrect sexual object choice: it was “an irritable manifestation of their [sexual] appetites.” In this sense, therefore, inversion was also quite similar to the modern concept of homosexuality that Foucault proposes as a “certain quality of the sexual sensibility,” and “a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul,” or the “special idiosyncrasies of sensibility.” Thus, the term “inversion” in Argentine texts of this period denoted a broad range of incorrect social, sexual, and gender behaviors and continued to be used in conjunction with a new concept of homosexuality based on sexual object choice.

**Pederasty**

To better understand the forms of representation and connotations of the different categories of homosexuality of the Argentine sexual science we are tracing, we must first consider the historical demographic context of the times.

At the turn of the century, male foreigners between the ages of twenty and forty were a large and highly visible part of the population of Buenos Aires. In 1895 two-thirds of the immigrant population were men; in 1914, Carl Solberg notes, “nearly four fifths of Buenos Aires’ male adults were foreigners.” But to these statistics must be added a great number of single men, aged twenty or older, who did not appear in the statistics because

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22 Ramos Mejía, pp. 272, 273.

they stayed only briefly in Buenos Aires en route to the countryside or to their countries of origin.  

In this historical context, homosexual panic was used to control these single men, who became a steady flow of "traffic," working by turns on farms or in the new industries, joining workers' protest movements, or seeking ways to become small landowners themselves. Ramos Mejía, who by 1899 saw the new Argentine society as a "multitude" of "sexual inverts," earlier had regulated prostitution as a representative of the state higienista bureaucracy; state-regulated heterosexual prostitution was a measure conceived as a defense against the proliferation of homosexual relations in a city with a large population of young single men, who in many cases found a place to socialize only in the brothels.

Particularly relevant at this point is a book entitled Buenos Aires, la ribera y los prostibulos en 1880, written in the mid-1900s by a Buenos Aires assistant police chief, Adolfo Bátiz. This book was a memoir that covered the period approximately from 1880 to 1906. Bátiz's work focused on two important themes: first, the promotion of a national heterosexual prostitution of "humble" women of "pure race," sexuality reorganized and regulated by sexual science; and, second, the danger posed by a subversive homosexuality of Italian "models," represented as sexual anarchists, activists who effectively proselytized among a new Argentine youth of passive pederasts, against whom prostitution was recommended as a prophylactic measure. In Bátiz's book the key category of homosexuality was pederasty: it was "lust, and now lust and pederasty" that impelled him to write. For Bátiz, the term "pederasty" denoted a sexual practice between two men but did not specify the role or mode that they might adopt. Here we should note that in these texts pederasty may have denoted a sexual practice similar to that of classical Greece, but it did not denote a similar institution that, as David Halperin notes, drew clear distinction between "the roles of pederast and philerast, relegating them not only to different age classes but virtually to different 'sexualities.'" In order to understand the significance of Bátiz's concept of pederasty, we must first review another text published in the same year (1908) by Eusebio Gómez.  

Gómez was a lawyer and criminologist. As a young and important member of the Argentine positivist bureaucracy, he was the director of the Peni-

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tenciaria Nacional and a professor of penal law at the Universidad de Buenos Aires. In 1908 Gómez published *La mala vida en Buenos Aires* (The profligate life in Buenos Aires). In the chapter entitled “Homosexuals,” under the subtitles “Sexual Inverts—The Morality of Sexual Inverts—Aristocratic Sexual Inverts and Plebeian Inverts,” he wrote, “It is important to note the existence of certain subjects [whom we] following the terminology of contemporary science designate with the denomination of sexual inverts.” Here, as in Mercante’s text published three years earlier, was the interchangeable use of the terms “homosexuality” and “sexual inversion.” Notwithstanding the persistence in the use of inversion, Gómez defined a “homosexuality/sexual inversion” that denoted more than incorrect sexual object choice, the sexual mode or role adopted in male-male sex. He explained that “the phenomena of sexual inversion” was “the growing tendency to seek satisfaction of the appetites of the sexual instinct, with procedures contrary to the laws of nature.” Here, more than sexual object choice, what was defined as deviation was a “procedure,” a form of action, or the enacting of sexual roles (insertive/receptive). Writing a history of what he understood to be “procedures contrary to the laws of nature,” Gómez added that “the phenomenon, however, is not modern; pederasty . . . in Greece was practiced under the shelter of a certain tolerance,” and “in Rome, in the times of the Empire, it led to all manner of excesses.” Defining pederasty, Gómez explained:

Homosexuality consists in the inclination toward persons of the same sex for the fulfillment and satisfaction of the carnal appetites. When the indicated inclination is of a man for a man, it is called uranism or pederasty, sapphism when of a woman for a woman. Sodomy is the term that serves to distinguish sexual relations characterized by *inmissio membrī in anum*, whether these relations be between persons of different sexes or of the same one. Pederasty takes diverse forms: reciprocal masturbation, anal coitus, and *inmissio pennis in os alterius [sic]* (mouth coitus).

Let us first note the inconsistency in the categories, which were intermingled and were confused in the texts of psychiatrists, criminologists, and pedagogues. According to Gómez, “The indicated inclination . . . of a man for a man . . . is called uranism”; however, Mercante’s article, written four years earlier, defined uranism as an epidemic among women.26

At this point the Argentine taxonomical elaboration seems to differ from the one studied by Chauncey. In Gómez’s book, homosexuality and sexual inversion continued to be used simultaneously. Despite Gómez’s

lack of differentiation, and in accordance with the development noted by Halperin, “the conceptual isolation of sexuality per se from questions of masculinity or femininity made possible a new taxonomy of sexual behaviors and psychologies based entirely on the anatomical sex of the person engaged in a sexual act (same sex vs. different sex).”27 Indeed, Gómez above all defined homosexuality as an “inclination toward persons of the same sex.” However, he defined sexual inversion as a “procedure contrary to the laws of nature.” It was in these procedures that men could invert their conventionally defined insertive role.

Homosexuality, like pederasty, meant incorrect sexual object choice but did not specify the role adopted in the sexual relation. Passive pederasty denoted the inversion of the insertive role defined as correct for men. According to this concept of sexual deviation, once the man inverted his sexual role, he also inverted his dress, manners, and modes defined as correct for his biological sex. As we will see below, the sexual invert, in addition to being perceived as generally adopting a receptive, passive role, was also usually represented as a transvestite.

The definition of a passive (receptive) or active (insertive) role was central to the definition of sexual and gender deviance in these texts. Deviance was the activism of women described above and the passivity of the men we will see shortly. The distinction between passive and active homosexuals, deeply rooted in Latin American cultures, was also, in my opinion, a Mediterranean concept of sexuality revived and adapted to the sociohistorical moment. As we have seen, Gómez traced the roots of “modern” pederasty to the sexual practices of Greece and Rome. This distinction in the representation of sex, in a masculine discourse that establishes a hierarchical relationship between insertive and receptive roles, could be reactivated in Latin America, certainly in Argentina, by the “polarization of masculine [active] and feminine [passive] modes of behavior in Victorian thought.”28

This polarization moved from defining a broad range of deviant gender behavior to defining a sexual behavior. In Gómez’s formulation, the repetition of the definition in Latin—adding the “vice” of sodomy, inmissio membri in anum, to that of pederasty, inmissio [penis] in os [alterus]—reflected the masculine concept of sex, which, as Halperin explains, was always inmissio or “penetration.”29 More than just pederasty (which, denoting only sexual object choice, was perceived, like sodomy, as a reprehensible but ideologically excusable vice), it was the inversion, passive pederasty, that particularly worried Báñez.

27Halperin, p. 39.
28Chauncey, p. 121. For a discussion on the forms of representation of sex in classical Greece, see Halperin, pp. 48–49.
29Halperin, p. 49.
In the second chapter of his book, Bátiz recalled his childhood impressions of Buenos Aires: “In the early years I explored the southern part of the city . . . to enter into la Boca meant lust, especially when we entered some brothel, always ruled by Italians and women of low Italian origin.” Between 1890 and 1914, with very occasional exceptions, Italians constituted a visible majority of immigrants in Buenos Aires. Bátiz described his walks to the north: “Another day, I took the Paseo 9 de Julio from the Casa Rosada all the way to the docks of Las Catalinas. I had a special antipathy toward the gardens of the Paseo 9 de Julio because they were the refuge of the passive pederasts who met around the statue of Mazzini, the revolutionary and man of Italian liberties.” In the north, then, the other symbolic pole of the city, Bátiz inscribed a pederasty that, inside the city, was represented as “passive” and in a “refuge” around the statue of Giuseppe Mazzini. Bátiz drew a symbolic axis around which he organized a dense constellation of meanings: lust and pederasty from south to north, and a national, heterosexual prostitution in the west (Buenos Aires) coming into contact with a cosmopolitan, homosexual prostitution infiltrating from the east (Europe).  

Bátiz’s description was a variation on the representation of sexual deviance characterized as the relation between the activist and suggestive leader and the suggestible group, which we saw in the texts of Biasi-Massé, Mercante, and Ramos Mejía. Furthermore, in Bátiz’s text the passive, suggestible, receptive mode also became “national” in contrast to the active, suggestive, insertive role of the revolutionary, or the Italian “external agitator.” Bátiz first identified the origin of a “Roman,” “atavistic” pederasty. In Gómez’s history it was “in Rome, in the times of the Empire [that pederasty] led to all manner of excesses.” In Bátiz’s book this active pederasty became “traffic” between Rome and Buenos Aires designed to subvert a new group of Argentine youths. Apparently concerned about the proliferation of heterosexual prostitution, Bátiz alleged that “prostitution has taken on an alarming character because it is increasing beyond the normal and logical to such a level that we are on the edge of Roman decadence.” Although he was alluding to the stereotypical decadence of imperial Rome described by Edward Gibbon, he went on to identify in early twentieth-century Rome “the existence in public life of an agency that provides models to passive pederasts, located in Rome in the Corso Humberto I [sic].”  

Imperial Rome became turn-of-the-century Rome, now characterized synchronically and diachronically as a historic center of homosexuality, further.


31 Bátiz, p. 79.
represented as the source, “agency,” business office, and means by which male homosexual prostitutes offered sex for hire to a new Argentine youth of passive pederasts.

The police chief also recreated the representation of an invasion that we have seen in other texts. Immediately after identifying the Roman agency, he warned that “there exists a traffic in models of a shameless international character.” The obligatory use of gender markers in Spanish leaves no doubt that these were all male models. The suggestive and active invasion of a foreign pederasty, when inscribed inside the national borders, became the same infection and danger of epidemic, now of suggestive and passive national pederasty, gathering around the leader who seduced them. And Mazzini, the carbonaro, the organizer of secret international societies of young men, was constructed as the seductive activist around whom the new Argentine youth, lovers of “Italian liberties,” congregated.

Bátiz argued that national security was threatened by external agitators who were represented as Roman models of a (homo)sexual anarchism proselytizing effectively among the youth. Bátiz also warned that an already well-known group of “new scandalmongers of Argentine youth [now] . . . go to Naples or Rome looking for models,” thus becoming the clients of the Roman “models for passive pederasts.”

It is important to note that when Bátiz inscribed the Italian pederasts outside national borders, he always called them models; he never used the term “active pederasts.” This representation made them dangerous agents of “perturbation,” activists, and foreign agitators, but from the sexual point of view these men were not stigmatized. Like the sodomites defined by Gómez, they did not invert the insertive position conceived as correct for their biological sex. What worried Bátiz was the inversion of the new Argentine youth, irremediably seduced by the Roman models.

To contain this pederasty, Bátiz promoted a national prostitution. Drawing the same distinction between Argentines and foreigners working in prostitution, Gómez asserted that “in the first can be discovered certain traits of nobility of which the other seems incapable. Passion for true love . . . is general in the Criollo prostitute, the one who furthermore shows herself to be lacking that fever to accumulate money which characterizes the imported harlot.” He added that “such women finally feel a profound dislike for men and give themselves over to sapphic love.” Bátiz advocated a national prostitution of “humble brothels with Criollo women of pure race, of the Latin American indigenous type.” This was prostitution designed as a prophylactic measure against passive pederasty. Writing about el culturanismo, the public auction of women (a common practice of het-

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., p. 83.
erosexual prostitution in Buenos Aires at the time), Bátiz described “a circle whose cordon was protected by a line of men, and the ugliest or prettiest woman was thrown into the center to be auctioned.” He added, “I believe that el culturanismo is preferable to pederasty.” Substantiating his argument for a national and humble prostitution to protect passive young Argentines from the active models, Bátiz again warned that there existed in Rome a house “that provides models for passive pederasts ... [and] traffics in these models.”

The Homosexual Subculture

Beyond attempting to control women and men who broke the cultural and social constructions proposed as “national” by the official Argentine ideology, the homosexual panic disseminated by means of the texts we have seen also aimed to regulate and control a visible subculture of men made up of homosexuals and transvestites in Buenos Aires.

This group of homosexuals was studied and described in great detail by Francisco de Veyga in a series of clinical histories published between 1902 and 1904. A doctor, criminologist, and specialist in the study of homosexuality, Veyga was an intimate friend of José María Ramos Mejía and one of his two most favored disciples.

Veyga studied and documented a homosexual subculture that seemed to acquire a subversive visibility during carnival. In an article published in 1902, for example, Veyga described a heterosexual married man who began to wear costumes during carnival, continued to do so throughout the year, and ended up dedicated to his newly acquired fame as a star among homosexual transvestites. In the following passage, Veyga's use of theatrical imagery and vocabulary reflected his concern with the public visibility of drag culture. This concern in turn expressed the anxiety that the “truth” of gender, as Judith Butler argues, “is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surfaces of bodies.”

Finding proclivities in the past of his patient, Veyga wrote:

Before getting married, and for some time afterward, the diversion to which he devoted the greatest enthusiasm was dressing up for carnival. He had a weakness for performing in carnival song and dance groups and in parties with stage designs. The adjoining photograph represents him in showy dress, cutting a good figure. In this theater,
where promiscuity of sexes is achieved on a grand scale, homosexual relations are not difficult to start up. In carnivalesque associations there is a purpose other than the aesthetic: the exhibition of forms, the intentionality of the musical airs [such as the original tango with its popular, anonymous, and “obscene” lyrics], and the decidedly erotic character these people give to their meetings, all boldly proclaim the goal to which they tend. And indeed it is there, in those parties, receiving loaded compliments on his physical endowments, and mixing with uranists of every species, that he began to perceive the first intimations of his change. One day he met a subject who approached him head on— the usual seducer, the initial agent of these deviations that seem to be exclusively the work of nature—and he did not hesitate to yield. The man says that “they had spoken to him so often of the matter,” and that he saw around him so many scenes of this type, without understanding that they might be reprehensible, that “it seemed to him his duty to try it.”

From there he threw himself into el público [which in Spanish means both the public and the audience]. His appearance in the world in which he figures “was a smashing success,” just as it had been predicted to him, and as he himself supposed. He took the name of “Rosita de la Plata,” celebrating an écuyère who at that time cut a considerable figure in the demi-mondaine society, and took little time to surpass her in fame. He still preserves said fame, although his star is already fading from the ravages of time and the rude competition presented by so many newcomers in the market, more or less gifted than he. To what does he owe his fame? To very little, to be sure. To his care in always lying in wait for parties and to his indefatigable activity in the labor of feminine imitation. “Rosita” follows fashion, and sets the fashion for his peers. Here, he is portrayed in the photograph, in a matinée dress, inciting envy in many for his gracious air and arrogance at the same time. She has imposed the fashion of several costumes and of these outrageous portraits that seem to be a speciality of these people, so idiosyncratic are they.36

The narration documenting the path out of the closet and the subsequent life of “Rosita de la Plata” followed a stereotypical pattern of the life and career of a theater diva; moved by an original “great passion for performing” she first “surrenders herself to the scene,” then “throws herself to the public,” “has a smashing success,” and “surpasses her rivals in fame,” until “her star fades from the ravages of time.”

Notwithstanding the exaggeration with which he sought to implant and

disseminate homosexual panic in this fragment and in his other articles on sexual inversion, Veyga depicted a large, visible, and well-defined subculture of homosexuals and homosexual transvestites who shared habits, dress, language, and meeting places, during carnival and the rest of the year. Among these men were role models who jockeyed for “fame”; “fashionable dresses” and styles which could be “set” and which other people would “follow”; and fashionable habits, such as “outrageous portraits.” Dresses, styles, fashions, and photographs circulated within this subculture in a profusion of “so many scenes of this class,” in which “homosexual relations are not difficult to start up” because, “mixing with uranists of every species,” there was an always renewed variety of “so many newcomers.” These became marginal modes of performance, functioning within and questioning the wider system of representations of gender.37

The creation of a new space in which these men were able to distance themselves from the humiliation they endured as sexual outcasts, while establishing an alternative moral order and culture in which they were in control, began with the adoption of a new naming system, through which these men, by taking female names, reinvented their gender. Veyga’s patient “took the name of Rosita de la Plata,” a name like “Aida . . . with which another subject became distinguished in the very special world in which she moves.” Luis D. “has adopted the name ‘La bella Otero,’ the celebrated Parisian cocotte of whom she presumes to be the rival”; “Aurora is a thirty-year-old man” while “Manón, for such is her nom de guerre, was a healthy boy until the age of fifteen.” The selection of clothing was as telling of one’s “true gender” as the selection of a name: “An adolescent recently abandoned to inversion has adorned himself with the name ‘Darclée’ and cannot give himself to the scene without his wig and a woman’s blouse.” Most of these men adopted the names of fashionable characters and divas of the glittering world of the opera, the theater, the circus, or the café concert: Rosita after “an écuyère”; Aida after Verdi’s opera; Manón after Massenet’s and Puccini’s operas; La bella Otero after the “celebrated Parisian cocotte”; and Darclée after Hericléa Darclée, the Romanian soprano who sang her world-famous Tosca in Buenos Aires in 1897, 1903, and 1907. Veyga, exasperated with the dramatic visibility—and pride—of the men creating these parodic repetitions, concluded: “Finally given entirely to the life of these people, with a new name which they have given themselves, they end up becoming characters of a public show, without being troubled by their sad reputation, indeed often proud of it.” After coming out and renaming themselves, “these people give themselves en-

37For a discussion on drag and the denaturalization of essentialist gender identities, see Butler, p. 138.
tirely to" a parallel, parodic reality. Veyga described a group of men who gathered at balls, parties, and social events all year. These gatherings fulfilled a number of social functions that strengthened the sexual identity of the members of this subculture. Emphasizing the importance that one of these reunions had in reaffirming the sexual identity of a forty-year-old man, Veyga wrote:

The occasion [a friend’s celebration] required that his companions take him to a party of homosexuals, enthusiastically telling him about the novelties that he would encounter there. That party decided his situation forever. The interest that the “ladies” provoked in him was immense, to the point that he “felt crazed by their grace and attractions; but to tell the truth” (according to him), he was not experiencing a purely casual interest, but one of “affectionate sympathy” and “companionship.” . . . The fact is that from that night, having made friends with many of the party-goers, his medium and his field of action became those that had just been revealed to him.

This feeling that it was “not . . . a purely casual interest, but one of ‘affectionate sympathy’ and ‘companionship,’” suggests that this man was encountering a developed social network that encouraged the assertion of his newly found identity.

The evidence of this rich marginal world in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Buenos Aires is an important moment in the history of homosexual subcultures. As Jeffrey Weeks notes, “Until comparatively recently, very few people found it either possible or desirable to incorporate sexual mores, social activities, and public identity into a full-time homosexual ‘way of life.’” However, in the homosexual subculture of Buenos Aires we see precisely this incorporation of sexual mores and social activities into a “homosexual ‘way of life.’” Although some of these men came out, found their peers, and asserted their sexual identities, others were like Mannon, who “in feminine clothes gives free rein to her inverted feelings, attending inverted soirées and dances in which, together with others, she acts out the role of grande dame.” Incorporating sexual mores with a public identity, some of these men took their parody of the “truth of gender” to the streets. La bella Otero created “disorders and scandals, motivated by her habit of going out into the street dressed as a woman. . . . Only


exceptionally does he wear male garb, preferring feminine accoutrements, which he wears with ease and even elegance. He leaves his house seldom and generally in a carriage, to avoid tiresome street incidents that would be impossible to evade, given the relative notoriety among the aficionados of the genre.”

Besides public visibility, disorder, and scandal—of dressing in drag outside in the streets or inside at parties and balls—these men flaunted ceremonies and rites that were caricatures of traditional sex/gender systems. The incredulity in Veyga’s tone showed that even the exceptions reinforced the rule for him: in his article entitled “Invertido sexual imitando la mujer honesta” (Invert imitating an honest woman), Veyga described Aida, who was discreet (in male clothing) at work, imitated “an honest woman” in drag, was serially monogamous, prudish in conversation, and—the best proof that she was a mujer honesta—claimed to get no pleasure out of the sexual act with her “husband.” Explaining that “the marriage of sexual inverts is not a rare occurrence, to be sure, but this ceremony ordinarily happens only as an act of scandalous ostentation,” Veyga nevertheless seemed shocked as he described the marriage of Aida “with the conventional apparatus of a real wedding: she dressed in white, her head adorned with orange blossoms, he in tuxedo and white gloves.” Here the parody called into question the “naturalness” of the “conventional [heterosexual] apparatus,” and thus made public the “dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” that Judith Butler calls “gender as a corporeal style, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative.”

Aside from their concern with these parodic repetitions, Veyga’s case histories conveyed a preoccupation with the photographs of these men in drag. With each history, Veyga published a series of photographs that he said fascinated but baffled him. At the beginning of the long fragment of Rosita’s history quoted above, Veyga called special attention to “the adjoining photograph [of Rosita] in showy dress, cutting a good figure,” and later he pointed out a “photograph in a matinée dress.” “These outrageous portraits,” the doctor proclaimed, “... seem to be a speciality of these people.” From the number, poses, and settings of the photographs published in different specialized and popular journals of the period, it is evident that these men made a habit of dressing in drag and having their pictures taken, to be kept, copied, shown, given, or passed around and commented upon. La bella Otero wrote, knowingly, that she had “the

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41Veyga, “Invertido sexual imitando la mujer honesta,” p. 371; Butler, p. 139.
honor of giving Dr. Veyga some portraits with [a] dedication,” and she did not, according to Veyga, “hide very well his desire to figure as a case study in the book on sexual inversion that we are preparing.”

Veyga’s concern with the photographs exemplified the subversive possibilities that Walter Benjamin saw in photography: the mechanical reproduction of photographs had the possibility of disseminating ad infinitum the parodic repetition of drag with its challenge to the “authenticity” of gender. Furthermore, this dissemination of photographs subverted the traditional homogenizing function of the mass media. Susan Buck-Morss, writing about Benjamin’s interest in photography, explains that “photography democratized the reception of visual images by bringing even art masterpieces to a mass audience.” But in Veyga’s articles, the masterpieces were images that, erasing the gap between sign (women) and referent (men), made clear that gender was a mere inscription on the surface of the body.

Pointing out the explosive potential of this erasure, Benjamin explained that photographs “acquire a hidden political significance. They demand a specific kind of approach; free floating contemplation is not appropriate to them. They stir the viewer; he feels challenged by them in a new way. . . . For the first time captions have become obligatory.” So, below each photograph Veyga added captions, such as “Manón—Congenital Sexual Invert in Dance Costume,” “Rosita de la Plata—Inverted by Suggestion,” and the like. But the tension between the captions describing men (invertido in Spanish using the masculine adjectival ending) and the drag images of women made visible a “fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification.” Veyga not only made obvious this fluidity of identities in the pages of his texts; he further contributed to the reproduction and dissemination of these images of wo/men.

Of Manón’s photographs Veyga wrote that “the photographs we publish suffice to give an idea of his correct and suggestive carriage,” and of a photo of Aurora that “the illusion that he must have offered that night can be measured by the demeanor in the adjoining photograph [of Aurora in drag].” Challenged, Veyga then tried to reorganize—to fix the “right” construction of gender. Of course this operation was first performed on Aurora’s own body. Veyga recalled that “when they brought him to the observation clinic of the police department he was still dressed as a woman, and I may be excused from speaking of the deprivations he underwent to

42Veyga, “Inversión profesional,” pp. 494, 496. To my knowledge Veyga’s book on sexual inversion was never published.
become accommodated to the locale. The change of clothing was a difficult task.” Afterward the police took a mug shot of Aurora as a man, which Veyga also published, next to Aurora’s photo in drag, in an effort to shatter the illusion: “The art which he uses to arrange himself can also be valued, comparing the face that he has in said portrait [in drag] with the one [portraying a man] that complements the illustration of this case.” Roland Barthes explains that “photography . . . began historically as an art of the Person, of civil status, of what we might call, in all senses of the term, the body’s formality.” And in spite of Veyga’s effort to (re)construct the gender of Aurora, Rosita, or Manón, their published photographs were indeed documentation of an “identity and civil status, . . . the body’s formality” forever deconstructed by images of f/c males of “correct and suggestive carriage.”

Photographs and captions were a visual representation of the attempt to contain the explosive possibilities of these images. In the same way that the explicatory captions tried to tame the visual images, the taxonomy of sexual inversion, which Veyga elaborated throughout six articles published between 1902 and 1904, tried to explain and control this subversive “art of the Person[a]” spreading through the city.

In his first two articles (published in 1902), Veyga specified a sexual inversion defined as “congenital.” However, in his third article (1903) the doctor added the definition of an “acquired sexual inversion.” Later on he further defined an “acquired-professional sexual inversion.” Examining Veyga’s six articles sequentially, two things become clear: the doctor’s growing effort to define sexual inversion as an acquired form of sexual deviance and his mounting struggle with a group of homosexuals who defined their condition as congenital. As we will see, the category and concept of acquired sexual inversion prevailed in Veyga’s articles published after 1903 and was reaffirmed in later texts of Argentine sexual science.

Before examining the various definitions and connotations of sexual inversion—congenital, acquired, or professional—we should first note that in Veyga’s concept of congenital (minoritizing) and acquired (universalizing) homosexuality, we see one more instance of the “radical and irreducible incoherence” that Sedgwick observes: “It holds the minoritizing view that there is a distinct population of persons who ‘really are’ gay; at the same time, it holds the universalizing view that sexual desire is an unpredictable powerful solvent of stable identities.”

In Veyga’s taxonomical definitions of sexual inversion, homosexuality—which denoted sexual object choice—appeared but became secondary to

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46Sedgwick, Epistemology (n. 1 above), p. 85.
sexual inversion, which, going beyond sexual object choice, denoted the “pathology” of transvestites who inverted the active and insertive mode and the dress and manners considered correct for men. Acquired sexual inversion was the social evil contracted from a demographically, politically, and sexually volatile environment. Male-male sexual contacts had increased in a city with a large population of young males, both on the streets and in the “supposedly all-female bordellos”; Veyga used as supporting evidence the growing visibility of the homosexual subculture and homosexual prostitution. In his definition of acquired-professional sexual inversion, while reaffirming the view that sexual inversion was an acquired social evil, Veyga conflated all transvestites with prostitutes, whom he called “professional inverts.” These “professionals” in turn he linked with lunfardos, the inhabitants of the marginal world of rogues, petty thieves, and unemployed immigrants. Thus Veyga criminalized all sexual inverts and disseminated the notion that all men living on the margins of society were homosexuals.

After his definition of congenital sexual inversion (in contradiction to his subsequently published definition of acquired sexual inversion) Veyga defined the more discrete category of professional inverts, or men who supported themselves by homosexual prostitution. Throughout his later articles, Veyga identified these men as “pseudo-inverts,” men who adopted the incorrect role, dress, and manners simply to make a profit, although these professionals identified themselves as maricas (sissies). Weeks explains that “a number of studies have suggested that many males who prostitute themselves regard themselves as heterosexuals and devise complex strategies to neutralize the significance of their behavior.” But this was not the case with the professionals in Veyga’s case studies. The doctor reported that Aurora felt “as though [she] were born a marica.” La bella Otero, the other “professional sexual invert” in Veyga’s histories, wrote in the first sentence of her “Autobiography,” published with the clinical history: “I have always thought of myself as a woman, and therefore I wear women’s clothing.” Both Aurora and La bella Otero viewed themselves as “born” or “born like” homosexuals, but in an effort to criminalize all homosexuals, Veyga defined maricas as (passive) pederasts, prostitutes, and criminals and lunfardos as (active) pederasts. Thus the relationship between sexual inverts and lunfardos reproduced the stereotypical relationship between passive female prostitutes exploited by active male pimps.

As a means of promoting social regulation, Veyga attempted to identify the homosexual subculture with the lunfardo world of wayfarers, unem-

47 Guy (n. 17 above), p. 86.
ployed immigrants, seamstresses, petty thieves, and prostitutes. The lunfardo underworld of turn-of-the-century Buenos Aires (and its language of secret codes) was the core of the mythical construction of today’s porteño “identity.” And in its time this keystone of an imagined Argentine identity was defined as a community of homosexuals. Veyga alleged that “the world of marias is so intimately linked with that of lunfardos and that of prostitutes, that it can be said to be part of both.” In the same article, all lunfardos became pederasts and pimps: “The lunfardo is a pederast by nature who knows how to exploit, by good means or bad, the invert?” Thus all male inhabitants of the low life of Buenos Aires were pederasts or stereotypical male pimps, and the invert were corresponding stereotypical female prostitutes.49

Veyga’s articles also portrayed all homosexuals, lunfardos, pederasts, and inverts (whether professionals or not) as criminals. He first wrote: “It is frequent—or rather, the rule, to say it better—that the professional invert is a delinquent.” Then he lumped all categories together under one term: the cofradia (confraternity). Describing Aurora’s first contact with other male homosexual prostitutes, Veyga pointed out that “he [Aurora] was very far from supposing that in Buenos Aires there was a whole cofradia that exercised this trade. But very quickly he learned that the mode of life that he had entered was not exclusively his, and that on the contrary, he had to contend with numerous competitors, sharp-eyed in the practice of the trade.” This term, however, was used by the members of the homosexual subculture to identify themselves. Here, a reading of a letter published by the criminologist Eusebio Gómez in La mala vida en Buenos Aires is illuminating. Apparently making few or no corrections, Gómez transcribed “the following letter directed to us by Mysotis, a congenital invert, a young man of the class we will call ‘aristocratic.’” Responding to a request for information by the criminologist, Mysotis replied, “Your requiring me to send you the details of my life, in the compromising form of a letter, is ridiculous. . . . I am like this because I was born like this. Anyway, this is the way I should behave because beauty has no sex. I do not do anything extraordinary; I like men and for that reason I am frank with them. I treat them with exquisite savoir faire, as one of the members of the cofradia (who writes the social column for a certain newspaper) said.” Further on, Gómez added that “the homosexuals of Buenos Aires have a particularity worth noting: the tendency to associate, forming a kind of sect, which they

49Veyga, “El sentido moral,” p. 28 (emphasis mine). Today lunfardo is the word that, changing meaning through time, denotes the porteño slang (porteño meaning inhabitant of the port city of Buenos Aires). In our day this argot has become the colloquial language of Buenos Aires, and it is identified in other Latin American countries and throughout the Spanish-speaking world as a very idiosyncratic “Argentine Spanish.”
The Argentine Dissemination of Homosexuality

This was not a cofradía of men who made their living from homosexual prostitution, as Veyga said, but a community of class-diverse homosexuals: some were "of the class we will call aristocratic," as was Mysotis, and Aida, who "was well born and grew up well off"; others were middle-class professionals, such as the journalist who wrote "the social column for a certain newspaper"; some were hairdressers like Manón; still others were servants like Rosita; and some were men who sometimes worked as hairdressers but also made a living from homosexual prostitution, such as Aurora. And then there were men who, like La bella Otero, lived exclusively from homosexual prostitution. This wide social spectrum not only reflected the ordering of the social classes of the time but also disorganized it, cut it vertically, and created a group in which sexual identities were as important or more important than social class. This was particularly significant in a society such as Argentina's, remarkable for its rigid social stratification.50

The Seducers

In Veyga's clinical history, this large group of maricas, homosexuals, and transvestites—members of the cofradía—appeared to be linked to an even larger group of men, who, despite having sexual relations with men, were very seldom called pederasts or homosexuals but were defined by Veyga as "seducers." Like Bátiz's models, the seducers were not stigmatized because they did not invert the insertive role defined as correct for them.

In Rosita's story she mentioned "the usual sederer, the initial agent of these deviations which seem to be exclusively the work of nature." The seducer, although he did not reverse the "correct" role of inserter in choosing another man as a sexual object, was guilty of indulging in practices contra natura and of fostering the "inversion" of men upon whom he practiced sex. La bella Otero's first sexual partner was "the sederer [who] on a summer afternoon invited him to bed, . . . thus initiating him into passive pederasty." Aida's first spouse was the "sederer [who made Aida] his 'wife' to have [her]."51

Veyga defined the sederer early in his investigations, in his second article published in 1902. This definition of an "initial agent" and propagator who was a product of the environment substantiated the idea of an acquired sexual inversion that spread in a city with a large population of single men. Defining the sederer, Veyga wrote:

Besides inverts, to determine and foment homosexual tendencies, there exist types previously inclined to sexual delights with their own sex. No matter how farfetched the conceptions of the sick mind are, there is always a base in the environment that serves as a justification, and in this case the phenomenon of "turning into women" responds to the existence of a special class of subjects, more numerous than that of the sexual inverts, that seeks to satisfy virile impulses upon an individual of their own sex. . . . With the invert we always find the sodomite.

Veyga offered a good example of the form of representing sex that Halperin describes: "Sex as is constituted by this public, masculine discourse is either act or impact: it is not knit up in a web of mutuality." In Veyga's definition, this "special class of subjects . . . seeks to satisfy virile impulses upon" other individuals. This was the origin of the sexual deviance acquired from the environment.52

Notwithstanding the sexual scientists' clear tendency to define sexual deviations as acquired, Veyga also took a position with respect to the perennial argument over the congenital or acquired definition of homosexuality. In his first article on congenital sexual inversion (1902), Veyga's rhetoric already moved within the space Sedgwick calls the unstable "gap between long coexisting minoritizing [essentialist or congenital] and universalizing [constructivist or acquired]" definitions. Leaning early toward the acquired definition, Veyga argued that "the teaching of the sexual functions, in one sense or the other, influences the determination of the inversion (or lack thereof) in congenitally predisposed subjects in the same way that special educational or environmental conditions can determine acquired sexual perversions in those not predisposed." Here we should note the emphasis on the possibility of "the teaching." Veyga at this time still supported the possibility of congenitally predisposed subjects, but a year later writing about acquired sexual inversion, he recognized that "the classification based in the nature of origin of this psycho-organic deviation is purely artificial, given that in the clinic there exists no determining feature that distinguishes the born invert from the one who converts for whatever reason. . . . Sometimes the details are so similar that the one can be identified with the other."53

As social and political instability was created by the great number of transient immigrants and by women and men organizing and demanding economic and political changes, and as the homosexual subculture became more visible, Veyga, like the rest of the Argentine medicolegal establish-

52 Veyga, "Invertido mujer honesta," p. 373 (emphasis mine); Halperin, p. 48.
ment of the time, became a sexual constructionist. In 1903, after defining the seducer a year earlier, the doctor argued that "the environment operates in such a way in the mind of these subjects that it could be said that it determines and sustains the growth of these aberrations. The counter-natural tendencies, the example and the direct and indirect suggestions which, as a joke, are constantly received by men from high school to the barracks and from the barracks to old age, are what determine, if not cause, the psychotic break in these subjects."54 The specific environments and institutions that induced the "psychotic break"—that is, the places that required special vigilance—were the high schools of the national educational system (thus Mercante's concern with the epidemic of feminine uranism in boarding schools) and the barracks of the national army. In 1908 Gómez, working with a somewhat more modernized taxonomy than Veyga (replacing invert with homosexual), also defined an "acquired homosexuality, which can be determined by, especially in beings with a certain predisposition, life in common. . . . Barracks and high schools provide copious examples."55

José Ingenieros (a disciple of Ramos Mejía and an influential Argentine physician, psychiatrist, philosopher, sociologist, and critic of art and literature) noted the same definition of a sexual deviation and identified the same spaces and institutions as places from which the "acquired" sickness was spread. He published an article in 1910 on the pathology of the sexual functions, in which he classified and ordered the sexual deviations studied by different authors whose investigations were published between 1902 and 1910. In this article, Ingenieros expressly said that his ordering was based as much on studies by foreigners as on "the national bibliography [that] includes select publications of Ramos Mejía, Mercante, Eusebio Gómez, . . . and principally various clinical monographs by De Veyga." Referring to inversion and feminine homosexuality, Ingenieros wrote, "Inversion is seen less frequently in women; their education and medium are not very conducive to the development of 'tribadism,' being less rare in women free of any social tie (artists, intellectuals, et cetera) . . . although sentimental or romantic inversion is quite frequent in girls' boarding schools (Mercante). In married women it is usually a deviation due to sexual or affective deficiencies of the husband." Under the category of "instinctive parafrodisias," Ingenieros defined "the inversion of the sexual instinct or sexual homoaesthesia":

It must be considered as a "congenital tendency." . . . This "congenital tendency" usually is confused with acquired pseudo-inversions,

55 Gómez, p. 181.
almost always secondary to the counter-natural practices, frequent in boarding schools for both sexes, in convents, and in the barracks. In all these pseudo-uranists the primitive sexual tendency is normal but has been deviated by education. . . . Militant homosexuals want to make us believe that they are true congenital inverts, because they understand that, thus, their acquired perversion will be more justified under the disguise of the congenital anomaly. Theuranist’s explanations (a woman’s soul in a man’s body, errors in sexual conformation, God’s will, et cetera) are preposterous.

Here all girls’ and boys’ schools, convents, and barracks were identified as the ideal media for the proliferation of “counter-natural practices” that gave rise to the “acquired pseudo-inversion . . . secondary to counter-natural practices.” Two pages later, Ingenieros wrote: “The true primitive inversion of the sexual instinct seems to us a less frequent fact than Krafft-Ebing and other authors have believed.” He concluded that “the primitive inversion of the sexual tendencies is very rare, despite the exaggerations of Krafft-Ebing. Inverts are passive pederasts who get used to living with a man.”

In response to the presumed need to take defensive measures against this acquired pseudo-inversion, represented as spreading outward from schools and army barracks, José María Ramos Mejía was named president of the Consejo Nacional de Educación in 1908, and between 1904 and 1906 Francisco de Veyga left teaching to become the Surgeon General of the Argentine army. Hugo Vezzetti explains that Veyga,

faithful disciple of José María Ramos Mejía, can be said to continue his true labor of that model of multitude-in-order that is the army, and he does not do a bad job, to judge by his career as a military doctor in which he achieved the position of Surgeon General of the Army with the rank of General of the nation. That such results led him to leave his professorship of legal medicine does not constitute for him a change of direction. The creation of obligatory military service brought together a heterogeneous population mass who needed sanitary attention but also organization and unification into the subjective moral order.

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57Vezzetti (n. 20 above), p. 178. As Eve Sedgwick points out, “The historical emphasis on enforcement of homophobic rules in the armed services . . . where both men’s manipulability and their potential for violence are at the highest possible premium, the proscription of the most intimate male bonding and the proscription of (the remarkable cognate) ‘homosexual-ity’ are both stronger than in civilian society—are, in fact, close to absolute” (Epistemology, p. 186).
Conclusion

In comparing the Argentine taxonomic elaboration of categories of sexual deviance with the contemporary medical inquiries studied by George Chauncey, Jr., and others, I suggest that in Argentina the medicolegal category of homosexuality did not seem to replace the category of sexual inversion. It is true that to define deviance after the 1900s doctors looked mainly at the issue of sexual object choice, but while doing so they further (re)defined correct roles for the sexual and social behavior of active men and passive women. The persistent distinction between an active and a passive role in male-male sex—as well as in a relationship between two passive uranist women—in my view was a residue of a Mediterranean concept and representation of sex. It was not by chance that the category of pederasty subsisted with a new emphasis on the more discrete categories of passive and active pederasty. The definition of the passive pederast coexisted with that of the sexual invert, the passive pederast who, after inverting the sexual role, inverted the dress and manners defined as correct for his biological sex.

The euphemistic references to and definitions of the pederast, the foreign model, the local seducer, and the sodomite reflected the concept of a sexual behavior perceived as an acquired vice or a procedure contra natura, not unlike Foucault’s view of sodomy prior to 1870, but no further stigmatized. Models or seducers did not invert the active, insertive role defined as correct for their biological sex, and therefore they were not marked as anything other than men. The Mediterranean pederast or the Latin American bugarrón was what we understand today as the homosexual. Whereas in Anglo-Saxon Europe and the United States sexual object choice (regardless of the sexual role adopted) was enough to define an identity, in the texts of Argentine sexual science at the turn of the century, primarily the sexual invert—the passive pederast—became the stigmatized category of male sexual deviance.

The Argentine taxonomic elaboration of categories of homosexuality has to be examined within a very specific historical context. Between 1900 and 1910 the European Argentina that had been imagined a century earlier had become the reality of a sudden metropolis, Buenos Aires, a major port at the mouth of the Rio de la Plata, which centralized the culture, wealth, and goods of a large portion of the South American continent. By 1910 many of the immigrants who had reached Argentina at the turn of the century had not been able to acquire land and therefore had established themselves in Buenos Aires, working in the new urban industries and commerce. Out of this large new urban population grew different social classes, which in thirty years rearranged the power structure of colonial times. At this point Argentina had to be imagined again. In charge of this re-
envisioning was a positivist scientific technocracy subservient to the traditional landowning class. These state bureaucrats produced a body of writing outlining a sexual science with explicit definitions and categories of sexual deviance, such as uranism, homosexuality, pederasty, and sexual inversion. This explication reflected their fear of an inversion of power between social classes and gender groups. While women working for wages or joining labor movements were perceived as doing jobs traditionally defined for men, men were apparently underemployed or unemployed, crowding the city, and in many cases having sex with other men. Thus activist women were defined as the opposite of the imagined national model of the white, prolific, submissive Argentine mother and wife, while passive men were defined as the opposite of the ideal of the new virile, nationalist Argentine youth.

As women started to compete with men in the industrial and commercial job markets in a city with a large population of young foreign men, male-male sexual encounters became more numerous and visible, while a subculture of homosexual transvestites flourished and mixed with groups of other homosexuals and transvestites who occasionally made their living from homosexual prostitution. This image of a city thriving on female labor and homosexual prostitution further concerned the state technocrats anxious about sexual inversion. As a defensive measure, the positivist Argentine state technocracy devised a campaign of social and moral reform, aimed primarily at the production and indoctrination of an ideal Argentine youth. The story of how this campaign was launched from the nation's elementary and secondary schools, and from the barracks of the national army, remains to be told.