NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Entrance Forbidden to the Yiddish Theatres:

Performance, Prostitution, and Protest in Buenos Aires (1900-1930)

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Field of Theatre & Drama

By

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EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

September 2020

ABSTRACT

Scholars of early-twentieth-century Buenos Aires—an international theatre hub—disproportionately emphasize Spanish-language performances. This tendency erases the histories of immigrant performing artists, such as Yiddish-speaking Jews who fled en masse to Argentina in order to escape rising antisemitism in Europe and Russia. By focusing on Yiddish theatre in Buenos Aires, this dissertation contributes a multicultural and transnational approach to Argentinean theatre history. I show how antisemitic, antitheatrical, and misogynist assumptions (especially that all Jews were prostitutes and pimps with "low brow" theatrical preferences) have prevented scholars from understanding how Jewish immigrant artists shaped the Argentinean theatrical avant-gardes. In doing so, I demonstrate how applying feminist historical methods to Yiddish theatre ephemera, newspaper articles, and other sources enriches scholarship on Latin American modernisms, multicultural theatre history, and Jewish cultural studies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I did not go looking for this project. Thankfully, it found me, bringing together interests in gender, theatre, and Jewish history that I could not have anticipated would intersect as they do here. I thank my colleagues at the New York Legal Assistance Group—where I worked from 2012 to 2013 as the Avodah fellow in family law—for sending me off with a book on Jewish sex trafficking in Latin America (journalist Isabel Vincent's *Bodies and Souls*) that became the impetus for this project. Eager to understand the mysterious references to Yiddish theatre in Vincent's book, during my first quarter in graduate school I enrolled in Lucille Kerr's course on Jews in Argentina which inspired questions that would take a dissertation to answer. Many thanks to Lucille for being an early advocate for this project.

I thank each of my committee members for their time, support, and attention throughout this process. Tracy C. Davis saw light years into this project's future and her master mentorship has guided it immaculately to completion. When I got stuck in small intellectual crevasses, Elizabeth W. Son asked big questions that rejuvenated my excitement for the research process. Lively conversations with M. Alejandra Uslenghi helped me articulate the connection between seemingly unrelated fragments. I am also grateful for the network of mentors who have shared their encouragement and wisdom along the way including Dassia N. Posner, Harvey Young, Marcela Fuentes, Joshua Chambers-Letson, David Shyovitz, Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, Claire Sufrin, Joel Berkowitz, Nick Underwood, Alyssa Quint, Zachary Baker, and Paula Hernandez. The generosity of the IPTD community has been a treasured resource, especially the encouragement and wisdom I have received from Amy Swanson, Grace Overbeke, Rachel Moss, Jordana Cox, Tara Rodman, Aileen Robinson, and my fellow cohort members Alícia Hernandez Grande, Liz Laurie, and Eleanor

Russell. I also thank my undergraduate advisor, Susan Jaret McKinstry, for such gracious guidance on the path of narrative theory, and providing much needed inspiration along each step of the way.

My research findings would not have been possible without the support of many generous funders including Northwestern's Crown Center for Jewish and Israel Studies, the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, the Sexualities Project at Northwestern, the American Society for Theatre Research, the American Academy for Jewish Research, the Buffett Institute for Global Studies, the Chicago Institute for Jewish Research (YIVO), the Association for Jewish Studies, and Northwestern's Mellon Cluster Fellowship in Latin American and Caribbean Studies. Thank you to the many archivists and librarians for their diligent work on behalf of this project, especially Ezequiel Semo, Silvia Hansman, Abraham Lichtenbaum, and Amanda "Miryem-Khaye" Siegel.

While abroad, I was fortunate to meet brilliant thought-partners and friends including Joanna Spyra, Michelle Matzkin, Paula Anslado, Deborah Kantor, Mariano Krawiecki, Paul Katz, Issac Leslie, Witchie Artu, Natasha Nakamura Cordiero, Marcos Paulo Oliviera, Beatriz Blay, Theodora Barbarosa, Paula Janovitch, Roney and Monica Cytrynowicz, Yvette Trochon, and so many more. I have been privileged to be part of many Jewish communities in Chicago that served as an essential antidote to the potential isolation of a solo research project—thanks to all of the kind folks I have connected with through Moishe House, Doykeit, Orot, and Mishkan. Special thanks to Mary Ellen Stint for consistent writing camaraderie amidst the challenges of the final stretch. I am eternally grateful to Grace Gleason, Genevieve Greinetz, Danielle Morse, Yoshi Fields, Shira Abramowitz, Lauren Henderson, Daniel Kieval, and Miriam Kudler-Flam whose interest in this story, and my role in it, has kept me in good spirits.

I am so very thankful to have such a loving and supportive family who may not always have understood what I was doing and why I had to go so far away to do it but continued to offer their

support regardless. Thank you to Danny Hoppe for his sincere curiosity and dedication to celebrating small, process-based successes. All of Team Hoppe has also provided invaluable support during the past year, especially Annalee Letchinger and Eve Bratman. My brother, Marty Markenson, has surprised me with his incredibly perceptive questions about my research and provided wonderful companionship during his visit to Buenos Aires. Words cannot capture how grateful I am to my parents, Maria and Glenn, whose commitment to doing good work in the world (while keeping a sense of humor) is a continual source of inspiration and comfort. Thank you.

NOTE ON TRANSLATION

As most of the sources in this study are in Yiddish and Spanish, I have translated and transliterated names, titles, and other texts. For Yiddish texts, I have followed the standard of transliterating the Yiddish according to the guidelines of the YIVO Institute, except when a name is already recognized in English that differs from those guidelines. As Yiddish-readers will discover, nonstandard spellings were common in the Yiddish press; in effort to contribute to the searchability of original source materials, I have preserved nonstandard spellings of source titles. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

DEDICATION

For my grandmothers, Ruth and Helen Aleria,

whose paths did not cross at Teatro Doria,

though they could have.

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INTRODUCTION

Entrance Forbidden to the Yiddish Theatres

The Yiddish theatres in Buenos Aires had a bad reputation during the early twentieth century: rumor had it that they were financed by members of a notorious Jewish trafficking ring, then known as The Varsovia Society.[1] Scholars of Jewish migration and Yiddish theatre contend that this group of Jewish pimps, prostitutes, and madams regularly attended Argentinean Yiddish plays, starting with the first known Yiddish productions in Buenos Aires, a three-part series of Avrom Goldfaden operettas in 1901.[2] The only surviving trace of these early Yiddish performances is British Jewish journalist David Hassan's first-hand account of his experience attending Goldfaden's *Kuni Leml*.[3] Writing to a London-based readership of *The Jewish Chronicle*, Hassan admitted that he did not go to the theatre to enjoy the stage performance, but rather to "enquire into" the outcast members of the Jewish community whom he expected to find in the auditorium. I have devoted the last several years to enquiring into the observations of spectators such as Hassan and other theatre chroniclers and memoirists (mostly men), who voiced similar beliefs that such undesirable members of Jewish society attended Yiddish performances and that their "low brow" preferences prevented

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[1] The trafficking ring is better known by a different name, "the Zwi Migdal," which it adopted in 1928 in response to Jewish communal efforts to dissolve the organization. Mir Yarfitz, "Uprooting the Seeds of Evil: Ezras Noschim and Jewish Marriage Regulation, Morality Certificates, and Degenerate Prostitute Mothers in 1930s Buenos Aires," in *The New Jewish Argentina*, ed. Adriana Brodsky and Ranaan Rein, vol. 2, Jewish Latin America (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013), 56-7. When referencing the trafficking ring before the year 1928 I will refer to it as "The Varsovia Society," and when referencing it after the year 1928 I will refer to it as the "Zwi Migdal."

[2] Silvia Hansman, Susana Skura, and Gabriela Kogan, *Oysfarkoyft, localidades agotadas: afiches del teatro ídish en la Argentina [Sold out: yiddish theater posters in Argentina]*, trans. Jane Brodie (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Del nuevo extremo, 2006), 30.

[3] David Hassan, "Notes from Argentina," *The Jewish Chronicle*, October 25, 1901, https://www.thejc.com/archive.

the repertoire from modernizing.[4] In general, historians of Yiddish theatre globally and Jewish migration perpetuate similar claims. However, in the course of my archival research in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Israel, and the United States I found that the remaining archival materials from Argentinean Yiddish theatre history do not support this argument. In fact, playbills, newspaper articles, photographs, and other theatre ephemera from the era suggest that Jewish impresarios *commonly* produced modernist repertoire on the Argentinean Yiddish stages. What, then, has led to the discrepancy between male spectators' beliefs and the historical Yiddish theatre repertoire?

This dissertation explores the varied factors that have led to misguided conclusions about Argentinean Yiddish theatre history including methodology, misogyny, and antisemitism (note that I consciously spell antisemitism without a hyphen to dispel the ideology, associated with Nazism, that an entity "Semitism" exists which "anti-Semitism" opposes).[5] By applying feminist methods to original archival evidence, I show how gender bias has limited historical understandings about the Yiddish theatre's social and cultural role for Jewish immigrants in Buenos Aires. I argue that the perceived connection to prostitution has overshadowed the ways in which migrant Jewish theatre artists contributed to Argentinean culture. The cases in this study illustrate that early-twentieth-century Buenos Aires was an inherently multilingual and multicultural metropolis; likewise the Argentinean avant-gardes were inherently multilingual and multicultural endeavors. Without including stage and social performances in non-dominant languages and cultures, histories of global modernism, Argentinean culture, and gender and sexuality remain incomplete.

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[4] Pesach Burstein, *Gesphilt a lebn* [*To perform a life*] (Tel Aviv, 1980); Shmuel Rozhansky, *Di yidishe gedrukte vort un teater in Argentine* [*The printed Jewish word and theatre in Argentina*] (Buenos Aires, 1941); Henry Shoskes, *Mit yidn* [*With jews*], 1960; P. Vald, "Argentina: 50 Años de vida judia en el país [Argentina: 50 years of Jewish life in this country]," in *50 yor di prese [50 years of Di Prese]*, 1938, 88–119.

[5] See *Memo on Spelling of Antisemitism*.

Dominant Narratives about Yiddish Theatre and Prostitution in Buenos Aires

Scholars who address Yiddish theatre in Argentina tend to argue that Jewish "pimps provided financial backing and enthusiastic audiences for Yiddish theatrical productions" between 1901 and 1930.[6] In Argentina, Jews were never the only ethnic group involved in the commercial sex trade, but antisemitic notions about Jewish sexual "deviance" led xenophobes to blame Jews for importing such a shameful social evil into their country.[7] In attempt to protect the Jewish community's reputation, Argentine Jews ostracized these members of the Jewish underworld through banning them from Jewish religious groups, philanthropic organizations, and cultural institutions. In turn, Jewish prostitutes and pimps established their own mutual aid and burial society called The Varsovia Society (or in Spanish, *La Varsovia*, named after the city of Warsaw) in 1906. In the 1920s, at the height of The Varsovia Society's power, over four hundred men and women were officially part of the organization, which maintained its headquarters in a "lavish mansion" where meetings, partings, and religious services were held.[8] As Nahma Sandrow writes in her global survey of Yiddish theatre (1977), The Varsovia Society even maintained "their own Yiddish theatre."[9]

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[6] Nora Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman* (New York; London: Garland Pub, 2000), 9; also see Susana Skura and Leonor Slavsky, "1901-2001. Cien años de teatro en ídish en buenos aires [1901-2001. One hundred years of theatre in Yiddish in Buenos Aires]," in *Recreando la cultura Judeoargentina: literatura y artes plásticas [Recreating Argentine Jewish culture: literature and visual arts]*, ed. Ricardo Feierstein and Stephen Sadow (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Editorial Milá, 2002), 294-308.

[7] Edward J. Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight against White Slavery, 1870-1939* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983).

[8] Mir Yarfitz, *Impure Migration: Jews and Sex Work in Golden Age Argentina* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 1.

[9] Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater*, 1st ed (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 87.

While the connection between Yiddish theatre and prostitution fascinates scholars, there is not consensus on the specific terms of the relationship. Sandrow writes that Jewish pimps ran the Argentinean Yiddish theatres for both entertainment and business purposes; it was a place where Jewish pimps would "meet friends, talk shop, and show off their latest merchandise. The rest of the Jewish community was outraged and stayed away."[10] Historian Edward Bristow repeats similar sentiments that prostitutes "loved to attend" the Yiddish theatres for matters of "business and pleasure both" yet contradicts Sandrow's observation that "respectable" Jews "stayed away" altogether.[11] In Bristow's history of international Jewish activism against "white slavery" (1983), he understands the transactions between The Varsovia Society and Yiddish theatre folk as follows:

> The pimps bribed cashiers for the best seats and pushed some of the respectable clientele into the galleries. Some prostitutes solicited there, others came to relax on Friday evenings in their madams' private boxes. The unclean ones subsidised some productions, their women patronised some of the actors, and generally [the pimps and prostitutes] were able to control what [the impresarios] produced.

Scholars of Jewish immigration to Argentina expand on Bristow's claims that Jewish pimps "subsidised some productions" and "were able to control" the repertoire.[12] For example, in the words of Jewish immigration historian Victor Mirelman,

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[10] Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater*, 1st ed (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 88.

[11] Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice*, 225.

[12] Victor A. Mirelman, *Jewish Buenos Aires, 1890-1930: In Search of an Identity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990); Haim Avni, *"Clientes", rufianes y prostitutas: comunidades judias de Argentina e Israel frente a la trata de blancas ["Clients", ruffians, and prostitutes: Jewish communities in Argentina and Israel in the face of white slavery]*, ed. Florinda Goldberg, trans. Margalit Mendelson (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: Leviatán, 2014).

> Theatre managers, and even some of the actors had vested interests in the presence of this abhorred element of the Jewish population. They all, in smaller or larger measure, made a living from the Yiddish shows, and the white slave dealers used this factor for their benefit. They were thus able to impose their will in some aspects of the theatres' policy, such as banning specific plays from the stage.[13]

In rehearsing this history, Mirelman joins Bristow and Sandrow in referencing two plays in particular that provoked controversy, and which serve as the primary case studies for two of this dissertation's chapters. First, a 1908 production of Peretz Hirschbein's *Miriam* starring British Jewish actress Fanny Epstein, during which pimps in the audience started "guffawing."[14] Allegedly, the guffaws provoked "a bloody battle" between the pimps and a group of young Zionists who "forced the pimps out of the theatre, at least for the time being." However, the "abhorred elements" stayed away from the theatre only temporarily.

Public outrage over Yiddish theatre and prostitution escalated again in 1926, particularly after one impresario declined to produce Leib Malakh's brothel drama *Ibergus*, a struggle which "galvanised respectable Jews against the impure and led for a time to the hanging of signs reading 'unclean ones forbidden.'"[15] Scholars have used this line of text to support claims that The Varsovia Society "exercised a great influence" on Yiddish productions.[16] Such a warning certainly conveys

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[13] Mirelman, *Jewish Buenos Aires, 1890-1930: In Search of an Identity*, 172.
[14] Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice*, 219.
[15] Ibid., 225.
[16] This quote comes from Silvia Hansman, Susana Skura, and Gabriela Kogan, *Oysfarkoyft, localidades agotadas: afiches del teatro ídish en la Argentina [Sold out: yiddish theater posters in Argentina]*, trans. Jane Brodie (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Del nuevo extremo, 2006), 30; for similar claims see: Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice*; Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*; Mirelman, *Jewish Buenos Aires, 1890-1930: In Search of an Identity*; Skura and Slavsky, "1901-2001. Cien años de teatro en ídish en buenos aires [1901-2001. One hundred years of theatre in Yiddish in Buenos Aires]."

that impresarios were attempting to move away from public expectations that the Yiddish theatre was associated with prostitution. I am not convinced that such a source demonstrates a causal relationship between Jewish pimps' aesthetic preferences and the Yiddish theatre repertoire particularly because studies of anti-theatricality elsewhere debunk claims that theatres were sites for sex.[17] However, it is possible to glean much about the repertoire from advertisements for Yiddish plays during the era as published in the Yiddish press. Contrary to dominant claims about the Yiddish theatre's "low brow" repertoire, I have found that Argentinean Yiddish theatres regularly produced modernist works in Yiddish and in translation. In fact, my findings suggest that historical dismissiveness around the Yiddish repertoire is rooted in classist prejudices that working-class audiences did not have good taste in art. Vanguardist theatre artists relied on these assumptions to advocate for an overhaul of theatre as they knew it to create something new, an idea which Bram Dijkstra has shown, is entangled with antifeminine and antisemitic prejudices.[18]

In revising the received history of Yiddish theatre in Argentina, I aim to show how the choice of historical methods (strategies for collecting data) and methodologies (approaches to interpreting that data as evidence) impact how Yiddish theatre scholars address the histories of Jewish women who do not conform to dominant expectations about feminine morality. In particular, I focus on female prostitutes who symbolically rejected the nation-building imperative of heterosexual monogamy and thus existed outside of the realm of accepted feminine sexualities.[19] While I am not persuaded that the surviving documents verify a historical relationship between

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[17] Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2002); Katie N. Johnson, *Sisters in Sin: Brothel Drama in America, 1900-1920* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[18] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[19] Eithne Luibhéid, *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xix.

Yiddish theatre and prostitution, they do provide insight into constitutive aspects of this history that others have overlooked, such as the Argentinean Yiddish theatre's role in facilitating transnational cultural exchanges between Jewish and Italian immigrant spectators.

This argument grows out of scholars' passing doubts about Argentinean Yiddish theatre's relationship to Jewish prostitution. For example, after Susana Skura and Leonor Slavsky rehearse the history described above, they acknowledge that other Yiddish theatregoers denied that the situation was as "severe."[20] For instance, the celebrated Argentinean Jewish actress and poetry recitalist Berta Singerman recalls seeing future Jewish artist-intellectual Samuel Eichelbaum in the foyer of Yiddish performances, a playwright who, like Singerman, enjoyed a successful theatre career on the Spanish-language stage. Likewise, as Mollie Lewis Nouwen suggests in her study of the Argentine Yiddish press readership, the Yiddish theatre's reputation as a "haven for Jews involved in the underworld, particularly prostitutes and pimps" was unlikely to have aligned with the breadth of spectators who attended the Yiddish theatres.[21] In addition, Faith Jones has drawn attention to the paradox that the same Jewish community that scholars depict as "nobly and virtually uniformly attempting to fight Jewish trafficking in women" was likely to have been purchasing sex from the prostitutes who ostensibly came to the Yiddish theatre to advertise their services.[22] These insights are consistent with the historiography of theatre, prostitution, and sex work in Argentina. As historian Donna Guy acknowledges in her seminal study on prostitution in early-twentieth-century Buenos Aires, "the independent life of the actress, as well as the dangers of work that involved public entertainment,

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[20] Skura and Slavsky, "1901-2001. Cien años de teatro en idish en Buenos Aires [1901-2001. One hundred years of theatre in Yiddish in Buenos Aires]," 297.
[21] Mollie Lewis Nouwen, *Oy, My Buenos Aires: Jewish Immigrants and the Creation of Argentine National Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), 49.
[22] Faith Jones, "Sex and Scandal in the Encyclopedia of the Yiddish Theatre," in *Inventing the Modern Yiddish Stage: Essays in Drama, Performance, and Show Business*, ed. Joel Berkowitz and Barbara J. Henry (Detroit, Mich: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 273 footnote 23.

had always made that profession somewhat disreputable for women. In Argentina this problem was exacerbated by the purported links between white slavery and the theater."[23] In contrast to the previous scholarship, Guy describes the business ties between theatre and prostitution as "purported" and inseparable from misogynist tendencies to conflate actresses and prostitutes.[24] Relatedly, Argentinean cultural historian Adriana Bergero argues that archetypal narratives about the "fallen" woman in Buenos Aires converged with popular understandings of the female body as a "hyper-sexualized site, and a crossroad where the transitional features of modernity converged."[25] These interventions have not yet been applied to the history of Yiddish theatre in Buenos Aires which is entangled with the history of Jewish migration to Argentina.

As Jonas Barish observes in his intellectual history of antitheatrical prejudice, the most vocal critics of the theatre—including Plato, the Christian Fathers, the Puritans, Rousseau, the Jansenists, and Nietzsche—agreed that "like prostitution" the stage was "a necessary evil."[26] Feminist theatre historians build on this insight to show how antitheatrical bias disproportionately impacts women's lives and careers and is more often a symptom of changing social expectations surrounding gender and sexuality.[27] As Tracy C. Davis has shown that in Victorian theatre, the separate professions of

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[23] Donna J. Guy, *Sex & Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991).
[24] Guy, *Sex & Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina*, 157.
[25] Adriana J. Bergero, *Intersecting Tango: Cultural Geographies of Buenos Aires, 1900-1930*, trans. Richard Young (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 197.
[26] Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 42.
[27] Barbara Antoniazzi, *The Wayward Woman: Progressivism, Prostitution and Performance in the United States, 1888-1917* (Lanham, Maryland: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014); Bergero, *Intersecting Tango*; Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2002); Katie N. Johnson, *Sisters in Sin: Brothel Drama in America, 1900-1920* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

acting and prostitution both gave women financial stability and independence which were unusual in this period thus fueling dominant perceptions that actresses and prostitutes were one and the same.[28] In a similar vein, Judith Walkowitz shows how moral reformers drew from nineteenth-century literary and theatrical tropes, particularly melodrama, to assent the largely spurious phenomenon of young women being in sexual danger.[29] Historians who focus on theatre during the moral panic surrounding "white slavery" in North America, particularly New York City, build on these studies to argue for theatre's role in producing and consuming women's sexualities.[30]

Jewish Migration to Argentina

Rising antisemitism in the Pale of Settlement (which presently includes parts of Poland and Russia) led Jews to flee to the Americas en masse between 1889 and 1930.[31] Around the same time as Jewish organizations were developing proposals to settle Jews in new countries, Argentina was coincidentally adopting liberal immigration policies designed to attract European immigrants. Motivated by a desire to modernize the country and strengthen its economy, Argentine statesmen created liberal immigration policies that they hoped would attract white Europeans, particularly from Northern and Central Europe. The strategy succeeded; by the start of the twentieth century, about half the population of Buenos Aires was foreign-born. Scholars do not agree on the precise numbers of Jewish residents in Buenos Aires because many Jews opted to not self-identify as such in national population censuses due to their concern of being listed as such in government databases, or

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[28] Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*.
[29] Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*.
[30] This particular argument is explicated in Johnson, *Sisters in Sin*, 13–16, though the curious reader might also benefit from consulting Antoniazzi, *The Wayward Woman: Progressivism, Prostitution and Performance in the United States, 1888-1917*.
[31] Jeffrey Lesser and Ranaan Rein, *Rethinking Jewish-Latin Americans* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 8.

because a hybrid Jewish-Argentine identity was not an available option. However, leading scholars of demography U. O. Schmelz and Sergio DellaPergola estimate that between 1900 and 1930, the Jewish population in Argentina grew from 15,000 to 191,000 (Figure 1).[32]

[32] U. O. Schmelz and Sergio DellaPergola, "The Demography of Latin American Jewry," *The American Jewish Year Book* 85 (1985): 65.

Year	Estimates
1900	15,000
1905	25,000
1910	68,000
1915	116,000
1920	127,000
1925	162,000
1930	191,000

Figure 1: Size of Jewish population in Argentina according to estimates by U. O. Schmelz and Sergio DellaPergola, 1900-1930.

Argentina especially appealed to Jews who could not afford the high costs associated with immigration because their journey was eligible for subsidy by a French Jewish philanthropist, Baron de Hirsch, who sought to establish autonomous Jewish agricultural settlements in Argentina's rural pampas.[33] Hirsch's organization, the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), funded Jewish farming colonies in Argentina's pampas and later Brazil. While the JCA succeeded in recruiting thousands of Jews from the Pale of Settlement, most did not have farming skills and were unprepared for the difficult living conditions. Many remigrated or left the colonies for Argentina's capital city, Buenos Aires.[34]

[33] Lesser and Rein, *Rethinking Jewish-Latin Americans*, 8–9.
[34] Avni, "*Clientes*"*, rufianes y prostitutas: comunidades judias de Argentina e Israel frente a la trata de blancas [*"*Clients*"*, ruffians, and prostitutes: Jewish communities in Argentina and Israel in the face of white slavery]*, 91.

Jewish migrants in Buenos Aires encountered high numbers of European immigrants who exploited antisemitic tropes to further their own performances of Argentine national belonging.[35] For example, as Micol Seigel has argued, Italian immigrants performed the national figure of the "cocoliche"—immigrants who imagined themselves to be gauchos, key symbols of Argentine nationalism—enabled Italians to move from the margins to the core of the nation's collective self-imagination, which centered on building an image of Argentine identity as white.[36] These performances of whiteness were more available to Christian, romance-language speaking immigrants, such as Italians and Spaniards, than they were to Jews. As José Moya has shown, Jewish stereotypes that circulated in Argentina included views about Jews as anarchists and pimps; since anarchists were known for embracing "the dregs of society," some mistakenly assumed that Jewish anarchists were pimps.[37] Antisemitism intensified in Buenos Aires in 1909 after a Russian Jewish anarchist assassinated the chief of police, and then again in 1919 during a week known as *La semana trágica* [The tragic week], wherein civilian groups attacked Jewish neighborhoods with the support of the Argentine police and army, killing 1,500 people and wounding 4,000.[38]

Assumptions that Jews were outside of normative realms of sexuality often led antisemites to stereotype Jews as queer, sexually predatory, or sexless.[39] Scholar Daniel Boyarin has illustrated how Jews challenged dominant cultural norms surrounding sexuality and gender. As Boyarin writes, Jews

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[35] Micol Seigel, "Cocoliche's Romp: Fun with Nationalism at Argentina's Carnival," *TDR: The Drama Review* 44, no. 2 (2000): 14.
[36] Victor A. Mirelman, "The Semana Trágica of 1919 and the Jews in Argentina," *Jewish Social Studies* 37, no. 1 (1975): 61–73.
[37] Jose Moya, "Immigrants and Associations: A Global and Historical Perspective," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31, no. 5 (2005): 22.
[38] Victor A. Mirelman, "The Semana Trágica of 1919 and the Jews in Argentina," *Jewish Social Studies* 37, no. 1 (1975): 61–73.
[39] Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 3.

"threatened the heterosexual, bourgeois order of gender" because Jewish men exhibited traditionally feminine dispositions in traditional Eastern European Jewish communities. For example, the ideal Jewish man was thought to be gentle, timid, sweet, and passive. These qualities were considered conducive to accessing power in Jewish culture through the immersive study of rabbinic and Talmudic texts, which women were prohibited from reading. However, the dominant Christian culture considered passivity to be a feminine quality and Victorians especially constructed masculine power as aggressive and dominant.[40] The feminization of the Jewish male fueled antisemitic stereotypes, for example that Jewish men were so effeminate that they were thought to menstruate. As Ann Pellegrini has argued, the antisemitic tendency to feminize male Jews has also led to the disappearance of the Jewish female, especially the Jewish female body; as Pellegrini reflects, "All Jews are womanly, but no women are Jews."[41] In the case of Argentina, many attempts to address the histories of Jewish women focus on prostitutes, which has led Sandra Deutsch to argue that scholars overemphasize prostitution in the history of Argentine Jews.[42] Yet, as Deutsch admits, any history of Argentine Jewry would be incomplete without addressing women in the sex trade; thus, to support her claim that Jewish women's history is intrinsically transnational, her book includes a chapter on Jewish female prostitutes and advocates for the "diverse ways" in which prostitutes crossed borders and "stepped over the line separating the permissible from the forbidden."[43]

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[40] Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 2.
[41] Ann Pellegrini, "Whiteface Performances: 'Race,' Gender, and Jewish Bodies," in *Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 109.
[42] Sandra McGee Deutsch, *Crossing Borders, Claiming a Nation: A History of Argentine Jewish Women, 1880-1955* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
[43] Ibid, 106.

While Deutsch and others have studied the role that gender has played in Argentine Jewish life, scholars have not yet seriously considered the role that sexuality plays in this history. This dissertation aims to integrate both gender *and* sexuality into the interconnected histories of Yiddish theatre and Jewish migration. To do so, I ground this study in the theoretical work of feminist scholars who have shown that women's bodies often delineate the boundaries between categories that patriarchal systems create, such as moral and immoral immigrants. I find the work of Eithne Luibhéid to be illuminating in this regard, particularly her monograph whose title coincidentally resembles that of the present study: *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border*. Luibhéid focuses on the immigration control apparatus in the United States to show how it has produced and reproduced "sexual categories, identities, and norms within relations of inequality" since 1875.[44] She builds on the work of key sexuality theorists, such as Michel Foucault, Floya Anthias, and Nira Yuval Davis, to urge scholars to consider sexuality as its own discrete axis of identity, rather than continue to conflate it with gender and race. A foundational premise of *Entry Denied* that is especially relevant to the present study is that the state has historically attempted to "discipline" the bodies of women such as prostitutes and lesbians who threaten the nation because they do not adhere to the heterosexual norm. As Hyunah Yang writes, these are the conditions in which "the nation becomes gendered, and women's sexuality becomes nationalized. Nation is equated with the male subject position and women's sexuality is reified as the property of the male nation."[45] I join Yang, Luibhéid, and other feminist scholars in bringing critical attention to the role that both gender *and*

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[44] Luibhéid, *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border*, x.

[45] Eithne Luibhéid, *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xix quoting Hyunah Yang, 'Re-Membering the Korean Military Comfort Women," in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism* eds Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi. New York: Routledge, 1998, 130.

sexuality play in the mutually constitutive processes of immigrant identity construction and nation-building processes.

The place of the nation is at the crux of the historiography, which vacillates between national and transnational approaches particularly in its exploration of the Varsovia Society. The first major scholarly study of The Varsovia Society was Edward Bristow's *Prostitution and Prejudice* (1982), which takes a global approach to the Jewish community's contributions to international anti-vice efforts.[46] Bristow traces the ways in which antisemites exploited Jewish stereotypes in their struggles to combat "white slavery" in geographic regions that include Latin America (specifically Argentina and Brazil), North America, Asia, and Africa around the turn of the twentieth century. Bristow's work covers an impressive scope yet tends to interpret primary sources at face value and out of context, which leads him to faulty conclusions about Jewish involvement in prostitution—for example that women were tricked or lured into "white slavery"—which later historians, such as Donna Guy, correct.

Guy models a national approach to the history of early-twentieth-century prostitution in Buenos Aires in her seminal work *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires* (1991).[47] Drawing from demographic data and medical records, Guy illustrates the ways in which the "[g]endered construction of [Argentine] national identity affected all women, native-born and foreign." While Guy foes not exclusively focus on the Jewish community, her work substantially addresses the Varsovia Society and the Jewish immigrant community to argue that "women's social and economic roles linked family and nation," and thus lower-class women who worked as prostitutes "existed outside traditional family structures" and "threatened the nation." Yet as Yvette Trochon has

[46] Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice*.
[47] Guy, *Sex & Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina.*

observed, the traffic in women was a transnational phenomenon that thus requires a similarly transnational approach.[48] Trochon models this in her study of the South Atlantic traffic in women which spans Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. As with Guy's work, Trochon addresses the Latin American Jewish community's role in the sex trade, though Jewish involvement in trafficking is not her only focus. Mir Yarfitz's recent monograph *Impure Migration* (2019) situates the national context of Argentina within the explicitly transnational history of Jews and sex work by focusing on social networks among Jewish men and women migrating to Argentina, including those in The Varsovia Society.[49]

Yarfitz views his intervention as part of a larger paradigm shift in how historians write about women involved in the commercial sex trade through challenging the "victim/exploiter dichotomy" to argue that "poor immigrant women could sometimes achieve new decision-making power in sex work, in comparison to the limitations they faced in their old and new homelands." While Yarfitz's deployment of sex positive gender theory provides an important counterpoint to prior theoretical approaches, he joins prior scholars in perpetuating the assumption that "pimps provided financial backing and enthusiastic audiences for Yiddish theatrical productions." To further inquire into the Yiddish theatre's social role for the Argentinean Jewish community, I needed to consult archival materials that were exclusively held in Buenos Aires and have not been digitized. Since not even the finding aids are available online, I needed to visit the materials in person.

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[48] Trochon, *Las rutas de eros: La trata de blancas en el Atlántico Sur: Argentina, Brasil, y Uruguay (1880-1932) [Routes of eros: the white slave trade in the South Atlantic: Argentina, Brasil, and Uruguay (1800-1932)]*, 10.

[49] Yarfitz, *Impure Migration: Jews and Sex Work in Golden Age Argentina.*

Absence and the Archive

In the fall of 2017 I arrived at the largest Jewish archive in Latin America, *Fundación IWO* [the Spanish acronym for *Idisher Visenshaftlecher Insitut,* or Institute of Jewish Research], in Buenos Aires. I soon learned that it would not be possible to consult the materials that I hoped to find because they no longer existed. In 1994, a suicide bomber entered *IWO*'s former institutional home the *Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina* [the Jewish Mutual Society of Argentina, or AMIA], and tragically killed 85 people and injured hundreds more. In addition, countless archival traces were destroyed beyond repair. While cultural workers were able to recover many archival materials, many more were not recoverable, including the original finding aids.[50] As *IWO*'s librarian Ezequiel Semo told me, the materials that suffered the most damage were from the first years of Jewish migration to Argentina (1880-1915), a period which includes half of the twenty-nine year period Susana Skura and Leonor Slavsky consider the first chapter of Argentinean Yiddish theatre history (1901-1930).[51] The past had intervened into the past. After learning this, it made more sense to me why scholars relied on memoirs so heavily in researching Yiddish theatre history. This new understanding required me to revise my research plan.

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[50] Rodolfo Compte, *Atentado a la AMIA: crónica de los jóvenes que rescataron la memoria [The AMIA attack: a chronicle of the young memory workers]*, n.d.

[51] Skura and Slavsky, "1901-2001. Cien años de teatro en ídish en Buenos Aires [1901-2001. One hundred years of theatre in yiddish in Buenos Aires]," 297.
Yiddish theatre chroniclers and memoirists reference the fact that before 1915, a handful of Yiddish presses existed, however, only fragments of a few issues remain. After 1915, the written record became more consistent with the founding of three Jewish newspapers: the politically conservative *Yidishe Tsaytung* (1915-1973), its progressive competitor *Di Prese* (1919-1993), and the weekly Spanish language periodical *Mundo Israelita* (1923-1999). Scholars can consult these periodicals which exist nearly in full at Argentina's national library, the *Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno*. Partial records (both on microfilm and in print) are located in diasporic Jewish archives, including the New York Public Library's Dorot Jewish Division.

While I initially thought that it might be possible to disprove the historiographic allegations that Jewish pimps funded the Yiddish theatres, I was now faced with the reality that there would not be enough archival evidence to either substantiate or negate such a claim. But the absences themselves were interesting. I started to take interest in their role in my methodological and theoretical inquiry. The circumstances that led to the *AMIA* bombing are, in some ways, a historically specific to Latin American antisemitism in the 1990s. And they interact with a key way in which antisemitic notions that Jews were sexually excessive predators seeped into the Argentinean Jewish community, many of whose leaders were deeply ashamed that prostitution and sex trafficking was part of their collective past. After the AMIA bombing, any remaining records about The Varsovia Society conveniently disappeared. Scholar Elisa Cohen de Chervonagura told me that after the explosion, she went to the site of the bombing where she found a page of The Varsovia Society's budget from 1926, the same year of the Yiddish production of *Ibergus* that this dissertation will explore. I find the budget that de Chervonagura reprints in her book *La prostitución judía y su discurso a la luz de un expediente judicial*, revealing for two key reasons. First, The Varsovia Society did not explicitly allot funds for the Yiddish theatre. Secondly, if this single page exists, then surely there once was much more documentation of The Varsovia Society's activities. We may never know whether they were destroyed in the explosion or intentionally excluded from the surviving archival holdings. Yet I understand the absences are a symbol of the significant shame and stigma surrounding this history that lingers.

In addition, the absences led me to foreground a foundational question that fascinates historians of theatre and gender: how do we study the performances and lives that, based on the extant documentation, make it seem as though they were never there? Scholars of live performance and gender are tasked with the challenge of making the invisible visible, which is also a core feminist

endeavor. As Tracy C. Davis reflects, irrecuperable absences are unavoidable in the study of live performance.

> the ephemerality of performance, especially performance before our lifetimes, means that any surviving evidence, even a playscript, is but a poor imitation of an actor's labor, let alone the combined efforts of actor, scenographer, orchestra, and stagehands. In performance history—encompassing, for example, events that conform to Victor Turner's version of social drama—the amateur counterparts of actors and so on, who made a performance look, sound, and feel a particular way on a specific occasion, may leave even fewer clues. In either case, the added complications of audience reception—who was there and what they thought or experienced—is often left up to guesswork: only rarely can it be deduced.[52]

As I discuss in chapter one, David Hassan's account of his experience attending *Kuni Leml* provides an unusual exception to the situation Davis describes in that Hassan discloses much about what he "thought or experienced" in the auditorium. Yet, Hassan leaves us with little information about the "labor" of the actors and the "combined efforts" of the various artists involved, and as this is the only remaining source, it cannot be corroborated.

Historians of gender and sexuality face related challenges in their studies of prostitution. In particular, archival records of prostitutes' lives are often incomplete for varied reasons. In some cases, prostitutes were unlikely to record their own experiences due to lack of access to literacy and/or leisure time. In other cases, families and institutions may have failed to preserve the records of known prostitutes. Remaining traces of prostitutes' lives that do exist—for example in trial transcripts or medical records—are heavily mediated, and prostitution historians must account for such mediation in their research design. Donna Guy models such an approach in her demographic

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[52] Tracy C. Davis, "The Context Problem," *Theatre Survey* 45, no. 2 (2004): 203.

study of prostitution in Buenos Aires, particularly when interpreting the data that physicians published about registered prostitutes in places such as municipal reports, statistical yearbooks, and medical journals.[53] While these documents seem to provide an abundance of data about prostitutes' lives (as narrated during prostitutes' health interviews), Guy emphasizes that this data is not neutral; prostitutes were *forced* to answer these questions as part of mandatory medical visits. Thus, Guy does not interpret prostitutes' oral histories as "truthful" representations of women's lives, but rather as evidence of what prostitutes anticipated that state authorities wanted to hear. Stephen Legg offers a related insight from his research on prostitutes in colonial India. As Legg argues, traces of prostitutes in colonial archives are "over-written, interpreted, and *represented*. They are spoken for, they do not speak; our challenge is to speak of them without speaking for them."[54] By critically approaching these traces of prostitutes as "*representations*," Legg reveals how these materials reveal more about the anti-vice campaigners who attempted to improve prostitutes' lives than the firsthand experiences of prostitutes themselves. Guy and Legg's strategies depart from prior approaches, which have interpreted the extant sources (primarily memories and popular histories) at face value, and so are crucial to the methodological approach that I model in the coming chapters.

Chapter Breakdown

Each of the subsequent chapters applies feminist theories and methodologies to a paradigmatic performance event in the first period of Argentinean Yiddish theatre history (1900-1930) to demonstrate how approaches from theatre history provide new insights into changing

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[53] Guy, *Sex & Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina.*
[54] Stephen Legg, "Anti-Vice Lives: Peopling the Archives of Prostitution in Interwar India," in *Global Anti-Vice Activism, 1890-1950: Fighting Drinks, Drugs, and "Immorality,"* ed. Jessica Pliley, Robert Kramm, and Harald Fischer-Tiné (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 260, emphasis in original.

expectations about gender, sexuality, and immigration that manifested in widespread debates surrounding "white slavery." Chapter one focuses on methodology, specifically through returning to sources that scholars have used to draw conclusions about a relationship between Yiddish theatre and prostitution. I show how applying feminist methodologies to these archival sources leads to a new understanding about Yiddish theatre's social and cultural role for the new immigrant Jewish community.

The next two chapters address controversial stage performances of "brothel dramas," a frequently overlooked genre in stage realism that generally depicts a romance between a "fallen woman" and her male savior.[55] Chapter two returns to British-Jewish actress Fanny Epstein's 1908 tour to Buenos Aires, particularly her production of playwright Peretz Hirschbein's naturalistic brothel drama *Miriam* which, as mentioned previously, fascinates scholars for promoting an outbreak in the audience between labor Zionists and Jewish pimps. I challenge conventional assumptions through considering *Miriam* amidst the global rise of first-wave feminism and local Argentinean activism for prostitution reform; rather than affirming the purported link between Yiddish theatre and prostitution, I suggest that this production served as a flashpoint for international concerns about feminine morality, particularly for new immigrant Jews.

Chapter three focuses on another paradigmatic theatrical performance that scholarship on Yiddish theatre and prostitution often references, Yakov Botoshansky's production of playwright Leib Malakh's *Ibergus* (1926). Scholars view this production as a pivotal moment in Jewish efforts to cleanse the Yiddish theatres of Jewish prostitutes and pimps. However, a close analysis of the Yiddish and Spanish-language press suggests that Botoshansky carefully crafted this narrative to serve his publicity efforts. Through focusing on multiple dimensions of this history—such as the

[55] Johnson, *Sisters in Sin*.

intra-ethnic conflict and the staging of the production—I illustrate how dominant assumptions have occluded the production's role in the history of the theatrical avant-gardes.

The final chapter illustrates how these approaches can enhance our understanding of performances that take place outside of the theatre auditorium. In particular, I ask how dramaturgical insights can enhance our understanding of one well-known court case involving former prostitute Raquel Liberman, whose famous denouncement of Jewish traffickers in 1930 led to a high-profile investigation and temporary disbandment of the trafficking ring. There are several discrepancies between Liberman's legal testimony and her biography which literary scholars and historians have struggled to understand. Because Liberman's biography is uniquely well-documented, it provides insight into how Liberman manipulated language and gesture to craft a story that would resonate with Jewish and non-Jewish authorities. Through applying approaches from theatre history to Liberman's construction of her past, I illuminate the ways in which Jewish migrant women persuaded diverse authorities that they were desirable Argentine citizens. Diversifying the cultural arenas in this study illuminates the entangled relationship between Yiddish theatre and Jewish migration history. As I hope to show, revising foundational claims about any one of these arenas changes what we think we know about the other.

CHAPTER ONE

Consider the Source:

Applying Feminist Methodologies to Argentinean Yiddish Theatre History

Teatro Doria, 1901. After attending one of the first known Yiddish productions in Buenos Aires, Avrom Goldfaden's *Kuni Leml*, British journalist David Hassan had surprisingly little to say about the production apart from that it was "nicely mounted and, of course, well acted. These people are born actors."[1] Perhaps Hassan's disinterest in the *mise-en-scène* betrayed his motivation to be there. Or perhaps it was because Hassan did "not understand a word" of Yiddish, which he considered not a language but "jargon." Hassan's disparaging attitude towards Yiddish was consistent with his belief that anglophone British Jews were of a "better class" than their coreligionists who frequented the Yiddish theatres. According to Hassan, this "better class" also included Jewish immigrants from Germany and France who, like him and his fellow British Jews, generally "abstain from Jewish communal and social life" in Argentina. Stressing that no self-respecting readers of *The Jewish Chronicle* would dare be seen at the Yiddish theatre, Hassan shared that he did not see "a single member of any of our congregations and much less their families" in attendance, using the word "our" to create an "us" that is clearly distinct from an implicit "them," the Yiddish theatregoers. Hassan was in a unique social position as a fellow Jewish immigrant yet an outsider to the Yiddish-speaking community. On the one hand, his role as participant-observer made him a critical informant. On the other hand, his bias against Yiddish and Yiddish-speaking Jews diminished the reliability of his first-person account.

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[1] Hassan, "Notes from Argentina."

Spectators' perspectives are inevitably limited. So long as historians account for these limitations, such partiality can illuminate the heterogeneity of lived experiences. As historian Jim Davis has argued about spectatorship, which he calls a "relatively unexplored area of theatre history," representations of audiences reveal much about "how audiences looked, perceived, and observed, and how they were looked at."[2] Davis's insights raise unacknowledged concerns about Hassan's predisposition to misperceive his surroundings. As Hassan admitted, he did not recognize anyone in the auditorium. What, then, can be gleaned about Hassan's embodied process of "enquir[ing] into" the theatregoers whom he expected to find? Because Hassan could not understand the Yiddish language, he heeded special attention to non-discursive cues, especially sound and sight. For example, the music of *Kuni Leml* stood out to Hassan; "judging by" the syllables that spectators repeated as they sang along, particularly "the chorus of 'ay nai yai,'" Hassan inferred that the audience was familiar with many of the tunes.[3] The next sound that Hassan noted was laughter. Though Hassan himself did not find the plot of *Kuni Leml* especially comical (perhaps because he could not understand it), he observed that "the house was in a constant roar of laughter." And indeed, the plotline provided its audiences with many opportunities to laugh. Set in Odessa, *Kuni Leml*, centers around an ill-fated arranged marriage between the title character, a disabled Hasid, and a young woman named Khayele, who would much rather marry her tutor, a university student named Max.[4] For tutor and student to evade the predestined betrothal, Max pretends to be Kuni Leml. Max fools Khayele's father and even dupes Leml himself into believing that Max is the "real" Kuni Leml.

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[2] Jim Davis, "Looking and Being Looked At: Visualizing the Nineteenth-Century Spectator," *Theatre Journal* 69, no. 4 (December 2017): 515.
[3] Hassan, "Notes from Argentina."
[4] Avrom Goldfaden, "Landmark Yiddish Plays," in *The Two Kuni-Lemls*, ed. Joel Berkowitz and Jeremy Dauber (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 201–56.

Hassan confessed that he would have at least been "amused by" the sound of Yiddish, which was to him a "novelty," had he not "felt depressed" by "the sight of the audience."[5] In particular Hassan was dismayed to see the "flashy, coarse-looking men" and "beautiful women" in the balconies. Hassan inferred that these women were prostitutes based on the way these women looked— "very extravagantly dressed and loaded with jewellerey"— and also the way they sounded; in particular, the pitch and length of their laughter. For Hassan, listening to these women laugh was a miserable experience; "the shrieks of laughter were loudest and longest from these painted lips. It was painful to hear, yet I stood it out." Scholars have tended to refer to this account, which is the only surviving first-person account from this performance, to argue for a historical business relationship between Yiddish theatre and prostitution at the turn of the twentieth century. While it is difficult to support that argument with just one piece of evidence, it does provide insight into Hassan's process of making meaning. Based on where certain women sat in the room, what they wore, and how they sounded, Hassan made assumptions about who these women were; these assumptions align with popular representations of Jewish women as excessive or "too much."

Hassan's assumptions led him to urge his international readership to support moral reform efforts, which did not appear to be his overt intention all along. While Hassan acknowledged that *The Jewish Chronicle* does not typically endorse "open-air preaching," he implored his readers to make an exception based on the circumstances. In particular, he asked his readers to support "'missionaries'" from "the better classes" who "would do good work in preaching faith and morality and educating and civilising on modern principles our newly liberated brothers and sisters." The perceived need for "preaching" aligned with a first-wave feminist tendency to project negative character traits—in this case faithlessness, immorality, lack of education, and boorishness—onto

[5] Hassan, "Notes from Argentina."

women who engaged in extramarital sex, especially prostitution.[6] Rather than reinforcing these misogynistic projections, I would like to suggest that they illuminate how male theatregoers such as Hassan assumed certain women were prostitutes based on how they inhabited public space.

This case is not unique, which, in part, has led to confusion about this history. For example, in Yiddish actor and director Max Berliner's published oral history Berliner insinuates that many of the women whom he saw at the Yiddish theatres as a child were prostitutes.[7] The son of Polish-Jewish parents, Berliner migrated to Buenos Aires with his parents and three older sisters in the early-1920s. His mother started a successful business making corsets and brassieres which she sold to Jewish women including actresses, impresarios' wives, and, as Berliner eventually learned, prostitutes. Each evening after dinner Berliner would read to his mother in Yiddish on their front doorstep, and he would notice her clients accompanying man after man into a nearby building.[8] "Little by little, things became clearer," Berliner recalls, particularly once he started to understand that there was a relationship between his parents' business and the Yiddish theatre.

Berliner's father had struck a deal with the Yiddish theatre impresarios. Before the Thursday night premiere of each week's latest Yiddish play, Berliner's father agreed to advertise for the performance by hanging up a poster in their shop widow free of charge. In return, Berliner's family received box seats for opening night. Berliner recognized the women from his parents' store in the Yiddish theatre auditorium: "it was impossible to forget the beauty of their dresses and the smell of the room," Berliner describes, his comment on the "beauty of their dresses" resonating with Hassan's remark that the women he observed were "very extravagantly dressed."[9] As Berliner

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[6] Jessica Pliley, Robert Kramm, and Harald Fischer-Tiné, eds., *Global Anti-Vice Activism, 1890-1950: Fighting Drinks, Drugs, and "Immorality"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
[7] Max Berliner, "El violin y otras cuestiones [The violin and other questions]," *Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina* 3, no. 8 (1994): 56–57.
[8] In the original Spanish: "las cosas poco a poco se me iban aclarando."
[9] In the original Spanish: "no se podía olvidar la belleza de sus vestidos, el perfume de la sala."

remembers, "The theatre was like a hair-dresser's salon, a perfumery, a runway. Each woman was in competition with the others in terms of her dress, her hair, and the perfumes."[10] While Hassan focused on sight and sound, Berliner allows us to add smell to the list of spectators' embodied perceptions of prostitutes inside the Yiddish theatre auditorium, particularly the scent of perfume.

Although Berliner knew that the women in the balconies also frequented his family's business, in the theatre he struggled to discern exactly which women were actresses, which were impresarios' wives, and which were prostitutes; as Berliner admits, "I couldn't tell 'who was whom.'"[11] Like Hassan, Berliner's interpretations of these women's performances of femininity—via their choices of clothing, hair style, and perfume—may have led him to draw misguided conclusions about their occupations. Contrary to Hassan's linguistic and social distance from the Yiddish-speaking community, Berliner was connected to Yiddish theatre impresarios and prostitutes through his family's business and involvement in the Yiddish-speaking community. Yet, as Berliner himself acknowledged there was an important contradiction.

"Men look; women watch themselves being looked at," feminist art historian Griselda Pollock writes.[12] Pollock's insights about how gender hierarchies mediate visual experiences strengthen historical approaches to theatre spectators. While Pollock writes about film viewers, her argument that "images are never innocent visual reflections of the world" resonates with visual experiences that also take place in theatre auditoria. As Pollock argues, "images work on us to convince us that their 'vision' is real, true, natural. Images, therefore, need to be deciphered in

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[10] In the original Spanish: "el teatro parecía una peluquería, una perfumería, un desfile de modelos. Cada una competía con las otras en el vestido, en el peinado, en los perfumes."
[11] In the original Spanish: "Por los afiches, mi viejo recebía el primer palco para cada estreno y mi confusión se agravaba enre las actrices, las esposas de los empresarios y las prostitutas. No sabía 'quién era quién.'"
[12] Griselda Pollock, "The Visual," in *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory*, ed. Mary Eagleton (Malden; Oxford; Melbourne; Berline: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003).

relation to cultural practices, social histories, and the interests of the dominant class, race, gender and sexuality." Hassan and Berliner presented not only what they saw, but also what they heard and smelled inside the auditorium as "real, true, natural" images when in fact their perceptions represented uncorroborated dominant cultural perspectives. Just as Hassan viewed the women with "painted lips" and "shrieks of laughter" as inseparable from the urgent need to moralize lower-class Jews, Berliner's description of the women in the auditorium led him to recapitulate the campaign to ban the "impure ones" from attending the Yiddish theatres.[13] Interpreting these representations "in relation to cultural practices, social histories, and the interests of the dominant class, race, gender and sexuality" suggests that dominant cultural perceptions impacted what, and also *how,* male spectators observed the women in their midst. As Pollock emphasizes, the experience of "being looked at, appraised, accosted, commented upon" also informs how women learn to perform femininity.[14]

As feminist standpoint theorists teach, it would be amiss to use only the observations of male theatregoers to make universalizing statements about Argentine Yiddish theater history.[15] And as critics of standpoint theory insist, it is impossible to know much about the women Hassan and

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[13] Berliner, "El violin y otras cuestiones [The violin and other questions]," 57.
[14] Pollock, "The Visual," 177.
[15] For an overview of feminist standpoint theory and its critiques, see Kristen Intemann, "Feminist Standpoint," in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). For further reading on the topic, consult Sandra Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is 'Strong Objectivity?,'" *The Centennial Review* 36, no. 3 (1992): 437–70; Nancy Hartstock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. Merrill Hintikka and Sandra Harding (Dodrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishing, 1983), 283–210; Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," in *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*, ed. Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith Cook (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 35–59; Dorothy Smith, "Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology," *Sociological Inquiry* 1 (1974): 7–13; Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davis, "Standpoint Theory, Situated Knowledge and the Situated Imagination," *Feminist Theory* 3, no. 3 (2002): 315–33.

Berliner observed because first-person accounts from these women are not available; even if such sources did exist, they would be insufficient in their own ways. To mitigate the limited perspectives of male spectators, Pollock and feminist art historians advocate for methodologies that embrace multiplicity.[16] To integrate greater multiplicity into this history, I now turn to another key source that scholars often use to argue for a relationship between Yiddish theatre and prostitution, but, as Jacky Bratton illuminates, also provide insight into spectators' multiple horizons of expectations: playbills.[17] One playbill that scholars have used to demonstrate a connection between theatre and prostitution comes from a production of *Sulamita*, a Hispanicized title of another Goldfaden operetta, *Shulamis*.[18] Scholars find this playbill unusual because it advertises that the production benefitted a new cemetery, *Barracas al Sud*, which was located just outside of Buenos Aires. This particular cemetery was specifically for members of The Varsovia Society. Since cemeteries were among the many institutions that Jewish immigrants forbid pimps and prostitutes from joining, Varsovia affiliates needed to purchase land of their own.

Adriana Brodsky's account of the history of Argentine Jewish burial grounds notes that migrant groups commonly prioritized burial societies and cemeteries early on in their institutional histories.[19] Yet the question of where Argentine Jews could bury their dead was fraught with

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[16] As Charlotte Canning has argued, methods that invite plurality are "more productive for articulating experiences that are themselves often contradictory and conflicting" (see: Charlotte Canning, "Constructing Experience: Theorizing a Feminist Theatre History," *Theatre Journal* 45, no. 4 (1993): 529–40); similarly, in "Questions for a Feminist Methodology in Theatre History," Tracy C. Davis advocates for methods that invite plurality in order to make the invisible visible about historical experiences for all genders. See: Tracy C. Davis, "'Questions for Feminist Methodology in Theatre History,'" in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance*, ed. Thomas Postlewait and Bruce McConachie (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 76.

[17] Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[18] Hansman, Skura, and Kogan, *Oysfarkoyft, localidades agotadas: afiches del teatro ídish en la Argentina [Sold out: Yiddish theater posters in Argentina]*, 89.

[19] Adriana Brodsky, "Burying the Dead: Cemeteries, Walls, and Jewish Identity in Early Twentieth-Century Argentina," in *Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine: Creating Community and National Identity, 1890-1960* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016), 25–52.

conflict.[20] In the late-nineteenth-century, Jewish immigrants in Buenos Aires used the dissidents' cemetery, "a term given to burial grounds not consecrated by the Catholic Church, which Jews and Protestants used," but this cemetery closed in 1892. Jews next sought land in the burial ground of British and German communities, but soon after British and German authorities decided that no more burials could take place in that section. The demand for a Jewish cemetery led both the Ashkenazi Jewish community and the Moroccan Jewish community to form their own burial groups, which gave members of these societies access to financial assistance for the burial and support for traditional Jewish rituals associated with death. The two groups negotiated over a potential future collaboration yet suffered from financial disagreements and power struggles. While Jewish pimps were not involved in these initial deliberations over the land, during the negotiation process Varsovia affiliates approached the Ashkenazi burial society and offered "an 'important sum of money' to participate in purchasing land to be used as a Jewish cemetery, stressing that they did not wish to be accepted as members." Yet Ashkenazi Jews had a custom of rejecting any donations that came from those involved with Jewish prostitution, and this case was no exception. Thus, those involved with the sex trade began the process of purchasing land of their own.

Even with awareness of this unusual context, some may find it strange to learn of a Yiddish playbill advertising for such a cemetery. The content of the biblically-derived operetta that the playbill publicized does not clarify matters. Set alternatingly between a desert outside of Bethlehem and in Jerusalem, the title character is a young shepherdess who suffers from unbearable thirst. As an act of faith, she lowers herself into a well that lacks a bucket.[21] Soon after, a young Maccabean descendent from Jerusalem named Avsholem approaches the well with his servant. From the

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[20] Adriana Brodsky, "Burying the Dead: Cemeteries, Walls, and Jewish Identity in Early Twentieth-Century Argentina," in *Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine: Creating Community and National Identity, 1890-1960* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016).
[21] Goldfaden, *Shulamis: The Daughter of Jerusalem.*

depths, Shulamis begs them for help. After Avsholem recovers from his initial fear that the sound below him is a spirit, he draws Shulamis out of the well. The two immediately profess their love for one another and sing of their desire to marry as they part ways. Marriage is not initially in store for the couple, who remain separated for the next two months. In Jerusalem, a dancer named Avigail seduces Avsholem. Unbeknownst to Shulamis, Avsholem breaks his vow with Shulamis and declares Avigail his bride. Meanwhile, Shulamis waits for Avsholem to return and plays mad before a stream of suitors who request her hand in marriage. Back in Jerusalem, Avsholem and Avigail struggle to bear children. Their second child is born exactly a year after the death of the first; devastatingly, the child fell into a well. In a dreamlike tableau, a depressed Avsholem realizes that Avigail's beauty led him astray from his promise to Shulamis. With Avigail's permission, Avsholem returns to Bethlehem. Shulamis and Avsholem reencounter each other at the well, where Shulamis' performance of madness ends. To conclude, the couple renew their vows and wed.

Whereas the playbill's reference to *Barracas al Sud* suggests that this particular production benefitted a cemetery for The Varsovia Society, I am skeptical of claims that it demonstrates an exclusive relationship between Jewish theatre artists and Jewish sex traffickers particularly after consulting other playbills from the era. Yiddish productions commonly benefitted a wide range of causes including the construction of Jewish schools, efforts to support Ukrainian Jewish families wishing to migrate to Latin America and fundraising for individual families in need.[22] I can only speculate that Yiddish impresarios could not afford to be discretionary because of how difficult it was to make a living as a Yiddish actor. However, I do find the *Sulamita* playbill striking for a reason that scholars have not yet considered: it is designed to address *Teatro Doria*'s primary audience of Italian immigrants. Founded in 1887, *Teatro Doria* attracted working-class immigrant families who

[22] Examples include "Di milkhome blut [The blood of war]"; "La suerte perdida [Lost luck]"; "Der vilder mensh [The Wild Man]."

could not afford tickets elsewhere but were in need of "cultural escape."[23] Artists primarily performed operas and operettas there with the occasional zarzuela performance. In 1903 *Teatro Doria* was demolished and then reconstructed as the Marconi theatre, meaning that the *Sulamita* was likely staged in the first years of the twentieth century.[24]

There are several clues that suggest that Yiddish productions staged in *Teatro Doria* served as a contact zone for Jewish and Italian Catholic immigrants. For example, the playbill is printed in Spanish, not Yiddish.[25] This was most likely a conscious publicity choice rather than a question of printer access since other publications from the era used Hebrew type to publish Yiddish texts, including a playbill for a different *Shulamis* production in 1902.[26] An Argentinean journal, *Caras y Caretas*, reprinted this other Yiddish language *Shulamis* playbill to highlight the growing "cosmopolitanism" of Buenos Aires vis-à-vis the presence of a Jewish immigrant theatre company. According to the well-intentioned author of the *Caras y Caretas*, these Jewish artists printed their programs in "Hebrew." Just as Spanish-speaking Argentineans struggled to identify unfamiliar Yiddish texts, most recent Yiddish-speaking immigrants would likely not have been able to read Spanish. Yet as one Jewish immigrant lamented in a letter to his wife back in Poland, the biggest challenge that he faced in Argentina was his inability to understand the language.[27] However, Spanish was much easier to understand for *Teatro Doria*'s native Italian-speaking regulars.

In addition, the *Sulamita* playbill culturally translates the storyline for prospective non-Jewish audience members. For example, the playbill emphasizes aspects of the production that were likely

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[23] César Dillon and Juan Sala, *El teatro musical en Buenos Aires [Musical theatre in Buenos Aires]* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1997), x.
[24] Dillon and Sala, *El teatro musical en Buenos Aires [Musical theatre in Buenos Aires]*.
[25] Silvia Hansman, Susana Skura, and Gabriela Kogan, *Oysfarkoyft, localidades agotadas: afiches del teatro ídish en la Argentina [Sold out: yiddish theater posters in Argentina]*, 89.
[26] "Una compañia teatral israelita en Buenos Aires [A Jewish theatre company in Buenos Aires]," *Caras y Caretas*, August 16, 1902.
[27] Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman*, 112.

to appeal to audience members with a Catholic upbringing by subtitling the play "the daughter of Jerusalem" and specifying that certain characters are from Bethlehem. Although Goldfaden's original narrative does not explicitly include Christian clergy, it informs its readers that the performance features "priests, pastors, and clergymen" to help non-Jewish audience members identify key characters. Furthermore, it uses larger typeface to emphasize a name that *Teatro Doria* regulars would have recognized: the Italian music director, Señor Enrique Astengo, who directed the twenty-five-person orchestra that accompanied the performance. These discursive cues suggest that *Sulamita* functioned as what Louise George Clubb has called a theatregram, a term that Robert Henke engages to describe "a semiotic unit that is materialized in theatrical performance, detachable, transportable, recombinable across geographic boundaries."[28] While this playbill is the only remaining trace of this performance, considering it as a theatregram suggests that the performance served as a site for cross-cultural exchange between Jewish and Italian Catholic immigrants.

Italian spectators' distinct horizons of expectations would have shaped their experiences attending *Sulamita*. For example, they would not have known that the production benefitted a cemetery for Jewish prostitutes and pimps. Based on the description of Yiddish operettas in an homage to *Teatro Doria* published around the time of the theatre's destruction, Jewish immigrant performers would have been one of several groups who rented *Teatro Doria*'s stage:

> The regulars of the *Doria* saw it all in their favorite theatre: circus companies, athletic competitions, turbulent political meetings, conjurers and magicians, heated socialist and anarchist meetings, tragedies of the greatest Italian masters, popular dramas, military plays, children's companies, and the great companies of Spanish zarzuela, *comic Yiddish operettas*,

[28] Robert Nicholson Henke, *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theater*, ed. Robert Nicholson Henke and Eric Nicholson, Studies in Performance and Early Modern Drama (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 13.

> repertoire from the dialect of Milan, Italian operettas, serial Italian operas, criollo dramas, zoological exhibitions, high comedic art, etc.[29]

Within the Jewish community, the most vocal theatre critics considered "comic Yiddish operettas" among the "low brow" productions that impresarios produced to satisfy the preferences of Jewish prostitutes and pimps, who did not enjoy modernist plays. However, traces of the Yiddish theatre repertoire do not support this claim.

Argentinean Yiddish impresarios regularly produced modernist plays, especially in the 1920s. The Yiddish press from the era advertises several upcoming Yiddish-language productions of leading European works by Henrik Ibsen, Leonid Andreyev, Ossip Dimov, and August Strindberg alongside plays by Yiddish modernists such as S. An-sky and Sholem Asch. In addition, while the early-twentieth-century claims of Yiddish theatregoers has led some scholars to believe that Jewish impresarios tailored the repertoire to the preferences of their proprietors, Jewish pimps, who refused to see representations of themselves on stage, a closer look at David Hassan's account challenges that claim. Hassan mentions that he attended one of three Avrom Goldfaden operettas in 1901; the only other production in that series that Hassan mentioned by name was *The Sorceress*, a play whose title character is a Jewish witch (traditionally played by a male actor in drag) who insinuates that sorcery is a disguise for her "actual" profession as the madam of a brothel.[30] Moreover, impresarios produced several Yiddish brothel dramas during the first decades of the twentieth century, including

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[29] As quoted in Dillon and Sala, *El teatro musical en Buenos Aires [Musical theatre in Buenos Aires],* my emphasis. In the original Spanish: "En una sucesión de temporadas más bien efímeras, puesto ninguna ha sido de larga duración, los frecuentadores del Doria vieron de todo en su teatrito predilecto: compañías de circo, luchas atléticas, turbulentas reuniones políticas, prestidigitadores e ilusionistas, conferencias socialistas y anarquistas hasta el rojo vivo, tragedias de los grandes maestros italianos, dramas populares, piezas militares, compañías infantiles, y compañías grandes de zarzuela española, opereta cómica israelita, repertorio dialectal milanés, opereta italiana, ópera seria italiana, dramas criollos, exhibiciones zoológicas, alta comedia moderna, etc."

[30] Alyssa Quint, *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), Appendix II: The Sorceress.

Isidor Zolotarevsky's *In a World of Sin* and Sholem Asch's *God of Vengeance* and *Motke the Thief*. In contrast with the productions of *Miriam* and *Ibergus*, which the subsequent chapters will discuss in depth, most other brothel dramas were produced without controversy. In fact, these other plays addressing prostitution were so unremarkable that they did not garner special attention in the Argentinean Jewish press, who merely reported that the productions took place. Thus, the next chapter will reframe this history more explicitly as symptomatic of changing historical conditions relating to gender and sexuality.

CHAPTER TWO

Performing First-Wave Feminism

"Our reformers have suddenly made a great discovery – the white slave traffic. The papers are full of these 'unheard-of conditions,' and lawmakers are already planning a new set of laws to check the horror…

How is it that an institution, known almost to every child, should have been discovered so suddenly? How is it that this evil, known to all sociologists, should now be made such an important issue? To assume that the recent investigation of the white slave traffic (and by the way, a very superficial investigation) has discovered anything new is, to say the least, very foolish. Prostitution has been, and is, a widespread evil, yet mankind goes on its business, perfectly indifferent to the sufferings and distress of the victims of prostitution. As indifferent, indeed, as mankind has remained to our industrial system, or to economic prostitution."

- Jewish anarchist Emma Goldman, "The Traffic in Women" (1910)

Buenos Aires, 1908. A manifesto appeared on the streets of the Jewish neighborhood of *Once*. Written in Yiddish, its authors urged fellow Eastern European Jewish migrants to "wake up" to a major problem facing the working-class Jewish masses: the Yiddish theatre's low-brow repertoire was inhibiting the enlightenment of the Jewish proletariat.[1] The manifesto's authors introduced themselves as leaders of a new organization called *Yungt* [*Youth*], who sought to change the Yiddish theatre's audience composition in order to revolutionize Yiddish theatre repertoire. *Yungt*'s strategy

[1] "Di yungend: yidisher ferayen fir oyfklerung manifest [The youth: yiddish union for enlightenment manifesto]," n.d., Centros Culturales y Bibliotecas en Proceso, IWO Foundation for Jewish Research.

was to "sanitize" the auditorium of an "unclean" subset of spectators, Jewish prostitutes and pimps, who allegedly financed the thriving Yiddish theatres. The manifesto urged its readers to pressure Jewish impresarios to forgo the "trashy" Yiddish plays that these spectators allegedly preferred in favor of "high art," modernism, *kunst*. Only once the Yiddish theatres were free from these "impure" spectators would Argentine-Jewish impresarios be able to produce avant-garde theatre. Or so the manifesto claimed.

This document is the sole surviving archival trace of *Yungt*'s activities and mission, yet the organization's legacy left an impact on Jewish communal leaders such as *Di Prese* editor Pinie Katz who, in an interview with the Spanish language press in 1930, recalled that Jewish youth formed *Yungt* in 1908 to combat The Varsovia Society.[2] Scholars believe that *Yungt* was started in response to one incident in particular, a confrontation between audience members during a 1908 production of Yiddish playwright Peretz Hirschbein's naturalistic brothel drama *Miriam*, which featured visiting British-Jewish actress Fanny Epstein and benefitted the local branch of an international labor Zionist organization, *Poale Zion*.[3] Set in an unnamed city in the Pale of Settlement, the first three acts take place in the one-room basement home where Miriam lodges with a non-kin family while she looks for work. More character oriented than plot driven, the drama centers on Miriam's relationships with this family of four. Miriam develops a playful friendship with the family's son, Jonah, who teases Miriam for her budding romance with a wealthy young man, Zilberman. In act three, the audience learns that Miriam is now pregnant and has moved elsewhere. Jonah reveals that Zilberman abandoned Miriam three months into the pregnancy. After Jonah and his family overhear

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[2] "Hace cuarenta años que los israelitas luchan contra la 'MIGDAL': en Buenos Aires también hay una sociedad francesa de caftens [The Jews have been struggling against the 'MIGDAL' for forty years: in Buenos Aires there is also a French society of caftens]."

[3] Peretz Hirschbein, "Miriam," in *Landmark Yiddish Plays: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Joel Berkowitz and Jeremy Dauber (Albany: State University of New York, 2006), 257–90.

a loud verbal argument between Miriam and Zilberman that takes place offstage, Miriam pleads her way back into her former lodging. Immediately after this, Miriam goes into labor. The third act concludes with the sounds of Miriam giving birth. During the production in Buenos Aires, tensions between spectators erupted during the fourth and final act which is set in a brothel. Miriam, who is now a prostitute, leaves her child at home while she visits two of her friends, Natalke and Grunye, both Russian Jewish prostitutes. During the visit, Natalke and Grunye refuse to open the door to a knocking john. Soon after, Natalke second guesses their decision and wonders aloud about how much he would have paid. "He can go to hell!" says Grunye, who insists that they take the evening off. Another knock at the door. Natalke and Grunye insist that Miriam stay the night with them rather than return to her child and madam.

While international Jewish audiences considered Epstein a leader in modernist theatre for her naturalistic acting style and repertoire, the remaining traces from the Argentinean production of *Miriam* focus on the audience response rather than Epstein's technique.[4] In one account, "Witnessing the miseries of the heroine at a brothel" made the pimps publicly "uncomfortable" to the extent that the pimps "walked out of the theater, followed by their women."[5] According to a different source, during the brothel scene the Jewish pimps and prostitutes "started guffawing."[6] Hearing the guffaws, a *Poale Zion* leader "challenge[d]" the pimps, "triggering a bloody battle in which the young Zionists forced the pimps out of the theatre, at least for the time being." While spectators disagree on the specifics of what happened during the last act, they agree that the scandal

[4] Zalman Zylbercweig, ed., "Fanny Epstein," in *Leksikon fun yidishn teater: ershter band [Encyclopedia of the Yiddish Theatre: Volume II]* (Warsaw: The Hebrew Actors Union of America, 1934), 1592.
[5] Mirelman, *Jewish Buenos Aires, 1890-1930: In Search of an Identity*, 210.
[6] Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice*, 219.

inspired young activists to create *Yungt* in order to extricate the Jewish traffickers from the Yiddish theatre.[7]

While scholars tend to use the case of *Miriam* to argue for a historical relationship between Yiddish theatre and prostitution, such arguments neglect to consider how this performance event dovetails with the work of first-wave feminists who considered prostitution a "key site" for intervening into the spread of immoral social vices.[8] Moreover, scholars have written about *Miriam* as if it were an exceptional case of a brothel drama performance on the Yiddish stage when in fact it was one of several plays about Jewish prostitution that Yiddish impresarios produced between 1901 and 1930. One way to understand the popularity of these Yiddish brothel dramas is that they allowed writers (and in turn audiences) to explore core issues facing diasporic Jews such as "religious orthodoxy vs. secularization, sin and redemption, generational conflict, economic crisis, and the challenges of living increasingly urbanized lives," as Joel Berkowitz reflects.[9] Whereas Berkowitz focuses on the symbolic role that the stage brothel played for diasporic Jewish audiences, Dijkstra's analysis demands that we also consider how these productions were all written by Jewish men, who reproduce misogynistic beliefs about Jewish women as hypersexual and degenerate. Much work remains to be done about how these antifeminine, and also antisemitic, ideals surface in the Yiddish theatre repertoire. For the purposes of the present study, I focus on a different aspect of this production history: its reception. In this chapter, I inquire into why *Miriam* provoked such a memorable conflict in the auditorium. My study of the social conditions in which *Miriam* took place

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[7] Mirelman, *Jewish Buenos Aires, 1890-1930: In Search of an Identity*, 210.
[8] Maureen Moynagh and Nancy Forestell, eds., *Documenting First Wave Feminisms: Transnational Collaborations and Crosscurrents*, vol. 1 (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 273.
[9] Joel Berkowitz, "The Brothel as Symbolic Space in Yiddish Drama," in *Sholem Asch Reconsidered*, ed. Nanette Stahl, The Yale University Library Gazette 5 (New Haven, CT: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, 2004), 35.

leads me to believe that two interrelated reasons informed the audience reception to Epstein's performance. First, the production coincided with major changes to Argentine prostitution legislation that were being drafted and implemented during this period. Second, Epstein's personal life, particularly her reputation as a sexually liberated woman, haunted the performance. Together, these factors transformed *Miriam* into a flashpoint of anti-prostitution activism during Epstein's 1908 tour to Buenos Aires.

Performing First-Wave Feminism

As the editors of *Global Anti-Vice Activism, 1890-1950* argue, the world experienced a "vicious turn" in the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, during which modernity became intertwined with the consumption of social "vices" concerning women's bodies, liquor, and narcotics.[10] To combat these social vices, especially prostitution and trafficking (which were often used interchangeably), moral reformers focused their efforts on regulating prostitution. Liberal feminists theorized women's freedom and citizenship via the figure of the "white slave," who was synonymous with "sex slave."[11] Leaders of feminist organizations launched "international campaigns, reports, surveys, and resolutions" all on the topic of regulating prostitution and sexually transmitted disease, which they understood as controlling "women and women's *sexuality*, thereby entrenching the sexual double standard feminists sought to overturn." These initiatives began in Britain and spread to Latin American urban centers such as Buenos Aires vis-à-vis European migration.

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[10] "La trata de blancas: continua la llegada de caftens [The white slave trade: the arrival of caftans continues]," *La Razón*, October 10, 1913.
[11] Moynagh and Forestell, *Documenting First Wave Feminisms: Transnational Collaborations and Crosscurrents*, 1:273.

The circulation of European liberal feminism to Latin America's Southern Cone is detailed in Asunción Lavrin's *Women, Feminism, and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay.*[12] As Lavrin writes, Southern Cone feminism primarily developed in urban centers, particularly in the capital cities of Buenos Aires, Santiago, and Montevideo. Due to the geographic proximity between Buenos Aires and Montevideo, feminists in these two cities held especially strong ties. Moral reform work appealed to both men and women from working class and middle-class backgrounds, often from European origin. Social historians have noted the abundance of "foreign" names among both Argentinean and Uruguayan activists, which is unsurprising in light of the high proportions of immigrants that these countries absorbed. In 1908, immigrants comprised 17% of the total population in Uruguay and made up 30% of the urban population in Montevideo. In Argentina, by 1914 one third of the total population was foreign born and 80% of residents could trace their parentage back to immigrants arriving since 1850. The majority of immigrants shared a Catholic culture.

Feminists in Latin America sought to emulate European models, for example through hosting the International Women's Congress on behalf of Latin American women.[13] Latin American feminists held similar concerns as their European feminist counterparts, such as their shared concerns about the sexual double standard which led to "laws and customs that held women accountable while absolving men of responsibility."[14] In the 1920s and 1930s, questions of morality garnered the greatest emotional appeal, which "put the burden of sexual honor on women and punished those who failed by depriving them and their offspring of their rights." However, Latin

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[12] Asunción Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890-1940* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).
[13] Moynagh and Forestell, *Documenting First Wave Feminisms: Transnational Collaborations and Crosscurrents*, 1:9.
[14] Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890-1940*, 8.

American feminists disagreed internally on matters of sexuality, and on what was a social construction versus what was considered "natural." As Lavrin writes, this led to the development of multiple feminisms and a "diversity of female-sensitive answers to the problems experienced by women of several social strata." According to Lavrin, the three pillars of Southern Cone feminism included (1) the acknowledgement of women's intellectual capacities, (2) the belief that women had the right to work in any job that they were able to, and (3) women's rights to participate in civic life and politics.

Observing that common approaches to anti-vice initiatives tend to focus on Great Britain and the Global North at the turn of the twentieth century, the editors of *Global Anti-Vice Activism* advocate for a transnational approach to the topic globally.[15] Similarly, scholars Maureen Moynagh and Nancy Forestell have attempted to rectify the over-emphasis on the northern hemisphere in *Documenting First Wave Feminisms*, an edited collection that seeks to illuminate "the overlapping and conflicting aims of feminists across the globe, and the largely unacknowledged influence of minority women and women from the south on international feminist thought."[16] The inclination to embrace a global perspective benefits the intrinsically transnational nature of anti-vice initiatives in Jewish history. For example, the primary Jewish anti-trafficking organization (The International Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women, or JAPGW) was founded in the 1880s in Britain.[17] In 1901, JAPGW established its first satellite branch outside of Europe in Buenos Aires, locally known as *Ezrat Noshim* (EN) or "Women's Section" named for the segregated area for women in a traditional synagogue. While ending trafficking was EN's primary objective, it also

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[15] Pliley, Kramm, and Fischer-Tiné, *Global Anti-Vice Activism, 1890-1950: Fighting Drinks, Drugs, and "Immorality."*
[16] Moynagh and Forestell, *Documenting First Wave Feminisms: Transnational Collaborations and Crosscurrents*, 1:xxii.
[17] Yarfitz, *Impure Migration: Jews and Sex Work in Golden Age Argentina*, 11.

focused on issues such as spousal abandonment, bigamy, divorce, alimony, and custody of minor girls.[18] The inclination to address transnational feminist initiatives, including those in the Global South, provides important correctives to the historiography, yet even these more recent studies fail to acknowledge a key critique that Emma Goldman was making as early as 1910: Christian ideals of moral and social purity were integral to the inception and execution of anti-vice campaigns, even for non-Christian immigrant groups, as seen in the Jewish community's reaction to Epstein's performance.[19]

In Buenos Aires, over three decades of evolving prostitution legislation preceded Epstein's 1908 tour to Argentina. Argentine municipal authorities legalized female sexual commerce in authorized bordellos in 1875 in response to a decade of rapid urbanization and population growth which resulted in high proportions of unmarried males.[20] Argentinean public health doctors originally spearheaded the state-sanctioned brothel system, designing the legislation after the French model.[21] Their intention was to limit the spread of venereal disease through placing restrictions on prostitutes, rather than their clients.[22] For example, prostitutes were only allowed to be in certain public spaces during limited hours and were medically examined twice per week. City-sanctioned surveillance over prostitutes' bodies was institutionalized in 1888 with the creation of two

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[18] Yarfitz, *Impure Migration: Jews and Sex Work in Golden Age Argentina*; "Causas de la prostitución [Causes of prostitution]," 1936, Ezras Noshim (4), IWO Foundation for Jewish Research.
[19] Emma Goldman, "The Traffic in Women," in *Anarchism and Other Essays*, Second Revised Edition (New York, London: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1910).
[20] Donna J. Guy, "White Slavery, Public Health, and the Socialist Position on Legalized Prostitution in Argentina, 1913-1936," *Latin American Research Review* 23, no. 3 (1988): 63–65.
[21] For more on the French system see *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850,* and Andrew Israel Ross, *Public City/Public Sex: Homosexuality, Prostitution, and Urban Culture in Nineteeth-Century Paris* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019).
[22] Guy, "White Slavery, Public Health, and the Socialist Position on Legalized Prostitution in Argentina, 1913-1936," 60.

institutions, created to periodically examine and treat registered prostitutes: the *Dispensario de Salubridad* (Prostitutes' Registry) and the *Sifilicomio* (Venereal Disease Hospital). In addition, the government required healthy prostitutes to carry identification cards to demonstrate that they were free from disease. As Donna Guy writes,

> By the early twentieth-century, local authorities were discouraging the employment of females as café waitresses by charging their employers high license fees and forcing the women to register as prostitutes. The common goal of these laws was to control independent, lower-class females at the same time that unsupervised women workers were being removed from the urban workplace.

The city taxed brothels and prostitutes with legal licenses, which increased the city's funds, and as Mir Yarfitz has observed, illustrates how the law benefited the municipality more than the prostitutes whom they viewed as "critical disease vectors" and sought to police.[23]

Prostitutes had wide-ranging experiences in the sex trade. Guy describes life as a prostitute as similar to that of a part-time jail inmate:

> Madams (*regentas*) could not leave the premises for more than twenty-four hours, and prostitutes were required to return within two hours of sunset. Women could not appear at windows or doors to entice customers. Outside, all prostitutes had to carry identity cards. If a woman wanted to leave the bordello, she had to prove her good intentions by 'volunteering' her services at a charitable institution for one month. Anyone who did not register and was accused of prostitution was automatically treated as a criminal and fined.[24]

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[23] Yarfitz, *Impure Migration: Jews and Sex Work in Golden Age Argentina*, 7.
[24] Guy, "White Slavery, Public Health, and the Socialist Position on Legalized Prostitution in Argentina, 1913-1936," 61.

In contrast, Yarfitz allots women in the sex trade with greater agency, emphasizing that women chose sex work among other available options.[25] Differing perspectives about the role of agency in histories of prostitution and sex trafficking grow out of major disagreements between feminist scholars about how to theorize the exchange of sex for capital, known as the "sex wars." In these debates, abolitionist critics generally argue that prostitution is inherently a form of patriarchal violence against women, which conflicts with a core belief of advocates for the rights of sex workers, who believe that prostitution is not intrinsically abusive, but rather depends on the conditions of labor.[26] I join scholars such as Eileen Boris and Rhacel Parreñas in moving away from the binary of "exploitation versus agency" and acknowledging the spectrum of experiences that were constitutive to women's experiences in the sex trade.[27] In the case of early-twentieth-century Buenos Aires, this evolving spectrum of experiences was shaped by changing prostitution legislation particularly during congressional debates about a bill known as "The Palacios Law" in 1907, the year before Epstein arrived in Buenos Aires.

The bill that eventually became "The Palacios Law" was originally drafted in 1902 by a group of moral reformers called the *Asociación nacional Argentina contra la trata de blancas* [National Argentine Association Against White Slavery]. Named for its advocate, socialist senator Alfredo Palacios, the law proposed to incarcerate anyone who forced a female minor to commit acts "that would satisfy the dishonest desires of others" with varied lengths of prison terms.[28] The law gained enough

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[25] Yarfitz, *Impure Migration: Jews and Sex Work in Golden Age Argentina*; Yarfitz, "Uprooting the Seeds of Evil: Ezras Noschim and Jewish Marriage Regulation, Morality Certificates, and Degenerate Prostitute Mothers in 1930s Buenos Aires."
[26] Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010), 8–9; Laura María Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry* (London; New York: Zed Books, 2007).
[27] Boris and Parreñas, *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*, 8.
[28] Guy, "White Slavery, Public Health, and the Socialist Position on Legalized Prostitution in Argentina, 1913-1936," 66–67.

interest to be debated in congress in 1907 but did not pass until 1913. According to Pinie Katz, activists from *Yungt* were key in the law's eventual passage, a detail which suggests that *Yungt*'s tactic evolved to address both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences.[29] One way to understand *Yungt*'s dual priorities is as what Henry Bial calls double coding, or the need to understand how a given performance of Jewishness in mass culture addresses both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences.[30] Bial defines double coding as follows:

> Many elements of a performance, from simple aural and visual signs to complex affective impressions, are open to multiple readings. While theoretically there are as many variant readings of the performance as there are spectators, in practice readings tend to coalesce around certain culturally informed subject positions: a "Jewish" reading and a non-Jewish or 'gentile' reading.

Considering the case of *Miriam* in light of Jewish and Gentile interpretations clarifies how an event that took place in the Yiddish theatre auditorium eventually led to Jewish-involvement in legislative initiatives. For example, a "Jewish" reading of the scuffle in the *Miriam* auditorium was that moral reformers were taking a stand against Jewish involvement in sex trafficking and, to my mind, leveraging antitheatrical tropes in order to emphasize their claims. At the same time, the historical presence of Jewish sex traffickers in Argentina—and their visibility in the Yiddish theatre auditoria—could lead non-Jews spectators to mistakenly corroborate antisemitic stereotypes that all Jews were "sexually deviant" others. To combat these stereotypes, *Yungt* activists expanded their work to include participation in non-Jewish anti-white slavery initiatives, such as the Palacios bill.

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[29] "Hace cuarenta años que los israelitas luchan contra la 'MIGDAL': en Buenos Aires también hay una sociedad francesa de caftens [The Jews have been struggling against the 'MIGDAL' for forty years: in Buenos Aires there is also a French society of caftens]."

[30] Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 16.

According to Marion Kaplan, the Jewish community's active participation in anti-trafficking efforts was motivated by the fact that antisemites found this issue to be "highly exploitable."[31] As Kaplan writes in her study of Jewish feminists in Germany, this created a dilemma for German-Jewish reformers who were leaders in the international anti-trafficking campaign: on the one hand, leaders were ashamed by Jewish participation in white slavery and hoped that their activism might combat any negative stereotypes about Jewish sexual deviance. On the other hand, the issue needed to be treated with caution, especially in vulnerable national contexts such as Germany where Hitler was quick to assert that the cause of white slavery and prostitution in Vienna was "the Jew...a cool, shameless, and calculating manager of this shocking vice" in *Mein Kampf*. As Emma Goldman wrote in 1910, the term "white slavery" was intimately connected with anti-immigrant and antisemitic notions.[32] In particular, the term was coined in an article asserting that prostitutes in Chicago brothels were supplied by an organization primarily comprised of Russian Jews. Goldman's insights remind us that an important part of what was at stake for Jewish immigrants in Argentina was their potential to assimilate into whiteness, which Argentine government officials were attempting to craft as intrinsic to Argentine national identity. While Argentina's immigration policies sought to affirm the idea of Argentina as a "modern and 'white' nation," the majority of immigrants who arrived to Argentina were "not considered fully white by Argentinean elites," especially Jews.[33] As Mir Yarfitz has observed, the rhetorical assumption that the exploiter of the "white slave" was assumed to be nonwhite, and thus "white slave" narratives "frequently served to whiten Jewish women, while darkening Jewish men."[34] From this disadvantaged position, anything that compromised Jewish

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[31] Marion Kaplan, "Prostitution, Morality Crusades and Feminism: German-Jewish Feminists and the Campaign against White Slavery," *Women's Studies International Forum* 5, no. 6 (1982): 622.
[32] Goldman, "The Traffic in Women."
[33] Tanja Bastia and Matthias vom Hau, "Migration, Race and Nationhood in Argentina," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40, no. 3 (2014): 478=9.
[34] Yarfitz, *Impure Migration: Jews and Sex Work in Golden Age Argentina*, 12.

immigrants' desirability as Argentine citizens, such as their perceived sexual "deviance," required extra efforts to combat.

Epstein's Personal Life

In addition to the surge of international concern and activism around prostitution, Epstein's personal and romantic life also impacted how audiences received *Miriam in* production. Epstein was born in 1868 in Warsaw, Poland, but her family moved to London shortly thereafter.[35] Around age seventeen, she joined the choir of Smith's Theatre, where she sang alongside future Jewish actresses Jennie Kayzer, Anna Held, and Dayna Shtetin (Faynman). In addition, Epstein sang in the choir of the Yiddish theatre, where she performed in Goldfaden operettas such as *Shulamis*. "Fantastic stories were told" about Epstein's private life, for example that "a white slave-trader brought her from Paris to Bombay" where she met a Hindu prince whom she eventually married. Epstein's biographer David Mazower, who is currently working on a manuscript about Epstein's life, has found that this particular rumor was rooted in some truth. Mazower writes, "Fanny Epstein lived life like a series of adventures from a Jewish version of the Arabian Nights. Exotic, charismatic, and resolutely independent, she fascinated contemporaries and baffled chroniclers who struggled to separate fact from legend."[36] Chroniclers were particularly "baffled" by her romantic life, particularly her marriage to Bomanjee Ardaseer Wadia, a man who came from an elite Bombay Parsi family and had studied law at Cambridge University. They eloped and left for India. Meanwhile, Epstein's parents were afraid that she had been abducted by a trafficker, and so sought the help of an anti-trafficking organization to locate their daughter. Epstein and her husband then returned to London where he

[35] Zylbercweig, "Fanny Epstein."
[36] David Mazower, "The Life of a Yiddish Actress from Bombay to Buenos Aires" (unpublished manuscript, n.d.).

converted to Judaism. While these aspects of Epstein's life might seem better suited for fiction than history, their marriage certificate verifies the wedding, and postcard images of her from the time include her hyphenated last name "Wadia-Epstein."

Epstein eventually returned to the Yiddish stage, where she toured to South Africa and Buenos Aires. Her repertoire included works from Yiddish and Gentile modernist playwrights such as Peretz Hirschbein, Jacob Gordin, Sholem Asch, Dovid Pinski, Henrik Ibsen, and Octave Mirbeau. Her celebrity as a leader of the "vanguard" who "amaze[d] audiences through her presentations of "the newest repertoire" lingered in the minds of her Argentine-Jewish spectators after she left Buenos Aires in 1909.[37] Descriptions of Epstein's skill as a performer suggest that she had the elusive lure that Joseph Roach calls "it," or "a certain quality, easy to perceive but hard to define, possessed by abnormally interesting people."[38] For example, Argentine-Jewish theatre aficionados remembered "great Mme. Epstein," for "dazzling our audiences with the magnitude of her scenic talent,"[39] and Argentine theatre critic P. Wald described Epstein's talent as follows:

> Hearing the whole play one time and hearing her role several times this was enough for [Epstein] to perform the piece; to grasp the idea, to see the conflict before her in front of the appropriate audience; to create depths, color, and mood. She didn't memorize her role—she embodied in the role with all her senses and her whole body, with her heart and soul; with her elegant speech and her artistically sensitive soul. Her room was transformed and became a kind of synagogue for actors, for fans, for movers and shakers in the community.[40]

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[37] Zylbercweig's *Leksikon* claims that Epstein "graciously led the vanguard and did not cease to amaze the audience with waves of moods through her appearances and in the newest repertoire."
[38] Roach Joseph, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 1.
[39] "El teatro israelita [The yiddish theatre]," in *Juventud [Youth]* (Buenos Aires, 1916), 66.
[40] Zylbercweig, "Fanny Epstein."

In accounts of Epstein's tour to Argentina, her production of *Miriam* is entangled with Jewish initiatives to end "white slavery." Even Epstein's entry in the Zalman Zylbercweig's *Encyclopedia of Yiddish Theatre* describes how the traffickers "could not bear to" endure the entire production and so "created a commotion" which led to fighting in the streets, organizing meetings, and disseminating manifestos.

These biographical entries do not mention that before and after *Miriam* Argentinean Jewish leaders collaborated with moral reformers and politicians outside of the Jewish community to advance local anti-vice campaigns and organize meetings that facilitated the exchange of ideas between diverse immigrant groups. Thus, the performance of *Miriam* was part of a process in which Jewish activists engaged Jewish and non-Jewish moral reformers. For example, in November 1908, one month after the production of *Miriam*, Jewish activists printed Spanish-language appeals insisting that the Jewish community must "recover their honor," and inviting Spanish-speaking Argentines to participate in a meeting against the "white flesh traders."[41] The meeting took place at a Italian opera house, the Salon Opera Italia, where a large sign in Spanish advertised that a meeting against the "white flesh traders" would be taking place on Wednesday, November 11. Its organizers brought together several influential Argentines and other leaders from various religious backgrounds, including Alfredo Palacios and pastors from the North American Methodist Church and the German Protestant Church, all of whom congratulated the Jewish community on their "noble undertaking." Journalists from Italian, French, and Spanish-language newspapers attended and summarized the meeting in their respective presses such as *La patria degli italiani*, *Le courrier de la plata*, *El diario, Ultima hora*, and *Sarmiento*. As an outcome of the meeting, the organization recommended that the government should pass a special law to "eradicate and destroy these known

[41] "Der miting un di milkhome gegen froyenhendler [The meeting and the war against the traffickers]," *Der zionist [The zionist]*, December 3, 1908.

gangs from the [Argentine] republic" and appoint special commissioners to carry out the proposed undertakings. In addition, they recommended obtaining images of all of the known traffickers from the chief of police, printing these in several different languages by the thousands, and sending them to all of the cities where the traffickers do their business including Russia, Austria-Hungary, Romania, and Turkey. Finally, the organizations requested the support from newspaper editors in advancing their struggle to end "white slavery."

Leaders in the Jewish community credit the activism of *Yungt* in leading to the 1913 approval of the Palacios Law.[42] However, Donna Guy acknowledges that there was another catalyzing event: William Coote, the president of the international bureau for the suppression of the white slave traffic, visited Buenos Aires and boosted the morale of those working on the bill.[43] On August 8 1913, Palacios reintroduced the bill, which as before was designed to punish pimps. As with the 1903 plan, "the guilty party would face a jail sentence, and if [they were] a relative, husband, or tutor, [they would] would lose the right to exercise parental authority (*patria potestad*) over the woman or minor. Foreign-born pimps faced deportation if convicted of white slavery more than once." However, in contrast to the 1904 proposition, the 1913 bill expanded the definition of white slavery to include the corruption of male minors and women younger than twenty-two. The major modification to this legislation was that adult females were given legal protection from pimps; as Guy writes, "if adult women were forced into prostitution because their consent had been given

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[42] "Hace cuarenta años que los israelitas luchan contra la 'MIGDAL': en Buenos Aires también hay una sociedad francesa de caftens [The Jews have been struggling against the 'MIGDAL' for forty years: in Buenos Aires there is also a French society of caftens]"; Susana Skura and Silvia Hansman, "La construcción de personajes femeninos en el teatro ídish en la argentina durante la primera mitad del siglo XX [The construction of feminine characters in Argentine Yiddish theatre during the first half of the twentieth century]," in *Judaica latinoamericana: VI estudios históricos, sociales y literarios* (Jerusalem: Editorial Universitaria Magnes - Universidad Hebrea de Jerusalem, 2009), 439–61.
[43] Guy, "White Slavery, Public Health, and the Socialist Position on Legalized Prostitution in Argentina, 1913-1936," 67.

under deception or threat of violence, the author of the crime would face from one to three years in prison. With this provision, the projected law ensured for the first time that any woman forced into prostitution involuntarily, whether by stranger or a relative, could seek legal redress." While the legally sanctioned possibility for redress was significant on paper, women within the sex trade did not often denounce their exploiters. The case of Raquel Liberman, which is the focus of chapter four, provides an important exception and the fatal threats that she received from her exploiters exemplify why prostitutes rarely sought out legal redress.

Palacios was an important ally for leaders of Jewish anti-white slavery initiatives, as their support of his legislation allowed the Jewish community to take a public political stance against trafficking. As Guy has pointed out, Palacios' personal motivation for advocating this bill was not a Marxist or public health perspective, or even moral opposition to licensed prostitution that lead to the illegal traffic in women. Instead, it was the shameful international reputation that Argentina was developing, particularly in Europe, as "the worst of all the centers of the immoral commerce in women." Guy alleges that "for [Palacios], it was simply a matter of national shame and embarrassment that Argentina was allowing the illegal traffic in young women to operate anywhere in the republic. According to his view, in order to eliminate the scandal, female minors—even if they were prostitutes—had to be given legal protection from pimps." By allying themselves with Palacios, leaders in the Jewish community sought to demonstrate that they wished to change Argentina's international reputation; and how could they be the source of such a shameful social evil if they were so publicly involved in activism against it? In September 1913, after the Palacios Law was approved, leaders in the Jewish community formalized the support of this new legislation through presenting him with a certificate that congratulated Senator Palacios on his "praiseworthy" initiatives to end

"white slavery."[44] The certificate included the names of ten signatories, six of whom identified themselves with the title of "President" though they did not specify which organizations they presided over. In addition, the certificate illustrates how Jewish leaders attempted to collectively demonstrate that they were upstanding Argentine citizens.

The work of maintaining the public image of morality involved crafting compelling social performances for Gentile neighbors, and also impacted the social performance of Jewishness within the Yiddish-speaking community. Part of being moral, modern citizens mean producing *kunst* repertoire. In the early 1920s, Yiddish impresarios contracted Russian Jewish actors for the explicit purpose of producing produced modernist plays, such as married couple Ninina and Leonid Sokolov, whom *Di Prese* lauded as "true *kunst* artists with a rich artistic career, and with a theatre culture and tradition from the Russian stage."[45] The Sokolov's repertoire included works by Russian playwrights such as Leonid Andreyev, Ossip Dimov, and August Strindberg. Russian Jewish actor Rudolf Zaslavsky brought a similar repertoire to Buenos Aires, and his production of Strindberg's *The Father* was advertised as "an excellent *kunst* performance in honor of the benefit for a great *kunst* performer."[46] Despite the rhetorical emphasis on *kunst*, there were a few exceptional cases that illustrate how the Yiddish theatre's bad reputation lingered due to its perceived audience composition. For example, during a 1925 Yiddish production of August Strindberg's *Der foter* [*The Father*], spectators again sighted Jewish pimps in the audience. As A. Horishnik and P. Nomberg took their seats in the balcony boxes, they noticed that they were surrounded by "criminals in fine

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[44] "Certificate Supporting the Alfredo Palacios' Anti-White Slavery Law," October 1913, Alfredo Palacios Papers, Archivo del Museo de Palacios.
[45] "Leonid un Ninina Sokolov kumen in 'Olimpo' [Leonid and Ninina Sokolov are coming to the 'Olimpo']."
[46] "Gran teatro israelita [The great Yiddish theatre]," *Di Prese*, November 18, 1925.

suits" with the "scent of pig-handlers" and the "décolletage" of the "grand dames" who captured the attention of the entire audience.[47] A hushed conversation between Horishnik and Nomberg crescendoed until one of them shouted "Ruffians, this is not your place!" and subsequently went to the box office to demand a refund. The "haunting" of the scuffle during the *Miriam* performance in this later incident points to an important contradiction in this history.[48] Scholars tend to insist that Jewish pimps' preferences for *shund* inhibited the modernization of Yiddish theatre repertoire, however the presence of sex traffickers during productions of works by Hirschbein and Strindberg suggests that these unwanted audience members attended at least two modernist plays.

Articles and advertisements that address modernist productions on the Yiddish stage challenge the historiographic narrative that Argentinean-Jewish impresarios exclusively produced *shund*. As the Yiddish press from the 1920s shows, Yiddish impresarios regularly produced modernist plays even before the disbandment of The Varsovia Society in 1930. In fact, modernist productions were such an accepted part of Yiddish theatre repertoire that they did not strike reviewers as unusual. For example, the 1925 theatre season included a repeat performance of Strindberg's "psychological" play *The Father* and a production of Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*.[49] While the historiography of Yiddish theatre would lead one to believe that Yiddish productions by Jewish and non-Jewish modernist artists—including Strindberg, Ibsen, Asch, and Ansky—must have been exceptional cases, the absence of commentary on the matter provides evidence that this repertoire was an accepted and even normalized aspect of Yiddish theatre culture. It is possible that producing modernist repertoire was one way in which new immigrant Jews attempted to prove their worthiness of belonging within a culture that prioritized European cultural production. Yet producing avant-garde plays did not

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[47] "Di rufianes un dos teater [The ruffians and the theatre]," *Di Prese*, November 20, 1925.
[48] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).
[49] "Der Foter [The Father]," *Di Prese*, October 4, 1925.

remedy the problem for several reasons, including the gendered and class-based challenges that Jewish immigrant women faced during their processes of assimilation.

These challenges are especially evident in one article by Doctor Benjamin Schriftschteler, a reporter for the Spanish-language Jewish newspaper *Mundo Israelita* (*Jewish World*). In his June 1925 profile of a theatergoing woman named Neje Beile, Schriftschteler argued that she exemplified the tension between old world and new world identities, and thus symbolized part of the Jewish community's collective struggle to shed Eastern European values for Argentinean ones.[50] Schriftschteler unexpectedly encountered Beile at the Yiddish theatre during a production of *Tsipke Fayer*. Since he and Beile emigrated from the same small town in Carpathian Ruthenia, Schriftschteler was privy to details about the changes in Beile's class status (or at least claimed to be). Schriftschteler devotes the second paragraph of his article, "Personas y cosas: Neje-Beile refiere sus impresiones de teatro" ["People and things: Neje-Beile describes her impressions of the theatre"], to describing the major changes in Beile's class status that transpired over the ten years that she and her family have lived in Buenos Aires. According to Schriftschteler, Beile held extreme communist values when she arrived to Argentina. Ostensibly these values stemmed from her proletariat origins. Upon immigrating to Buenos Aires, her husband Moishe (who was trained as a blacksmith) found work in a factory that made iron beds. Six years later, he and Beile had saved enough money to start their own business which was now worth 200,000 pesos and employed over 70 people. Schriftschteler harshly judges Beile for claiming to be a communist even though she is now a member of the owning class. He presents her as an oblivious caricature who is shamefully ignorant of her own hypocrisy. On the surface, Schriftschteler's article is not directly about the Yiddish theatre and prostitution, but applying the feminist methods illuminate how that Beile's embodiment

[50] Benjamin Schriftschteler, "Personas y cosas: Neje-Beile refiere sus impresiones de teatro [People and things: Neje-Beile describes her impressions of the theatre]," *Mundo Israelita*, June 20, 1925.

of femininity disproves crucial foundational historiographic assumptions that Jewish pimps inhibited the Yiddish theatre repertoire in Buenos Aires. A feminist approach to Schriftschteler's account reveals that Beile's Jewishness interferes with her ability to persuade Schriftschteler that she has transformed into a high-class Argentinean woman.

Schriftschteler's perspective is inextricable from his identity as a male Jewish doctor. While he does not specify what kind of doctor he is, his title indicates his access to class privilege vis-à-vis education. His class status is also evident in the fact that he writes for the Spanish-language Jewish newspaper, *Mundo Israelita*, rather than for the Yiddish press. As I explored earlier in the case of David Hassan, language was inextricable from class for the new-immigrant Argentinean Jewish community. While Schriftschteler does seem to understand Yiddish (as is evident in his detailed recapitulation of the Yiddish-language play *Tsipke Fayer*), his choice to write for *Mundo Israelita* demonstrates his alliance with upper-class Jewish values and culture. Even though Schriftschteler does not insinuate that Beile is a prostitute, his depiction of her engages stereotypes that resemble the male perspectives of Hassan and Berliner. Furthermore, Schriftschteler's article demonstrates his gender and class bias through including several other stereotypes about Jewish women, particularly misogynistic concerns that their presence is excessive.

Beile's failed performance of femininity is evident in her first interaction with Schriftschteler at the Yiddish theatre. As Pollock observes, "structures of looking are not natural, but historical" and "Any regime, such as the 'natural' assumption that men look at women, and women watch themselves being looked at (Berger 1972), has specific effects that are not within the reflection of a given difference between men and women: gender."[51] Yet Beile did not abide by this "natural" rule at the production of *Tsipke Fayer*. Instead it was she who dared to look. Schriftschteler states that

[51] Griselda Pollock, "The Visual," in *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory*, ed. Mary Eagleton (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 176–77.

Beile's image was so transformed that he did not recognize her at first. Thus it was she who saw Schriftschteler first and called out to capture his attention. Beile's rejection of the accepted social hierarchy indicates that while she might appear to be a "modern" woman on the surface, her Jewishness makes it impossible for her to escape her unenlightened Jewish past with its inverted gender norms. Beile attempts to outwardly demonstrate her access to class privilege in several ways, including how she dresses. Schriftschteler perceives her choices of clothing and jewelry to be ostentatious, yet still her appearance piques his curiosity to the extent that he lists each item that she wears: a floor-length fur coat over a colorful dress, a silk scarf, a large gold necklace adorned with a watch, and an additional necklace with two black jewels that "must have weighed half a kilogram." To Schriftschteler, her costume displays excessive wealth. Moreover, Beile is also too loud and too bossy. As Schriftschteler points out, while Moische was socializing in the lobby between acts, Beile "yelled loudly" to get his attention when their daughter Myrl started to cry. While Beile is excessive in some ways, in other ways she is not feminine enough. For example, Beile comments that the only problem with the performance of *Tsipke Fayer* is the lack of childcare, suggesting that she would rather be entertained at the theatre than fulfill her primary womanly role as all-nurturing mother.

Outwardly, Beile demonstrates her economic mobility through her choice of clothing and through her repeated remarks that one of the main reasons she attends the theatres is to support the impoverished actors. Yet Schriftschteler depicts Beile as inauthentically upper-class for her aesthetic preferences, particularly her preference for melodrama over realism. For example, when Schriftschteler asks Beile what she thinks about the theatre, Beile says that she prefers the "sentimental" musical performances during which justice triumphs over evil and the actors visibly emote. She does not like it when something sad happens and the actors stay quiet; as she tells him, she does not need to go the theatre to witness silent tragedies that are ubiquitous in everyday life. As if winking at his readers, Schriftschteler reveals that Beile has missed the point of avant-garde

theatre. His tone implies that as any well-informed reader of *Mundo Israelita* ought to know, dramatic realism was innately superior to the melodramas and musical comedies that Beile preferred.

Schriftschteler demonstrates his superiority over Beile to *Mundo Israelita* readers through showcasing his familiarity with the European repertoire. When Beile tells Schriftschteler that one of her least favorite performances was a production called *The Father*. Schriftschteler asks her "*Father* by Strindberg?" and she replies "No, by Moscowitch [sic]," showing her naïvete. (Moscovitch was the surname of a well-known Argentinean Yiddish actor of the time, Mauricio Moscovitch.) Not only did Beile not know the author of *The Father* but she did not appreciate its formalistic innovations. "What a horrible play!" Beile remarked, "It had only three acts, and they were all very short" and all very sad. "There was no singing, and not even one dance, nothing," she lamented, emphasizing her preference for *shund*. In addition, Beile did not realize that the production was a translation, so was confused about why the protagonist spoke Yiddish but was not Jewish. By Beile's own account, she did not understand the storyline. To her mind, it was a play about a conversation between a soldier and his wife about things that she did not understand. She recounted the plot as follows: the soldier started to doubt if he was the father of his wife's child, then reads books, talks to his friends, and thinks about the matter incessantly until he eventually throws a lamp at his wife and dies. "Tell me doctor, what kind of story is this?" Beile cries. For Schriftschteler and his readers, the implicit answer is that it is a story about psychological interiority. Despite Schriftschteler's attempt to parody Beile, his article provides an important exception to the historiographic assumption that the "low brow" tastes of Jewish prostitutes slowed the integration of *kunst* into Yiddish theatre repertoire. As the article makes clear, Beile's resistance to *kunst* was a matter of class. While Beile is economically mobile, Schriftschteler exposes that she remains too Jewish to perform upper-class femininity that would allow her, and other Jews like her, to fully assimilate into Argentinean culture.

Beile's lack of appreciation for *kunst* theatre provides a new understanding of Argentinean Yiddish theatre history. Her account illustrates that modernist repertoire and avant-garde acting styles such as realism were present on the Yiddish stage during an era of Yiddish theatre history that scholars believe consisted of exclusively low-brow repertoire. It is possible that impresarios attempted to transform the status of the Argentinean Yiddish theatres from "low brow" venues to high-class artistic and moral institutions through producing avant-garde repertoire, such as that of Strindberg. (As an aside, it would be unsurprising if Jewish pimps enjoyed Strindberg, who is a notorious misogynist.) But as the case of Beile shows, not all audience members welcomed the change in repertoire. This was not because they were prostitutes or pimps, but because of personal preferences that were tied to their education and class status. The next chapter builds on this argument by illuminating another important reason why historians have misunderstood the relationship between Yiddish theatre repertoire and audience composition. As a feminist analysis of the production history of *Ibergus* shows, impresarios and directors strategically leveraged antitheatrical narratives to bolster their own reputations as avant-garde innovators.

CHAPTER THREE

Yiddish Theatre and the Argentinean Avant-Gardes:

Reconsidering Yakov Botoshansky's 1926 Production of *Ibergus*

The winter of 1926 was a difficult time to be a Yiddish actor in Buenos Aires. Theatre critic Yakov Botoshansky had launched a press campaign urging Jewish audiences to boycott the Yiddish Actors Union (the *Yidisher Aktorn Farayn,* hereafter YAF).[1] The campaign's inciting incident was a private reading of playwright Leib Malakh's latest four-act drama *Ibergus* [*Regeneration*], which featured a Jewish prostitute's plight to "regenerate" herself into a paragon of feminine virtue i.e. a mother. Botoshansky was convinced that *Ibergus* would be a success, but impresario Adolfo Mide refused to produce the play without further revisions.[2] Botoshansky did not take the rejection lightly. In the daily Yiddish-language newspaper that Botoshansky co-edited, *Di Prese*, he published article after article exploiting a rumor that Yiddish theatre artists catered repertoire to their "ruffianish" proprietors: a ring of Jewish pimps. According to Botoshansky, pimp-funded theatres prevented Yiddish actors from taking a political stance on Jewish involvement in "white slavery."

Scholars of Jewish migration and Yiddish theatre in Buenos Aires refer to the scandal surrounding *Ibergus* as a pivotal moment in Jewish efforts to cleanse the Argentinean Yiddish theatres of Varsovia affiliates, or as they were euphemistically known at the time *tmeim*, a Hebrew word for ritually unclean.[3] Writing from the disciplinary contexts of literary criticism, social history,

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[1] To my knowledge, the YAF had no connection to the Argentinean actors union founded in 1919, *la Asociación Argentina de Actores* Teodoro Klein, *Historia de luchas. Asociación Argentina de Actores [A history of struggles: the Argentinean actors union]* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Asociación Argentina de Actores, 1988).

[2] "A skandal in der hiziker yidisher teater velt [A scandal in the local Yiddish theatre world]," *Yidishe Tsaytung*, March 25, 1926.

[3] Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice*; Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman*; Mirelman, *Jewish Buenos Aires, 1890-1930: In Search of an Identity*; Yarfitz, *Impure Migration:*

and anthropology, these studies draw heavily from memoirs and popular histories published in the 1930s and 1940s, which represent the *Ibergus* scandal from Botoshansky's perspective. Yet a close analysis of the 1926 Yiddish and Spanish-language press reveals a greater range of perspectives.

The Yiddish actors defended themselves against Botoshansky in several letters to the editor of *Di Prese*'s rival newspaper, *Yidishe Tsaytung*. As the actors observed, Botoshansky's campaign was a hyperbolic response to legitimate concerns about Malakh's writing; even though the actors shared Mide's concern about *Ibergus*, they did not have power to influence which plays were produced.[4] In a manifesto calling "all friends of the Yiddish theatre" to defend their beloved Yiddish actors, the YAF insisted that Botoshansky's capitalistic desire to sell newspapers led him to publish "libel for the sake of business."[5] To recuperate their reputations, the YAF requested support from other Yiddish actors unions around the world, which inspired international performing artists such as Ester Valershtayn to write letters defending the YAF.[6] A weekly Spanish-language Jewish newspaper, *Mundo Israelita*, also voiced its support for Yiddish theatre artists—whom they described as well-intended "members of the proletariat"—and reframed the situation's true antagonist as the profit-making theatre business.[7]

Jews and Sex Work in Golden Age Argentina; Skura and Slavsky, "1901-2001. Cien años de teatro en ídish en Buenos Aires [1901-2001. One hundred years of theatre in Yiddish in Buenos Aires]"; Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*.

[4] "Farvos mir hoben biz itst geshvigen [Why we have been silent up until now]," *Yidishe Tsaytung*, April 11, 1926; "An oyskler vort funm yidisher aktyoren fareyn tsu der yidishe kehile en Argentina [A clarifying word from the Yiddish actors union to the Jewish community in Argentina]," *Yidishe Tsaytung*, April 16, 1926.

[5] "Manifest fun idishn aktyorn farayn in Argentine [Manifesto of the Argentine Yiddish actors union]," n.d., Dorot Jewish Division: Buenos Aires Yiddish Theater Placards, New York Public Library Digital Collections.

[6] "Di artistin Ester Valershteyn bagrist dem aktyoren-fareyn [Artist Ester Valershteyn congratulates the Yiddish actors union]," *Di Yidishe Tsaytung*, June 14, 1926.

[7] "La eficacia de una campaña [The effectiveness of a campaign]," *Mundo Israelita*, November 28, 2015.

To continue the work of feminist theatre historians who mistrust histories told from a single perspective, I argue that Botoshansky's emphasis on Yiddish theatre and prostitution has distracted scholars from questions that *Ibergus* raises about immigrant theatre's role in the Argentinean avant-gardes.[8] As part of Botoshansky's efforts to politicize Yiddish-speaking audiences, he announced that he was forming an independent Yiddish theatre company, *Yung Argentina* [*Young Argentina*], which would be free from the reign of Jewish pimps. Botoshansky attested that such economic freedom would revolutionize the Yiddish theatre repertoire by finally replacing *shund* with the latest innovations in *kunst*, or modernist art. Four months after the private *Ibergus* reading, Botoshansky directed Yung Argentina's inaugural performance, an experimental production of *Ibergus* that included an eclectic mix of avant-garde aesthetics such as biomechanical acting techniques, symbolism, and masks. The production history is recorded entirely in Yiddish, and until now scholars have not considered it as part of the 1920s Argentinean avant-gardes.

In the introduction to the edited collection *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*, James Harding and John Rouse urge scholars to supplant a Eurocentric notion of the avant-garde with a transnational understanding "which recognizes that the sites of artistic innovation associated with the avant-garde tend to be sites of unacknowledged cultural hybridity and negotiation."[9] To do so, they challenge three primary notions of the avant-garde: the hierarchical ordering of aesthetic categories, the reinforcement of European cultural prerogatives, and the uniform linear conception of history. As Harding acknowledges, the avant-garde's colonialist underpinnings mark it as a global cultural phenomenon rather than an exclusively European one. To advance Harding and Rouse's efforts, Jean Graham-Jones advocates for

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[8] Canning, "Constructing Experience: Theorizing a Feminist Theatre History"; Davis, "Questions for Feminist Methodology in Theatre History."

[9] James M. Harding and John Rouse, eds., *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 2.

methodological plurality in the specific case of Argentina. Focusing on Buenos Aires theatre in the 1930s and 1960s, Jean Graham-Jones "takes into account local, multiple nonsynchronicity to demonstrate how the Argentinean avant-garde, *vanguardismo*, resists critical reduction to imitative or political theatre."[10] As part of Graham-Jones's efforts to "restore the multiplicity in the term avant-garde," she includes Argentina's Independent Theatre (*Teatro Independiente*) movement within the purview of *vanguardismo* for its "anticommercial mix of theatrical forms, its project of activating the spectator and training the actors, and its efforts to bring together the Argentinean playwright, actor, designer, and spectator."[11] While Graham-Jones writes about Spanish-language theater in a later decade, Argentinean Yiddish theater artists shared similar frustrations with commercial theatre and wished to politicize Yiddish theatre audiences through non-naturalistic theatrical techniques.

While the contributors to *Not the Other Avant-Garde* do not explicitly address Jewish immigrant theatre artists, itinerant Yiddish performers often brought together Jewish influences and "a wide range of non-Jewish avant gardes" to advance leftist political aims, as Debra Caplan argues in her 2018 monograph on the Vilna Troupe.[12] This strategy of "global borrowing" made Jews into the "archetypal modern transnationals" for their constant movement across national borders. While many members of the Vilna troupe travelled to Buenos Aires, most Yiddish theatre scholarship focuses on urban centers in the Global North. One important exception is the work of Paula Anslado, who illuminates how Jewish theatre artists contributed to the Argentinean independent

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[10] Jean Graham-Jones, "Aesthetics, Politics, and Vanguardias in Twentieth-Century Argentinean Theater," in *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*, ed. James M. Harding and John Rouse (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 169. For more on the term *vanguardias* see Graham-Jones 185 footnote 5.

[11] Graham-Jones, "Aesthetics, Politics, and Vanguardias in Twentieth-Century Argentinean Theater," 170, 175.

[12] Debra Caplan, *Yiddish Empire: Jews, Theater, and the Aesthetics of Itinerancy* (University of Michigan Press, 2018), 13.

theatre movement.[13] Anslado focuses on an independent Argentinean Yiddish theatre created in 1932—IDRAMST (*Idishe Dramatishe Stude*, or Yiddish Dramatic Studio) which later became *Teatro IFT* (IFT is an acronym for *Idisher Folks Teater,* or the Jewish People's Theatre). Tracing the evolution of IFT from a Yiddish-language company to creating work for Jewish speaking immigrants to its first Spanish-language performance in 1957, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Anslado argues that IFT shared an ideological commitment to ensemble-based theatre and social transformation with the leaders of the Argentinean independent theatre movement.

While studies of the Argentine *vanguardias* and independent theatre movement often prioritize the 1930s, important changes to mainstream Argentinean theatrical forms were brewing in the previous decade.[14] During the 1920s, Argentinean theatre artists who were unsatisfied with

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[13] Paula Anslado, "Teatro popular, teatro judío, teatro independiente: una aproximación al Idisher Folks Teater (IFT) [Popular theatre, Jewish theatre, independent theatre: a study of the Yiddish Folks Theater (IFT)]," *Culturales* 6 (2018): 1–27. For more Spanish-language scholarship on Argentinean Yiddish theatre see Skura, Susana, and Silvia Gloser. *Teatro ídish argentino (1930-1950) [Argentine yiddish theatre (1930-1950)]*. Editorial de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2016; Hansman, Silvia, et al. *Oysfarkoyft, localidades agotadas: afiches del teatro ídish en la Argentina [Sold out: yiddish theater posters in Argentina]*. Translated by Jane Brodie, Del nuevo extremo, 2006; Hansman, Silvia, and Susana Skura. "Curatorship, Patrimonialization, and Memory Objects: Exhibition of Yiddish Theater Posters Created in Argentina." *Yiddish/Modern Jewish Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2004, pp. 57–86; Skura, Susana. "'A por gauchos in chiripá…': expresiones criollistas en el teatro ídish argentino (1910-1930) ["And for the lucky gauchos: creole expressions in the argentine yiddish theatre]." *Iberoamericana: América Latina-España-Portugal*, vol. 7, no. 27, 2007, pp. 7–23; Skura, Susana, and Silvia Hansman. "La construcción de personajes femeninos en el teatro ídish en la Argentina durante la primera mitad del siglo XX [The construction of feminine characters in argentine yiddish theatre during the first half of the twentieth century]." *Judaica latinoamericana: VI estudios históricos, sociales y literarios*, Editorial Universitaria Magnes - Universidad Hebrea de Jerusalem, 2009, pp. 439–61; Skura, Susana, and Leonor Slavsky. "1901-2001. Cien años de teatro en ídish en Buenos Aires [1901-2001. One hundred years of theatre in yiddish in Buenos Aires]." *Recreando la cultura Judeoargentina: literatura y artes plásticas*, edited by Ricardo Feierstein and Stephen Sadow, Editorial Milá, 2002, 294-208; "El teatro ídish como patrimonio cultural judío argentino [Yiddish theatre as Argentine-Jewish cultural heritage]." *Recreando la cultura Judeoargentina: literatura y artes plásticas*, edited by Ricardo Feierstein and Stephen Sadow, Editorial Milá, 2004, pp. 41–50.

[14] David William Foster, *Argentine Teatro Independiente, 1930-1955* (York, South Carolina: Spanish Literature Publishing Company, 1986); María Fukelman, "Los antecedentes del teatro independiente en Buenos Aires: la importancia de Boedo y Florida [The antecedents of independent theatre in

commercial theatre sought to transform the means of theatrical production in Buenos Aires. Some Argentinean theatre artists trained abroad or learned from the work of European avant-garde artists who toured to Argentina, including Luigi Pirandello, who first visited Buenos Aires in 1927.[15] However, 1920s Buenos Aires is better known for its thriving Spanish-language popular theatres. Argentine national stages often featured local versions of performance styles from Spain, such as one-act depictions of everyday life (*género chico criollo*) and satirical representations of Argentina's lower and middle classes (*costumbrismo*).[16] In 1925, around 6.9 million spectators attended the theatre annually, especially second-generation immigrants.[17] David William Foster considers the Argentinean theatrical grotesque (*grotesco criollo*) to be the sole exception to the commercialization of Argentinean 1920s theatre, a theatrical form that Graham-Jones considers the "beginnings of the theatrical avant-garde in 1930s Buenos Aires."[18]

According to Jorge Dubatti, the shared "enemies" of these independent theatre artists were the sole lead actor, the commercial impresario, and the state.[19] Argentinean intellectuals in the 1920s tended to affiliate with one of two groups: "the politically committed 'Boedo' social realists" who

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Buenos Aires: the importance of Boedo and Florida]," *Culturales* 1, no. 11 (2017): 151–87; Graham-Jones, "Aesthetics, Politics, and Vanguardias in Twentieth-Century Argentinean Theater"; Ricardo Risetti, *Memorias del teatro independiente Argentino: 1930-1970, Buenos Aires [Memories of the Argentinean independent theatre: 1930-1970, Buenos Aires]* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2004).

[15] Celia de Aldama, "De Italia a la Argentina: las embajadas culturales de Luigi Pirandello [From Italy to Argentina: Luigi Pirandello as a cultural ambassador]," *Perífrasis. Revista de Literatura, Teoría y Crítica* 6, no. 12 (2015): 49–61.

[16] Victoria Lynn Garrett, *Performing Everyday Life in Argentine Popular Theater, 1890–1934* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Nora Mazziotti, ed., *Comedias y sainetes argentinos: antología [Argentine comedies and sainete plays: an anthology]* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Colihue, 1979).

[17] Nora Mazziotti, "Bambalinas: el auge de una modalidad teatral periodista [Drop scenes: The rise of a journalistic theatrical mode]," in *Mundo urbano y cultural popular: estudios de historia social argentina*, ed. Diego Armus and Dora Barrancos (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1990), 75.

[18] Foster, *Argentine Teatro Independiente, 1930-1955*; Graham-Jones, "Aesthetics, Politics, and Vanguardias in Twentieth-Century Argentinean Theater," 170.

[19] Jorge Dubatti, *Cien años de teatro argentino: Desde 1910 a nuestros días. [One hundred years of Argentine theatre: From 1910 until our times]* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2012), 81.

desired social art for the worker's revolution, and "the apolitical 'Florida' Europeanists" who envisioned an aesthetic revolution for the sake of art, though as Fukelman has observed there was never an absolute dichotomy between the two groups.[20] While the best-known leader of the independent theatre movement, Leónidas Barletta (1902-1975), was a member of the Boedo group, he integrated both of these ideological strands in creating what is often considered Argentina's first sustained independent theatre, *Teatro del Pueblo*, in November 1930. Yet even before Teatro del Pueblo, Argentinean theatre artists embarked on several attempts to resist the commercial theatre by forming independent companies. Scholars of Argentinean independent theatre tend to emphasize Teatro del Pueblo because it endured until Barletta's death in 1975. Yet as Sarah Townsend has demonstrated in her work on the Brazilian and Mexican avant-gardes, durability is not the best metric for historicizing avant-garde performance. As Townsend argues, focusing on "unfinished" works illuminates how avant-garde art is inextricably tied to "the uneven development of capitalism" and "unravels what we know" about transnational avant-garde performance.[21]

I suspect that the lack of Spanish-language press coverage of 1920s Yiddish theatre has led scholars to overlook the "unfinished" work of Yung Argentina (1926). Even though Yiddish theatre companies comprised three out of the thirty companies that *La Prensa* and *La Nación* include in their daily theatre listings, Spanish-language theatre columnists did not typically review Yiddish plays, perhaps due to language or cultural barriers.[22] Instead, these listings briefly mentioned the kinds of repertoire that Yiddish companies tended to produce—operettas, dramas, and comedies—and sometimes include a translated or transliterated title of a Yiddish play. However, for Argentinean

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[20] Fukelman, "Los antecedentes del teatro independiente en Buenos Aires: la importancia de Boedo y Florida [The antecedents of independent theatre in Buenos Aires: the importance of Boedo and Florida]," 152.
[21] Sarah Townsend, *The Unfinished Art of Theater: Avant-Garde Intellectuals in Mexico and Brazil* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 5–6.
[22] See, for example, the theatre advertisements of *La Prensa* from 1920-1926.

readers unfamiliar with Yiddish theatre repertoire, titles alone did not communicate the importance of otherwise significant performances. For example, whereas in New York, S. Ansky's symbolist play *The Dybbuk* was such a sensation among Jewish and Gentile audiences that it resulted in what became known as "Dybbukmania," *La Prensa* only acknowledged a 1926 production of *The Dybbuk* in Buenos Aires through misspelling its title "*Dibrik*."[23]

Reconstructing Ibergus

March 1926. Around a table at the *Gran teatro israelita* [Premiere Yiddish Theatre] in Buenos Aires, Jewish actresses and actors listened to Botoshansky read Leib Malakh's newest play aloud, a four-act brothel drama called *Ibergus*.[24] Set in Brazil, its protagonist is a Jewish prostitute named Reizl who initially refuses to "regenerate" herself into traditionally feminine social roles such as a pious wife. The play opens in a brothel on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year. Rather than repenting for her sins at synagogue, Reizl stays home and rejects a marriage offer from a Jewish teacher who is hopelessly in love with her. Next, Reizl entertains a group of drunken sailors from off the street, even stealing one of their guns and threatening to shoot it. As the play continues, Reizl assimilates into more conventionally feminine roles by marrying one of her suitors (a Gentile government official) and ingratiating herself with the Jewish social elite. Yet Reizl's new friends reject her once they learn that she was recently a sex worker. Reizl voluntarily "regresses" back to the brothel, where she learns that she is pregnant. She briefly considers an abortion but ultimately decides to continue with the pregnancy. The play ends with Reizl running back into the arms of her

[23] "Diversiones publicas [Public entertainment]," *La Prensa*, July 31, 1926.
[24] "Di forlezung fun L. Malakh's 'Ibergus' [The reading of L. Malakh's 'Ibergus']," *Di Prese*, March 23, 1926.

Catholic husband who represents her future potential to assimilate. According to Botoshansky, this ending symbolized Reizl's successful "regeneration."

Botoshansky anticipated that *Ibergus* would appeal to Jews from across "social strata" even though it addressed "life in the underworld, which is painful for honest Jews." As Botoshansky predicted, "*There will not be a single Jew who does not go to see it*."[25] Despite Botoshansky's enthusiasm, impresario Adolfo Mide refused to stage it on the grounds that the script was "not suitable" for the stage.[26] While Argentinean Yiddish actors and theatregoers were familiar with stage representations of Jewish prostitutes from productions of other Yiddish brothel dramas, Mide and the YAF were hesitant about *Ibergus* for its representation of one figure in particular, a Brazilian-Jewish actor named Star who both acts in Yiddish plays and sings for members of the Jewish trafficking ring during their ritual celebrations such as weddings and circumcisions.[27]

Scholars speculate that Malakh set *Ibergus* in Brazil to avoid backlash against a critique of the situation in Buenos Aires.[28] Alternatively, Malakh's lack of critical distance between history and representation fueled the Argentinean actors' and impresarios' negative reactions to *Ibergus*. In *Ibergus*, the character of Star explains that he performs for the traffickers because they pay better than the Yiddish impresarios; otherwise it was impossible to make a living as an actor.[29] The

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[25] Emphasis in original.
[26] "A skandal in der hiziker yidisher teater velt [A scandal in the local Yiddish theatre world]."
[27] "Di rufianishe idealogie in 'yidishn teater' [The ruffianish ideology in the 'Yiddish theatre']," *Di Prese*, March 25, 1926. Also see "'Di Prese' rayst iber mit'n teater fun der rufianisher idealogie ['Di Prese' calls it quits with the theatre's rufianish ideology]."
[28] Susana Skura citing Avni 2005 in "'A por gauchos in chiripá…': Expresiones criollistas en el teatro ídish argentino (1910-1930) ["And for the lucky gauchos: creole expressions in the Argentine Yiddish theatre]," *Iberoamericana: América Latina-España-Portugal* 7, no. 27 (2007).
[29] In addition to the fictional Star's Brazilian doppelganger, he also shared opinions about the relationship between art and politics with at least one historical Argentinean Yiddish actor. In Act Three of *Ibergus* Star cries out: "What does art have to do with politics? A theatre is like a public pool: anyone who wants to swim can swim" Leib Malakh, *Ibergus: drame in fir actn [Ibergus: A drama in four acts]* (Buenos Aires, 1926). Star's provocation repeats almost verbatim the words that a real-life Argentinean Yiddish actor publicly voiced in 1925: "A theatre is like a public pool, it should be

Argentinean Yiddish actors attending the reading attested that they recognized Star as a fictionalized depiction of a colleague they considered "like a brother to us": a Brazilian Yiddish theatre impresario named H. Star.[30] As Caplan has shown, Yiddish actors needed to tour in order to survive. Since Argentinean actors relied on H. Star's support to make a living, they were understandably concerned about how Malakh's critique of their colleague would impact their ability to tour.[31]

In the months following the *Ibergus* reading, Botoshansky used *Di Prese* to urge his co-religionists to take action against Jewish involvement in sex trafficking. Concerned spectators from the Argentine provinces, Uruguay, Paraguay, and even New York wrote letters to the editor echoing Botoshansky's claim that Jews had a moral responsibility to "speak out against the ruffianish ideology that reigns miserably throughout the 'Yiddish theatre.'"[32] Even though Botoshansky's concept of a "ruffianish ideology" was ill-defined—and nonsensical according to the Yiddish actors—the idea resonated with diasporic Jewish audiences who used similar language to support Botoshansky's call to action.[33] The authors of these letters spoke out against the "great shame" that "the Yiddish theatre in Argentina is an organ of the unclean," and cried out that the Yiddish press "must struggle against this with all of our means."

Despite the YAF's subsequent efforts to recuperate their public image, the negative press inhibited their abilities to tour. On at least two occasions, Yiddish actors traveled outside of Buenos Aires to give performances—one in the Argentinean province of Bahia Blanca and the other a short

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available for anyone who pays to attend," "Vegen intsident in 'yidishen teater' [On the incident in the 'Yiddish theatre']").

[30] Botoshansky, "Rufianishe tsenzur in teater un teror oyf der prese [Ruffianish censorship in theatre and terror of the press]."

[31] For an overview of Yiddish theatre in Brazil, see Nachman Falbel's *Estrelas errantes* (Ateliê, 2013).

[32] "Di rufianishe idealogie in 'yidishn teater' [The ruffianish ideology in the 'Yiddish theatre']."

[33] "Di oyslendishe yidishe prese vegn dem kamf kegn dem rufianizm in unzer yidishn teater [The foreign Yiddish press on the struggle against ruffianism in our Yiddish theatre]," *Di Prese*, June 1, 1926.

ferry ride away in Montevideo, Uruguay; upon arriving, the actors learned that the managers had cancelled the performances due to audience protests.[34] The boycotts inspired a handful of actors to publicly leave the YAF and join Botoshansky's efforts to create an independent Yiddish theatre where "high art" would thrive free from the "ruffianish" interests of the commercial Yiddish stage.[35] While Botoshansky's supporters congratulated these artists for taking the moral high road, the campaign's critics considered these actors "traitors" who compromised their morals in a weak attempt to salvage their careers.[36] The debut production of this new independent Yiddish theatre company, Yung Argentina, was an experimental production of *Ibergus* that Botoshansky directed.

Zalman Zylbercweig's biographical dictionary of international Yiddish theatre makers, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater [Lexicon of Yiddish Theatre]*, characterizes Botoshansky as a leader in the struggle "between the underworld and the Yiddish theatre in Argentina" and the founder of "experimental art" in Argentina.[37] Born in the 1890s in Bessarabia, on the border of Moldova and Ukraine, Botoshansky fled to Romania at the beginning of World War I, where he contributed to Romanian and Yiddish periodicals, took a particular interest in Yiddish theatre, and at one point was arrested for "socialistic activity." Botoshansky's career as a dramatist began in 1915 upon writing his

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[34] "Bahia Blanka reagirt gegn aktyorn farayn, nit derloybndik di yidishe aktyorn tsu shpiln in salon fun tsenter yidishe yugnt [Bahia Blanca reacts against the actors union, not allowing the Yiddish actors union to play in a salon for Jewish youth]," *Di Prese*, April 13, 1926; "Der ershter brokh inm aktyorn farayn? [The first break in the actors union?]," June 6, 1926.

[35] "Der ershter brokh inm aktyorn farayn? [The first break in the actors union?]."

[36] "A meldung fun yid. aktyorn farayn [An announcement from the Yid. actors union]," *Yidishe Tsaytung*, June 13, 1926. Also see Avraham Mendzelevski, "Nokh a mitgild tret aroys fun aktoyrn farayn [Another member leaves the actors union]," *Di Prese*, June 14, 1926; Shlome Nomov, "Der artist Shlome Nomov aroystretn funm actyorn farayn [The artist Shlome Nomov leaves the actors union," *Di Prese*, June 16, 1926; Itzkhak Meir Varshavski, "Der artist Varshavski aroysgetrotn funm aktyorn farayn [The artist Varshavski leaves the actors union]," *Di Prese*, June 13, 1926; Berta Zaslavski, "Nokh mitgilder tretn oys funm actyorn farayn [Another member leaves the actors union]," *Di Prese*, June 13, 1926.

[37] Zalman Zylbercweig, ed., "Botoshansky, Yakov," in *Leksikon fun yidishn teater [Encyclopedia of Yiddish Theatre* (New York: The Hebrew Actors Union of America, 1931).

first play, *Letste* [*The Last Ones*], which he staged in several Romanian cities with semi-professional actors. Botoshansky also wrote several revue plays during this era, and managed the troupe for Galician-born actress Clara Young, "the most beloved Yiddish actress in Poland and Russia during the 1910s," who was adored by Jews, Poles, and Russians alike.[38] In 1920, Botoshansky became the literary director for Vienna's *Freie Jüdische Volksbühne* [Free Jewish People's-Theatre] while it toured to Romania.[39] While the *Freie Jüdische Volksbühne* used a German name, it was a Yiddish-language ensemble whose repertoire included works by Yiddish modernist playwrights including Sholem Asch, David Pinski, Y. L. Peretz, H. Leivick and S. Anski.[40] After immigrating to Buenos Aires in 1923, Botoshansky became co-editor and lead theatre critic of *Di Prese*. He wrote prolifically throughout his life, publishing numerous newspaper articles, travelogues, theatre and literary criticism, fiction, and plays.

As Faith Jones reflects in her article on Zylbercweig's endeavor to document "all major and minor figures involved in every aspect of Yiddish theatre, from all eras and countries," scholars must consider *Leksikon* entries within their idiosyncratic publishing contexts.[41] As Jones writes, most living actors were "surprisingly" uncooperative in Zylbercweig's endeavor; those who agreed to participate had habits of "exaggerating their successes, lowering their ages, claiming to have initiated a particular role or to have founded a theatrical troupe, and generally of putting self-serving goals above accuracy." Starting with the volume after Botoshansky's entry, the trend toward the hyperbolic led Zylbercweig and his assistant editor to corroborate all material they received. Thus, we might

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[38] Nina Warnke, "Going East: The Impact of American Yiddish Plays and Players on the Yiddish Stage in Czarist Russia, 1890-1914," *American Jewish History* 92, no. 1 (March 2004): 26.
[39] Zylbercweig, "Botoshansky, Yakov."
[40] Brigitte Dalinger, "Popular Jewish Drama in Vienna in the 1920s," in *Jewish Theatre: A Global View*, ed. Edna Nahshon, trans. Aileen Derieg (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009), 175–96.
[41] Faith Jones, "The Fate of Yiddish Dictionaries: Zalmen Zylbercweig's Leksikon Fun Yidishn Teater," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 5, no. 3 (2006): 324.

consider Botoshansky's writing about himself and *Ibergus* in sources such as the *Leksikon* and *Di Prese* as subjective interpretations.

Ibergus rehearsals were unusually well documented in the Yiddish press, perhaps in service of Botoshansky's aim to pique public interest in this production. The journalistic narratives about the rehearsals describe the eclectic aesthetic that Botoshansky developed as part of his mission to make *Ibergus* the harbinger of "modern artistic theatre in Buenos Aires." After the actors rehearsed their diction to Botoshansky's liking, they began working with masks that were created by artists in La Plata, Misha Schwartz and S. Lopidus. A week later, the cast integrated "musical illustrations," with original music written for the production by M. Gerberov.[42] After one reader wrote in to *Di Prese* to inquire about the "musical illustrations," an unnamed *Di Prese* contributor (most likely Botoshansky) responded: just as an illustration in a book can be used to depict a scene, so can a play use music as part of its means of expression.[43] Botoshansky explained that the use of music was integral to his process of modernizing the repertoire. Unlike *shund* theatre, which might include melancholy music to accompany an actor's equivalent inner state, a "musical illustration" used sound to illustrate character traits that were otherwise concealed.

Music accompanied each character's entrance as they moved across the stage like an "automaton," as Botoshansky described in a preface he wrote for the published play, a term that indicates his familiarity with Russian avant-garde director Vsevolod Meyerhold's actor training system biomechanics, which trained actors to move in non-naturalistic stylized sequences.[44] While Botoshansky explicitly acknowledged his engagement with Meyerholdian tactics here, and then again

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[42] "Haynt a probe ilustrit mit muzik fun Malakh's drama 'Ibergus' in teater 'Politeama' [Today, a rehearsal with musical illustrations from Malakh's drama 'Ibergus' in the 'Politeama' theater]," *Di Prese*, July 7, 1926.
[43] "Ibergus," *Di Prese*, July 4, 1926, 4.
[44] Yakov Botoshansky, "Prologue," in *Ibergus: drame in fir actn [Ibergus: A drama in four acts]* (Buenos Aires, 1926), 6–7.

in one publicity article, it is not yet known where and how Botoshansky encountered biomechanics.[45] I can only speculate that Botoshansky encountered biomechanics before immigrating to Buenos Aires in 1923, or learned about it from reading about other theatrical innovations in the Global North.[46]

Advertisements for *Ibergus* stress that it was "no ordinary performance" but rather "a communal act of protest against the scoundrels that rule the Yiddish theatre."[47] Such rhetoric shaped the audience's horizon of expectations that *Ibergus* would mark the new era of "clean" Yiddish theatre through transforming the Yiddish theatre into a "modern, artistic theatre" and a "cultural establishment."[48] As Botoshansky emphasized, Reizl's plight to "remold" herself from a prostitute to an upstanding Jewish woman symbolized the performance's role in "the remolding of Yiddish theatre in Argentina."[49] Botoshansky's values resembled those of first-wave feminists at the time, who used "Christian rhetoric of sin and salvation" to advance their transnational campaigns to end "white slavery."[50] Botoshansky drew from Christian iconography in his production, for example through masking Reizl as Mary Magdalene, and masking Blondie (played by Misha Shvarts) as Jesus.[51] Blondie is hopelessly in love with Reizl, and, in one review of the production, exhibited a

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[45] "Di oyffirung fun 'Ibergus' [The production of Ibergus]," *Di Prese*, July 11, 1926.
[46] For example, *Di Prese* occasionally covered recent work by the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre, such as the 1925 production of Y. L. Peretz's symbolistic play without a plot *Bay nakht afn altn mark* [*At night at the old market*] "Alfons Goldshmit vegn 'baynakht oyfn alten mark" [Alfonso Goldshmit on 'Night at the Old Market Place"]," *Di Prese*, November 8, 1925.
[47] "Ibergus," *Di Prese*, July 18, 1926.
[48] "Haynt a probe ilustrit mit muzik fun Malakh's drama 'Ibergus' in teater 'Politeama' [Today, a rehearsal with musical illustrations from Malakh's drama 'Ibergus' in the 'Politeama' theater]."
[49] Jacob Botoshansky, "Director's Prologue to Leib Malach's Play 'Remolding,'" in *Yiddish South of the Border: An Anthology of Latin American Yiddish Writing*, trans. Alan Astro (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), 91.
[50] Pliley, Kramm, and Fischer-Tiné, *Global Anti-Vice Activism, 1890-1950: Fighting Drinks, Drugs, and "Immorality,"* 5.
[51] Botoshansky, "Director's Prologue to Leib Malach's Play 'Remolding,'" 91.

"Jesus-like desire for her salvation."[52] In contrast, Botoshansky depicted the "unclean" members of the Jewish underworld as only partially human. The kosher slaughterer for the prostitutes and pimps (played by Yakov Krakov) wore the tail of an ox and the beard of a billy goat, and the brothel's madam (played by Matilde Zeyr), was costumed as a white-haired and bearded witch, images that repeated an antisemitic trope of the time about the inhumanity of Jews.

On July 16th, 1926, opening night, 2,000 spectators from Buenos Aires and the Argentinean provinces found their seats into Teatro Politeama to attend the much-anticipated world premiere of *Ibergus*. "Not a seat in the house was empty," *Di Prese* reported, comparing the festive atmosphere to that of a major Jewish holiday. While some spectators had visited the *Di Prese* offices to purchase tickets in advance, others bought tickets at Teatro Politeama on the night of the performance. As with most Yiddish plays during the period, children under five were not permitted, but childcare was provided for parents who wished to attend.[53] Members of a local Zionist group, Chevre Zion, volunteered to usher spectators to their seats. All proceeds from the production would benefit the Borokhov schools affiliated with a local branch of a labor Zionist union, Poale Zion.

"The feverish controversy surrounding the play had a definite influence on how I directed it" reflected Botoshansky.[54] While Malakh's text did not include a prologue, Botoshansky took liberties to insert a "dance of shadows" before the opening scene.[55] As the shadow dance concluded, the scene transitioned to a street filled with sailors singing drunkenly outside a brothel. Inside the brothel, an immigrant schoolteacher named Blondie transcribed a letter that Reizl addressed to her

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[52] "Ibergus: der kolosoler derfolg fun L. Malakhs piese bet der premirer in 'Politema' ltoyva di Borukhov-shuln unter der rezhi fun Y. Botoshansky [Ibergus: The colossal success of L. Malakh's play during its premiere in Politeama in honor of the Borokhov schools and under the direction of Y. Botoshansky]," *Di Prese*, July 20, 1926.
[53] "Ibergus," *Di Prese*, July 18, 1926.
[54] Botoshansky, "Director's Prologue to Leib Malach's Play 'Remolding.'"
[55] "Di forshteyendik forshtelung fun 'Ibergus' [The upcoming performance of 'Ibergus']," *Di Prese*, July 15, 1926.

mother (an observant Jew) and brother (a poor shoemaker) in Poland. Reizl strategically represents her life to her family back home. For example, Reizl tells them that she has married an Italian Jew when in actuality she is dating a Catholic mixed-raced representative of the Brazilian parliament (Dr. Silva, played by Volf Dorelin) who repeatedly expresses his desire to marry her. Botoshansky used blackface to signal that Silva was multi-racial, and in doing so racialized Jewish ethnicity as white.

By the second act, Reizl has moved to Silva's home and begins to "regenerate" herself by becoming a philanthropist for Jewish causes and ingratiating herself with members of the Jewish social elite. Reizl has also sent for her mother and brother to join her in Brazil, but when her family first arrives in Silva's home they find his wealth disorienting. Her mother and brother are religious Jews from simple origins who refused to eat any food provided on the boat because it was not kosher. Botoshansky farcically illustrated the "greenness" of Reizl's family through costuming them in the color green.[56] Reizl's mother and brother demonstrate their confusion about the surroundings by asking Reizl why Silva does not speak Yiddish and trying to clarify whether or not he keeps a kosher home. Yet Reizl's brother starts to catch on to the subtext when Reizl's friends from the brothel visit to ask her for a donation to the Jewish cemetery they are creating, which is necessary because the "upstanding" Jews refuse to inter prostitutes and pimps.[57]

Act three takes place at the Yiddish theatre. Backstage, the president of the Jewish anti-trafficking society announces that the audience is protesting Star's participation in the performance. In the play's most meta-theatrical moment, Star barges on to the stage to defend himself before a crowd of Yiddish theatregoers (played by amateur actors), after which the president of the women's help society voices her concern about the children in the community. Someone in the audience points to the balcony, where Reizl is seated beside Silva, and announces that she is one of "them," a

[56] Botoshansky, "Prologue," 91.
[57] For more on historical context regarding the need for a separate cemetery see Brodsky.

prostitute. Blondie intervenes, attempting to humanize his beloved Reizl by describing her and other prostitutes as "victims; they are blind women who are searching for the right path."[58] Enter the police in civilian clothing, who announce that Reizl is under arrest. A "nervous attack" overtakes Reizl, who faints.[59] Silva attempts to defend Reizl by providing evidence of his government status and telling the police that Reizl is his wife. Embarrassed, the police apologize profusely. As Reizl stirs, she cries out that the police were not mistaken and implores them to arrest her on the spot.

Following the public revelation of Reizl's past, in act four Jewish women from an upper-class organization—a fictionalized representation of the Latin American branch of an international Jewish women's aid organization, *Ezrat Noshim*— flood Reizl with letters forbidding her from returning to their group and the Jewish community due to her "immoral" behavior. Meanwhile, Reizl's friends from the brothel beg her to return, and she agrees. Reizl is also facing a new concern: she is pregnant with Silva's child, a remnant of her "clean" life. A French prostitute directs Reizl to a doctor named "the Golden Finger" who will abort the pregnancy. Her friend also mentions that the body of mutual friend from "the life," a Japanese prostitute, was found in a river; it was unclear if someone had thrown her into the water or if she committed suicide. In Botoshansky's production, after hearing this "an image came to [Reizl]'s eyes," after hearing of this incident—a vision of her friend on the autopsy table, which Reizl interprets as a discouraging symbol.[60] Rather than following through with the abortion, Reizl ran back to Silva. End of play.

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[58] Nora Glickman, Rosalía Rosembuj, and Leib Malaj, *La trata de Blancas: estudio critico* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Pardes, 1984), 114.

[59] "Ibergus: der kolosoler derfolg fun L. Malakhs piese bet der premirer in 'Politema' ltoyva di Borukhov-shuln unter der rezhi fun Y. Botoshansky [Ibergus: The colossal success of L. Malakh's play during its premiere in Politeama in honor of the Borokhov schools and under the direction of Y. Botoshansky]."

[60] It is not known precisely how this moment was staged.

"The premiere of *Ibergus* in Teatro Politeama is an enormous success!" read a headline in *Di Prese* two days after the performance.[61] Artists and theatre critics congratulated Botoshansky's team for introducing an "entirely new style" to its audiences.[62] Yet there was not total consensus about Botoshansky's production within the Argentinean Jewish community, particularly among members of the YAF who expressed dissatisfaction with Botoshansky and his campaign through tearing down *Ibergus* posters around the city.[63] According to *Di Prese*, their "pogrom" against Yung Argentina required the company to postpone its next performance and offer refunds for anyone who had purchased tickets in advance.

Despite the YAF's attempts to thwart Yung Argentina, the company had a brief life after its inaugural production. The three surviving editions of the company's theatre journal, *Di vokh* [*The Week*], capture Yung Argentina's activities in September and October of 1926. In the inaugural edition of the journal, Yung Argentina described its mission to create a "clean Yiddish folks theatre" in Argentina and provide "proof that a theater with a literary repertoire can exist in Buenos Aires."[64] Their repertoire included a mix of Yiddish translations of Russian plays, such as *Di teg fun undzer lebn* [*The Days of our Life*] by Leonid Andreev and works by Yiddish authors ranging from S. Ansky's *Tog un nakht* [*Day and Night*] to Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye der milkhiker* [*Tevye the Dairyman*].[65] In addition,

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[61] "Di premire fun 'Ibergus' in teater politeama a iziker derfolg [The premiere of Ibergus in teatro politeama is an enormous success]," *Di Prese*, July 19, 1926.
[62] "Ibergus: der kolosaler derfolg fun L. Malakhs pyese beys der premyer in 'politema' ltoyves di Borukhov-shuln unter der rezhi fun Y. Botoshansky [Ibergus: The colossal success of L. Malakh's play during its premiere in 'Politeama' in honor of the Borokhov schools and under the direction of Y. Botoshansky]."
[63] "'Aktyorn' makhn pogromen" [An 'actors' pogrom]," *Di Prese*, July 22, 1926, Programas.
[64] "Geshikhte funm yidisher folks teater [History of the Yiddish folk theatre]," *Di Vokh*, September 14, 1926, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.
[65] "Repertuar fun 'yidish folks teater" [The repertoire of the 'Yiddish folk theatre']," *Di Vokh*, October 3, 1926; "Repertuar fun 'yidish folks teater" [The repertoire of the 'Yiddish folk theatre']," *Di Vokh*, September 14, 1926.

Yung Argentina produced *Ibergus* again, this time under the direction of Rudolf Zaslavsky who deployed a naturalistic aesthetic for reasons that he did not explain.[66]

While the Spanish-language periodical *La Prensa* typically included Yiddish theatre companies among the upcoming performance listings, these advertisements did not mention *Ibergus* or Yung Argentina. However, the international Yiddish press did summarize Botoshansky's campaign in publications such as *Morgn journal* in New York and *Literarisher bleter* in Warsaw.[67] While Botoshansky was not one to shy away from the spotlight, he may have chosen to focus publicity efforts within the diasporic Yiddish-speaking community to avoid unwanted attention from antisemites. However, in later years the Spanish-language press did take an interest in the endeavors of IFT, as did leaders of the independent theatre movement such as Teatro del Pueblo's leader Leónidas Barletta.[68]

How, then, are we to understand the production history of *Ibergus*? While one might situate Yung Argentina as the predecessor of later Yiddish and Spanish-language vanguardist efforts, feminist scholars of the transnational avant-gardes have expressed concern that chronological genealogies repeat a Eurocentric model of positivistic influence.[69] As an alternative, feminist media scholar Griselda Pollock suggests that scholars theorize relevant productions as "diverse and discontinuous avant-garde *moments* at which the defining collision of social and aesthetic radicalisms

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[66] "Repertuar fun 'yidish folks teater" [The repertoire of the 'Yiddish folk theatre']," October 3, 1926.

[67] "Di oyslendishe yidishe prese vegn dem kamf kegn dem rufianizm in unzer yidishn teater [The foreign Yiddish press on the struggle against ruffianism in our Yiddish theatre]"; "Chronik [Chronicle]," May 7, 1926.

[68] Ansaldo, "Teatro popular, teatro judío, teatro independiente: una aproximación al Idisher Folks Teater (IFT) [Popular theatre, Jewish theatre, independent theatre: a study of the Yiddish Folks Theater (IFT)]," 14.

[69] James Harding, *Cutting Performances: Collage Events, Feminist Artists, and the American Avant-Garde* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010); Griselda Pollock, "Moments and Temporalities of the Avant-Garde 'in, of, and from the Feminine,'" *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010): 795–820.

occurred."[70] I propose that we understand *Ibergus* as one of these moments that attempted to address issues of gender and sexual difference among Argentinean immigrant Jews. It is not trivial that the word "moments" appears in the plural. As this chapter has explored, different stakeholders in the history of *Ibergus* held a range of beliefs and experiences which led to several contradicting beliefs and experiences within this production history (and moments within moments) that conventional narratives occlude. Embracing this multiplicity is especially relevant in histories such as this one where Botoshansky's campaign and directorial choices perpetuated gendered expectations. Unfortunately, there are few remaining sources that address how actresses and other women experienced *Ibergus*. Making Botoshansky's gendered assumptions visible clarifies the need for further inquiry into cases that highlight how women navigated dominant assumptions about their genders and sexualities through performance. As we shall see, in the history of Jewish migration to Argentina one of the best-documented performances took place outside of the theatre auditorium.

[70] Pollock, "Moments and Temporalities of the Avant-Garde 'in, of, and from the Feminine,'" 796, emphasis in original.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Social Dramaturgy of the Raquel Liberman Case

Raquel Liberman was miserable in Lodz. In 1921 her husband Yakov Ferber emigrated to Argentina in search of a better life for her and their sons, the youngest of whom Ferber had still not met because he left Poland while Liberman was pregnant. In poetic Yiddish, Liberman wrote Ferber several letters emphasizing how painful it was to be apart, and to be living off the charity of her sister and brother-in-law who did not treat her with respect.[1] Each of Liberman's missives included stern instructions that Ferber "hurry your papers and see what you can do so we can reunite soon." Ferber echoed Liberman's desire to be together and asked for her patience; he was struggling to learn Spanish, and without it he found it impossible to keep a job in Argentina. Finally, the day arrived that Liberman had been waiting for. With the help of his sister, with whom Ferber lived, he was able to send Liberman an envelope with enough money for her and their sons to join him in Talpalqué, a town in the province of Buenos Aires. While Liberman and her sons migrated to Argentina in 1922, the joy of being reunited was fleeting. Ferber died in 1923, most likely of tuberculosis, leaving Liberman to provide for her children. Among the limited options for immigrant women, Liberman chose the most lucrative financial solution—it was not respectable, but nor was it permanent. She left her children with family and friends in Talpalqué and entered the commercial sex trade in Buenos Aires.

In 1930, Liberman shared her migration history with Argentine officials, a decision that transformed her into an iconic national heroine. In the story that Liberman told to Argentine police commissioner Julio Alsogaray, and eventually to Judge Rodríguez O'Campo, Liberman did not

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[1] Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman.*

mention Ferber or her children.[2] Instead, Liberman crafted the narrative that Argentine officials expected to hear: she alleged that Jewish pimps trafficked her to Buenos Aires under the guise of a false marriage.[3] Liberman's denouncement against her traffickers incited a high-profile judicial investigation of the Jewish prostitution ring, which in 1928 changed its name from The Varsovia Society to the Zwi Migdal (ZM).[4] Liberman's denouncement led the Argentine police to raid the ZM's headquarters and order arrest warrants for all 400 members of the organization, many of whom went into hiding or left the country.[5] Ninety years later, Liberman's story continues to fascinate Argentine poets, novelists, playwrights, television writers, and scholars.[6]

To make sense of the discrepancies between Liberman's self-representation and her historical experience, literary scholars tend to situate Liberman's denouncement within a binary of truth and fiction. Critic Nora Glickman—whom we are to thank for locating the private archives containing Liberman's correspondence, migration documentation, and photographs—claims that Liberman led a "double life."[7] According to Glickman, Liberman purposefully concealed her "true"

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[2] Gerardo Bra, *La organización negra: La increíble historia de la Zwi Migdal [The underworld: the incredible history of the Zwi Midgal]* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Corregidor, 1982); "Asociación ilícita [Illicit organization]," *Gaceta del foro* 89, no. 4729 (1930): 3–24.

[3] Julio L. Alsogaray, *La organización negra: La increíble historia de la Zwi Migdal [The underworld: the incredible history of the Zwi Midgal]* (Buenos Aires, 1933); Yarfitz, "Polacos, White Slaves, and Stille Chuppahs: Organized Prostitution and the Jews of Buenos Aires, 1890-1939."

[4] Yarfitz, "Uprooting the Seeds of Evil: Ezras Noschim and Jewish Marriage Regulation, Morality Certificates, and Degenerate Prostitute Mothers in 1930s Buenos Aires," 56.

[5] Avni, *"Clientes", rufianes y prostitutas: comunidades judias de Argentina e Israel frente a la trata de blancas ["Clients", ruffians, and prostitutes: Jewish communities in Argentina and Israel in the face of white slavery]*; Yarfitz, "Polacos, White Slaves, and Stille Chuppahs: Organized Prostitution and the Jews of Buenos Aires, 1890-1939."

[6] For some of the cultural production on this history see Myrtha Schalom, *La polaca: inmigración, rufianes y esclavas a comienzos del siglo XX [The polish woman: immigration, traffickers, and slaves at the beginning of the twentieth century.]*, 1. ed. (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2003); Patricia Suárez, *Las polacas* (Buenos Aires: Teatro Vivo, 2002); Nora Glickman, *Argentine Jewish Theatre: A Critical Anthology* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1996).

[7] Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman*, xiii, 53-4.

identity as a prostitute to protect her children.[8] Similarly, Claire Solomon argues that "everything in Liberman's testimony was a lie, with the probable exception of the outrage she expressed at her mistreatment."[9] Scholar Mir Yarfitz understands Liberman's testimony differently; as he points out, prostitutes who were also mothers "aroused fear of degeneration, as they could spread profligacy through heredity. Prostitutes who fit the white slavery narrative of seduction and abandonment could be potentially rehabilitated, but contaminated future generations and would be beyond redemption."[10] Therefore in order for Liberman to present herself as redeemable, she needed to suppress her identity as a mother.

Of the several studies on Raquel Liberman I find Yarfitz's analysis that Liberman may have "deliberately structured her story in order to better fit with the victim narrative promoted by anti-prostitution activists" to be the most persuasive.[11] As Yarfitz observes, Liberman's story repeated familiar tropes about "white slavery" as featured in the contemporary literature, plays, and press. The notion of an "deliberate" structure resonates with the work of theatre and performance scholars who offer an additional framework for the relationship between history and fiction that the Liberman case presents. Rather than claiming that Liberman manipulated or concealed "the truth," we might think of Liberman's testimony as an autobiographical social performance, or a strategic self-representation that is constructed to achieve a desired political aim, in this case the end of the ZM. This concept builds what Suk-Young Kim considers a social performance, or a term that

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[8] Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman*, xiii, 53-4.
[9] Solomon, "Reconsidering Anti-Semitism and White Slavery in Contemporary Historical Fiction about Argentina," 312.
[10] Yarfitz, "Uprooting the Seeds of Evil: Ezras Noschim and Jewish Marriage Regulation, Morality Certificates, and Degenerate Prostitute Mothers in 1930s Buenos Aires," 57.
[11] Yarfitz, *Impure Migration: Jews and Sex Work in Golden Age Argentina*, 132.

describes "the precarious, full-bodied experience of migration."[12] Kim's definition builds on what Tracy C. Davis considers social dramaturgy, "a modern day permutation of the *theatrum mundi*, for which the rationale goes like this: all the world's a stage, so if we accept the premise of social constructivism we may as well refer to acting, costumes, scene-shifting, and finales as the language of social interaction."[13] Kim uses this metaphor "to capture the individual agency of the crosser by considering the dynamic network of motion, emotion, visual representation, and spectatorship of border crossing," in her study of varied acts of crossing the Korean DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) which divides North and South Korea.[14] While Kim focuses on a different geographical context, I find her deployment of social dramaturgy pertinent to Jewish women's migration history—and especially the case of Liberman—for its focus on agency and its emphasis on embodied dimensions of border-crossing that discursive analysis often overlooks. To inquire into the relationship between Liberman's historical experience and her public testimony, I apply what Kim calls the "principles of acting, staging, dramaturgy, scenery, and costuming" to Liberman's migration experience as represented in her private letters, public denouncement, and a home visit that an EN official conducted four years after the trial. I build on Yarfitz's insights to show how dominant cultural expectations around feminine morality impacted Liberman's performance of her autobiography before non-Jewish and Jewish authorities.

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[12] Suk-Young Kim, *DMZ Crossing: Performing Emotional Citizenship Along the Korean Border* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 11–12.
[13] Tracy C. Davis, "Theatricality and Civil Society," in *Theatricality*, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 130.
[14] Kim, *DMZ Crossing: Performing Emotional Citizenship Along the Korean Border*, 12.

Life in Lodz: What Liberman did not tell the courts

Scholars who address Liberman's history generally focus on the period after she migrated in 1922 yet surviving documents that addressed Liberman's pre-migration history fill in many of the details that Liberman omitted in the story that she constructed for Alsogaray and the courts.[15] These documents include Liberman's correspondence with Ferber before she left Poland, photographs of Liberman and her children, and some of her immigration paperwork. Glickman accessed these documents through her relationship with Liberman's grandchildren, who, since then, have not been willing to share the materials with scholars. Despite the limitations of the remaining corpus—for example, some letters are missing pages and/or lack dates—it contains enough information to reveal key aspects of how Liberman's biography differs from Liberman's public migration narrative. Moreover, since Argentine officials transcribed and summarized all of the materials relating to Liberman's denouncement, these manuscript papers are the only surviving materials that Liberman wrote herself. As Glickman reflects, Liberman's "mastery of the Yiddish language and of Jewish history" is evident in her voice as a writer. Contrary to the stereotype that Jewish prostitutes were uneducated and illiterate, Liberman received a high level of education in Warsaw from a school called "Jerusalem." In addition, Glickman observes that her education was clear in both her "eloquent voice, her vibrant, clear style" and also her "correct Yiddish grammar" and "careful calligraphy." In contrast to Ferber, whose writing straightforwardly communicates details and practical information, Liberman writes poetically, drawing frequently from Jewish tradition to illuminate the depth of her emotion.

Liberman's letters contain traces of what Kim might consider the "dynamic network" between emotion and motion. For example, Liberman describes herself as "bathed in a sea of

[15] Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman*, 63–184.

loneliness and misery" in Poland, a metaphor that conveys the strong emotions that motivate Liberman to migrate. In addition, the letters describe how Liberman's brother-in-law, Shaie, gave her 300 marks a week that she spends on sugar, milk and food, but prices rose every day and she wished for more. In one letter to Ferber, Liberman emphasized how unpleasant it was to live with her sister and brother-and-law. Liberman implores Ferber to send her the money as soon as he can through posing rhetorical questions such as "Do I have to bear how my sister goes about with a long face without saying a word to me?" The implicit answer to Liberman's question is that yes, she must continue to "bear" her sister's "long face" and silence, and "put up with my brother-in-law shouting and insulting me" until Ferber sends the funds for her to leave. Liberman insisted that Ferber speak to his sister Helke and "beg her on your knees, with tears, that she save your wife and little sons from this prison . . . that she takes us away from here."[16] Referencing her living situation as a "prison" clarifies that Liberman wants to be "away from here" in a place where she will feel free.

The significant personal events that Liberman and Ferber each experienced while apart exacerbated the pain of their separation. In particular, Liberman gave birth to their second son while they were living in different hemispheres. Ferber described the "despair" that he felt at not being able to attend their son's circumcision ceremony. Eager for details, Ferber asked who attended the ritual and who surrogated his role as father by holding the baby. Ferber, for his part, had been ill; while he did not specify the illness, he disclosed that he been to the doctor several times and was briefly hospitalized. Upon learning of Ferber's illness, Liberman grew impatient. She insisted that Ferber send her the tickets for herself and her children so she "can finally breath[e] without the terrible sorrows I live with." To Liberman, migrating to Argentina was the only reprieve to her suffering. Liberman described her happiness as "boundless" upon learning that she would be able to

[16] Ellipsis included in original translation.

leave Poland. While it would still be a few weeks before she saw Ferber, knowing that she would be leaving Poland drastically changed Liberman's relationship to her sister and brother-in-law who started showing her "respect" for the first time in months.

In the last letter that Liberman received from Ferber before she and her sons left Poland, Ferber provided her with a detailed travel guide that influenced her horizon of expectations about the voyage. For example, Ferber recommended that Liberman take "one of the best ships in the world," the *Kad Polonia*, which would bring her through Hamburg. Ferber also made several suggestions as to what she might do should certain situations arise, satisfying Liberman's earlier request that Ferber detail his experience on the boat. As Ferber writes,

> [W]hen you hand in the luggage, you should take the tickets with you. And when you arrive to the port you should check well to see that the luggage arrived. Ask them to give you a pillow and a blanket, especially for the children, because at night it's cold in the boat. And when you're on board the ship ask them for milk for the children. And if you feel *halila* (God forbid) seasick, call the nurse in the hospital to take care of you and of the children, so they lack nothing. The crew is very good and they don't charge for their favors. And if they give you something you have to pay for, tell them that your husband will pay for everything when he comes to greet you at the port.
>
> Also try not to remain without money in the trip. In case you wish to drink a glass of beer or another drink and buy chocolate and oranges for the boys, at least you should have ten dollars when you go on board for a long journey. And at each stop the boat makes, you'll see that children approach the boat in small rafts and you can buy everything from them!
>
> Don't be frightened if you get seasick. Try to have warm clothes for the children, and for yourself. Don't sell your clothes; pack everything, clothes and household items. Buy

> yourself and the children coats and shoes. And when you come out of this trip *beshalom* (in peace) I'll buy you such clothes that noone [sic] will guess you're a *greene* (foreigner) but that you are a native.[17]

The first two paragraphs display Ferber's desire to provide for his family through instructing her to bring or ask for specific material objects (a pillow and blanket, milk, money, warm clothes), for herself and "especially for the children," and to make sure that they "lack nothing." While the majority of this excerpt focuses on what the journey will be like, the last sentence transitions to what Ferber will do to ensure that Liberman does not stand out like "a *greene* (foreigner)"; in particular, he promises to purchase his wife clothing that will persuade others that she is a "native."[18] Ferber anticipated that such a costume would conceal her outsider status.

Ferber's ideas about what will help his family appear to be Argentine are consistent with Ferber's description of his own experience in a previous letter. According to Ferber, the clothing he arrived in made him appear "too much like a gringo," so he "purchased a pair of patent leather shoes and a foreign-made hat" to blend in.[19] In fact, even before Ferber arrived in Argentina, his family had anticipated that he would stand out in his Polish attire, and so they too purchased silk clothing for him in advance. "Silk on the inside and silk in the lining," Ferber wrote, reflecting that "it would cost a fortune in Poland." In referencing the cost of silk clothing back home, Ferber also crafts an image of Liberman's future life in Argentina as one in which they will seem to be upwardly mobile through having access to luxurious objects, such as clothing, that they would not be able to afford in Poland. Moreover, Ferber's emphasis on clothing suggests his careful attention to his own

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[17] Note that emphasis and parenthetical translations are in the original translation.

[18] By "native" Ferber likely means assimilated into Argentine culture rather than indigenous.

[19] Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman*, 106.

social performance of national identity; though he was struggling to learn Spanish, wearing a silk costume allowed him to act as if, like a "native," he belonged. While photographic evidence indicates that Liberman and her two sons met Ferber at the harbor in Buenos Aires in 1922, there is no available documentation of Liberman's own travel experience or her first impressions about life in Argentina. After Ferber's death, the majority of the remaining written documentation about Liberman's life focuses on her denouncement.

Liberman was not the first person to denounce the Jewish traffickers. Jewish communal leaders also denounced them in 1925 and 1928 in efforts that led The Varsovia Society to disband and reformulate under a new name.[20] Unlike prior denouncers, Liberman was an insider to the organization who spoke to the right person at the right time. Specifically, she shared her experience with a man who had a vendetta against the ZM and had been gathering information against the ZM since 1926, police commissioner Julio Alsogaray.[21] Moreover, Argentina's political climate and migration policies were becoming increasingly conservative and antisemitism was on the rise. The government was famously on the brink of its first presidential coup, a "watershed moment" that would lead to "a half century of politics dominated by the military."[22] Such a denouncement against the ZM confirmed antisemitic arguments that Jews were "undesirable immigrants" responsible for importing social evils such as prostitution and sex trafficking to Argentina.

Despite Liberman's national recognition, there are no surviving documents in which Liberman describes her experience in the sex trade first-hand. Yet male interlocutors—such as Alsogaray, court clerks, and journalists—summarized their interpretations of Liberman's

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[20] "Asociación ilícita [Illicit organization]," 3.
[21] Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman*.
[22] Bastia and vom Hau, "Migration, Race and Nationhood in Argentina"; Yarfitz, *Impure Migration: Jews and Sex Work in Golden Age Argentina*, 6.

denouncement in several different forms. For example, Alsogaray described his process of working with Liberman to formulate the denouncement in his antisemitic memoir, court clerks transcribed the trial in what would become a 4,000-page file of the case, and journalists from the Spanish language newspaper *Crítica* published daily updates on the case.[23] Thus, the remaining traces of Liberman's denouncement are highly mediated. The question of how to interpret these mediated accounts is familiar to scholars who work on stigmatized groups such as prostitutes. On the one hand, these layers of mediation make it increasingly difficult to access Liberman's personal experience with the ZM. As Donna Guy claims, institutional records do not "accurately" reflect prostitutes' lived experiences but rather better reveal what prostitutes believed that authorities wanted to hear.[24] Likewise, Stephen Legg argues that any archival trace of a prostitute is inherently an interpretation.[25] Thus, I do not interpret the public records of Liberman's denouncement as neutral sources, but rather as evidence of how varied authorities received Liberman's performance of femininity and sexuality.

My focus on performance builds on the work of Mir Yarfitz, who observes that Liberman's self-representation neatly aligned with popular perceptions about how young Jewish women became prostitutes: in small towns in Eastern Europe (*shtetlakh*), wealthy Jewish men would convince poor women to marry them and then kidnap or trick them into migrating to Latin America. After travelling miles away from home, the women learned that their marriages were shams, and their "husbands" were in fact pimps who trafficked them into the sex trade. As Yarfitz describes, a young woman's "marital obligations, linguistic limitations, and lack of options would guarantee the young

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[23] For a close reading of Alsogaray's memoir, see Claire Solomon, *Fictions of the Bad Life: The Naturalist Prostitute and Her Avatars in Latin American Literature, 1880-2010* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2014), 117.
[24] Solomon, *Fictions of the Bad Life*, 117.
[25] Legg, "Anti-Vice Lives: Peopling the Archives of Prostitution in Interwar India."

bride's imprisonment in a brothel, where she would be doomed to sexual subjugation to dark-skinned men, followed by a none-too-quick syphilitic death."[26] Liberman convincingly persuaded Alsogaray that she was an "archetypal" trafficked woman, or in the words of Claire Solomon, "a poor, ignorant Eastern European Jewish girl, sold into prostitution under false pretenses and left to a miserable existence in Buenos Aires, only to be rescued by good, upstanding Argentines and, finally, integrated into the nation."[27] Alsogaray's responsiveness to Liberman's story suggests that she successfully performed expected feminine social roles such as ignorance and submission. Likewise, by portraying herself as a victim in need of rescuing, Liberman cast Alsogaray in the traditionally masculine role of rescuer. Liberman's strategic self-representation satisfied Alsogaray, who enthusiastically supported her in filing a formal denouncement against the ZM without realizing that *he* was the one being duped.

While stories such as the one that Liberman articulated often circulated in the public imaginary, historians of prostitution have proven them apocryphal. Instead, it is more likely that some women voluntarily entered into these non-civilly binding marriages to grant them the legal right to migrate.[28] In Donna Guy's inquiry into early-twentieth-century prostitution in Buenos Aires, Guy argues it was more likely that "economic need and family pressures" led women into the sex trade.[29] Similarly, Yarfitz argues that some women in Eastern Europe "chose a religious marriage as an emigration strategy, even if aware that they might end up in prostitution. In some cases they were already sex workers and were looking for a more lucrative market."[30] Moreover, Yarfitz emphasizes

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[26] Yarfitz, *Impure Migration: Jews and Sex Work in Golden Age Argentina*, 13.
[27] Solomon, *Fictions of the Bad Life*, 3.
[28] Yarfitz, "Uprooting the Seeds of Evil: Ezras Noschim and Jewish Marriage Regulation, Morality Certificates, and Degenerate Prostitute Mothers in 1930s Buenos Aires," 74.
[29] Guy, *Sex & Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina*, 16.
[30] Yarfitz, *Impure Migration: Jews and Sex Work in Golden Age Argentina*, 58.

that "sex work offered women unrivaled financial opportunities" in Buenos Aires, and provided women with opportunities for upward mobility, for instance through eventually becoming a madam within the organization. Writing about the "white slavery" scare in late-Victorian London, Judith Walkowitz observes that even though stories of sexual kidnapping were largely mythical, they tangibly impacted people's lives and identities. As Walkowitz contends, popular narratives about such as "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" inspired women's sexual subjectivities and enabled women to inhabit public space in new ways.[31] A similar argument can be applied to the case of Liberman; even though the situation she described differed from her personal immigration history, articulating enabled her to provoke a legal investigation of the ZM.

Around the turn of the twentieth-century, the trope of being tricked into a marriage with a Jewish pimp, or a "false marriage" (in Yiddish *stille chuppah*, literal translation: "quiet wedding canopy"), was a familiar storyline for Jews and non-Jews alike. [32] During the court's investigation of the ZM, one Jewish mother told the court the same story: when she and her family were living in Lodz, a man approached her and her husband stating his desire to marry their daughter and bring her to Argentina.[33] After they married and her daughter moved across the ocean, her parents learned that the marriage was false and that her daughter in Argentina was "a woman of the life." Even Polish Ambassador Ladisiao Mazurkieviez alleged that Jewish pimps used marriage to evade strategic measures that the Polish embassy took to prevent the trafficking of women.[34] The story structure of the *stille chuppah* aligns with what Diana Taylor calls scenarios, or "meaning-making paradigms that

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[31] Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*.
[32] Yarfitz, "Uprooting the Seeds of Evil: Ezras Noschim and Jewish Marriage Regulation, Morality Certificates, and Degenerate Prostitute Mothers in 1930s Buenos Aires," 72.
[33] "Asociación ilícita [Illicit organization]."
[34] "El problema de la trata de blancas es internacional [The problem of the white slave trade is international]," *Crítica*, May 24, 1930.

structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes."[35] Scenarios construct events in recognizable yet pliable narrative forms, such as scenes of "discovery" in the Americas.

While scholars focus on the discourse surrounding the Liberman case, understanding such situations as scenarios demands that we include embodied aspects of storytelling that escape language. As Taylor writes, "the *scenario* includes features well theorized in literary analysis, such as narrative and plot, but demands that we also pay attention to milieu and corporeal behaviors such as gestures, attitudes, and tones not reducible to language. Simultaneously *setup* and *action*, scenarios frame and activate social dramas."[36] Similarly, in Catherine Cole's study of personal testimony during South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Cole encourages scholars to prioritize the crucial ways that embodiment "such as intonation, gesture, cadence, and eye contact" shape narrative in public testimony.[37] To understand how Liberman's "corporeal behaviors" shaped the construction and reception of her testimony, I needed to consult the 4,000-plus courtroom files that Gerardo Bra summarizes in his book *La organización negra: la increíble historia de la Zwi Migdal* [*The underworld: the incredible history of the Zwi Migdal*].[38] In particular, I hoped to hone in on what Catherine Cole calls the "dramaturgy of events," or, in this case, not just *what* Liberman said, but *how* she said it.[39]

While Bra reconstructed the testimony using Judge O'Campo's private archives, I was not able to contact Judge O'Campo's family to do the same. Instead, I went looking for the originals at the *Palacio de justicia de la nación* [The Palace of Justice of the Nation], or as it was better known, the

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[35] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 28.
[36] Emphasis in original.
[37] Catherine M. Cole, *Performing South Africa's Truth Commission: Stages of Transition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 89.
[38] Bra, *La organización negra.*
[39] Cole, *Performing South Africa's Truth Commission*, xv.

Palacio de tribunales [Palace of Tribunals] in Buenos Aires. Each person I spoke to told me that they could not help me but insisted that they knew someone else who could. Eventually one clerk, Paula Mura, took a special interest in the case; she was an actress, and someone in her acting class was performing an excerpt from Myrtha Schalom's *La Polaca*, a novel about trafficked Jewish women during the twentieth century. She was able to locate the *Libro de entradas y salidas* [Registration Book] from 1929 and 1930, which documented each person who came and left the courthouse during those years. She pointed me to an entry listing the names of several ZM members with charges against them, including two men who Liberman's denouncement explicitly references: José Salomón Korn and Mauricio Kirstein. Eventually, Paula discerned that if the file existed it would be in the basement archives. Her colleague made a phone call on my behalf, and eventually we learned that all 4,000-plus documents were destroyed while Argentina was under a highly antisemitic military dictatorship on August 13 1970. Thus, long before I arrived in Buenos Aires, the past had already intervened into the past. One state-sanctioned form of violence—a dictatorship that led to the disproportionate harm of marginalized identity groups, particularly women and Jews—disappeared living people in the 1970s and systemically erased the histories of Jewish women through destroying traces of their lives in the archives. Though the work of scholars such as Guy and Legg equipped me with the theories to make sense of these erasures, these absences remind me of all that we do not know in these histories, and may never be recoverable. Moreover, during the process, I also learned that Argentine courts are largely modeled after the judicial system in the United States with the important difference that witnesses do not verbally testify before a judge. Instead, all materials are

submitted in written form.[40] Thus, Liberman's testimony would have been presented more like a script for Judge O'Campo to read rather than an embodied, courtroom performance. O'Campo would have needed to imagine Liberman's forced migration to Argentina and process of entering, then leaving, the sex trade.

Notwithstanding these setbacks, the remaining trial summaries provide an extensive record of how Liberman's testimony was constructed and received. They follow a similar structure to the set-up for a Taylorian scenario, which includes the formal elements of "encounter, conflict, resolution, and dénouement."[41] As Taylor writes,

> These elements, of course, are themselves the product of economic, political, and social structures that they, in turn, tend to reproduce. All scenarios have localized meaning, though many attempt to pass as universally valid. Actions and behaviors arising from the setup might be predictable, a seemingly natural consequence of the assumptions, values, goals, power relations, presumed audience, and epistemic grids established by the setup itself. But they are all, ultimately, flexible and open to change.

In general terms, the story that Liberman told Alsogaray and the court was organized as follows: the "encounter" between poor Jewish women and wealthy Jewish pimps led to the "conflict" of women being forced into sexual labor against their will. In Liberman's case, the "resolution" was to pursue legal action, which eventually led to the "dénouement," in this case, the supposed end of the ZM. Understanding Liberman's denouncement as an autobiographical performance provides insight into how dominant "economic, political, and social structures," particularly relating to the naturalization of gender inequalities, were reproduced in early-twentieth-century Buenos Aires.

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[40] Edwin Borchard, *Library of Congress Guide to the Law and Legal Literature of Argentina, Brazil and Chile* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1917), 95.
[41] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 28–29.

In Liberman's denouncement, she depicts herself as a young naïve women being lured into an unexpected situation. For example, Liberman told the Argentine courts that she first saw the man who would become her pimp, Jaime Cissinger, in her hometown of Lodz, Poland outside of the synagogue that she frequented.[42] Liberman described Cissinger as a tall, blond, well-dressed man. Her first impression was that he was older and financially successful. Before Cissinger began courting Liberman, one of Liberman's friends mentioned that Cissinger had left Poland for Argentina where he made a fortune. Now, Cissinger had returned to Poland to find a wife. As the courtship progressed, Cissinger expressed his love for Liberman and his desire to marry her. One day, Cissinger announced that he had received a letter that his business partner in Argentina unexpectedly died. Cissinger suggested that he and Liberman go back to Argentina so that he could tend to business; once they had all the necessary documents in place he would marry her.

After leaving Lodz, Liberman realized that something was awry when she started noticing changes in Cissinger's behavior. Cissinger became more controlling and started speaking in ways that Liberman did not understand; for example, he told Liberman that she would be fine in Argentina as long as she complied with Cissinger's demands. Upon arriving in Buenos Aires, Cissinger brought Liberman to a house where several of his friends lived. Cissinger's friends looked suspicious to Liberman; the men held "firm faces and cat-like gazes," and the women "were smeared with make-up" and "smiled ironically" at her. Their facial expressions and appearance led Liberman to deduce that they knew something she did not; this suspicion was confirmed when Liberman learned that Cissinger expected her to sell her body for sex. Liberman felt profoundly "shattered" upon realizing that Cissinger had deceived her and recalled this period of her life as filled with "pain, grief, loneliness, and hopelessness." These feelings were exacerbated by Liberman's isolation in a new

[42] Bra, *La organización negra.*

country, where she had no connections and did not speak the language but was living as a "prisoner."

The second *stille chuppah* scenario took place just after Liberman believed she had left the ZM. After the initial encounter with Cissinger, which led her to "the life" for over ten years, Liberman saved enough money to purchase her freedom and open an antiques store. Cissinger visited Liberman's store multiple times and threatened her, saying that if she did not go back to the brothel he would retaliate, and making clear that Liberman's life was in danger. Cissinger only stopped harassing Liberman after she threatened to call the police. Afterward, Liberman still lived in fear, but her life seemed to return to normal. One afternoon, a well-dressed young man named José Salomón Korn entered Liberman's business. Korn told Liberman that he was Polish and Jewish, and expressed interest in various objects in her store. Korn started visiting Liberman's store regularly. After they became friends, Korn demonstrated an interest in seeing Liberman more often and eventually told Liberman that he loved her. They began courting, and eventually were "married" in a synagogue in a ceremony that Liberman thought was authentic, though she later learned that the ritual was a *stille chuppah* as it had taken place in the ZM's synagogue. A few days later, Korn stole around 100,000 pesos of Liberman's savings and demanded that Liberman return to prostitution.

As Liberman told Alsogaray and the court, from a place of desperation she decided to meet with Julio Alsogaray, the police commissary of her brothel's district, because she knew of Alsogaray's "rectitude and the repudiation that he felt for the traffickers." After Liberman explained the situation to Alsogaray, he told her that she needed to leave the brothel and asked her if she was ready to make a formal denouncement against her pimp. Alsogaray needed this in order to open a provisional case that would then be sent to the judge. Liberman requested time to think it over. She was concerned that Cissinger and Korn might retaliate if she filed a legal claim against them.

Liberman did not take legal action immediately. First, she sought advice from a friend of Korn's, Simon Brutkievich, whom she thought might be willing to intervene on her behalf. By the time Liberman met with Brutkievich, who was also a member of the ZM, he had already heard a rumor about Alsogaray's investigation. Brutkievich discouraged Liberman from making a denouncement, and asked Liberman to give him one week to talk to Korn before taking any legal measures. According to Liberman, Korn pretended to make an arrangement with Brutkievich. However, when Liberman went to meet Korn herself, she was threatened with violence. Korn threatened to escalate the violence if Liberman denounced him. Exhausted, Liberman decided to file the denouncement anyway.

The third and final attempt to lure Liberman into a *stille chuppah* occurred after another member of the ZM, Mauricio Kirstein, visited Liberman at her home to insist that Liberman withdraw the denouncement. Liberman refused. Infuriated, Kirstein then said he would "cut her face." Liberman still refused. Kirstein then raised the stakes, threatening Liberman's life. Liberman told him that whether or not she was alive, "the denouncement will still stay the same." After this initial encounter, Kirstein arranged a second meeting with Liberman wherein he tried a different strategy. Rather than threatening Liberman, he conceded that she had fairly purchased her freedom, and admitted that that he had acted inappropriately. Kirstein then attempted to seduce Liberman. This time, Liberman caught on to Kirstein's approach and did not fall into the trap. After Liberman left the meeting with Kirstein, he and other members of the ZM continued to make threats against Liberman's life. In response, Liberman decided that she would denounce not just Korn and Cissinger, but the ZM as a whole.

The audience of this "white slave" narrative included Judge O'Campo and the readers of the tabloid-style Spanish-language daily press, *Crítica*. Between May and June 1930, *Crítica* published

daily reports on the ensuing court investigation emphasizing Liberman's imagined affective experience as a "white slave." For example, *Crítica* represented Liberman as a "victim" who they sometimes described as "hopeless" and other times described as "rebellious," and divided Liberman's story into three phases.[43] First, *Crítica* focused on the "scene of discovery," or the process by which police commissioner Julio Alsogaray "discovered" Liberman during the depths of her desperation. Next *Crítica* highlighted Liberman's feelings of uncertainty about whether or not she would actually make the denouncement, despite the judge's insistence that the court would protect her. Finally, *Crítica* emphasized that by denouncing the ZM, Liberman had risked her life.

Figure 2: A cartoon of a "white slavery" victim pleading to Judge Rodríguez O'Campo as published in *Crítica*, May 20, 1930.

[43] "La víctima se rebela [The victim rebels]," *Crítica*, September 30, 1930.

Figure 3: A visual representation of one illustrator's understanding of life inside the brothel as published in Crítica, May 23, 1930.

The images above demonstrate how modernist aesthetics impacted the construction of "white slave" scenarios outside of cultural arenas such as the courtroom and theatre auditorium (see figure 2 and figure 3). These images were published in the sensationalistic Spanish-language newspaper *Crítica* just three days apart, a short time frame which illustrates how contemporaneous artists drew from diverse modernist forms—including modified collage and a mix of illustrations and photographs—to construct "white slave" narratives. The representations of masculinity and femininity in these images reinforce misogynistic beliefs about an innately hierarchical relationship between men and women which were ubiquitous in Victorian and turn-of-the-century visual art. As Bram Dijkstra argues in *Idols of Perversity*, publications such as Charles Darwin's *On The Origin of Species* codified popular understandings that men were innately superior to women.[44] Dijkstra shows

[44] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

how visual artists of this time commonly depicted masculine figures as dominant, aggressive, spiritual, and all-powerful; in contrast, artists tended to portray feminine figures as submissive, meek, ignorant, lacking spiritual connection, and powerless. Jewish masculinity proved to be an important exception to these scientific "norms," as Jewish men were thought to lack conventional masculine qualities, which supposedly confirmed the innate inferiority of the Jewish "race." As Dijkstra stresses, the mutually constitutive relationship between these antisemitic and antifeminine beliefs ultimately led to the Holocaust.

The differences between Jewish and Gentile masculinities are evident in how the artists depict Judge O'Campo's casual heroism versus the debase violence of the ZM. O'Campo's authority is evident in his size which overpowers the tiny "white slave" who pleads in his ear. The caption to figure 2 affirms that O'Campo is the protagonist by stating it is an image of "Judge Rodriguez O'Campo, who has guaranteed the discovery of the traffickers," not even acknowledging the woman's presence. O'Campo's evenly lined suit and crisply parted hair create a clean-cut image that signals his respectability. The largeness of his head emphasizes his cerebral nature, and his pursed lips and lack of visible emotion depict him as highly rational. In addition, he looks upward toward heaven as he listens, suggesting a connection with divine insight. While O'Campo seems to be listening to the woman, her story is not neutral. As Donna Guy reminds us, the "white slave" tells O'Campo what he expects and wants to hear: in order for her to be saved from the dangerous Jewish men who tricked her into prostitution, she must tell him a narrative that reinforces the perceived need for an all-powerful white male savior.

The representations of the Jewish men in the second image (figure 3) emphasize a connection between Jewish masculinity and criminality. Consistent with antisemitic notions that Jews were "inverts," the Jewishness of these men has inverted the exemplar qualities of O'Campo's

righteous masculinity. Like O'Campo, the man who appears in the center illustration also wears a suit and parts his hair; yet the Jewish man's jacket is wrinkled and his hair is disheveled, demonstrating his failure to attain the composure that O'Campo naturally embodies. Moreover, the Jewish man's posture reveals his innate violence—his left hand pulls at a tuft of a woman's hair and his right hand threatens to beat her with a cudgel. The mugshots of other male Jewish criminals that surround this illustration suggest that the drawing is just as "real" as the images that the camera lens depicts. While the photographs focus on the face, clearly these are not portraits of the fine minds of Argentinean intellectuals such as O'Campo. As the article's title laments, these are immoral immigrants who are evading police custody. The title and ensuing article explicate that today only two members of the ZM have been detained, meaning that hundreds of these Jewish criminals are on the loose. Two of the photographs include epithets—first Rafael Nicosía "the dominator of women," and then Victor di Baza "the head," or figuratively a warhead—descriptors that support Argentine state officials' constructions of Jewish masculinity as an unredeemable menace.[45]

In contrast, the representations of femininity in these images demonstrate that some fallen women could redeem themselves or in Spanish *regenerarse*, regenerate themselves. For example, the woman in figure 2 appears above O'Campo's right shoulder in the position of the "good angel," indicating that she is capable of being redeemed. This woman clasps her hands and kneels in a posture that evokes Catholic confession. Moreover, it emphasizes that the O'Campo is more than a legal authority—he is also her spiritual savior. Based on O'Campo's well-publicized investigation of the ZM, it would make sense that this woman was a Jewish "white slave," but her appearance is remarkably un-Jewish. Although artists generally depicted Jewish women at the time with dark curly

[45] Tanja Bastia and Matthias vom Hau, "Migration, Race and Nationhood in Argentina," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40, no. 3 (2014): 475–92.

hair, the woman in question is blond. Moreover, unlike Catholics, Jews do not traditionally kneel or confess to a living individual. Thus, for this woman to redeem her virtue, she must embody a form of white, Catholic femininity and thus shed any lingering traces of her Jewishness. Women who retained their Jewishness were unredeemable, as the voyeuristic representations of Jewish prostitutes in a brothel show (see figure 3). While the blond angel hovers mid-air, the women in figure 3 embody their fallenness from virtue through their proximity to the ground. On the right, one woman crawls out from the dark abyss of abjection; to her left, another woman sits on its edge. While the women outnumber the man, his dominating stance overpowers them. With untamed hair and vacant eyes, these women resemble the nineteenth-century Victorian figure of the sex-crazed female vampire whose insatiable libido inevitably leads her to hysteria.[46] As Dijkstra notes, images of women with extinguished eyes symbolize the misogynistic ideal that women are devoid of intellect and lack a soul. The empty gazes of these women contrast with the contemplative glimmer in O'Campo's eyes and the fiery look of the man with the cudgel. In *Crítica*, the vampiric femininity of these women would have been consistent with the Victorian perception that vampires originated in Eastern Europe, a place associated with the past. Whereas the blond angel proves that she is a modern woman by wearing a long skirt with iron pleats, the fallen women in figure 3 are barely clothed. According to Dijkstra's argument, for these syphilitic vampiric women the only path to regeneration is through death. In the local context of Buenos Aires, these women do seem to have at least one other available option: to excise their Jewishness for whiteness.

These images resonated with the concerns of Argentine state officials who increasingly attempted to keep out "politically dangerous" immigrants whom the state considered a "threat to

[46] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 334.

public order."[47] As scholars of Argentine immigration have observed, government officials wished to attract "desirable" European immigrants, especially Anglo-Saxons who would support Argentina's visions of being a country that was white.[48] After 1923, when the United States introduced nationality quotas on immigration, many Jews turned to Argentina as a place where they could seek refuge from rising European antisemitism. As José Moya reflects, Argentinean elites perceived Eastern European Jews as not approaching the 'white' European migrant ideal.[49] Throughout the 1920s, Argentine authorities "became increasingly selective as to the kinds of European they would like to attract and sought to prevent immigrants with undesirable characteristics from entering the country."[50] To do so, local officials required new arrivals to have a passport with a photograph, a health certificate, and a clean police record; moreover, immigration officials had "more discretion in denying potential migrants the right of entry."[51] These restrictions increased in the 1930s, for example through increased visa costs and demands for new arrivals, such as a work contract.

The ZM fit perfectly into this ideal of "dangerous" immigrants, as seen in the public reception to the Liberman case. O'Campo described the ZM as "perturb[ing] the tranquility and social order" and claimed that each member represented a "huge danger to society."[52] Likewise, as one legal periodical published, "rarely has the court encountered an organization as dangerous as the

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[47] Bastia and vom Hau, "Migration, Race and Nationhood in Argentina," 480; David Cook-Martín, "Rules, Red Tape, and Paperwork: The Archeology of State Control over Migrants," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 21, no. 1 (2008): 92–95.
[48] Bastia and vom Hau, "Migration, Race and Nationhood in Argentina."
[49] José C. Moya, "A Continent of Immigrants: Postcolonial Shifts in the Western Hemisphere," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 86, no. 1 (2006): 1–28.
[50] Fernando Devoto, *Historia de la inmigración en la Argentina* [The history of immigration in Argentina] (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2003).
[51] Bastia and vom Hau, "Migration, Race and Nationhood in Argentina," 480.
[52] "Delito poco comprobado [A crime that is rarely verified]," *Crítica*, September 30, 1930.

Zwi Migdal."[53] As a result of the Liberman case, in 1930 the ZM was deemed an "illicit organization," or an association with the purpose of exploiting women, obliging them to partake in forced sexual labor. The police took into custody 180 of the 400 known members of the ZM.[54] The other 334 members on the list went into hiding or continued living their lives with pending orders for arrest.[55] O'Campo recommended that the state take legal measures to reduce entry and exit of "undesirable subjects."[56]

While the case was perceived as a victory, it also galvanized the public towards anti-immigrant sentiments. One *Crítica* article voiced the need for a metaphoric "broom" that would "sweep away these undesired elements—mostly foreigners" who were responsible for giving Argentina a bad name.[57] As several scholars have observed, press coverage of the legal action against the ZM exacerbated the erroneous assumption that Jews were primarily responsible for sex trafficking in Argentina, when, in reality, Jews were never a majority in the sex trade.[58] The aftermath

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[53] "Camara criminal y correcional de la capital de la república [Criminal and correctional court of the capital of the republic]," in *Jurisprudencia Argentina: Publicación Periodica*, vol. 35 (Buenos Aires: Compañía Impresora Argentina, S. A.-- Alsina 2049, 1932), 9.

[54] Haim Avni, *Argentina & The Jews: A History of Jewish Immigration* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 142.

[55] In the original Spanish: "Ciento ocho miembros de la Zwi Migdal, 93 hombres y 15 mujeres, se hallaban en prisión preventativa a la espera de formulación de las acusiones. La gran mayoría de los otros 334 miembros incluidos en las listas de la organización--menos aquelos que fallecieron antes de la investigación—se ocultaron o siguieron el curso normal de sus vidas, con ordenes de arresto pendientes." Avni, *"Clientes", rufianes y prostitutas: comunidades judías de Argentina e Israel frente a la trata de blancas ["Clients", ruffians, and prostitutes: Jewish communities in Argentina and Israel in the face of white slavery]*, 142.

[56] "Camara criminal y correcional de la capital de la república [Criminal and correctional court of the capital of the republic]."

[57] "Se precisa una escoba [In need of a broom]," *Crítica*, May 20, 1930.

[58] Avni, *"Clientes", rufianes y prostitutas: comunidades judías de Argentina e Israel frente a la trata de blancas ["Clients", ruffians, and prostitutes: Jewish communities in Argentina and Israel in the face of white slavery]*; Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice*; Guy, *Sex & Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina*; Yarfitz, "Polacos, White Slaves, and Stille Chuppahs: Organized Prostitution and the Jews of Buenos Aires, 1890-1939."

of Liberman's denouncement has influenced the periodization of Argentinean Yiddish theatre history, particularly what historians Susana Skura and Leonor Slavsky call the "first chapter" of this history, which started in 1901 with the first known Yiddish productions in Buenos Aires and ended in 1930 with the legal investigation of the ZM.[59] Contrary to the popular perception that the Argentine courts successfully disbanded the ZM in 1930, in 1931 the ZM's lawyers quietly appealed the case.[60] As EN's institutional records show, Argentine Jews continued to work towards ending Jewish involvement in prostitution into the late-1930s.[61]

Raquel Liberman's "Regeneration"

Four years after the denouncement, Liberman requested a travel visa from the Polish consulate. Before granting it to her, the consulate followed their standard procedure of requesting that EN inquire into Liberman's "moral situation."[62] While the process was routine, the only unusual aspect to it was that Liberman was not an anonymous applicant, but rather was "very well known for her participation in the case against the *Zwi Migdal*."[63] However, EN had lost track of Liberman's professional and social standing. To prove that Liberman was no longer part of "that disreputable element," EN officials needed to observe her up close. Lacking the time "to carry out the research in a discreet manner," EN officials visited Liberman in her home to inquire into "the

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[59] Skura and Slavsky, "1901-2001. Cien años de teatro en ídish en Buenos Aires [1901-2001. One hundred years of theatre in Yiddish in Buenos Aires]," 297.
[60] Avni, *"Clientes", rufianes y prostitutas: comunidades judías de Argentina e Israel frente a la trata de blancas ["Clients", ruffians, and prostitutes: Jewish communities in Argentina and Israel in the face of white slavery]*, 141–50.
[61] "Causas de la prostitución [Causes of prostitution]."
[62] This document in its original form is available at the IWO & CAHJP archives, and has been reproduced and translated by Nora Glickman in *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman*.
[63] "Causas de la prostitución [Causes of prostitution]"; Translation in Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman*, 77.

moral conduct and the means of subsistence of a certain Raquel Liberman." EN officials described their observations about Liberman in a sixty-page report entitled "Causas de la prostitución." Published in 1936, this document included the results of EN's research into the factors that led Argentine Jewish women to become prostitutes. The document describes this phenomenon as interrelated with the struggles of migration and the process of adapting to a new life. The bulk of the document includes short case studies that summarize EN reformers' impressions of Jewish women, and occasionally Jewish men, who were involved with the sex trade.[64] While the document's authors suspected that women performers—particularly those in dance and cabaret—were more likely to be involved with the sex trade, the report did not explicitly mention the Yiddish theatres, which were no longer a perceived locus for Jewish involvement in prostitution after *Ibergus* because impresarios worked to shift public expectation through the hanging of signs that forbid the "unclean" ones from entering the premises. In addition, the historiographic emphasis on theatre and prostitution would make it likely that Liberman had mentioned the Yiddish theatres in her denouncement, yet the absence of a reference to theatre also supports an argument against the Yiddish theatre's perceived relationship to prostitution. However, EN's observations about Liberman reveal much about her performance of reformed femininity.

The document's authors describe a typical "fallen woman" as someone who "sacrifices her dignity in exchange for a little bit of material well-being." The authors insist that prostitution is a mechanism for survival, and, like the character of Blondie in *Ibergus* and other first-wave feminists of the time, implored its readers to bestow compassion upon these women who "are mere victims of the imperfect conditions of life." EN identified several categories of women who become

[64] "Causas" further describes that its intentions are to disprove exaggeration, correct inaccuracies made from either good or bad intentions, and to end Jewish involvement in prostitution. Its scope focuses on Argentina, including both Buenos Aires and the country's rural provinces.

prostitutes. According to the document, many of them had a "zeal for wealth" and wish to "enjoy, in excess, the material wellbeing" that money provides.[65] The next category of women was those with mental illness, or those who were "physically or spiritually mad," which according to the document included mostly "spouses and mothers in normal material conditions." Finally, the last category is women in a "morbid state" with an inclination towards "vice" that draws them towards prostitution. It is not clear which, if any, of the categories were thought to describe Liberman.

This document is especially valuable for providing insight into how EN officials interpreted Liberman's body language and nonverbal cues to determine that she was no longer involved in the sex trade.[66] The authors state that upon entering Liberman's home they "received a pleasant impression" of her. The root of the Spanish language word that the author used, "intuir" (to intuit), suggests that the positive "impression" was based on intuition. While clothing choices, facial expressions, and gestures may have contributed to this discernment, they did not identify any specific factors that contributed to this positive "impression." However, they did acknowledge the scenery in general terms, which suggests that there was something they could not pinpoint about Liberman's home that made it a "healthy surrounding."[67] EN officials expressed confidence in their observations, insisting that "anyone who saw her now" would draw the same conclusions or in their words, "would be far from surmising that this was the same woman who had once spent a licentious life for several years."[68]

Despite the success of Liberman's "regeneration," EN acknowledged that "stigma generally leaves an *indelible seal* in the faces of many women who had the misfortune of surrounding

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[65] "Causas de la prostitución [Causes of prostitution]"; As translated in Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman*, 77.
[66] Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman*, 77.
[67] "Causas de la prostitución [Causes of prostitution]."
[68] Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman*, 77.

themselves continuously to vicious practices."[69] It is unclear if they saw this "indelible seal" on Liberman's face, or if she was an exception. As they describe in the following sentence, Liberman appeared much like other "redeemed" women who EN officials "observe[d] closely." In particular, her performance of reformed femininity was evident in her character traits—as EN officials noted, she was agreeable and pleasant.[70] In addition, the officials were impressed with Liberman's willingness to provide all the information that they asked for, which to them confirmed that "her regeneration was a real fact." The word "regeneration" here is telling. As with the character of Reizl in *Ibergus*, it suggests that the way for a former prostitute to redeem her fallen morality was to undergo a total transformation. However, as with Liberman's prior autobiographical performances, she strategically embodied dominant expectations about femininity, such as pleasantness and agreeability, to satisfy the expectations of EN officials. As a result, Liberman's performance led EN officials to assure the Polish consulate that she was no longer connected to "her sad past." Ultimately, Liberman was not able to travel to Poland. In April 1935 she fell ill and was hospitalized in Buenos Aires, where she died at age 35.[71] Her death certificate lists her cause of death as an "exoftamic goiter," or an autoimmune thyroid condition now called Graves' disease. She was survived by her mother, Elena Vaynerton, and her two sons.[72]

Liberman's performance of femininity before different audiences inspires several avenues for future research about how migrating Jewish women navigated dominant expectations about gender and sexuality in varied Argentinean arenas. These performative sites include the courtroom and the Yiddish theatre, and also venues that it has not been possible to address in the present study,

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[69] My emphasis.
[70] "Causas de la prostitución [Causes of prostitution], my emphasis."
[71] Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman*, 79–81.
[72] Nora Glickman, "The Jewish White Slave Trade in Latin American Writings," in *White Slavery Writings*, n.d., 79–81.

including the ship harbor, street, and *conventillo* (tenement). I anticipate that further study of the varied ways in which migrant women leveraged performance in different settings will strengthen historical understandings of Jewishness, gender and sexuality, and national/transnational identities.

Coda

This dissertation has shown that a perceived connection to prostitution was just one aspect of Yiddish theatre history, yet a long legacy of misogyny and antisemitism has led it to dominate the historiography. While the remaining archival materials neither confirm nor deny a relationship between Yiddish theatre and prostitution, the historiography of antitheatricality strongly suggests that such business ties were unlikely. Moreover, the overemphasis on prostitution has led scholars astray from other critical aspects of the Yiddish theatre's social and cultural significance in early-twentieth-century Buenos Aires, including its role in facilitating cross-cultural exchanges and its contributions to the Argentinean avant-gardes.

This oversight is understandable when considering that feminist analysis is not yet widely integrated in the field of Yiddish theatre history. While the study of gender is not new to the field of Jewish Studies, these studies overwhelmingly focus on Jewish masculinities. Recent and forthcoming scholarship is beginning to do the recuperative work of inscribing women into Yiddish theatre history, an important first step in creating the foundation for a more robust feminist analysis. And as I hope to have shown, one need not be writing exclusively about women in order to deploy a feminist historical approach. Embracing multiplicity—of sources, theories, and methods—is one way that scholars can integrate feminist theory and methods into their interpretations of original and well-trodden archival sources.

Each chapter of this dissertation has engaged multiplicity differently. Chapter one illustrated how gendered cultural expectations led to the construction of the conventional narrative, which led some male early-twentieth-century spectators to misguided conclusions that certain theatregoers were prostitutes. Through reading the surviving archival materials against the historical grain, I illuminated a significant yet neglected aspect of Argentinean Yiddish theatre history—particularly its

role in facilitating artistic and cultural exchanges between working-class Jewish and Italian immigrants. The next chapter continued the process of reframing this history through challenging the accepted narrative that one controversial Yiddish brothel drama production, *Miriam*, demonstrated a connection between Yiddish theatre and prostitution. Instead, I showed how the reception to the production illustrates how the Yiddish theatre was a flashpoint for first-wave feminist activism for prostitution reform. I argued that the audience's response was symptomatic of a global moral panic surrounding "white slavery" and a byproduct of social and political reform efforts involving both Jews and Gentiles. The third chapter homed in on the intracultural dynamics among Yiddish-speaking Jews. Through closely attending to the publicity for *Ibergus* and its eventual staging, I proposed that Botoshansky and his team of Jewish theatre artists participated in an already active avant-garde Yiddish theatre scene in Buenos Aires. For scholars of global avant-garde theatre, this demonstrates the value of including productions in non-dominant languages. The discrepancy between the naturalistic style in which Leib Malakh wrote *Ibergus* and non-naturalistic techniques that Botoshansky used to stage *Ibergus* invites further attention to the relationship between language and gesture in performance, a dynamic that chapter four expanded on by focusing on a brothel drama that took place outside of the theatre auditorium. Amidst a tense political situation, Raquel Liberman drew from the accepted discourse and gestural vocabulary about "white slavery" in order to achieve her desired political aims.

While this coda marks the conclusion of this dissertation, no one is more aware than I that this project is inevitably complete. I am eager to address the limitations of the present project in the next iteration of this work, which I anticipate will inquire more broadly into the relationship between antisemitism, antitheatricality, and the Latin American avant-gardes. As Dijsktra has shown, turn-of-the-century misogynism was inseparable from antisemitism which especially manifested in non-

Jewish communities and escalated to the Holocaust. Yet representations of Jews and Jewishness on the Yiddish stage—and the intracultural debates surrounding the Jewish "parasites" (prostitutes and pimps) who were "infecting" the new Jewish immigrant community in Argentina—suggest that, unfortunately, anti-Jewish sentiments also circulated within the Argentinean Jewish community. In the case of Buenos Aires, antitheatrical myths created the conditions for antisemitic discourse to thrive.

Under the same set of conditions, itinerant Jewish performing artists experimented with new aesthetic techniques that scholars of global modernism are only beginning to acknowledge, particularly with the recent publication of Debra Caplan's monograph, *Yiddish Empire*. Caplan argues for the intrinsically transnational dimensions of the modernist Yiddish performances of one sprawling company (or as Caplan argues, a sprawling "brand) called the Vilna Troupe, whose members did visit Buenos Aires. Yet the travelling Vilner's were not the only Yiddish artists who contributed to the transnational avant-gardes. Moreover, most studies of avant-garde theatre, including Caplan's, prioritize the global North. Buenos Aires was the primary focus of this study for several reasons, including that it was a crucial hemispheric center for transnational avant-garde theatre during the early twentieth century. While conducting archival research, I started to understand how expanding my geographical scope to include the many cities and countries where Yiddish theatre artists toured was the natural next step for this project. Both Argentinean-Jewish artists *and* their audiences travelled across national and international borders to give and receive performances. Yiddish performers regularly toured to the Jewish farming colonies in Argentina's pampas and also to various urban and rural audiences in Uruguay, Paraguay, and Brazil. And on several occasions, Jews living in the colonies or in Montevideo traversed hundreds of miles to witness Yiddish performances. I hope my future work will build on the various kinds of

transnationalism that Caplan outlines to provide new insights into how Jewish theatre-makers navigated the unique geographies of the River Plate Basin.

Yiddish theatre has never existed in a vacuum. Since its inception, it has always interacted with dominant cultural norms and local audiences—in the case of Buenos Aires, that is evident in the traces of artistic collaboration between Jews and Italians at *Teatro Doria*. The case of *Teatro Doria* in particular has piqued my interest in cross-cultural theatre making between Jews and non-Jews. I anticipate that my future research will delve more deeply into these exchanges, and expand on a final point that Alyssa Quint makes in her recently published monograph *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theatre*. In Quint's conclusion, she coins the term "extravernacular" Yiddish to describe the phenomenon of Gentile Russian theatregoers who attended the Yiddish theatre, even though they did not speak Yiddish. Likewise, as Quint observes, most Yiddish artists were polyglots, and consciously honed their craft in Yiddish even though they were fluent in many tongues. I look forward to applying this concept to explore the collaborations between Yiddish and Gentile theatre artists at *Teatro Doria* and elsewhere. In addition, I hope to build on it to explore the work of well-known Yiddish performers who successfully crossed-over to the Spanish language stage, such as Samuel Eichelbaum and Berta Singerman. Both of these artists grew up in rural Jewish farming colonies and Yiddish-speaking families, and attended the Yiddish theatres as spectators even though they did not regularly perform on the Yiddish-language stage. I anticipate that my future research will consider how Jewishness and gender impacted the identities as performers such as these ones, and consider their contributors to the Latin American avant-gardes.

Finally, Quint ends her book with a reflection about the relationship between *kunst* and *shund* theatre; in particular, she briefly mentions how avant-garde Yiddish artists engaged *shund* repertoire in their modernist experiments. The field of Yiddish theatre is ripe for a re-theorization about the

relationship between *kunst* and *shund*—theatre historians have observed that these are never isolated movements, and the possibility that their unique interaction within Jewish performance culture suggests that perhaps something unique is happening on the Yiddish stage. At present, I envision that the following questions will guide the my expansion of this study's exploration of Yiddish theatre and the Latin American avant-gardes: What is the relationship between antitheatricality and antisemitism? And what role did these prejudices play in the formation of the Latin American avant-gardes? Was there such a thing as Jewish modernism? And, if, so, how does that allow us to reconceptualize the relationship between *kunst* and *shund*? I hope that pursuing these questions will offer new insights for interdisciplinary scholars of theatre history and Jewish studies, which allow for new ways to access the constitutive yet ineffable experience of live performance.

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