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Spaceship to Argentina: Observations Upon Landing II

By Martha Farmelo

OCTOBER 5, 2001

BUENOS AIRES— In my first newsletter, I described my three-year-old son's conviction that a fellowship is a spaceship, shared some initial impressions from my first week in Argentina and described some of the contradictions that first jumped out at me. The purpose of this second newsletter is to share some additional first impressions about Argentine society, this time about diversity and homogeneity.

So Who is More Italian: the Anglo-Argentine or the Italian-American?

I am drawn to Argentina in part by the similarity between its culture and my Italian-American heritage. When as a teenager I first traveled to Italy, I said to myself, literally, "So this is why I am the way I am!" I was standing close to whizzing traffic in Rome's Piazza Barberini surrounded by people who not only looked like me, but also greeted each other with hugs and kisses and opined with passion and emphatic gesticulation. I had sometimes been ribbed by my four siblings for speaking like that, so I felt vindicated—and at home.

My paternal grandparents were born in southern Italy. My son's middle name is Alessandro, after my grandfather who, when he was eleven and orphaned, ran away from an uncle, joined a friendly family at the port in Naples, and sailed to Ellis Island. Years later, he worked in a tannery in north Pennsylvania where his job was to clean hides that were imported from Argentina. At age 24, he returned to the province of Caserta to marry his first wife, Philomena, the eldest of eight children. They had five sons before she died. He then returned again to marry her



(Above) My grandfather, Alessandro, and grandmother, Pasqualina

(Below) My grandfather, Alessandro Ferraiuolo (later changed to Alexander Farmelo), brought his first bride, Philomena di Francesco, to the U.S. in 1906. Their ship, the Prinzess Irene, docked at Ellis Island. Photo from the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation and the Essex Peabody Museum.



youngest sister, Pasqualina, my grandmother. They had three sons, the first my father.

On my mother's side, I qualify to join the Daughters of the American Revolution and can trace my lineage to President William H. Taft. However, my Italian identity tends to dominate and is stronger than that of my siblings, in part because of time spent in Latin America over the last several years. Central Americans in particular expressed surprise that I violated the stereotype of the light-haired, light-skinned North American and spoke Spanish with a decent accent, and routinely inquired about my ethnic background. They inevitably replied "ah-ha" in response to the Italian half, as if that explained everything.

On my first trip to Buenos Aires in 1991, I was stunned by the strength of the Italian influence on the language, people's physical appearance, food, and architecture—and by how utterly at home I felt. Over the last month or so, I have gotten a kick out of the Italian names everywhere I turn: two notary publics named Badaloni and Marconi; two feminists quoted in an article on women peacemakers named Magui Bellotti and Mabel Bellucci; the former Minister of Foreign Relations, Guido di Tella; my political scientist friend, Marcela Natalicchio; a judge in the appellate court of the city of Buenos Aires named Carlos Pizzatelli; and a well-known leader of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo named Hebe Pastor de Bonafini.

Argentines speak Spanish (which they call *castellano*, or "Castillian") with a striking Italian lilt. Over the last week, as our son increased his Spanish at the speed of light, the Salvadoran accent he picked up from his day-care providers in Washington has given way to a marked Argentine accent, even in English. "*Qué lindo paaarque,*" he says — what a beautiful playground. And after dinner, "Daaaddy, can I have iiiice cream?"

Beyond the accent, Argentine Spanish is replete with Italian vocabulary and idioms. Argentines even exclaim "*ecole,*" or "*ecolecua,*" two direct imports from Italian that



(Left) I was astounded to stand in the cavernous room where most of the Ferraiuolo's — perhaps my relatives—who came to Argentina had their first meals at the Buenos Aires Immigrants' Hotel. (Below) Here's what the dining room looked like then.



mean roughly "that's it," or "there you go." I've heard them say "*mangia, que te fa bene,*" Italian for "eat up, it's good for you." And one time when I sneezed, someone actually replied "*Salute Garibaldi*"—to the health of Giuseppe Garibaldi, a father of modern Italy and brilliant soldier of the *Risorgimento*. In the early 1800s, he mastered the techniques of guerrilla warfare while fighting for Uruguay and Río Grande do Sul, the southernmost section of the Brazilian empire, then seeking to establish itself as an independent republic.

But my favorite is the Argentine use of the word "gnocchi," that delectable little round pasta made of potatoes. Here, *ñoquis* are also ghost employees, people who are on the payroll but never show up for work, and are often family members of politicians. In Argentina, there is a tradition that families get together on the 29th of each month to eat gnocchis and put money under their plates, which they are then supposed to keep to attract wealth. Hence the other gnocchis, who only show up on the 29th—to collect their paychecks. Candidates for the October 14



The front of the Immigrants' Hotel, located right next to the dock at the port of Buenos Aires

mid-term elections agree that the latter type of gnocchi has got to go. They use this word when speaking to the press and public if it were formal terminology, and promise that there will be a cut in the congressional payroll.

The Italian influence can be traced directly to the massive wave of immigration spanning the late 1800s and early 1900s. According to Carlos Díaz Alejandro's *Essays on the Economic History of the Argentine Republic*, between 1857 and 1930 there was a net immigration of about 3.5 million into a country whose population was only 1.7 million in 1869. In 1914, every other resident of Buenos Aires was foreign born. Out of every ten immigrants, one would find five from Italy, three from Spain, one from northwestern Europe and one from the Balkans or eastern Europe.

The percentage of men in Buenos Aires age 20 to 60 increased significantly, and among them in 1914 the foreign-born comprised the majority. Furthermore, unlike today's dreadful levels of under- and unemployment, from 1860 to 1930 Argentina's was a full-employment economy in which temporary joblessness was resolved by going back to one's home country, or to labor-poor countries such as the United States.

According to Argentine sociologist Ronaldo Munk, in 1914 nearly half the workers in Buenos Aires belonged to Mutual Benefit Societies, male-dominated vehicles for mutual aid, worker solidarity and political protagonism. The Italian societies were the most numerous and best organized. They were often schools of anarchism, socialism or other "free thinking," and played a considerable role in building class solidarity and the early trade unions.

Many Argentines today tell me that descendents of

Italians, Spaniards and others simply consider themselves Argentines and would never dream of hyphenating their identity as do Italian-Americans or African-Americans. Nonetheless, I've noticed that Argentines often refer to others as "el Tano" (the Italian) whose daughter just migrated or "el Gallego" (literally Galician, but used to refer to all Spaniards) who sells fruits and vegetables on the corner. When seeking a pediatrician for our son, Camilo, I was referred to the British, German and French Hospitals, originally built by the Mutual Benefit Societies for their respective immigrant communities. When eyeing kids' activities for the Columbus Day weekend, I saw a puppet show offered by the *Asociación Italiana de Belgrano* in the neighborhood just north of ours.

And this week, in an effort to build mutual understanding, the *Federación Arabe* and the Jabad Lubavitch Jewish community organization participated in a soccer match for their kid's teams. The *Federación Arabe* won 6-0.

Actually, the strength of ethnic identity seems to vary from family to family, and even person to person. As I sipped espresso with a 50-something woman who immigrated from Spain at age five, she told me that she was thrilled about traveling as an adult to her homeland. But after a week of, "Hey, you must be from Argentina," she left with a highly consolidated Argentine identity. At the



This ad for Italian citizenship reflects today's reverse emigration, largely a result of Argentina's profound economic crisis. Argentina was recently rated the most risky country for foreign investment in the entire world—surpassing Pakistan and Nigeria. A recent editorial in London's Financial Times argued that it is no longer worth investing in Argentina.

same time, her sister, who was born in Buenos Aires, considers herself indisputably more Spanish than Argentine.

My partner, Alan, and I like to rib each other, half in jest, about which of us is more Italian, the one with 50 percent Italian blood who grew up in Buffalo, New York, or the one with not a drop of Italian blood who grew up on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. In any event, moving to Buenos Aires has produced in me a profound sense of homecoming. Mysteriously, this holds true even when I can't understand the woman in the dry cleaner's, or think that the sign on the train platform that says *Locutorio* indicates a station that, oddly, is not on the map (it's actually a place with several public phones, next to the station).

African-American in Argentina For a Day: The Sore Thumb Effect

In the almost six weeks since I arrived, I've often noticed that Buenos Aires has a similar feel to New York. The buildings aren't as high, but the city bustles like New York. It has a magnificent nightlife, is packed with people, taxis and buses and has wall-to-wall businesses, big and small, at ground level and above. But of course, one of New York's hallmarks is the diversity of its people. Individuals there come from all over the world, and just about anything goes in terms of clothing, behavior and appearance.

That is not the case in Argentina, not even in cosmo-

politan Buenos Aires. The two words that flash in my brain as I move around the city are "homogeneity" and "conformity." People tend to dress similarly, wear their hair fairly the same, and behave within a perfectly acceptable but relatively narrow range of conduct, e.g. women are not supposed to cross their legs in that open fashion with one upper ankle resting above the knee, only with the entire upper legs touching each other. And while fads come and go, basic fashion doesn't seem to change much over time. Men still wear v-neck sweaters under their blazers, and women well-fitting pants and skirts of relatively subdued colors. Even red and purple leather shoes and jackets are surprisingly understated.

Perhaps this apparent homogeneity strikes me in particular because I spent most of the last 20 years in Washington, DC, home to enormous racial and cultural diversity. When I last changed jobs, I was anxious to work on women's health but mindful of Dorothy Roberts' inquiry in *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*: "How can we possibly talk about reproductive health policy without addressing race, as well as gender?"

I was fortunate to land at the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, where the staff is roughly half African-American and the Black Church and Latino Initiatives involve hundreds of clergy in addressing teen-pregnancy and related issues. How will those experiences serve me in Argentina? At first blush, I felt that I was leaving such issues behind.



The D-line subway headed toward Congreso de Tucumán. As I move around the city, the two words that flash in my brain are "homogeneity" and "conformity."

Since I've been here, I have seen 14—count 'em—14 people of African descent. I had heard more than once that there is no racism in Argentina, and that unlike neighboring Brazil and even Uruguay, there are only a handful of Blacks in Argentina, and none of them are actually Argentine. Fortunately, we brought a copy of George Reid Andrews' *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires 1800-1900*, which does an excellent job of reconstructing Black history in Argentina, especially the social, economic and political roles of Afro-Argentines after abolition in 1831. Afro-Argentines constituted 30 percent of the population of Buenos Aires in 1778, but only two percent by 1887. However, Andrews demonstrates that the Afro-Argentines did not disappear but rather were erased from the city's awareness. As he says, they were "forgotten but not gone."

Three weeks after my arrival here, my freshman college roommate, Monica, was here for about 48 hours

These matrons were members of the Afro-Argentine middle class and were photographed in 1902 at a dance. Photograph from the Argentine National Archive.



to recruit students to Georgetown's business school. Although most of the other African-American and European-American roommates on our floor split up within months, we shared a wonderfully harmonious, if closet-sized space. Just a few months ago, Monica had told me that a previous trip to Buenos Aires had been most unpleasant, so as we walked near the replica of Big Ben adjacent to the Retiro train station, I asked her to share her experiences in more detail.

First, some of the representatives of the other universities with whom she travels rave about Buenos Aires because it is so European, making clear that things and people European and white are, in their minds, inherently superior. (Inside, I thought, are my positive feelings about Buenos Aires racist?)

She said that she gets glaring stares, and that people look her up and down. She understands the curiosity, but people are sometimes out-and-out rude to her. Many of them have called her a "*negra estúpida*" to her face. Monica understands Spanish, though just about anyone can translate that. If she's in a group, things are generally OK. But when alone, she often does not get service. For example, the day we met, she stood in line at the black-marble concierge desk at the Sheraton, one of Buenos Aires' swankiest hotels. Numerous white guests wandered up after her, yet were all attended before she was.

Shortly after she left, I read in *Página 12*, a leftist daily, about the case brought against Facundo Mazzini Urriburu by Elisa Souza de Melgarejo, an Afro-Uruguayan who has lived in Buenos Aires since 1973. On March 8, 2000, while they were both buying groceries, Mazzini Urriburu told her that "All Blacks should be killed when they are little, like this one [her 18-month-old grandson]...yes, I'm telling you, you Black shit, you Black slumdweller, and the whore that birthed you." ("*A los negros hay que matarlos a todos desde chiquitos, como a éste...sí, a vos te digo, negra de mierda, negra villera y la puta que te parió.*")

Perhaps it is not surprising that al-

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though I suspect that one of Alan's friends has African ancestors, I feel it would be an offense to inquire if this is true. On the other hand, my Argentine sister-in-law, Cristina, used to call me *Negra* with affection, which is not uncommon. Argentines also use the term to refer with fondness to public figures such as the legendary folksinger Mercedes Sosa, *la Negra Sosa*.

Before taking legal action, Melgarejo consulted the National Institute Against Discrimination, Xenophobia and Racism, an agency of the Ministry of Interior. The Institute investigates violations of a 1988 law that prohibits discrimination based on "race, religion, nationality, ideology, political opinion, sex, economic position, social class, or physical characteristics," and carries out educational programs to promote social and cultural pluralism and combat discriminatory attitudes.

The judge has decided that her case will go to trial. He reaffirmed the right to free speech, but ruled that Mazzini Urriburu's aggressive and intimidating tone violated the prohibition on behavior that encourages persecution and hatred against a person or group because of their race.

I got to see firsthand some of what people of African descent experience that Saturday that Monica and I spent together. To celebrate the 20th anniversary of our friend-



To celebrate the 20th anniversary of our friendship, Monica and I rode the Buquebus ferry to neighboring Colonia, Uruguay, just 45 minutes away.



This ad on the Plaza Italia subway platform wishes Jews a Happy New Year and urges them to celebrate the High Holy Days.

ship, we traveled to neighboring Colonia, Uruguay, a 45-minute ride across the Río de la Plata on a massive white ferry. While sitting at a small, square, black table at the café in the terminal of Buquebus, the boat company, she could not get a waiter to come to us. As soon as I lifted my hand, one came right over. And after we took our airplane-like seats for the return trip home, a gray-haired gentleman sat down next to me but did not stop his strikingly obvious staring at Monica. I decided to stare back, equally obviously—mind you, we were separated by inches. After a full minute or two, he apparently became uncomfortable enough to justify his staring with a comment. “Yup, it’s really windy. This boat is really going to bounce around today.”

Monica has decided not to let such experiences ruin her trips. Still, if I hadn’t been here in Buenos Aires, she would have gone directly to Lima, Perú. “I love to visit the artisan markets there, and prefer to be somewhere where they don’t stare at me all the time. Also, why would I come all the way to Latin America to be in a country that is so European? I like Europe, but when I’m in Latin America, I want to be in a more Latin American country.”

Clearly, Blacks are still a novelty in Argentina. In the press, the only other reference I’ve seen to someone of African descent in Argentina was a profile in the September 30, 2001 magazine of *La Nación* of an inter-racial couple, both journalists, Eliana Patricia Melgarejo de Souza (the daughter of Elisa Souza de Melgarejo, mentioned above), and Horacio Embón, who is Jewish. Both of them describe experiences of racism. For example,

Horacio is quoted as being told that Russians like he are incapable of falling in love. (Jews are often referred to as *Rusos* because so many emigrated to Argentina from Russia.)

Religious and Cultural Diversity: More Than Meets the Eye

Although I do not see people of all different races, as I used to in Washington, Argentina is by no means a homogeneous society. While most of the population in Buenos Aires is white and Catholic, I already have a sense that the fabric of Argentine society is far more complex than one perceives at first glance.

The Jewish community, which is predominantly Ashkenazi, illustrates this point well. Jews number about 250,000 in Argentina (200,000 live in Buenos Aires), and are prominent in film, music, journalism and certain sectors of the economy. At the same time, Argentina is famous for harboring Nazi war criminals and for the highly anti-Semitic, even Nazi elements of its armed forces. Each day when we take Camilo to and from pre-school, we pass an advertisement on the platform at the subway stop at Plaza Italia for activities related to the Jewish holidays.

Over the last two weeks, the Jewish community has been highly visible in the news as the first trial opened in the case of the deadly 1994 bombing of the AMIA, (*Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina*), Buenos Aires’ Jewish Community Center. On trial are several Buenos Aires police officers accused of securing the vehicle that was

used to transport the explosives. The case is extremely complex, its investigation fraught with malfeasance by the investigating judge, including negligence, destroyed evidence and negotiations to purchase testimony for \$400,000—which he himself illegally videotaped. Just last week, the now-presiding judge announced his intention to subpoena former President Carlos Menem to testify as to why early, apparently solid leads to an Iranian connection provided by the Argentine embassy in Teheran were not investigated by his administration.

Given the AMIA trial and the September 11 attacks in the U.S., it is a difficult time for people of Arab descent in Argentina. Also, much attention has been given to newly heightened security measures in the area surrounding the “triple border” of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil. Tourism to the nearby, majestic Iguazú falls is on the wane. This area is a sieve for illegal entrants into Argentina, and is apparently a center for groups of Islamic fundamentalists suspected of planning terrorist activities. Amazingly, the combination of events has also reopened the question of whether the armed forces should be involved in internal security. Like others, I thought that debate was closed, given their role in the

ghastly repression of the 1976-1983 dictatorship.

Beyond the Jewish community, there is considerable religious diversity in Argentina. This weekend there will be a prayer service for world peace at the obelisk downtown organized by youth from the Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Orthodox, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Hindu and other communities. During my time here so far, I have been surprised at how little I notice the presence of the Catholic church. First, it seems there are far fewer churches in Buenos Aires than in Washington, DC. Also, I have seen only scattered Catholic imagery, such as the tile Virgen Mary at Plaza Italia, and a few Catholic medallions worn around women’s necks. With images of seductive women’s bodies on display at every turn and supremely sexual ads for condoms and health plans on TV, the overall environment is by no means as sexually repressed as I expected. Last week, *The Vagina Monologues* was the non-fiction bestseller at Librerías Fausto, a chain of bookstores. An article on a bill recently presented to normalize gay unions mentioned opposition from the Catholic church only toward the end.

On the other hand, the role of the Catholic church in





Many of the Catholic churches are contemporary, unremarkable buildings, such as the Nuestra Señora de Loreto parish at Coronel Díaz and Juncal, about half a block from where we live in the Palermo neighborhood.

Argentine politics and society is legendary. Last week I was told that the church has squashed the possibility of any sexuality education in the schools. It has succeeded in defining life as beginning at conception within the constitution and controls several municipal leaders in Buenos Aires and other provinces, if behind the scenes. Until the constitution was rewritten in 1994, the President had to be Roman Catholic—though witness former President Carlos Menem, who simply converted from Islam to Catholicism. Also, a seventh son is entitled by law to have the President be his godfather, a Catholic ritual. And if a couple has a seventh daughter? The answer I received was “too bad.” (I was expecting worse.)

My in-laws, who reside in Burzaco, a suburb just south of the city of Buenos Aires, have given me an introduction to the growing evangelical movement in Argentina. One Sunday, I attended the local Brethren church with Alan’s mother. I wondered if I would hear any echoes of a book that Alan’s mother gave me called *Let Me Be a Woman: Notes to My Daughter on the Meaning of Womanhood*. The author, Elisabeth Elliott, asserts that “to learn what it means to be a woman, we must start with the one who made her.” Drawing from the book of Genesis, she states that “God created male and female, the male to call forth, lead, initiate and rule, and the female to respond, follow, adapt, submit....so the woman who accepts the limitations of womanhood finds in those very

limitations her gifts, her special calling—wings, in fact, that bear her up into perfect freedom, into the will of God.”

My mother-in-law apologized for my having to wear a veil, something she herself dislikes but tolerates. As the norm is to wear black lace, I was afraid my purple and light blue flowers would offend. But when I saw that the pastor’s wife wore a black scarf with a silver pattern woven throughout, I relaxed.

The walls of the simple chapel were a combination of pink paint and exposed brick, with *Solo Cristo Salva* (Only Christ Saves) painted above the yellow windows. We joined about 50 others, including several humbly dressed young men, on the wooden benches with straight planks for backs. The pulpit was a lovely, modest wooden dais with enormous fresh-cut lilies in front, and there was no altar. I was startled when the pastor, dressed in a dark gray suit, came up suddenly from behind and touched my elbow.

“Do you come from another church?” he whispered.

“No,” I replied.

“Are you baptized?” he inquired.

I clutched, paused, and answered, “No.”

Although I was baptized as a baby in the Presbyterian church, I imagined that he wanted to know if I was baptized as an adult, and, therefore, if I would eat from the large loaf of bread and sip a tiny cup of the extra-sweet, alcohol-smelling wine. Betty leaned over and told him that I was her daughter-in-law from *Norteamérica*, and as silently as he appeared, he disappeared again.

Except for his sermon on being close to Christ in both good and bad times, the soothing service reminded me of a Quaker meeting, with periods of silent prayer interrupted occasionally by men who stood, prayed out loud, and read the first verse of a hymn that the organist and congregation would then take up. The refrain of one hymn asked repeatedly, “If God works thusly on the earth, how must it be in heaven?” (*Si Dios obra así en las tierras, como será en el cielo?*) After the service, I felt connected to Alan’s mother as we walked home along the broken sidewalk, arm-in-arm, Betty leaning on me just enough to support her ailing back.

Racial, Ethnic, and Class Diversity: The Fabric Takes on a Bumpy Texture

In addition to the variety of religious groups, if one looks closely, there is more racial and ethnic diversity in Buenos Aires than originally meets the eye. I have heard frequent references to the Bolivian, Peruvian and Paraguayan immigrants who come in search of work and usually live in miserable conditions in the slums Argentines

call *villas miserias* on the outskirts of Buenos Aires.

I was certain that the long-haired, golden-skinned women who lay out their vegetables, t-shirts and women's underwear on small plastic sheets along the streets near our apartment were Bolivian. But I was equally sure that Emilio, who does maintenance in our apartment building, was Bolivian or Peruvian until he told me that he is from the far northwestern province of Salta, which borders Chile, Bolivia and Paraguay. At first I suspected that he was afraid to admit to being an illegal immigrant. However, the truth is I've never been to Salta or known anyone from there, and what I've read about that region since the day we had that conversation indicates that he may very well be a native Argentine.



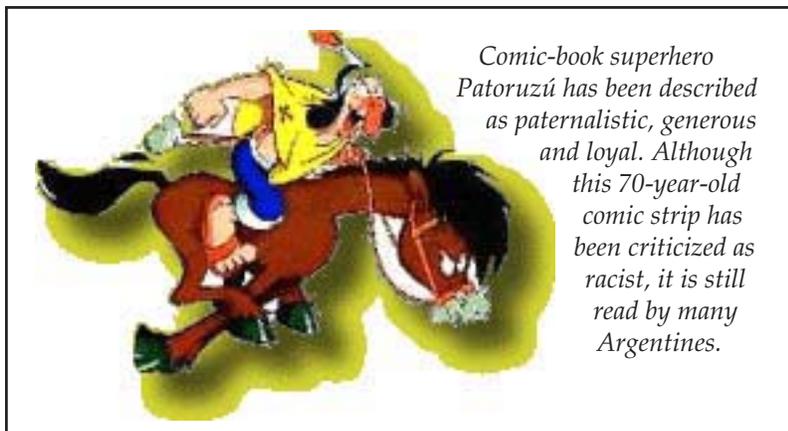
Camilo and I enjoy saying hello each morning to the women near our home who sell us ginger for dinners and lima beans for pre-school projects on germinating seeds.

In fact, I have learned that the indigenous groups are numerous, including, for example, the Atacamas, Ava-Guaraní, Cochinos, Diaguito-Calchaquí, Huarpe, Kolla, Mapuche, Mocoví, Ocloya, Omaguacas, Pilagá, Purmamarca, Qom (Toba), Ranquel, Tehuelche and Wichí. I have learned that several campaigns are under way to protect and expand the rights of native Argentine indigenous groups (as opposed to indigenous groups from other countries). Since 1930, at least four generations of Argentines have avidly followed the adventures of the Tehuelche comic-book superhero Patoruzú. This defender of noble causes has no superpowers, but relies on the great fortune that his father left him hidden in a temple in the Patagonia. I have also heard the term *cabecitas negras* (literally, little black heads), to refer to Argentines from "the interior" who have noticeably Indian, and in some cases African, ancestry.

At the same time, when I walk down a street called

Thames on my way to Camilo's pre-school, the English reference is eclipsed by the presence of a handful of Asian businesses. Not far from there I caught a glimpse of a "Chinese Christian Church in Argentina," but quite frankly, like the stereotypical Argentine who calls all Asian people *chinos* (Chinese), I don't know if the Asians I see are from China, Korea, or somewhere else.

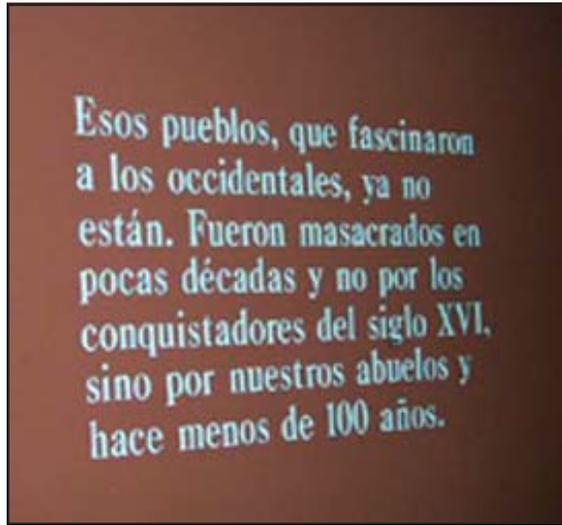
One medium-sized Asian-owned supermarket along Thames is called *Supermercado Bendición*, (Blessing). In addition to gold Asian characters which I guess are Chinese, the red letters for *Bendición* look like the squarish ones you see in Chinese restaurants in the U.S. On one of our first Sundays in Palermo, our new neighborhood, we strolled by a storefront that advertised both Chinese Food and *Rotisería* (roisserie chicken). Although we were in the market for take-home food, we decided to hold out for something else—it seemed too strange to buy Argentine rotisserie at a Chinese establishment. I've heard that many residents of the *Once* (Eleven) neighborhood of Buenos Aires, formerly the Jewish ghetto, are indignant at the number of Koreans that run sweatshops and other businesses there.



Comic-book superhero Patoruzú has been described as paternalistic, generous and loyal. Although this 70-year-old comic strip has been criticized as racist, it is still read by many Argentines.

Of course, Alan's family has exposed me to some members of the Anglo-Argentine community, especially their habit of having tea and scones each evening. So did a Saturday sunbathing next to towering pine trees in a huge back yard in Hurlingham, a western suburb where Katrina, a North American mother of two who speaks almost no Spanish, feels quite at home amid the English-speaking community. The English influence around Buenos Aires is hard to miss.

This message at Buenos Aires' Museo Etnográfico reads: "Those peoples, who fascinated Westerners, are no longer. They were massacred in just a few decades, and not by the 16th century conquerors, but by our grandparents and less than 100 years ago." In the 1870s, the forces of then-Minister of War General Julio Roca massacred indigenous Argentines in the pampas and Patagonia and took possession of their land.



cent women. These vendors are almost invariably, visibly, working-class or lower class, given their worn clothing and shoes and yes, their darker skin. There is, indeed, a noticeable connection between class and skin color in Argentina, and—generally—the darker your skin, hair and eyes (moving more toward indigenous features, rather than African ones), the lower your socioeconomic class.

These vendors sell goods ranging in price from one to five pesos, including things like cigarette lighters, plastic

When we ride the train to Burzaco, we pass stations such as Banfield and Temperley. Although cars travel on the right side of the road in Argentina, trains run on the opposite tracks compared to the United States, as do the subways.

I have a lot to learn about Argentina's racial and ethnic complexities and, of course, how they intersect with today's oh-so-critical class divides, which themselves are in flux as the middle class continues to slide faster and faster below the poverty line.

The class issue has been visible as we've ridden public transportation, especially those trains to Burzaco. Camilo loves to look out the rectangular windows, and always anticipates seeing the cargo cars near Avellaneda and the stables and horses near Lanus. As I daydream with him on my lap, we've passed fathers and children walking slowly along the paths that parallel the tracks, tiny white trucks making deliveries of food and other goods, young women on the platforms sitting across their boyfriends' laps, clusters of white backs of stickers on kids' bedroom windows, graffiti about leftist politics and punk rock and one or two gypsy women breastfeeding their babies.

My daydreaming is constantly interrupted by a stream of people hawking all kinds of products. About 98 percent are men of all different ages, one percent small boys and one per-

cent table cloths, tiny ear phones or *alfajores* (Argentine treats made with *dulce de leche*, an extra-sweet version of caramel). These sellers make extremely elaborate speeches, given their wares. The first time one appeared on my train, I thought he was selling some kind of computer, which is laughable now. He was actually selling plastic covers for a personal computer, but his pitch was so involved that I assumed the product was far more sophisticated. A typical sales pitch goes something like this:

"Ladies and Gentlemen, please forgive me for interrupting on this lovely afternoon. I hope you will have the goodness to listen for just a few minutes while I tell you about an offer that will make your day very special,



This vendor on the 8:00 p.m. train from Burzaco to Buenos Aires, is selling vinyl backpacks. At the end of the day, the sellers' speeches become much shorter and lose much of their punch.

as I have here boxes of matches the likes of which you have not seen, I can assure you, for as long as you can remember. [Holding up a match]: These matches are elaborated from the finest wood that will not break as you light them by gliding them along the box. They have abundant and solid red tips that light in an instant, and the strip for lighting them on the side of the box simply will not wear off. In a store, you would pay at least one peso for a box of 500 matches, but I am here to offer you an amazing deal: six boxes of 500 matches each, that's 3,000 matches, yes, 3,000 matches, for just one peso, just one coin..."

I would never have picked this up, but Alan commented that their use of sophisticated vocabulary and very detailed sales pitches clashes with their accent—things like dropping the final “s” on many words—which gives them away as lower class.

It must be exhausting to sell along the trains all day. I've noticed that on the morning trains, the vendors are quite energetic, but by the end of the day, their speeches are much shorter and have far less punch.

On Being Foreign and Yet At Home

With my dark hair and eyes, I do not look like a foreigner in Buenos Aires, and can even pass for Argentine if I am careful about the way I speak. Strangely, I often feel at once very foreign and oddly at home. I'm delighted that I no longer have to spell out my last name (In the U.S. it was invariably, “That's ‘f’ as in Frank, ‘a,’ ‘r,’ ‘m’ as in Mary, ‘e,’ ‘l,’ ‘o;’ no that's one ‘l,’ and an ‘o.’”) I feel comfortable traveling in a city full of small cars (our old Honda Civic looks huge here), using a tiny washing machine and hanging my clothes to dry. On the other hand, I am often clueless about basic cultural norms. For example, I was baffled when I went to the movies in a gloriously huge theater with a massive screen. A man bid me good evening, asked to see my ticket, led me to the exact seat I had purchased, and then expected a tip.

The first week Camilo went to pre-school, he was invited to a classmate's birthday party that Sunday afternoon. I had no idea what to wear or how much to spend on a gift. Fortunately, another mother called to invite me to go in on a gift with a group of mothers. I was left with the understanding that only the women attend these parties, so Alan

stayed home. Actually, many men were there, and as Camilo was totally overwhelmed by the hired show put on for the kids, Alan's presence might have freed me up to spend more time getting to know the other parents. The show overwhelmed me a bit as well. I was a bit shocked when Casandra, the four-year-old birthday girl, appeared in a deep-pink, full-length, sexy princess outfit and each child had to give her a kiss in exchange for their bag of party favors.

I am delighted to have found an indoor swimming pool right in the grimy heart of the city but, again, have had to relearn the rules. Instead of people sharing each individual lane and circling around it when three or more swimmers are present, at this pool, one lane is for going up and then we all cross under the nylon rope divider to the other lane to swim back down. I was particularly nervous about the prospect of swimming in a crowded space with men I don't know, but



The tiled walls at the 9 de Julio subway stop depict scenes of colonial life in Argentina. This mural shows workers stacking grains at the port of Buenos Aires.

A Favorite Moment of the Day

The Buenos Aires subway is extremely convenient, if hot. Stations are still elaborately tiled with scenes depicting themes such as an 1830s trip from Buenos Aires to Cuzco, majestic natural wonders such as the Iguazú falls or colonial life in the provinces or back in Spain. The trains were refurbished when the system was privatized. On the way home from pre-school, Camilo insists on riding in the “caboose.” Upon disembarking, he waves to the operators who ride in the back of that last car. Nine times out of ten they wave back and even flash the lights or toot the horn as the train disappears from the station. If I wave, they invariably respond, and so as not to disappoint Camilo, I sometimes lift a hand.

interestingly, the men at the pool have been nothing but respectful, if not deferential. Even the gang of young guys that showed up and mostly just horsed around left me entirely at ease and quite cordially stayed out of my way.

Ironically, the times I've felt truly condescended to involve a Marlo Thomas look-alike named Fabiana who works at a tiny optical shop in a beautiful old building near my new home. She insists on call me *niña*, which feels like "little girl." So far I've noticed no flirtatious remarks from men (*piropos*), and have only been bothered by the videographer at Casandra's party. The first time he planted his leg against me as I crouched next to Camilo, I assumed that I was simply in his way. The second and third times, however, I began to suspect that his choice of angles was not a coincidence.

Camilo's entry into pre-school has opened many doors for getting to know families with small children. At the same time, his little presence sometimes causes strangers to strike up a conversation. One dark-haired, older woman at the grocery store wearing a brown skirt and printed top smiled as I lifted Camilo into the child's seat of the shopping cart and later spied us deciding between strawberries and kiwi in the produce area. She blurted out that she had always wished she had had a son, that they are far more low-key and affectionate than little girls, and that the stereotype of the wild little boy is a myth.

In the check-out line, I could barely take my eyes off the handsome, 40-something woman and her disheveled teenage son just ahead of us. They stood close to each other chatting with both heads looking downward until her son ran off to fetch something they had forgotten. Upon his return, they laughed together about their respective plans for the weekend. Like time I spent years ago with families in neighboring Uruguay, this moment captures my overriding, if idealized vision of the relationship between mothers and sons in this part of the Southern Cone. I know that young Argentines have supposedly "lost direction," and I am certain that all teens fight with their parents, but I have rarely observed the angst, alienation and tension with parents that seem to afflict so many North American teens. I clutch at that vision of the mother-son link as my hope for my future with Camilo. I would like to learn more about what makes that relationship tick, and what meaning and potential it holds in the context of a *machista* society.

After all, as several women smoking Marlboros commented at a recent workshop on women's human rights, mothers are responsible for transmitting to their sons many of the *machista* values that dominate Argentina today. In fact, a self-identified feminist activist sitting behind her large wooden desk confessed to me that when her son arrived home late last Saturday night, she failed to talk to him about his responsibility for coming in at a reasonable hour. Instead, she accosted him, asking, "What is wrong with your girlfriend's mother that she has no control over her daughter?"

I, too, am the mother of a son, I reflected. Life in Buenos Aires provides much food for thought. □

ICWA Letters (**ISSN 1083-4303**) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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Author: Farmelo, Martha J.

Title: ICWA Letters - The Americas

ISSN: 1083-4303

Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH

Material Type: Serial

Language: English

Frequency: Monthly

Other Regions: East Asia; Sub-Saharan Africa; Mideast/North Africa; South Asia; Europe/Russia

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