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Urban Images of Solidarity: Fashioning Citizenship in Argentina

Regina A. Root

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THE POLITICS OF DRESS in Asia and the Americas

Edited by Mina Roces and Louise Edwards



THE POLITICS OF DRESS IN ASIA AND THE AMERICAS

Edited by
MINA ROCES AND LOUISE EDWARDS

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URBAN EXPRESSIONS OF
SOLIDARITY: FASHIONING
CITIZENSHIP IN ARGENTINA

REGINA A. ROOT

During the transition to democracy in Argentina, visual artist María Silvia Corcuera Terán challenged the politics of seduction that came to characterize the neoliberal period when she began to incorporate a forgotten cultural icon, the exuberant *peinetón*, in her work. Worn by women in the 1820s and 1830s to distance them visually from the customs of Spain, this comb of one metre in height and length quickly emerged as a site of resistance in the annals of popular poetry and the press. As part of the independence movement, it became an accessory that women used to assert their presence in public, a fashionable statement against the political vanity of nineteenth-century male leaders who had fought Spanish oppression but then denied women their emancipation. In the 1990s, at a time when magazines such as *Gente* (People) and *Caras* (Faces) showcased the exuberant lifestyles of the rich and famous, Corcuera Terán deliberately used this icon from the past to expose the nation's dead, its migrations, its unresolved conflicts. Her 1998 exhibition entitled "Voluntad de desmesura" (Desire for Excess) presented blindfolded female subjects embedded within the frames of combs with nail-like teeth (see figure 13.1).

"Put it on. It hurts you and it hurts me. If I feel pain, so do you," the artist would later explain,¹ begging the viewer to take on the wounds of Argentina's past, in particular the plight of the "disappeared" and the collective pain of human rights abuses and violations from the "dirty war" (1976–83) that targeted its own citizens. The term "disappeared" refers to the 30,000 people that the military regime labelled subversives, had kidnapped and then executed, leaving behind little or no indication of what had happened to them. Fashioning her works from paper, wood, string, rusted nails and other found materials, Corcuera Terán located the politics of memory in the *peinetón* and

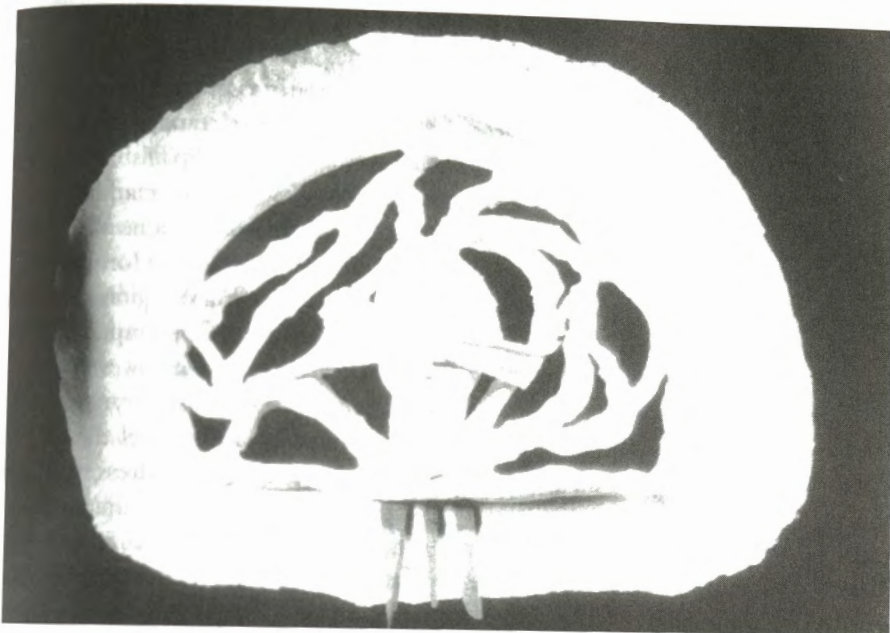


Figure 13.1 *Peineton* (1993), by María Silvia Corcuera Terán. Paper, cloth, wood. 1.10 x 0.90 x 0.19 meters. Exhibited in 1997 at the Centro Cultural Borges, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Courtesy of the artist.

began to register artistically the dynamics of active memory, collective identity, and everyday life in her native Buenos Aires.

Transforming fashion icons into symbols for human rights, Corcuera Terán documents the tensions and conflicts that haunt the nation and reveals contemporary sites of resistance. More recent works have inverted the comb, creating a cityscape with arches and teeth that represent vessels bringing immigrants to the port of Buenos Aires at the turn of the nineteenth century, or totem-like towers that ascend towards the sky from the forces of global migration below. The use of menacing colours in these works – forty hues of red in the case of one sculpture – remit to the foundational tensions on which Argentine collective identity rests: the elitist ideals of city-dwellers and the populist forces from the countryside that made themselves apparent during the regime of Juan Manuel de Rosas (1829–52). At a time when Argentines have begun to reassess the “fracturing of memory” that makes up the present-day process of national reconstitution, artists and authors have appropriated the historical vocabulary of colour and fashion to reformulate the tenets of collective identity. Fashion, after all, can provide a powerful visual and narrative force within which to place the body politic.

As a profoundly social process, fashion invites individual and collective bodies to assume certain identities and, at times, to transgress its limits. While certainly inspired by the contemporary representations of couture and consensus in Argentina, this essay explores the roles played by dress and culture in the process of fashioning citizenship. Following the retreat of Spanish colonialism, unique fashions emerged on the streets of Buenos Aires to mark significant moments of political transition. The *peinetón*, which later became a symbol for the politically inspired woman, expanded the Spanish *peineta* (or comb) and crowned fashionable female inhabitants of the River Plate region with presence in what appeared to be an expanding public sphere. Contemporary representations of postcolonial dress reveal a conflicted presence, however, as if the historical object embodies a realm of the collective imaginary still in the process of being recovered and articulated. As scholars unravel the political history of dress in Asia and the Americas, we might find that dress has always been intimately connected to the workings of culture, citizenship, and social change at critical moments of transition. The multivalent characteristics of dress in postcolonial Argentina, and especially in the urban environs of Buenos Aires, certainly reflect larger cultural processes at work.

Fashion and nation building

In postcolonial Buenos Aires, fashion engaged a battlefield of signifiers. The dress of young patriots inspired to build a nation distanced political subjects from the relics of Spanish colonialism, a period when dress served as a visual register that complemented the caste system and its notions of European privilege and construction of cultural, racial, and ethnic differences.² Under the colonial system, creole descendants of Europeans had been considered of inferior social status, although some boldly dared to appropriate subtle details in order to imitate their Spanish superiors.³ As tensions mounted, creoles moved to Parisian styles that represented the legacy of the French Revolution and a society based on merit rather than inherited privilege. Dress would even appear to represent emerging political identities that would later have a significant role in shaping the future Argentine nation. Even the rhetoric of fashion could serve as a forum through which to engage the configuration of a pre-national identity.

With independence, due to conflicting economic and political interests, the inhabitants of the River Plate region found themselves staunchly divided between two prominent parties – the Federalists and the Unitarians. The dress of these opposing political parties often reenacted foundational tensions between the customs of a “civilized” few and the practices of a “barbaric” Other, a dichotomy later analyzed with much fervour in *Facundo, Civilización y*

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barbarie by Domingo F. Sarmiento, a nineteenth-century statesman and future president who was forced to live in exile throughout this period.

In an attempt to restore order, an interim government supported the rise to power of Juan Manuel de Rosas, who would rule an Argentine Confederation from 1829 to 1852. Shortly after assuming power, Rosas legalized a civilian uniform in the province of Buenos Aires, with severe penalties for those who did not follow such mandates. On 3 February 1832, a decree legalized crimson as the national colour of faith in the Federation. From here on, citizens were required to don a crimson insignia while about in public. Most urban inhabitants immediately added crimson apparel, such as jackets, dresses, purses and hair ribbons, to their everyday wardrobe. Rosas himself crafted many of the standards for public and private appearances. And the words for street watchmen to cry out publicly on the hour, "Long live Holy Confederation, Death to the Savage, unclean, loathsome Unitarians", even appeared on milliners' bills.⁴ Unsure of the hostile political climate, some men resorted to conveying opinions and political messages secretly, placing their ideas on round cards within their top hats, which they would extend to another whenever taking a salutatory bow.⁵ Seeking to unite a divided River Plate region under one Argentine Confederation, the regime sponsored a series of didactic materials and performances that outlined the healthy sideburns, moustaches, and sometimes rurally inspired styles of Federalist men. The U-shaped beards and European lines of Unitarian dress, on the other hand, were associated with weakness and perversion. Police records reveal that any individual who dared transgress the dress code was promptly identified as a Unitarian, arrested and punished.

It should come as no surprise that fashion became a metaphor for renovation and change that the Unitarian opposition used to plot Rosas's demise in the press. Interestingly enough, censors may have even overlooked such presentation because fashion was still perceived as a frivolous endeavour and not intrinsically political in nature. With its prescriptive outlook, the rhetoric of fashion contributed to visions of political solidarity, national identity, and the formation of a model political body. Disguising their ideological currents, fashion periodicals like *La Moda* (Fashion) disseminated progressive political agendas. In its first issue, for example, one anonymous fashion writer helped guide the reader's gaze from Paris to the homes of Buenos Aires, asking him or her to reconsider the old-fashioned armchairs that had once belonged to the country's Spanish grandfathers. The classic armchair of Buenos Aires, described as a mass of crimson cloth attached to the frame by rusty nails, no doubt made a powerful allusion to some expired qualities of the seats of power held in the Argentine confederation. Other fashionable dictates of the day commented on the need to restore and replace outdated styles, clearly a comment directed at Rosas and his Federalist supporters. Yet the editors of *La*

Moda could only go so far. An early article on “Political Fashions”, while acknowledging that crimson clothing disgusted many in the River Plate region, still appears to have been worded carefully, highlighting instead the patriotic fervour behind such trends. “All individuals wish to flaunt on their garments the color that expresses the thoughts and interests of the majority,” it read. “In this way, it achieves the double success of gaining both public approval and fashionability, which is another form of public sanction”.⁶ Politicized images of governing bodies emphasized the significance of improving Argentina’s moral state through dress, as if the status of the future nation rested on the respectability and decorum of its citizens.

Artistic modifications of dress took place at the level of discourse, allowing for a more politicized discussion of style. As Francine Masiello has suggested, “[. . .] Fashion discussions drew attention to appearance and frivolity, to the faulty design of the garments chosen to cover the national body. In a country lacking dominant ideas or customs, fashion came to signal a weakness of the cultural imagination”.⁷ Aware of the implications, the editors of *La Moda* argued that Argentine fashion was not an imitation of European style but a “modification . . . executed artistically by intelligent men”.⁸ *La Moda* capitalized on this vision of modified design to help its urban readership shed rural customs of times past. Liberty would not be achieved, as one anonymous author believed, by perfume alone.⁹ As such, the *payador* (a musician and storyteller well versed in the rhythm of popular song) would need to learn the cadences of the minuet. Or a country wife would be advised to discard her all-inclusive customs and assume more discriminatory ways. Such an elitist approach, while apparently inspired by the ideals of liberty and democratic sentiments, no doubt offered a marginalized view of popular sectors and women.

Because fashion writing was successful in initiating discussions on political culture and paving the way for alternative points of view, women writers also seized the opportunity to press their status as future citizens of an Argentine nation in this unlikely forum.¹⁰ Fashion magazines offered authors the shroud of anonymity, as several male authors voicing their political opposition to the regime had resorted to female pseudonyms. Using similar pseudonyms, women authors now entered a male-dominated discussion as public owners of their discourse. Some women’s fashion magazines such as *La Aljaba* (its title a play on words with the words *fuchsia* and the *quiver* that holds arrows) coopted the vocabulary of fashion that their male predecessors had already used as symbolic ammunition. Edited by Petrona Rosende de Sierra, *La Aljaba* studied the effects that the quest for beauty and luxury had on women’s lives. For one anonymous writer, the vanity attributed to women differed little from the pride attributed to men, the same pride that threatened the countryside, with

no end in sight for the brutal civil war. Mary Louise Pratt writes that throughout the nineteenth century the women of this region, “though lacking in political rights, ... remained able to assert themselves legitimately in national print networks, engage with national forms of understanding, maintain their own political and discursive agenda, and express demands on the system that denied them full status as citizens”.¹¹ In this uncharted moment of the public sphere, women stood to gain a more pronounced access, despite numerous obstacles and negative male sentiments regarding their political participation. A new type of fashion writer thus emerged in the postcolonial period, her identity concealed yet publicly recognized.

Satirical magazines would make light of attempts to sway the political direction of men. *La Cotorra* reprimanded those men who so shortly after taking power from the Spanish continued to imitate the limitations of their predecessors. The magazine, with the title *The Female Parrot* or *The Chatterbox*, criticized those men who continued to relegate women to the confines of their homes as their political pronouncements seduced the public with promises of liberty, equality, citizenship, social rights and constitutional unity. “All tyrannical dominations have their last hour, and this hour has sounded for the male sex,” an article on the constitutional rights of “skirted citizens” read. With cackling voices, its anonymous writers also played with words that the spirit of independence had inaugurated, transforming them through cynical games into so many other words that the original inevitably lost meaning. In such a manner, *política* (or politics) became a bizarre and seemingly unconnected string of words of no relevance to citizens.¹²

Inverting many of the narrative strategies that engaged fashion to build the customs of a new nation, *La Cotorra* called on women to use their fashionable accessories against men if they were precluded from citizenship. One satirical poem, not at all unusual for its time, asked men to renounce all power in order to avert a women’s revolt.

How well we know those tyrants
 Who belittle the female sex
 What have they done with the destiny
 of the universe in all this time?
 Do they not see that their plans are in vain
 and that to follow them is a mistake?
 Renounce your wicked power now
 Or women will revolt.
 Let us revolt already: It’s easy to change
 the commonplace parasol into a cruel sabre,
 the frivolous distaff into a sharp lance,

the *mantilla* into a steel helmet.
 We're not made of marzipan or butter:
 Should a knee fold before these men,
 it will not show a humble request
 but instead will form the first row of the firing line. [. . .]

Ugly sex, respond: What great
 sin did we commit to cause you
 to deny us a post in the State
 as if we didn't have a brain?
 Without representation in the Senate,
 without representation in the Congress,
 We see that you are messing up the world by yourselves
 Without listening to us as we cackle and fly about.
 You'll hear us nonetheless: women who,
 united together with strong bonds,
 have views that are not useless,
 and which words and deeds will prove.
 From this day forward their duties
 entail the final conquest of their rights.

The march of the “skirted citizen”, as this same periodical read, belonged to the woman whose quest for coexistence in the public arena turned prevailing notions of beauty and fashion inside out.

New crowns in Buenos Aires

As male leaders set out to arrange political hierarchies following independence, they found their very spaces obstructed by groups of women. Wearing *peinetones*, fashionable women became unavoidable public participants. The fad for audacious hair combs had begun in the 1820s, when women of the region began to discard Spanish customs for other styles. The hybrid *peinetón* soon represented a gendered link to the creation of customs in a newly independent region. Foreign travellers and reporters did not overlook this pulse; the eye-catching comb was a source of some pre-nationalist sentiments, they would write, as the accessory stood out as uniquely Argentine and apart from any other style observed in the rest of Latin America and Europe. French traveller Arsène Isabelle equated them with elaborate structures similar to fortresses in the growing cityscape.

By the early years of the Rosas regime, women's hair accessories had grown to great lengths, with combs providing ample spans for patriotic slogans. In

1830, the word *peinetón* appeared for the first time in an advertising section of *La Gazeta Mercantil*.¹³ With her corseted waist, Elizabethan-style collar and mutton sleeves, the fashionable woman of Buenos Aires looked like a walking hourglass. One fashion lithograph, shown in figure 13.2, reveals a model in a glamorous crimson dress with rose embellishments to convey support for Rosas (which can also mean “roses” in Spanish) and his vision for the newly formed Argentine Confederation. To carry the immense *peinetón*, which could have from six to fourteen teeth and weigh around 800 grams, women sometimes wove their hair into a French-style *chignon* and used concoctions made of ingredients such honey and hemp seed oil, to help maintain their style.¹⁴



Figure 13.2 “Woman from Buenos Aires: Ball Gown.” Fashion lithograph from César Hipólito Bacle’s *Trajes y costumbres de la provincia de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Bacle y Compañía, 1833).

Responding to popular requests, artisans increasingly amplified the comb, traditionally crafted from *carey* (tortoiseshell) but also from imitation tortoiseshell or other materials, in a laborious process. After boiling the material in salt water to soften it, the artisan overlapped sections and then proceeded to shape and cut them manually. After later processes helped to shape the comb further, the artisan then dried and polished the final piece. The horizontal shape of some combs allowed the artisan and the client to work together on the creation of elaborate motifs, such as natural and patriotic scenes, for the comb. This creative extension of what was on the wearer's mind is perhaps what has inspired contemporary visions of the *peinetón*. On some combs, one read the carved proclamations *Long live the Argentine Confederation!* and *Confederation or Death*. From an advertisement in *The British Packet*, we know that even the portrait of Rosas was incorporated into comb designs.¹⁵ Yet other women preferred a more neutral pattern for their comb, opting instead to flutter a politically inspired fan or don gloves with Rosas's portrait so that guests could at once kiss their hands and the image of the Federalist leader.

While portraits have tended to immortalize elite women of the region with their jewel-encrusted combs, there is some evidence to suggest that women of other social classes also enjoyed this fashionable pursuit. An early lithograph by César Hipólito Bacle depicts an Afro-Argentine woman wearing a *peinetón* as she makes her way past the corner *pulpería*, a popular marketplace.¹⁶ The female protagonists of *La Gaucha*, a popular gazette by Luis Pérez that circulated widely throughout the River Plate region,¹⁷ discuss in verse the pride felt in making patriotic statements through dress in the same way one might advertise a politically inspired T-shirt. In fact, the *peinetón* became so popular that it was eventually used as “a new figure of speech to designate the ladies”, with reporters sometimes commenting on the number of combs observed at political events to register the number of female patriots present.¹⁸

As “Argentine” as the claims to the *peinetón* appear to have been, a dose of irony resides in the fact that many of the more popular designs were fashioned by Manuel Masculino, a Spanish artisan living in Buenos Aires. This fact provoked some critics of the *peinetón*, especially those who disregarded fashion out of concern for the economic wellbeing of families, to ask that women discard such symbols of political vanity. Despite such responses, a few fashion columns continued to argue that current styles appealed to the majority. Otherwise, as the pages of *La Argentina* argued, why did so many men insist on buying women these novelties as gifts? One debate in verse explained that, despite a Spanish conspiracy to impose designs and once again seize the earnings of Argentines, it was still the Creole male population who had garnered control over the marketplace and thereby profited from the very items they claimed to abhor. The poem strongly questioned the lack of rights afforded to

women in postcolonial society but also reassured its male readership that most women hoped to retain their traditional roles as wives and mothers.

Jesus, what craziness!
 Jesus, what blockheads!
 To desire at whim
 to limit our sex,

when by disgrace
 they hold us down.
 Only to the latest fashions
 do we have rights

because from fashion
 man derives profit
 and it helps the arts
 progress immensely.

In spite of the song
 in the tone of a maestro
 and the advice
 a missionary would give us

to not use combs
 that make hair fall out,
 thinking that this will
 impose fear on us

so that we will abandon
 the resolute project
 to which all women
 have subscribed.

As a symbol of the powers of female persuasion, the comb could – quite literally – shift the direction of men. The editor of *La Argentina* proposed that a woman should use her *peinetón* to pacify men by ushering them back into the home and away from the war-torn countryside. Nevertheless, several letters to the editor in this magazine and the official press denounced the vanity of those who continued to weave their hair around an inordinately large comb. “Let us defend ourselves from these female tyrants,” one military official wrote, “because their despotism is intolerable and they will always obtain all that they

want through infinite ways...".¹⁹ With allusions to battle and a volatile public sphere in the wake of invading females, this official implored women to abandon their combs and regroup within the domestic sphere.

Under the title *Extravagancias de 1834* (*Extravagances of 1834*), French artist César Hipólito Bacle satirized what many perceived as the absurdity of female agency in the public domain, portraying women as unpredictable and destabilizing forces. Bacle had moved to Argentina from France with the intention of publishing a joint European and Latin American fashion newspaper, *Diario de la Moda*, but this project never eventuated. He turned to fashion lithography instead. He holds an important place in Argentina's history, as the nation's founding lithographer and the director of the government-sponsored *Imprenta del Comercio*. The press, which dates to January of 1835, published bulletins, Confederate insignias, and official portraits of Rosas. In an attempt to phase out the extravagant combs that had once represented the patriotically inspired Argentine woman, the *Imprenta del Comercio* also published a series of poems equating the women who wore *peinetones* to Unitarian supporters and prostitutes. Along with Bacle's renditions of the *Extravagances of 1834*, such menacing representations sponsored by the Argentine Confederation were undoubtedly designed to phase out this unique headdress.

Each lithograph included in the *Extravagances of 1834* allowed for a playfully ambiguous reading of the fashion for extravagant combs. Spatially speaking, the images depict men who find themselves obstructed by the presence of women.²⁰ The women are represented as female "home wreckers" who emerge from their houses to convene in the streets of Buenos Aires, or fashion victims literally "carried away" by *ventarrones* (an allusion to compulsive shopping practices). In "Peinetones en el Teatro" (Peinetones at the Theatre), shown in figure 13.3, COLOUR PLATE SECTION, the men who kindly accompany fashionable ladies to their theatre balconies humbly remove their top hats and are reduced to squinting through the tiny, decorative holes in the women's combs.

Based on their European-style clothing and lack of a crimson insignia, one could wonder if the women present have associated themselves with Unitarian men, a visual cue that surely would have added tension to this public spectacle. Although some men have brought along opera glasses and spectacles, these devices are rendered useless. The combs impose upon their views and they will be forced to piece together the fragments of their evening. On the floor of the theatre, in contrast, a comfortable and sexually segregated crowd of men stands proudly with their top hats in place; they await the upcoming spectacle while engaging in lively conversation.

While women's fashions such as the *peinetón* were once emphasized for their unique and patriotic character, the tensions over women's roles in the political realm and the negative representations prominent in the press and the visual

arts ultimately led to the demise of this intriguing chapter in Argentine material culture. Without an understanding of the historical context from which it emerged, it would be difficult to conceptualize how an object representing political solidarity with the independence movement and, later, the Federalist cause at the time of Juan Manuel de Rosas, could have been discontinued so abruptly. Yet women had been assigned the problematic role of political vanity, and this limited their participation spatially and politically. Shattering expectations, the emblematic *peinetón* called into question the exclusivity of male participation in the public sphere by allowing women to improvise their citizenship individually and collaboratively. Like a stream of thoughts that could mirror the hopes and dreams of a politically engaged woman in a newly independent region, fashion was instrumental in the weaving of new alternatives into the fabric of public life. No longer hidden from public view, women took their vision of independence to the streets of Buenos Aires. Without question, a fashion such as the *peinetón* only represents one historical piece of the puzzle of Argentina's cultural imaginary.²¹ Several references to the comb made today seem like awfully brief, identity-inspired quotations in the sea of global trends, as when *Vogue* appropriated it to evoke the spirit of Buenos Aires when marketing a design by Jean Paul Gaultier.²² Some artistic allusions to the *peinetón* and other fragments of postcolonial culture in Argentina, however, tend to evoke the charged legacies of authoritarianism.

The legacies of authoritarianism

A few years into the twenty-first century, a walk in downtown Buenos Aires on a summer afternoon reveals a trend for solidarity-inspired styles.²³ The relaxed styles of today contrast sharply with those of previous decades, when strict codes imposed clean-cut styles for men and feminine designs (such as skirts and dresses) for women. Little has been written about the political nature of clothing from this period, although dress was clearly used to regiment the population during dictatorship. In "Scattered Bodies, Unfashionable Flesh", Fabricio Forastelli writes,

My first memories of fashion date back to the 1970s, precisely the moment when fashion becomes "moda"; that is, a statement that unveils the repetition and the triviality always present in the nature of violence. Back then, people wearing pants too tight or their hair too long would be stopped by the police and publicly punished.²⁴

Forastelli reminds us that individual and collective forms of dress could disclose some very powerful emotions. The unwritten but regulated dress

codes of the late 1970s and early 1980s served to control the populace at large and any disruption of such codes called into question the legitimacy of power.

At around this time, on 30 April 1977, a courageous group of women banded together to demand information about their missing family members and protest human rights violations. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, known for their weekly marches around a monument commemorating the first revolutionary government installed by patriots, initially wore morning robes and house slippers as if to register visually that they longed to be at home caring for their families. They often walked alone or in pairs in order to avoid arrest, unlike today's gatherings that can attract large groups. Often, the Mothers carried with them the black and white photographs of their "disappeared" children. Because the military regime labelled their children enemies of the state, the Mothers remember when few dared march in solidarity with them, let alone recognize their struggle. The Mothers gathered to march together every Thursday afternoon to keep alive the memory of their children and grandchildren, eventually becoming the leaders of a peaceful movement against the brutality of military dictatorship and for independence from all forces of domination.²⁵

The Mother of the Plaza de Mayo has usually been recognized by the white shawl she wears that has the name of her beloved child cross-stitched in blue thread on the back corner. Worn during marches and at other public events, the white shawl initially served to help the Mothers identify each other in large crowds, and eventually became an internationally recognized symbol of consciousness in the struggle for human rights in Argentina. During the "Dirty War", while several associations organized a Mothers' Day march, the Catholic Church called upon one million Argentine youths to make a pilgrimage to Luján, Argentina, a town some 67 kilometres from Buenos Aires with a cathedral that houses a famous statue of the Immaculate Conception, the Virgin of Luján. Known as the patron saint of Argentina, the Virgin of Luján is reputedly the source of several miracles, having allegedly healed the afflicted and disappeared from one location only to reappear in another. Protesting the role of the Church in overlooking if not condoning the actions of the military regime, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo decided to make the pilgrimage on behalf of their missing children. Realizing that it would be extremely difficult to find each other in the waves of people making their way to Luján, Hebe de Bonafini remembers that the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo collectively decided to wear the pale white cotton diapers of their children on their heads.²⁶ This same white shawl appears as an icon on books, posters, pins and handkerchiefs that the Mothers sell today at the Plaza de Mayo to raise funds for human rights causes. Images of the shawl have also been painted around

the same monument of independence at which the Mothers began their movement some thirty years ago.

Since the economic collapse of 2001, the politically active perform a new nation by wearing *Arte y confección* T-shirts and other clothing produced in factories that were abandoned by their owners, like Brukman, and that workers have reclaimed.²⁷ As Forastelli has argued, “Dress may be the very performance that helps us calculate the ruins of the local amidst the ashes of the economic global market”.²⁸ The fifty-eight seamstresses of Brukman who had long produced quality men’s suits found their plight at the forefront of national debates, a recent presidential campaign, and an entire social movement. The seamstresses were owed back wages and benefits, but the owners had abandoned the enterprise. Dressed in their blue smocks, the seamstresses reclaimed the factory in order to continue working and control the terms of production, but were then treated “as if sewing a grey suit were a capital crime”.²⁹ Many of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, standing out in large crowds with their white shawls, marched with the seamstresses of Brukman and other protestors at the factory site, in vehement opposition to the forced removal of the seamstresses from the worksite.³⁰ Because such mobilizations were highly publicized and covered by the media, protestors sometimes wore printed T-shirts with political slogans and images of revolutionary figures to assert what was on their minds.³¹ Several men present at this demonstration also wore baseball caps, although these probably served as a buffer against the cold. A few wore a black and white *kaffiyeh*, a cloth headdress for Arabic men also used as a radical leftist accessory, as a scarf. Since the height of the repression occurred in the late autumn, jeans and dark hued sweatshirts prevailed – with the sweatshirts unzipped to reveal newly designed political T-shirts beneath.

Inexpensively printed cotton T-shirts announced solidarity with the Brukman workers and set the wearer apart from any group wearing the designer logo sportswear sold in the fashion districts of Buenos Aires. The artists of the Taller de Serigrafía Popular recall printing, at the very site of the demonstration, designs with three different colours of ink.³² Often, they used the old T-shirts that a few demonstrators had gathered from their closets. Sometimes protestors took off the very shirt they were wearing and waited patiently for an affiliated artist to stamp it with a political design.³³ New messages of resistance marked the moment with unique patterns such as imaginary stitches for a sewing machine to follow, the parts of a sewing machine, and a sale ticket announcing that “Brukman belongs to the people” (*Brukman es del pueblo*). The *Arte y Confección* T-shirts made in 2003 quickly became an important form of urban expression for supporters of the right to work movement in Argentina who sought to get the word out about critical events and to

unite artists, intellectuals, university students, and textile workers under a common cause. Eventually, the words “Work, dignity and social change” (*Trabajo, dignidad y cambio social*) were to be seen not only printed on T-shirts but also gracing handbags, handkerchiefs and denim jackets worn throughout the city.

Not surprisingly, contemporary political struggles in Argentina have brought about a significant shift in the way many consume fashion. As Forastelli indicates, gestures in dress that might have seemed overtly rebellious statements some twenty-five years ago are today less menacing than a European-styled suit. Dalmiro Sáenz, the bestselling author of a crimson-coloured book entitled *Yo te odio, político* (I Hate You, Politician), asserts that the politics of neoliberalism in the 1990s were more preoccupied with image-making apparel than Argentina’s constituents. In the late 1980s, Carlos Menem sported sideburns and ponchos to appeal to the working classes during a successful bid for the presidency. While he claimed to represent the interests of all citizens in 1989, government policies over the next ten years overwhelmingly favoured the Washington Consensus, especially when it came to privatization for economic development. It was not long before Menem moved to tailored Versace suits.³⁴ In 1999, as Sáenz writes, Fernando de la Rúa successfully bid for the presidency with sober, dark-coloured suits that eventually came to represent a passive stance in the face of change. While French fashions once announced political revolution in the time of nation building, those who don European styles seem to go against the trend in today’s Argentina. “Status” clothing can sometimes be regarded with suspicion, as if such clothes reflect allegiances to those forces blamed for the political and economic disenfranchisement of others. Sáenz’s intriguing exploration of politics fully integrates the coded signs of dress, with the crimson cover of his book seeming to evoke both the turmoil of early nation building in Argentina and social revolution.

If fashion in Argentina often points to the failure of politics, as Forastelli argues, then a new trend appears to be emerging. Responding to the influx of global goods that accompanied neoliberalism in Argentina, several designers are proposing creative solutions that market local products competitively, integrate local forms of knowledge, and aim to disseminate progressive ideological content. The transnational network *Identidades Latinas*, established in 2003, seeks for its members a share of the global marketplace while also inspiring social change.³⁵ Design thereby becomes a dialogue that involves local communities in the creative process and provides living wages. Furthermore, designers in this network work collaboratively to project as “lifestyle” the values of fair trade and environmental and social responsibility.³⁶ Fashion thus envisioned invests the wearer with enhanced meaning in the contemporary

cityscape, providing a significant alternative to the machine of mass production and consumption.

The work of designer Flavia Angriman, a professor at the Institute of Art and Fashion in Buenos Aires, explores social and psychological responses to authoritarianism through design. Some sketches made during the economic crisis integrated representations of silence and voice, national self-understandings and the politics of memory, and public presence. Delving into the idea that “efficient” models of mass production and consumption neglect the spirit of political transition in Argentina, Angriman presented in 2001 a sportswear collection constructed from fragmented but not necessarily separate visions of maternity, mourning, and the wounds of the soul.³⁷ Fully aware of the pitfalls of rendering the pain of dictatorship artistically, Angriman evoked the power of citizenship in reconstructing memories, and imparted on her designs the emotional pulse of daily life in Buenos Aires. Her understated skirts, for instance, evoke the triangular shapes of the shawls worn by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and their freedom of movement. At least three sketches for shirts with long, flared sleeves integrate one to six X-shaped patterns delicately fashioned with bandages, symbols of urgency and care that initiate the healing process. The colours depicted by Angriman’s sketches convey a sombre and understated impression, although visual disharmony erupts onto this pattern as if to overpower some of the more muted pieces. Angriman was very careful with the ways in which she represented the spirit of resistance artistically, aiming to disavow any pretentiousness in the collection.³⁸ While one might argue that such creative imaginings inescapably fix one’s gaze on the trauma of the “dirty war”, this collection ultimately asks the wearer to acknowledge a national past and reconsider its struggles through active presence in the cityscape. As scholars continue to analyze the cultural politics of memory in Argentina, the role that fashion design has played in re-articulating the past and “producing” cultural meaning merits further study.

Negotiating the promise of the future while facing the memory of dictatorship, María Silvia Corcuera Terán continues to map the nation’s political tensions onto the *peinetón*, protective layers, and the shawls of mothers from around the world who appeal for justice on behalf of their children. In *The Suppliant*, a sculpture in red wood of an inverted comb is like a trough used in the north of the country to grind grains for popular foods or wash clothing. From this structure emerge the city of Buenos Aires and the new migrations of a global economy. As a creative endeavour worn collectively, this *peinetón* calls into question those political interests that do not bear in mind equity for all citizens. Resisting marginalization, the politically engaged woman of the postcolonial period engaged new ways of thinking and, in the process, disrupted authoritarian practices that limited her participation. Exuding confi-

dence, she surveyed the political horizon and attempted to configure new forms of cultural expression that reflected a breakdown of rigid gender roles and the transformation of public spaces. It is the potential for creative agency in everyday urban life that inspires artists such as Corcuera Terán. The symbols of political consciousness in Argentina, whether a *peinetón*, crimson-coded poncho, white shawl or stamped T-shirt, continue to extend the symbolic dimensions of “representation” and reverberate with new messages and meanings in the heart of Buenos Aires.

Notes

- 1 “Ponételo. Te duele a ti, me duele a mí. Si yo me siento herida, vos también”. Interview with the artist, Buenos Aires, 2002.
- 2 The Spanish Crown had even issued a series of statements to emphasize the delineations of dress according to caste hierarchies, denouncing ostentatious dress on the part of mestizas, or women of mixed race, but not the luxurious presence of clergymen. See in particular the work of Arnold Bauer in *Goods, Power and History: Latin America’s Material Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and the article by Mariselle Meléndez on “Visualizing Difference: The Rhetoric of Clothing in Colonial Spanish America”, in *The Latin American Fashion Reader*, ed. Regina Root (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2005), pp. 17–30.
- 3 Bauer, *Goods, Power and History*, p. 112.
- 4 Tulio Halperin Donghi, “Argentine Counterpoint”, in *Beyond Imagined Communities. Reading and Writing the Nation in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, ed. Sara Castro Klarén and John Charles Chasteen (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press), p. 46.
- 5 The Brigadier General Cornelio de Saavedra Historical Museum has on display an intriguing collection of the messages placed within top hats during this period.
- 6 Francine Masiello, *Between Civilization and Barbarism: Women, Nation and Literary Culture in Modern Argentina* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), p. 24.
- 7 Masiello, *Between Civilization and Barbarism*, p. 23.
- 8 *La Moda*, No. 1, p. 3.
- 9 *La Moda*, No. 21, p. 3.
- 10 A previous version of this discussion of *La Aljaba* and *La Cotorra* appeared in my article on “Vestidas para matar: La mujer, la moda y el espíritu de la independencia de América Latina en el siglo XIX”, *DeSigniS* 1 (October 2001): 239–52.
- 11 Mary Louise Pratt, “Women, Literature and National Brotherhood”, in *Women, Culture and Politics in Latin America*, ed. Seminar on Feminism and Culture in Latin America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 52.
- 12 A list of words created out of *política*, or politics, included “óptica, palco, lícito, Paco, pica, taco, copa, alto, cito, palo, topa, ato, toca, pito, polca, plato, Hipólito, Pilato, úo, tipo, ola, pato”.
- 13 Claudia López and Horacio Botalla, “El peinetón en Buenos Aires, 1823–1837”, *Boletín Histórico del Instituto de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires* 8 (1983): 11–12.
- 14 Women appear to have expressed concern over the heaviness of their headdress, which sometimes pulled out otherwise healthy hair. Usually recipes required staple goods

- available in most homes: eggs, milk, hemp seed oil, honey, vinegar and broth. A few concoctions involved a great deal of time for preparation; the magazine *El Iris* provided some of the more favoured recipes. *El Iris*, no. 4, pp. 3–4.
- 15 *The British Packet*, no. 474, p. 3.
 - 16 Daniel Schávelzon, *Buenos Aires negra. Arqueología histórica de una ciudad silenciada*. (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 2003), p. 104b.
 - 17 See, for example, “Buena federal”, a popular poem about a female street vendor who has saved her earnings in order to wear a *peinetón* on Independence Day. Individual pages of this poem circulated as part of a series in *La Gaucha* around 1833.
 - 18 *The British Packet*, no. 417, p. 3.
 - 19 *La Argentina*, no. 20, p. 10. *La Argentina*’s editor quickly replied to these harangues, “With immense sacrifices, we women are busy contributing to society so that it can become a theatre of pleasures. You men insist on our society becoming a valley of tears. Man has always inherited error and weakness. In vain he feigns great knowledge and strength”, *La Argentina*, no. 21, p. 8.
 - 20 This seems to have happened in real life, with social codes addressing the ways in which to pass a woman and her *peinetón* on the street. In the more extreme cases, it appears that some men felt they were run off the street, haunted by the “grenadier-like appearance” of the comb-touting woman (*The British Packet*, no 356, p. 3). In previous work, I have discussed how women were perceived as being almost literally “dressed to kill”, their towering combs linked to the terror of castration, with an effect not unlike that produced by the snakes on Medusa’s head.
 - 21 The government of Buenos Aires, for instance, has recently established a site to document surviving artifacts from the nation-building period. The “collective catalogue” of hair ornaments compiled by the Ministry of Culture can be found at <<http://www.acceder.buenosaires.gov.ar/acceder/index.htm>>. Be sure to click on “Moda e indumentaria” (Fashion and dress) to survey this online collection. The primary collections of *peinetones* in Argentina are housed at the Isaac Fernández Blanco Museum of Spanish American Art and the Brigadier General Cornelio de Saavedra Historical Museum.
 - 22 See p. 481 of “The Leading Lady”, a fashion spread set in Buenos Aires, in the March 2006 issue of *Vogue* magazine.
 - 23 Victoria Lescano, *Followers of Fashion. Falso Diccionario de la Moda* (Buenos Aires: Interzona Editora, 2004), p. 36.
 - 24 Fabricio Forastelli, “Scattered Bodies, Unfashionable Flesh”, in *The Latin American Fashion Reader*, ed. Root, p. 284.
 - 25 The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo are divided into two factions: the Línea Fundadora, or founding group, which focuses on archiving information on what happened to the “disappeared” in order to bring to justice those responsible for the kidnappings and murders; and the group of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo led by Hebe de Bonafini, who seek to carry out the revolutionary goals to which their children had subscribed, and who have founded a human rights university. For more on the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, see the work of Diana Taylor, in particular *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s “Dirty War”* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).
 - 26 Hebe de Bonafini, Speech given as President of the Association of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Buenos Aires, 6 July 1988.
 - 27 *Arte y confección* means “art and confection”, and refers to a series of cultural and political events organized to express solidarity with the plight of the Brukman seamstresses

and the workers' movement in Argentina. Organizers took issue with the fact that cultural events sponsored by city government tended to be juried and overlook the creative contributions of workers. Contributing artists at the first event, from 27 May to 1 June 2003, offered the viewing public many different ideas on creative agency and its role in asserting solidarity with the Brukman seamstresses.

- 28 Fabricio Forastelli, "Scattered Bodies, Unfashionable Flesh", in *The Latin American Fashion Reader*, ed. Root, p. 288.
- 29 Naomi Klein, "Argentina's Luddite Rulers", *Globe and Mail* (Canada), 24 April 2003, p. A17.
- 30 Naomi Klein reports in her article "Argentina's Luddite Rulers" on what occurred at the Balvanera worksite from 18 through 21 April 2003,

Police had evicted the workers in the middle of the night and turned the entire block into a military zone guarded by machine guns and attack dogs. Unable to get into the factory and complete an outstanding order for 3,000 pairs of dress trousers, the workers gathered a huge crowd of supporters and announced it was time to go back to work. At 5 p.m., 50 middle aged seamstresses in no-nonsense haircuts, sensible shoes and blue work smocks walked up to the black police fence. Someone pushed, the fence fell, and the Brukman women, unarmed and arm in arm, slowly walked through.

They had only taken a few steps when the police began shooting: tear gas, water cannons, first rubber bullets, then lead. The police even charged the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, in their white headscarves embroidered with the names of their "disappeared" children. Dozens of demonstrators were injured and police fired tear gas into a hospital where some had taken refuge.

A selection of photographic images of the seamstresses and supporting demonstrators can be found at: <<http://argentina.indymedia.org/news/2003/05/108349.php>> and <<http://www.poloobrero.org.ar/marcha/brukman2/index.htm>>.

- 31 See Victoria Lescano's article entitled "Estampado popular", which appeared in one of Argentina's main newspapers, *Página/12*, on 6 June 2003: <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/las12/13-659-2003-06-08.html>. Interestingly enough, the manner of representing revolutionary gestures has become somewhat iconic. When an artist's workshop stamped on T-shirts the image of Darío Santillán with long hair, a beard and arms extended, many confused his image with that of other revolutionary figures such as Che Guevara and even Jesus. Santillán was a *piquetero*, or a member of the unemployed workers' movement in Argentina, who along with a friend was gunned down and killed by police at an anti-globalization demonstration on 26 June 2002.
- 32 The Taller de Serigrafía Popular was founded by Diego Posadas and Mariela Scaffati. Due to the popularity of the printed T-shirts at various demonstrations in Buenos Aires, Victoria Lescano writes that the two workshop founders later enlisted the help of other artists, including Magdalena Jitrik and Karina Grainieri. Victoria Lescano, "Estampado popular".
- 33 Victoria Lescano, "Estampado popular", Buenos Aires: *Página/12*, 6 June 2003. <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/las12/13-659-2003-06-08.html>.
- 34 Dalmiro Sáenz, *Yo te odio, político* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2001), p. 8.
- 35 Laura Novik of Argentina and Celaine Refosco of Brazil founded *Identidades Latinas* in 2003. This, in turn led to the creation of a non-governmental organization called Raíz

Diseño in 2007. A feature story entitled "Redes latinas" appeared in *Página 12* on December 10 2005: <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/m2/10-839-2005-12-10.html>.

36 Laura Novik and Alex Blanch, "Buen diseño, buen negocio", *ARQ Chile* 62 (December 2006): 15-17.

37 I would like to thank Laura Novik for her assistance in compiling sketches by Flavia Angriman.

38 Correspondence with Flavia Angriman and Laura Novik, December 2006.