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El sainete porteño and Argentine Reality: 
The Tenant Strike of 1907

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The purpose of this exploratory essay is to investigate how popular culture can be used as a source for research in social history. Popular culture can be defined essentially as mass culture. While this is not a precise definition, there seems to be no more definite definition available. The editors of and contributors to the *Journal of Popular Culture* and to *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* have sought more precise definitions but without much success. In this study, the popular cultural form will be the sainete porteño [jocular short play of Buenos Aires] and the particular work will be *Los inquilinos* [The Tenants] written in 1907 by the Argentine Nemesio Trejo (1862-1916). Perhaps the description and definition of what the sainete porteño was will aid in the clarification of what “popular culture” is.

While the origin of the Spanish word sainete is obscure, by the eighteenth century it came to have as one of its accepted definitions a “short comic theatrical piece” (Carella 10). In Argentina the sainete fused elements from the Spanish light opera [zarzuela] and the comic popular theater of late nineteenth-century Spain (género chico, literally small genus or class, e.g., small theater—“low brow” versus “high brow” theater). The Argentine saineteros [writers in the sainete genre] sought to create a hybrid cultural form that was inspired by the everyday life experiences of the common people but that used the form of theatric production acceptable to those who would be the paying audience—the emerging middle and lower-middle classes of Buenos Aires in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their most popular day for theater attendance was Sunday afternoon, and sainete theaters offered as many as seven functions starting at 3:00 p.m. Regular weekday presentations were in the evening starting at 8:30 p.m. and had four functions per evening (or as called in Spanish teatro por sección). Each function was a different play, which placed a tremendous burden on the creative talents of the sainetero (Posadas iii). There were at least ten major sainete theaters and numerous minor ones functioning in Buenos Aires during the “Golden Age” of the sainete porteño (1890-1930). It is estimated by the author that these theaters represented a combined seating capacity of over 3,000 seats,
so that it is not difficult to say that the sainete was a “popular” cultural form. Other theatrical companies went on tour on a regular schedule to La Plata, provincial capital of Buenos Aires province, and to Rosario, the principal city in the province of Santa Fe, carrying with them the sainete. Ticket cost per function in the early 1900s was about one peso. In contrast, for productions in the elite porteño theaters such as the Colón, tickets for comparable platea [orchestra] seats cost over four times as much (Gallo 93). Nevertheless, given the lack of discretionary funds available to the working classes, even the relative inexpensiveness of sainete functions still made these a popular culture form for the lower-middle and middle classes. In many ways the jocular play during its heyday had the same impact on Buenos Aires nightlife that the Broadway musical had on New York.

The locale of the sainete was Buenos Aires (with few exceptions such as La gringa by Florencio Sánchez, written in 1904) with its ethnic and cultural mix of immigrants and native Argentines (creoles), and its different social classes. The characters in the sainete were based on all the types found in the poorer classes, and the themes of the plays were found in how these people lived, what their daily lives were like in the tenement houses of Buenos Aires [conventillo], in the streets of the city, or in essence what is called in Spanish la vida coditiana [the daily routine of life]. The sainete porteño themes are so thoroughly Argentine and current (most plays took place in época actual, e.g., actual time) that one author has stated that unlike the works of “cultured” Argentine dramatists who aped European form and subject matter, the sainetero “es eminentemente nacional” (Carella 14) [“is eminently native based”].

Several saineteros were also newspapermen, and their biting satirical articles often got them in trouble with government officials. One of the most famous cases involved the sainetero and theater owner Emilio Onrubia in 1889. He was arrested for his satire and criticism of the Juárez-Celman government and some of its most notorious grafters. Other cases involved Carlos Mauricio Pacheco (1881-1924), and Nemesio Trejo (see Trejo’s “La ley electoral” [“The Electoral Law”] in Caras y caretas [Faces and Masks]) (Carella 15). The sainete was a literary vehicle in which these and other authors could deal with controversial issues of the moment as if they were fictional. As one Argentine authority on the sainete, Blas Raúl Gallo, put it: “en el teatro pueda repetirse cuando se dice en la prensa sin temor a escándalo, persecuciones o multa” (44) [“in the theater it is possible to repeat things written in the newspapers without fear of scandal, persecution, or fine”]. The sainetero could portray on stage issues that could embarrass political figures or governments such as political graft and corruption (see Los políticos [The Politicians] 1897), social problems
of crime, poverty, and alienation (see *Los [e]scruchantes* [The Second Story Men] 1911, *Los disfrazados* [The Disguised Ones] 1906, *Tu cuna fué un conventillo* [Your Cradle Was a Slum] 1920), and ethnic and labor conflicts (see *Los devotos* [The Devout Ones] 1900). Nemesio Trejo's *sainete Los inquilinos* is in this vein.

The *sainetero* was an author of the "here and now" and of subject matter that was of interest to his audience composed of people who, if they did not actually live in the environment or conditions portrayed on the stage, could at least clearly understand and identify with the stage characters. Therefore, in terms of a search for a definition of popular culture, I would suggest the following based on the *sainete porteño*: a cultural expression with a focus on "the here and the now," with themes or subject that, if not actually experienced, could at least be understood or identified with by large number of a population within a given society.

The work chosen as a "source" for this study is an unusual *sainete*. It is *Los inquilinos* [The Tenants] by Nemesio Trejo. It is unusual because it was the only *sainete* written during the actual event that the author sought to portray on stage, the Buenos Aires Tenants' Strike of September-December 1907. It must have been very unnerving for the audience to move from being participants in a real event to being participants in a "fictional" event that was the same. Since the fictional account was written in the "heat of the moment," one might ask how accurate a portrayal it was, how well the author "captured" the moment, and how well the author used his opportunity to make a political statement, which must have been the intent of Trejo. This essay will attempt to answer these questions by comparing the fictional account of the strike with the "real" strike as reported in traditional research sources within a context of how effective popular culture sources are for research into social reality at a given moment in time.

**The Historical Event: The Tenant Strike of 1907**

The Tenant (or Rent) Strike broke out spontaneously in early September and continued through December 1907. At its height some 2,000 *conventillos* (tenement houses) and 120,000 renters were involved. While primarily a *porteño* [pertaining to the port city of Buenos Aires] event, there were reports of similar strikes in Rosario and Bahía Blanca. The causes for the strike were varied and long-standing. The catalyst for the strike was a dramatic increase in rents carried out in the city at the onset of winter (May-June 1907) (*Boletín* 5: 238). Tensions were already high in the city among the working classes; strikes had broken out in the port of Buenos Aires (December 1906-January 1907) among the stevedores and among the coal handlers [carboneros] in April 1907 (in the La Boca and Barrancas districts of the city). Other workers
who had jobs located in the port area of the city also struck out of sympathy with the plight of the **stevedores** and **carboneros** and out of frustration with their own poor wages and working conditions. Thus by the end of the fall some 20,000 workers were on strike in Buenos Aires (Marotta 258).

Strikes were occurring in other areas of the country as well. Workers in the Banfield railroad maintenance facilities near Buenos Aires went on strike in August as part of a series of sympathy strikes happening in support of a workers’ protest in Bahía Blanca. In late June railway workers struck the maintenance shops in that Southern city. The police and the naval prefecture (Bahía Blanca was a major navy base) used excessive force in putting down the strike, which in turn led to the proclamation of a general strike paralyzing the city in July-August 1907 (Marotta 257). The labor federations of the Socialist Party (Unión general de trabajadores, UGT) and of the Anarcho-Syndicalist movement (Federación obera regional argentina, FORA) jointly declared a general strike for Buenos Aires, Rosario, and Bahía Blanca for August 2-3, 1907, in support of their fellow workers in those cities (Iscaro 83). Thus, while the rent rate increases were very poorly timed in terms of labor unrest, they were well timed to coincide with the increase in cold weather when the need for shelter would be greatest. The uniformity of action also demonstrated the strength and cohesion of the landlords’ Association of Owners of Rental Property, a fact that would complicate the eventual settlement of the strike. It was estimated by the Argentine Department of Labor, that in 1907 over 269,017 workers went on strike in one of the worst years of labor unrest in that country. Further, it was estimated in the report prepared in 1908 by the Department that over 32 percent of the total Argentine population was on strike (Boletín 5:231); these strikes were caused by poor wages, long working hours, high food prices, and excessive rent for workers’ housing (Boletín 8).

The issue of cramped and unhygienic workers’ housing rented at excessively high rents was not a new issue in Buenos Aires (see Castro, “Lunfardo”). As early as 1890 and later in 1893 protests were mounted by disgruntled renters; these failed for lack of cohesion among the city’s renters (Spalding 34). At the sixth congress of FORA held in Rosario in September 1906, the Anarcho-Syndicalist labor federation urged its members to organize to fight high rents and poor housing conditions. The goal of these efforts was to be an eventual rent strike (Marotta 265). In late 1906 another labor association (Federación de las Artes Gráficas) [Federation of Graphic Arts Workers] urged its members to follow the advice of FORA. The Socialist Party also in late 1906 agitated for housing reform and just rents (265) at its confederation of labor’s congress (November 1906) where resolutions to reduce rents
by 50 percent and to support a rent strike were adopted (283). It is clear that even before the rent hikes of May-June 1907, rents were considered excessive. The rent rate increases were just too much for the working class to bear.

Social reformers within the Argentine elite structure, such as the sociologist and urban planner Samuel Gache, clearly connected unhealthful workers' housing with crime and disease. As early as the municipal census of 1887, it was reported that 116,167 workers lived in slum conditions (Gache 62). By 1898, Gache reported that there were in the city over 2,000 slum condition buildings housing workers. The wards which had the worst conditions were San Cristobal, Balvanera, Pilar, Concepción, Santa Lucia, and San Juan Evangelista. These were the areas with the highest death rate from infectious diseases (measles, scarlet fever, typhoid fever, and diphtheria) as well as the areas with the highest infant mortality rate (85-86). The municipal census of 1904 showed that the conditions reported by Gache in 1900 had not improved, but only worsened. In the census report there were 2,462 slum buildings with 138,188 tenant residents (Ciudad de Buenos Aires cxxii-cxxv, 128-134). By 1907, it was estimated that some 150,000 people lived in slum conditions (Spalding 33). These were the conditions under which the porteño working class existed.

In early September 1907, at a tenement house [conventillo] located on Calle Ituzaingo #279-325 in central Buenos Aires, a spontaneous demonstration broke out in support of a dispossessed renter who was wailing in the street with her belongings, pleading for help from her fellow tenants and from anyone else who might help. She, a poor widow with children, had been evicted for nonpayment of rent (Spalding 35; Scobie 156). In sympathy with her plight and out of their own desperation, the 130 tenants of the Ituzaingo Street conventillo demanded that the widow be reinstated and that all rents be reduced by 30 percent, and stated that no one would pay any rent until the reductions were made. The rent strike had begun. The strike spread throughout the city and then on to Rosario and Bahía Blanca (Marotta 265-66; Scobie 156-159; Panettieri 74-75). In each of the conventillos, strike committees were organized. Speakers who were known for their oratorical skills were sent throughout the city to win support (Gilimon, Hechos y comentarios, 1911, as quoted in Panettieri 74-75). Parades of children carrying brooms and shouting “sweep away the landlords” were reported in the popular magazine Caras y caretas [Faces and Masks] (Sept. 21, 1907: 468), and banners were raised throughout the city proclaiming “Nadie pague el alquiler sin antes haber obtenido la rebaja del 30 por ciento” (Marotta 265 and various photos in Archivo Nacional) (“No one is to pay rent until receiving the 30 percent reduction”). Whole neighborhoods took on a carnival air with jubilant
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The landlords through their association responded with mass evictions and tenant blacklisting. Under the leadership of Colonel Ramón Falcón, Chief of the Federal Police and violently anti-labor, the federal police, the municipal fire department (armed with mauser rifles), and the owners’ own security men were used to assist the owners in carrying out the evictions. At one location, a tenement house located in the San Telmo district (San Juan #677), the tenants blocked the police from entering the conventillo. The police fired on the demonstrators wounding many and killing one tenant, an 18-year-old day laborer, Miguel Pepe (Scobie 157). This happened on October 22, 1907. In response, a mass demonstration was organized for October 28, 1907, when again police violence occurred against demonstrators who were marching to a mass meeting in the Plaza de Mayo [May Square] in front of Government House and the municipal offices. Many demonstrators and police were injured (La Prensa, Oct. 28, 1907; Caras y caretas, Nov. 2, 1907: 474). Unlike many other workers’ demonstrations of the same time, these were family events with women and children participating. While violence may have been used by the anarchists in labor-related events since the beginning of the year (such as burning of rolling stock in railroad strikes, bombing of street cars and port facilities during other related strikes), the rent strikes were peaceful demonstrations (Moreno 347) marred only by police brutality. Further, unlike the coal handlers’ strike, which affected the whole city by causing power failures, the rent strike impacted only the landlords and the tenants. It was estimated that 15,000 participated in the demonstrations.

While the rent strike was strongly supported by radical workers’ groups such as the anarchists, it also had support from noted criminologists and social reformers from the middle and upper classes who railed against the crime and prostitution that was fostered in these tenements—warrens of vice and disease (Castro, “Lunfardo” 109). Nevertheless, in large part the strike failed. The known organizers of the strike were blacklisted and in some cases deported. Using the provisions of the hurriedly enacted antiforeign “Ley de residencia” [“Residence Law”], passed in late 1902 as a vehicle to “control” the rise of anarchism in Argentina, some eight foreign-born labor leaders including José Paneda (a member of the executive board of FORA) were deported. The severity of the repression was shocking, given the findings of the Federal Government in a report published in 1908.

This National Department of Labor study carried out subsequent to the strike reported that the reasons for the rent strike were valid (Boletín 5: 229-43). The rent strike had as its aims the following:
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(1) reduction of rents by 30 percent; (2) abolishment of deposits and other sureties except for the first month deposit; (3) no eviction of tenants without due process and only for nonpayment of rent in excess of three months; and (4) improvement of hygienic conditions in the tenements (Boletín 5: 229). In terms of the hygiene issue, the anonymous writer of the report “Coste [sic] de la vida” [“Cost of Living”] stated that the medical consultant to the Department of Labor reported that:

En la construcción... se ha dejado de lado por completo la faz higienica para atender la parte lucrativa del negocio a fin de sacar mejor interés al capital empleado. (229)

[In terms of construction... the builders of tenement houses have ignored hygiene in favor of maximizing their profits from their capital investment.]

Further, rents were still very high in 1908. It was a sellers’ market because of shortages of affordable housing with an estimated 15,000 unit shortfall of need. The report continued with an evaluation of the current status of the 23 major tenement houses that were the centers of the rent strike and found that the 3,146 tenants lived on average four to a room which measured 4 x 4 meters and paid an average rent of 22 $m/n. Ventilation was from an open door and sanitary facilities were common latrines and baths. Drinking water came from a common tap (240). As late as 1916 it was reported that landlords were still charging excessive surety deposits (as noted in the sainete Las mujeres lindas [The Pretty Women] by Nemesio Trejo in El teatro 160). It can only be concluded that, while the strike was justified, it failed to achieve its goals.

The Fictional Event: “Los inquilinos” (1907)

The Tenants [Los inquilinos] was written sometime between the outbreak of the strike in early September and the opening of the play on October 21, 1907, at the Teatro de la Comedia [The Comic Theater] in Buenos Aires. It was staged by the company of Rogelio Juárez with music by Francisco Paya, both well considered in their respective fields and both of whom had a long affiliation with the author. It was reported as a “hit” (Historia del teatro 22).

The author Nemesio Trejo (1862-1916) was a noted sainetero who is credited with forming a bridge between the Spanish género chico and the emerging sainete porteño and then with giving the sainete its character and form (Historia del teatro 22). He came from a creole background and was a famous contrapuntalist [contrapuntalista] in the
gaucho payador tradition. He was often paired with the most famous of the contrapuntalists Gabino Ezeiza (1847-1916). The contrapuntalist style of point and counterpoint in verse was a characteristic stylistic device used by Trejo in his sainetes. Trejo, while a famed sainetero who wrote some 55 plays, was also a noted writer in the popular press. He wrote for Caras y caretas and for the evening newspaper La razón [Reason] where he was in charge of crime-police reporting. His first sainete was a biting satire of Juárez-Celman society, written in 1890, La fiesta de don Marcos [The Party of the Gentleman Marcos], which was staged by Rogelio Juárez, and his last sainete was written shortly before his death in 1916, Las mujeres lindas [The Pretty Women]. Trejo had a good knowledge of the law and served as a magistrate’s clerk [escribano] in the Central Law Courts from 1890 to 1907. He was an active union member and was a key figure in the writers’ union. His knowledge of the common people, the working class, and the urban poor of Buenos Aires made his sainetes all the more credible.

His use of the theme of the tenement house and its inhabitants was not unusual. It was one of the most commonly used locales for the sainete and was a major inspiration for the emerging popular musical form of the time, the tango (Castro, “Popular Culture” 77). What is unusual is not the theme but the rapidity of the writing of the sainete to capture on stage the spark of the moment. The play must have been written in a matter of weeks (six weeks intervened between the start of the strike and the play’s opening, and some of that time must have gone to rehearsals, staging, set design, et cetera). Trejo must have been highly motivated. One Argentine theater historian, Luis Ordáz, has written:

Los inquilinos es una de las piezas menos conocidas y más curiosas de Nemesio Trejo. En ella, el celebrado autor de Los políticos, Las mujeres lindas y tanta obra memorable de la época, captó en forma burlesca el grave conflicto, con muertos, contusos y presos, que se produjo en Buenos Aires a fines de 1907. (Historia del teatro 21)

[The Tenants is one of the least known and most curious works of Nemesio Trejo. In it, the celebrated author of The Politicians, The Pretty Women, and many other memorable sainetes of the period, captured in burlesque form the grave conflict that happened in Buenos Aires at the end of 1907, with deaths, injuries, and arrests.]

While the gist of Ordáz’s comments is correct, it must be noted that the play was written before the major demonstrations and violence had
occurred. As we shall see, however, Trejo did in fact anticipate such violence. Unfortunately, his prognostication of the strike's outcome was far more optimistic than the facts of the event would show.

This sainete, like most of its genre, is composed of one act made up of three scenes: the first and the third take place in the central court [patio] of a two-story tenement house, and the second scene has as its locale the street in front of the tenement. The sainete locale was sufficiently anonymous to be any or all conventillos in Buenos Aires. The characters were also sufficiently commonplace to be any one of the lower classes/day laborers who inhabited the slums of the city. The time frame of the play was literally the day of the opening (described in the play's preface as época actual), with the strike in progress outside in the streets of the city. The edition of the play used in this study is a copy of the one remaining edition of the play reprinted in 1963 (Historia del teatro 56-82).

The play opens with a dialogue between one of the tenants Filomena and the vegetable peddler Salvador. Using the common sainete device of the stereotype, Trejo portrayed the vegetable peddler [el verdulero] as an Italian immigrant who barely spoke Spanish. The point of this dialogue is the message that the urban poor faced high food prices, which was one of the factors behind the strike. Filomena accuses the vegetable peddler of trying to make an easy living out of the misery of the poor:

Filomena: Ustedes son los que ponen caros los articulos, porque quieren hacer pronto la América. Y hay que sudar, mijito, para ganarse la vida. (57)

[Filomena: You are the ones who make everything expensive because you immigrants want to get rich quick. One must sweat, little man, in order to earn a living. Life is not easy.]

The immigrant replies in his Italian-Spanish that he too suffers; he must pay high rent in his conventillo, pay high fees to the city to sell his vegetables, pay off the police to park his cart, and pay protection money to the ward boss's ruffians [compadritos] in order to sell his fruits and vegetables. That is why prices are high. He barely makes a living. He muses about justice and asks why the buildings of Congress and the Central Law Courts needed to be so large because justice is so small, "la justicia e muy piccola, marchanta, e troppo casa per tan poca justicia" (58) ["justice is very small, dear customer, too much building for so little justice"]. He changes the subject and asks if the rent strike will happen in Filomena's conventillo as if to say it is already in progress elsewhere. She replies that all is ready. They
end their conversation with an agreement that her vegetable buys will
go on account until tomorrow when her husband is paid. She returns
to her room [pieza] and Salvador goes on his way.

The action of the play moves on to two others, the bread seller Pedro
(a Spanish immigrant) and the conventillo manager [encargado]
Manuel. Manuel is one of the few characters in the play who is given
the title of respect don. Don Manuel is complaining to the bread seller
that the bread is of poor quality and so hard. Pedro responds by saying
that the bakery owner, his wife, and Pedro are making the bread as
best they can because the bakers are on strike, which is a further
suggestion by Trejo that all is not well. Pedro continues to say that
another tenant don Ponciano, a retired attorney, never complains about
the bread, but then again he shouldn't because "el paga por trimestre
atrasados" ["he pays by trimester—delayed"]'). This produces the
following dialogue:

  Don Manuel: ¿En tres plazos entonces [sic]?
  Pedro: Sí; tarde, mal y nunca.
  Don Manuel: Como el alquiler. (59)

[Don Manuel: In three payments then?
Pedro: Yes; late, poorly and never.
Don Manuel: Like the rent.]

Trejo seems to be making the point that even respectable people—and
not just immigrant day laborers—could not pay their rents. Also the
point is made that retired government employees often did not receive
their retirement pay from the state, which left them in a state of
penury.

The bread salesman leaves don Manuel musing about the tenants
who have not paid their rent. He thinks about how he has tried to
collect the rent but has failed. Could it be they are planning something?
Perhaps it would be best that he be prepared: "Iré preparando lus [sic]
desalojos por si acaso, iré preparando al oficial de justicia y me iré
preparando el café, que ya es tarde" (62) ["I will prepare their eviction
notices just in case, I will get the Justice of the Peace ready to issue
the writs, and I will go make my coffee because it is getting late"]).

The role of the Justice of the Peace in the eviction process was very
important. These justices were political appointees and wielded
considerable influence in each city ward (or police district). They were
notoriously favorably disposed to issue judgments in favor of the owners
rather than the tenants, who were viewed as all foreigners, illiterate,
dirty, and without regular employment (day laborers). As the rent
strike progressed, the justices became targets of threats and were given
police escorts (Scobie 157). The passage quoted above is also typical of the whole sense of the sainete, which is jocular and satirical—the serious themes of the strike are given more significance because of the satire and comic romances interspersed throughout the work.

In the play, a new group appears on stage, marching and chanting to a guitar: “Down with high rents”; “Down with the tyranny of the landlords”; “Death to the conventillo managers”; “Long live poor tenants.” This group forms the organizing committee for the conventillo’s strike. In the words of Baltazar (an Afro-Argentine):

... hoy damos el grito e liberta como el 25 de Mayo. Hoy le decimos al encargao: no nos da la gana de pagarle el alquiler que nos cobra. Protestamos del abuso y de la avaricia. ¡Abajo los alquileres! (62)

[... today we give our cry for liberty just as on the 25th of May. Today we will tell the manager: We don’t want to pay the rent that he wants to collect. We protest this abuse of high rents and the greed of the landlords. Down with high rents!]

Another member of the committee simply called the “Young Boy” [Pebete] moves that they give the manager “una felpiada ... Si no nos lleva el apunte bajando el treinta por ciento” [“a thing to remember if he does not accede to their demand of a 30 percent reduction”]. Further, he continues, if they are hauled before the Justice of the Peace for eviction, he has prepared a defense of their actions in verse that includes the causes of their strike:

Y hemos quedao sin comer  
 a veces dias enteros  
 los vagos y jornaleros  
 por pagar el aquiler.

Y en ese bárbaro afán  
 de estrechar al pobre tanto  
 haciéndole largar llanto  
 al ver sus hijos sin pan.

Dijimos: no más sufrir  
 justo es que nos levantemos  
 también los pobres tenemos  
 el derecho de vivir. (63)
[We have gone without food sometimes for whole days both the jobless and the employed just to pay the rent.

This barbarous pleasure of squeezing the poor so that they wail in grief and pain to see their children go hungry.

We declare: No more suffering. It is just our cause and our strike because even the poor have the right to live decently.]

He calls upon the judge to do his duty and administer justice and to treat everyone fairly. Avarice must be defeated, so the only just decision is to set aside the eviction notices (64). Given the known sympathies of these justices, Trejo seems to be heightening the irony by calling upon the Justice of the Peace to do his duty and “administrar la justicia” [“dispense justice”]. He also interjects an ugly bit of anti-Semitism when he calls upon the judge to rule against avarice and not support “blood sucking Jews” (64). If the implication is that the landlords are Jews, then Trejo is distorting the facts and using the common device of scapegoating. The most common landowners were the creole upper class.

Baltazar comments on how well the defense has been written and presented by describing Pebete as a “doctor Palacios.” This is a reference to Alfredo Palacios, the leader of the Socialist Party, a member of the Argentine Chamber of Deputies, and a noted orator. It is also, perhaps, a reference to the Socialists’ support of the rent strike. Baltazar also introduces at this point a tango he has written, “Tango de los inquilinos” [“The Renters’ Tango”], which he proposes to sing to the Lord Mayor “si salimos bien de la huelga” (64) [“if we win the strike”].

While the words of this tango only echo the sentiments of Pebete’s verse to the Justice of the Peace, it is very significant. It is one of the first times a tango forms part of a sainete and demonstrates the growing importance of the tango as the music of the urban poor. Further, it demonstrates the fusion of musical traditions, the rural payador gaucho tradition of using verse set to music as a means of telling a story or transmitting feelings/news of the moment, with the emerging musical-dance vehicle, the tango. Baltazar’s tango is also important because Trejo tied the emerging tango to his only Afro-Argentine character in
the play. This seems to recognize the significant role of the Black in
the development of the musical form of the tango. Perhaps this is also
a recognition and acknowledgement of his friend and fellow
contrapuntalist Gabino Ezeiza, who was an Afro-Argentine.

After Baltazar sings his tango, the group breaks up. Baltazar
remains in the conventillo to prepare for the strike while the others
go next door to agitate in favor of the planned strike. Later the tenants
meet and create a formal strike committee with Baltazar as president
(68). The role of the retired lawyer Ponciano is also discussed, and some
express the fear that he might betray the strikers to the conventillo
manager since Ponciano is also his “lawyer.” Most feel that he will
be on the side of the strikers because he is writing a speech for Baltazar
to deliver. Enter Ponciano who delivers the speech he has prepared
for Baltazar (73-74).

In the speech Ponciano states there are two main strike issues:
hunger and unjust rents (73). The Constitution of the nation is being
subverted to protest the rights of the property holder, “El derecho del
fuerte es más fuerte que el derecho del debil” [“The rights of the
powerful are stronger than those of the weak”]. Today in the capital,
Ponciano goes on to say there is “una metempsicosis bárbara con los
alquileres” [“a barbaric rent transformation”] which is producing the
renters’ strike, and he concludes the speech with “levantemos la
protesta unánime y a luchar, a luchar contra el capital y la avaricia”
(74) [“we raise the unanimous protest and to battle, to battle against
capitalism and avarice”]. He goes off stage.

Filomena enters and describes to one of the Strike Committee
members her understanding of what they are going to do when the
strike is declared. At the first cry of strike, all tenants are to go to
the central court and announce their solid unified decision of protest
because “no es posible soportar por más tiempo esta tiranía” (76) [“it
is no longer possible to tolerate this tyranny” (of high rents)].

The long first scene ends with the declaration of the strike and with
a confrontation with the manager. With shouts of “¡El treinta por ciento
de rebaja!” [“Thirty percent reduction!”] and “¡Viva la huelga!” [“Long
live the strike!”], the manager is beaten. He escapes, running into the
street where he calls for police assistance. The police arrive and there
is confused fighting. The curtain falls, ending the scene. It is a scenery
curtain with a street scene painted on it.

Scene two takes place on the street in front of the conventillo and
opens with don Ponciano running out of the conventillo shooting a
pistol. It is unclear at this point if he has shot the manager, but
according to his words, he has cleansed the world of a tyrant just as
they have done so many times in Russia (reference to anarchists and
the 1905 revolution) (77). On the street he meets with the rest of the
Strike Committee and they agree to join in the tenant demonstration
marching to the square (Plaza de Mayo?). Baltazar (and others) want
to go to the head of the procession so he can give the speech Ponciano
has prepared. All the tenants march off.

Trejo was very perceptive. His play, written before October 21, 1907,
when it was first presented, anticipated the mass demonstrations that
in fact occurred on October 28, 1907. He also anticipated the violence
and shooting—if only somewhat jocularly. Symbolically he seems to
be saying through the lawyer’s act of violence that the law has no more
validity. Its abuse by the owners has produced this gesture of defiance
by Ponciano, who only slightly wounds Manuel (79).

Scene two ends with a conversation between Manuel and the
landlord don Timoteo. Manuel appears with his arm in a sling and
bitterly complains to the landlord that if the police had not come in
time he would have been a corpse. The landlord replies that the tenants
are going to pay dearly for this affront. Manuel expresses his fears that
he cannot go back to the conventillo as manager because his life is in
danger. Don’t worry, assures the owner, because he has a plan. Fearing
that the Justice of the Peace will not find in his favor and evict the
tenants, he will have the conventillo closed down because of
“unsanitary” conditions. The tenants will be evicted and he will not
have to reduce the rents “by one cent.” Timoteo concludes by saying,
“La propiedad es inviolable. Las leyes y la Constitución amparan los
derechos del propietario” (79) [“Property is inviolate. The laws and the
Constitution protect the rights of the property holder”]. They go off
to fetch the police to evict the tenants because of “unsanitary”
conditions. This ends scene two.

Again using satire, Trejo switches the basis for the evictions. The
judge is honest and will not find in favor of the landlord, so the landlord
must seek a “false” cause for eviction: health and sanitary conditions
of the conventillo. We know from the facts of the conditions of the time,
as was most likely true for the audience, that the judges were pro
landlords and the issue of hygiene was not a false one. It was a very
real one as was reported by Gache in 1900 and collaborated by the
Department of Labor in 1908 (Boletín 5:231) and was another factor
behind the rent strike.

The last scene, scene three, is the shortest of all the sainete’s scenes.
It opens with the same scenery as in scene one: the view of the interior
court of the conventillo. Unlike the opening scene with a lot of tenant
activity, the tenants are not there. Furniture is piled in front of each
of the rooms of the conventillo. Two city employees are hauling more
tenant belongings out of the humble rooms. The eviction is in progress.
The landlord, the manager, a municipal health inspector, a police
sergeant, and two other municipal workers are clustered together in
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conversation. Timoteo is explaining the infestation of the tenement and requesting the continuation of the evictions for health reasons. The inspector agrees and asks, as if as an aside, “Did you not have a rent strike here?” Timoteo replies that no, the tenants are all peaceful and all has been quiet. How strange, replies the inspector, when throughout the city such disturbances have been going on. Timoteo explains the absence of the tenants by saying they have all gone off to find new lodgings because of the infestation. Suddenly there is the sound of voices, the demonstrating tenants are returning. The inspector asks who are these people? Timoteo says the demonstrators are from next door; Manuel expresses his fear that the tenants will kill him. The tenants enter the conventillo courtyard astonished to discover their eviction. The inspector is astonished to discover that the eviction is not for health reasons. Timoteo is astonished to discover the lawyer Ponciano has joined the strike.

Ponciano answers Timoteo’s question of why he joined the strike by saying: “Sí señor, yo también; que tengo la palabra de todos los inquilinos, pobres victimas de su avaricia desmedida, que pretende acharles a la calle porque no acceden a sus pretensiones” [“Yes, sir, I too! When I speak I speak for all the tenants, poor victims of your unbridled avarice, whom you seek to throw out on the street because they did not give in to your wishes”]. He goes on to conclude: “Yo también, que protesto en nombre de la santa igualdad, contra los usureros que le roban el pan al pobre” (81) [“I too protest, in the name of holy equality, against the usurers who steal the bread from the mouths of the poor”].

The tenants demand that the owner and his manager leave the tenement house. The landlord demands that the police sergeant do his duty and continue the evictions. The municipal inspector orders the sergeant to do his duty. The sergeant refuses: “Yo no puedo, señor. Yo también soy otra victima del abuso. Renuncio al puesto y me uno a los companero de infortunio” (83) [“I can’t sir, I also am another abused victim. I renounce my position and join with these unfortunate comrades”]. The City Inspector, the municipal workers, the manager, and the landlord flee the scene, but as he goes Timoteo says ominously, “Ya me las pagarán” [“You are going to pay”]. As the assembled tenants cheer “¡Viva la justicia!” [“Long live justice!”], Ponciano states, “Y ahora, señores, dueños del campo otra vez. A meter la lingera a su puesto y esperar el fallo de lajusticia” (82) [“And now we are again in control. Now that we have put things in their proper place, all we have to do is wait for the judgment of justice”]. The play ends.

Trejo’s sainete Los inquilinos ends on an optimistic note that would prove false in reality. Perhaps, given his sense of irony, he already knew the strike would fail. As warned by Timoteo, the strikers would
have to pay for their actions. The socialist sympathies of Trejo are obvious and his intent was clear to win support for the strike, which was strongly endorsed by the Socialist Party. Given the fact the play was a “hit,” he was successful, but his plea for understanding and support by the rank and file of the police would prove to be in vain. The federal police would continue their anti-labor stance and would be ruthless in their handling of workers’ demonstrations, which in turn would lead to excessive violence culminating with the assassination of the hated Chief of Police, Colonel Ramón Falcón in 1909.

The use of the play to document the strike of 1907 personalized the event. It added a dimension not available from other contemporary (and traditional historical) sources such as the anonymously written reports in the newspapers of the time. Since Trejo had a particular point of view on the rent strike, his play is a good source as to how one Argentine felt and how important he felt it was to win support for the cause of the strikers. He used the vehicle of the sainete porteño to influence people to support his cause. Popular culture in this Argentine case is not only an example of one man’s view but also a demonstration of how the popular theater could be used to influence others. As a source for history it serves on various levels. It is an “artifact” of the period and as such is a valid source. It clearly states the causes of the strike: poor wages, high food prices, unsanitary living conditions, and exorbitant rents. It describes well the tenants’ sense of cohesion, their use of democratic practices to form the strike committees, and their naive faith. While it is true that a documentation of the rent strike of 1907 could have been done without the use of this nontraditional source of the sainete Los inquilinos, the play adds a quality of immediacy that Trejo was able to capture in his work, which related well how the people of the time viewed, felt, and lived the event. Social history cannot truly be written without the “human” element that popular culture can provide to the historian.
Works Cited


