



## Custom-building the fictions of the nation Arab Argentine rewritings of the gaucho

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**ABSTRACT** ● This article addresses the discursive relationship and intersecting construction of identities between Arabs and Argentines by examining how Arab immigrants in Argentina make use of the invocations and representations of the gaucho and the Arab, produced by canonical Euro-Argentine writers at the turn of the last century. Whereas Sarmiento and Lugones, prominent Argentine intellectuals, pair the figures of the Arab and the gaucho to further their exclusivist nationalist projects, the Arab Argentines Hallar and Yaser make use of these correlations between Arabs and gauchos to write alternative histories that create a deep connection between Arab immigrants and Argentina. These writers turn the gesture of rejection of ethnic immigrants – that is, the elevation of the gaucho to national hero – into an entry point for Arab immigrants into Argentine subjecthood. Moreover, even the Arab Argentine writers' narratives participate in orientalism, leading to a reevaluation of theorizations of both orientalism and counterrepresentation. ●

**KEYWORDS** ● Arab immigration ● Argentina ● counterrepresentation ● ethnicity ● gaucho ● nationalism ● orientalism ● race ● subjectivity

As Argentine intellectuals at the turn of the last century were using images of the Arab world in their formulations of national identity, actual Arabs were arriving as immigrants in Argentina. Images of the Orient were central in texts written by two prominent *criollo* (creole)<sup>1</sup> Argentine intellectuals,

Domingo F. Sarmiento and Leopoldo Lugones, who sought to establish an Argentine national identity linked to the figure of the gaucho – the cattle hand of the pampas. In a curious case of subaltern response, decades later two Arab Argentines, Ibrahim Hallar and Juan Yaser, rewrote the history of the gaucho making use of these Euro-Argentine intellectuals' Arab gaucho. This study is concerned with how Hallar and Yaser's texts attempt to make sense of the cultural dislocations that they experience while responding to Orientalist Euro-Argentine discourses.

In the 1860s a flow of Arab immigrants began to arrive in the Americas. Most of those who emigrated to Argentina came from what was then the province of Greater Syria under Ottoman rule – what are now Syria, Lebanon, Palestine/Israel and parts of Jordan. Because they came from the Ottoman Empire they were given the name *turco* – 'Turk' in Spanish – a usually derogatory term still used today. Various political, economic, religious and cultural factors have been cited for this Arab immigration movement, most of them linked to the crisis that arose in the Ottoman empire in the mid-1800s and which would later culminate in the dissolution of the empire after its defeat in the First World War.

In terms of the numbers of immigrants, many difficulties are involved in establishing precise statistics, both because many people left illegally and because the terms used to record the origins of immigrants were neither standardized nor accurate. It is estimated that, amid the flood of European immigrants between 1887 and 1913, almost 131,000 Arabs arrived in Argentina. The numbers of Arab immigrants peaked between 1904 and 1913 and then declined because of the First World War. Another wave, this time of lesser numbers, started in 1931 and lasted until the 1950s. During this period some Palestinians arrived and in the 1980s there was an influx of Lebanese because of the Lebanese civil war. Thus Arabs – most of them Christians – make up roughly the fourth largest immigrant group in Argentina. Those who arrived at the turn of the last century usually began, as they did elsewhere in the Americas, as itinerant salesmen of cloth, notions and housewares and then set up shops. Although many are still small business owners, a number have also become major industrialists or key figures in regional politics, as can be seen in the case of Carlos Menem, who rose from local Peronist politics to become president of Argentina.<sup>2</sup>

Although a good number of Arab Argentines have enjoyed political and economic success, or precisely because of this success, anti-Arab sentiment in Argentina lingers to this day. A reaction against the massive influx of immigrants from Europe and the eastern Mediterranean began in the last two decades of the 19th century and in the 1910s it began to manifest itself clearly on political and institutional levels. In the mid-1930s xenophobic nationalism became the central political movement. During these first decades of the 20th century, Semitic immigrants – that is, Jews from Europe and the Middle East as well as Arabs of different faiths – were seen as the

most undesirable immigrants. These views, based on positivist notions of ethnicity as well as on economic concerns, operated into the 1950s with Peronist immigration policies. Renewed anti-Arab bigotry surfaced in 1988 when Menem, a political as well as cultural outsider, won the presidential nomination of the Peronist Justicialista party. Since that time the press has often linked his shortcomings as president to his ethnic origins (Klich, 1995: 141–2, n. 92 and Jozami, 1993: 190–1).

Conceptions of Arabs as a separate, clannish and politically and economically powerful group in Argentina are seen in the press and in opinion polls conducted in Argentina in 1992. In one of these surveys, carried out jointly by a Jewish Argentine and Jewish American association, about one-third of the participants considered Jews and Arabs to be the groups least integrated into Argentine life, with an even higher number considering them to belong to a separate people. More than half of the respondents thought of Jews and Arabs as richer than other Argentines. In another survey carried out earlier that year almost one-third of those surveyed considered Arabs to be rich and powerful and almost half considered that Arabs were one of the ethnic groups that only worked for its own benefit.<sup>3</sup> Thus, to a certain extent, the notion of inherited ethnic characteristics and the political and economic resentment of non-Arabs persist to this day in Argentina.

Interestingly, the stereotypes about Arabs that play such a central part in the enduring anti-Arab essentialist views have roots that stretch back before the arrival of Syro-Lebanese immigrants in Argentina. As early as 1845, some 20 years before the first Arab immigrants arrived, the Orient – an ‘Orient’ assembled through readings in Orientalist academic studies and literature produced in Europe and through travels in the Middle East – was already a presence in Argentina. Images of the Orient appear in some of the founding texts of Argentine literature and Argentine cultural nationalism, such as those written by Sarmiento and Lugones.

Sarmiento, a prominent 19th-century Argentine writer and statesman, uses the figure of the Arab in *Facundo o civilización y barbarie* [Facundo or Civilization and Barbarism] and *Viajes por Europa, África y América* [Travels in Europe, Africa and America] as a conceptual model, a graspable counterpart to the gaucho, and in this way formulates a national identity that balances between eschewing barbarism and embracing the gaucho as that which is most Argentine. Sarmiento is widely considered to have inaugurated Argentine literature by writing *Facundo* (1979[1845]). And it is in this very text, largely a historical and political essay that Sarmiento fashions as the biography of Juan Facundo Quiroga, a provincial leader during the Rosas dictatorship of the mid-1800s, that we first find Argentine images of the Arab and the Orient. Woven into anecdotes about Facundo Quiroga and descriptions of Argentina, Sarmiento deploys Orientalist images of a ‘gaucho-Bedouin’. While Sarmiento was in exile from Argentina he visited Algeria and wrote a travel essay about his experiences there. This

account of actual contact with the Orient is part of Sarmiento's travelogue *Viajes* (1981[1849]). The images of the Arab that emerge from both of these texts serve to frame the gaucho in a comprehensible way for Europeans as well as for Sarmiento himself, to translate that which is known to non-Spanish Europeans (the Arab 'Other') and the way in which they know it (through overseas colonization) into a picture of the somewhat different type of relationship that exists between Argentines and gauchos.

As part of the Generation of '37, a group of young writers and intellectuals who held in common the desire to rid the Argentine provinces of Rosas and all that was seen as 'uncivilized', Sarmiento sought to delineate the problems that hindered the former Spanish provinces' unification and how the provinces could develop into a modern nation. These images of an Arab gaucho, produced by a key figure in the discussions about 'civilization' and 'barbarism' in Argentine national identity, are an attempt to formulate a stable Argentine identity during the socially and politically chaotic decades following Argentine independence from Spain.

Similarly, at the beginning of the 20th century Lugones uses the figure of the Moor in *El payador* (1979[1916]) to make the conflict-ridden gaucho an Argentine icon, and one which represents pre-immigration Argentina. Divorced from the reality of gauchos as a marginalized group pressed into service in the wars of independence, whose lifestyle and culture had been nearly wiped out by the early 20th century, in *El payador* Lugones presents a romanticized gaucho who is *the* Argentine hero. This version of the gaucho, together with Lugones' efforts in this same essay to promote *Martín Fierro*, a gaucho-style verse narrative written in 1872 by José Hernández, as the Argentine national epic, are a response to the rapid and radical changes experienced in Argentina at the turn of the last century. In reaction to the massive immigrant influx, as well as the haphazard growth of the economy and the city of Buenos Aires, and facilitated, in a sense, by the near-extirpation of the indigenous people of Argentina in the late 1800s, strong anti-immigrant sentiment arose in Argentina. Linked to this, city versus country – the 'corruption' of the modern city versus the 'virtue' of a nearly lost rural life that must somehow be recuperated – was a dominant theme. Additionally, the intellectual elite countered the social changes by promoting Argentina's Spanish heritage. Lugones, a principal figure in this Hispanism, presents the gaucho as a descendant of the Arabs of Spain in order to turn the once reviled gaucho into an icon that stands for an Argentine national tradition of which immigrants are not, and cannot, be a part.

Syro-Lebanese immigrants, in addition to figuring as the objects of non-Arab Argentine cultural production, have a cultural and literary history of their own – and one which reveals that they have been active in various modes of textual expression. In the first half of the 1900s they founded more than 60 newspapers and magazines in Arabic, Spanish and bilingual editions, a few of which are still published. The first generations of Arab

Argentines published a great deal of poetry as well as works in various prose genres (novels, stories, dramas, travelogues and autobiographies) in both Spanish and Arabic.

Arab Argentines seem to have been especially prolific in writing histories, with a plethora of articles, essays and book-length works in both Arabic and Spanish. One set of Arab Argentine historical texts consists of works written in Spanish in which the authors try to establish long-standing connections between themselves and the Americas in general, or Argentina specifically, on the basis of alternate versions of history which they present as fact. In this way, they highlight the textual and narrative basis of history, so much so that they blur the commonly accepted boundaries between history and fiction.

Indeed, in reviewing all the Arab Argentine texts available, it soon becomes apparent that literary and historical projects were often closely connected. This is seen, on one level, in the urge to narrate their origins in historical texts, as well as in the type of literature, understood in its stricter sense, that they wrote, which often thematizes a particular historical period. In this way, the corpus of Arab Argentine writings is particularly rich terrain in which to observe and explore historical texts as imaginative narrative, and literary texts as documents linked to specific historical conditions, and even as constructors of reality. The Foucauldian and New Historicist projects of highlighting the textual and interpretive nature of history and the contingent discursive and material context of literature are central to my interest in the historical and the literary as forms of representation and narrative. The opposition between history and literature – conceived of as the empirical versus the imaginative – is untenable when we acknowledge that history is a textual phenomenon built on events that can be said to be objective reality but that are selected, organized and framed within a narrative and are shaped by interpretation. Inversely, literature is implicated in a web of material practices which it both refracts and has an impact on. Thus, history and literature are functionally, although not ontologically, distinct.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, my interest is in the representational and rhetorical strategies of these writers' narratives.

In a sort of inversion of Sarmiento and Lugones' references to Arabs, two Arab Argentine authors – Hallar and Yaser – make use of the established writers' work as they write Arabs into the early history of the Americas. Ibrahim Husayn Hallar, the son of Lebanese immigrants and a practicing Muslim, was born in San Luis, Argentina, in 1915 and died in Buenos Aires in 1973. In conjunction with being one of the founders of the Centro Islámico de Buenos Aires [Buenos Aires Islamic Center], and promoting Muslim-Christian dialogue,<sup>5</sup> Hallar wrote three historiographic works that seek to present the Arabo-Muslim world to Argentines, as well as to create links between these two cultures. In his *El gaucho, su originalidad árabiga* (1962) [The Gaucho and his Arab Originality] he incorporates Sarmiento

and Lugones' writings as part of the supporting evidence for his claim that the Argentine gaucho arose out of relationships between indigenous women and Arabs from Spain.

Juan Yaser was born in Palestine in 1925. In 1952, as a result of the Israeli occupation, he emigrated to Córdoba, Argentina, where he lived until his death in 1996. In addition to composing and publishing poetry in both Spanish and Arabic, Yaser wrote historical and literary studies. In two of these studies, *Herencia árabe en América* (1979) [Arab Heritage in Latin America] and *Fenicios y árabes en el génesis americano* (1992) [Phoenicians and Arabs in the Latin American genesis], Yaser presents basically the same argument as Hallar about the Arab origins of the gaucho, with similar support, basing himself at least partially on Hallar's work.

In their works Hallar and Yaser take the similarities between Arabs and gauchos that Sarmiento and, to a lesser extent, Lugones base on the notion of geographically determined character, and they make them literal. That is, they take these notions to a concrete, biological realm. In terms of Lugones and his description of the link between Arabs and gauchos as a biological one, Hallar and Yaser take this idea of physically inherited character to its limits. Rather than a genealogy of Arabs intermingling and intermarrying with Spaniards who then carry Arab atavisms with them to the New World, Hallar and Yaser narrate a much more immediate heredity. They point to the probable presence of Arabs from Spain among the Spanish conquerors of the Americas. According to their narrative, these Arabs – who were not bound by the Spanish *Leyes de Indias* [Laws of the Indies] which (theoretically) forbade sexual relations between Spanish Catholics and indigenous peoples – had children with indigenous women. These children were the first gauchos. The histories written by Yaser and Hallar make it such that the infusion of Arab blood took place not only in the Iberian peninsula (as Lugones argues) but also more recently and on Argentine soil itself.<sup>6</sup>

The basic rhetorical strategy that Hallar and Yaser deploy is the invocation of the historical connection between the Hispanic world and the Arab world in *al-Andalus* or Arab Spain. The two immigrant writers literally bring this Hispano-Arab connection to Argentina to establish a direct biological link with the gaucho – the Argentine *par excellence*. This formula for revising history continues in other ideas presented by Hallar and Yaser in these texts and elsewhere. In a 1978 article, Hallar purports that the tango, the cultural product that most symbolizes Argentina, has its origins in Arab Spain. In Yaser's *Herencia* and *Fenicios* and in another text by Hallar, *Descubrimiento de América por los árabes* (1959) [The Discovery of America by Arabs], both authors assert that it was in fact either Arabs or Phoenicians (the forebears of the Lebanese) who were the first to discover the New World. These writers conceive of their works, if not as accomplished scholarly studies, at least as studies that open the door to a much-needed revision of history.

I would like to put aside any judgment of the historical validity of their claims and read their works as narratives, perhaps alternative histories.<sup>7</sup> My purpose in examining their works, with a focus on Hallar's writings on the gaucho, is to investigate the rhetoric that they use in making their claims, the motives that might propel such insistence on inserting Arabs into Argentine history, and the discursive relationship between these Arab Argentine texts and those of Sarmiento and Lugones. Looking at how Arab Argentines try to connect themselves to national discourses and thus insert themselves into the Argentine national community sheds light not only on the construction of immigrant subjectivities, but also on the claims that underlie nationalisms and shape national subjects both in Argentina and their Arab homelands.

Yaser and Hallar consciously present their works as alternative histories. At the beginning of *Herencia*, Yaser says in reference to Arab civilization: 'In the captivating epic of the discovery of America, as with the ethnic and cultural formation of the American peoples, the recording of the participation of one important and genuine civilization, considered the first of civilizations, has been unjustly omitted' (1979: 1). Likewise, in Hallar's introduction to *Descubrimiento*, he states that he wrote his book 'with the object of rousing historians from their slumber, of which we partake, in this issue which is so relevant and of vital importance for the better understanding of the American and Arab peoples' (1959: 11). In the epilogue he expresses this idea with more pointed criticism of historians to date. He says that with *Descubrimiento* he is certain 'to have fulfilled an unpostponable duty toward a people whom historians, aside from rare exceptions, have tried to silence, undermine, and sometimes, ignore their transcendental movement in the history of humankind' (1959: 125). With these narratives of a historical Arab presence in Argentina, Hallar and Yaser are able to make a space, however small, for themselves in Argentina. They are able to assert, as Hallar puts it, that 'The Arab is here incognito, diluted, unrecognized, but he is here' (1959: 11).

Although Yaser, focusing more on the Phoenician discovery of the Americas, devotes only short sections of his works to the gaucho question, Hallar dedicates all of *El gaucho* to presenting an alternative narrative about this figure. The text consists of revisionary and oppositional, albeit often convoluted, conceptions of gauchos and of the ethnic origins of both Arabs and Argentines. From the start of his book Hallar offers a picture of the gaucho that diverges in certain ways from this Argentine figure's established image. Immediately after emphasizing the centrality of the gaucho to Argentine character and virtue, Hallar presents a portrait of the gaucho as a figure of paradoxical origins: 'Nobody's son. Stellar figure of our pampas. Indomitable, rebellious, ferocious, generous and free, he tore down cowardliness, avarice, and slavery. He founded a country in war and knew how to perpetuate it in peace' (1962: 3). On the one hand, this

romantic portrayal of the gaucho establishes him as an orphan, someone who has nobody's support, but who also owes his greatness to no one. Yet, on the other hand, Hallar is stating in this work that the gaucho is the son of Arabs.

This apparent contradiction is addressed in the next paragraph: 'He did not belong to any race and was the amalgam of all stocks; rather, he was a social class, with those preceding attributes affirming, without fear of equivocation, his great Arab originality' (1962: 3). Here Hallar plays up the proverbial independence of the gaucho and not only replaces his Spanish and Amerindian origins with Arab and Amerindian heritage, but also suggests that, in fact, it is not race that is at issue here, but social status as an outsider. In this way, he creates a figure who is at once marginalized – 'nobody's son', and the son of Arabs in his greatest qualities. We could go so far as to say that this gaucho is like Hallar, the Muslim immigrant's son; in the eyes of *criollo* culture Hallar is no one's son, yet he insists that he is also someone important's son.

In a passage soon after this one Hallar redefines the identity of the prototypical Arab such that the Arab forebear of the gaucho is not a threatening Other, but rather, more Spanish than even a Spanish king. Hallar reworks the identity of perhaps the most famous Moor in Spanish history, Boabdil (Abu 'Abd Allah), in opposition to Carlos V, based on what his readers already know about them:

The reader must of course know that this king was a native of Belgium and did not know one bit of Spanish. Therefore, more Spanish than he was Boabdil, the last Granadan monarch of Arab Spain whose ancestors for centuries were buried all over the land of Andalusia. (Hallar, 1962: 4)

The effort to make Arabs more Spanish, or at least less different from the Spanish, becomes prominent in *El gaucho*. Yet Hallar must not only assert the greatness of Arabs, but also insist that they are not a threat to a nation that prides itself in being the most European of Latin America. It seems that, in order to do so, he must address the issues of race and 'whiteness'.

Historically, gauchos often were, and often were thought of as, *mestizos* (part indigenous and part Spanish).<sup>8</sup> It is interesting, then, that in Hallar's account Arabs are paired off with indigenous women as the progenitors of the gaucho. This version of the origins of the gaucho places Arabs in the position of the white element that is mixed with the Other. Yet, at the same time, the Spanish *Leyes de Indias*, which forbade Christians from having sexual relations with the indigenous peoples, and which Hallar cites as corroboration of his thesis, do not apply to Arabs because of their difference from Spaniards. In effect, it is Arabs' very difference that allowed them to create the gaucho. This positioning of Arabs delineates a nuanced identity that is at once non-Christian but white, different but the same.



Throughout *El gaucho* Hallar continues to emphasize not only the non-European whiteness of Arabs, but also the need to celebrate racial mixture and the *mestizo*. Hallar makes a point of mentioning the mixed race of a famous gaucho, Sargento Cabral, as well as the revered Nicaraguan *modernista* poet Rubén Darío (1962: 15, 17). Hallar even goes so far as to speak of the need to be proud of Argentina's racial mixture, including indigenous and African blood: 'We are, save rare exceptions, a mish-mash of *Arabo-hispanics*, blacks, and Indians, in the historical initiation of South and Central America. A new race which should move us to be proud of such a remarkable conglomeration' (1962: 46; my emphasis). In this way he counters the commonly held notion that Argentina is a Latin American nation of almost purely European descent. What might motivate him to express an opinion that runs so contrary to mainstream Argentine notions of national identity?

In part, this interest in highlighting the *mestizaje* in Argentina might be a way of creating space for all different types of peoples, including immigrants whose whiteness is not firmly established. If Argentines were already a mixed race before the influx of immigrants, then the new immigrants, whether European or not, could not possibly taint the national stock. The emphasis Hallar places on *mestizaje* in Argentina might also be linked to Hallar's interest in characterizing the Spaniards and Moors as a fused people. At one point, Hallar directly counters the statement made by the historian Carmelo Bonet that there were many different *razas* [ethnic groups] in Argentina at the time of independence from Spain. What Hallar argues is that there were '*Moorish-Andalusians*, Indians, and blacks' (1962: 38; my emphasis) at that time and that it was not until later with the immigration wave that others arrived in Argentina. What is of importance here is that Hallar takes opposition to Bonet's opinion as an opportunity both to insert Arabs in early Argentine history and to have their presence be part and parcel of the Spanish Andalusian presence. Later in his text, when referring to differences in racial make-up between North and South America, Hallar quotes prominent Argentine sociologist José Ingenieros to qualify the European element in Latin America as 'racially mixed with Arabs' (1962: 41, 42).

This portrayal of Spaniards and Moors as a combined racial group could serve to further bolster the idea that Arabs are a white people. This is a point that Hallar takes care to emphasize as he discusses the racial/ethnic make-up of Argentina after the onset of the great wave of immigration. Yet the passage becomes rather convoluted as he tries to establish both that Arab immigrants intermarried a great deal with indigenous peoples, thus helping to 'whiten' Argentina, and that the 'whiteness' of Argentina is limited. Hallar refers to the project of 'whitening' Argentina, which was promulgated by the 19th-century liberal Argentine elite, Sarmiento among them, and claims that the only immigrant groups who mixed with natives were

Spaniards, Italians and Arabs. Making this claim positions Arab immigrants as one of the few immigrant groups who truly helped to further the founding fathers' plan to whiten the race and improve the national stock through immigration.

Nevertheless, Hallar then uses this claim as counterevidence against Bonet's belief that Argentina 'is becoming whiter' and that one can already see light eyes and blond hair all over the country (1962: 38). Thus, directly after touting Arab participation in the whitening of Argentine stock, Hallar limits the degree to which this whitening was successful. What begins to emerge in the text, however, are the two different types of 'whiteness' with which the founding fathers of the Generation of 1837 themselves operated: the Mediterranean white versus the 'whiter than white' blond, blue-eyed Northern European white. One of the main ways in which the concern for the racial make-up of Argentina manifested itself early on in Argentine history was precisely the mid-19th-century intellectuals' call for immigrants, and specifically Northern European immigrants. (Although these intellectuals themselves were of Spanish descent, they considered Iberians to be of inferior stock.) The impetus behind this project was the desire to populate – to make productive – Argentina's vast rangelands and agricultural zones in the interior; concomitantly, the remaining indigenous peoples would be absorbed into the national body, and *mestizos* and *criollos* would be counterbalanced with 'superior' Northern European stock. The Generation of 1837's immigration project, however, did not come to fruition as its promoters had believed it would. Rather than mostly Northern European immigrants, it was mostly Mediterraneans and Eastern Europeans who arrived; and rather than populating the interior, most immigrants stayed in Buenos Aires.

In *El gaucho* Hallar presents the immigrant influx in a very particular way. He argues that although the majority group in the Argentine population shifted in the mid-1800s from non-whites (blacks, *mulatos*, natives or *mestizos*) to whites because of the immigrant wave, these whites 'were not all blonds and neither were they all Europeans' (1962: 40). He offers a list of different immigrant groups registered in the 1916 census, among them the Syro-Lebanese, and repeats: 'not all were blond nor were all European' (1962: 40). Through this splitting of the terms 'white' and 'European' Hallar redefines the term 'white' for his own inclusion in that category. However, to claim whiteness for Arabs through their Spanish connection, and whiteness for Mediterranean peoples in general, Hallar must contend with the stance of the Argentine founding fathers toward Mediterraneans.

Hallar states that he does not agree with the low opinion of Iberian stock held by 'Argentine sociologists' and founding fathers such as Sarmiento and Juan Bautista Alberdi: 'We lament having to differ with many Argentine sociologists with respect to our national type, for they uphold the definitive superiority of the Argentine variety of non-peninsular European races'

(1962: 41). He discredits Sarmiento and Alberdi's preference of Anglo-Saxons by saying that 'today it is evident and proven that Anglo-Saxons do not mix with other racial stocks, despite they themselves being an accumulation of foreigners' (1962: 41). Here Hallar relativizes racial mixture such that even the supposedly pure Anglo-Saxons are '*mestizos*'. Then Hallar takes his argument on yet another turn by pointing to the idea that Anglo-Saxon peoples no longer mixed with other racial groups. Thus, unlike Arab immigrants, they would have been useless to the project of creating an overall whiter Argentina, albeit one that is not blond.

Throughout the twists and turns in Hallar's argumentation we see that he is manipulating Argentine notions of racial purity and patriotic miscegenation for the purpose of bolstering the position of Arab immigrants to Argentina from numerous, and often contradictory, angles. He undoes fear of ruining a pre-existing racial purity, makes Arabs more white and European, redefines the term 'white' so that it need not mean European and says that Arab immigrants helped to 'whiten' Argentina. *El gaucho*, therefore, can be understood as an attempt at shoring up the position of Arabs in Argentina through various entry points into the ideologically charged issue of race that has played a major role in Argentine identity formation.

With the arrival in Argentina of millions of Spaniards, Italians, Eastern European Jews and Syro-Lebanese, concerns about ethnicity only intensified. By the mid-1890s, the most recent in a series of economic crises was over and modernization had become palpable in Argentina. None the less, this period also saw the growth of intense class conflict which largely pitted the old Argentine elite against immigrant laborers. Thus the plans for the development, and 'civilization', of Argentina through immigration resulted in tensions between the *criollo viejo* – the old creole elite – and immigrants. A capital city teeming with poor immigrants (many of whom were demanding workers' rights), together with modernization and the rise of a *nouveau riche* class, created in the Argentine elite a climate of fear about foreignness and materialism, as well as a nostalgia for the countryside, lost values and pre-immigrant Argentina.

Once the cultural nationalist movement that arose at that time was under way, the positions of immigrants and gauchos had shifted to such an extent that, rather than immigrants being the element of civilization that would tame 'barbarian' gaucho culture, the gaucho was invoked as the true Argentine who would keep the barbarous immigrants at bay. Turning the gaucho into a revered icon was part of intellectuals' search for a historically rooted national culture that would contravene rising mercantilism with more enduring values, and counter the immigrant onslaught with a strong autochthonous tradition.

As mentioned earlier, one feature of this nationalist xenophobia was the targeting of Semitic immigrants – whether Eastern European Jews, Christian Arabs, Muslim Arabs or Arab Jews – as the most undesirable of immigrants.<sup>9</sup>

This anti-Arab and anti-Jewish sentiment has continued into the present, albeit in more subtle forms. Hallar and Yaser's writings, then, must be read in light of this socio-historical context. By expounding on the Arab heritage of the gaucho, they attempt to maneuver around the whole issue of the great wave of immigration. The *gaucho-moro* allows them to establish a pre-immigration Arab presence and thereby disassociate themselves from the negative image of the Semitic immigrant.

One of the conceptual frameworks that Hallar and Yaser use to support their argument about the Arab heredity of the gaucho comes out of the positivist understanding of human character and cultural formation that was part of the Generation of 1837's desire for immigration. The 19th-century project of literally creating a particular type of national body arose out of positivist scientific theories which arrived from Europe at that time. The biological and geographic determinism that are the hallmarks of positivist conceptions of human nature are strongly evidenced in Sarmiento's writings and those of Lugones. Hallar makes some references to similarities between gauchos and Arabs based on the similar geographic environments of the pampas and the deserts of the Arab world, emulating in this way much of Sarmiento's configuration of the gaucho-Arab connection. However, because Hallar's aim is to establish the biological link between gauchos and Arabs, he tends more toward the biological determinism of inherited character and atavisms in which Lugones' *El payador* is steeped. What relationship could be stronger than the biological one that binds together both Spaniards and Arabs and Arabs and gauchos? For this reason, throughout *El gaucho*, as well as in Yaser's treatment of the gaucho, similarities between gauchos and Arabs are attributed to their common lineage. Moreover, the principal ways in which these Arab Argentine writers support the *gaucho-moro* narrative are also methods of creating additional direct links between Arab culture and those people and things that are considered most 'authentically' Argentine: the Spanish language, the word 'gaucho' itself and distinguished *criollo* intellectuals such as Sarmiento and Lugones.

In addition to legitimating their claims about the Arabs' role in New World history through biological determinism, Hallar and Yaser make use of the linguistic influence of Arabic on Spanish. Hallar and Yaser refer to the lasting linguistic hegemony of Arabic in Spain as a way of emphasizing the greatness of Arab culture and its impact on Spain and the Hispanophone world. Both authors seem to take pleasure in listing many of the large numbers of Spanish words that come from Arabic.

The tour de force, however, is Hallar's insertion of Arabic into the uncertainty surrounding the word 'gaucho'. The etymology of this term remains very unclear, with, as Shumway notes, up to 38 different theories about the origins of the word. The theories run from a Gallic origin connoting 'outlaw', to an indigenous American origin meaning 'orphan'. 'River Plate intellectuals continue arguing over the "true" meaning of the term' in a

debate that insists on finding a single origin and meaning (Shumway 1991: 69). Hallar and later Yaser, who follows his lead, try to take advantage of this ambiguity, this gap where no stable knowledge has been established, to further claims about the Arab heredity of the gaucho. Although Hallar makes use of this contested space, in which there is no fixed origin or meaning, as an opportunity to create his own meaning, he goes so far as to present not one but several Arabic etymologies for the word 'gaucho' (1962: 7–9). This absurd overabundance can be read as Hallar's attempt to fill up the space of unfixed meaning and thus stabilize it in accordance with his theory, even if it is by means of presenting etymologically unrelated words as being somehow simultaneously the root of one single word.

Although Hallar also uses his knowledge of Arabic to access some Arabic-language documents related to Sarmiento's trip to Algeria, most of his support of his thesis comes not from language but from figures such as Sarmiento. Throughout Hallar's *El gaucho*, as well as Yaser's *Fenicios*, prominent Argentine writers – Sarmiento, Lugones and others – are referred to and quoted extensively as part of the documentation of the Arab origin of the gaucho. Even the works by Sarmiento that are considered more literary than historical – that is, *Facundo*, *Viajes* and *Recuerdos de provincia* (1952[1850]) – are used by the two Arab Argentine writers as factual proof for their arguments. In this way, Sarmiento and Lugones' invocations of the Arab as a means to delineate a specifically Argentine identity are in turn used by Arab immigrants, those left out of this national identity, to stake a claim for their central place in Argentine culture.

Hallar and Yaser take many of the references to the Orient found in Sarmiento and Lugones' writings at face value and use them to corroborate a thesis about the gaucho that places Arabs at the heart of that which is Argentine. Hallar also ventures further afield than Sarmiento's most significant texts and hunts up quotes which, on the one hand, illustrate perfectly Sarmiento's interest in the figure of the Arab, and, on the other hand, play right into Hallar's argumentation. For instance: "The Chilean," observes Sarmiento, "is not similar to the Argentine, who is more Arab than Spanish" (1962: 13). Here we see that the nation-building fictions that Sarmiento creates are taken up by Hallar, at least ostensibly, as fact. Hallar then uses these fictional facts in order to build a valued position for Arab immigrants in Argentina.

The 'facts' that Hallar and Yaser glean and the lengths to which they take them become preposterous; yet, on another level, their works are taking advantage of the already blurred lines between the imaginary and the factual in the work of Sarmiento, and to a lesser extent Lugones. Sarmiento's *Facundo* is a work of vaguely defined genre; it lies somewhere between history, novel and biography. The places that Sarmiento describes in it – the pampas and the Arab World – are places he has yet to see; the nation over which he is puzzling has not yet defined its national borders. He somehow

writes non-fiction about the imaginary for the purpose of constituting that which is not yet a reality – the Argentine nation. Lugones similarly uses an amalgamation of historical fact and that which he imagines to write the history of a largely fictional national tradition. He delineates a historical context about literature (the gaucho ballad *Martín Fierro*) in an effort to establish the national history of Argentina.

Part of the ambiguity in Sarmiento's texts, and to a certain extent in those of Lugones, comes from the difficulty in knowing when references to the Orient are sheer rhetoric and metaphor, and when they are meant as fact-based reality. Hallar and Yaser take this ambiguity and completely elide distinctions between metaphor or rhetoric and factual reality. Using this ambiguous realm of metaphors about the Arab and hearkening back to documented, historical contact with Arabs, they write themselves into the historical fictions or fictional histories of Argentina. In an attempt to undo the tensions between the old Argentine *criollos* and particularly unwanted immigrants, Hallar and Yaser insert themselves into the nation's need to establish a history for itself. That is, they write themselves into pre-immigratory Argentina and attempt to affiliate themselves with the *criollo*. Thus, they can be seen as taking advantage (unwittingly or not) of the ambiguity between fiction and history which is part of Sarmiento and Lugones' works in order to negotiate their identities as Arab Argentines.

None the less, in using literature to rewrite history and playing with the hazy line between the two, the textual practices of the two Arab Argentine writers can be read as self-essentializing. A large part of Hallar and Yaser's support for their statements about Arab culture comes from the Orientalist literary and historical texts written by Sarmiento and Lugones, as well as those of classic European Orientalists. In light of this, their texts could be termed 'auto-Orientalist'. For example, Hallar describes the 'Spirituality' of the gaucho and his Arab forebear by writing: 'The gaucho is also a poet. Sad and contemplative like the Arab, who speaks in verse and improvises ballads.' He then substantiates this by quoting Lugones' *El payador* (1962: 16). Hallar presents stereotypical portraits of the Orient – here the melancholic Arab speaking in verse – based on Euro-Argentines' depictions of Arabs, and in that way he himself participates in Orientalist practice.

It was Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) that first pointed to knowledge about the Orient as a means to attain power over it and to position Self against exotic Other. However, his work does not account for more heterogeneous forms of orientalism,<sup>10</sup> such as those that arise from the relationship between creole colonials of Spanish descent and the Arab world. The orientalisms of not only *criollo* Argentines, but also those of Arab descent, call for a more fluid, context-based notion of essentialization of the Orient. Lisa Lowe, in her study of French and British orientalisms, argues for a new conception of orientalism in which images and figures of an Oriental Other are not necessarily unified in meaning, reference or mode of expression, but are

shaped by cultural context (1991: ix). Lowe does this in order to allow for the existence of interventions and resistances to such controlling discourses.

I would like to take Lowe's formulation even further, and thereby make it even more suitable to the discursive practices of postcolonial and migratory contexts, by emphasizing the heterogeneous functions, and also sites, of orientalism. Not only is orientalism interconnected with many other discourses, but it takes place in diverse sites. This interplay of discourses is particularly salient in cultural locations of marked heterogeneity, such as Latin America. A more fluid and multiple, rather than binary, theorization of orientalism, in addition to allowing for the existence of interventions and resistances to controlling discourses, also allows for other subjectivities – subject positions outside of the strictly 'Oriental' or 'Occidental' which are involved in imagining, in their own ways, both the Orient and Europe, as well as their own cultural sites.

Hallar's orientalism, at another point in *El gaucho*, actually echoes that of Sarmiento in *Facundo*. Amid anecdotes about Facundo Quiroga and a region he frequented, Sarmiento asks: 'Do you think, by chance, that this description is plagiarized from the *Tales of The 1001 Nights* or other Oriental fairy tales?' (1979: 175). That which is fantastic and inconceivable is conceptualized by Sarmiento through the lens of 'the Orient'. This mechanism of comprehending the strange through the analogy or metaphor of the Oriental Other is used by Hallar as well. To illustrate gaucho and Arab similarity Hallar presents stories about incredible valor and honor taken from Argentine history and Arab history and then frames them as intelligible through the Orient. 'These authentic facts, culled from historical reality and which appear to have escaped from fantastic Oriental legends, were factual in all of their majesty, among peoples of one single root and of identical telluric and environmental formation' (1962: 36). In this passage, even more so than in Sarmiento's texts, the framing of gauchos by the Arab is also a framing of Arabs by the gaucho.

The fantastic tales of the East are a way to understand both Arab and gaucho reality. Although, on the one hand, this reduces Arabs to the representations of the *Tales of The 1001 Nights*, on the other hand, it puts the outlandishness of the Arab and the gaucho on a par. The Arab who seems so foreign can be understood through that which is, particularly by the time Hallar writes, most familiar and intrinsic to the definition of the Argentine national subject – the gaucho. Hallar uses his self-essentializing orientalism as a way to package Arabs for Argentine understanding. The ends, then, if they do not justify the means, temper and qualify them. The context and motivations behind Hallar and Yaser's reliance on quotations and rhetorical devices taken from Orientalists make it such that they participate in a specific sort of orientalism – one in which the reinscription of stereotypes and the reframing of the Arab for an Argentine audience occur simultaneously.

In spite of Hallar and Yaser's orientalism, or perhaps because of its particular context, it is possible to view their texts as a sort of 'writing back' – an intervention and resistance. I understand their claims as arising out of the desire to legitimate their position as citizens of Arab descent in Argentina through a double-pronged rhetoric. On the one hand, they create an organic and primary relationship between themselves and the Americas. Hallar and Yaser not only invoke the historical connection between the Hispanic world and the Arab world, but they bring this connection to Argentina and avow a biological link with the gaucho. In doing so they point to an Arab-Argentine connection which pre-dates the immigrant wave and the very evidence they present to support this creates further connections between Arabs and those people and things that are most Argentine. On the other hand, Hallar and Yaser also speak to the presence of Arab immigrants in Argentina. By representing Arabs as white immigrants who did their part to help whiten Argentina and who have wholeheartedly adopted Argentina as their new homeland, they also counter negative images of Arab immigrants and their descendants. Writing of 'our pampas' and 'our gaucho' in Spanish is certainly a way of attesting to this. In this way, Hallar and Yaser insert themselves into Argentina's past and create a space for themselves in its present.

Hallar and Yaser's texts constitute a response not only to the anti-Arab immigrant sentiment around them, but to Sarmiento and Lugones' projects for Argentina – exclusionary nation-building projects that make use of the figure of the Arab gaucho. Hallar and Yaser insert themselves into a national culture through their rhetorical management of an icon that was developed first to establish a specifically Argentine character and then to shut out the immigrant population through this national character. In these Arab Argentines' version of the fictional history of gauchos, they use that which was meant to delegitimize immigrants as a means of legitimization.

Moreover, the presence of Orientalist essentialization in not only the texts written by Argentines of European descent, but also those by 'Orientals' themselves, makes it clear that essentialism is not only a discursive act carried out on an objectified 'Other', not simply a confining epistemology used to create the abject Other. Rather, as corroborated by the broader geographic and biological essentialization seen in these works, there is a phenomenon of self-essentialization that must be taken into account as both a discursive violence and a part of strategies of resistance. Self-essentialization exists alongside and even woven into efforts at counterrepresentation. The contradictory, double-edged discursive elaborations of Hallar and Yaser serve to remind us that, even in the midst of manipulating a figure (the Arab gaucho), there are reinscriptions of controlling discourses and/or barriers that cannot be transcended. In the same way that there is no pure or whole essential self, there is no unequivocal, unbounded discursive resistance.

During the past two decades Latin American studies has seen a movement toward reconceptualizing Latin American culture and literature as plural,



heterogeneous or multifaceted. Ironically, however, within this call for plurality – which has concerned itself primarily with the cultural production of popular classes, indigenous peoples, Afro-Hispanics and women – little attention has been paid to questions of how European discourses such as orientalism have come into play in Latin America, let alone how immigrants have participated in the cultural debates of Latin America. In the specific case of Argentina, both Arabs and immigrants have generally been reduced to circulating images and stereotypes. There is a need to heed these images and uncover the ways in which they function in Argentine culture, as well as a need to attend to the voices of the objects of these discourses. ‘Listening’ to the many languages and discourses that come together in the textual enunciations of the Arab/Argentine dialogue includes being attentive to reworkings of European essentialisms, self-essentialization and contestation and re-presentation in alternative narratives.

## Notes

- 1 Although the Spanish term *criollo* carries the potential for racial mixture, by virtue of birth in the Americas, it does not necessarily denote this. The term has a particular valence in Latin American cultural history where the *criollo* is first at odds with the colonial Spanish administration and then with immigrants.
- 2 For histories and sociological studies of the Syro-Lebanese migration to Argentina, see Klich (1992, 1993a, 1993b, 1995; Klich and Lesser, 1998) and Jozami (1987, 1993, 1996).
- 3 For details about these two surveys, see Klich, 1995: 142, n. 94.
- 4 On the discourse of history, see White (1973). On the methodologies of New Historicism, see Healy (1992) and Veaser (1989). Although I conceive of ‘literature’ and ‘history’ as only functionally distinguishable, I do use the terms at different points to designate either these functional roles, or the categories of writings commonly understood as imaginative fiction and historical fact. I trust that the context will clarify the use of the terms.
- 5 See Scheffold, 1993: 87, n. 304.
- 6 A third Arab Argentine, Julio Chajj, also refers to the connection between Arabs (specifically Bedouins) and *gauchos*, but sees it as an affinity that arises from geographic and social, rather than mainly biological, factors. In addition, Chajj points to similarities between *gauchos* and Syrian peasants. Chajj (1956) puts forth these ideas in his seven-page Spanish-language introduction to the Arabic translation of *Martín Fierro*. The Arabic-language introduction to the translation, written by the Argentine Orientalist Osvaldo Machado, makes no mention of Bedouins or Syrian peasants.
- 7 Some of their claims in fact may not be as far-fetched as they seem. In 1948 M. de Ornellas wrote about the Arab influence, via Portugal, on Brazilian

gauchos. The study's 3rd edition (1976) was published in conjunction with the Instituto Nacional do Livro, Ministerio da Educação e Cultura. Thus, the work was deemed to have scholarly credence by the Brazilian government's educational branch. There is no indication that Hallar or Yaser had any knowledge of de Ornellas' text.

- 8 There were also some gauchos who were mulato, or part Spanish and part African.
- 9 See Solberg (1970) on anti-immigrant sentiment and movements from 1890 to 1914.
- 10 I use the term 'orientalism' without capitalization in order to allow for the possibility of more than one form of this discursive, academic and/or institutional phenomenon, rather than a single hegemonic form. 'Orientalist' remains capitalized because it refers to one who studies 'the Orient', a geographic location of unclear and Eurocentric definition, which is none the less recognized as the object of Orientalist discourse.

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