In 1975, tango poet Héctor Negro wrote about “an invasion that began sometime in the 1950s and put an end to an entire lifestyle: at that point, Buenos Aires was dressed in a winter-like fashion, a grey city.” In 1975, meanwhile, Buenos Aires looked different because it had become “beautifully blue.” Negro illustrated the changing city lifestyles as an invasion of color, where blue replaced grey. The blue of the jeans, to Negro, marked a new lifestyle, developed by young people, that spread to transform the city. This article tells the story of that blue invasion by focusing on the social and cultural life story of a commodity. It reconstructs how, at different stages of its life story, the blue jean was commercialized, who wore it, and the meanings they attributed to the jeans. In addition, it explores the cultural representations of the blue jean and analyzes the debates it sparked in the public arena, which revolved around the “Americanization” of Argentina’s culture; the shifting understandings of gender and sexuality; and the changing youth identities the blue jean allegedly embodied.

Scholars who have studied youth of the 1960s and 1970s in Europe and the United States have often pointed out the importance of dressing practices in the making of youth cultures and subcultures. Scholars have analyzed, for example, the way English mods appropriated of Edwardian suits or the French blousons noire made use of leather items to develop identities and styles, and how these styles were later domesticated, or commodified. Ironically, however, only a few anecdotal accounts have been devoted to unraveling the meanings and uses of the blue jean by youth in the 1960s and 1970s. These studies have also focused on the birthplace of the jean, the United States. Jeans, which pervaded most youth cultures and subcultures, have been taken for granted.

As in most places in the West, the blue jean came to epitomize youth in 1960s and 1970s Argentina. The blue jean helped young people to cementing a sense of generational belonging at the same time that it served to registering the multiple differentiations that crossed by “youth” as a seemingly homogeneous category. As sociologist Fred Davis has asserted, dress acts as a visual metaphor for identity and for noting the culturally anchored ambivalences that resonate among and within identities. In 1960s and 1970s Argentina, the blue jean acted as a prime marker of a youth identity as separate and eventually opposed to an “adult” identity and fashion. Indeed, jeans were the first dress item to be worn exclusively by young men and women, who increasingly dressed—and thought, and behaved—differently from the older generation. Yet the blue jean also served to signal and reinforce class distinctions and gender differences among young people. Jeans styles, brands, and “nationalities”—whether imports or locally produced—became ways of elaborating intra-generational differences. By the mid 1970s, there was a “blue-jean generation,” although young people neither wore the same jeans nor endowed them with the same meanings.
Writing the life story of the blue jean not only involves addressing the making of youth in 1960s and 1970s Argentina but also, in doing so, shedding new light into the transformations of gender and sexuality that youth came to embody. The limited historiography on gender and sexuality in 1960s and 1970s Argentina has so far accounted for the prudent liberalization of sexual mores and practices as well as for the opening of new spaces and expectations for young women, especially from the urban middle classes. In this regard, by looking at the uses and meanings that young people made out of the blue jean, this article seeks to expand our understanding of the transformations in the performances and representations of masculinities, femininities, and eroticism in 1960s and 1970s Argentina, and to disentangle how those transformations intersected with class and political dynamics. I contend that the blue jean became a privileged object through which analyze those transformations in the realm of gender and sexuality, in which not only young people but also a wide spectrum of “adult” actors intervened, including state officers, the media, and the advertising industry.

In the process of “invading” Argentina, the blue jean underwent three life stages. By 1958, the time of its arrival in the country, the blue jean constituted a link in the chain of American goods, including comics and rock music. The advertising and uses of the blue jean were often coded and decoded using its American-ness at their reference point. Argentines soon baptized the blue jean as vaquero (cowboy) and the locally produced brands carried definite American names, such as “Far West.” At this initial stage, working-class young men were the vanguard among vaquero consumers. Through the adoption of this new dress item, they constructed and deployed alternative meanings of masculinity, which became the center of the first public controversies that surrounded jeans and those who wore it. Middle-class young men, for their part, wore blue jeans, not vaqueros: they sought out the imported American brands and, in doing so, constructed a way of signaling class and cultural distinctions among boys.

A second life stage of the blue jean in Argentina began in the late 1960s. Both middle- and working-class young women became prime blue-jean consumers. Young women developed new understandings of beauty, which included a profound redefinition of the ideals of feminine desirability. These new ideals soon became the lure of the blue jean as a commodity, since advertisers heavily relied on them to promote either the well-established local or the recently-arrived American brands. During the authoritarian regime led by Gen. Juan Carlos Onganía (1966–1970), however, young women in blue jeans sparked heated public debates. From the mayor of Buenos Aires City to sociologists and psychiatrists, Argentines discussed the supposed “over-sexualization” of public life and the perils of a unisex fashion to the blurring of gender roles. As women became blue-jean consumers, the local market expanded.

By the early 1970s, the blue jean had “invaded” Argentina. The third and final stage of the life story that this article analyzes was characterized by still another shift in the uses young people made of the blue jean. Many members of the “blue-jean generation” actively engaged in radical politics and committed themselves to political militancy in party, student, and neighborhood organizations they contributed to create. Politicized young women and men made of the blue jean the anti-fashion item par excellence, almost a “uniform for struggling.”
Between 1971 and 1974 almost no sphere of social and cultural life remained untouched by the politicization process, including fashion and the relation between American mass culture and youth consumption.

The Vaqueros are for Young Men

On September 1, 1958, the most widely-read newspaper in Argentina carried a full-page advertisement. All in capitals, in a bold font, the ad announced that “Far West has arrived.” The ad stated that the “authentic vaquero” was a “joyful, resistant” item and pedagogically informed its readers that it could be worn “at home, to go to the club, and even to go to work.” A drawing of jumping, doubtlessly masculine legs with rolled-up Vaqueros dominated the ad, conveying a sense of dynamism and youthfulness. The ad clearly targeted the recently-arrived vaqueros to working- and middle-class young men inasmuch as it emphasized still another trait of the new item: it was cheap. Until the mid 1960s, the Far West brand was crucial to the life story of the blue jeans in Argentina, dubbed “vaqueros.” The vaqueros became the center of the initial controversies on youth masculinities and supposed problematic sexuality as well as on the Americanization of Argentina’s culture.

Although promoted as an American good and endowed with an obvious American label, the Far West vaqueros were locally produced by the Fábrica Argentina de Alpargatas. One of the largest textile factories in Argentina, the company produced the slipper-like, rustic shoes—alpargatas—worn by rural workers. In the early 1950s, perhaps to emulate the original uses of the blue jean in the United States, Alpargatas began to produce denim fabric in a failed attempt to provide rural workers with pants. A chance to use the denim appeared in the mid 1950s, when a series of American “teen” movies arrived in Argentina and showed the potentials of creating and exploiting a market other than rural workers. In re-launching the denim pants, Alpargatas had the invaluable support of the local representatives of the oldest advertising agency in the United States, John Walter Thompson (JWT). Beginning in 1957, JWT’s representatives helped Alpargatas’ executives to choose a label with American resonances and to target a new market: young men.

In the late 1950s, working- and middle-class young men’s clothing largely replicated their parents’ dress code. As in many other western countries, boys experienced a crucial rite of passage to adulthood when they achieved the “right” to wear long pants, preferably suits. Although some progressive psychologists began to advise parents that the rite needed to be re-thought in an era when boys wanted to be adolescents before becoming adults, the tradition persisted. Through the rite of passage, families invested boys with the attributes of a respectable masculinity: sobriety, seriousness, and responsibility—or the cornerstones for building disciplined work habits and responsible family behavior. The new men bought their clothes in the same retail stores their parents did. One of these stores, Casa Muñoz, advertised its collections by playing on the words “suit” and “both,” which are the same in Spanish, ambos. An ad that promoted the 1958 fall collection, for instance, stated “For ambos (both), the best ambos (suits).” Young men could only pick among different fabrics: the suit styles and colors were the same for ambos, father and son.
Yet those young men in suits made their own choices in a variety of other arenas, particularly entertainment. By the late 1950s, movie going was the favorite activity of both boys and girls, ranking over sports and dancing. A survey conducted between 1957 and 1959 determined that working- and lower-middle- class teenagers, who for the most part did not have a television set at their homes, attended movies twice a week. While girls preferred American and Italian dramas, boys opted for Westerns and for "what Americans call teenager movies, like Rebel Without a Cause or the many that include rock music." Young people enthusiastically embraced rock movies: they danced in the movie theatres and eventually broke seats. In one of those spectacles at a popular movie theatre, a group of young men dressed in grey suits carried a banner that read "The Argentine Youth is with Bill Haley"—Bill Haley being on the screen. The entire situation, as portrayed by the numerous pictures reproduced by the fanzine Antena, unravels ambivalence: on the one hand, young men asserted their "youthfulness" by appropriating of American icons of youth culture; on the other hand, they still were inserted into a dress code that spoke of an adult masculinity whose values of sobriety and seriousness they did not seem to fully endorse. The vaqueros helped solve that ambivalence of generation and masculinity.

Young men embraced vaqueros as enthusiastically as rock movies and music. Along with rock-related goods, working-class young men were the vanguard among vaquero wearers. Carlos, a former working-class youth from Lanús, a neighborhood in the Greater Buenos Aires area, still remembered when and how he purchased his first vaqueros: "I was fifteen or sixteen," Carlos said, "and I was paid 250 pesos per week as an apprentice in Campomar [a local textile factory], so I gave 150 pesos to my family, kept 70 as pocket money, and only could save 30 per week. A vaquero was, I don't remember exactly, but almost 350 or 400 pesos. I didn't go to the movies or to soccer matches in two months, but I had my vaqueros at the end." His detailed memoirs reveal that Carlos is still proud of having purchased his first Far West as he did, by saving from his meager salary as an apprentice. When I asked why he put so much effort in getting those vaqueros, Carlos simply said "Think I only had those old grey pants ... on the vaqueros you felt as if you were a new person."

For many working-class young men, like Carlos, the vaqueros conveyed a sense of total renewal. They wore vaqueros to go to work, to dance clubs, to the movies, or to simply hang around. They became their "second skins," as Carlos put it. Yet those "second skins" were anything but natural. Since dress constitutes a situated bodily practice, wearing vaqueros most of the time involved also making a symbolic statement that rested upon a new relationship with their bodies. Working-class young men further exhibited their bodies and seemingly proudly exposed their "virile" strength. As a sociologist commented on while interviewing "a gang" in an industrial suburb of Buenos Aires, "they were all in their vaqueros, showing themselves to the girls, under the disapproval of their mothers and fathers." The vaqueros offered working-class young men a tool to both assert their "youthfulness" and challenge, at a practical level, the values of sobriety and seriousness attached to the hegemonic masculinity, as expressed in the former intergenerational dress code.

The working-class young men's practical challenges to the values of the hege-
monic masculinity were not uncontested. A magazine addressed to working- and lower-middle class women, for instance, received several letters from mothers who complained about their vaquero-consumer sons' behaviors. A woman referred to the case of her “irresponsible, unruly son,” who only thought of “spending money he doesn’t have to purchase his little vaqueros.” Likewise, in a panel organized in a working-class neighborhood, a group of parents complained that “their boys” showed an increasing disrespect for parental authority; were incapable of saving money because “wasted each peso they have” in dance halls; and dressed in “those ugly, tightened vaqueros.” Exhibitionist, joyful, irresponsible: working-class vaquero consumers reversed each of the values embedded into a respectable, hegemonic notion of masculinity. As in other countries in the West on the eve of the 1960s, the vaqueros seemed to metonymically involve the notion of disorder, in gender and other terms.

Contemporary representations of vaquero consumers helped expand public anxieties by attributing them an overt, unlimited, or problematic sexuality. Popular film *La patota* (The Gang), for instance, tells the story of a young woman who, after graduating as a teacher of philosophy, is appointed at a night school in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, the land of an all-vaquero-consumer gang. The macho-like youths rape the teacher, who ultimately forgives and redeems them. To receiving that redemption the gang changes vaqueros for grey suits and promises the teacher to become “responsible.” Another series of representations linked vaquero consumption to male homosexuality. One of the first surveys on the gay scene in Buenos Aires, for instance, stated that “homosexuals assume the same styles that our contemporary irascible youths [jóvenes iracundos], blue jeans and white shirts, to the point that it is extremely hard to distinguish each other.” Other interpretations stemmed from intellectual milieus. Leftist writer David Viñas, for example, coined the expression “Marlon Brando category” to refer to working-class boys who hanged around Buenos Aires, “tightening and tightening their *blueyins* [blue jeans], waiting for selling their asses to the best payer.” The “Brando category” boys that exhibited their bodies to conquest other men constituted, in Viñas’ representation, plebeian “sexual deviants,” who contributed to bring the moral hypocrisy of a bourgeois, respectable society to the surface.

While vaquero consumers kindled anxieties over the changing understandings of masculinity and sexuality, they also provoked fears about the Americanization of Argentina’s culture and the “imperialist menace” on the younger generation of workers. The Communist Youth Federation, the largest youth political organization in the early 1960s, produced a pamphlet that explained its readers how the daily life of “a young worker” was ruled by “something named imperialism.” Thus, “the young worker turns the light on and General Electric makes a profit; brushes his teeth and Colgate makes a profit. Strange businessmen have decided that our young worker will wear blue jeans, and so he does.” In the frame of the mounting Cold War, Communist activists feared the possible effects that American goods could achieve on young workers’ “consciousness.” Such an “imperialist invasion” would instill consumerism and conformism as the prime values among young workers, to whom they conceived of as the ultimate target of their political activity. Yet ironically, when the pamphlet used to state the actual big American firm that profited from “our young worker,” it could not...
list any attached to the "strange businessmen" that obliged him to wear jeans: in 1962 there were only Argentine factories producing vaqueros to serve the local market.29

By 1964, however, American brands began to make their way into Argentina and the local market expanded by incorporating new consumers. Lee and Levi's became a particular sort of luxury commodities: they were imported in small lots, sold on the most exclusive shopping streets, and their prices were four times that of the local brands.30 The consumption of Levi's or Lee required expertise, both to find the jeans and to identify their authenticity. Middle-class young people developed that expertise and could afford imported brands. As the media reported, middle-class youths had increased their consumption: stereo sets, music records, soft drinks, for example, were consistently targeted to the "modern adolescent." Advertising agencies recognized the potential of the young consumer and called for carrying out qualified surveys to determine their tastes and choices.32 In terms of clothing, nevertheless, their choices were already obvious: middle-class young men were expert "hunters" of Lee and Levi's. A fifteen-year-old boy, for instance, reported that he regularly checked the arrival of new "models" in a store whose name he refused to reveal to "keeping the exclusivity." When asked how he distinguished an imported jean he just answered "You have to look at the rivets, and of course at the side pockets."33

Alpargatas's executives reacted against the apparent impossibility of the "national" brand to reach an extended market of blue jean consumers. Although proud of having sold 902,405 pairs of Far West during the first semester of 1966, Alpargatas asked its marketing and advertising agency, JWT, to conduct a survey to determine how to appeal to the blue-jean consumers that had never purchased a pair. JWT's representatives performed interviews with 500 middle- and upper-middle class young men. When asked their opinions on blue jean preferences, most judged the local vaqueros as "excessively blue, rustic, and tightened" when compared with the "faded-blue, finely-terminated, and loose-fitted" Lee and Levi's.34 Targeting that segment, depicted as composed of "young men fond of fashionable night clubs and eager to succeed in life," Alpargatas launched a second brand, Super Far West. Alpargatas paid for an unusually intense and original advertising campaign, based on minimalist slogans and drawings of sexy women "to be shocked" by wearing the new Super Far West.35 Despite the advertising campaign, Super Far West was a fiasco: middle and upper-middle class young men did not even go to the retail stores to try the new brand.36

To middle-class young men, wearing American brands of blue jeans involved signaling their distinction. Through expert-like insights into fabrics, color, and fittings, middle-class young men went far beyond technicalities: they appealed to aesthetic ideas of elegance and "good taste." When middle-class young men did not even try vaqueros, they made apparent that, as noted by Pierre Bourdieu, "Tastes are perhaps distastes, or the visceral intolerance of the taste of others." Middle-class young men projected onto the vaqueros their intolerance of working-class boys' tastes and elaborated a way of remarking their distinction. Wearing Levi's or Lee meant shaping a class-based, culturally-inflected distinction. In doing so, middle-class young men also rejected the alternative masculinity deployed by working-class vaquero consumers, as especially coded into the "tight" versus "loose-fitting" controversy. Representations of middle-class con-
sumers of the imported brands, in this regard, point to their construction of an understanding of masculinity associated with youthful "coolness," far from the macho-like imagery supposedly linked to the vaquero wearers. As many Latin Americans before and after them, middle-class young men in 1960s Argentina invested imports with attributes related to authenticity and cultural renewal. Wearing an "authentic" American blue jean involved being unequivocally included into an international youth culture, while neglecting that belonging to their generational peers that "only" wore national vaqueros. In this regard, the experience of a peripheral setting, like Argentina, helps rethink an enduring consensus among scholars of 1960s youth. By studying European youth, scholars have suggested that what was new and seen as "typically American" in the 1950s—namely rock music and jeans—came the repertoire of an internationalized youth culture in the 1960s. When looking at the life story of the blue jean in Argentina, that statement could be only partially endorsed. Young men indeed adopted and adapted the blue jean, albeit its connections with "America" had not blurred. Rather, the "authenticity" of an American blue jean became a potent marker to elaborating distinctions among young men.

Sexed, "Unisex:" Blue Jeans for Everyone

On the eve of the 1960s, and by contrast to young men, young women did have possibilities of differentiating their dress practices from the ones of previous generations of women. As feminine magazines increasingly noted, young women could pick among diverse fabrics, styles, and colors for their dresses, skirts, and blouses and thus "always have a joyful, chic, and modern youthful look." Some magazines began to include a brief section dubbed "designs for the young women," which carried designs taken from European fashion catalogues and added practical advice on how to make them at home. Further, pants began to make their way among young women. Perhaps expecting to find different opinions, Claudia magazine interviewed five men (a writer, a fashion designer, a "common man," a psychoanalyst, and a priest) to have their insights on "women in pants." To the journalist's surprise, they agreed upon pants were not "aesthetic" but "convenient" on some occasions and that were to be worn solely by young women.

Formal and informal dress codes, however, prevented young women from wearing pants, with the exception of some particular situations related to leisure activities. A strict formal dress code prohibited girls from wearing pants in high schools and also affected teachers at the primary school level, a profession chosen by many female university students. Working women were not supposed to wear pants either. Manuals for female job seekers explicitly advised not to attend a job interview on pants because "you will not be hired even in the humblest workshop." Yet young women who dared to wear blue jeans on other occasions knew their practice would be deemed a transgression. The oldest feminine magazine in Argentina, Para Ti, went as far as to produce a test to identify "extremely rebellious" young women and asked...
“Do you wear blue jeans regularly?” If the answer was positive, points were added to the troublesome profile. Also interviewed by Para Ti, girls between 16 and 18 confessed that they would love to wear blue jeans, but that their parents did not grant them permission.

In the second half of the 1960s, however, young women embraced blue jeans, and they did so in the framework of a total renewal of women's fashion marked worldwide by the arrival of the miniskirt. In August 1966, a month after the military coup d'état that imposed the so-called Argentine Revolution—an authoritarian-bureaucratic regime headed by Gen. Juan Carlos Onganía that outlawed political activities and harshly censored cultural expressions—only a few and exclusive stores sold miniskirts in Buenos Aires. The first consumers of the miniskirt were, for the most part, young women related to avant-garde aesthetic movements or to intellectualized milieus, headed by the students at the School of Philosophy and Literature at the University of Buenos Aires who were credited as the “initiators.” One year later, nevertheless, the miniskirt had reached even the most remote working-class neighborhoods in the metropolitan area. A survey conducted in July 1967 showed that, in the City of Buenos Aires and the Greater Buenos Aires area, 65 percent of young women aged between 14 and 25 had purchased at least one miniskirt in the past year. Some of the young women polled reckoned that they had felt somehow ashamed when wearing the miniskirt for the first time and had feared of awakening a wave of “flirtatious remarks” (piropos) and “lascivious gazes” from men while walking in the streets. Some of them compared that situation with the feelings they experienced when trying blue jeans for the first time.

In July 1967, a Lady Far West advertising campaign that included both blue jeans and miniskirts triggered a small scandal on the perils of the “over-sexualization” of the female body and, by extension, of public life. The ad showed two young women, one wearing a denim miniskirt and the other a denim pant, whose backs are turned to the viewer and whose bodies are naked from the waist above. In the week that followed the launching of the ad, several moral watchdog organizations, such as the Catholic-affiliated League of Mothers, sent letters to the Buenos Aires City Mayor to have the ad banned because, they argued, “it offends public morals.” Mayor Schettini, a representative of the most conservative wing within the administration of Gen. Onganía, obligingly agreed to ban the ad. Schettini had recently passed an Advertising Code that increased the penalties for ads that “damage public morals,” and applied it for the first time to the Lady Far West ad. The ad soon disappeared from billboards and periodicals, while the advertisers had their license temporarily removed.

The Mayor banned the ad but he could not prevent young women from wearing blue jeans. Yet, at one point, the Mayor and most of the “public opinion” coincided: blue jeans had an unusual “sex appeal.” That “sex appeal” constituted, in the late 1960s, the subject matter of opinion surveys. In one survey, a team compared the reactions that a young woman got while walking in Buenos Aires, once in a miniskirt and then in blue jeans. To the survey team, the result was plain: “She received three times more piropos and gazes when walking in blue jeans.” Two years latter, another survey confirmed those “findings,” this time by performing in-depth interviews with men aged 15 to 55. Most of the men agreed that they conceived of young women in pants, especially blue jeans,
as the most “sexy” in Buenos Aires and reckoned that they “often to very often” called out *piropos* to them in the streets.\textsuperscript{56}

Though the surveys were not serious, they contribute insights to the ways in which blue jeans served to channel new understandings of female sexuality and beauty in late 1960s Argentina. By largely wearing tight blue jeans, young women shifted what fashion theorists labeled “erogenous zone” from above the waist to below the waist.\textsuperscript{57} In doing so, young women further displayed their bodies, which they attempted to keep thinner. Not by accident, perhaps, the dissemination of the blue jean among young women coincided with the growth of dieting practices. Magazines began to carry practical advice to perform those practices and eventually young women wrote letters to complain on how difficult it was for them to fit the new ideals of beauty.\textsuperscript{58} Observers of daily life also noted the changing ideals and practices. Dr. Florencio Escardó, for instance, compared how young women looked in the early 1950s and how they looked in the late 1960s. He concluded that “now they are increasingly thinner. Young women in elegant streets and in humble neighborhoods alike show themselves more confident in their bodies, yet it takes them considerable effort.”\textsuperscript{59} Wearing blue jeans—and miniskirts—involved both constructing and meeting a new ideal of feminine beauty, which encompassed displaying new “erogenous zones.”

The discussions about jeans and the “over-sexualization” of public life intersected with a second set of preoccupations, which ironically revolved around the menace of “unisex” dress to the blurring of gender identities. Sociologist Julio Mafud, for instance, devoted a study to unraveling the “Argentine sexual revolution” apparently experienced by young women and men. One of the signs of such a revolution was the growing resemblance of young women and men, especially in the realm of dress, whereby women tended to emulate men “by wearing the same kind of blue jeans.”\textsuperscript{60} To Mafud, that resemblance involved both a promise to “level the sexes” and a risk of “forgetting who the man and the woman are,” and he asked women to be “prudent” and keep clear-cut gender barriers.\textsuperscript{61} Psychiatrist Isaac Lubchansky, for his part, asserted that the “ambiguity of dressing” was related to “the search for new styles, common to both sexes. Long hair and blue jeans are the symbols of the ‘unisex’ youth world.”\textsuperscript{62} Other accounts focused on how young women’s changing dress practices implied an “aggressive invasion” into a men’s world. Young men “counterattacked” by wearing long hair and eventually more colored clothes.\textsuperscript{63}

In contrast to the debates on how jeans “over-sexed” young women’s bodies, the discussions of the “unisex fashion” mainly addressed anxieties on masculinity and young men’s sexuality.\textsuperscript{64} At the most extreme level, in the late 1960s and within the frame of the authoritarian regime led by Gen. Onganía, the police forces raided bars and rock concerts and either imprisoned or scared young men with a “hippie” look, including blue jeans, colored shirts, and long hair.\textsuperscript{65} The imagery that informed those actions chained drug abuse and sexual deviancy and went as far as conceiving of “unisex” dress as a prime issue of national security because it prevented the police forces from identifying men from women.\textsuperscript{66} However, even progressive psychologists, like Dr. Eva Giberti, expressed concerns over the “unisex fashion”. While celebrating the “exhilarating youthful energy” displayed in a rock concert, Giberti warned her readers on the perils of the “little cross-dressing games” undertaken by rock fans and musicians. By
wearing long hair, colored shirts, and tight blue jeans, male rockers, she said, heightened "the natural sexual confusion of adolescents." Similar concerns were still voiced in 1970, when a survey on "unisex fashion" published by the popular magazine Siete Días awoke a flurry of letters to the editor, most of them pointing to the connections between blue jeans, long hair, and homosexuality.

In the early 1970s, when censorship relaxed, advertisements played with the "unisex" yet "sexy" characteristics of the blue jean. Instead of emphasizing the product itself, as the early 1960s Far West ads did, ads now focused on a "climate" around blue jean consumption whose representation rested upon the articulation of a desirable femininity. As art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau has noted in theorizing on the profound linkages between femininity and consumer culture "that the feminine image operates as a conduit and mirror of desire, reciprocally intensifying and reflecting the commodity's allure." Female "over-sexed" bodies, whose "erogenous zones" had shifted to below the waist, became the emblem of the blue jean, as well as its lure. Jean ads helped to eroticize the visual culture of early-1970s Argentina, perhaps constituting the first series of advertisements that relied so heavily on the overt display of young women's buttocks. Even though many ads showed mixed couples wearing the same models, female bodies were supposed to catch the viewer's eye and infused the sexed atmosphere purveyed by blue jean consumption. Ads included that atmosphere into a representation of a youthful world characterized by a relaxed, pleasant sociability. Dynamic, joyful, and especially sexy: advertisers competed to convey these attributes and attach them to blue jean consumption.

The most prevalent advertisers, Lee and Levi's, became prominent in the Argentine market. Lee sold its license to an Argentine textile factory in 1968 and Levi's opened its own factory in 1971. According to its advertising agency, Lee initially faced a dilemma: whether to hide that it was now a locally produced brand. Initially, advertisers kept the ambivalence and, in television spots, included a ballad in English with unrecognizable Argentine settings. Levi's, by contrast, widely publicized its arrival in Argentina by promising to combine the "best American quality designs" with the "best Argentine textile craft." While the imported Lee and Levi's had become "luxury commodities," now they were mass produced in situ, fully advertised, and available in most retail stores. In the process of their expansion, middle-class young men could not manipulate wearing a Levi's or Lee to elaborate class-based, culturally inflected distinctions, as had happened in the mid 1960s. Rather, by the early 1970s these brands shared the 60 percent of a market they had decisively contributed to expand: while in 1966 only 2 million pairs of blue jeans were produced and sold, in 1970 the figure jumped to 8 million and in 1972 to 15 million.

By the early 1970s, a "blue-jean generation" has emerged in Argentina. A market survey determined that, in May 1971, 90 percent of people aged from 13 to 25 had bought at least one pair of blue jeans during the first four months of the year. Young women and men, from both working- and middle-class backgrounds, had embraced the blue jeans. At that time, even traditional retail stores, such as Casa Muñoz, had incorporated the blue jean as a prime item in their stacks and hired a youthful staff to assist the growing youthful clientele, while Modart, another traditional store, opened a new locale entirely devoted to young people. The blue jean was pivotal to the shaping of youth market of
clothing in Argentina. It was also a crucial item for young people to forge a sense of generational belonging inasmuch as only youths wore jeans. Yet at the same time that a “blue-jean generation” became visible, many of its members fostered entirely new meanings out of the blue jean, which practically contested the ideals of a “dynamic, joyful, and sexy” youth that advertisers sought to convey.

Between Eros and Politics

In May 1969, a popular revolt in Cordoba province led by students and workers marked the political finale of Onganía’s regime and the beginning of an intense process of political radicalization, in which many members of the “blue-jean generation” actively engaged, either by participating in party, student, and neighborhood organizations or by supporting the ideals of national liberation or socialismo nacional.78 Between 1971 and 1974, the process of political radicalization reached its heights and no sphere of social and cultural life remained untouched. For example, Argentine fashion models created a union, which attempted to regulate their working conditions as well as discuss the role of fashion “in a changing society.”79 The head of the union and one of the most famous models in Argentina, Chunchuna Villafañe, was not only the “face” of Lady Far West ads but also a renowned militant within Left Peronism, who claimed that a “national and popular” government would erase the fashion system, which contradicted the principles of equality by fomenting consumerism.80 Yet the involvement of models in radical politics constituted only one venue of the politicization of the realm of fashion and dress practices. Perhaps most fundamentally, as they became involved in radical politics, young people also rearticulated their dress practices, including their uses of the blue jean.

Testimonies of young women who engaged in political activism reserved a paramount place for the changes in their dress practices. Mabel, for instance, recalled that in the late 1960s she used to buy fashion magazines and tried to follow their advices regarding dress and make-up. In the early 1970s, however, she began to work as a secretary and engaged as an activist in a student organization related to the Peronist Youth. “My days were endless,” Mabel recalled, “I did not have either the time or the desire to follow any fashion. I wore always the same uniform: blue jeans and plain shirts. That was the new Mabel.”81 Pola, a former militant within the Workers’ Revolutionary Party, recalled a similar story. She was 17 when she attended her first meeting with a “political responsible” from the Party. Pola decided to dress herself so as to better impress the (male) political responsible: skirt, elegant blouse, high-heeled shoes, and make-up. “Are you sure you want to become a revolutionary militant,” he asked without waiting for an answer. Pola was sure and, after some weeks had passed, she asked for a second meeting. Meanwhile, Pola underwent her bodily conversion and she attended the new meeting in “blue jeans and olive-green shirt. There, I formally became a party activist.”82

Both Mabel and Pola narrated their becoming political activists as a conversion process, involving the rejection of what was conceived of as fashionable. In doing so, Mabel, Pola, and many other young female activists embraced a new ideal of femininity, which tended to downplay the ideals of eroticism and desirability that advertisers and many other young women at the time associated,
precisely, with the blue jean. Testimonies of former young militant women insistently recalled a single cultural product that condensed their ideal of femininity, a folk song by Daniel Viglietti, which widely circulated amidst political activists. Dedicated to a female militant who had died in an armed action, “Muchacha” describes her as “the young woman of the clear look/ short-haired/ I don’t know her name / But I see her: compañera / But I cry: guerrillera.” A blend of sacrifice and personal integrity, the muchacha was cherished because she was a militant fellow, a guerrilla woman who lost her life in the frame of an all-encompassing revolutionary project. As Alejandra, another former militant, recalled, “We all wanted to be the muchacha of the clear look and the short hair. Thus we forgot about hair dressing and fashion. We dressed plain; I only wore blue jeans.” To many young militant women, the blue jean acted as an avenue to constructing an anti-fashion femininity, in the process of becoming revolutionary.

In similar ways, young militant men embraced blue jeans to the point that they became stereotyped as the blue jean wearers par excellence. In a satirical magazine, for instance, a journalist noted that “the leftist militant, intellectual, or sympathizer spends the most in blue jeans, average two per year, preferably—so ironic—American brands.” To illustrate that statement, a famous comic artist drew the “unmistakable militant:” long hair and beard; Marx’s Capital on one hand, a hammer and a sickle on the other; US-army like shirt; and blue jeans. Yet not only comic artists stereotyped leftist militants in that way: the repressive forces did the same. In late 1972, Gen. Ricardo Gómez led the brutal repression of a demonstration of teachers and other workers in Mendoza province, which ended with three people dead. When asked on the rationale of the repression, Gómez asserted that “the demonstrators were activists who came from ‘outside’ and they wore blue jeans as a uniform to recognize themselves. So basically we targeted young men in blue jeans.” That brutal repression in Mendoza was one of the last before March 11, 1973, when a Peronist government supported by a vast majority of young activists was elected.

Throughout 1973, the promises of a “national and popular” project seemed close to fulfillment, while an anti-imperialist wave crossed almost all spheres of public life. Schools and universities became key sites where young people aimed at constructing socialismo nacional and eroding markers of authoritarianism. The formal dress code that prevented female students from wearing pants represented one of those markers. The new educational authorities discontinued the code and promoted a wider discussion of fashion and its social underpinnings. To that end, the Ministry of Education funded the writing of an encyclopedia geared to high-school students, which included a long entry on fashion. There, journalist Daniel Samailovich explained that “Argentina occupies a peripheral position in the world,” which helped elucidate why “we used to passively adopt European and North American fashions.” He reminded his youthful readership that advertisers sought to convince them that “if you do not wear an American brand of blue jeans, you will not succeed in life, and they have you trapped.” Blue jean consumption thus turned into an arena where youths could fight against imperialism and contribute to build a “national and popular” movement on a daily basis.

When producing their annual assessment of the trends in 1973, fashion journalists also focused on the pervasiveness of the blue jean and its connections
to both the politicization process and the anti-imperialist struggle. A journalist noted the “enormous political participation experienced by young women” and linked it to the absence of “sophistication” in women’s fashion in that year: “our young women voted for the blue jean, an item that became the citizens’ uniform for good.” Another journalist, however, suggested a more ambivalent evaluation. While commenting favorably on the definite consecration of a “unisex fashion” marked by the expansion of the blue jean, the journalist called for deepening a process towards greater austerity and anti-imperialist struggle. He stated that “since May 25 [the day when the Peronist president Héctor Campora came into office], I have only worn white shirts as a symbol of austerity. We all should work toward our liberation. We should all wear blue jeans, as our young people do, but not Levi’s.”

Amidst the intense anti-imperialist feelings that informed the political mobilization of 1973, the American-ness of the blue jean came to the spotlight again. Unquestionably, the blue jean epitomized youth, especially those young women and men who had made of it the symbol of anti-fashion. Young activists and militants combined blue jeans with ponchos, the utmost symbols of a telluric nationhood that, along with folk music, had resuscitated to signal the nationalist imagery that pervaded that political mobilization. Yet the blue jean acquired a twofold meaning. One the one hand, it seemed to have been finally appropriated as a marker of an internationalized youth culture, which in 1973 Argentina incarnated into a mobilized generation. On the other hand, as journalists and sociologists stated, the jean functioned as a reminder that “America”—North America—still dangerously shaped youth consumer options. Perhaps for the last time in its local life story, the American-ness of the blue jean generated political and cultural controversies.

A Blue Jean Generation

In 1975, when tango poet Héctor Negro wrote about the invasion of blue, 22 million pairs of jeans had been produced and sold in Argentina. According to business observers, jeans were the only textile items whose sales did not suffer from any retraction in that year, marked throughout by inflation and economic instability. The market for the jeans, as expected, was depicted as composed of young people between 15 and 25, from all social classes. Doubtlessly, this expansion profoundly resonated in Negro’s comments, who hyperbolically spoke of a new “era” for Buenos Aires. Even if exaggerated, Negro’s comments offer insights into a common perception among the older inhabitants of the city: young people had contributed to spread a livelier lifestyle, and one of its conduits was precisely the blue jean. The blue jean signaled the cultural presence of youth in the Argentine visual culture, the emergence of a “blue jean generation.”

The metaphor of a “blue jean generation” at the same time reveals and excludes. As an image, it reveals that, in Argentina, the blue jean became the first dress item to be worn exclusively by young people, to the point that it metonymically invoked youthfulness. The pervasiveness of the jean in mid 1970s Buenos Aires speaks of a successful story through which the jean and those who wore it helped to subvert previous, formal dress codes, and eventually to promote a more egalitarian, eventually democratizing fashion. The “blue jean generation,”
in that regard, also contributed to channeling a cultural vindication of casualness and informality. However, while the jean was normalized and celebrated in mid 1970s Argentina, it had sparked heated debates in the public arena over the past 20 years. The blue jean provoked debates because it signaled the culturally disruptive presence of a "generation" that it helped to publicly identify, debates that most of the times revolved around the allegedly troublesome sexuality that young people came to embody.

Yet the "blue jean generation," as a metaphor, occludes the fact that the blue jean also served as a site to the elaboration of intra-generational distinctions and differences. While working-class young men in the early 1960s asserted their "virile youthfulness" and practically contested the performances and notions of the hegemonic, adult masculinity, their middle-class peers appropriated of the imported brands to construct a class-based, culturally anchored sense of distinction, which had working-class boys' tastes and preferences as a referential point. In a similar way, by the late 1960s the blue jean served to the articulation of new ideals of feminine beauty and desirability, and—through the advertising strategies—to a whole erotization of the Argentine visual culture. Yet while many young women appropriated of the blue jeans to construct their senses of desirable femininity; other young women, who engaged in radical political organizations, made of the blue jean the anti-fashion item par excellence, thus paving the way for shaping new understandings of femininity.

The life story of the blue jean intertwined with the making of youth as a cultural and political actor and as a cultural category in 1960s and 1970s Argentina. The uniformity that the jean produced among who wore it was just apparent. Underneath the same blue denim, young women and men produced divergent uses and meanings out of the jeans. In this regard, writing the life story of this particular commodity helps deepen into the complexities of stabilizing a cultural category, youth, which historically overlapped, interacted, and many times conflicted with others, such as class and gender. A "blue-jean generation" certainly emerged in 1960s and 1970s Argentina, yet perhaps it was visible only to contemporary observers, like Negro, or to today's historians.

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ENDNOTES
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15. "En la Capital y en el Gran Buenos Aires, las mujeres van más al cine que los hombres, y todos concurren, pues es la diversión menos costosa," La Razón, April 6, 1959, 13.


17. Interview with Carlos (b. in 1944 in Valentín Alsina, Lanús), September 16, 2007.


21. "¿Es este su problema?," Vosotras No. 1204, January 1, 1959, 68. Other letter writers expressed similar concerns in the years that followed; see Vosotras No. 1268, March 24, 1960, 68; No. 1282, June 30, 1960, 76; No. 1318, March 9, 1961, 60; No. 1365, February 1, 1962, 68.


23. In her study of youth in postwar Italy, Simonetta Piccone Stella notes that, in both the everyday chronicle and the sociological literature, the consumption of blue jean was treated "seriously" and always as a sign of a disorderly male youth, La prima generazione: ragazze e ragazzi nel miracolo economico italiano (Milan, 1993), 156–9.

24. La patota, Dir. Daniel Tinayre, theatrical release on August 11, 1960. For a similar story, La mano en la trampa (To Fall into the Trap), Dir. Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, theatrical release on June 8, 1961.


27. El imperialismo en la vida de un joven obrero, Folder 708, Partido Comunista Argentino Archive.

28. The Communist Youth Federation claimed to have distributed 150,000 of those pamphlets at factory entrances and at technical night schools in Buenos Aires, Federación Juvenil Comunista: Informe y Balance General, 1962, 7, Folder 50, Partido Comunista Argentino Archive.

29. While the most important, in terms of production and sales, was Alpargatas with its Far West, two other brands emerged by the early 1960s: Ranchero and Cisko Kid, which specifically targeted children.

30. For a retrospective account, see "El motor de la moda," Panorama No. 137, December 9, 1969, 30.

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32. Ricardo De Luca, a leading local advertiser, went on to state that television campaigns that did not target young people were deemed to fail. Asociación Argentina de Agencias de Publicidad, *Actas de la Primera Convención Argentina de Agencias de Publicidad*, Mar del Plata, September 1963, 48–9.


36. One of the Alpargatas executive directors at the time of the promotion of Super Far West reminded of the fiasco in, “Las cosas por su nombre,” *Mercado* No. 222, October 11, 1973, 40–44.


38. In this vein, several chapters of the 1965 season of *La Familia Falcón*, a popular television series that focused on the daily life of a “typical” middle-class family, represented how the youngest Falcón, a 16-year-old teenager, saved money to purchase his imported jean, wore it everyday, and—at the same time—struggled to display a “cool” masculinity, eventually devoid of any explicit sexuality.


44. *Consejos útiles para las chicas que quieren trabajar* (Buenos Aires, 1964), 34.


49. For a retrospective account of the uses of the miniskirt, see "La consagración de la minifalda," *Siete Días* No. 86, December 12, 1968, 13. Laura Podalsky rewrites the early reception of the miniskirt among “avant-garde” young women in her *Specular City: Transforming Culture, Consumption, and Space in Buenos Aires, 1955–73* (Philadelphia, 2004), 188.


54. Presumably after the fiasco with Super Far West in 1966, Alpargatas moved to an advertising agency other than JWT, Castignani & Burd propaganda, whose license was temporarily removed, “Las chicas del aviso audaz,” *Gente* No. 105, July 27, 1967, p. 18.


56. “¿Qué miran los hombres?,” *Siete Días* No. 47, April 2, 1968, 30–5.

57. To explain the cyclical changes in fashion, some psychologists and psychoanalysts developed the theory of the “shifting erogenous zone,” or how, at different stages in fashion history, a part or feature of the (female) body became mostly accentuated. Psychoanalyst J.C. Flugel is generally credited as the initiator of that theory in his *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930). For a discussion of this theory and its shortcomings, see Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, 82–6.


64. In his reconstruction of the emergence of a Mexican counterculture, Eric Zolov notes the same anxieties about the “unisex fashion,” *Re-Fried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley, 1999), 101–106.

65. The press often reported on those raids, “¿Qué está haciendo la policía?,” *Gente* No. 134, February 2, 1968, 8; “Nuevo orden capilar,” *Análisis* No. 192, February 12, 1968,


70. It is noteworthy that most of the literature on the relationships between dress and/or fashion and eroticism and sexuality has so far focused on dress items explicitly connected with the realm of the erotica, like the Victorian corset, paying almost no attention to items like the jean, see for example Leigh Summers, Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset (New York, 2001), and the articles in Fashion Theory: Special Issue on Fashion and Eroticism, Vol. 4, No. 4, December 1999.

71. A historian of the Argentine advertising industry stated that the ads for jeans in the early 1970s "insistently appealed to eroticism" and, to a large degree, made "advertising permanently hot," see Alberto Borrini, El siglo de la publicidad, 1898-1998; Historias de la publicidad gráfica argentina (Buenos Aires, 1999), 33.

72. For instance, a mixed couple was the protagonist of the 1971 advertising campaign for Lee, beginning in Gente No. 234, January 15, 1970, 17. Perhaps the most erotic series belongs to the Giovane brand, which throughout 1973 centered on images of a seminaked, mixed couple, presumably right before having sexual intercourse, and focused on the young woman's buttocks.


75. "Encuesta sectorial: Indumentaria," Pulso No. 176, September 22, 1970, 9-10; "Los pantalones unisex," Mercado No. 179, December 14, 1972, 158. That figure is a minor one if compared to the US, where 350 millions were sold in 1971, Sullivan, Jeans, 138. However, if compared to European contexts, the Argentine figures acquired more relevance. In France, for instance, only 6 millions were sold in 1973, cfr. Gilles Lipovetsky, The Empire of Fashion: Fashioning Modern Democracy (Princeton, NJ, 1994), 165.


77. "¿Qué compran y qué venden los jóvenes?," Mercado No. 38, April 4, 1970, 40-3.

78. For overviews of the process of political radicalization that emerged after 1969, see especially Alfredo Pucciarelli, ed. La primacía de la política: Lanusse, Perón y la Nueva Izquierda en tiempos del GAN (Buenos Aires, 1999) and Liliana de Riz, La política en suspenso, 1966-1976 (Buenos Aires, 1997).
79. “Reclamos de bella gente,” Análisis No. 528, April 27, 1971, 43.


81. Interview with Mabel (b. in 1952 in Valentín Alsina, Lanús), September 2, 2007.


85. The study of the construction of femininities and masculinities among revolutionary militants in the Southern Cone countries is at its beginnings. For a first approximation, see Ana Amado et al., Historia, género y política en los 70’ (Buenos Aires, 2005).


