

Exploring Space/Excavating Place: Alejo Peyret, the Misiones Territory, and the Argentine State¹

Rebecca M. Stephanis

Gonzaga University

"Iré al Iguazú aunque no acabe de conocer Buenos Aires, porque es más importante el Iguazú que Buenos Aires." Y es claro, del Iguazú han de salir dos o tres Buenos Aires y además un poderoso imperio. El Iguazú es como la Argentina futura; el nervio vital de la América Latina y el centro propulsor de una civilización que no tiene precedente en la Historia. Sin el Iguazú casi no habría América del Sur, por lo menos no habría Argentina, porque no es porvenir poseer una pampa, por dilatada que sea; el porvenir está en el aprovechamiento de las fuerzas de la creación, y el Iguazú es la mayor fuerza virgen y libre que hasta ahora se conoce; el pueblo que domine el Iguazú será el pueblo de América.

Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (171)

Oftentimes discussions regarding construction of Argentine national identity during the period of national consolidation revolve around the spaces of Buenos Aires, the *pampas* ("plains"), and more recently, Patagonia. However, little mention is made of the Argentine jungle. In fact, with the possible exception of Horacio Quiroga in the early twentieth century, this region is largely overlooked. Nonetheless, in the early part of the twentieth century, Mexican writer and critic José Vasconcelos not only mentioned the territory of Misiones, but imagined it as the potential center of civilization for Argentina, and for all of South America. This essay will examine the first text produced post-1880 regarding the territory of Misiones. It briefly contextualizes the author, Alejo Peyret, with respect to this period in Argentine history, analyzes the particularities of the jungle as an alternative locus of enunciation, and defines the gaze that Misiones elicited from this first traveler-writer of the modern nation. In essence, this article proposes the jungle space as an alternate space for the conceptualization of Argentine identity during the period of national consolidation

¹ The present day Province of Misiones is located in Northeastern Argentina. It is a thumb shaped territory that juts into the neighboring countries of Paraguay and Brazil, and all but fifty kilometers of its borders are defined by a system of rivers: the Paraná, the Iguazú, and the Uruguay. Misiones was named as such due to the concentrated presence of thirty Jesuit *reducciones* in the area from 1607-1767. After the expulsion of the Jesuits, from the eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century, Misiones fell victim to numerous border disputes with the neighboring countries of Brazil and Paraguay as well as with the Argentine province of Corrientes. It formally became a national territory in the late nineteenth century.

and seeks to differentiate it from those territories traditionally associated with the Argentine identity at the time.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Misiones territory was considered to fall completely outside the realm of the modern State. In fact, many who inhabited the space did so as a deliberate means to escape the trappings of the metropolitan life offered in Buenos Aires. However, the State would soon cast its gaze upon Misiones in an attempt to determine whether or not this outlying area could and should be truly incorporated into the nation. In 1880, after Argentina's political borders had been established, the "Conquest of the Desert" concluded, and power was consolidated into the federal capital city of Buenos Aires, President Julio Argentino Roca sought to develop the Argentine economy. He endeavored to situate Argentina definitively within the realm of "civilization" (Spicer-Escalante 31). In addition to creating important financial, political, and educational institutions to meet his objectives of "Peace and Administration," Roca appointed various individuals to explore the territorial margins and report both on their potential with respect to agricultural production as well as their feasibility for colonization.² He felt that agriculture and colonies would enable the marginal territorial spaces to be brought under the auspices of the modern Argentine state. This process of defining the lesser-known territories with respect to the city center of Buenos Aires contributed to an examination of what comprised "argentinidad" (Argentine identity) in the minds of the inhabitants. As J. P. Spicer-Escalante has noted: "... el año 1880 sirve como punto de partida para la búsqueda de su identidad: el proceso de acrisolamiento que el país experimentaba constituía parte de su *coming of age* no sólo con respecto a la formación de un Estado argentino, sino también para su población en términos de las características que lo identificaron como nación moderna" (35-36). While several territories were easily identified with a specific product (wine production in Cuyo, cotton in Chaco, sugar in Tucumán, etc.), Misiones's particular contributions to agriculture and/or identity were yet to be defined.

Much has been written about the open spaces of the *pampas* and the Patagonian desert during this period of national consolidation.³ However, little is known about the Northeastern frontier. Misiones offers a very distinct space from which to examine territorial representation, its relationship to the State, and its contributions to the national imaginary.⁴ Prior to its exploration under the Roca administration, the area was

² The colonization effort was first envisioned in the mid-nineteenth century under the guidance of intellectuals such as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and Juan Bautista Alberdi, who sought to populate the interior of the country with desirable immigrant communities and thus combat the perceived *barbarism* embodied in the indigenous and gaucho nomadic populations. To this end, late in the nineteenth century the government commenced "the Conquest of the Desert"; to exterminate or expel those groups was thought to be *dangerous* to the well-being of the Nation. As Aarti S. Madan points out, institutionalized geography was seen as a means to protect the nation from dangerous elements, both internal and external. Knowledge of the land allowed for the economic stability and social progress necessary in order to create a "civilized" and modern nation according to Sarmiento's ideals (259-60).

³ For further discussion of the *pampas* and Patagonia concerning their representation with respect to the Argentine State, see the works of Ángel T. Tuninetti, Gabriella Nouzeilles, Eva-Lynn Alicia Jagoe, and Ernesto Livon-Grosman.

⁴ By national imaginary I draw upon the ideas proposed by Benedict Anderson, Ernest Renan, and Homi K. Bhabha. The Nation is an imagined political community, both limited and sovereign, whose inhabitants are bound by a shared image of their connection to a larger community (Anderson 6-7); it is not concrete in nature, but a "large-scale solidarity" with a presupposed past (Renan 19); and, it is conceptualized through

simultaneously considered a virgin jungle sparsely inhabited by indigenous populations, a site for exploration and study by European scientists and botanists, and a land of potential for fortune-seekers and pioneers. In 1881, one year after Argentina's national consolidation, Peyret was commissioned by the Office of Land and Colonies to investigate the possibilities for official colonization in the Misiones territory. At the same time he was asked by the director of the newspaper *La tribuna nacional* to report back on his findings.⁵ He penned a series of letters which were subsequently published collectively as *Cartas sobre Misiones*, the preface of which clearly sets the thirty letters to follow squarely within the realm of relations to the State. The individual letters were written to the director of the newspaper, Olegario Andrade, a former colleague of President Roca's in the Colegio Nacional de Concepción del Uruguay; and the collection as a whole was dedicated to Enrique Victorica, grandson of President Urquiza and son of the minister of war, Benjamín Victorica.⁶ Peyret's interlocutors were closely tied to the project of Argentine national consolidation. They were comprised of statesmen and readers of the State's official newspaper, the intellectual and political elite who would be responsible for the planning and execution of the territory's subsequent infrastructural development.

Through his writings, Peyret began to brush off and examine the ruins of Misiones's failed colonial beginnings and to *re-invent* it within the modern national realm. Together with subsequent writers-explorers (for instance, Ramón Lista [1883], Eduardo Holmberg [1887], Carlos Burmeister [1899]), Peyret initiated the process of re-founding the territory within the Argentine imaginary. In doing so, he was the first to contribute to the "sum of stories" (Moretti 20) that served to construct Misiones within the national imaginary at the end of the nineteenth century. In much the same manner that Franco Moretti suggests in the European context, and Nouzeilles in the Argentine (38), Peyret's narratives serve as the foundation upon which textual inroads into Misiones were constructed. These virtual roads would facilitate the territory's physical development and incorporation into the national fabric in the decades to come.

narration (Bhabha 1). The liminal nature of the Nation can be juxtaposed to State, which is understood to be a sovereign political entity that resides within internationally recognized political borders, and is responsible for those institutions that ensure its survival: education, infrastructure, economic activity, etc. Travel narratives contributed to the formation of the Argentine national imaginary as the State began its process of consolidation.

⁵ The *Tribuna nacional* was an important political tool at the time. Founded in October 1880, a few days before President Julio A. Roca became president again (1880-86), it was financed through credits of the Banco Nacional as well as subscriptions from the national and provincial governments. The paper was used from 1880-86 as an instrument of the government in order to construct itself and its legitimacy in the eyes of the paper's readers. The mission of the *Tribuna nacional* was to announce a new period in Argentina's history replete with references to construction of railway lines, bridges, roads, and expeditions into the far reaching territories of the country. In other words, this newspaper contributed directly to the formation of the Argentine national imaginary. For a more detailed discussion of the importance of *La tribuna nacional* see Paula Alonso's analysis of the periodical production in this period.

⁶ The Colegio Nacional de Concepción del Uruguay was founded in 1849 by President Justo José de Urquiza, the first constitutional president of Argentina. He saw the school as a site for the formation of the future leaders of the country. Many of the first teachers there were immigrants from France. These men brought with them the political ideals of the French Republic, a wealth of scientific knowledge, and were considered to pertain to the population of desirable immigrants according to Sarmiento's model.

With the publication of Peyret's *Cartas*, Misiones began its conversion from a forgotten territory outside of the national imaginary to the potential economic center and national treasure that Vasconcelos would describe almost fifty years later. The agricultural resources and abundance of waterways in the territory were first identified for the modern State in Peyret's letters. Much like Sarmiento, Peyret contributes to the "didactic geography" marketed to both Argentine citizens as well as potential colonists; in "writing the earth" he is simultaneously "writing the nation" (Madan 260-61). It was the creation of narrative paths that allowed readers to penetrate the jungle and imagine this seemingly wild and unconquerable space as inherently Argentine. Peyret embarked on a project closely linked to the second wave of official colonization efforts in the region. The industries and future colonies he imagined in his texts foreshadowed the physical integration of the territory in subsequent years that culminated in its formal promotion to a province in 1954.

Peyret's two-month expedition is concentrated primarily within the southern region of the Misiones territory, although he does briefly cross into Paraguay and ventures north to Iguazu Falls. His visits to the area are centered upon his exploration of the towns surrounding the ruins of Candelaria, San Ignacio Miní, and Santa Ana, as well as the failed modern colonization project started near Corpus, "Marcos Avellaneda." Notable is the fact that when one makes reference to a map of Misiones, the observations Peyret made are based on six closely clustered anchoring sites and the trails and rivers that connect them; however, they project a vision of a territory that lies far beyond the borders of his own path.⁷

When Peyret embarked on his journey, Misiones was not yet included in the *national inventory*. The territory did not pertain to Argentina in the census of 1869; therefore, it did not belong, in a legal sense, to the Nation (Hernández ii). As such, it occupied the vast undefined space that had haunted the imaginations of political and intellectual leaders since the publication of Sarmiento's seminal work, *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie*, in 1845. Sarmiento had defined one of the major obstacles to Argentine progress and modernization as the vast open spaces which its boundaries encompassed (56). In order to be considered Argentine, Misiones needed to be physically explored, the space represented through its descriptions, and the experiences and information gathered into a logical and coherent narrative. As Edward S. Casey has observed, the exploration of a space makes visible the potential for place. As explorers begin to tie what they see to what they know, the land becomes populated with social connotations. It is experienced and understood through a collective cultural lens (Casey 31); thus, place is the site which allows histories to be written. As a consequence of processes of its transformation into place, Misiones could become more closely linked to a national narrative.

Much like Sarmiento, Peyret confronts a space that he perceives to be deserted, virtually empty of human activity and traces of civilization. He writes:

⁷ Much of Peyret's exploration was done by river or by short excursions into the jungle on foot and on horseback. It was not until late in the 1890s with Juan Queirel and Carlos Burmeister's explorations of Misiones that true inroads into the jungle and mountains of Misiones were made. Even then, it is unclear as to how deeply these men penetrated the eastern territories.

Estamos actualmente en la línea divisoria de tres naciones: la República Argentina, la República paraguaya y el Imperio de Brasil. Podemos lanzar una bala á cualquiera de los tres Estados que se nos antoje. Pero ningun vestigio humano indica aquí los confines de tres naciones. Esos grandes ríos corren en el desierto. No hemos encontrado, no encontraremos hombre alguno en nuestra excursion.

¿De quién es entónces este territorio? Del tapir, del tucan. . .
Ellos son los dueños indisputables de esta selva vírgen. (220)

Without a physical indicator or human presence to clearly delineate borders between one nation and the other, Peyret had to devise other strategies that enable him to wrestle Misiones from the natural realm and to conceptualize it as place, Argentine, modern, and inhabitable.

As mentioned before, during the period that Peyret embarked on his journey, Argentina was in the process of developing what Domingo Ighina refers to as “*diseños territoriales*” (623). These territorial sketches did not always correspond to the physical space that the State occupied, but instead indicated the Nation’s desired political and economic outcomes. According to Ighina, “un *diseño territorial* tiende a apropiarse simbólicamente del espacio donde un Estado devendrá en nación. . . . Lo que se apropia es *tierra de nadie, desierto, carece de historia y de significación humana*” (624). However, in most cases, the spaces were in fact inhabited, by gauchos or by indigenous groups. As a result, at the end of the nineteenth century—in much the same manner as the first generation of colonization that had taken place three hundred years prior—the territorial spaces had to be emptied physically or virtually of their inhabitants (Mignolo 309). In the case of Peyret, this was accomplished by largely ignoring the Tupí-Guaraní indigenous populations from the land, except to use these populations as evidence for the failure of the Jesuit colonization project.⁸ Simultaneously, the writer-explorer closely examines and celebrates the *pioneers* in the region—French, Italian, North American, and in some cases Argentine *criollo* individuals—who had managed to carve out an existence in this frontier land, thus populating Misiones with the ideal inhabitant.

The territorial designs also allowed agents of the State to visualize the ideal and to overlay the future ideal upon the physical topography. In the case of Argentina, Patagonia and the *pampas* shared various elements in their territorial designs. The Patagonian desert was considered “the uttermost part of the earth and as a primordial, pre-historical space” (Nouzeilles 36), an ideal site for “recrear la ilusión de un origen geológico y antropológico” (Livon-Grosman 1). At the same time, the emptiness allowed for the projection of a future ideal (Livon-Grosman 4). In the case of the *pampas*, a vast, empty expanse inhabited by dangerous, *savage*, and/or *barbaric* Indians and gauchos was imagined. It was a place in which time stood still, thus forcing its explorers toward nostalgia or toward the contemplation of a pre-modern past (Jagoe 13-14). In both Patagonia and the *pampas*, the physical space comprised a largely blank screen upon which writer-explorers could project images of civilization and progress.

⁸ It should be noted that Peyret shared much of the same racism toward the indigenous populations as did Sarmiento and other statesmen at the time. He did not consider the Tupí-Guaraní populations to be capable of advancing the State’s ideals into the region and instead focused his attention upon those individuals that he felt were better equipped to extend the reach of the Argentine State into the territory.

This screen vanishes in the context of Misiones. Peyret did not confront a vast and empty geographical space. Instead, he encountered a dark and impenetrable region:

Hay árboles enormes que han hundido sus raíces en las paredes, otros que envuelven los pilares, enroscándose alrededor de ellos como culebras colosales; los musgos, los caragatás, los *isipós* se entreveran y forman grandes cortinas que se descuelgan perpendicularmente, y que es preciso cortar con el machete para abrirse paso. El paseo, ó mejor dicho, la ascension es penosísima, y aun algo peligrosa entre esos montones de escombros, de piedras cúbicas, de grandes paralelepípedos derribados unos sobre otros, húmedos, resbaladizos, porque están constantemente sumidos en la sombra, y solo por casualidad reciben alguno que otro rayo solar, que, semejante á un flechazo de oro, cruza la densa oscuridad. Por lo demás, silencio completo entre esos bosques, *lucos silentes*, dice Virgilio; y ese silencio, añadido á la devastacion, causa la tristeza y el espanto (120-21).

As he explored, Peyret was forced to enter the landscape and to physically interact with it. He could not project future ideals onto the land as he could not separate himself from the landscape that surrounded him. He did not benefit from the perspective and distance that writer-explorers of other territories did, but instead was immersed in a space that consumed, enveloped, embraced, strangled, and invaded: the jungle.⁹

While the dense vegetation of the jungle marked Misiones's geography in a very visible sense, there also existed an invisible marker which further complicated Peyret's interactions with the territory: time. In his reflections upon the "place-world," Casey carefully ties the temporal to the spatial; it is in fact the former which enables the definition of the latter (21). He observes: "It required time to resolve the problem of determining exact location in space. . . . The winning logic was this: when lost in space, turn to time. . . . The determination of the latter allowed the specification of the former. The measure of space was taken by time" (6). In a space in which physical movement was made extraordinarily difficult, time came to occupy an important measure of progress. In this manner, Misiones's process of exploration and representation differs from the southern territories.

In contrast to the desert or *pampas*, in which the writer-explorer could easily traverse long distances and move forward, thus facilitating a vision of the future and progress, the jungle inhibited movement. Perhaps as a direct result of his inability to advance physically, Peyret often finds the only way to move forward in his narrative is by retreating to a contemplation of the past, most often in the form of long quoted citations from texts produced in the mid-nineteenth century (i.e., Martin de Moussy's exploration notes and a brief history of the region by Grego Joao Pedro Gay, a Brazilian vicar). As time passes slowly and little progress is made physically, Peyret begins to link space/time to frustrated economic progress. When discussing the Monday River, he observes:

. . . no encontré mas que monos en sus riberas, y una canoa de indios arrebatada por la corriente. Echase de ver que poco hemos adelantado, no digo desde la escursion de Martin de Moussy, costeadado por el Gobierno de la Confederacion Argentina, sino desde la espedicion de Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, hace tres siglos y medio. . . . [N]o hemos adelantado, hemos mas bien retrocedido (7-8).

⁹ For a detailed description of the multiple ways that the jungle has been conceived as a space in Latin American literature, see Fernando Aínsa's comprehensive analysis (51-110).

This quotation is significant not only with respect to the relationship between space, time, and progress, but also because it hints at the second most important characteristic that differentiates Misiones from the other territories being explored in the late nineteenth century. In addition to natural surroundings that overwhelmed and the evidence of indigenous inhabitants (elements that were also found in Patagonia and the *pampas*), Peyret encountered a watermark of the past.

Beneath the seemingly overgrown vegetation, there existed traces of a previous encounter. As Jessica Dubow notes with respect to the ideological connotations of landscape, "Landscape *outlives* history; it surpasses it. Over time—and almost as a function of its earth, its soil—landscape absorbs the events played out on its surface; it inters the marks of past practices as much as it bears its traces " (Cosgrove et al. 100). In Misiones, Peyret could not free himself from the vestiges of the former Jesuit presence. It had been inscribed upon the cultural *mystic writing pad*,¹⁰ and as such, had left its indelible scratch upon the national imaginary. Although it was considered to be a virgin jungle at the time of the expedition, ripe for exploration, settlement, and civilization, Peyret was forced to encounter echoes of Misiones's previous placement at every turn. The ruins of the *reducciones* made evident the failure of place one hundred years before; in them were contained narratives that could no longer be told (Kerr 136). In order to create a place within the modern Argentine imaginary Peyret virtually excavates the Jesuit *reducciones*'s ruins, reveals their history, and then creates a new narrative for them that would address the concerns of the modern State. In doing so, Peyret is able to imagine the human presence that would enable the triumph of civilization over the jungle, the creation of colonies, and exploitation of natural resources. He foreshadows the conceptualization of Misiones as a powerhouse that Vasconcelos would perceive and echo over four decades later.

As a consequence of the previous encounter, a unique double-tiered frontier space arose in Misiones. In the context of the desert or plains, the frontier is conceived as the dividing line between culture and nature (Carter 158), between civilization and savagery (Turner 60), or between inhabited and empty (Webb 3). In other words, the frontier operates as a buffer zone upon which two opposing forces exert their influence. However, in Misiones the tension operates vertically instead of horizontally. The territory in question experiences the folding over and superposition of one side upon the other, bound spatially, but separated temporally by more than one hundred years. In essence, the Misiones territory could be understood as an Argentine "contact zone." What Mary Louise Pratt has conceptualized as the encounter between European and Latin American inhabitants—"[A contact zone] is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect" (7)—within the Misiones context becomes an encounter between two colonization efforts simultaneously populating the same space. The presence of this dual-tiered frontier, unlike the deserts and *pampas* that had captured the imaginations of territorial explorers elsewhere in Argentina, meant that this particular territory could not be perceived to be "empty." The jungle of Misiones, far from a blank screen upon which to

¹⁰ Here I make reference to Freud's *mystic writing pad*, or the notion that memory functions much like the wax or resin tablets upon which words could be written. Once the top layer was released from the wax below, the wax paper would render itself blank again. However, the wax underneath would capture the impressions made by the stylus and would thus record traces of the previous inscriptions.

project images of progress, instead comprised a densely populated space. At once chaotic, impenetrable, and confrontational, it was the frustrated attempt at domesticating the first frontier (under the Jesuits) that seemingly offered promise for the second.

Throughout the thirty letters, Peyret is particularly disturbed by the idea that the territory of Misiones has been forgotten and has lain fallow for over one hundred years, and at various moments he reflects upon the positive and negative aspects of this first colonization effort, in an attempt to convince the State to intervene in the development of Misiones. When reflecting upon the failed Jesuit project, Peyret repeatedly mourns the defeat of civilization in this forgotten land. He regards the vestiges of the Jesuit project with a combination of nostalgia and regret:

... esas ruinas que lloran por la ausencia del hombre.

Yo tambien contemplé esas ruinas, yo tambien paseé entre esos escombros invadidos por una vegetacion exuberante, y, aunque nunca fuí amigo de los jesuitas, sentí las lágrimas asomarse á mis ojos; no pude reprimir un movimiento de indignacion contra la desidia, contra el abandono que dejan inutilizados tantos elementos de riqueza y me aparté melancólico de ese teatro destruido de la actividad humana. . . .

Habia visto lo que solo conocia por las descripciones de los poetas y de los viajeros; habia visto las ruinas de Troya, de Cartago, de Palmira, en las selvas de la América del Sud.
(52)

While Misiones's exclusion from the national imaginary at the time of Peyret's expedition poses no direct threat to the Nation, Peyret's letters do instill in the readers a sense of dread. As Douglas Kerr points out in his discussion of jungle ruins in literature, the jungle is "constantly at war with human efforts to subdue, cultivate, civilize, and narrate it. . . . Ruins, especially if they are overrun by an encroaching nature, encourage thoughts about the mortality of civilizations" (134-35). In this manner, the ruins serve as an indirect threat to the survival of State as they serve to emphasize nature's expulsion of the human presence.

Within the unique space that Misiones offers, it is not surprising that Peyret's gaze is also made more complex. Perhaps this unique gaze is a result of the larger cultural forces that operated in Argentina at the end of the nineteenth century: the European and the Argentine. As Rebecca Solnit, Róisín Kennedy, and others expressed during their conversations regarding representation of landscape in European and North American art in the early twentieth century, the European gaze is one which communicates loss and is directed toward the past whereas North American art is directed toward the future (Cosgrove et al. 97-99). Frustrated by his attempts to move forward in the territory physically in the moment, Peyret is unable to root his descriptions in the present. Instead, he alternates between a gaze directed to a pre-Colonial past, evoking images of ancient civilizations and his projections of a modern Argentine future. In other words, while he describes what he sees, he simultaneously imagines what Misiones *could have been* and what it *could become*.

Peyret does not admire the Jesuit project—he strongly criticizes their failure to teach the indigenous population Spanish, for instance, and feels that this has been one of the major impediments to the region's progress (44-45)—but he does regard their presence in the territory as its "origin." A sense of melancholy creeps into Peyret as he is confronted by the ruins. In order to extract himself from this state, Peyret confronts the past and the future simultaneously in an attempt to find promises of progress. The ruins that jut from

the jungle floor serve as a concrete reminder of an opportunity lost. Nonetheless, his elevation of the Jesuit ruins to those of the lost civilizations of the Greek, Roman, and Ottoman empires suggests that the State could root itself in this marginal space and Misiones could once again become a place—a civilized center. In this manner, Peyret's letters anticipate modernist concerns. As he contemplates the Jesuit ruins, he simultaneously seeks to posit the Greco-Roman tradition as the alternate origin for Misiones; he creates a new locus of enunciation, one from which to imagine a modern Argentina.

The awe-inspiring impression that the Jesuit ruins make on Peyret does not dissuade him from gathering them under his economic gaze. After his exploration of the ruins of San Ignacio Miní, Corpus, and Santa Ana, Peyret calls for the State's intervention in order to clean and preserve the sites, to convert them into historic monuments. Like others tasked with mapping outlying territories, Peyret also seeks to construct "sites of memory" (Nouzeilles 37) that will help to infuse the space with the presence of the State and further incorporate Misiones into the national imaginary. He proposes that in the eyes of the tourists and travelers who will visit them, the ruins of Misiones will be comparable to those found in Europe: Pompeii and Herculano, the Greek and Roman ruins, and those recovered from the Middle Ages (150-51). The same natural surroundings that at the beginning were considered wild and savage, an unfortunate obstacle to the region's development, transform themselves under Peyret's gaze. He begins to see the jungle as a resource or product that can be marketed to travelers and tourists: Misiones could become a destination, thus transforming the ruins into an economically productive vestige of the past.

In 1880, however, this could only be concretely accomplished through significant infrastructural advances. It is only the invocation of future promise that allows Peyret and his readers to advance along the narrative inroads, and this is best accomplished not on land, but on the water. Upon contemplating the Río Paraná, Peyret observes:

A veces al contemplar sus pintorescas barrancas cubiertas de una vegetacion exuberante, engolfabase mi pensamiento en los tiempos futuros, y lo veia entonces convertido en una especie de calle líquida que regaba ciudades, poblaciones, usinas, casas de campo, cañaverales, cafetales, viñedos, quintas; en fin, un mundo de riquezas, como le conviene á todo río civilizado.(3)

Throughout his journey, Peyret overlaid his own future vision upon the existing landscape, both in his observations of his natural surroundings as well as in his conversations with those he encountered. No element was left untouched by his gaze. Frustrated with the slow journey on the steamship, he began to regard the water as a source of hydroelectric energy. The impenetrable forests were considered "una mina inagotable de combustible" (5). Just as he had viewed the Jesuit ruins as theaters of commerce, instead of cultural forums, Peyret's Misiones would not become a cultural center, but an agricultural one; it would become the powerhouse that would feed and fuel projects in the rest of the Nation.

Peyret's letters were the first texts written to the modern State regarding Misiones and thus were pivotal in the transformation of the territory within the national imaginary. Nonetheless, in Misiones the more familiar models for representation of a national territory are undone. During his expedition, Peyret does not gaze upon vast expanses of

empty space; instead, he encounters a space that is virtually populated by the vestiges of the Jesuit past, and is visually dense and chaotic. It is a space that is already full. In Misiones, Peyret must engage with a watermark of the past. As a result, the territory represented by this writer-explorer was neither primordial nor pre-historical, but a space that held the traces of place, and as a direct consequence offered promise for the future.

For a fleeting moment, Misiones moved from the territorial margins to the center of the page. Peyret's *Cartas sobre Misiones* would be the first text to propose an alternate space—the jungle of Misiones—from which to consider the project of national consolidation. Misiones would become a space that struggled to find its own identity at a time in which the nation did the same. In the process of excavating the Jesuit ruins within the Argentine national imaginary, Peyret initiates the creation of narrative inroads into the jungle. He represents the region as unequalled in its economic potential, as a site for future colonies that could effectively contribute to the ideals of the State, and as a space from which to imagine a distinct origin for the modern Argentina. For the readers of *La tribuna nacional* Misiones becomes more than a mere territorial space. Instead, it begins to position itself within the imaginary as modern, civilized, and Argentine. No longer lost, forgotten, and beyond reach, under Peyret's gaze for the first time within the modern Argentine context, Misiones can be imagined as a place.

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