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David M. K. Sheinin

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The Slow Conquest of the Argentine Frontier: From the Subversive Gaucho through the Erasure of First Peoples to the Cold War Military Triumph over Antarctica

DAVID M. K. SHEININ

Abstract

This article assesses the shifting character of the Argentine frontier. Over time, Argentines have altered their understanding of the concept of a frontier. Two constants over the past century and a half, however, have been the popular notion of the conquest of Indigenous peoples as balefully incomplete, and the associated idea of a racially compromised frontier. These have contrasted sharply with settler myths of the destruction of First Peoples as a steppingstone to early nation building. During the mid-twentieth century, the influence of US American cowboy culture helped confirm the erasure of Indigenous Argentines in popular culture. At the same time, there was a southward shift of the imagined frontier in cultural, territorial, and military claims to Malvinas and Antarctica, territories that, unlike northern Argentine provinces, held no Indigenous populations.

Résumé

Cet article évalue le caractère changeant de la frontière argentine. Au fil du temps, les Argentins ont modifié leur compréhension du concept de frontière. Cependant, deux constantes se sont maintenues au cours du dernier siècle et demi : la notion populaire de la conquête des peuples indigènes comme étant incomplète, et l'idée qui lui est associée d'une frontière racialement compromise. Ces idées ont fortement contrasté avec les mythes du colonisateur qui voyaient dans la destruction des peuples autochtones un tremplin pour la construction de la nation. Au milieu du XXe siècle, l'influence de la culture des cowboys américains a contribué à confirmer l'effacement des indigènes argentins dans la culture populaire. En même temps, on a assisté à un déplacement de la frontière imaginaire vers le sud dans les réclamations culturelles, territoriales et militaires des Malouines et de l'Antarctique, des territoires qui, contrairement aux provinces du nord de l'Argentine, n'abritaient pas de populations autochtones.

In Argentina, the idea of the frontier as a mix of open space, a point of conflict between civilization and barbarism, and a source of national wealth, has generally been understood by town dwellers as dangerously and immediately close in both physical distance and imminence of peril. The popular urban notion of the perilous immediacy of the frontier evolved from the menace of Indigenous attack in the late nineteenth century to a more amorphous threat of racial subversion on the frontier through the twentieth century. There is no racialized Argentine mythology of a "cowboy/Indian" binary. In history and in folklore, the gaucho is both celebrated as a national icon and denigrated as racially compromised by virtue of his proximity to First Peoples.[1] As an icon, through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, in literature, film, and other cultural representations, Argentine urban middle classes and elites have held up the gaucho as morally good.[2] He became a marker of Argentine *arielismo,* the early twentieth-century idea that, in its emphasis on moral and spiritual values, Argentine civilization stood apart from and rejected the ugly materialism and utilitarianism of the United States.[3] As a racially "compromised" figure, however, from as early as the first years of the nineteenth century the gaucho also represented one side of a longstanding political divide that has evolved into the *grieta* (chasm) that divides Argentina's most lasting social movement, Peronism, from its opponents. For some, the gaucho represented barbarism and dictatorial rule, in opposition to liberal democratic modernity. For others, he was a defender of organic democracy (sometimes led by a populist authoritarian) in the service of working people of colour and defined by redistributive politics.[4]

The cultural construction of the Argentine frontier underscores the contradictory character of the gaucho as the prototypical Argentine settler. As have other nineteenth-century settler conquest narratives, the Argentine "Conquest of the Desert" has been remembered and memorialized as a civilizing destruction of First Peoples. At the same time, equally strong parallel narratives have often characterized that defeat of Indigenous peoples as ominously incomplete. Yet, over the twentieth century, despite persistent ambiguities of a culturally constructed porous and racially subversive frontier — reinforced after 2005 by new legislation that eased the transition to citizenship for undocumented immigrants from neighbouring countries — urban middle-class Argentines constructed a parallel historical chronicle of a frontier emptied of First Peoples.[5] That process had its origins in the myth of the destruction of First Peoples in the 1870s "Conquest of the Desert," the most infa-

mous of a long sequence of Argentine wars against Indigenous people. The Indigenous death toll of the conquest was severe. But despite a new historical narrative that emerged underscoring that severity, tens of thousands of First Peoples survived. To account for that ongoing Indigenous presence, Argentines melded the destruction myth with an historical erasure of First Peoples — a frontier supposedly emptied. However, historical accounts of the Conquest and the settlement of rural Argentina in its aftermath transformed the destruction of some First Peoples into the erasure of an Indigenous presence in Argentina.[6]

Through the early part of the twentieth century, the Indigenous erasure narrative succeeded by multiple measures. These included the consolidation of the conquest narrative as having destroyed Indigenous Argentina in hundreds of celebratory monuments of the military officers that had led the charge. That narrative remained complicated, though, by a lingering sense in academic, popular, and political cultures that the frontier was racially ambiguous and dangerously porous. But by the middle of the twentieth century, the erasure of First Peoples in popular narratives of the modern nation took hold more firmly. That process is evident in dozens of narratives that tied modernization to national expansion into the frontier. One example is the birth of *turismo de carretera* (touring car racing) in the 1930s. The sport became enormously popular during the Cold War as a function of the rapid growth of Argentina's auto industry, a popular association of cars with Argentine modernity, the expansion of the national highway system, the birth of live radio and televised sports broadcasts, and the "heroic" conquest of an Argentine interior by drivers who risked injury and death at high speeds as they penetrated hundreds of kilometres in the "dangerous" interior of the country that most racing fans had never visited. Though physically present in large numbers, Indigenous Argentines were entirely absent from the imagined auto-racing interior of the country.[7]

Building on the problem of the porous frontier and the ambiguity of conquest through the late 1920s, this article addresses two additional, linked components of the Indigenous erasure narrative and the frontier. The first is the growing mid-twentieth century power of US cultural influences in Argentina through Hollywood films, dime store novels, and dozens of comic book runs that recast for many Argentines the idea of frontier as something approximating variants on the "American West," even as longstanding contradictory tropes of Indigenous Argentines and gauchos persisted in the art of Dante Quintero and Florencio Molina Campos. Cartoonish, stilted versions of US First Peoples — not

those who dwelled in Argentina — populated the imaginations of both urban and rural Argentines. The prominent novelist Manuel Puig and the iconic political leader Eva Perón each reminisced at having spent hours in movie theatres on Saturday afternoons watching Hollywood Westerns. The second component is that, during the Cold War, Argentines closely followed media reports of new military triumphs on a new frontier, Antarctica, in ways that evoked another frontier territory devoid of First Peoples, the Malvinas (Falkland Islands).

This article demonstrates how the "Conquest of the Desert" was incomplete in three concrete ways. It was unfinished as a war of destruction against First Peoples, since many survived, as did their descendants. Moreover, there was a lingering sense among urban Argentines of a persistently dangerous and racially subversive frontier. These contradictory narratives persisted through the late twentieth century in the mass consumption of US narratives of the American West and in the military "conquest" of Antarctica and Malvinas, each of which extended the idea of a yet-to-be conquered frontier.

Unfinished Conquest

The military conquest of First Peoples began soon after Argentine independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century, and continued through successive campaigns of destruction, One months-long campaign in 1879 has long captured the attention of Argentines as the ostensibly definitive subjugation of First Peoples. The "Conquest of the Desert," led by General Julio A. Roca, was a triumphalist Army mission sent to end the military threat of First Peoples on the frontier and pave the way for building a modern, agriculture-driven nation state. However, in a seeming contradiction, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Argentines have remembered the Conquest precisely as it was intended but also, in a seeming contradiction, as incomplete.[8] The Conquest of the Desert was hardly an end point. While Conquest battles were waged to the south of Buenos Aires, military expeditions against Chaco First Peoples in the far north of the country were also launched in 1870, 1879, 1880, 1881, 1883, and 1884. Military conflict there persisted through the early twentieth century.[9]

After 1929, the role of the armed forces as a sometimes violent arbiter of the acceptable boundaries of economic and political order in civil society expanded from the frontier to the nation state as a whole, punctuated over the twentieth century by what Argentines routinely

described as *golpes cívico-militares* (civil-military coups d'état). At the same time, the military held on to the veneer of their putative role as conveyers of civilization to the frontier. The armed forces promoted public health by combatting disease among rural peoples, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.[10] Despite the influx of European and other immigrants, many of whom settled on the plains through the middle of the twentieth century, soldiers were often the first non-Indigenous settlers on the frontier in *colonias militares* (military settlements) and many lived as late as the 1960s.[11] As in 1879, soldiers arrived on other military missions to kill First Peoples in the three decades that followed. Then, afterward and repeatedly, in a historical narrative advanced by the armed forces, having shed their uniforms, those same soldiers became fellow citizens to the Indigenous peoples who survived the attack, imparting the purported benefits of civilization. In contrast to the image of rapacious wealthy landowners, the settler-soldier often became a sympathetic figure in the minds of urban Argentines, present on the frontier to bring modernity and to work the land. With this transformation, the soldiers became gauchos.[12]

In his short story *La otra muerte* (The Other Death, 1949), Jorge Luis Borges writes of a cowardly soldier at the Battle of Masoller (1904). While Borges does not dwell on it, the battle itself is significant as the last in a long line of grasps at power by a rural *caudillo* (a strongman, gaucho leader) in the littoral region along the Paraguay and Paraná rivers. For modernizing, chauvinistic, nation-building historical narratives, Masoller meant the end of popular, gaucho-backed, non-liberal organic democracy in Uruguay and the littoral region of Argentina, which shared a rural gaucho political culture with its neighbour.[13] The story protagonist — an avatar for Borges himself — learns of a cowardly soldier who retreated to live in isolation and shame on the frontier. Some time later, the central character passes through the area where the soldier has settled. Only, there is no trace of him. Those who once knew the soldier no longer remember him, and the elderly retired military officer, who initially told the protagonist the tale, remembers it differently over time. In this second version of the past, the soldier died a battlefield hero. For Borges, the historical reality is not the narrative ease of the heroic battlefield account and the resounding defeat of a last great gaucho challenge to the modern nation state at Masoller. It is, rather, the meaning of Masoller for Argentina, as having left unresolved the problem of the Argentine frontier, unintegrated into the national polity. Borges's story broke with many literary works

that juxtaposed the rural gaucho with conquering soldiers representing the modern Argentine nation. In Borges's fictional case, however, and in historical and other interpretations of Argentina's rural past, the transition from soldier to gaucho came only in the context of a non-triumphal, inconclusive historical narrative of the frontier.[14] One of many historical examples celebrated in popular memory is the army of General Martín Miguel de Güemes, which fought Spanish forces in northwestern Argentina during the early nineteenth-century independence wars. The gauchos who joined Güemes's forces, then returned to rural work at the end of his campaigns, are celebrated in dozens of works of art and literature, as having heroically defended the nascent republic before returning to a marginalized, impoverished, and dignified existence as gauchos.[15]

In 1925, decades before he served briefly as foreign minister in the early 1960s, Miguel Angel Cárcano also puzzled over the inconclusive character of the Conquest of the Desert. Cárcano was more concerned than Borges with the blend of civilization and barbarism on the frontier, and with rural areas as sites of subversive racial mixing. As settlers, soldiers had been unable to block Indigenous invaders. More troubling for many urban Argentines, Indigenous social and cultural influences continued to proliferate as antithetical to the modern nation. Settlers, Cárcano found, fomented immoral behaviours among First Peoples. The frontier on the border of civilized society was porous, festering with political, moral, and other subversive elements of barbarism.[16] Cárcano referenced the Conquest of the Desert as both a civilizing feat and as incomplete. The 1879 military mission had sought to empty frontier territories of First Peoples. Instead, he wrote, Indigenous people and settlers had assimilated together into a dangerous creole culture on the margins.

Gaucho or Cowboy?

In 1942, RKO Radio Pictures released *Saludos Amigos*, a feature-length animated film from Walt Disney Productions and overseen by Walt Disney himself. The US government sponsored Spanish and English versions to foster a friendly familiarity among peoples in the Americas. In one segment, the cartoon character Goofy — a Texas cowboy in this incarnation — flies to the Argentine *pampas* (plains) where his cowboy gear is replaced with a gaucho's kit. Goofy now has a horse and a guitar, and though dressed as a gaucho, for his lonely

strumming under the stars, he might well have been back in Texas. Just as the gaucho and the cowboy were pretty much one and the same, screamed the film's messaging, so too were all peoples in the hemisphere good neighbours. But Walt Disney got it wrong. The culturally constructed gaucho combined the contradiction of a beloved, longstanding national icon with an individual always dangerously close — culturally and racially — to Indigenous peoples.[17]

In 1966, in contrast to Walt Disney's fantasy of the transnational white cowboy, the Círculo Militar, a retired officers' club whose mandate included memorializing the accomplishments of the armed forces, issued a new recording of the *Retreta del Desierto*,[18] a military march commemorating the Conquest of the Desert. The music is ponderous, nondescript, and still played regularly by military bands on celebratory occasions. The most striking aspect of the edition is the cover; the nineteenth-century soldier portrayed is depicted as what would have appeared to consumers as a person of Indigenous ancestry. This is Cárcano's mixed-race frontier dweller writ large. There is no indication as to why the artist chose the image, nor is it possible to know what sort of reaction it might have generated among military march aficionados. However, in the 1960s, as in earlier decades, urban middle-class (and to some extent working-class) cultures, as well as military cultures, were committed to the idea of Argentina as a "white republic," a nation of European immigrants and their descendants. There are thousands of popular references to Argentina as white, including the famous 1970 declaration by heavyweight boxer Ringo Bonavena on the eve of his departure for the United States to fight Muhammad Ali. Bonavena had built a popular working-class Italian-Argentine image, famously fuelled by his mother's pasta. A journalist asked him how he knew he was going to win the fight. "Because I'm white and I'm Argentine," came the answer. (He lost.) In the context of that and other popular culture references to Argentine whiteness, the album cover is jarring.[19]

Figure A. Enrique Vidal Molina, et al., *Retreta del Desierto* (Buenos Aires: Círculo Militar, 1966).

Whatever the artist intended, and whatever urban Argentines believed about constructions of whiteness, the image — as visualized — may have been a fair reflection of the Indigenous (and African) origins of many nineteenth-century soldiers who would not have self-identified as "Indigenous." Moreover, further complicating the civilization/barbarism binary, in a parallel with North American conquest narratives, the Argentine armed forces continued to honour the military support they received during the Conquest of the Desert from so-called *indios amigos* (friendly Indigenous peoples).[20]

While early twentieth-century elites like Cárcano worried about an uncivilized, racially ambiguous, porous frontier, and while intellectuals such as Borges tried to make sense of it, by the mid-twentieth century this frontier was out of sight and out of mind for many Argentines. From the 1940s onward, working people of colour backed the Peronist movement. Many were migrants from rural areas to Argentine cities. They self-identified and were labelled by others — often disparagingly — as people of colour, precisely the racially ambiguous groups Cárcano had fretted over. During the late 1940s, in the first constructions of public housing *inside* the city of Buenos Aires, Peronist policy makers understood the persistent force of frontier tropes explored by Cárcano and others; that housing was *meant* to alarm white, middle-class urban dwellers hostile to Peronism, and serve as an intrusion of frontier, migrant working people of colour into the city. Yet, through the early twenty-first century, Peronism made scant reference to Indigenous peoples except in folkloric settings that often referenced First Peoples as a vestige of the past, concealing Indigenous identities within that of the racially nebulous Argentine worker.[21]

Then again, was Walt Disney all that wrong? Constructions of the frontier in twentieth-century Argentina took on an additional, complicating feature. There were popular renderings of the gaucho as heroic. Founded by Enrique Rapela, for example, the 1970s comic magazine *Fabián Leyes* featured the serialized adventures of the eponymous Fabián Leyes, a gaucho in a distant past traversing Argentina's western terrain, alternatively allied and in conflict with what would have appeared to readers as racially ambiguous (non-white) frontiersmen. Fabián travelled the plains looking for work accompanied by a friend described by the racially tentative, non-white descriptor, "moreno" (dark-skinned). Every issue featured patriotic historical instruction on past Argentine military heroes in addition to short manuals on how to perform gaucho skills, like roping a wild horse, for urban readers

unlikely ever to live on the plains.[22] However, through dozens of far more popular Argentine and foreign publications and films, attracting tens of thousands of readers and viewers, much of the representation of the frontier as an idea came into middle- and working-class popular cultures by way of stilted, discriminatory mainstream US images of Indigenous peoples in North America, not unconnected from what Argentine film audiences would have seen in the Spanish version of *¡Saludos Amigos!* In those immensely popular renderings of frontier, the gaucho, South American Indigenous peoples, and the tensions explored by Cárcano and Borges vanished. The Conquest was finally completed.[23]

While the gaucho was absent from these Americanized depictions, the racially constructed white cowboy from an imaginary US West appeared constantly. From 1909 to 1957, the Editorial Manuel Láinez publishing house in Buenos Aires produced a Spanish-language version of the British magazine *Tit-Bits* for an urban, middle-class Argentine readership. It advertised itself on the cover of each issue as an "Argentine illustrated magazine of all that is most interesting, useful and pleasant in the world." In fact, it was predictable and formulaic. Argentine content was mostly limited to technical school advertisements for ambitious men and women. "Improve your future," announced an ad for the Ateneo Técnico y Comercial (Technical and Commercial Cultural Centre), which promised a free "Guide to Success" and individualized courses by mail in electricity, mechanics, and more.[24] For women, there was the Universidad Femenina (the Women's University) that offered correspondence courses in calligraphy, cooking, and hygiene.[25] In addition, like its British equivalent and similar magazines in the United Kingdom and the United States, it featured serialized cartoons and novellas that celebrated British and US imperial traditions. Stories included Peter Garnet's "Charka el hombre mono" (Charka of the Great Apes), depicted as white, always on an African adventure, and explained to Argentine readers unfamiliar with his exploits as courageous and "knowledgeable of the advantages of civilization," which "made him superior to the [Africans] around him." In a 1937 cartoon of his exploits, Charka finds himself fighting off an attack of "Pygmies."[26] Frank Buck's "Atrapándolos Vivos" (Bring 'Em Back Alive) was a 1932 Hollywood film before it was serialized in over a dozen languages. The episodic cartoon version in *Tit-Bits* was set in an unnamed Southeast Asian territory and showcased dark-skinned "natives" in turbans up to no good against white adventurers in pith

helmets.[27] And Ralph Redway's cowboy, the Rio Kid, fought "Indians" and Mexican bandits in the American West. The full-page illustration on the cover of a 1934 issue depicted a night forest scene on the US Western frontier. The Rio Kid rises slowly, reaching for his revolver as he spots a "red skin" in the distance. "Feathered Face!," he shouts, alarmed.[28]

From 1957 to 1963, the legendary cartoonist Héctor Germán Oesterheld directed the Buenos Aires publishing house Editorial Frontera. A fan of US Western dime novels, Oesterheld collaborated on drawings and story lines for the enormously popular, original serialized cartoons "Ticonderoga Flint" and "Verdugo Ranch," which appeared in the magazines *Frontera* and *Hora Cero.* Both cartoons featured US "cowboy-and-Indian" stories, in the former magazine set in eighteenth-century forests on the US frontier and in the latter set in the nineteenth-century "Far West" of the United States. The cover of *Frontera* sometimes featured a caricature of an iconic "angry" Indigenous "warrior" in war paint attacking settlers, who were at times depicted as young, white, and blonde. These images and the story line had nothing to do with Argentine pasts. Four special issues of *Frontera* in 1961 and 1962 presented translated versions of the serialized US Western cartoons "Buck Jones and the Man from Montana" (El hombre de Montana), "Buck Jones in Apache Manhunt" (Muerte Apache), "The Gun Tamers" (Domadores), and "Kit Carson in the Trail of Treachery" ("Sendas de traición"). The drawings of violent US frontier scenes were done by Argentine artists Roberto Regalado, Alberot Breccia, Jesús Blasco, and others.[29]

The fortnightly cartoon magazine *Suplemento de Bucaneros* ran for 280 issues from 1952 to 1967, averaging 55,000 copies per instalment. In its first years, it often included only one long US Western cartoon, and, through 1957, the stories were translated from similar publications in the United States. After that, the story lines were Argentine, though modelled on US standards and drawn to reflect what Argentine readers of US publications and viewers of Hollywood films might expect of a US Western story backdrop. Sometimes the magazine sent Alfredo Julio Grassi to watch US Westerns in Buenos Aires theatres and then write cartoon story lines based on what he had seen on the screen. Such was the Americanization of the Argentine frontier genre, that in 1957 Argentine readers of "El llano Estacado" (The Staked Plains) — an original Spanish term referencing a region in eastern New Mexico and Western Texas but with no relevance to Argentina —

were greeted with the story of Texans' fight for independence in the nineteenth century. Characters included heroic white Texas cowboys, sinister Mexicans, and an Indigenous person who stated, "Blanco irse o Comanches matar" (White go or Comanches kill). The racist use of stilted, broken Spanish to illustrate Indigenous speakers was common in Spanish-language Argentine film and cartoons. But in this case, the affected "primitive" Spanish is a direct translation from the English original, *not* the Argentine equivalent of racist, stilted language that appeared in Argentine cartoons about Argentina.[30]

Despite the success of US cowboy culture over the same period, two well-known illustrators did more than anybody to promote the racial ambiguity of the gaucho and the idea of a subversive Indigenous presence. A collaborator on *¡Saludos Amigos!*, Florencio Molina Campos, was the most famous twentieth-century Argentine artist. The widely distributed Alpargatas Company's annual calendar featured his cartoon *viñetas gauchescas* (gaucho vignettes) on each month's page. Settings evoked a dreamy rural past of the sort that would have piqued the interest of *Fabián Leyes* readers. Molina Campos's gaucho characters consistently reflected the frontier contradiction. Family men, expert horsemen, morally good, hard-working and hard-playing, they represented an urban Argentine ideal of a frontier past. Yet, for urban Argentines who turned over the calendar page above the kitchen counter every month, the faces of those portrayed were viewed as ugly, dark-skinned, and Indigenous.[31]

In 1928, Dante Quintero began to draw Argentina's most renowned twentieth-century cartoon series, Patoruzú. The character of Patoruzú, a Tehuelche, reflected a longstanding fascination that white urban Argentines held about First Peoples as physically powerful and mystically skilled. As did Molina Campos, Quintero inverted the logic of the Conquest and revived for five decades the idea of a persistent Indigenous presence. At its height, the magazine *Patoruzú* had a circulation of 300,000. The premise of the series is that Patoruzú is an extremely wealthy Indigenous chief. His superhuman physical strength derives both from the power of his ancestors and from having eaten the bones of a prehistoric beast. Improbably, but in an oblique reference to the manner in which Spanish authorities had considered Indigenous people "children" as a matter of law, the adult Patoruzú has a guardian. Instead of looking after Patoruzú's best interests, however, the elite Buenos Aires ne'er-do-well, Isidoro Cañones, is constantly in need of Patoruzú's assistance.[32]

A 1942 sketch by Dante Quintero likely reflects the prevalence of foreign racist colonial images in Buenos Aires cartoon publications of the day. It also included a plot line familiar to readers where Isidoro is in trouble yet again. Mistaking the smell of fire for the preparation of a festive meal, Patoruzú arrives to exclaim, "Darn! They're barbequing my guardian." In the bizarre mix of racial identities on an unidentified tropical island, Quintero uses poor Spanish, expressed in stilted spellings, to denigrate both the Africans depicted and Patoruzú. Only such is the disturbing care with which Quintero crafts his narrative that the racist, stilted dialogue is *distinct* for the Africans and for Patoruzú. Meanwhile, as always, Patoruzú saves the day, rescuing his floundering white guardian.

Figure B. Dante Quintero "¡Cálmate, Oh Blanco!" Original Patoruzú Sketch, Part I, 1942. Author's Collection.

Figure C. Dante Quintero "¡Cálmate, Oh Blanco!" Original Patoruzú Sketch, Part II, 1942. Author's Collection.

The Frontier Shifts South

In April–May 1982, during the Malvinas War and the Argentine occupation of the islands, dozens of Argentines wrote to interior minister Alfredo Saint-Jean offering to move to the newly recovered territory. They volunteered to go with their families to live off what a small farm might provide; to build a new, better Argentina starting on the islands; and to engage in noble, honest, hard work.[33] They imagined factories, schools, and a burgeoning population.[34] They wrote in the language of a new frontier whose significance culminated in the 1982 war, but whose basis had been laid culturally at the same time as the Conquest of the Desert, though with a unique feature. Malvinas was the frontier that Roca had been tasked with creating, but unable to construct. Like in the American West cartoons of the Cold War period, there were no Argentine First Peoples.

Indigenous peoples had lived on the islands before 1800. But while the Argentine historical narrative about the loss of the islands in the early nineteenth century and the longing for recovery boasted famous gauchos, First Peoples were absent.[35] The beginnings of the Malvinas frontier narrative can be attributed to the author José Hernández, the first of hundreds of writers to imagine Malvinas as far more significant to Argentina than a few distant islands in the South Atlantic. In 1872 and 1879, he published two epic poems that later appeared as one volume, *Martín Fierro,* Argentina's most renowned literary work, in print ever since and translated into over eighty languages. The gaucho Martín Fierro combines much of what Borges found in the cowardly soldier in *La otra muerte*—a high moral character, the tragedy of rural poverty in the face of greedy landowners, and a sense of place on the rural frontier as ennobling. Argentines have always been attracted to the notion that what makes Martín Fierro a good man rests in part in his distance from the city, and in the setting aside of the complications of racial reckoning that Cárcano feared.[36]

But before *Martín Fierro*, Hernández had published *Las Islas Malvinas* (1869), in which he explored themes that would reappear in the more famed epic poem. In *Martín Fierro*, Hernández linked probity, self-worth, and rural frontiers. In *Las Islas Malvinas* that tie was established between Malvinas, those same virtues, and an Argentine ideal.[37] Where *Martín Fierro* was a fictional gaucho, in *Malvinas* Hernández took up the cause of Argentine rural workers (that is, gauchos) living on the islands under British rule. In the twenty Argentines on

Malvinas in the 1860s, he saw the beginnings of Martín Fierro. Dignified and hardworking, they embodied the best of an Argentine rural frontier.[38] That cultural premise of the islands as a morally elevating frontier has been a persistent theme in Argentina. It helps explain the passion many Argentines have felt for their recovery from the United Kingdom, even as non-Argentines have puzzled over the importance of a few small islands hundreds of kilometres from the Argentine Atlantic coast. It also confirms that parallel, potentially contradictory narratives can exist in popular culture — in this case, the alternative vision of the frontier as porous and racially subversive. An example of how the Malvinas frontier ideal infuses popular culture is evident in the 2011 film *Un cuento chino,* written and directed by Sebastián Borensztein. Few Argentines would trace their imagined Malvinas to José Hernández's 1869 book, and even fewer to similar themes of rural moral uplift in *Martín Fierro*. *Un cuento chino*, though, marks one step in a long cultural path where, since the 1870s, many works of literature, films, paintings, television programs, and other renditions of Malvinas have connected the ideas of Hernández to ongoing notions of national loss, Argentine character, a frontier purged of Indigenous Argentines, and moral uplift. That extends to the 1982 letters sent to Saint-Jean, as well as to an ongoing dream of a better society through Malvinas in today's Argentina.[39]

Cuento chino is not about Malvinas. Late in the film, however, viewers learn that the islands mark a key backdrop to plot dynamics; they help explain the protagonist's high moral character and human decency in a manner reminiscent of how José Hernández once imagined the Malvinas, helping to shape an ideal national character. The film tells the story of an Argentine everyman, Roberto, whose life is upended by the appearance of a Chinese immigrant, Jun. Neither speaks the other's language. When the film was shown in Buenos Aires theatres, that communication barrier was accented by the absence of Spanish subtitles under Mandarin-language passages on screen. A man of obsessive order and routine, Roberto overcomes his frustration at the disorder Jun has introduced into his life by acting in a way film viewers find admirable. He does the right thing by inviting Jun to stay with him until the uncle he is seeking can be found. Roberto undertakes the uncle search himself in a Buenos Aires immigrant world with which he is unfamiliar. Moreover, at significant personal risk, he defends Jun in the face of a violent, rogue police officer. Roberto is a good man, and, late in the film, we learn of the singular event

that shaped his high moral conduct — the 1982 Malvinas War. It is a detail of crucial importance because without fanfare or elaborate explanation, it suggests as a backdrop to the main film narrative what Argentines for over a century have understood intrinsically: the barren Malvinas frontier equates with moral uplift.[40]

The second important southward shift of the frontier, and its attendant emptying of Indigenous peoples and racial uncertainties, came both as a throwback to nineteenth-century military campaigns and as a feature of twentieth-century modernity. Through to the present, Argentine military strategists have often conceived of the frontier south with reference to nineteenth-century challenges. In 1944, General Jorge A. Giovanelli wrote of the protection of the Southern Argentine frontier from Chile as "desert operations."[41] He wrote of military strategy as had Roca on secured transportation routes and a network of military bases in the Argentine south. Giovanelli's rendering of the combative spirit of the gaucho General Martín Miguel de Güemes was not meant as an inspirational metaphor; he wrote of Güemes's triumphs as a mid-twentieth century manual for soldiers on mountain warfare.[42] The armed forces' greatest strategic triumph of the twentieth century was the technology-driven push even further south with conquest of Antarctica, a new frontier devoid of Indigenous peoples *and* of racially compromised gauchos.

The Antarctic frontier captured the imagination of Argentines during the Cold War. It revived Malvinas and *Martín Fierro* moralities of an Argentina cast as hardworking and morally upright as a function of its frontier zones, while removing entirely the problem of the gaucho and of Indigenous Argentines. The language of Argentine advances on the "frozen continent" evoked earlier frontier victories. A 1979 full-page article described Argentine Antarctic triumphs as "una epopeya" (an epic patriotic moment), a term with no good English translation, normally reserved for General José de San Martín's heroic crossing of the Andes during Argentina's battles for independence from Spain and for the Conquest of the Desert.[43] A 1956 issue of the children's magazine *Billiken* included a cartoon that told the story of Swedish Antarctic Expedition (1901–03) whose ship had become stuck in the ice. It fell to an Argentine naval officer, Captain Julián Irízar, to lead a rescue mission that saved the European explorers. "Even as the rescue demonstrated the valour of our sailors," the cartoon explained, "it served as a courageous precedent for the defence of Argentine rights in Antarctica."[44] Thousands of middle-class Argentines read the Spanish

edition of *Life* magazine, which featured periodic news of US triumphs in Antarctic exploration.[45] News media presented long stories on the international history of the "conquest" of the "white continent" while documenting new adventures, as in the case of Edmund Hillary's 1958 trek to the South Pole. Argentina's stake in Antarctica placed it firmly within the modern, Western Cold War struggle in reported Soviet incursions. When a Soviet expedition planted its flag on an Antarctic island in 1958, Argentine media described the site as claimed jointly by Great Britain and Argentina. Under other circumstances, Argentines would never have shared the claim jointly with the United Kingdom. But in this instance, it was meant to reflect Argentina's bona fides as a member of the anti-Communist West on the Antarctic frontier.[46]

The new frontier was modern, military, and devoid of Indigenous peoples and the racially ambiguous gaucho. Argentina's claim to a slice of the continent derived from the principle of *res nullius* in international law, or, as an Argentine government document made the case in 1978, "a no man's land."[47] It was a frontier desert, but of a new sort. In 1948, the magazine *¡Aquí Está!* described Antarctica as the most important desert in the world, the object of a range of new Argentine scientific expeditions and discoveries, from the habits of the blue whale to the geological significance of the continent snow cap.[48] In 1958, naval Lieutenant Enrique Jorge Pierrou wrote of a long, arduous series of Argentine naval strategic objectives in Antarctica. They were all scientific, he argued, in meteorology, oceanography, seismology, geomagnetism, and glaciology.[49] In 1968 a team of scientists spent several months at an Argentine station researching local fauna. In a full-page article on the mission, the newspaper *La Nación* gave equal attention to the path-breaking nature of the work and to the fact that the investigators were all women, often overlooked in Argentine scientific circles.[50] Technology permitted a long series of firsts, including the arrival of the first tourist cruise ship from Argentina, cast by the media as the latest in a long line of grand human adventures.[51]

Antarctica also brought a foundational frontier narrative full circle. As they had been in the Conquest of the Desert, the armed forces were once again front-and-centre, only this time the emptied space was devoid of First Peoples and gauchos. Military narratives evoked longstanding frontier themes of patriotism and moral uplift. A long article in 1955 by Brigadier General Ángel María Zuloaga in the newspaper *La Nación* is typical of a genre of military reporting on the

new Antarctica frontier during the period of military rule in the late 1950s. "Let us build," he wrote, "before the altar of our homeland, an evocation of our distinguished compatriots dedicated to affirming our sovereignty in Antarctic territories." The author boasted of a succession of military assaults and dramatic conquests not of people, but of harsh landscapes. Of a famous 1942 flight over the continent by Admiral Gregorio Portillo, Zuloaga wrote, "the reign of silence in the frozen landscape was interrupted by the roar of the motors of the LV-ZEI [Avro Lincoln aircraft] that faced clouds, ice formations, and winds of 90–100 km/hour…."[52] A full-page newspaper spread a week earlier featured photographs of an ice shelf, a dogsled team of fifteen carrying supplies at the edge of an Argentine military base, and a monument on the ice to independence hero General José de San Martín.[53]

During the last Argentine dictatorship (1976–83), there was new intense media attention to the Antarctic as a frontier. Compared to the media reports from the late 1950s, the stories were focused less on historical heroics, more on imminent strategic threats, and less on romanticized tales of triumph. Underscoring the improbably good relations between the People's Republic of China and the military government in Chile, a 1979 editorial in *La Prensa* signalled a double strategic threat: Chile's growing interest in establishing a stake in Antarctica risked allowing communist China an entry point into South America.[54] In 1978, Argentina hosted the Second Special Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting. While a range of problems from the environment to telecommunications was considered, the Argentine government's message to its citizens by way of the media was that on the Antarctic frontier, the military was protecting Argentine strategic interests against Great Power aggressors. On the question of krill fishing, Argentina worked to reinforce international legal precedent on a 200-mile coastal sovereignty rule, which would apply to Malvinas and Antarctica as it did to the mainland.[55] Similar to how General Jorge E. Leal spoke in 1979 of the immense value of the continent's mineral wealth, and to how Vice Commodore Luis Remorino in 1980 celebrated the strengthening of Air Fore infrastructure in Antarctica, senior military officers gave regular interviews to the press on Argentina's militarization of the southern frontier to defend Argentine sovereign rights.[56] In a series of articles in November 1979, the distinguished journalist Oscar J. Gómez wrote of the urgent priority for the armed forces to halt the advances of Great Britain, Chile, and

other countries with designs on Argentina's Antarctic claims. Gómez's delimitation of Argentina's V-shaped territorial claim, extending south to the South Pole, replicated that of the Argentine military. The Eastern border of Argentina's claim at 75°17′S 25°0′W included Malvinas, joining the Antarctic and Malvinas frontier imaginaries.[57]

Conclusion

Argentina has undergone cultural transformations with unprecedented rapidity in the past twenty years on how people understand political, human, gender, and civil rights. That includes the problems that Borges and Cárcano puzzled over decades earlier. Once monuments to the conquest of Indigenous Argentines, museums began to feature exhibits of work by and about First Peoples in contexts other than an examination of the "primitive," the anthropological, or the distant past.[58] In 2011, as many as 100 Q'om Indigenous people marched from northern Argentina to downtown Buenos Aires to assert longstanding land and water claims, and to protest police violence. There was nothing subtly subversive about this incursion into the centre of national political and economic power. They adopted the in-your-face tactics of non-Indigenous groups in protesting human rights abuses. The Q'om occupied one lane of traffic along a major avenue for several days. Then, in an unprecedented negotiation with the city government, they moved to a grassy median where they camped out for seven months. It is unthinkable now that, as recently as the 1990s, the city provided the protesters with portable toilets, blankets, and other necessities, and even sent public health workers to check in periodically on the occupiers. Meanwhile, the Q'om met with human rights activists and politicians, addressed the media, and spoke with whomever wandered by showing an interest in their cause. When they decamped, they did so for reasons that combined the sad and the mundane: they could no longer afford to stay in Buenos Aires without the prospect of government action on their claims. Even so, this was a first encounter with First Peoples for many city dwellers, and, over the next decade, the community of human rights organizations began to make the struggles of First Peoples a priority.[59]

At the same time, writers and artists began to address the contradictions in how Argentines have traditionally depicted the frontier. César Jones's 2008 film *La Zona Cautiva* (The Captive Zone) alludes in its title to the pre-1900 fear among Argentines of being taken cap-

tive by Indigenous peoples.[60] It takes place on a small rural estate on the *pampas* where the rules of civilized society are upended by the normalization of subversive sexual practice among racially ambiguous protagonists. In 2015, the artists' collective Un Faulduo challenged the dark absurdity of *¡Saludos Amigos!* with doctored images of Walt Disney dressed as a gaucho riding a horse upside down, a Mapuche from southern Argentina seated on a horse while visiting Disneyland, and Donald Duck wandering through an eerily emptied children's park named for Dante Quintero.[61] In the 2014 novel *Los misterios de Villa Durazno,* a gaucho traverses two hundred years of Argentine history with his bloodied head under his arm. An allegory for a shattered nation, he sets the record straight (or not) on everything from the multiple brutal conquests of First Peoples to his fantasies of a Nazi plot to create a new Aryan race in Southern Argentina after the Second World War.[62]

Despite transformative shifts in how many Argentines understand First Peoples and rural areas, in some regards little has changed for most rural Argentines. First Peoples have achieved little in their fight for land, water, and other rights. Over the past twenty years, foreign mining companies have polluted Indigenous traditional lands. Rural workers have experienced falling wages and have seen their villages disappear as people move away because of rail service ending on many branch lines. Once a staple of even the most impoverished rural residents and an iconic symbol of life on the frontier, meat has become too expensive for many Argentines for the first time in memory. The frontier has ceased to capture the imagination of Argentines as it once did, as a vast expanse of emptied space, open to settlement and endless agricultural riches. That said, what most sharply set rural Argentina apart from the cities through the twentieth century was the persistence of ongoing, grinding poverty, First Nations' struggle for basic civil rights, and a sense among many white, urban Argentines that the countryside is linked with blackness.[63]

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DAVID M.K. SHEININ is professor of History and director of the History Graduate Program at Trent University. He is the winner of the Trent University Distinguished Research Award (2017) and has served as the university's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada mentor from 2015 to 2020. A member of the Argentine

National Academy of History, David has held the J. Franklin Jameson Fellowship in American History (Library of Congress/American Historical Association), and has served as the Edward Larocque Tinker Visiting Professor in Latin American History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His most recent books are *Race and Transnationalism in the Americas* (co-edited with Benjamin Bryce, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021) and *Armed Jews in the Americas* (co-edited with Raanan Rein, Brill, 2021).

DAVID M.K. SHEININ est professeur d'histoire et directeur du programme d'études supérieures en histoire à l'Université Trent. Il est le lauréat du Prix pour la recherche distinguée de l'Université de Trent (2017) et a été le conseiller avisé du Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada auprès de l'université de 2015 à 2020. Membre de l'Académie nationale d'histoire d'Argentine, David a été titulaire de la Bourse J. Franklin Jameson en histoire américaine (Library of Congress/American Historical Association) et a été professeur invité Edward Larocque Tinker en histoire de l'Amérique latine à l'Université du Wisconsin-Madison. Ses livres les plus récents sont *Race and Transnationalism in the Americas* (coédité avec Benjamin Bryce, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021) et *Armed Jews in the Americas* (coédité avec Raanan Rein, Brill, 2021).

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Círculo Militar, 1969), 9–11; Leandro Ruíz Moreno, *La peste histórica de 1871. Fiebre Amarilla en Corrientes y en Buenos Aires (1870-1871)* (Paraná: Nueva Impresora, 1949), 61–3. See Carlos P. Berri, *Las enfermedades del Soldado Argentino en la paz y la guerra* (Buenos Aires: Guidi Buffarini, 1912).

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13 Though Masoller is in Uruguay, the battle was central to Argentine identity formation as well. For much of the nineteenth century, Argentina was a patchwork of independent provinces and regions, several of which were much like Uruguay. Gaucho culture permeated both countries. Moreover, the littoral region, which incorporates both Uruguay and parts of Argentina extending along the Paraná and Paraguay rivers, has a shared culture that is distinct from the cultures and identities of other parts of Argentina. That said, some argue that the 1860s revolts of Ángel Vicente "Chacho" Peñaloza in La Rioja province marked the end of popular gaucho democracy in Argentina. See, for example, Patricio Fontana, "Una tanatografía del bandido: Sarmiento y el 'Chaco' Peñaloza," *Iberoamericana* 11, no. 43 (2011): 29–40.

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16 Miguel Angel Cárcano, *Evolución histórica del régimen de la tierra pública, 1810–1916* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria, 1972 [orig. 1925]), 165.

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18 "Retreta" can be translated as "retreat." In this case, it refers to the occasions on which the march is still played—popular evening gatherings at which a military band performs.

19 "Ali, Bonavena Exchange Insults: Dundee's Glasses Only Casualty," *Washington Post,* 2 December 1970, D3; Hector Luis Zabala, "El triunfo de Clay y la gran noche de Bonavena," *Gente,* 10 December 10 1970, 7–14. According to the historian Matthew Karush, one of several key moments in the construction of a white, Argentine identity came in the consolidation of the Peronist movement in the 1930s and 1940s. "By conflating this racially defined group [rural migrants to the cities] with the working class and with the followers of Perón, anti-Peronists constructed their own identity in both class and racial terms: they were middle-class, and they were white. Peronists, for their part, responded by embracing the racial slurs directed at them." Matthew B. Karush, "Blackness in Argentina: Jazz, Tango and Race Before Perón," *Past & Present* 216 (2012): 216. On the construction of whiteness in Argentina see also, Enrique Garguin, "'*Los Argentinos Descendemos de los Barcos'*: The Racial Articulation of Middle Class Identity in Argentina (1920–1960)," *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2007): 161–84; Ezequiel Adamovsky, *Historia de la clase media argentina: apogeo y decadencia de una ilusión, 1919–2003* (Buenos Aires: Booket, 2015).

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Through the Visual Culture of Peronism," in *Rethinking Race,* ed. Elena and Alberto, 155–83.

22 Enrique Rapela, "Conozcamos lo nuestro," *Fabián Leyes,* IV: 33 (June 1971): 39–40; Enrique Rapela, "Gurí mal enseñao," *Fabián Leyes,* VII: 71 (August 1974): 4–17.

23 See Eugenia Scarzanella, *Ni gringos ni indios: Inmigración, criminalidad y racismo en la Argentina, 1890–1940* (Bernal: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2015), 141–54. Twentieth-century Argentine culture was enormously and increasingly focused on what the historian Alina Mazzaferro describes as *porteñidad* (an ostensibly Argentine identity constructed by way of urban, Buenos Aires reference points). Mazzaferro did not coin the term, which was at the core of most problems around Argentine identity since the late nineteenth century. Male Argentine film stars performed that identity in baritone voices and in the way they carried themselves on and off the screen. These young urban heroes were "desired by women, loved by adolescent girls, and admired … by a masculine public." As much as any cultural markers, the *porteño* film star marginalized rural Argentines. See Alina Mazzaferro, *La cultura de la celebridad: Una historia del* Star System *en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 2018), 68; Gustavo Cabrera, *Hugo del Carril, un hombre de nuestro cine* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Culturales Argentinas, 1989), 28.

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