

**“Quemando el parquet: cabecitas negras, urban legends and abjection. The construction of regional identity in an Argentine working class community”.**

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Santiago del Estero is the migrant province par excellence in Argentina. It is one of two provinces which have the majority of its sons and daughters living outside the boundaries of their tierra. This migration already had a long history going back to colonial times and by the 1930s santiagueos worked in the maize and wheat harvests of Córdoba , Santa Fe and Buenos Aires, the cotton harvest of the Chaco, the zafra of Tucuman and the grape picking of San Juan and Mendoza. In the late 1930s a new wave of migrants left the parajes of the departments of Loreto and Atamisqui for the packing houses of Berisso driven out of their homes by an epic drought that lasted almost two years and that Roberto Arlt would describe in Dantesque terms for the newspaper "Crítica". They arrived in a working class community that was one of Argentina's largest meat packing centers, whose two packing houses would at the height of the Second World War employ almost 20,000 workers. The social and cultural landscape of this community was one dominated by European immigrants who had been arriving since the beginning of the century from all over Europe and the old Ottoman Empire. They found work in the frigoríficos and created and nurtured a dense network of cultural associations known locally as the "colectividades". This network would continue to dominate Berisso's social and cultural space. In 1977 the city was designated "The capital of the immigrant" and today it still nurtures some fourteen ethnic

associations. It is the complex interaction between these new migrants – the santiagueños – and the established community – which I wish to unpack in this paper. Berisso’s other claim to fame is that it is “la cuna del Peronismo”. This claim goes back to Perón’s early contact with the packing house workers before he became President and to the role as protagonists that Berisso’s workers played in the seminal events of October 17, 1945 that rescued Perón from confinement and launched him on the path to the Presidency. It is at this foundational event – or rather, the fiftieth anniversary celebration in Berisso in 1995 that I wish to start by way of a prologue to the urban legend of “quemando el parquet” and the iconic figure of the cabecita negra.

On October 17, 1995 I am waiting in the Plaza 17 de octubre in Berisso for the start of the commemorative march that will recreate the day fifty years earlier when workers from the packing houses marched on La Plata to demand the release of Colonel Juan Domingo Perón. It is a hot day, as it had been fifty years earlier, and I take advantage of the shade at the side of the plaza to watch the arrival of different contingents of marchers. I have been invited by the mayor elect to march with his followers. Standing with me are a group of veterans –

peronistas de la primera hora – some of whom have decided to recreate the eight kilometer journey to the Plaza San Martín in La Plata. Over the course of an hour a steady stream of young members of the mayor elect's *unidad básica* drift into the plaza. It is clear from their pitch black hair, their skin color and the accents that many are poor. As some of them walk past it is apparent that they have been drinking. They are loud and a little defiant as they shout slogans and loudly joke with each other. There is also the unmistakable aroma of marijuana drifting in the air as they march past. For perhaps fifteen minutes the group of older veterans watch them pass by. There is little interaction with the younger *companeros*. Finally one of the older men turns to me and with a scornful gesture of his head toward the raucous youngsters begins to tell me how their ancestors had acted when they first arrived in the 1940s. He tells me that they were mainly *santiagueños* and that a disproportionate number of them had been awarded houses in the newly constructed “barrio obrero” – the public housing project funded by Perón's government. These were by the standard of of the time in Berisso spacious. Modern units built in the style of Swiss chalets. As a mark of their status and as a symbol of the new treatment of workers they were also fitted out with wooden parquet flooring. “You know, they were so unfit for those houses that within a short time many of them had broken up the floors to use the

wood in the *parillas* of the backyard. All the kitchens had gas stoves but they broke up the floors and cooked outside”. He shook his head in disgust and added other details to prove the inability of the santiagueños to adapt to adapt to the civilized life style.

The notion of belonging to a different place but being part of the Argentine nation was a familiar one to the internal migrants who settled in Berisso. The community had attracted European immigrants and migrants from a variety of Argentine provinces. The formation of ethnic identities was an ongoing process within the community. Although the features of this cultural identity were not predetermined, the immigrant groups had certain elements in common. In principle, they were distinguished by native tongue and, at times, forms of dress and food. They had chosen certain symbolic elements to identify themselves to others in the community when each year – since 1977 – they took part in the Fiesta del Inmigrante. In the past they had organized institutions, edited ethnic newspapers, acted in theatrical productions all of which had sought in some way to recover the fundamental landscapes of their identity(ethnoscapes). Our study of the Ukrainians of Berisso showed that the process of ethnic identity formation was a complex one which at times was generously inclusive and at others far

more restrictive and which was always dependent on complex subject positionings and the historical contexts that conditioned them.

Unlike the case of the immigrant groups, the differentiating elements were not so clearly visible for the santiagueños. In fact they formed part of a far larger whole that was generically designated by the category “cabecitas negras” which referred to the workers who inhabited the peripheral barrios and villas miserias of Buenos Aires and other urban centers. The category was an overwhelmingly cultural construction, imprecise in geographical designation but clearly derogatory in intent. Cabecitas could be from any number of provinces. They could be correntinos, riojanos, salteños, tucumanos, santiagueños, jujeños, san juaninos. The santiagueños of Berisso clearly recognized themselves as part of this broader category. They also recognized the negative connotations explicit in the term.

The older members of the CRS who met in the oral history workshop in 1986 clearly recalled these connotations. Raúl Coronel speaking of the early years of the community in the 1940s remembered that “nos decían cabecitas negras”. It is clear from the testimonies that this was a complex and painful issue for the

speakers to address. The testimony of Miguel Ignacio Aguirre was particularly interesting when he spoke of this issue:

“MIA: Si Vd. me permite decir una cosita yo estaba muy marcado porque había una diferencia de clase tremenda.

ML. ¿qué quiere decir diferencia de clase?

MIA: diferencia de clase, por ejemplo al obrero lo miraba completamente distinto

ML: ¿quiénes lo miraban distinto?

MIA: y los que tenían simplemente un almacén ya había una diferencia grande hacia el obrero, era difícil que alguien pudiera hacerse de novio de la chica del almacenero por ejemplo, le hacían la guerra, aparte de eso el provinciano ya cuando llegamos nosotros no nos podían ver.

ML: ¿quiénes no los podían ver?

MIA: la gente de acá, los nativos, los quienes vivían acá porque la mayoría eran extranjeros.”

Aguirre, like the other participants, had worked in the frigoríficos since his arrival in Berisso in 1943 and referred to the “rivalidades” within the plants between the “nativos”, “extranjeros” and what he either referred to as “provincianos” or

simply “criollos”. Suggestively he also spoke of the social space of clubs and salons as particularly fraught with these tensions:

“en los bailes se hacía notar muchísimo”.

Reading this with care we notice that what starts as an account of social distinctions within a community – between the almacenero and the worker - becomes something more complex and difficult to articulate. When he is asked to elaborate on “quiénes no los podían ver?” he shifts from local social class markers to distinctions of geographical origin. It is the “provincianos” – most prominently the santiagueños – who are disliked by the “extranjeros”. It is in the aftermath of Aguirre’s account that Raul Coronel makes the specific connection between provincianos and cabecitas negras as he attempts to control the interpretation of Aguirre’s recognition of hostility towards them. He does this by placing the issue within a narrative of progressive overcoming of prejudice and ultimate winning of respect, a narrative that ultimately places the Centro de Residentes Santiagueños at its core:

“Y nos hemos empezado a hacernos fuerte...no nos hemos dejado doblegar, defender nuestra provincia con fuerza porque a veces nos decían cabecitas negras y entre nosotros esa cabecita negra con el correr del tiempo nos hemos hecho



popular, hemos doblegado a todas las colectividades y hoy ellos son los que nos aprecian, los que nos respetan en todo aspecto, y quiere decir que nosotros no nos hemos dejado dominar bajo ningún punto de vista”

Aguirre will himself follow this cue:

“los extranjeros nos miraban un poquito, así, y la gente de aquí nos trataba de cabecita negra, pero con el correr del tiempo se iban dando cuenta de quienes éramos nosotros los santiagueños que veníamos buscando trabajo, hicimos hincapié y nos valió eso por nuestra humildad y por ser honestos.....fuimos demostrando que clase de gente éramos”

While Coronel’s account is framed in terms of a collective affirmation of provincial pride Aguirre offers us more concrete glimpses as to what was at stake in being named as cabecitas. He affirms that they had come to work and they were honest.

“La gente de acá, los porteños, lamentablemente pensaron en aquel tiempo una cosa, no era así, el tiempo fue el mejor testigo.

ML: ¿Qué pensaban por ejemplo?

Bueno, que éramos gente muy atrasada, que no sabíamos nada.”

Aguirre makes a significant semantic shift here by introducing a further category to define those who thought badly of the santiagueños – they are no longer “extranjeros” but now are “porteños”. He goes on to elaborate:

“Mire, la rivalidad que hemos tenido aquí ha sido con el porteño, no así con los extranjeros....los porteños como sucede en la Capital, más acá en La Plata se dan de sobredores, de todo y ese era el motivo por el cual nosotros teníamos choques con ellos.”

The semantic shift is significant because it places the ultimate blame for the hostility and tension beyond Berisso. It is no longer the “nativos” or “extranjeros” living and working in the community when the santiagueños arrived who are to blame. The blame now rests with a group who were literally resident in the Federal Capital but who in fact would seem to connote big city dwellers in general

who suffer from an arrogance and contempt toward those from the provinces. In factual terms this invention of the “porteño” is difficult to sustain. There were very few actual porteños in Berisso as Aguirre and the others in the oral history workshop well knew. We could suggest, however, that this shift enables them to more effectively deal with a deeply painful issue whose recounting in 1986 still troubled them. It is almost as though having – briefly – exposed the wound they rapidly sought to stem the pain that flowed from it. Blaming the “porteños” helped to reestablish the coherence of the dominant community narrative of ethnic harmony and solidarity and to cover up the wounds opened by the “mote infamante” – cabecitas negras.

Wherein lay the capacity of this category to continue to wound? The term has a complex etymology with a somewhat opaque discursive history. It seems to have first entered into common usage in the immediate aftermath of 1945. One of the first specific written references can be found in the pro-Peronist “El Laborista” in an article by Julian Centeya entitled “Los Cabecitas Negras”, dated October 27, 1948. The article starts by testifying to the very recent “invention” of the term which came into use in popular porteño idiom, he claims, “ayer no mas” to define and differentiate the “hombre de campo criollo”. While the article’s general

intent was to protest the cruel humor that had made the recent arrivals the butt of porteño jokes, it also defined and itself participated in the process of stereotyping that was at the core of these jokes. The cabecitas are “atontados, incómodos, tarumbas”, they are “desacomodado” “por esta febril ciudad de los apuros.” They are “hoscós y toscos”. They speak differently, wear “blusas corraleras” and they are “amazed by the tall buildings, the subways, the flashing illuminated signs, the constant coming and going of people that lay siege to our calle Florida.” (llevarse el asombro de la casa alta, del subte, de la sincopa de los carteles luminosos, del trajín que atosiga nuestra calle Florida.) However, above all, the crucial marks of differentiation that define the cabecita for Centeya are racial and visual. The “Juan” who is the butt of porteño jokes has “piel cetrina, pómulos salientes, cabello lácio, aindiado renegrado.”

Enrique Garguin has recently argued that this sort of racialized gaze was crucial to middle class self projection as a distinct social category in the Argentina of the 1950s. The anti-Peronist sectors of the middle class articulated their sense of identity by constructing a racialised working class Other. We would suggest that the category of “cabecitas negras” also plays a more complex role in the process of identity formation and subject positioning *within* the working class.

The cabecita became in Judith Butler's terms the "constitutive outside" that was so crucial to working class subjectivization. Butler argues that the subject emerges "from a process of identifications formed through the repudiation which produces a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge".

While Butler is primarily concerned with the production of sexual and gender identities through the repeated, compulsive citations of norms that she calls performativity, her analysis can also encompass class and racial subject formation. Indeed she has explicitly extended the notion of "abjected positions" to migrant groups such as the Turkish gastarbeiten in Germany which echoes in important ways the situation of the internal migrants in Argentina:

"We get a differential production of the human or a differential materialization of the human. And we also get a production of the abject. So it is not as though the unthinkable, the unintelligible has no discursive life – it does have one – it just lives within discourse as the radically uninterrogated and as the shadowy contentless figure for something that is not yet made real."

We would argue that it is this "shadowy contentless figure" living within the dominant discourse that haunts the oral testimony of santiagueños in Berisso. We

know very little about the racialized regime of perception present in 1940s and 50s Argentina, what we might call the Peronist scopisic regime at a national level; we know even less about such perceptual schema within working class communities like Berisso. However, we do have some information that indicates the existence of a certain racialized prejudice in Berisso in the 1940s. A Bulgarian communist whom we interviewed recalled the difficulty the Communist Party had in the frigoríficos at that time combating the racially explicit contempt expressed by Bulgarian communists towards the recently arrived migrant workers. Likewise, within the Ukrainian community the expression used to refer to santiagueños and other migrants was “chorny” a term with contemptuous connotations that might be best translated as “darkies” or “niggers”.

Cabecita negra was a particularly problematic and resistant discursive category. Unlike many of the other terms that emerged in the 1940s to negatively connote Perón’s working class supporters, cabecita was not available for resignification. “Descamisado”, “grasitas”, even “la chusma” were seized upon and incorporated into Peronist discourse. They were semantically uncoupled from their original meanings and given positive connotations. The clearest example is

that of “descamisados”. In his speech on 1 May 1952 – the occasion of Evita’s last public speech – Perón explicitly recasts the meaning of the category:

“Acaso porque nosotros pensamos en la felicidad de nuestro pueblo y por haber elegido como primera meta de nuestros afanes a los sectores mas humildes de la nación, a quienes la vieja clase dirigente bautizó con el insulto glorioso de “descamisados”.

There is no such comparable recasting for “cabecita negra”. Indeed the term does not appear in the public discourse of Perón; nor do we find it mentioned in Evita’s speeches which abound in the discursive embracing of her “grasitas” and “descamisados”. In part the explanation may lie in the fact that “cabecita” was by the early 1950s irredeemably defined as anti-Peronist and anti-worker. This is indeed the explanation offered by Hugo Ratier one of the first Argentine anthropologists to investigate the category. For Ratier “cabecita” emerges and catches on as an epithet only because of the success of Peronism and its massive social and political incorporation of workers into Argentine society – it was not fundamentally about race: “Lo racial es solo un condimento para lo social”.

Yet, we would suggest that in large part it was difficult to embrace precisely because of its racial/ethnicised coding. As Oscar Chamosa has pointed out Peronism resolutely refused to racialize its forms of addressing workers in the Peronist decade. It eschewed ethnic language and interpellated its constituents in class terms or in terms of a generic criollo nationalism which was Argentina's version of the mestizo nationalism prevalent in many other parts of Latin America at this time. This nationalism postulated an ideal citizen of the New Argentina who was vaguely described as criollo, and many of whose essential values were associated in the officially sponsored cultural nationalism with the Northwestern culture of which the santiagueños were perhaps the most specific example. Yet, this did not lead to any attempt to construct an ethnically inflected hierarchy of cultural values that would have explicitly privileged the "criollo" at the expense of the "foreign" or the "European". As Rita Segato has convincingly argued for the twentieth century in general: "En el caso argentino, el discurso sobre el sujeto nacional lo pretende neutro de otras identidades que no sean la que le estampa un abstracto 'ser nacional'." In this context any official attempt to appropriate an explicitly racialized category like "cabecita" would have conflicted with this overarching national rhetorical construction.



The santiagueños of Berisso were, therefore, operating within a complex matrix of local and national discursive configurations. Any explicit articulation of racialized differentiation or discrimination was impermissible within a national discourse premised on the construction of an unproblematic hybridized “ser nacional”. At the local level within Berisso this was reaffirmed by narratives that spoke of a community founded on the harmonious synthesis of the “crisol de razas”. Yet, oral testimonies also clearly indicate the existence in the past – and the continuing existence today – of a sense of discrimination among the santiagueños. For the first generation of migrants, those who founded the Centro de Residentes, we have seen how difficult it was for them to address this issue. In the testimonies given in the Oral History Workshop in 1986 the issue of discrimination appears implicit in certain verbal phrasings. When Miguel Ignacio Aguirre spoke of the tensions in the community between provincianos and nativos in the 1940s and the “diferencias de clase” that we have already analyzed he articulated these tensions through the use of explicitly visual metaphors. Utterances such as “lo miraba completamente distinto”, “el provinciano ya cuando llegamos nosotros no nos podían ver” speak of a discrimination that was effected by specific forms of seeing the other. Later testimonies from a younger generation of santiagueños are far more likely to be explicit in their recognition of

a racially coded discrimination: “Nos tratan de indios, somos negros.” Yet such testimonies also contain frequent references to barrio harmony between “rusos” and santiagueños and the frequent marriages between the two.

The question remains then: how was this othering lived by the santiagueños? There exist a number of ways to verbally frame the analytical tactics we can use to try and gain access to the “shadowy contentless figure” of whom Butler speaks, the discursive life of the abjected other which lives within the dominant discourse. One would be to interrogate the subtexts of oral testimonies. Another might be to address the realm of cultural intimacy present in any national or local culture. Michael Herzfeld suggests that cultural intimacy refers to the tensions between collective self-knowledge and collective self-representations. Such intimacy can explain how nations, or communities, can present a harmonious and homogenous identity to the outside world while also allowing for a degree of internal disharmony and contestation. We would suggest that one way of accessing this realm of cultural intimacy in the case of internal migrants in Argentina is to take certain urban legends seriously.

The most pervasive of the urban legends with regard to internal migrants is the “leyenda negra” of the migrants who break up the parquet flooring of their

new houses to burn in the parilla. It is a ubiquitous story which can be found throughout Argentina and dates back to the Perón era. In Berisso it is almost always related to the Barrio Obrero, the new housing project built in the late 1940s. It achieves its effect of othering by explicitly referencing the violation of norms of accepted urban behavior and working class respectability. It rarely mentions race, color or phenotype. Indeed, as we have argued, it cannot do this either in terms of the hegemonic national discourse, or even less in terms of the local Peronist one. Rather it does its work through indirection. The category *cabecita* normally connotes “villero”, the inhabitants of the villas miserias. In this identification we encounter a situation wherein the uttering of the category also names the social and cultural characteristics it is taken to embody. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that this naming is done silently, it has no need of explicit articulation since it is present in the term itself. However, in the case of working class communities like Berisso this naturalized association does not exist. In this context the function of legends such as “quemando el parquet” is to perform an identification that in other cases is not necessary. It is a story that is framed in terms of an internal cultural coding within the working class. Such a story would have no function within the villa miseria. In the villa the site of residence itself speaks of abjection and otherness. In Berisso this is not the case.

There was no explicit spatial separation of provincianos and santiagueños within Berisso. The story functions, therefore, as a device that denotes abjection and speaks of internal differentiation in the only way it legitimately can: by invoking the norms of respectability, decency and their violation by the internal migrants.

Thus, the legend of “quemando el parquet” signifies more than an anti-Peronist, anti-working class canard, which is the usual way it is analyzed in the literature. Indeed, there is a strong temptation to place it within the same analytic that addresses the emerging trope of middle class fear and contempt of the Peronist mass embodied in texts such as Cortazar’s “Casa Tomada” and German Rozenmacher’s “Cabecita Negra”. Yet as the version recounted at the beginning of this chapter makes clear it still has purchasing power *within* an overwhelmingly Peronist working class community like Berisso, and even among specifically Peronist defined groups such as those gathered to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of October 17, 1945. In fact, the legend functions as a means of stereotyping. The santiagueños in communities like Berisso had, of course, to confront and negotiate a variety of other stereotypes that referenced a wide array of alleged characteristics and proclivities. They were inclined to violence, they were unreliable, they were lazy, they drank to excess, they loved partying,

and they were sexually promiscuous. Stereotypes do far more than embody prejudice. Stereotyping is a signifying practice that as Stuart Hall says ultimately, “reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes difference.” One of the principle ways that it does this is to establish a divide between the normal and acceptable and the abnormal and unacceptable. Stereotyping is, therefore, concerned with boundary delineation and the stereotypes themselves patrol the boundary through, in Richard Dyer’s words, “closure and exclusion”. As Hall comments stereotypes ultimately are about the maintenance of the symbolic order as they help establish what belongs and what is Other, or in Butler’s terms, abject. “Typologies”, she affirms, “are usually exactly the way in which abjection is conferred.”

This sense of otherness was reinforced for the santiagueños by the particular configuration of public aesthetics in Berisso. Public space in the community was dominated by the aesthetic staging of the immigrant narrative. The popular saying “descendemos de los barcos”, which encapsulates the dominant immigrant narrative in Argentine popular culture, finds overwhelming visual expression in Berisso. The centro civico is replete with representations that visually convey this story. There is not even an attempt to reproduce the generic

criollismo of state discourse. In Berisso the santiagueño found an overwhelmingly Europeanised – and white – set of visual representations. Even the statue of the gaucho – normally the most anodyne of cultural signifiers of Argentina’s interior peoples – appears on closer inspection to be not a gaucho at all but an “arriero”, one of the workers on horseback who controlled the corrals of the frigoríficos. The other statues in Berisso complete this dominant symbolic order. Copernicus and Almafuerte – the poet of the Litoral plebeian classes - dominate Berisso’s other main plaza and Juan Larrea one of the ‘proceres’ of Argentine independence stands guard on the Avenida Montevideo. Beyond the central areas of the city in the increasingly abandoned Plaza 17 de octubre the figure of the descamisado breaking the chains of exploitation is clearly drawn from standard Argentine working class iconography. The institutions that dominate Berisso’s public sphere – the colectividades – populate the central area of the city and present their own aesthetic and cultural affirmation of presence, whether this is found in the heavy wooden doors of “Prosvita” fashioned in traditional Ukrainian style or the ornate copula of the Greek Orthodox church of Saint Agnes. In contrast the Centro de Residentes Santiagueños is located on a piece of land on the outskirts of the city beside the main road to La Plata.

In addition to this dominant aesthetic landscape, there are frequent public performances of the immigrant narrative. The most important is the Fiesta del Inmigrante which every year with official provincial funding celebrates Berisso's status as the "Capital of the Immigrant." In the Fiesta Berisso's fundamental immigrant essence is performed in the streets with each collectivity parading down the main streets in its distinctive traditional dress and with its distinctive music. Traditional food is served along the route. Within the schools, too, the narrative of "descendemos de los barcos" is reinforced. In 1995 schools throughout Argentina were encouraged to enter a competition organized by the Secretary of Culture. The goal was to choose the best theatrical or musical representation of a community's history. In Berisso the local high school participated in the competition producing a musical play based entirely on the immigrant narrative. Berisso's history begins with Juan Berisso and the saladeros, moves through the classical stages of the founding of the frigoríficos, the arrival of the immigrants, the harshness of their lives in the plants, their overcoming of hardships to reach its culmination in the October 1945 events and the election of Perón as President. The narrative counting of Berisso's history thus ends at precisely the moment when the internal migrants begin to arrive in the city.

All this has created within the santiagueño community a strong sense of otherness within a whole that is yet familiar and hegemonic. Clara Roldo arrived in Berisso as a young adolescent in the late 1950s from Santiago. Her father had left Santiago for Buenos Aires several years before and had attempted to maintain his family back in Santiago on the family smallholding. A bad drought in 1957/58 made that project untenable and he brought his wife and children to Berisso. Her story is in many ways a typical Berisso success story. She and her husband worked hard and acquired a lote, built a modest but comfortable house, furnished it modestly and educated their children. She is active in various local charities and has in recent years helped produce a radio program devoted to Santiago and santiagueños on one of Berisso's local FM radio stations. She is deeply proud of her provincial heritage but also aware of the ambivalent position of her community within Berisso. In her interview she recounted an incident that had recently occurred:

“Yo me fui y deje una alcancía en un centro de jubilados docentes y cuando voy a dejar allá me dice la señora “¿ud es santiagueña?” “Si – le digo – soy santiagueña” .....Entonces me dice “Yo no se porque – me dice – vinieron todos los santiagueños en lugar de quedarse en su provincia”. Ahhhh.....Mire. Cuando me



dijo así me clavaron...Era una cosa que yo sentí tan, tan fuerte acá. Y yo le dije, “Vos conocés, le dije porque la veía más joven que yo, digo “¿vos conocés Santiago del Estero? Y me dice, “Si, conozco”. Y le digo, “¿Que parte conocés? Y me dice, “Las Termas, conozco la zona de Tucumán...” “y – le digo – conocés zonas muy lindas” le dije yo, “Vos conocés esas zonas, son muy lindas, agrícola-ganaderas esas zonas que vos conocés”. Y le digo, “¿conocés la meseta, conocés las salinas...? Y me dice, “No, no conozco”. “Entonces, no conocés, no sabés lo que es Santiago”, le digo. Le digo, “Tu cara, que vos sos, o tus padres o tus abuelos, son, este, Europeos”, le digo. Y ella me dice, “Si”. Bueno, le digo, “Así como tus padres o tus abuelos vinieron huyendo de la guerra, nosotros venimos huyendo de la guerra que es con el agua”. Le digo, “¿vos sabés lo que es cuando tenés algo y ves morir hasta las gallinas cuando no tienen agua, cuando se mueren de sed? Y le digo, “Mi padre me contaba...” Y esto es verdad, mi padre contaba que estaba trabajando en unos obrajes límite con Chaco. Venía el tren carguero trayendo agua y se mataron por un balde de agua. esto es verdad, entonces le dijo a ella, “¿Sabés lo que es matarse por un balde de agua?”. Mire a mi me salieron a chorros las lagrimas, Salí llorando. y cada vez que me acuerdo me conmueve, porque no es que quisimos venir. La *vida* nos obligó a venir. Porque esto es real. Eso no es mentira porque yo le digo sinceramente, a mi me sacaron en una edad

que...cuando yo estaba aprendiendo y reconociendo a amar....Y a mí me arrancaron, porque yo no tenía decisión propia. ¡Yo viví dos años llorando! Lloraba con todo mi familia (se quiebra) yo extrañaba a mis ovejas, extraña a mi caballo(llora). ¡Extrañaba todo lo que tenía! Y hoy han pasado cuarenta y ocho años y cada vez que me acuerdo lloro. Porque somos muy arraigados nosotros, a nuestra tierra. Y yo con quince años me doy cuenta que nunca pude cortar ese..ese lazo de afecto que deje allá. Por eso fuimos discriminados y somos discriminados”.

This is therefore a narrative of loss, nostalgia and discrimination which formed part of a structure of feeling characteristic of the santiagueño community in Berisso. Part of the pain comes from the shock of being confronted with a reality that normally lay dormant within the community, at least in public interactions between santiagueños and their fellow Berissenses. Clara Roldo uses the expression, “me clavarón” to describe the impact of the woman’s statement that the santiagueños should have stayed in Santiago. The word is intended to convey the sense of physical shock she felt when she heard this utterance; “clavar” has the sense of being physically struck, like a bolt out of the blue. The emotion is undoubtedly genuine and it also leads us to ask the reason why this

comment was so stunning to Clara. Its ability to shock came from the explicit utterance of the sentiment. If this sort of explicitly hostile comment had been habitual within Berisso it would not have had the power to wound that it clearly had for Clara. It is a breach of a fundamental sense of public etiquette within a community centered on a foundational myth of a harmonious “crisol de razas”. Clara would go on to say, “A mi no me paso, y yo nunca lo habia conocido” when asked if this had happened to her before. She will also go on to reaffirm the notion of a harmonious community of her adolescence in Berisso: “Éramos todos santiagueños y rusos. Pero con ellos nos llevamos muy bien, incluso seguimos esta amistad hasta ahora. Ellos no...nunca tuvimos problemas”.

But this intimate local affirmation of barrio harmony which is very common among the santiagueños we interviewed does not prevent her from also deriving an overarching recognition of contempt and discrimination that is ultimately racially coded:

”...Alguna vez cuando cicatrice esta herida yo digo seguramente lo voy a dar a conocer en la radio. Lo voy a decir. Porque a nosotros nos dicen siempre “los

negros santiagueños”, “cabecitas negras”. Eso siempre nos dijeron, cuando llegamos y ahora, a lo mejor nos dicen santiagueños de mierda.”

The concrete personal experience of inter group harmony does not offset the recognition of larger discriminatory practice and perception. It simply coexists as a sort of minor register within the broader narrative.

An important part of the structure of feeling that the santiagueños inhabit in Berisso is made up of an affirmation of cultural specificity and its value. This goes beyond the basic affirmation that is to be found in the testimony of the early members of the CRS that they were honest; that they built their houses like the “extranjeros”; that they worked hard and that they founded an institution – the CRS – that could rival any of the foreign colectividades. As we have seen, the founding statement of the CRS placed defense of Santiago culture at the center of its mission. This was a culture defined by the founding members in terms of its music and dances and in terms of its unique historical formation. Amongst members of the intermediary generation who arrived in the late 1950s and 1960s this general affirmation is articulated as an affirmative value that bequeaths a certain distinction based on superiority and difference. This difference may be

defined as constituting a distinct way of being in the world. We have seen something of this in the subtext of the 1988 official history of the CRS. It also appears strongly in the oral testimonies of this generation of santiagueños.

In the interviews we find explicit reference to, and valorization of, a broad array of elements that make up this culture. It clearly includes references to dance and music, religious beliefs, burial practices, legends and myths, family life and values premised on respect for elders within the family and the compadres that make up the broader range of affective family relations. Finally there is a frequent reference to the issue of their quichua linguistic heritage. This is clearly a hybrid culture that is being practiced and evoked. In one way this is, of course not surprising. As Ralph Jones says, “cross fertilization of cultures is endemic to all movements of peoples, and all such movements in history have involved the travel, contact, transmutation and hybridization of ideas, values and behavioral norms”. At both a national and local communal level in Berisso hybridity is expressed as a strategic rhetoric practiced by local and national state that is natural, commonplace and desirable in intercultural relations and which is therefore non-contentious.

When santiagueños began arriving in Berisso in large numbers in the 1940s they encountered an official cultural context that proclaimed this hybridity at a national level.

The figure of the criollo had acquired national prominence and visibility. This visibility could be expressed in the visual iconography present in the ubiquitous photos of Evita attending to the needs of her clearly darker skinned subjects in the Fundacion or visiting them in the North West on official excursions. While, as we have indicated, official Peronist rhetoric skillfully avoided racializing/ethnicizing the ideal criollo citizen of the New Argentina, the visual presence of the dark skinned northerners in official iconography was impossible to avoid. Similarly, the culture of these migrants as expressed in their music, dance and legends had acquired a place of honor at the table of officially promoted Argentine culture. This was embodied in Perón's continuation of policies established since the early 1940s that mandated the use of folklore materials in teacher training and in school textbooks. The Peronist government also continued the policy of fixing quotas for the playing of "national" music on the airwaves. The Five Year plans explicitly included support for this "nationalization" of Argentine culture. Oscar Chamosa argues that this represented the victory of the cultural nationalist project inspired by the North

Western elites since the time of Ricardo Rojas which hinged on “bringing criollo culture to the core of national culture and at the same time dissociating that folk culture from any claim for ethnic autonomy”.

At the same time in Santiago itself, as we have indicated, local intellectuals had developed a vibrant assertion of the value (and superiority) of santiagueño popular culture. Centered in particular on the cultural center and review “La Brasa”, figures like Orestes Di Lullo and Bernardo Canal Feijoo will develop this affirmation into a defense of their province against the “cultura forastera”. This is a clear positioning that we see reflected in the interviews of the first generation of santiagueños in Berisso and which alerts us to the intense circulation of ideas between the educated local elite and the popular classes of the interior at this time. This locally inspired assertion of the value of folklore as a decisive component of popular culture – echoed as it was by the official cultural discourse of the Peronist regime - will provide the santiaguanan migrants with a powerful resource as they sought to create a social and cultural space for themselves in their new environment.

In 1953 Perón paid an official visit to Santiago. His speech to the masses assembled in the Plaza San Martín reflects – and legitimates – the essential elements of this discourse. He began the speech by evoking the special place that Santiago occupied in his and Evita’s affections: “Yo la he visto llorar frente a los changuitos descalzos y harapientos” that she saw on her first visit to the province. He then went on to define the debt that “la patria entera tiene con Santiago”. This is a debt that is rooted in history which saw Santiago act as the center of the Spanish colonization of the region and the prominent role played by santiagueños in the Independence struggle. He follows this by establishing the special relation between Peronism and Santiago: “En Santiago una doctrina como la nuestra es simple, porque en este pueblo humilde el justicialismo es casi una ley”. Perón’s speech was the center piece of a carefully choreographed spectacle centered on the presentation of the fundamental santiagueño cultural symbols. The plaza was framed by key icons of Santiago folklore in the form of musical groups and dance troupes all dressed in traditional costume. At the end of his speech before the musicians took the stage Perón explicitly references these cultural elements:

“Vamos a escuchar ahora a los santiagueños. Yo no olvido ni olvidare nunca que una vez desde esta tierra diez compañeros trabajadores fueron a pie hasta la casa



del gobierno entregándome a mi un bombo en el que estaba grabada la letra de una vidalita que cantaron en esta oportunidad...Yo como buen criollo recibí ese obsequio que conservo como el más preciado de los recuerdos que poseo”.

The journalist describing the scene in “Mundo Peronista” ended the report picking up on this telluric note:

“Y después los cantos y los bailes. El alma de un pueblo glorioso sencillo y humilde surgiendo de sus vidalas y de sus danzas”.

The essential elements of the construction of “Santiaguinidad” are rehearsed here and offered, through Perón, to his public. He as a “buen criollo” like them and keeps, as his most prized possession, next to the desk where he guards the fortunes of the nation the quintessential symbol of Santiago folklore, the bombo, on which is inscribed the lyric of a vidala, the most primitive and authentic of Santiago’s musical forms.

Later in his stay Perón gave a speech to the First Congress of Argentine History in the Teatro 25 de Mayo. Here he had more time to elaborate the

fundamental elements of santiagueño identity. Echoing the local provincial intellectuals and the founders of the Centro de Residentes Santiagueños in Berisso he begins by rehearsing their fundamental virtues and contrasts them with the men of the coast. Santiago is the “mas humilde y sufrido” of Argentina’s peoples and it is the “Corazon de la Patria” because unlike the man of the Littoral the santiagueño has known how to preserve “el tesoro inapreciable de su amor a la tierra”. Porteños, dazzled by the false promises of a civilization that sold them its bright baubles, have lost this telluric rooting in the soil.

“Santiago del Estero y su pueblo vivieron mirando hacia adentro, hacia la Patria, con los ojos clavados en la tierra y con las manos dispuestas a clavarse en ella para morir pegadas al polvo de tantas glorias mientras el antiguo patriciado venido a menos consumaba la venta de la sangre argentina derramada”.

Then, in a striking act of metaphorical reversal Perón affirms the figurative inversion of the center-periphery, civilization-barbarism binary that had dominated the relationship between province and nation in Argentine history:

“Santiago del Estero fue algo como el cofre donde la Patria guardaba nuestras viejas cartas de amor, las que escribimos para ella en los años felices de nuestra juventud. Ahora, superada la etapa de las traiciones volvemos a Santiago desde todos los puertos y todas las fronteras argentinas y en su cofre de recuerdos encontramos intactas aquellas viejas cartas de amor que conservo la historia...y releyéndolas advertimos que desde aquí precisamente partía el camino que perdimos por mirar hacia fuera...un camino que se abre en nuestra propia tierra y que nos conduce a nuestro propio destino de justicia, de libertad y de soberanía”.

Santiago is therefore constructed as a fundamental moral reservoir for the nation which has preserved its true values intact while the nation lost its way in “la etapa de traicion”. Now the nation that lost its way is returning, from the periphery – its port cities, its frontiers – to recover the lost ideals and values of its youth preserved in its historical core, Santiago and its culture. These recovered values will then lead to their natural culmination in the political program of Peronism.

Thus Perón’s visit to Santiago enables us to observe the complex construction from within state discourse of the constitutive elements of santiaguinedad. The santiagueño is long-suffering, honest and simple – humilde y

sencillo is the constant verbal construction used in Perón's speeches and by the journalists who covered the visit. He is also imbued with a fundamental sadness that comes from a tradition of exploitation. At the beginning of his speech to the Congress of History Perón recognized the roots of this sadness:

“Sus hijos conocieron todas las caras de la explotación y de la miseria. En los obrajes de sus montes, en los ingenios y en los cañaverales del Tucumán, en los algodones del Chaco los santiagueños aprendieron a saborear una tristeza que no se les desprende del alma ni con vidaladas que mas parecen lagrimas que canto”.

Suffusing this evocation of provincial identity is an overarching tone of nostalgia. It is present in the metaphor of the love letters recalling an idyllic, lost youth. It is also present in the reference to the vidaladas which are more like tears than songs. Melancholy and nostalgia are in general intimately connected. Here they are also related to a specific feature of the santiagueño, his nomadic life. His exploitation does not only take place in his native tierra but in the zafra of Tucuman and the cotton harvests of the Chaco. None of this is being constructed “ab novo” by Perón in 1953. His speeches in 1953 are echoing preexisting discourses that had emanated from a variety of sites within Argentina in the

previous twenty years: local provincial intellectuals, folklorists, cultural nationalists and santiagueño migrants. Yet, we should not underestimate the legitimizing power for santiagueños in communities like Berisso of finding both elements of their social experience and culture reflected and validated in the official speech of the state and its “lider”.