Topographical Violence and Imagining the Nation in Nineteenth-Century Argentina
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Introduction

In 1883, the Argentine artist and cultural theorist, Eduardo Schiaffino (1858-1935), began working as a correspondent for the daily newspaper, El Diario. Writing under the catchy pseudonym Zig-Zag, the twenty-five-year-old quickly came to public attention when he published a series of articles that same year entitled, “Notes on Art in Buenos Aires: A Lack of Protection for Their Development.” The series was ostensibly about ways that the municipal government could help to bolster national art academies and institutions, and yet, it presented something more ambitious: a program for the future development of Argentina’s national cultural identity. Schiaffino argued that Buenos Aires was becoming a “huge body without a soul,” whose wealth was nothing but material. The antidote, he said, was art: “Art is the last component of great nations, that must act as a compliment to material wealth.” Among other suggestions, Schiaffino insisted that the government sponsor scholarships for artists to travel and study European painting and sculpture first-hand, and he eventually advocated for the foundation of a national museum. He himself received funding to live in Rome, Venice, Turin, and Paris for a total of seven years, between 1884-91.

Schiaffino’s views can be best summed up in his 1885 article, “The Study of Art in Paris II,” in which he writes: “Just as material wellbeing cannot come from industry alone, moral wellbeing cannot exist without artistic production; which is to say... one cannot conceive of a civilization without art just as one cannot have art without advanced civilization.” Schiaffino was perhaps the most outspoken cultural commentator to broadcast these notions to Argentina from abroad, but he was not alone. He was an integral member of a group of powerful intellectuals, politicians, and artists known as the Generación del Ochenta (Generation of the 1880s), all of whom considered art imperative to a modern society that represents “advanced civilization.”

For the Generación—most of whom had either moved from or trained in Europe—art, transatlantic cultural exchange, and national development were inextricably linked. This overlapping relationship is the subject of this essay, which attempts to answer the questions: What was the nation-building function of art in late nineteenth-century Argentina? How did landscape paintings help the evolving population of European transplants develop a cohesive sense of identity, particularly in relation to the indigenous communities they were in the process of supplanting? To get to the heart of this question, we must begin in the 1840s, when the writer and future politician, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, introduced his so-called “civilization versus barbarism” dichotomy. In the seminal text, Facundo, Sarmiento presents art,
education, and European immigration as markers of “civilization,” which could serve to keep the forces of “barbarism”—caudillismo, indigenous peoples, and provincial rule—at bay. This binary was frequently cited as a justification for confiscating land from indigenous groups who were deemed biologically unfit to govern themselves.

This text became nearly required reading for Argentine intellectuals, just as the violent struggle between autochthonous and migrated peoples played out on the Pampas. Indeed, in Argentina, as elsewhere, bloodshed was a central element of early nation-building, as indigenous tribes were moved or killed and their land forcibly taken by the Argentinean government through The Conquest of the Desert, a series of military campaigns led by Julio Argentino Roca in the 1870s. These brutal conflicts were proudly reflected in the country’s visual culture, highlighting Argentina’s military might, while either glossing over the populations that were left homeless or presenting them as inhumane. In many cases, the monotonous Pampas landscape became a backdrop for the country’s origin story and its modernization process. The practice of aggressively taking control of the land—which I term “topographical violence”—involved the ruination of both native cultures and unspoiled nature, followed by an imposition of new technology, like agricultural machinery, silos, dams, bridges, roads, and railroad tracks.

These aspects of Argentina’s complex history were depicted through the guise of landscape paintings, many of which were heavily promoted by members of the Generación. Works like Reinaldo Guidici’s Primer ferrocarril “La Porteña” cruzando la campaña (The First Train, “La Porteña,” Crossing the Countryside), of 1881 (Figure 1), which shows a train nearly colliding with a galloping gaucho, and Ángel Della Valle’s La vuelta del malón (Return of the Indian Raid), from 1892 (Figure 2), which depicts a white woman abducted by a group of Mapuche men on horseback, were championed as nationalist propaganda. Both works will be analyzed towards the end of this essay to show how each artist uses a confrontation between conflicting peoples or ways of life to manipulate the viewer into siding with modernity, or Eurocentric views of civilization.

These visual representations specifically aimed to cement Argentina’s “imagined community,” a term Benedict Anderson developed to explain nationalism in an era of globalization, by evoking a sense of shared indignation, awe, or fear. In Argentina, though, the imagined community was exclusive and exclusionary, formed of white, European transplants and their offspring. This essay weaves together these seemingly disparate threads to offer a novel slant on the story of Argentina’s emergent art community, its ties to Europe and immigration, and its rhetorical representations of topographical violence.
Framing the Debate

One cannot understand the motives and thinking of the *Generación del Ochenta* without a deeper look at the formative text they all read and the man who wrote it. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-88) served as the seventh president of Argentina, from 1868-74, but his lasting influence derives from his 1845 text, *Civilización i barbeire: La vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga, i aspecto físico, costumbres, i ábitos de la Republica Argentina* (Civilization and Barbarism: The Life of Juan Facundo Quiroga, and the Physical Aspects, Customs, and Habits of the Argentine Republic), or simply *Facundo* to most readers. *Facundo* was named for Juan Facundo Quiroga, the ruthless caudillo (autocratic leader) who ruled rural Argentina throughout the 1820s and 1830s, and who, in Sarmiento's mind, was a role model for Juan Manuel de Rosas, president of Argentina from 1829-32 and 1835-52, when the book was published. Though Rosas was the true target of Sarmiento's scathing critique, for political reasons, he could only be attacked indirectly. As such, Sarmiento inveighs against Facundo—a stand-in for Rosas—but his greater aim was to introduce what he determined to be the problematic clash of civilization versus barbarism.

As aforementioned, this dialectic was central to Argentina's national consciousness throughout the nineteenth century, and it was used as a raison d'être by the *Generación del Ochenta*. To be sure, Sarmiento's convictions were based upon outdated, racist, and politically constructed notions of "civilization" and "progress," which remained pervasive throughout Latin America during the colonial period and afterwards; however, they were also geographically specific. Sarmiento was among the first to connect Argentina's topography to its cultural and political challenges and eventual development. According to him, Argentina's chief hurdle was the Pampas, vast plains that stretch west of Buenos Aires all the way to the Andes Mountains. Sarmiento postulated that "the disease from which the Argentine Republic suffers is its own expanse." He argued that the spread-out, sparsely populated nature of the Pampas made them difficult to govern, inhibiting the creation of public space, schools, churches, and other Western markers of modernization.

Throughout his text, he is less concerned with the specific indigenous groups living in Pampas than he is with setting them all in opposition to cosmopolitan Buenos Aires province and the European immigrants who lived there. For Sarmiento, the tense coexistence of urban and rural, modern and traditional, European-born and indigenous, was crucial to Argentine identity, and it continued to captivate artists and theorists for decades to come. As Spanish Language Professor, Mary Louise Pratt, explains, it was not uncommon for the identity of a metropolitan center, like Buenos Aires, to be shaped by its relationship to the periphery, the Pampas. In her text, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), she explores the many ways that "America" was fashioned by outsiders or Creoles in the postcolonial period, creating a new form of colonialism in which the Americas were politically
independent but still culturally linked to Europe, "retaining European values and white supremacy."

For Sarmiento and his followers, the Pampas were the mythical core of the country, the natural habitat of the gauc...
the territory” should be understood as a desire to form “the space of the Republic.” General Julio Argentino Roca (1843-1914), who led the military *Conquest of the Desert* between 1878-85, was convinced that, in order to establish a national territory in the Pampas and the desert (further south), these areas would first need to be depopulated, and he no doubt read *Facundo* as he formulated this opinion. In fact, in *Facundo*, Sarmiento posits that Argentina should be settled and shaped primarily by European immigrants. He arrived at this thinking through years of self-directed inquiry and international travel. Since he remains the first important architect of what later became Argentina’s cultural policy, and since he was incredibly powerful for the *Generación del Ochenta* and the artists they supported, it is instructive to delve into his story to understand the derivation and evolution and his ideas. How did the perceived battle between civilization and barbarism, which had arisen for Sarmiento in his childhood, grow to become so all-encompassing, a subject that obsessed him throughout his adult life, during his travels, and for his entire political career?

**Sarmiento and the Birth of Argentina’s Cultural and Immigration Policy**

Sarmiento’s foundational principles were first developed in his early and teenage years. and they were later cemented through travel abroad. Born in Carrascal—a suburb in the eastern province of San Juan, near the Chilean border—on February 15, 1811, Sarmiento was the fifth out of six children and the only son in a family that was nothing if not eccentric. His mother, Paula, was Sarmiento’s greatest hero: her parents died when she was young, and though she neither attended school nor learned to read, she was industrious enough to pull herself and her family out of poverty. This strong female figure inspired Sarmiento’s conviction in the power of women. His father, Clemente, fought in the Argentine War of Independence in 1816-17, and he enrolled Domingo in the province’s first school, Escuela de la Patria, at age five. The school was overtly egalitarian—every pupil was referred to as señor, regardless of class or family background—which influenced Sarmiento’s thinking, as he always believed in the equality of educated people and in the power of education to enable one to rise through the ranks of society. By age sixteen, he’d begun to engage in politics, first fighting with his father for a battalion of the provincial militia, headed—ironically enough—by Facundo. He was soon thrown in jail by one of Facundo’s officers for insubordination, and after months of reading British and American political philosophy, he emerged a *Unitarist*, wanting central control in Argentina, as opposed to the *Federalists*, like Facundo, who advocated for local autonomy in the provinces. Very early on, Sarmiento developed a simple, if vague, thesis: *fight the caudillo, educate the masses*. Yet, it wasn’t until about ten years later that he developed a more specific idea about how to do this.

While in exile in Chile between 1841-45, while Sarmiento worked on *Facundo*, his thinking evolved into a more coherent program that led him to promote immigration, and eventually, the arts. He began by defining what he opposed, namely president
Juan Manuel de Rosas and his cult of personality. He blamed the problem on poor Spanish examples of autocratic leadership, which he saw as endemic throughout Latin America. “Any form of government is impossible in South America,” he wrote, “considering the fact that the Spanish race inhabits the continent.”20 In fact, Sarmiento blamed many negative aspects of Argentine society on Latin America’s Spanish heritage: civil conflict, attachment to ritual, and a hostility towards progress, social control by clerical superstition rather than reason, and a lack of original thought. He believed that the way to eliminate Rosas and everything he embodied was to link him to Spain at a time when Argentina sought cultural independence. “Who do you think Rosas is?” Sarmiento asked. “Rosas is the political inquisition of old Spain personified. He was nursed on the milk of despotism, the hatred for civilization and the liberty that he saw born in his homeland.”21

Next, Sarmiento began to shift his focus by thinking more about what he wanted—a government that was focused on laws and principles, a nomocracy, rather than one focused on personality, or personalism. He believed that, in order to make progress, Argentina needed to culturally and politically break with Spain and become more similar to the United States, which has defined itself in opposition to its colonizer, England. One way to dilute the “Spanish-ness,” he asserted, would be to encourage immigration from other parts of Europe. “European immigration is one of the elements of [North] American wealth, power, and industry,” he wrote. “Europe has an excess of men and a scarcity of bread; America has an excess of land a great scarcity of hands....We need a law on colonization that would give guarantees to the immigrants and create known agencies in Europe to attract them.”22

In his introduction to Facundo, he states that his goal is to understand Argentine history through the title figure, and by looking to “national precedent, to the physiognomy of the land, to popular traditions and customs, and for the points where they are bound together.”23 To examine the roots of Argentina’s customs and tradition, Sarmiento turned back to Spain, with much consternation. For Sarmiento, Spain lay “somewhere between the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century.” Even as the world became increasingly mechanized, Spain retained its cult of personality in the form of absolute monarchy, and this bled over into much of Spanish-controlled Latin America. The country became subservient to the charismatic (or not so charismatic) leader, and this leader gradually increased his sphere of influence to larger swaths of the country. As Sarmiento’s biographer, Allison Williams Bunkley, explains, Argentina experienced three periods of personalism: 1) gauchochecy, in which local leaders controlled small, fragmented areas; 2) caudillismo, or nascent centralized rule, starting in the 1820s; and finally, 3) adaptation, wherein the country reorganized itself along the lines of European nations, and began to install elections and some form of democracy. When Facundo rose to power in 1824, during the second aforementioned phase, he ruled the country with two other caudillos by force, and he was known as El Tigre de los Llanos (the Tiger of the Plains).24 The current
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situation was not the fault of any one person, argues Sarmiento, but a manifestation of systemic failure, and again, a consequence of history and geography:

In Facundo Quiroga I do not see simply a caudillo, but rather a manifestation of Argentine life as it has been made by colonization and the peculiarities of the land. ... Facundo, finally, being what he was not through an accident of character, but rather through inevitable causes apart from his own will, is the ... most notable historical character that can be offered for contemplation...a caudillo who leads a great social movement is nothing more than a mirror in which the beliefs, the needs, the prejudices, and the customs of a nation...are reflected in colossal dimensions.  

Ultimately, in order to become “civilized,” in Sarmiento’s eyes, Argentina needed to overcome two central hurdles: one physical—its sparsely populated geography—and the other cultural and ethnic—its personalist Spanish heritage, as embodied through the election of Rosas.

When Rosas, the true subject of Facundo, became president on April 13, 1835—in an election that was likely rigged—he took power as a Unitarian, unifying the whole country under his rule. Yet, instead of the cosmopolitan-ness of the city overtaking the Pampas, as Sarmiento would have wanted, the Pampas encroached upon the capital. Rosas moved in and quickly wiped Buenos Aires clean of European elements, replacing them with violent techniques or instruments from the Pampas: the knife superseded the gun; Rosas supporters wore red ribbons, which Sarmiento likened to branding one’s horses; tailcoats and elegant hairstyles were swapped out for wide pants and ponchos; charities were closed and university professors went unpaid.  

The city was broken, tamed, just like cattle on a Pampas estancia (Rosas himself was an estancia owner), and anyone who was well-educated and could afford to leave decamped for Montevideo. As emigration spiked, Sarmiento concluded his text with an awkward plea for more immigration. He writes: “The principal element of order and morality upon which the Argentine Republic relies today is the immigration of Europeans.”  

He desperately believed that an increased European population would lead to “civilization,” for he saw many “causes of civilization” missing—schools, architecture, doctors, lawyers, judges—and felt that they could arrive with more European immigrants. A few years later, he would write in his scathing anti-Rosas political treatise Argirópolis, “It is necessary to attract a population from other nations to augment our number and wealth and introduce the knowledge of the arts and sciences that we lack.”

When Sarmiento began traveling throughout Europe and the United States, he arrived at specific conclusions regarding the links between education, art and progress. Spain, which he visited in October of 1846, was seen as the negative example and a key to understanding Argentina’s political troubles. While there, he realize that, though the Bourbon monarchy was nominally in charge, Spain was truly
ruled by military caudillos, much like Argentina. "It was an easy job to find in the Iberian Peninsula... the cradle of the barbarism inherited by the Hispanic peoples of South America," he writes. Though attracted to the boldness of the Spanish national character, he ultimately felt that Spain's greatness was in the past: "After major forces of intelligence, Spain had returned to a state of slumber since 1808," and it was now out of sync with the rest of Europe. From Spain, he made his way to Rome, where he began visiting important sites of Classical architecture: the Colosseum, the Pantheon, Trajan's Column. Further south, he experienced the ruins of Pompeii and the incredible museum of frescos in Naples, as well as numerous churches, like Santa Croce, and the Campanile, in Florence. These encounters led him to the conclusion that "art separates the savage from the civilized man." and that Argentina suffered from a lack of high quality art or a national style. In May of 1865, Sarmiento sailed to New York, only months after the conclusion of the American Civil War. While there, he aimed to learn more about the country's burgeoning public education system, which he saw as key to the social equality, economic mobility, and peaceful relations he hoped to encourage back home. Inspired by what he found, Sarmiento began an unprecedented presidential run while still abroad. He was elected—unbelievably, while sailing back to Argentina—as a candidate who championed culture and education, and who sought to quickly modernize his country.

In his desire to fit Argentina into the pattern of rational social behavior that he'd seen abroad, Sarmiento aimed to "civilize the gaucho," educate the masses, and bring in a new population from Europe, some of whom might foster a national art movement. During his six years in office, the number of educated children in the country increased three-fold, from 30,000 to 100,000. With the help of American education reformer Horace Mann, Sarmiento brought in teachers from the United States to run new schools, and he also created mobile schools for the small towns of the Pampas. Simultaneously, he passed aggressive immigration reform: when he was elected in 1868, approximately 34,000 immigrants were entering the country each year; by 1874, the number had doubled due to increased job opportunities and cheap land, and numbers only rose from there. In sum, 280,000 Europeans moved to Argentina during his six-year term. Simultaneously, Sarmiento increased telegraph lines throughout the country, linking the capital to Europe through transatlantic cables; he extended railroad construction; and he built a national library system of over a hundred branches.

On October 12, 1874, much to Sarmiento's surprise, he was voted out of office. Upon departure from the presidency, he concluded that his program had failed to create lasting change. In his twilight years, Sarmiento repeatedly lamented his inability to enact meaningful reform in Argentina. He wondered if part of the problem was related to the particular type of immigration that had flourished in Argentina: though Europeans had arrived by the hundreds of thousands since the 1860s, they were not coming from the Northern European countries he considered to be industrious and
socially advanced—Scandinavia, France, Germany, and England. Instead, they were drawn chiefly from Southern Europe, most notably the _mezzogiorno_ (southern Italy), which he deemed as backward and underdeveloped as Spain. This conviction of a perceived southern deficiency was pervasive throughout the nineteenth century, fomented in part by the racially-charged research of criminal anthropologists like Cesare Lombroso, who argued that southern Italians were closer to Africa, and were therefore less biologically evolved and more prone to violence.³² This stigmatization prevented Southern Italians from advancing within Italy, creating a ripple effect of migration from one south, the _mezzogiorno_, to another south, Argentina.³³

Once there, rather than identifying as "Argentine"—as American immigrants were expected to assimilate and become “Americans”—these Italians remained disengaged from their adopted country, and instead, continued to associate only with other Italians. Sarmiento was particularly dismayed to see pictures of the King of Italy and maps of the country in Italian schools, as opposed to comparable Argentine examples. Yet, his fundamental logical flaw was his lack of faith in the many indigenous peoples of his country—on both a racial or biological level and on the basis of traditions he considered to be violent.³⁴ Rather than focusing on native populations, he imported outsiders, without any program to hold them together. Following his death, in September of 1888, and in light of the massive population shift, the central question among the Buenos Aires elite became not, "How can we civilize Argentina?", but rather, "How can this population, made increasingly of transplants, come together as a cohesive nation?"

**The Generación del Ochenta Imagines the Nation**

This is precisely the question that plagued the _Generación del Ochenta_. In the 1870s and 1880s, as the this group of artists, intellectuals and politicians coalesced, it became clear that the issue Sarmiento raised in his many texts had reached a critical point: the Argentine people lacked a coherent sense of identity, and increased immigration, while positive in many ways, exacerbated this problem. Key figures of the _Generación_, like Eduardo Schiaffino, who was quickly becoming known as an arbiter of taste, and the painters Eduardo Sívori, Reinaldo Guidici, and Angel Della Valle, among others, began consolidating power through the foundation of the Sociedad Estímulo de Bellas Artes (SEBA), or the Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts, on October 23, 1876. All of these figures had trained in Europe and then returned to Argentina around the time of Sarmiento’s presidency, hoping to develop the country’s cultural landscape. When the SEBA first met, they immediately began to address the need for a “national art.”

In fact, In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, many popular press articles and small journals lamented the mediocre fine art in Buenos Aires and, like Sarmiento, they argued for its improvement, precisely because it could be a positive way to unify the nation and cement its identity. _El arte en el Plata_ (Art in the Plata Region), organized and published by the SEBA in 1878, was the first journal dedicated solely to visual arts.
in Buenos Aires, and it was based on the assumption that painting and sculpture had a greater ability to foment national culture than the written word. Sarmiento's numerous texts failed to lead to "civilization," but painting could succeed, and later, museums would come to cement the "national grammar," to use Anderson's terminology.

As art historian Laura Malosetti Costa explains in her indispensable text, *Los primeros modernos: Arte y sociedad en Buenos Aires a fines del siglo XIX* (The First Moderns: Art and Society in Buenos Aires at the end of the Nineteenth Century, 2001), which studies the evolution of Argentina's national art between 1871-96, there was an institutionalization of nationhood in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The formation of artist societies like the SEBA, and later the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, in 1896, all related back to the development of the imagined nation and its physical image.35 For Costa, the SEBA marks the initial crystallization of the project of cultural nation building, and it helped to shape the goals of the Generación del Ochenta. These goals were four-fold: 1) to develop artistic activity in Buenos Aires and create conditions for its professionalization by implementing policies to improve available material and technical resources; 2) to elevate artistic activity to intellectual activity by encouraging collaboration with writers, poets, and historians; 3) to promote the formation of an audience and a market for the sale of works; and 4) to establish links with major international art centers, either through travel or through exhibiting Argentine works at Universal Expositions.36

One may note that, though these goals are much more focused, they contain echoes of Sarmiento's plan of "civilization," and again, they can now be more fully understood and analyzed through the lens of modern nationalism studies.37 In the words of Anthony D. Smith, a key founder of the field, our ideas of the *nation* and *nationalism* are "the product of an interplay between a technological revolution (i.e. printing), an economic revolution (capitalism) and the fatality of linguistic diversity."38 In order for nationalism to flourish, citizens must be able to read origin stories, see reproductions of iconic images, and discuss both of these in an organized fashion through a standard national language, which cannot emerge without printing, mass literacy, and free, public education, one of Sarmiento's central crusades. For Smith, culture is the fulcrum, and he defines a *nation* quite specifically, as "a named and self-defined human community whose members cultivate shared myths, memories, symbols, values, and traditions, reside in and identify with an historic homeland, create and disseminate a distinctive public culture, and observe shared customs and common laws."39 Indeed, ethnic memories and (invented) traditions become most powerful—and most necessary—when there is a lack of national cohesion, and when there is a newly enfranchised population that needs to be swayed to vote in favor of the ruling class.40
As a general rule, according to the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, nascent countries invent traditions, build monuments, and paint history paintings, in order to bring people together. Hobsbawm asserts that traditions arise somewhat organically, but are also gradually manipulated and cemented through repeated practice and education. Though Hobsbawm is referring to Europe, his ideas can easily be applied to Argentina. For Hobsbawm, nationalism—which he deems real—precedes the nation—which he considers a construct: “Nations do not make states and nationalisms, but the other way round.” But how is the nation constructed? In Ernest Gellner’s estimation, two individuals belong to the same nation if: “1) they share the same culture...and 2) they recognize each other as belonging to the same nation...It is their recognition of each other as fellows of this kind which turns them into a nation, and not the other shared attributes.” As such, the awareness of belonging matters even more than the qualities that allow one to belong. Habitually, a trickle-down effect—from urban to rural, and from upper to working classes—can be found in the spread of national consciousness, and this was certainly true in Argentina. Ideas about nationality were fomented primarily in Buenos Aires among the elites like the Generación, and they slowly fanned out and down from there.

When the SEBA began to codify a national iconography, it was with the goal of creating an “imagined community” out of diverse European transplants with disparate visual heritages. They were used to seeing their countries of origin (or those of their parents) depicted in a variety of ways, as elucidated by Anthony D. Smith, who lists four basic “dimensions” of national art: 1) community; 2) territory; 3) history (particularly origin myths); and 4) destiny. Like Hobsbawm, Smith discusses the trickle-down effects of nationalism, and the role that art can play in forming a visual match first for the elites, and then the working classes, as it helps them to visualize something abstract and elusive. Landscapes are perhaps the most literal form of national imagery, but they also maintain a spiritual dimension. As artists became increasingly linked with national schools of art and came to identify more with the idea of a homeland themselves, the landscape was thought to reveal the inner self of the artist; and therefore, the inner self of the whole nation, argues Smith. As cultural studies professor Jessica Evans explains, “nations are best viewed as particular ways of ‘imagining’ bonds of human solidarity...What it means to be and feel Australian, American ... is bound up with the ways those nations ... are made tangible through repeated and recognizable symbolic forms, narratives and communicative styles.”

In 1878, Santiago Vaca Guzman, the journal’s editor, wrote an article entitled “El arte” (The Art), which proposed that Buenos Aires was poised to become a major cultural hub, because the “Latin race” had a predisposition towards all things aesthetic, and he further reasoned that, given the laws of cultural evolution, Europe was dangerously close to a point of decadence and decline, leaving South America to rise and fill the void. And herein lies the paradox: the paintings being created were meant to show
Argentina as a developed nation, which in nineteenth century terms, meant that it needed to appear European. How could Argentine art show a united, modern nation, when in reality, the country was not yet industrialized and there was still infighting between many factions of the population? Perhaps the answer was to use art as an aspirational projection of the *imagined* nation, rather than a portrait of what already existed. Or, more accurately, it could show a nation in the process of becoming through struggle. As Peter Brownlee, Valeria Piccoli and Georgina Uhlyarik write in *Picturing the Americas: Landscape Painting from Tierra de Fuego to the Arctic* (2015), “While landscape painting had, for centuries, functioned in Europe to express the ideological outlook of royalty and, gradually, the landed elite, the prospect of purportedly open and available land in the Americas shifted the demographics of who owned and worked the land, as well as who was displaced or evacuated from it.”

In Argentina, as elsewhere, displacement of indigenous peoples was a core part of the nation’s origin story and a precondition to modernization. When painters began to portray the Pampas, they used the vast, open land as a neutral space upon which to depict either physical confrontation or the building of new infrastructure. In the United States, railroad development led to the commissioning of myriad landscape paintings, as if portraying the land was a way to legitimize its possession, having wrested it from the hands of Native Americans. Malosetti Costa argues that, in promoting movement to places that were previously considered “nowhere or damned,” works by artists like Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran had as much influence as the laying of the tracks themselves. Yet, perhaps because the railroads in Argentina united previously formed centers, areas already considered civilized, rather than developing the open territory in between, the railroad did not become a frequent symbol of progress in Argentina as it did in North America. Similarly, the first Argentine railways were controlled by British interests, and many Argentinians were initially afraid of steam engines, which created so much rumbling that people feared buildings might collapse. Finally, the great plains of North America seemed to represent promise, while the Pampas were, in the public imagination, merely inhospitable. “In the United States, the prairies were conceived as precursors to the greatness of the empire,” Costa writes, “while in Southern American countries such as Argentina, the empty pampas had a negative connotation, representing barbarianism, loneliness and death.”

Even in the 1880s, the pampas remained truculent and resistant to change, but the *Generación del Ochenta* took a different approach than Sarmiento. Rather than trying to subdue the Pampas through education, many (though not all) of the artists associated with the group created work that would turn the audience away from this land. Unlike North American landscape artists who depicted the American West romantically, convincing people to move to the prairies and the mountains in order to make “Manifest Destiny” a reality, many Argentine painters showed the nature as barren and inhospitable, and the people who inhabited it—primarily the gaucho—as
brutish or outmoded. The goal was always to pit the civilized city (where all of these artists resided) against the savage Pampas, and to force the audience to chose the rational, urban, Europhilic, path, or to at least see its ascendance as inevitable.

**Depicting Conflict as a Mode of Unification**

One highly affecting image is Reinaldo Guidici's *Primer ferrocarril "La Porteña" cruzando la campaña* (*The First Train 'La Porteña' Crossing the Countryside*), from 1881, in which he shows an awkwardly galloping gaucho in the foreground nearly intersecting with a speeding train in the background (Figure 1). Though they are in different spaces—the gaucho is much closer to the viewer, and the train is passing through with no sign of stopping— it appears that the train is about to plow into the gaucho's head and torso, acting as a heavy-handed metaphor for the triumph of modernization over the native-born cowboy and his ways of the past. The fact that the painting is titled after the train, even though the gaucho is more prominent, highlights the significance of the new technology, which had been introduced in Argentina in the late 1850s, to the consternation of many. The pictured locomotive, *La Porteña*, was the first train to run in Buenos Aires province and eventually head west across the Pampas. Built by the British firm, E. B. Wilson and Company, in Leeds, England, and installed on British manufactured tracks, it was yet another imported, European marker of civilization, vigorously unseating the ways of the gaucho, leaving billowing smoke in its path.51

The gaucho—considered a victim of modernization and an object of nostalgia by the late nineteenth century—is depicted with a high degree of pathos. His horse lurches inelegantly into swampy ground, seeming to slip with its front right hoof, sinking irredeemably, while the cowboy holds onto his hat and satchel as if they might slip away. Finally, the agave plant on the right side of the composition is in bloom—a flowering which only happens once in the agave's lifetime, making it a rare and fleeting event—but its thorns look as though they are about to prick the gaucho. This symbolism all points at the tragic fate of a dying way of life, one that had previously been labeled "barbaric" by Sarmiento, but was now seen as part of Argentina's core identity and mythology, something to be memorialized now that the rowdy cowboy was safely a relic of the past.

Like the gaucho, Guidici himself was a complicated figure, and the clash within the painting may have reflected his own internal conflict. Like many Argentine artists of the 1880s, Guidici had a transnational story. Born abroad, in Lenno, Italy, in 1853, Guidici emigrated to Uruguay with his family in 1861 and eventually moved to Argentina, in 1876, where he studied with the famous genre scene painter, Juan Manuel Blanes, before receiving a scholarship to study in Italy for two years. While there, he came into contact with many realist artists who portrayed disenfranchised people, and this social conscience comes through in his work.52 Though he officially
settled in Argentina, he spent much of his career traveling back to Italy, and perhaps because of this transatlanticism, his painting blend elements of European-made modernity—the train—with Argentine terrain and characters. Though the landscape is nondescript, it is also regionally accurate; the topography is completely flat, with a low horizon line and an enormous, cloudy sky. The low-lying shrubbery, the agave, and the ombú tree, all the way to the left, are all characteristic of the region.53 Since the painting is more about the confrontation between the train and the gaucho than about a depiction of a place, the work functions as an allegory or a national mythology, one that Argentine viewers could easily identify. Indeed, Guidici’s painting is more emotionally manipulative than it first appears; he first makes viewers empathetic towards the gaucho, but this feeling soon transitions to pride over the mighty, government-funded train.

In other propagandistic images, the challenges of the Pampas were shown through battle, rape, and conquest. Scenes of a white woman attacked, robbed, or abducted by indigenous men (usually on horseback) were common throughout Argentine art and literature, and they came to represent not only the conflict between European-born and indigenous populations, but also the more general struggle between civilization, as personified in the white woman, and barbarism, depicted through the native man. These multivalent images contain erotic overtones while also provoking outrage in the likely white, nineteenth-century viewer and highlighting an “us” versus “them” mentality, thus heightening the fear of miscegenation. Furthermore, Costa argues, the myth of the woman being abducted by a malón, a raid of Mapuche men, shows the Spanish as the rightful owners of the land and Mapuche as usurpers or “contaminators.” Her body is an incarnation of the land through which she is being carried, and through contact with the Mapuche raiders, the woman is transformed from a heroine to a victim to a woman who will not be able to reinsert herself into white culture. She is conceived as the point of intersection between the “civilized world” and the “land of barbarians,” and she helps to justify the unjust conquest on ideological grounds.54

Ángel Della Valle’s La vuelta del malón (The Return of the Indian Raid), from 1892, is a painstakingly rendered, paradigmatic example of this subject, and one of the first Argentine paintings exhibited publicly abroad (Figure 2). Loosely based on a raid on an unnamed village led by Chief Cayutril, the painting, like Guidici’s, is more a general exploration of major themes circulating at the time than a record of any specific historical event. La vuelta del malón was first shown in the Nocetti y Repetto hardware store—which occasionally showcased paintings before galleries became more prevalent—on Buenos Aires’s cultural and commercial thoroughfare, Calle Florida. Since it was painted for the Argentine pavilion at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where it won a medal, it was celebrated as the first “genuinely national work of art.”55 Though La vuelta relates to Argentina’s origin story, stylistically, it owes much to Della Valle’s training in Florence, between 1872-73,
where he trained with the Swiss-Italian painter Antonio Ciseri, and was exposed
to work by Risorgimento painters as well as the Macchiaioli Group, who painted
outdoors in natural light. Interestingly, the captive woman, though illuminated in the
foreground, is not nearly as noticeable as the overriding sense of Mapuche raiders’
power, victory, and speed, along with the dramatic coloring of sunrise, an expansive
sky, and the muddy, endless plains. The cross that one of the Mapuche men raises in
his left hand, which then draws the eye to chaînes, censers, and other tools of worship,
indicates that the malón may have raided a church. Given that most viewers at the
time would have been Christian, Della Valle is clearly intending to rile up his audience
and engender fear that tribal religions and value systems might encroach upon the
Christian world. The heavy-handed depiction of brutality—skulls strewn over the
saddles of some of the horses, along with the lances, and finally, the semiconscious
woman—is intended to alarm Della Valle’s white audience, thus hammering home
the idea that indigenous peoples were “barbaric,” and must be wiped out in order for
the nation to move forward.

Propagandistic images like this were used to validate the Conquest of the Desert,
and when shown at the Columbian Exposition—celebrating the fourth centennial of
Columbus’s arrival in the Americas—La vuelta served to connect Argentina’s acts
of genocide and territorial expansion with those of other nations involved in the
fair, thus building a case that violence was a common, even necessary, step towards
statehood. In fact, at the Exposition, La vuelta was hung in a pavilion full of sacks of
Argentine exports, like wool, grain, and cowhides. Many visitors understood it as an
illustration of the difficulties that the country had surmounted in order to become a
successful agricultural exporter (which it was by this time). Taken a step further, the
painting and the surrounding exports could, together, draw a through-line, showing
how the country had aggressively expanded into the Pampas, and was now stretching
its commercial reach abroad.

When the painting returned to Buenos Aires in 1894, it was put on permanent display
at the Salon Ateneo, the first perennial exhibition of Argentine art, where it took
on a different valence. There, it served a unifying function, much as the Generación
had hoped. Though other artists had painted raid scenes before, La vuelta was the
first one shown to a large and socioeconomically diverse public—both inside and
out of the country—making it particularly powerful. As a wide array of viewers
scrutinized the image, they came together in amazement at Della Valle’s technique
and in outrage over the treatment of the white woman. As such, it became one of
the earliest examples of a work that helped delineate the imagined community of
Argentineans in the 1890s as white, of European descent, and in agreement with
Sarmiento’s aforementioned notions of progress and civilization.
Conclusion: Topographical Violence

When Della Valle passed away unexpectedly in 1903, Schiaffino, by then the Director of the fledgling Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (MNBA), which he had helped found in 1896, requested the painting from the artist's family, hoping to officially make it a national treasure. Interestingly, the family opted to instead donate it to the SEBA, which later sold the painting to the MNBA in return for the introduction of an endowed painting award named after Della Valle. This award secured Della Valle's artistic status and guaranteed him a place in the minds of future generations as both a gifted painter and teacher, but also an artistic and nationalistic warrior. For Schiaffino and his peers, La vuelta was an indelible symbol; it represented a link to European techniques, and a portrayal of Argentina's land, but more importantly, it stood as a seminal point in the development of Argentina's imagined community of civilizers who were working together to combat forces they saw as threatening their new nation. This conflict had been first defined by Sarmiento, then heightened by waves of European immigration and the Conquest of the Desert, and was finally depicted visually by Della Valle and Guidici.

In the works of each artist, we find representations of what I have termed "topographical violence": violence done to the land through the construction of modern industry, or violence enacted upon the land through relentless raids, which were pictured to validate the violent killing of indigenous peoples on the same land. The artistic portrayal of topographical violence was a way of showing the nation coming into being through arduous struggle on land that the audience knew well. This trope had a specific nation-building function—backed by the Generación, the Argentine government, and the MNBA—of bringing viewers together to celebrate Argentine victories.

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Figure 1. Reinaldo Guidici, Primer ferrocarril “La Porteña” cruzando la campaña (The First Train, ‘La Porteña; Crossing the Countryside), 1881, Oil on canvas, 51 x 100 cm (20.1 x 39.4 in.). Image courtesy of Museo de Arte Hispanoamericano Isaac Fernández Blanco, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Figure 2. Ángei Della Valle, La vuelta del malón (The Return of the Indian Raid), 1892, Oil on canvas, 186.5 x 292 cm (73.5 x 115 in.). Image courtesy of Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes.
NOTES

1. Eduardo Schiaffino, "Apuntes sobre el arte en Buenos Aires: falta de protección para su desenvolvimiento," El Diario: 18 IX, 1883. Schiaffino worried that the enormous Pampas, which stretch west of Buenos Aires, gave Argentina an illusion of grandeur, but given that they were vast and uncultured, they contributed to the nation's overall sense of emptiness.


3. Sarmiento uses the terms "civilization" and "barbarism" ad nauseum throughout Facundo. When used in this essay, I am referring to his historically specific meaning and definitions. For more, see: Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism, trans. Kathleen Ross (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

4. Facundo was first published as a serial in a local newspaper in Santiago de Chile, where Sarmiento was forced into exile by Juan Manuel Rosas, throughout the 1830s, before being compiled as a complete book in 1845.

5. Sarmiento, Facundo, 45.


8. The notion of the gaucho evolved throughout the nineteenth century. The gaucho as a civic hero and an object of nostalgia for simpler times can be found in José Hernández, Martín Fierro (La Plata: University of La Plata, 1872). For more on this, also see: Roberto González Echevarría, introduction to Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism, trans. Kathleen Ross (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1-12.

9. Sarmiento, Facundo, 49.

10. Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and the Spread of Nationalism, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 6. Anderson goes on to explain that any community larger than the primordial village is imagined, because only this sort of community can allow for face-to-face contact with everyone. These ideas will be discussed later in this chapter.

11. Ibid., 6-7.


16. All early biographical information is taken from: Allison Williams Bunkley, The Life of Sarmiento (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1952), 29. Since Bunkley studied 15,000 unpublished letters to, from, and about Sarmiento, her text is invaluable for readers looking to learn about the vicissitudes of his public and private life.
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17 Sarmiento, quoted in Ibid., 29.
18 Sarmiento, Obras III, (Santiago de Chile: Imprenta Gutenberg, 1885), 182.
19 Ibid., 69. Facundo, the Aldaos, and Rosas, were the three major caudillos ruling the country at this time.
20 Sarmiento, “Chile y la america del sur,” El Nacional, April 14, 1841.
21 Sarmiento, “Quinta cara a Don Rafael Minvielle,” Gaceta del comercio, October 28, 1843.
22 Quoted in Bunkley, The Life of Sarmiento, 186. Sarmiento was not interested in promoting immigration from Spain or Italy; rather, he wanted to bring in people from Northern European nations, which he associated more with industriousness.
23 Sarmiento, Facundo, 32.
25 Sarmiento, Facundo, 38.
26 Ibid., 208-26.
27 Ibid., 248.
28 Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Viajes I: de valparaíso a París (Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1849), 82-83. Mary Louise Pratt also discusses Sarmiento’s Viajes. See her Imperial Eyes, 189-95.
29 Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Arqirópolis, rev. ed. (Buenos Aires: Secretaría de cultura de la nación, 1994), 32. Sarmiento proposes a new path for Argentina and Uruguay by creating a joint capital territory Arqirópolis—the Silver City—in the middle of the Parana and Uruguay Rivers.
30 Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Viajes II: España e Italia (Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1849), 90.
31 All statistics here are taken from: Bunkley, “The President: The Difficult Years,” in The Life of Sarmiento, 457-70.
33 For more on this theme, see: Aliza S. Wong, Race and the Nation in Liberal Italy, 1861-1911: Meridionalism, Empire and Diaspora (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
34 Ultimately, he felt that the provinces were “incapable of governing themselves, and [were] condemned to ruin themselves in revolts, useless struggles, and interventions.” This quote comes from a letter her wrote in 1868: Sarmiento—Bienvenida Sarmiento, (Buenos Aires) October 30, 1868, quoted in Bunkley, “The President,” 475.
36 Ibid., 17-18.
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43 Hobsbawm, The Invention of Tradition, 10.
44 Gellner, Nations and Nationalism, 7.
45 Smith, The Nation Made Real, 15-17.
46 Ibid., 108.
47 Jessica Evans, “Introduction” in Representing the Nation, 2-3. Evans emphasizes that generating a series of narratives and symbolic forms, certain groups are necessarily excluded and moments of conflict are often sanitized or erased.
48 Santiago Vaca Guzman, “El arte,” El arte en el Plata, May, 1878, 3. Guzman bases his optimism on three factors, “race, milieu, and moment,” derived from the French critic and historian, Hippolyte Taine, in his 1865 text Philosophie de l’art, which was translated into English and Spanish in the 1870s.
50 Malosetti Costa, Picturing the Americas, 182.
52 For more on Guidici and his motifs, see: Aldo Ramella Opazo, “Reinaldo Guidici, The First Train, ‘La Porteña Crossing the Countryside, 1881,” in Picturing the Americas, 200-201.
56 Costa, “La vuelta del malón,” Costa notes that the SEBA sold the painting to the MNBA for $5000 in 1909.