

Introduction

In December 1928, in celebration of its one thousandth edition, the illustrated Argentine magazine *El Hogar* printed a special issue dedicated to the key changes that had taken place in the country over the past several decades. Through the juxtaposition of nineteenth- and twentieth-century women's images, the magazine conveyed the idea of how times were changing. Among these images, a drawing entitled "Yesterday and Today" stands out. It portrays an old lady of yore wearing a surly expression and a high-necked dark dress. She is looking disapprovingly at a heavily made-up and bobbed-haired girl in a short, low-cut dress who is smoking a cigarette. On the floor next to her is her golf equipment, and on the table an open magazine, probably *El Hogar*, which she may have been perusing.¹ In the same issue, another drawing depicts a group of fashionable young women coming out of the subway, chatting and laughing. Entitled "Today's Women on the Streets," it stands in comparison to "Yesterday's Women on the Streets," in which the women are sketched with long dresses and foulards covering the high combs atop their heads.² Later in the magazine, a set of sketches entitled "Greetings" portrays a man bowing before a demure lady; next to this image, a young woman is raising her fashionable cloche hat and waving to a man.³ New female fashions and mannerisms, novel socializing practices, and the remarkable presence of women in public were portrayed as ways of contrasting past and present. These images reference an important change in female representations and gender relations in Argentina. Not only was fashion transformed, but women also looked more confident in public spaces and more assertive in their relationships with men,

conveying a greater sense of empowerment overall. The time of the modern girl had arrived.

The figure of the modern girl emerged worldwide during the 1920s and faded around World War II. These years were marked by an increasing interdependence among different countries both economically and culturally. Corporations and the mass media began to incorporate international strategies to conquer new markets. Transnational ideologies of consumption and individualism spread worldwide, and the connections among the world's economies and cultures grew quickly. As a result of these interrelations—and particularly, of the emergence of a transnational consumer culture—the figure of the modern girl was marked by certain looks, behavior and attitudes that made her recognizable all over the world. Her cosmopolitan style, tall, slender figure, make-up, short, bobbed hair, loose-fitting clothes, and clearly flirtatious poses were her visual markers. Described as an unmarried, pleasure-seeking young woman involved in consumer culture, she was usually an object of nationalist scrutiny in every context in which she appeared. Indeed, different types of nationalism, ranging from cultural and ethnic to racial, emerged in these years as a way to undermine globalization, especially after the economic collapse of the world economy. In the Soviet Union, China, and South Africa, for instance, the modern girl was frequently represented as a threat to national traditions and was associated with American decadence, while in Nazi Germany, it was her cosmopolitanism that was often criticized. In several white-dominated contexts, such as the United States and Australia, the modern girl was employed in racial nationalism as an idealized representation of whiteness and good health that was contrasted with dark and “primitive” young women.⁴

The Argentine figure of the modern girl, or *joven moderna*, as she was locally known, shared a number of qualities with modern young women in European, North American, African and Asian contexts. Her emergence, but also her eventual decline, closely resembled the path of other modern female figures. After peaking in the mid-1920s, she persisted for two decades before being replaced by diverse representations of urban women during the Peronist administration. Like other modern girls, she also symbolized what contemporaries defined as the best and the worst of modernity—values like progress and strength, but also the anxiety associated with cultural loss. Her male counterpart, the modern boy, who also became a global novel figure during this period, never sparked the same level of interest.

The *joven moderna* was also indicative of the class, gender and racial formation of Argentina, and more specifically, that of Buenos Aires. In the course of two decades, and due to a massive influx of European immigration, the population of Argentina's capital more than tripled, reaching 1.5 million by 1914. Buenos Aires became a large metropolis characterized by rapid social mobility and a bustling consumer culture. Women became increasingly present in the public sphere as they entered the labor market, pursued career opportunities, and began to enjoy all that consumption culture offered. Mass culture helped inhabitants of Buenos Aires assimilate these rapid social and cultural transformations. The popular press, cinema, and radio explored the changing role of women and raised a debate over the pros and cons of this rapid transformation. By introducing a transnational consumer culture to a *porteño* audience—as inhabitants of Buenos Aires were called—popular culture encouraged the ideologies of consumerism, individualism, and middle-class aspirations, which specifically targeted women. At the same time, popular culture addressed the pressing issue of defining Argentina's authentic values in a context of increased entanglement with the world.⁵

During the 1920s and 1930s, Argentine popular culture saw an explosion of new images of women. Magazines and newspapers portrayed figures of trend-conscious upper-class young women zipping around the city in cars, sports-women playing tennis or swimming, and beauty queens parading in bathing suits. Pulp fiction, tango lyrics, and films depicted variety theater performers and tango singers out and about in Buenos Aires nightlife and salesgirls at luxurious department stores flirting with men of a higher social status. These single young women became icons of the modern city. Though such representations were nurtured by domestic changes, they were also supported by a transnational repertoire of images, ideologies, and commodities that circulated globally, condensing complex and contradictory views about women, the nation and modernity. Next to these diverse modern female figures, images and stories of the *gaucho*, the famous cowboy of the Pampas, flooded the popular media. Portrayed wearing his typical outfit—a *poncho* and loose-fitting trousers—while drinking *mate*, an infusion sipped from a gourd, or out hunting, his image appeared in pulp fiction, films, and advertisements, as well as in state-sponsored programs and intellectual movements. The *gaucho* became the official symbol of being Argentine. Known for his strength, honesty, pride, and his proclivity for violence, he also embodied conservative male values. The

contrast between images of the *gaucho* and the *joven moderna* could not have been more striking. While the former epitomized values rooted in the past, the latter looked confidently to the future.

Through the collection and analysis of a wide range of sources, this book explores several Argentine variants of the modern girl figure. As Liz Conor explains in her study on the modern woman in the 1920s, different types of female identities emerged during this period. Modernity had made women more visible in Western culture, and a flurry of images centered on women's visual status, taking advantage of the new visual technologies. According to Conor, these images of modern femininities, in turn, became part of women's self-perception as modern.⁶ In this book, I pursue these considerations by analyzing visual and written descriptions of modern girls as defined by popular culture, the statements attributed to them, and the connection between their depiction and real-life women.

I identified four diverse types of modern young women defined mainly by their social class. The archetype of the modern girl in Argentine popular culture was known as the *joven moderna*, and was characterized by her cosmopolitanism, wealth, and snobbery. She appeared as a widely recognized figure in general interest magazines, penny novels, and films during the 1920s and 1930s, and was consistently depicted throughout the period and across different genres. At the same time, other less-prevalent but nonetheless appealing versions of the modern girl also existed, including the salesgirl and typist figures, (who worked in downtown offices and department stores), the sports-woman, and the beauty contestant. The class identity of these modern girls shifted, in fact, depending on the type of young women being portrayed, the genre, and the context in which she was depicted. Young female workers were usually described as having humble origins, but their class identity could lean toward working- or middle-class values depending on the genre in which they appeared. Melodrama intensified class polarization and identified the female worker with the values of the poor, while magazines were more inclined to use her to spread transnational middle-class ideals. Conversely, many beauty contestants professed middle-class values, though the symbolism of their geographical origins (the rural provinces of Argentina, not its capital city) was equally important in defining an authentic and respectable identity. The only figure not decisively defined by class was the young athletic woman. The importance of social class in the diverse representations of the modern girl

confirms the centrality of class to Argentine popular culture of the 1920s and 1930s and especially to the populist melodrama at its core. In fact, much of the gendered and class dynamics encompassed by popular culture during this period continued to be central during the Peronist administration, as I show in the epilogue. Peronism endorsed humble women's aspirations for respectability and consumer rights while also validating notions of working-class loyalty and resentment over class differences.

The book shows that during the 1920s and 1930s, young women were at the center of a public debate about modernity and its consequences for Argentine national identity. In this period, the multifaceted figure of the modern girl embodied the hopes, tensions and anxieties associated with sociocultural transformations, but was also subjected to diverse assessments of the qualities of the Argentine nation. While the young modern woman was sometimes used to symbolize fears of the country's moral decadence and cultural loss—seen mainly as a consequence of foreign-inspired fashions and manners—at other times, she stood for an “advanced” nation in the media, and her image was a demonstration of national progress and civilization. By reconstructing the emergence and evolution of new female figures and their link to the different versions of Argentina's national identity, this book not only analyzes the dynamics of sociocultural change, but also explores its gendered and nationalistic dimension.

Popular Culture and Women

The emergence of a consumer culture and the advent of a strong feminist movement were two important historical developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Cultural historians interested in mass culture, consumer culture, and women's history have investigated this period from different angles, exploring in particular how gender representations were created as well as transformed by consumer culture and feminism. This book engages with popular Argentine cultural commodities from the 1920s and 1930s, mainly illustrated magazines and newspapers, but also literature, songs, cinema and advertisements, investigating the female representations they conveyed. Feminist cultural studies long ago identified these popular media sources as key to analyzing social and cultural constructions of femininity, but they have also noted the challenges of using these sources.