

# A Genealogy of Sexual Harassment of Female Passengers in Buenos Aires Public Transport

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## Abstract

This article traces a genealogy of sexual harassment in Buenos Aires public transport, analyzing the intersection between gender and mobility through cultural history. It focuses on the first decades of the twentieth century in which the city became a modern metropolis and women became more visible commuters using public transport. It deals with the tensions, interactions, expectations, and representations that emerged from the increasing presence of female passengers within the male imaginary and how women became a sexualized object in order to contextualize sexual harassment and explain how it became a “natural” practice over time. Finally, this article argues that the case study triggers the need to analyze gendered mobilities paying more attention to the relationship between sexuality and transport to understand passengers as sexualized bodies.

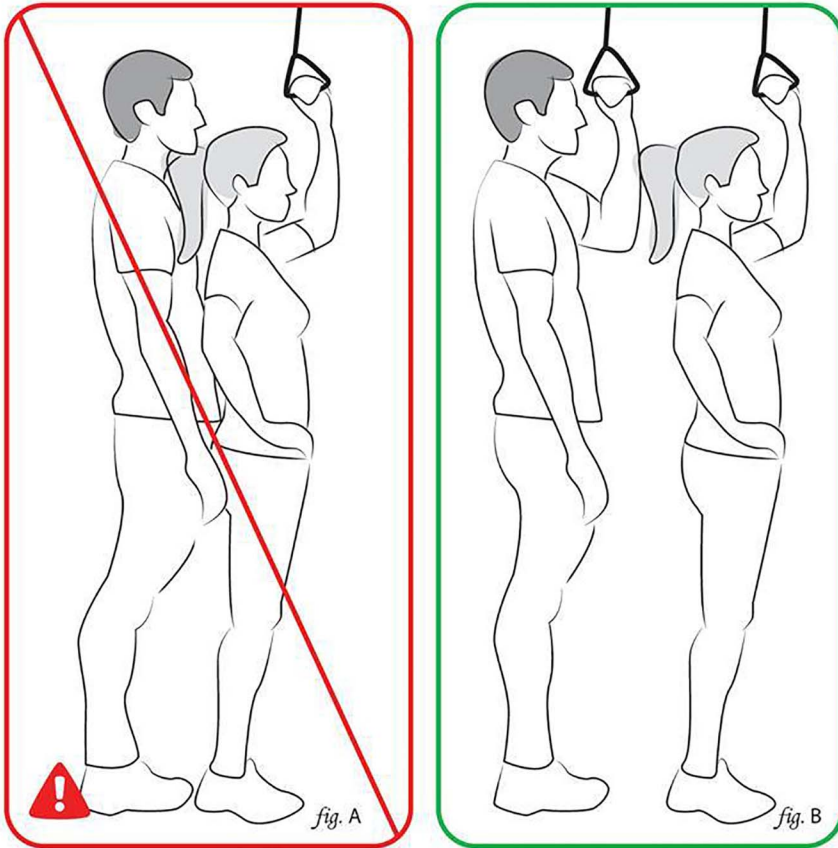
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In March 2013, a Facebook campaign led by Argentinian feminists pressured a beer company to recall an offensive advertisement for Woman’s Day. The company’s slogan said *#Perdón por buscar el roce arriba del bondi* (#Sorry for looking for the brush on the bus), and the posters were placed at bus stops.<sup>1</sup> Critics argued that the message was sexist and that it naturalized gender violence because “brush” means rubbing up. In the local slang, Argentinians use the word *apoyar* (lean into), which in Spanish also means “to support” or “to back,” to indicate the action of touching, from behind, a woman’s body with a male pelvis or penis. It usually occurs among unknown people and in crowded public spaces, and it is different from groping, catcalling, or staring. In public transport, moreover, a vehicle’s movement serves as an alibi to touch the other’s body, as shown by recent official campaigns in the New York City Subway, London Underground, Paris Metro, and Mexico City Metro. A survey in Latin America shows that rubbing up is the most frequent harassment.<sup>2</sup> In Mexico, it is called *arrimar*, in Brazil *sarrar*, in Chile *puntear*, and *serer* in France. Figure 1, an illustration made by a feminist group against harassment





## INSTRUCCIONES BÁSICAS PARA PASAJEROS



**ATENCIÓN:** Bajo ningún motivo se apoye inapropiadamente o busque el roce contra una mujer de modo intencional.

f / ACCIONRESPETO

t @ACCIONRESPETO

**Figure 1:** “Basic instructions for passengers” #TransporteLibreDeAcosos (Acción Respeto, 2015).

in public spaces, shows how this practice often takes place in Buenos Aires public transport.

Rubbing up in public transport is not as evident as other forms of harassment, since it can be difficult for the victim to distinguish between an unintentional touch and an inappropriate conduct. Campaigns or policies seek to make harassment more visible, as it is usually unreported. The recent feminist

actions in Buenos Aires help to avoid the euphemism of the term *apoyar* (the ambiguity between the unintentional and the intentional), indicating that it is a sexual harassment, and turn this experience into a public problem. There are no official statistics to give an account of harassment in Buenos Aires public transport, yet it is the sixth most dangerous city for women, according to a Thompson-Reuters Foundation survey about public transport.<sup>3</sup> Occasional news about sexual abuse in public transport (like a man who ejaculated on a woman's back in the subway during rush hour) have also triggered public debates about how often sexual harassment is experienced, whether it is an individual or a sociocultural problem, and to what extent it is a consequence of machismo, lack of manners, or lack of space (due to bad public service). It has triggered the idea of separating women from men in the subway like in Mexico, Rio de Janeiro, or Tokyo. Despite the lack of statistics, new legislation that punishes sexual street harassment has been recently approved, although no spatial intervention to prevent it was implemented. However, in 1927, there were women-only cars in the Buenos Aires Underground, showing that this problem is not new.

On the contrary, recent campaigns have stressed that many forms of male violence against women have been naturalized. This naturalization is exemplified by a dialogue between two women for a TV news report about the city's bus history in 2012. During the segment, the female anchor asked the female reporter about her travel experience and if she had experienced a rub-up. The reporter, smiling but shamefaced, replied, "I never escaped from it ... That it is something that happened to all of us. What can we do?"<sup>4</sup>

This article seeks to understand, from a historical perspective, how rubbing up in Buenos Aires public transport has become "natural." It focuses on the first decades of the twentieth century—when the city became a modern metropolis, women became more visible in the public sphere as commuters, and the first examples of harassment on transit were registered—and explores Argentinean films that give an account of how rubbing up has been culturally represented.

Outlining a genealogy of harassment in Buenos Aires public transport can help to understand how gender and mobility intersects in a particular historical and local context. A gendered transport history implies not only a reconstruction of women's stories as commuters or a tracing of sexual harassment but also a relational analysis that situates women within a male-dominated space and demonstrates the effects of this interaction on both groups.<sup>5</sup> Feminist geographers and mobility scholars have shown how "mobility shapes gender and gender shapes mobility," in terms of Susan Hanson, identifying different mobility patterns, perceptions and experiences of fear, and unequal access to transport between men and women.<sup>6</sup> This difference demonstrates, for example, not only that there is not a universal passenger but also that difference can express forms of subordination, inequality, and power asymme-

try.<sup>7</sup> As Françoise Collin points out, “verbal provocation, either kind or rude,” or “the threat of a possible violence” can work as forms of control and subordination, making feel women without “intimacy” in public space.<sup>8</sup>

Since mobilities are political, as Tanu Priya Uteng and Tim Cresswell state, they enable/disable/modify power practices and relations as gender ones.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, this article not only tackles mobility in public transport as an expression of social structures, like gender, but also tries to see how mobility operates in the (re)production of gender order, considering daily experience mobility as an embodied social practice over time, a lived practice with meaning, shaped by and shaping power.<sup>10</sup>

In Latin America, sexual harassment has been studied in many cities, mainly in gender geography focused on the use of space, to create policies for women’s safety and rights.<sup>11</sup> Fear, limits on freedom (of movement), and unequal access to the city are identified as violence against women, but gender and mobility have not been largely explored through a historical view.<sup>12</sup> For Buenos Aires, transport history has been largely studied by economic or urban history, while social and cultural historians have focused more on space, social groups, experts, and representations.<sup>13</sup> However, there has been a mobility blindness of social and gender history in Buenos Aires, although those studies have brought insights about women in public space.

This article also seeks to fill the gap between transport and gender history of Buenos Aires through an empirical inquiry about mobility experience and how gender relations in public transport were lived and represented. First, a brief outline of Argentinean scholarship on women’s and gender history is made to frame how women experienced public space in early twentieth-century Buenos Aires. Next, it contextualizes women’s use of public transport and how they were represented as new users of the system. Then, there is an analysis of cultural and media representations of female passengers found in main newspapers and magazines, advertising, photos, and literature, which shows how the presence of women affected male experience.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the article traces the hostile experiences confronted by female passengers in public transport through cultural representations—for example, how rubbing up was represented as quotidian and natural through films—and discussing the pursuit of potential solutions such as the creation of exclusive transport for women. Finally, the article tries to explain how harassment was naturalized, and proposes to approach rubbing up following Jo Stanley’s claim for the need to explore the relationship between transport and sexuality.<sup>15</sup>

## **“Out of Place”: Women in the Modern Buenos Aires**

Social and gender historians help us to understand the presence of Argentinean women in public spaces in the context of the rapid social, cultural,

and material transformations that affected Buenos Aires between 1880 and 1940—known as “metropolization.”<sup>16</sup> An urban expansion and material modernization was accompanied by a rapid population growth due to immigration, mainly from Europe; between 1887 and 1914, the population grew from 430,000 to 1.4 million, reaching 2.4 million in 1936. By the turn of the twentieth century, the urban growth rate of Buenos Aires was similar to Chicago and New York.<sup>17</sup> The city worked as an agent of modernization for nineteenth-century intellectuals and political leaders who pursued the values of “progress” and “civilization,” guided by principles ranging from liberalism, utilitarianism, enlightenment, and romanticism to positivism and epitomized by the dichotomy between “civilization” and “barbarism.”<sup>18</sup> According to Richard Morse, since the Hispanic-American culture was rejected, as it represented the colonial past, notions of civilization were imported from England and France, with Buenos Aires becoming an “Anglo-French capital city.”<sup>19</sup> However, modernization was a contradictory process with ambivalent reactions like in other cities of Europe or the Americas.<sup>20</sup> Buenos Aires’s modernity was characterized by early confidence in progress and a later mistrust of that same progress when material and social consequences became visible, particularly immigration, resulting in a turn toward a modernity based on material modernization, but with culturally and politically conservative values, marked by the different nationalisms.<sup>21</sup> Many immigrants achieved rapid social upward mobility or brought revolutionary ideologies (socialism, anarchism). Conservative intellectuals and politicians perceived modern Buenos Aires as corrupted by materialism, liberalism, imported fashions, leftist ideologies, and foreign languages.<sup>22</sup>

In this context, women participated in nearly every social and political sphere. Those from the most traditional and wealthiest families did so as charity ladies or Catholic activists. Middle- and working-class women, on the other hand, became reformists, freethinkers, suffragists, socialists, and anarchists. Female intellectuals, academic scholars, medics, and artists also represented an emerging public woman. Women also participated in the new capitalist economy, as both workers and consumers.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, women were also the targets of political and cultural discourses about modernization crisis since modernization challenged “the ideology of domesticity” that bound femininity to maternity as the natural identity of women.<sup>24</sup> Conservative female activists, as much as liberals, reformists, and socialists did, shared this association between female identity and maternity.<sup>25</sup> Marriage, seen as a requirement to be a mother, became the social norm for women of all social classes.<sup>26</sup>

Less time with children, the husband, and housework signified a threat for the cultural association between women and private space, and triggered anxieties and new forms of control, exemplifying what Doreen Massey calls the “uneasy relationship” between capitalism and patriarchy.<sup>27</sup> In Argentina, the paid work of women outside the home was seen as an unavoidable tem-

porary situation. The participation rate of women in the labor force between the late nineteenth century and the 1930s was about 30 percent; urban women worked as teachers, nurses, domestic service, clerks (mainly in fashion or department stores), seamstresses, telephone operators, and typists, using skills that were identified as naturally female.<sup>28</sup> Participation in the labor market was also marked by employment segregation (low-skilled industrial jobs, wage discrimination) and by sexual harassment from male bosses or colleagues.<sup>29</sup>

In cases of hardship, wage work for women was seen as a significantly better outcome than prostitution.<sup>30</sup> Prostitution was a major concern because it was legal for the first decades of the twentieth century when the majority of immigrants were men and prostitutes were in high demand among single and married men.<sup>31</sup> In this context, young women leaving suburban homes represented a major moral risk, and families worried that their daughters would be corrupted by life downtown.<sup>32</sup> Literature, tango songs, and cinema expressed such concerns through the character of the cabaret woman: *Milonguita*.

However, another figure represented the young female out of home: *Es-thercita*, which helps us to characterize Buenos Aires's female passengers. This character of the young worker and commuter became an icon of penny novels that "narrated love affairs of beautiful, but working-class young women with men of the upper classes."<sup>33</sup> These stories had a double moral, as Cecilia Tossounian claims. First, young female readers "inevitably identified with the heroines of these stories," but at the same time became well aware of the "moral consequences of this journey between the suburbs and downtown."<sup>34</sup> Media products depicted emotion, sentimentalism, and passion, helping to shape a new female subjectivity showing the tragic ending that befell women who did not follow the right path to marriage.<sup>35</sup>

Another characterization that helps us to understand the female passenger was the stigmatization of the female worker as a "loose or easy woman," with "dubious morals," not only because they left home but also because of how they dressed, wore their makeup, and engaged in the habit of smoking. Moreover, consumerism, usually identified with upper-middle-class young women but increasingly practiced by female workers, was considered a sign of frivolity.<sup>36</sup> The young, modern girl represented in magazines, films, penny novels, and other mass media products was also depicted as a "masculinised young woman ... fanciful, conceited and egocentric, and elsewhere as a sexually adventurous subject, who imitated foreign fashions and manners," signaling the disintegration of national identity.<sup>37</sup> Women who left home to work challenged the notion of women as mothers of new citizens, further endangering the national identity.<sup>38</sup>

In short, while new work, consumption, and leisure patterns increasingly brought women into public spaces and threatened the ideology of domesticity, normative practices and social and cultural discourses still made women feel "out of place." Nonetheless, looking at the representations of women in

a specific public space such as urban transport, it is possible to observe a “friendly” discourse that tries to include women as passengers. This particular discourse of transport companies highlighted increasing participation of women in public transport.

## Women in Public Transport

Because of urban expansion, traffic between residential suburbs and downtown increased. Residential growth on the urban periphery occurred at a fast pace, encouraged both by a property market that permitted purchases on an affordable installment plan and by a large public transport network of rail and tramways. After 1913, subways provided a rapid connection to downtown.<sup>39</sup> This fixed-line transit remained in place until the introduction of omnibuses in 1923, and *taxi colectivos* (automobiles used for public transport, carrying up to six passengers) in 1928 eroded tramway business. The public transport system, however, could not satisfy the continuously growing travel demands of residents living across the metropolitan region.

Representations of movement within the city tended to depict the life of white-collar employees rather than of the industrial worker. The latter lived close to their workplaces, in the south of the city, while the former tended to commute longer distances between the western suburbs and downtown. It is difficult to say how many women participated in daily journeys on Buenos Aires public transport during the first decades of the twentieth century, since statistics did not distinguish passengers by gender. Nonetheless, the urbanist Carlos della Paolera noted in 1929 that mainly men practiced the “pendulum-like movement” of the commuters between the periphery and downtown, but “representatives of the beautiful sex” were increasingly on the move as well.<sup>40</sup> Media images, personal histories, and popular literature all noted the presence of women on public transport, although in very small numbers. That women were a minority in the full sense of the word was illustrated by a 1928 drawing of subway passengers, published by an important magazine for middle-classes families and women, *El Hogar* (Home), where a female passenger is the object of male gazes (Figure 2). The faces and clothes of men represented in this picture signaled the ethnic and social heterogeneity of Buenos Aires, while the image of three female passengers depicted here are more homogeneous. Posters at the back, on the wall, advertise shop sales for women, yet it is not clear if the female passengers on the platform waiting for the train are going to work or going shopping. It is possible they are both workers and consumers at the same time like “the young modern female worker” described by María Paula Bontempo and Graciela Queirolo.<sup>41</sup>

Transport company advertising, a discourse that tends to shape the ideal passenger, also offered representations of female passengers. Companies de-



**Figure 2:** A representation of Buenos Aires Underground commuters. “Los porteños de hoy,” *El Hogar*, 14 December 1928, 149.

pictured travel not merely as a matter of daily necessity but also as a form of consumption, a space that was safe and comfortable for middle-class women and white-collar female workers. A good example of this comes from the covers of *El Riel Porteño* (1925), the magazine of the Anglo-Argentine Tramway Company (AATC), the largest tramway company of Buenos Aires. A cover advertising purses that showed a woman boarding the tram after leaving her daughter with a nanny, emphasizing the woman as a passenger and indicating the tramway as a female-friendly mode of transport, focused on a more controversial figure for “the ideology of domesticity”: the woman who leaves home and family.

Other representations in the magazine reinforced the image of women as novel passengers. For example, the instructions to women on how to position their legs as they got off the tram in motion—because it rarely stopped—or a picture of a guard helping a woman with a child as an example of “attention” (*galantería*). Both discourses are normative, but if the former sought to train a new passenger about practical skills for safety, the latter told male passengers how to behave in relation to female passengers.

To contextualize and grasp the gendered experiences of daily mobility in Buenos Aires public transport, it is helpful to explore the predominant discourses and images diffused through main newspapers and magazines, looking also at photos and cartoons, as well as literature and films, since they show that the presence of women in public transport triggered a myriad of representations in the urban imaginary.



## Representations about the Female Passenger: Male Views and Experiences

A focus on female voices would give us an idea of how women perceived themselves as passengers, but most recurrent discourses and images in cultural products tended to be male views. Viewing female passengers through the eyes of their fellow male commuters sheds a great deal of light onto how a daily journey was a gendered experience. Representations were diverse, but routinely oscillated between romanticized and eroticized depictions of female passengers. These representations give a sense of how women in public spaces were perceived by men through male expectations, excitement, and anxieties about sharing spaces with them.

Sensuality was a common trope found in short stories, penny novels, cartoons, and advertising, and the female body expressed it as a target of male gazes. The street or the department store were spaces in which people could see and be seen, desire and be desired, but public transport vehicles offered a peculiar spatial and bodily arrangement to gaze and flatter. The entrances to Buenos Aires subway stations are a good example. As shown by several city images, the angle of the stairs allowed for the photographing of passengers from above and below. A 1929 slimming tea advertisement, which targeted women, depicts a gentleman watching two ladies going down the stairs. The ad stresses charm (to be seen) as the benefit of the product—“slender figure, clean skin, irradiating youthful charm.” This representation is more discreet if compared with a picture about the charming, young Buenos Aires women, published in 1928 by *El Hogar*, an important magazine for middle-class families, where the stairs become like a catwalk for models. Cheerful and slim young women, carrying bags, boxes, and books (representing the female consumer rather than worker), are going up the stairs, and the viewpoint clearly stresses their legs and curves.<sup>42</sup>

Body shape, particularly legs became explicitly the target of male gazes. Vehicles like the Imperial tram and the double-decker, in which the spiral staircase was open and at the back, allowed women’s legs to be watched when going up the stairs. A comic illustration captioned “The omnibus has its advantages” demonstrates this situation in 1924, showing male excitement at the presence of female bodies. A very interesting representation of voyeurism is shown by one of the most popular Argentinean films of the 1930s, *Los muchachos de antes no usaban gomina* (The boys didn’t wear hair gel before) (1937). The film portrays Buenos Aires at the end of the nineteenth century to emphasize the moral decay of the 1930s. Although the film tried to exalt traditional values and customs, it shows the double standard of a machismo culture when a fiancé—an aristocratic man—is caught by a couple of friends (one of them his future brother-in-law) bending down in a corner to look at the legs of female passengers boarding a horse-drawn tramway. The friends’

first reaction is to condemn the practice (“A serious man like you, are you not ashamed?”) and warn him that his fiancée will know. But the man argues immediately that he is surprised by the insolence of Buenos Aires women, associating female “insolence” to the moral decadence of the nation: “Poor country, where we’ll end up!” But also of interest here is how the friends change their attitude showing a double standard. While the fiancé points at two women lifting their long skirts to board a tram (and the camera zooms in on their calves), one of the friends says, “He is not stupid (*otario*) your brother-in-law. Tomorrow I will settle here,” pointing with two fingers that he will come to watch, too. The poet Raúl Scalabrini Ortíz, arguing against the catcall, pointed out in 1930 that for young Buenos Aires men, the real flirting was the gaze: “In the street, tramways ... subway cars, everywhere he is alone with a pretty woman, the *porteño* [Buenos Aires men] shoots a glance clearly erotic.”<sup>43</sup>

Along with the view, the chance of body contact triggered expectations and excitement. Public transport vehicles were diverse and arranged passenger bodies in different ways, generating several forms of proximity, as Wolfgang Schivelbush shows through a comparison between the isolated compartment of the European railway and the shared space of the American car.<sup>44</sup> Jo Stanley claims that different relationships between sexuality and transport are established according to the mode of transport and travel.<sup>45</sup> In the sources analyzed here, it is not possible to identify a systematic difference between modes in Buenos Aires. Nevertheless, the forms and dimensions of different transport modes created different experiences and perceptions: the larger and more crowded the vehicle, the worse the perception of discomfort. Depending on the model, trains, subways, and trams could force passengers to sit in opposite seats, seeing one another, or in a row like buses. The *taxi colectivo*, until 1933, was a car with two lines of seats. While all the passengers traveled seated in a car, the other modes of transport carried seated and standing people. Yet, in every form of travel, passengers had to deal with each other, managing “personal distance” in a situation of bodily proximity (proxemia) because “for the brief duration of the journey women and men alike were confined together within a narrow, intimate space.”<sup>46</sup> In such an intimate social space, passengers “share the same atmosphere” and each other’s bodily temperature, breath, scent, and diseases—as the Uruguayan novelist Enrique Amorín put it in 1933, depicting the experience in a *taxi colectivo*.<sup>47</sup> But they can also touch each other, as Baldomero Fernández Moreno, known as the poet of Buenos Aires, said in his poem “Underground”: “With my forehead I could brush against her body” while he was traveling seated in the subway beside a woman who was standing.<sup>48</sup>

I argue that this closeness signified a permanent tension between bodily proximity and social distance, which are culturally shaped and thus variable through time. Interaction could be established simply with eye contact but

also when lurching and crowded passengers might touch one another unintentionally, unexpectedly leading to a social interaction—whether friendly or embarrassing. This kind of proximity was a motif of romantic stories within the male imaginary. The short story “Mi Noviecita del Tranvía” (My girlfriend from the tramway), published in 1925 by *El Riel Porteño*, illustrates very well a man’s expectations of initiating a relationship with an unknown woman during a daily journey as much as the intention of the company to show the tramway as a space of sociability. He was a worker, in love with a female employee who took the same tramway every day. He used to “let her choose a seat” and then “sat beside her.” One day, a collision between the tram and a car provoked an interaction between them. The man thanks “Providence” for the accident because the woman “caught my arm and sought refuge in my chest.” It was for him a “delicious second that I will never forget.”<sup>49</sup>

In large vehicles like the tramway, or buses and trains, a man like this protagonist must find strategies to sit beside a woman when it did not happen by chance. However, when taxis started to be used for public transport (*colectivo*), they triggered expectations for new forms of interaction and sociability. When it appeared in 1928, the writer Roberto Arlt celebrated, in his daily newspaper column in *El Mundo*, the chance to sit beside “young, pretty women” because traveling with a young lady in a car was “something profoundly appealing.”<sup>50</sup> In 1933, however, the *taxi colectivo* underwent several modifications, becoming larger and more like a minibus (nine passengers). In a literary supplement, another writer lamented the passing because the “classic *colectivo*” allowed “direct contact between the kind male passenger and the nice female one,” whereas intimacy was lost when it became larger and crowded, and behavior more regulated.<sup>51</sup>

Expectation and excitement provoked by bodily proximity in the “reduced space” of a vehicle like the *taxi colectivo* are also shown in Amorín’s story of a journey in a six-passenger *colectivo* (three women and three men). The author thoroughly describes the bodies of three female passengers, matching the stereotype of the modern female worker (the *Esthercita*). Although smart, their clothes are similar; even “the quality of the rouge in their lips” seems to be the same. After describing their hats, Amorín looks down to detail the “six legs” that “occupy the reduced space,” focusing on the type of stockings (“cotton,” “silk”) and leg positions (“open,” “closed”), as well as how the knees “swing.”<sup>52</sup> Amorín uses the journey as the starting point for love stories between passengers in which the female passenger’s aspirations and desires of falling in love and getting married are stressed. As Tossounian claims, tango songs and penny novels warn these naïve, young, working-class women against being cheated or “falling in love with a wealthy man and ending up abandoned.”<sup>53</sup>

If public transport appeared as a space of flirting, young women, rather than being passive, could be depicted as women with desire or what I call a “hunting woman.” “*Una Hermana Fea y Otra Linda No Deben Salir Juntas*” (A

pretty young lady and her ugly sister should not go out together) is another Arlt story published in *El Mundo* in 1928. In the story, the author gives an account of interactions between two young ladies and a young man in the subway car through reading their faces and gaze interplays. The stereotype of the hunting female is stressed in this story because there are women who want to conquer a male passenger. Arlt points out that the sisters “do not go in the car for women that the company has introduced for the female sex during the rush hour” and highlights the women’s strategy: “they enjoy traveling in the mixed car” because they are looking for a “good man.” The story inverts expected gender roles as the young man feels embarrassed by the sisters’ glances: “the passenger dares to look at [the sisters], shyly and carefully like someone who ventures into virgin lands.”<sup>54</sup>

Such women’s desires and aspiration that could be accomplished in a public transport was depicted by another novelist, Manuel Mujica Láinez, during a suburban railway journey (c. 1950), when “two girls who, with eyes wide open, watch from a window the train go by. What are they looking for? Are they expecting, perhaps, the zealous gentleman who will come to free them?”<sup>55</sup> The single woman who expected to find a man on public transport is, in fact, satirized by these male writers, reproducing the stereotype of the modern female worker as “a sexually adventurous subject” and, somehow, condemning her attitude. The “female hunter” shows women’s agency, desire, and the use of the mobility space as a place of encounter and, probably, freedom. However, the image of women as a target of men’s object of seduction prevailed. For example, the police considered the catcall (*piropo*), today considered a form of street harassment, a moral offense and a contravention in 1906.<sup>56</sup> A comic illustration from 1925 shows several situations of catcalling, highlighting that men were not concerned about being fined. While Raúl Scalabrini Ortíz celebrated the gaze, he criticized the catcall and how young men boasted of their “conquests” in public transport.

Examples of public transport as an opportune space for men to approach women are abundant, like the story of the tramway girlfriend. Indeed, the expectation of encounters was expressed by romantic male narratives as much as the stories about the hunting female. However, evidence of women expressing a romanticized view of the journey in public transport has not yet been found. On the contrary, what can be seen throughout the period are permanent inconveniences for female passengers, which go from discomfort to hostility.

## **Hostility: Lack of Manners or Sexual Harassment**

Past evidence reveals that passengers suffered a wide variety of inconveniences while on Buenos Aires public transport. Newspapers, political pam-

phlets, popular magazines, and public reports all illustrated the contrast between actual daily experiences of passengers and the promises of modern transport advertising made. But women faced additional pressures and confronted “inconveniences” unique to their position. The physical toll traveling took on women was one aspect often highlighted. They were victims of shoves and other bumps and bruises. This kind of aggression indicated that real comfort and safety were hard to find in public transport. Much of the hostility suffered by female passengers informed by the press seem to be related to lack of manners, the body struggle within the crowd, rather than sexual harassment.

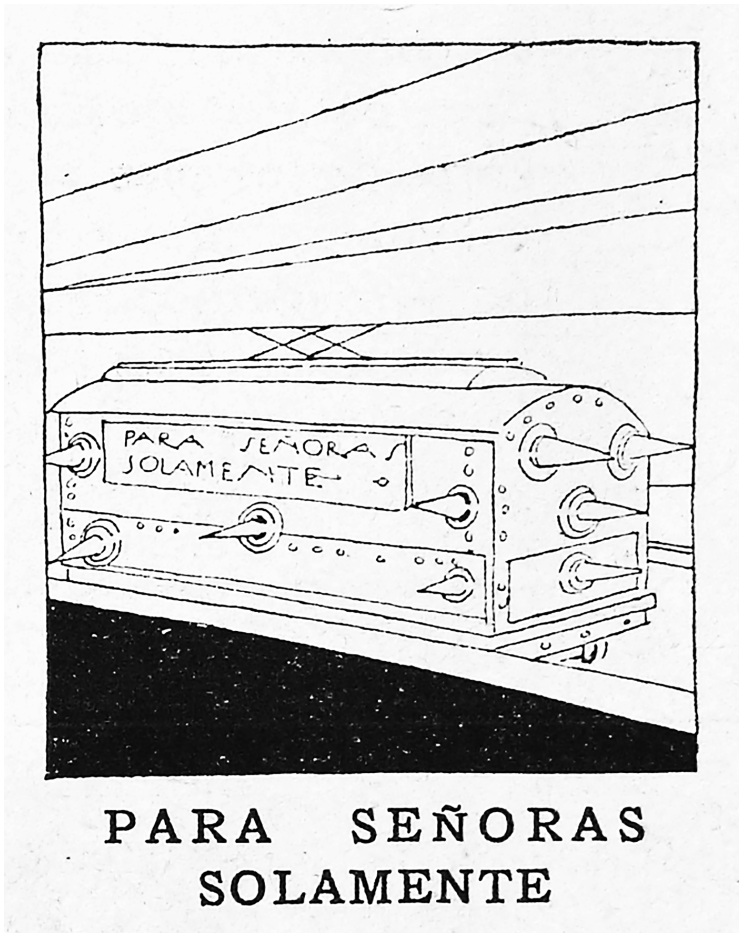
One of the few female voices in the press, Josefina Marjous, pointed out in 1930 that a tramcar was a “battlefield” where “it was forbidden to be comfortable.” From the viewpoint of a middle-class woman, and talking ironically about gender equality, she said, “my inner feminist feels happy in a tram. This is the site where men abandon their traditional privileges. They concede us equal rights and, naturally, we women rapidly abuse it: by offering the foot to be stomped on; rejecting hypothetical courtesy.”<sup>57</sup>

This is not only a woman’s perception. Abundant discourses like this condemned certain behaviors, mostly how men behave, that were considered contrary to codes of urbanity or etiquette. Male passengers smoking, carrying on coarse discussion, or not giving a seat to a woman, or guards treating passengers rudely, were said to signal a lack of manners (*incultura*) or civility in itself. While there was no clear ethnic or class pattern in these discourses, there was an obvious gendered component. This seemed to take the form of addresses to the multitude of male passengers—either at the “gentleman” who carelessly moved his cane, hitting other people, or the male worker who cleaned under his nails in the bus or tram—as shown by the 1928 column “Don’t Be Impolite” published by the magazine *Mundo Argentino* to highlight problems of etiquette. Women, however, were rarely depicted as perpetrators of bad behaviors, appearing instead as their victims. Indeed, most behaviors were seen as significantly worse if they were carried out in front of a female passenger. The lack of courtesy, expressed through not giving up a seat, was one of the most typical complaints in newspaper columns and satirical cartoons.

These inconveniences seem to have triggered the AATC’s creation of *coches exclusivo para señoras* (“women-only cars”) in the subway in 1927. This car was held exclusively for the use of women, children, and old people—populations considered weaker than working-age men or seen as likely victims of the crowd. This measure was taken to provide more comfort, according to the company, although the causes of discomfort were not mentioned. In 1944, during the transport crisis created by World War II, complaints about the treatment of women on public transport in the press led to the implementation of the women-only car for the whole subway network and some bus lines. From a technical point of view, the female car clashed with the maximization of the service, and it was dismissed the same year.<sup>58</sup>

In 1944, the demand for more safety and comfort for female passengers stemmed from an exception where the lack of oil, rolling stock, and spare parts affected the normal service of tramways and buses and, in turn, the daily experience of passengers. However, the earlier inception of the all-female car in 1927 indicates that women's mobility experience was already problematic. But what kind of problems did women go through?

"Sex-segregated trains" were already in use in New York (1909) and Tokyo (1920). Today, the policy is applied in several cities to tamp down on sexual harassment. Argentinean sources, on the contrary, did not make it clear that sexual implications underlay the choice of gender segregation. Yet, in an illustration that accompanied an article against the measure in 1928, a subway car appeared ironclad denoting a chastity belt (Figure 3). The author, Julio



**Figure 3:** The women-only car represented as an ironclad vehicle. "For Women Only," *Caras y Caretas*, 3 March 1928.

Indarte, pointed out that “the separation stems from an absurd Puritanism,” denoting that this policy was related to some form of sexual abuse. Moreover, “the act of separating men from women in public spaces says little in favor of the culture of a people” and implied a cultural and international discredit (“in the eyes of the foreigner”) for a progressive metropolis like Buenos Aires. If the city was shaped by the ideals of progress and civilization, he sees this measure as a sign of barbarism—Buenos Aires was becoming provincial (“a small village”).<sup>59</sup>

An explicit reference to groping in public transport can be found in the anarchist newspaper *La Protesta* on 3 October 1928. The article by Alfredo García, “*Del ambiente en el tranvía obrero*” (the atmosphere in the tramway for workers), outlines the daily abuse suffered by female workers in the tramway, pointing out the “immoral behavior” of men who groped female passengers. As explained by gender historians, female workers were accustomed to abuse and harassment at the hands of male bosses and male coworkers.<sup>60</sup> This seems to be the case, as García denounced in a well-known and widely read working-class newspaper. This kind of article was not frequent, though, and further exploration into feminist publications might shed light on this issue.

What the press did not explicitly name can be found in films. Between 1940 and 1970, several well-known Argentinean films featured scenes in buses, tramcars, and subways, where sexual harassment was shown as a common practice. These films illustrate how women, rather than passive victims, reacted but also how other passengers tended not to condemn the men who touched. The 1955 film *Catita es una dama* (Catita is a lady) shows a very famous comedian, Nini Marshal, being harassed by male passengers on a bus. The protagonist, who is traveling standing, moves down the bus when she sees two men looking at her—one of them even turns to face her. They follow the protagonist, approaching her from behind. One of them stares at her but looks the other way when he touches her. She yells and hits the men with her purse while she says, “Learn to respect a girl!” All the male passengers also react but against her, yelling, defending the two men. The fuss increases but rapidly dissipates as if nothing happened. The film is a comedy whose frame allows it to simultaneously ridicule the situation and obscure the abuse. Rubbing up was represented as a common and generalized practice, but social disapproval of the behavior was ambiguous. On the one hand, the protagonist’s role contrasts with the image of a passive woman who endures harassment without reacting. On the other, the men’s reactions trivialize the woman’s response and make it appear exaggerated.<sup>61</sup>

Rubbing up appears in a number of other comedy films in which harassment is not only minimized but also legitimized through laughter. This is clear in films like 1958’s *Las Apariencias Engañan* (Appearances deceive), in which abuse in the subway is represented as wiliness. The protagonist, a man holding a big pack, moves through a crowded subway carriage and stops behind

a woman who after few seconds reacts as if she was touched, and yells, “Take care! Impudent!” “Take it easy, young girl, the masseur must be someone else. Me?” the man responds seriously, showing his pack. She moves away, and the camera shows that behind her was a short man who, before following the girl, winks at the protagonist. He laughs, celebrating the short man’s slyness. A still more bizarre representation can be found in 1981’s *La Pulga en la Oreja* (The flea in the Ear), in which a couple is almost assaulted by a crowd of male passengers in the subway. The man, a famous comedian, becomes angry but makes jokes while she (a revue actress) yells. Both leave the train half-naked.

Finally, in the famous 1971 film *La Mary* (The Mary), rubbing up is in the scene in which the main characters meet up while traveling on an old bus; the film is situated in 1941. Susana Giménez plays a young, pretty woman waiting for the bus in the middle of the night in the port district. It is an everyday scene in a working-class neighborhood, but there is an atmosphere of defenselessness, something stressed by the contrast between passengers—the young, white woman among old port workers. Nonetheless, when a man touches Mary, she silently responds with a stomp. The act passes unnoticed. An old man offers her his seat, but she refuses it and keeps standing. The camera zooms in on her face among the crowd of men because someone calls her attention. It is Carlos Monzón (world champion boxer), the stereotype of the Argentinean macho, who looks and smiles at her. Gaze and smile are returned. She gets off the bus in a deserted street, and he follows her.

In this film, sexual harassment is not vulgarized but rather naturalized and, even worse, is shown as an intimate situation between the passenger who abuses and the abused woman. Mary handles the situation by herself and does not involve anyone else. The act becomes invisible and silenced in the middle of the crowd. (As shown above, when women complain, no one supports them.) *La Mary* adds another element. Although this scene shows harassment as an experience that female passengers went through, the bus became here a space of cordiality and even a space for romantic encounter. This representation expresses more the male’s views and desires than women’s experience.

## Conclusions

Exploring the period in which Buenos Aires women began to frequently use public transport to work or for leisure places harassment in a wider context to understand how gender and mobility have intersected. It shows that women’s mobility affected a space predominantly for men, affecting both groups but in different ways, producing uneven mobilities that now seem “natural.” As Georgine Clarsen says, this study might help to see “how differences are experienced and made to seem natural, how particular social spaces are structured and imbued with meaning, and how change occurs.”<sup>62</sup>



Commuting in Buenos Aires public transport involved new encounters and sharing time between anonymous men and women, a negotiation of bodily proximity in a confined public space. As gender historians have shown, the more mobile and more visible women became in Buenos Aires, the greater pressure was put on the “ideology of domesticity.” The increasing presence of female passengers was recognized and even promoted, but at the same time, some practices made women feel “out of place” or, because they were considered “out of place,” less respected.

Although rubbing up is not named in that period (even the term *apoyar* is not used), female passengers were targets of the male gaze, catcalls, and other forms of hostility (mentioned as a lack of manners), pushing gender segregation in public transport. This early evidence, and how rubbing up is represented by movies, shows that violence was a usual experience in daily mobility and therefore a repetitive embodied practice over time that reproduces power relations reaffirming gender differences.<sup>63</sup> Rubbing up, however, is a specific power operation produced by mobility in public transport. The repetitive characteristic of this daily practice has naturalized harassment, making it something considered “normal.”

Sexual violence against female passengers can rise when social norms are in crisis, as Barbara Schmucki has shown in the history of tramways in Germany during World War II.<sup>64</sup> But what we see here it is a normalization of a form of abuse. Although practices and meanings change over time, this case study shows the persistence of certain abusive practices that female passengers once went through, mostly negotiating individually although surrounded by others in a confined space. Films show the lack of an immediate social condemnation and how harassment can be legitimated by laugh.

Cultural history helps to understand how experiences of mobility were represented—an important aspect (considering mobility is a meaningful practice) nearly unexplored by contemporary studies on women and city in Latin America. As media products were mostly produced by men, the cultural history of daily mobility in Buenos Aires sheds light on male perceptions, anxieties, and expectations (their own mobility experience) triggered by women’s mobility. On the one hand, there is a discourse about civility that tries to control male behaviors; on the other, discourses show what Alisa Freedman found for the Tokyo Metro in the 1920s: young female passengers provoke male excitement.<sup>65</sup> In the Japanese case, the figure was the schoolgirl. As portrayed by Buenos Aires culture, “the young modern women” can be considered the stereotype of the female commuter. The romantic or erotic but objectified representations of female passengers, and even the image of the female hunter, show passengers as sexualized bodies, as Jo Stanley claims.<sup>66</sup>

Commuting in Buenos Aires public transport was a space-time of transgression in which social norms and the (male) idea of civility seem to fail signifying a “moral” or cultural crisis, where flirting, love, and contacts could

take place. Further research on discourses about the experience of women on Buenos Aires public transport is needed to assess whether women attached any excitement to the chance of bodily proximity or if transit love stories were a central part of the female imaginary—which would show public transport as a space of freedom or agency, as the figure of hunting woman suggests—and not only deprivation, as studies on gender urban violence usually depict. The sexual implication in these practices cannot be explained only by gender differences but through a transport-sexuality analysis. As Stanley observes, “reciprocal respectful sexual pleasures” are rarely linked to transport, and the transport-sexuality relationship tends to be about “abusive and exploitative practices.”<sup>67</sup>

Recognizing travelers as sexualized bodies stresses the importance of the (corporeal) body, as Stanley points out, to disentangle how flirting, excitement, gazes, and different ways of bodily contact involved in daily mobility experiences expresses a transport-sexuality relationship. Furthermore, transport is the site not only where these practices take place, but also that shapes, produces, and stimulates them.

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## Notes

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1. “Repudio a la campaña en Vía pública de Cerveza Schneider” [Repudiation of Schneider Beer’s advertising campaign], <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Repudio-a-la-campa%C3%B1a-en-via-p%C3%BAblica-de-cerveza-Schneider/177894155692591> (accessed 27 April 2017). All sources in Spanish are translated by the author unless otherwise indicated.

2. Patricio Rozas and Liliana Salazar, *Violencia de género en el transporte público: Una regulación pendiente* (Santiago: CEPAL, 2015).
3. Survey available at Crina Boros, "Exclusiva: El transporte público en ciudades de Latinoamérica es el más peligroso para las mujeres," *Reuters América Latina* (29 October 2014), <http://lta.reuters.com/article/topNews/idLTAKBN0II17720141029?pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=0>.
4. Video available at "Vivo en Argentina: La historia de los colectivos—24-09-12 (1 de 2)," YouTube video, 16:29, filmed 24 September 2012, posted by "TV Pública Argentina" (25 September 2012), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjVe9RbVLnE>
5. Robin Law, "Beyond 'Women and Transport': Towards New Geographies of Gender and Daily Mobility," *Progress in Human Geography* 23, no. 4 (1999): 567–588; Margaret Walsh, "Gendering Transport History: Retrospect and Prospect," *Journal of Transport History* 23, no. 1 (2002): 1–8.
6. Susan Hanson, "Gender and Mobility: New Approaches for Informing Sustainability," *Gender, Place and Culture* 17, no.1 (2010): 5–23.
7. Paola Jirón, "Implicancias de género en las experiencias de movilidad cotidiana urbana en Santiago de Chile," *Revista Venezolana de Estudios de la Mujer* 12, no. 29 (2007): 173–198.
8. Françoise Collin, "Espacio doméstico, espacio público," in *Ciudad y Mujer* (Madrid: Seminario permanente Ciudad y Mujer, 1999), 231–237, here 236.
9. Tanu Priya Uteng and Tim Cresswell, *Gendered Mobilities* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), 1.
10. John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007); Ole Jensen, "Flows of Meaning, Cultures of Movements: Urban Mobility as Meaningful Everyday Life Practice," *Mobilities* 4, no. 1 (2009): 138–158; Tim Cresswell, "Towards a Politics of Mobility," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28, no. 1 (2010): 17–31.
11. Ana Falú and Olga Segovia, *Ciudades para convivir sin violencia contra las mujeres* (Santiago: Ediciones Sur, 2007); Mónica Colombara, "Violencia urbana, su relación con la violencia de género," *Revista Geográfica de América Central* 2, no. 47E (2011): 1–16; Paula Soto, "El miedo de las mujeres a la violencia en la Ciudad de México: Una cuestión de justicia especial," *Revista INVI* 27, no. 75 (2012): 145–169.
12. Few works on mobility history have focused on practices and representations and highlight some gender aspects. Guillermo Giucci, *The Cultural Life of the Automobile* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012) stresses the relation between car and eroticism; Tomás Errázuriz, "La Experiencia del Tránsito: Motorización y Vida Cotidiana en el Santiago Metropolitano, 1900–1931" (PhD diss., Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2010) identifies public transport as a erotic space in Chile; an account of women and walking in 1920s Buenos Aires through the poet Alfonsina Storni can be found in Claudia Darrigrandi, "Ciudad, Cuerpo y Traje: La Flâneuse en Buenos Aires," *Revista Iberoamericana* 94, no. 222 (2008): 85–99.
13. See Valeria Gruschetsky, "Argentina in Motion: Connections between Mobility, Politics, and Culture in Recent Historiography," *Mobility in History* 4 (2013): 138–141.
14. This is ongoing research, and thus materials like feminist pamphlets that can provide women voices about their own experience and views must still be consulted. Nonetheless, those publications were not hegemonic.

15. Jo Stanley, "On Buffer-kissers, Bus-station Skanks and Mile-high Clubs: Sexualities and Transport," *Mobility in History* 4 (2013): 29–49.
16. Adrián Gorelik, *La Grilla y el Parque* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 1998).
17. Charles Sargent, *The Spatial Evolution of Greater Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1870–1930* (Tempe: Center for Latin American Studies, Arizona State University, 1974).
18. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo: Or, Civilization and Barbarism* (1845; repr., New York: Penguin, 1998).
19. Richard Morse, "The Multiverse of Latin American Identity, c. 1920–c. 1970," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America. Latin America since 1930, Ideas, Culture, and Society*, ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1–127, here 25.
20. Richard Dennis, *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); José Luis Romero, *Latinoamérica: Las ciudades y las ideas* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2001).
21. Beatriz Sarlo, *Una Modernidad Periférica: Buenos Aires, 1920 y 1930* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Nueva Visión, 1988); Romero, *Latinoamérica*.
22. Mirta Zaida Lobato and Juan Suriano, *Nueva Historia Argentina: Atlas Histórico de la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2000).
23. Dora Barrancos, *Mujeres en la sociedad argentina: Una historia de cinco siglos* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2007).
24. Graciela Queirolo, "Mujeres que trabajan: una revisión historiografía del trabajo femenino en la ciudad de Buenos Aires (1890–1940)," *Nuevo Topo* 3 (2006): 29–49.
25. Barrancos, *Mujeres en la sociedad argentina*; Mirta Lobato, "Lenguaje laboral y de género en el trabajo industrial," in *Historia de las mujeres en la Argentina: Siglo XX*, ed. Claudia Gil Lozano, Valeria Pita and María Gabriela Ini (Buenos Aires: Taurus, 2000), 95–116.
26. María Paula Bontempo and Graciela A. Queirolo, "Las 'chicas modernas' se emplean como dactilógrafas: Feminidad, moda y trabajo en Buenos Aires (1920–1930)," *Bicentenario* 11, no. 2 (2012): 51–76, esp. 53.
27. Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 180.
28. Queirolo, "Mujeres que trabajan."
29. Lobato, "Lenguaje laboral"; Barrancos, *Historia de las mujeres*, 144.
30. Queirolo, "Mujeres que trabajan."
31. Dora Barrancos points out that prostitution was the reverse of a repressed sexuality and a double standard that claimed the marriage as sacred institution and sex only for reproduction. *Mujeres en la sociedad argentina*.
32. Diego Armus, "El Viaje al Centro: Tísicas, Costureritas y Milonguitas en Buenos Aires, 1910–1940," *Salud Colectiva* 1, no. 1 (2005): 79–96.
33. Cecilia Tossounian, "The Body Beautiful and the Beauty of Nation: Representing Gender and Modernity (Buenos Aires 1918–1939)" (PhD diss., European University Institute, 2010), 148.
34. *Ibid.*, 152.
35. Beatriz Sarlo, *El imperio de los sentimientos: Narraciones de circulación periódica en la Argentina 1917–1927* (Buenos Aires: Catálogos, 1985), 79.

36. Bontempo and Queirolo, "Las 'chicas modernas'"
37. Tossounian, "The Body Beautiful," 123.
38. Queirolo, "Mujeres que trabajan"; Lobato, "Lenguaje laboral"
39. First line opened in 1913, second in 1930, two more during the 1930s, and the fourth in 1944.
40. Carlos della Paolera, *Buenos Aires y sus Problemas Urbanos* (Buenos Aires: Olkos, 1977), 22.
41. Bontempo and Queirolo, "Las 'chicas modernas'"
42. *Para Ti*, 10 September 1929, 38.
43. Raúl Scalabrini Ortíz, *El Hombre que está Solo y Espera* (Buenos Aires: Librerías Anaconda, 1933), 17.
44. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (New York: Berg, 1986).
45. Stanley, "On Buffer-kissers."
46. Barbara Schmucki, "On the Trams: Women, Men and Urban Public Transport in Germany," *Journal of Transport History* 23, no. 1 (2002): 60–72, here 60. For proxemia, see Edward T. Hall, *La Dimensión Oculta* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2003).
47. Enrique Amorín, "Capacidad, 6 pasajeros," *Crítica*, 19 August 1933, 3.
48. Baldomero Fernández Moreno, "Subterráneo," in *Ciudad, 1915–1949*, ed. César Fernández Moreno (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Municipalidad, 1949), 92–95, here 92.
49. Josue Quesada, "Mi Noviecita del Tranvía," *Riel Porteño* 1 (1925): 27–29, here 22.
50. Roberto Arlt, "Resurrección Inesperada de los Chauffeurs," *El Mundo*, 8 October 1928, 4.
51. R. Parpagnoli, "El Hombre Providencial," *Crítica*, 6 January 1934, 6.
52. Amorín, "Capacidad, 6 Pasajeros," 3.
53. Tossounian, "The Body Beautiful," 157.
54. Roberto Arlt, *Aguasfuertes Porteñas* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1976), 96–98.
55. Manuel Mujica Lainez, "Retiro-Tigre: Apuntes de un Viajero Desocupado," in *En La Vía: Cuentos desde un tren*, ed. Christian Kupchik (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2004), 45–50, here 48.
56. The police chief, Ramón Falcón, created the ordinance on 28 December 1906.
57. Josefina Marjous, "Jornada," *Aconcagua* 4, no. 10 (1930): 32.
58. Archivo General de la Nación (AGN, General National Archive), Comisión de Transporte de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires (CTCBA) 100020-1620-S.
59. Julio Indarte, "Para Señoras solamente," *Caras y Caretas*, 10 March 1928.
60. Barrancos, *Mujeres en la sociedad argentina*, 144.
61. In his article, García refers to a similar male reaction when a woman complains.
62. Georgine Clarsen, "Gender and Mobility: Historicizing the Terms," *Mobility in History* 1 (2009): 235–241, here 241.
63. Priya Uteng and Cresswell, *Gendered Mobilities*, 3.
64. Schmucki, "On the Trams."
65. Alisa Freedman, "Commuting Gazes: Schoolgirls, Salarymen, and Electric Trains in Tokyo," *Journal of Transport History* 23, no. 1 (2002): 23–36.
66. Stanley, "On Buffer-kissers."
67. *Ibid.*, 31–32.