

Time-Space Dilation: Railway Decay and Temporal Dislocations in Buenos Aires

Dilatación espacio-temporal: Decadencia de los ferrocarriles y desplazamientos temporales en Buenos Aires

Stephanie McCallum
Universidad de San Andrés

Abstract

Argentina has the largest railroad network in Latin America, encompassing over 30,000 km of tracks. In a process sometimes referred to as “ferricide,” the killing of the national railroad system, by the mid-1990s most railroad branches and workshops in the interior had been closed down, workers laid off, and freight and passenger lines privatized. In the city and province of Buenos Aires, metropolitan and interurban trains continued to offer an affordable, if increasingly precarious, means of daily mobility. Drawing from ethnographic research in Buenos Aires, including participant observation onboard trains and in train stations, railroad clubs, museums, and repair workshops, as well as interviews with commuters, activists, railroad workers, and train enthusiasts (ferroaficionados), this article tells the story of railway privatization through the lens of temporality. It charts how shifting management and repair practices, and concomitant infrastructural decay, wrought temporal dislocations for commuters and workers. It examines, too, mobility along a forgotten branch of an infamous, accident-prone railroad line: the Merlo-Lobos branch, which connects suburban Buenos Aires to a touristic town in the rich agricultural plains of Buenos Aires, and is served sporadically by aging diesel trains. Here, remoteness results not from physical distance to urban centers, but rather from the temporal dislocations produced by unreliable transport. This article illustrates the relevance of paying ethnographic attention to the materiality of transport infrastructure and suggests that the histories etched into material surfaces and structures shape the experience and very possibility of mobility.

Keywords: Railways, Infrastructure, Temporality, Privatization, Argentina

JEL codes: L92, R42

Resumen

Argentina tiene la red ferroviaria más extensa de Latinoamérica, abarcando unos 30.000 km de vías. En un proceso ocasionalmente descrito como un “ferricidio,” para mediados de los '90 la mayoría de los ramales y talleres ferroviarios en el interior del país habían sido clausurados, trabajadores cesanteados, y líneas de cargas y de pasajeros concesionadas. En la ciudad y la provincia de Buenos Aires, mientras tanto, trenes metropolitanos y urbanos continuaron ofreciendo una modalidad de transporte accesible, aunque precaria. Basado en trabajo de campo etnográfico en Buenos Aires, incluyendo observación participante en trenes y estaciones, ferroclubes, museos ferroviarios y talleres y entrevistas con pasajeros, activistas, ferroviarios y ferroaficionados, este artículo narra la historia del concesionamiento de la red ferroviaria a través del lente de la temporalidad. Traza cómo cambios en las prácticas de administración y de reparación, y el deterioro de la infraestructura que resultó, produjo dislocaciones temporales para pasajeros y ferroviarios. Examina, además, la movilidad en un ramal olvidado de una línea notoriamente aquejada por accidentes ferroviarios, el ramal Merlo-Lobos, que conecta los suburbios de Buenos Aires con una ciudad turística en las planicies fértiles de la provincia y que es servido por trenes diésel envejecidos. Aquí, la condición de ser remoto resulta no de la distancia física de los centros urbanos, sino de las dislocaciones temporales que resultan de un medio de transporte no fiable. Este artículo ilustra la relevancia de una mirada etnográfica puesta en la materialidad de la infraestructura y sugiere que las historias trazadas en superficies y estructuras le dan forma a la experiencia de la movilidad.

Palabras clave: Ferrocarriles, infraestructura, temporalidad, privatización, Argentina
Códigos JEL: L92, R42

Time-Space Dilation: Railway Decay and Temporal Dislocations in Buenos Aires

[Fecha de recepción del original: 11/2/20; versión definitiva: 29/7/20]

Stephanie McCallum

Universidad de San Andrés^Ψ

Introduction

In the early 1990s, Carlos was sent by his supervisors to travel by train to different railroad stations throughout the province of Buenos Aires. His mission: retrieve station clocks and bring them to the city to safety. The first railroad freight line was about to be concessioned, in these early days of privatization, and rumor had it that station clocks would be pillaged.

Carlos had grown up among clocks. A son and grandson of railroad clocksmiths, Carlos defines himself as belonging to “the railroad race” (“*Soy de raza ferroviaria*”). As a child, his father, who worked at *Ferrocarriles Argentinos* (Argentine Railways), the state railroad company, used to leave him a couple of alarm clocks for him to disassemble and reassemble. The hands of the clocksmith are not unlike those of the surgeon, Carlos told me, and must be refined with practice. At the age of 17, he began working at the clock repair workshop (*taller de relojería*) in Constitución station, the terminal station of the Roca railway line, where his father was employed. The workshop was the last of its kind in Argentina, and it looked “just like the English had left it,” according to Carlos. Time appeared to have stood still. Carlos’ first tasks included cleaning clock pieces. On Fridays, he accompanied a supervisor on his rounds to wind up all the terminal station’s clocks, holding the ladder in place for him. There were clocks in each of the administrative offices that spread out over several floors, as well as in the guards’ room, the telegraph room, and in the bell tower overlooking the street. Winding up these clocks would take Carlos and his supervisor six hours. A large French clock in the telegraph office kept the official time, transmitting it to the entire Roca railway network, all the way to Patagonia (station masters would receive the official time by telegraph and would wind their station clocks accordingly).

^Ψ Contacto: smccallum@udes.edu.ar. Departamento de Humanidades, Universidad de San Andrés.

At 17, Carlos was by far the youngest employee in the workshop; his eight or nine colleagues were, on average, in their late fifties. He remembers his boss telling him at that time, “Kid, learn, because you will be the one who will remain.” He describes his career in the railroad as a pilgrimage, one that took him to clock workshops along different railroad lines, allowing him to observe their idiosyncrasies. In 1991, voluntary retirements, harbingers of the widespread layoffs to come, began to be offered. Carlos believes that railroad superiors, and the media, were preparing the ground for privatization: “They sweetened us u:” Work schedules became more flexible, and lack of control more evident.

When Carlos was sent to retrieve station clocks throughout the Roca line, it was rumored that the new freight concession company, Ferroexpreso Pampeano, would oversee track infrastructure, but not stations. In La Larga, Carlos met three railroad workers, brothers, who kept the station immaculately clean. He watched them wee: “Even the clocks they take away,” they cried. “Many things disappeared,” Carlos says of that period, “There was total *desidia* (neglect). There was pillaging.”

Clocks have long been integral to the railway system. In this article, I examine the temporal disruptions wrought by railway privatization in Argentina, home to the largest railway network in Latin America in terms of extension, encompassing around 45,000 km of tracks at its peak (Salerno 2014). Built with British, French, and national capital in the mid- and late-nineteenth century, the railway system was envisioned as an ambitious, if initially hesitant, project of progress, one which would civilize unruly space and stitch the nascent nation together with tracks and trains (Wright 1974; López and Waddell 2007; Schvárzer and Gómez 2006). Resented as a symbol of foreign imperialism, the railway system was nationalized by President Juan Domingo Perón in 1948, leading to the reorganization of the different lines and their renaming after prominent Argentine statesmen. Throughout most of the second half of the twentieth century, this sprawling grid was managed by *Ferrocarriles Argentinos* (Argentine Railways), the railroad state company created during the nationalization of the network. Modernization projects in the 1960s and 1970s portrayed the railway as unprofitable and failed to protect it from the growing popularity and power of trucks and cars. Under President Carlos Saúl Menem’s neoliberal reforms during the 1990s, most commuter lines were concessioned to newly-created companies. In the interior provinces, meanwhile, the erstwhile “veins of the nation” fell largely in disuse, while stories of the overnight appearance of ghost towns proliferated. Where trains survived, mainly in Buenos Aires, connecting the city proper to its sprawling suburbs and hinterland, commuters increasingly traveled “like cattle.” *Ferrocarriles Argentinos* (Argentine Railways) was dismantled: Most railway branches and workshops in the interior of the country were closed down, workers were laid off, and freight and passenger lines concessioned to newly-formed private companies. Railroad workers often describe this period using the terms *desidia* (neglect) and *desguace* (gutting out, or stripping bare), as stations and tracks were pillaged and left to ruin.

Drawing from 13 months of ethnographic research in Buenos Aires, including participant observation onboard trains and in train stations, railroad clubs, museums, and repair workshops, as well as interviews with commuters, activists, railroad workers, and train enthusiasts (*ferroaficionados*), this article charts the temporal dislocations that resulted from infrastructural decay and shifting management and repair practices. First, however, I briefly trace the history of railway time-keeping and its reordering of daily life.

Keeping Time

The expansion of the railroad, which for some scholars signaled the advent of modernity (Aguiar 2011), if not the Anthropocene (Swanson 2015), produced a radical shift in conceptions and conventions of time.¹ Regions had long had their own individual times. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1986: 43) has observed, in England “London time ran four minutes ahead of time in Reading, seven minutes and thirty seconds ahead of Cirencester time,” resulting in a “patchwork of varying local times.” These temporal discrepancies were manageable while railroad traffic was low; with increased traffic, however, came the need to standardize time in order to coordinate departure and arrival times in a “supra-regional schedule” (Schivelbusch 1986: 43; see also Prasad 2013) and thus facilitate the circulation of goods, people, and information in a predictable and concatenated rhythm (Rieznik 2012).

Time standardization—the erasure of local times and thus local “temporal identity”—was first instituted in England by individual railroad companies in the 1840s, when each established its own time (Schivelbusch 1986: 42-43). It was only with the creation of a national railroad network that Greenwich Time was established as standard railroad time for all rail lines. Railroad time was finally recognized as national standard time in 1880, thus securing national temporal unity (Schivelbusch 1986).² Four years later, at an international conference in Washington D.C., the world was divided into time zones (Schivelbusch 1986). Coordinated time, or synchrony, as Peter Galison (2003: 40-41) shows, entailed “coordinating not just procedures but also the languages of science and technology.” The history of time coordination is thus “not

¹ Beyond simply “symbolizing” modernity, in some colonial contexts railroads were seen by the state as a technology that could “literally transport temporally backward societies into a normative historical modern” (Prasad 2013: 1254). In this regard, railroads, as a technology of empire, were seen as *precipitating* modernity, as bringing it into being.

² Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1986: 44) asserts that the process of standardizing time was more complex in the United States, where railroad companies were reluctant to cooperate: stations serving multiple railroad lines held several clocks displaying the time observed by each railroad company (often the local time of the company’s headquarters).

one of a forward march of ever more precise clocks; it is a story in which physics, engineering, philosophy, colonialism, and commerce collided” (Galison 2003: 41).³

In colonial contexts, the standardization of time was merely one of the modernizing corollaries of the railroad as a technology of empire. Prasad (2013) explores how passengers in colonial India grappled with the temporal restructurings wrought by railroads, both in terms of speedy transport and of standardized time. Prasad (2013: 1275-1276) shows how station clocks and timetables were “artefacts that marked the establishment of a new temporal order,” and how train timings shaped “emerging time-structures of work and leisure.”⁴ Train schedules were often contested, so that “among the demands of passengers for the alteration of train timings, one sees not only the spread of bureaucratic-capitalist structures, but equally a *tempering* of the theoretical abstractness of these with individual and local concerns—inserting the minutiae of daily life back into the theoretical empty homogeneity of standardized time” (Prasad 2013: 1276-1277).⁵

In Argentina, before 1894 Buenos Aires time competed with time as established by the National Observatory in the province of Córdoba. Marina Rieznik (2012: 9) describes the challenges of simultaneity and coordination: clocks carrying city time were transported by train to different locales, where they joined the cacophony of local time marked by church bells.⁶ Train tickets, in fact, had to specify whether departure time was in accordance with Buenos Aires time or with Córdoba time. As Rieznik (2012) shows, the imbrication of technologies and communication systems (railroads, telegraphs, postal service, horses) resulted in temporal overlays. Smooth and timely telegraphic communications in Argentina, furthermore, were hard won, undermined and upended as they were by a number of factors that at the time were seen as eminently “local” in nature. Trade magazines of the time reveal that “faults,” “interferences,” and short circuits were attributed to the bands of parrots that perched on wires, the ovenbird (*hornero*) that built its nest on telegraph poles, the dense spider webs known as *baba del diablo* (devil’s slime) that wrapped wires and poles, and the atmospheric dust and fog that altered insulators (Rieznik 2012: 14-15). The difficulties posed to modernity by an unruly environment underscore the multispecies nature of infrastructures (see, for instance, Carse 2012).

³ Galison (2003) reflects on the centrality of clock synchronization to modern scientific and philosophical thought: at the turn of the twentieth century, synchronized clock simultaneity was upheld as “a beacon of modern thought” (: 24) and as the “paradigm of a proper, verifiable scientific concept” (: 25). In particular, Galison describes how the phenomenon of train coordination was integral to Einstein’s grappling with the problem of relativity: it was in observing the arrival and departure of trains that Einstein pondered the problem of the simultaneity of events separated in space.

⁴ Anthony Giddens (1991: 20) writes of the train timetable a “time-space ordering device,” anchoring a train’s arrival in a particular “when” and “where”.

⁵ The heterogeneity of reactions towards this new temporal order, Prasad argues, challenged imperial policies predicated on reified notions of colonial difference (which portrayed the colonized as possessing a distinct “time-sense” and existing in a time-lag).

⁶ I am indebted to Dhan Zunino Singh for bringing Marina Rieznik’s work to my attention.

In 1894, a decree established the time set by the National Observatory in Córdoba as official time for all national railroad lines, and later also for all public offices (Rieznik 2012). This enabled the “creation of a national space unified temporally and calibrated in such a way that communications between La Quiaca and Buenos Aires could take place in a hypothetical ‘common time’” (Rieznik 2012: 13).⁷ Argentina adhered to the international system of time zones in 1920, adopting GMT-4 as its official time. In 1923 the Navy was put in charge of maintaining correct time on the clock tower popularly known as *la torre de los ingleses* (“the Tower of the English”) in Plaza Británica (renamed Plaza Fuerza Aérea Argentina, or Argentine Air Force Plaza, after the Malvinas/Falklands War). Buenos Aires time, determined by the Naval Observatory, became the official time nationwide (Servicio de Hidrografía Naval, accessed 12/2/2016).

Curiously, today Argentina is in the “wrong” time zone by international standards: while its territory falls within the UTC-4 time zone (except for its westernmost region, which technically falls into the UTC-5 zone), as reflected in the 1920 decision to adhere to said time zone, a decree by de facto President Onganía in 1969 instituted Daylight Savings Time as official time year-round, leaving the country in the UTC-3 time zone permanently.⁸ An attempt by the Executive Power in 2008 to implement daylight savings (to reduce power usage and curtail the blackouts that affect the country seasonally) backfired, with several provinces rebelling against the measure (Bullentini 2008; Ruchansky 2008).

Beyond their role in the standardization of time, railroads also reshaped the temporal *experience* of travel, decreasing the time it took to traverse space. Increased speed changed the texture of travel: travelers experienced landscape at a remove, from within the train compartment, and at a speed that defied a close observation of places. Mechanized transportation thus mechanized perception, and travel became “panoramic” (Schivelbusch 1986:52). In the 19th century, the railroad was seen as *annihilating* time and space. As trains “shot” through the landscape like projectiles (Schivelbusch 1986), travel space (the in-between space connecting points of departure, way-stations, and terminals) seemed to disappear and localities grew closer together.⁹ The temporal and spatial effects of accelerated travel, which David Harvey

⁷ La Quiaca is the northernmost point in Argentina.

⁸ See Bilinkis 2015, Videla 2008, and, for a discussion of chronobiology (i.e. bodily rhythms and time), Ruchansky 2008.

⁹ The 19th century poet Heinrich Heine described this collapsing of distance wrought by railways as follows: “Space is killed by the railways, and we are left with time alone (...) I feel as if the mountains and forests of all countries were advancing on Paris. Even now, I can smell the German linden trees; the North Sea’s breakers are rolling against my door” (cited in Schivelbusch 1986:37). Doreen Massey (2005) has critiqued the separation of time and space implicit in such conceptualizations. Nancy Munn (1992:94) has argued that “in a lived world, spatial and temporal dimensions cannot be disentangled.”

(1990) has theorized as “time-space compression,” have been deemed characteristic of life under capitalism.¹⁰

Drawing inspiration from the “temporal turn” in anthropology (Bear 2016, Dawdy 2010), particularly scholarship on inequality and temporal insecurity (Auyero 2012) and the embodied experience of time in specific political contexts (Verdery 1996), in what follows I focus on temporalizing devices such as station clocks and train timetables as lenses through which to examine the effects of the concessioning of railroad lines in Buenos Aires.¹¹ If station clocks have epitomized the struggles over territorial expansion, synchrony, and coordination precipitated by the railroad, then the disappearance of railroad clocks from station landscapes in early 1990s Argentina can be seen as pointing to an unraveling of the dream-world of modernity and its hope in progress and technology. The lack of coordination signaled by absent or frozen clocks (for even where clocks survived, these were often at a standstill) seeped into the everyday in the form of delays, service interruptions, and cancellations. The concessioning of the metropolitan railroad system in urban and suburban Buenos Aires, I propose, exacerbated, if not produced, *temporal dislocations*. These were still prevalent when I began fieldwork in late 2013, in the midst of what was often portrayed as a “railroad crisis,” on account of the ubiquitous delays and frequent derailments and crashes (including collisions in or near the stations of Flores, Once, and Castelar between 2011 and 2013). While railroads have often been theorized as having produced time-space compression (Schivelbusch 1986; cf. Harvey 1990), in Argentina, I argue, unreliable trains and their obsolete infrastructure brought about time-space *dilation*, as locales were rendered further apart by infrequent trains and as train travel became increasingly marked by prolonged waiting and pervasive uncertainty.

In the next section, I offer an overview of the political and economic context in which the concessioning of the railroad system unfolded. Then, I show how in the aftermath of Argentina’s 2001 financial crash, exceptional measures taken to weather a perceived railway emergency became solidified into a context of “permanent exceptionality.” Drawing from interviews with a train ticket vendor, a train conductor, and a commuter in the rural hinterlands of Buenos Aires, I examine how shifting

¹⁰ For a discussion of how space-time compression has been understood by different theorists, see Dodgson (1998).

¹¹ Laura Bear (2016: 29.3) has underscored the heterogeneity of the times of capitalist modernity and suggests ethnographic focus on “timescapes” to foreground how “human practices of time intersect and affect social and nonhuman rhythms.” Human practices of time, she argues, are forms of skillful making that “bring social worlds into being and link them to nonhuman processes” (29.4). Shannon Dawdy (2010) has provocatively reflected on anthropology’s own temporal practices (as evinced, in particular, in the “turn to ruins” in the discipline). Defining modernity not as an epoch or a set of practices and ideas, but rather as “a form of temporal ideology that valorizes newness, rupture, and linear plot lines” (2010:762), she calls for attention to alternative temporalities to release anthropology from the mirage of progressive time.

business models and maintenance practices produced temporal dislocations and a context of permanent risk.

Figure 1
Twilight in Retiro, terminal station of the Mitre line. July 2014



Source: Photo by author

Disappearance

Verónica Pérez (2012) has proposed that the Argentine state's handling of the railway concession process created a privileged environment of accumulation (*ámbito privilegiado de acumulación*) in the transportation sector. Arguing against portrayals of the privatization process as one marked by the withdrawal of the state, she traces the ways in which the Argentine state helped sustain spaces of little to no business risk, thus guaranteeing generous profits for the concession companies. Thus, for instance, the concession agreements acknowledged that the price of train tickets was too low to sustain the investments needed to run and maintain passenger services adequately, and established the need for state subsidies (Pérez 2012).¹² In theory, the payment of subsidies would be subject to the fulfillment of contractual investments and improvements by the concession companies (Pérez 2012). However, in practice the

¹² Potential concession companies would thus be ranked and chosen based on the efficiency of their business proposals, i.e. on their alleged ability to carry out the maximum improvements with the lowest amount of state subsidies (Pérez 2012).

concessionaires did not pay the fees (*canon*) for using state-owned railroad infrastructure and rolling stock established by contract. Furthermore, they were not forced to pay fines for their breaches of contract, insofar as the national Secretary of Transport routinely ignored the reports presented by the National Commission for the Regulation of Transport (*Comisión Nacional Reguladora del Transporte*, CNRT for short), tasked with auditing the concession companies. Despite initial improvements in passenger services,¹³ the state's inability, or unwillingness, to enforce concession contracts would have pernicious effects on railroad infrastructure and passenger safety.

Concession did not merely imply a shift in management of rolling stock and infrastructure from within the purview of the state to that of private companies. The process is often described by railroad workers and train activists as a *dismantling* of Ferrocarriles Argentinos: as the network was carved up into sections and granted in concession to different companies, many of its assets (*patrimonio*), including real estate in abandoned lines and branches, workshop and depot buildings, rolling stock, rails, and spare parts, were sold off (Martínez 2007). Some of the larger railway workshops, such as those in Rosario, Laguna Paiva, and Junín, were transferred to worker cooperatives. Patricio, a middle-aged artist who has long been fascinated by trains and who intervenes dilapidated stations with fellow performance artists, portrayed the months leading up to privatization as ones of *saqueo preventivo*, preemptive looting or pillaging. Railroad objects brought to Buenos Aires (clocks, bells, antique telephones, desks) were gathered (*acopiados*) in warehouses and later sold. Concession companies, in his words, were akin to occupation troops, and what was lost during this period was as much *fierros* (metal) as “human material” and “a sense of belonging.”

Privatization entailed the disappearance of artifacts, workers, infrastructures, and knowledge. Craft/trade workshops (those dedicated to train upholstery, metallography, even the printing press) were dismantled; these services would now be outsourced, and the chain of knowledge and apprenticeship (*cadena de formación*) was interrupted. “We were also gutted out,” Carlos, the clocksmith, lamented. When describing the long queues of haggard workers, lining up to collect their salary in the months leading up to privatization, uncertain whether they would be fired or not, he likened these to soup kitchen lines and to Auschwitz prisoners. “We were ghosts”, he told me.

¹³ Martínez (2007) portrays the period immediately after concession in a positive light. In his account, during these early years (in a period he defines as spanning from 1991 to 1998) railway traffic rebounded, freight and passenger demand increased, the workforce was reduced, and the indices of productivity increased (Martínez 2007). He attributes the increase in passenger demand to improvements in service frequency, punctuality, cleanliness, and safety, and to the fact that the cost of tickets remained low. Pérez (2012), however, suggests that records of higher passenger traffic might instead be a reflection of tighter controls of ticket evasion, procured through architectonic changes in the layout of stations and in the access to platforms, and through increased numbers of security officials. Furthermore, Martínez (2007) surmises that the availability of rolling stock (insufficient despite the fact that there was an abundance of inactive material from defunct long-distance services) acted as a limiting factor for passenger traffic, as did the number of railway crossings (*pasos a nivel*), which constrained the frequency of trains.

'95 was terrible, because many *compañeros* (colleagues or comrades) committed suicide. Many people who were attached (*aferrada*) to the railway were suddenly left *outside* –let us not forget the number of railway lines that closed, the kilometers and kilometers of tracks, the towns that have disappeared. The stations that died, the stations that were destroyed– because by the end they stole even the station roof plates.

Carlos mentions a stationmaster who hung himself, and another who jumped in front of a moving train. Others suffered from depression or turned to alcohol. Carlos himself was rendered disposable when the Roca line's clock workshop was dismantled. He was offered a post in the signaling department (which he considered a downgrade), and later in the telephone department, but he only lasted ten days with the new concession company. He spent the next five years working in the CeNaCaF (*Centro Nacional de Capacitación Ferroviaria*), the National Railway Training Center, in Temperley. "Those years it was all about survival." He would see trains go by on their way to Constitución, his former workplace, and think to himself, "I should be on one of those." "I was someone who was left over," he lamented, "It was a painful period."

Permanent Exceptionality

Towards the end of the 1990s, the national government moved to renegotiate the concession contracts and adjust ticket prices, but was met with increasing complaints from opposition parties and commuter and consumer associations, who denounced delays in investment projects, lack of transparency regarding subsidies and their allocation, and insufficient improvements in terms of cleanliness, rolling stock maintenance, infrastructure, and customer service (Pérez 2012). President Fernando De la Rúa's administration (December 1999 - December 2001) finally granted concession companies an increase in ticket price and extended the concession periods. By then, Pérez (2012) finds, state subsidies to the metropolitan passenger concession companies (around \$376 million in 1999) were comparable to, if not higher than, the \$1 million dollars a day that the railway system in its entirety (including freight and interurban transport) had allegedly cost the state prior to privatization, and that had served as its justification.

By 2001, in the wake of different international financial crises (in Mexico, Russia, and Brazil) and as export commodity prices fell and foreign debt increased, Argentina was in a severe economic recession. In December, the national government defaulted on its sovereign debt. The fall below the poverty line of more than half the population (and the purported dissolution of the middle class in a country that has historically defined itself as middle-class), the widespread social protests (most famously the *cacerolazo* protests, in which the impoverished middle class took to the streets banging pots and pans), and the political upheaval signaled in the rapid

succession of five presidents in ten days have turned the 2001 financial crisis into one of the most spectacular defaults in world history (Shever 2012). As unemployment rose, train ridership fell by 25.1% (Presidencia Auditoría General de la Nación 2013a), impacting concession companies' earnings through sale of tickets.

Under President Eduardo Duhalde, who stepped in to complete the presidential term after De la Rúa and a series of interim presidents resigned, the national government declared the railroad system to be in a state of emergency (Decree 2075/02), in the context of a wider public emergency outlined a few months earlier in Law 25.561 (Pérez 2012). This decree acknowledged that the fiscal crisis had thwarted the concession companies' programs of investment in infrastructure (insofar as these were reliant on state subsidies, which were by now heavily delayed) and that the devaluation of the peso had altered their cost structure (Pérez 2012). The railway emergency decree thus exempted the companies from investing in infrastructure and rolling stock (beyond a bare minimum needed for daily operations). In effect, the decree instituted a context of "permanent exception" (Presidencia Auditoría General de la Nación 2013a).

While the election of Néstor Kirchner as President in 2003 ushered in a period of economic recovery and a concomitant increase in demand of passenger railroad services (Martínez 2007), over the next decade commuting conditions only worsened in most railroad lines.¹⁴ Train punctuality decreased and derailments became more frequent. The *Auditoría General de la Nación* (the Nation's General Audit Office, AGN for short, an independent body tasked with auditing public services that reports to Congress) audited all concession companies between 2002 and 2012, and found that the percentage of trains that ran according to schedule fell from 97% in 1998 to 78.5% in 2007 (Presidencia AGN 2013a).

Despite repeated reports by AGN and the National Commission for the Regulation of Transport (CNRT) on the deteriorated state of rolling stock and track infrastructure, state subsidies increased. In the case of Trains of Buenos Aires (TBA, one of the concession companies with the worse performance records), subsidies accounted for 33% of the company's earnings in 2003, and 75% by 2009. TBA, in fact, is one of the major stakeholders in the public bus system (the Cirigliano brothers, of TBA, own Grupo Plaza, one of the largest commuter bus companies in Argentina), and had much to gain as disaffected train riders resorted to bus transportation (not the least because bus tickets are more expensive than train fares).¹⁵ As subsidies were not pegged

¹⁴ Ferrovías and Metrovías, the concession companies that oversaw the Belgrano Norte and Urquiza lines respectively, are often cited as exceptions to the rule.

¹⁵ TBA was comprised by COMETRANS S.A. (Consorcio Metropolitano de Transporte, which was presided by transportation mogul Sergio Claudio Cirigliano and which held 41.65% of TBA's shares, as well as substantial shares in Metrovías S.A., the concession company that oversaw the Urquiza line and the subway system), MK Rail Corporation (an American company that produced locomotives), and Burlington Northern Railroad Company, also American (Pérez 2012; Ministerio de Economía y Obras y

to performance and profits were not accrued from the sale of tickets, concession companies had little incentive to improve train services. Instead, concession companies pursued the maximization of their profits by cutting back on operation and maintenance costs, and by pressuring the state for increases in ticket prices (Pérez 2012).

As subsidies increased, investments froze and quality of service diminished: while between 1995 and 2000 1.78% of trains were cancelled and 3.34% were late, in the following decade (2000-2010) the numbers had risen to 4.93% and 10.59% respectively (Presidencia AGN 2013a). Due to poor maintenance of rolling stock (as further examined below), the fleet of trains in working condition fell, and the average number of people transported by train increased from 450 in 2002 to 600 in 2008 (Presidencia AGN 2013a). Chronic overcrowding became a trait of most metropolitan railroad lines.

As the next two sections illuminate, the restructuring of the railroad system into a hybrid public-private arrangement (where rolling stock and infrastructure belonged to the state, but services were managed by concession companies) brought forth a period of increased precarity for railroad workers and commuters, as experienced through unreliable trains and timetables (particularly after the 2001 crisis).

Boom and Bust

Sergio had never planned on working in the railways. He had developed a passion for trains as a teenager, when he traveled daily on the Roca line to high school in the industrial southern suburbs of Buenos Aires. His commute often led to *rateadas*, skipping school or cutting class in order to travel to new destinations. As an adult, he was one of the founding members of *Todo Trenes* (literally “Everything Trains,” or “All Trains”), one of the most popular “train buff” or rail fan magazines in Argentina. I met with Sergio in December 2014, in the library of the Fundación Museo Ferroviario, a private foundation set up by a group of railroad enthusiasts during the early years of privatization in order to safeguard the National Railroad Museum’s archive, which they feared would be dismantled. His entry into the railways as a worker had been purely circumstantial, “an accident,” he told me. In 1995, while unemployed, he was promised an administrative job in railway management, with the suggestion that, in the meantime, he should begin working in what is known as the “commercial sector” (*Sector Comercial*), that is, the ticket-vending office. The administrative job never

Servicios Públicos 1995). The brothers Sergio Claudio and Mario Francisco Cirigliano, President of COMETRANS and Director of TBA, respectively, also owned commuter bus lines in Buenos Aires and other Argentine cities; long-distance bus lines in Argentina; and participated in transportation concessions in Brazil and in the U.S. (in Miami). The Cirigliano brothers also purchased a rolling stock manufacturing plant in suburban Buenos Aires, naming it *Emprendimientos Ferroviarios S.A.* (literally “Railway Enterprises,” and locally known as *Emfer*).

materialized, and Sergio wound up working as a ticket vendor for eleven years (1995-2006). He trained in the San Martín railway line for a month, and was then transferred to Constitución (the Roca line's terminal station) for a brief period, before finally winding up in the *boleterías* (ticket offices) of the Mitre line, concessioned to TBA. Sergio describes his time working for TBA as having spanned a cycle of boom and bust: "I saw the boom...the moment of promise, the great projects, the renegotiations, the decline (*decadencia*), and the neglect (*desidia*)." He added, "I left aghast, precisely because I liked [the railway] too much to withstand the internal atmosphere [*la interna*] that we were living, no? And the decline of service, and that type of thing."

After an initial period during which concession companies helped re-establish the "rules of the game," managing to run trains according to schedule and to subdue railway unions and workers, things began to change. Sergio partly attributes the decline in the service offered by TBA to "political matters" that exceeded the railway world, beginning in 1998 or 1999 with what he refers to as the "wearing out" of the convertibility model (*el desgaste de la convertibilidad*), that is, the decreased capacity of the Argentine peso to remain pegged to the U.S. dollar.¹⁶ During this period, Sergio began noticing "superfluous investments, little attention to service." "The elemental basics were not attended to, but suddenly you found LED screens, things that were not essential to service, but that were part of collateral businesses, because the [concession] companies were negotiating other working conditions and, until they achieved these, they did not want to risk any investments," Sergio explains.

In a context of economic and political crisis and uncertainty, the concession companies' business model shifted. According to Sergio, "the business [*el negocio*] became basically sustained by subsidies. So, the companies lost interest...Their profit was no longer linked to the fulfillment of service. Companies like Metropolitano, like TBA, said, 'Well, my business [*negocio*] is to make this subsidy last, spending as little as possible. So I do not buy original spare parts, I patch things up [*ato con alambre*, lit. "tie with wire"], I lower the circulation speed."¹⁷ State subsidies, according to Sergio, generated an atmosphere ripe for distortions, as concession companies habitually

¹⁶ This measure had been instituted by President Menem to battle hyperinflation, but, in a context of increased political and economic weakness, particularly during President De la Rúa's brief term, it became untenable.

¹⁷ The expression "*ato con alambre*" (literally to tie things together with wire, to wire together) was often used by commuter-activists and railway workers to describe the concession companies' practice of patching things together in a superficial, precarious manner.

overpriced spare parts and maintenance projects in their accounting books.¹⁸ “There was no relation between what was done and what was made to figure,” he remembers.¹⁹

Olivos station, where Sergio worked from 2002 to 2006 as a ticket-vendor, is nested in an affluent neighborhood (where the Presidential residence is located) in the northern suburbs of Buenos Aires, roughly halfway between the terminal stations of Retiro and Tigre. From within his ticket booth, Sergio observed that commuters on the Mitre line seemed oblivious to what was unfolding, and he grew impatient: “I, in particular, first got very angry with the people, because it seemed to me that they did not realize what was going on.” He partly attributes their complacency to class, describing Mitre commuters as belonging to a “*very particular social spectrum*.” “I noticed that people complained, but they complained about trivial matters. We would suddenly receive complaints about peddlers (*vendedores ambulantes*), or because there were people begging in the stations... It was as if people were not aware of the situation that was being lived beyond the station platform.” Towards the end of his tenure (before he resigned in 2006), however, the situation had become less manageable for commuters and workers: “Those last years, I experienced them, well, coexisting with a total disorder in the service, with complete non-fulfillment (*incumplimiento*) [of schedules], with permanent [technical] failures, with people’s anger [*bronca*]. Always fearing the explosion [*estallido*] or aggression.” “If people travel badly, they live badly,” he quipped. Passengers lost work bonuses because of recurrent tardiness due to the train’s unpunctuality, and university students’ choice of classes was limited by the

¹⁸ Many of my interlocutors engaged in frequent comparisons of different railway lines and concession companies. For Sergio, *Metropolitano*, the concession company that ran the Roca line, was particularly flagrant in its irregularities: “We’ve reached extremes that are shameful, like *Metropolitano*, which said: ‘We remove the trains’ windows [*ventanillas*, I think he actually meant the shutters, as this is the story that I heard from different sources] and we sell them as aluminum.” He describes his brief time working for *Metropolitano* in *Constitución*, the Roca’s terminal station, as “alienating,” and narrates occasions in which angry passengers even spat at him. Remarks of this sort on the distinctive behavior of passengers from different railway lines reflected a racialized affective geography of urban and suburban Buenos Aires. Activists from a commuter-coalition group, comprised by passengers from different railway lines, often appeared to compete with each other in terms of whose railway line was “worse;” at a group meeting, Juan, a commuter-activist, portrayed *Metropolitano* as the harbinger of precarity: whatever TBA did, *Metropolitano* had done it first, but without leading to large-scale tragedy, as did occur with the former.

¹⁹ Like many of my interlocutors, Sergio made an exception with *Ferrovías*, the concession company that oversaw the Belgrano Norte line. *Ferrovías* is often regarded as the most successful concession company: although it suffered the same political and economic crises as the other companies, *Ferrovías* continued to offer a passenger service that is often described as reliable and safe. Sergio attributes their performance to a matter of moral standards: “Perhaps not because they are better people, I am not trying to make a judgment beyond what I am entitled to, but as a business model, you can take the responsibility of saying, ‘Well, I do not want to leave dead bodies along the way (*dejar muertos en el camino*)’...I think that *Ferrovías*’ policy, of *that* particular business group, is, ‘We will do our business projections, caring for what we have, and *without* disregarding our responsibility.’” That is, while *Ferrovías* did not renovate or “modernize” its rolling stock, maintaining diesel traction, the service that these trains offered was consistently reliable. Other interlocutors attributed *Ferrovías*’ better performance to the fact that the company retained older, knowledgeable railway specialists on staff, rather than replacing them, as other companies presumably did.

train's erratic schedule. While his coworkers remained impassive in the ticket-booth, perhaps out of self-protection, Sergio would walk out onto the station platform and try to explain to passengers that the problem was systemic: "You know what the issue is? This railroad that you are traveling on, it is not investing."²⁰ You have to go and knock on the company's door, you have to go and complain there." He began plastering the station with posters.

TBA was quick to retaliate: "As if it were a disciplinary measure, they punished us by withholding information about the trains. When you work with an absolutely irregular service, where timetables are not complied with, you need to have information about the trains, because the *basic* thing that people come to ask you is at what time is the train coming," Sergio complained. He continued, "I was in a company that did not care whether you produced and worked, if trains ran, if they arrived on time... It was *so* evident that their profit [*negocio*] was elsewhere, this made room for that territory that the company did not occupy, that space that the company did not occupy, to be occupied by groups [*camarillas*], union groups... It was all really very sad."

Although Olivos did not experience as much passenger traffic as other stations, it was a track-switch area, which meant that whenever there was a problem (such as a technical failure, a suicide, an accident), trains arriving to Olivos were turned around and sent back, leaving passengers stranded at the station. On those increasingly frequent occasions, angry passengers would gather in front of the ticket booth and demand a refund and an explanation, often insulting Sergio and his coworkers. In the tumult, it was impossible to control tickets and verify who deserved a refund. The cash register would thus often operate at a loss, which was compounded by the thefts that the booth suffered on a nearly daily basis, in the absence of security officers (and which eventually led to night shifts being cancelled altogether; that is, while trains continued to run, ticket offices remained unmanned at night). In this climate of unease, Sergio stopped wearing his uniform when he rode the train to work; from source of pride to one of risk, TBA's uniform turned him into an easy target for passengers' fury.²¹

The increasing precarity of train services and working conditions pushed Sergio to resign. "That violence that I experienced, which was antagonizing me with even my own affection for the railway, was stronger than I," Sergio reminisces of that time, "What I call violence... I took everything as an aggression, you see. That the trains did not work, that the station was dirty, that commuters complained all the time, and rightly so. That my coworkers did not seem to mind..."

²⁰ Here, "the railroad" (*el ferrocarril*) appears as a metonym for the concession company (in this case, TBA).

²¹ Passenger outbursts (*estallidos*) became more common on railroad lines serving less-affluent commuters, who depended disproportionately on trains for their daily mobility (see Rebón et al 2010).

During TBA's tenure, shifting train temporalities—frequency of service, delays, interruptions, and cancellations of service—rendered palpable broader shifts in business model and maintenance practice. As train timetables became increasing untrustworthy and unavailable (withheld from station personnel as a disciplinary measure), train schedules became a site of struggle through which TBA asserted its mode of profit seeking, above and against the need to provide reliable service.²² Train delays and interruptions in service, in turn, were largely attributed to shifting maintenance and work practices, as the next section underscores.

Permanent Risk

Ramón, a middle-aged *motorman* (train conductor) with dark hair and an open face, has worked for decades on the Mitre line's José León Suárez branch, which connects downtown Buenos Aires with its northwestern suburbs and serves less-affluent communities than the Retiro-Tigre branch where Sergio worked. Like Sergio, Ramón claims to have witnessed the unraveling of the railroad system. A former delegate for *La Fraternidad*, the century-old train conductors' union, he abandoned the organization as he became increasingly aware—and critical—of its complicity in railroad decay; he participated, in fact, in the widespread strike led by railroad workers in 1991 to protest the massive layoffs that heralded impending privatization. Today, he is one of the more visible figures of MoNaFe (*Movimiento Nacional Ferroviario*), the National Railroad Movement, a group of current and former railroad workers who aim to revive the national railroad industry and recover defunct railroad services in the interior. In an inversion of former President Menem's infamous 1989 dictum "Branch that strikes, branch that will shut down" ("*Ramal que para, ramal que cierra*"), a phrase that for many veteran railroad workers encapsulates the destruction of the railroad system, MoNaFe's slogan is "Branch that fights, branch that returns" ("*Ramal que lucha, ramal que vuelve*"). Because of his affiliation with MoNaFe, Ramón has now been blacklisted by the union.

As we conversed in an office space shared by MoNaFe and the *Movimiento Emancipador* (the Emancipatory Movement),²³ surrounded by books, pamphlets, and

²² In other contexts of neoliberal reform, train schedules have been enrolled in battles of other sorts. Mark Fleming (2016) examines how in San Francisco's Municipal Railway (Muni) problems with time (namely, slowness and lateness) attributed to unproductive transit workers are mobilized to justify neoliberal restructuring, in particular, labor reform. Fleming explores how chronic lateness is produced and portrayed, and argues that, in exerting impossible demands on transit workers, neoliberal time discipline foments public disapproval and erodes solidarities that might contest flexible labor arrangements. In Buenos Aires, meanwhile, train conductors' work practices and ethics came under public scrutiny in the aftermath of a series of train crashes, when conducting habits deemed irresponsible and dangerous were invoked to justify increased security measures and undermine the railway conductors' union.

²³ On their blog, members of the *Movimiento Emancipador* (Emancipatory Movement) present themselves as the "heirs of the Sanmartinian-Bolivarian project" of Hispanic American unity and as supporters of the "Latin American socialists and revolutionary experiences led by Fidel Castro, Hugo Chávez, and Evo

portraits of Latin American revolutionaries (Juana Azurduy, Manuel Belgrano, Salvador Allende), Ramón described the current state of the railroad network as the result of 19 years of neoliberal policies and privatization: “We always say it was business schemes [*negociado*], looting [*saqueo*], corruption, and death,” he quipped. “I always say, I saw the splendor, the last splendor of Ferrocarriles Argentinos...Honestly, the railroad was something impressive,” he mused, “Well, I also had the opportunity to travel along different long-distance lines, and, well, I saw the end...”

Ramón began working in the Mitre line in 1980 as a *peón de estación*, a station handyman, cleaning the platforms and bathrooms in Urquiza station. When an opening came up for a railroad crossing guard (a *guardabarreras*), he took it. Two years later, he began training to become a conductor, first as a diesel locomotive assistant conductor, traveling to the interior of the country on both freight and passenger trains. His tasks included assisting the conductor with train check-up before departure, monitoring oil, water, and sand levels, and, on days with low visibility, calling out the position of railroad signals along the tracks. Ramón was also in charge of updating the *libro de abordó*, a journal kept on board of trains where anomalies were recorded (a practice, he says, that has since been dropped). But Ramón disliked traveling to the interior, and after a while asked to be transferred to the terminal station in Retiro, where he worked as an assistant conductor in the shunting yard, helping maneuver freight and passenger trains. By 1986, Ramón graduated as a train conductor and began driving electric Toshiba trains on the José León Suárez branch.

Throughout his tenure as *motorman* over the last 30 years, Ramón has witnessed shifts in management practice, workers’ routines, and railroad infrastructure. He described how a “context that enabled and exposed workers to permanent risk,” as he put it, was created.²⁴ In his early days as a conductor, Ramón began his shift (*servicio*), like all conductors, at the terminal station of José León Suárez. At the adjacent warehouse (*galpón*), a supervisor would assign him a train (*una unidad*, or “a unit”). For certain shifts, Ramón had to arrive half an hour early, and had 15 minutes to check the train “top to bottom” and test its brakes. “Of course, the brake test there is relative, because the train is at a standstill,” he conceded. But with TBA, shifts and checkups were reconfigured. Conductors now often began their shift not in the warehouse at the end of the line, but rather at a way station, where another conductor would hand over a train already in service, with passengers on board. The incoming conductor thus could not revise the train, much less check the brakes, and was forced to trust the previous conductor’s judgment.

Morales”, identifying imperialism as their greatest foe (see <http://movimientoemancipador.org/cartadepresentacion/>).

²⁴ The context of “permanent risk” illustrated by Ramón was not peculiar to TBA, but rather also characterized other railroad lines, under other concession companies, and even outlived their tenure.

Changes in infrastructure also exacerbated the “permanent risk,” in Ramón’s words, that workers were exposed to. During the time of Ferrocarriles Argentinos, each section of a railway branch had its own independent electric circuit. But under TBA these independent circuits were shorted (*punteados*) and could now only be shut down from the power station. Short-circuits provoke fires, Ramón explained, a situation compounded by infrastructural decay. He described the material wear and the lack of maintenance that provoked or exacerbated the “incipient fires” (*principios de incendio*; literally, “the beginnings of fire”), the catchall term used to describe plumes of smoke rising from the train’s underside, often from where the train’s “shoe” (*patín*) makes contact with the electrified conductor rail (known as *el tercer riel*, the third rail). This phenomenon of incipient fires was not uncommon, and on at least one occasion panicked passengers jumped from a moving train to escape what they believed would become a full-blown fire (as reported, for instance, in *La Nación* on 12/21/2007). Most times, these fires prompted service delays and cancellations. Dirtiness, grease, oil, overheating resistors, and metals lying on the tracks (either accidentally detached or purposely thrown) all help provoke incipient fires, according to Ramón. “We attribute it to the lack of maintenance and the obsolete state of the systems, no?” he said. In earlier times, when rolling stock checkups were routine, a train’s different elements were cleaned and blown, and contactors and cables were revised. When these practices were abandoned or performed only rarely or superficially, unsupervised material wear began to pose greater risk. As changing labor practices and the deferral of maintenance enabled the unchecked advance of material decay, obsolete infrastructure and aging rolling stock translated into lower circulation speeds in order to minimize the risk of derailment. As faulty train units were taken out of circulation for haphazard repairs that always proved to be insufficient, a dwindling fleet resulted in lower train frequency, exacerbating already recurrent delays.

Topologies of Dis/Connection

For train commuters in Buenos Aires, habitual delays, interruptions of service, and cancellations of scheduled trains produced a pervasive sense of uncertainty that permeated their everyday. Yet the routinization of uncertainty and risk that came to shape the experience of mobility and citizenship (Soldano 2013) was unevenly distributed along lines of race and class and mapped onto geographies of precarity and abandonment, as TBA funneled its resources into branches serving wealthier sectors of the population. If “temporal insecurity” is a central component of the experience of inequality (Bear 2016: 2-3), nowhere was this more apparent to me during fieldwork than along one of the diesel branches of the Sarmiento line, which, like the Mitre line where Sergio and Ramón worked, had been concessioned to TBA.

Known as “the Other Sarmiento” (*el otro Sarmiento*), this branch connects the working-class district of Merlo, in the western suburbs of Gran Buenos Aires, to the city of Lobos, an agrarian and touristic hub located 90 km (56 miles) west, and is operated by diesel, rather than electric trains like the Sarmiento’s mainline. At the time of my fieldwork, the Merlo-Lobos train was comprised of an old locomotive emblazoned with TBA’s logo, and two or three cars that still bore the initials of the Roca line (where they had previously been in service). It was often cancelled for days at a time, and when it did run it did so with an unpredictable route and schedule.

Frequency of service in this area is partly determined by the nature of this railway’s infrastructure. This branch is comprised of a double track between Merlo and the way station of Las Heras, enabling two-way traffic on that segment; between Las Heras and Lobos, however, there is a single track. In practice, this means that if a train arrives in Las Heras and is scheduled to continue to Lobos but there is another train heading from Lobos towards Las Heras, the first must wait in Las Heras until it has right of way (i.e. until the train from Lobos arrives to that station and the track is clear). Yet these trains often run late, and conductors are reluctant to work overtime (any labor beyond their shift goes unpaid). Thus, a conductor who is waiting in Las Heras for right of way and is behind schedule might decide to turn around and head back to Merlo, rather than continue on to Lobos as scheduled. This occurs often, leaving passengers stranded.

While Las Heras and Lobos are sizeable towns (with populations of over 11,000 and 30,000, respectively), the territory between them is sparsely populated, comprised mainly by farmland. Speratti, population 40 and one of the flag stops between Las Heras and Lobos, is home to a rural elementary school and kindergarten. In the absence of paved roads, schoolteachers depend on the train for their mobility, particularly in rainy weather, when the dirt road becomes impassable.²⁵ Schooldays, in fact, are dictated by the train’s varying frequency: on days in which the train does run, classes last from whenever the train drops teachers and students off in Speratti to whenever the train returns (usually, the length of time it takes the train to cover the distance between Speratti and the terminal station of Lobos, and back).

²⁵ While Speratti does not appear on most maps, the dirt road that runs parallel to the tracks, connecting the area to neighboring communities, does. On maps, however, it appears as an asphalt road, in line with official documents that proclaim that it was asphalted in the 1960s.

Figure 2.
Las Heras station. October 2013.



A train stops on its way to Merlo, while passengers await the train to Lobos. Note the sunken, undulated rails, and TBA's logo on the diesel locomotive.

Source: photo by author

Cecilia, the school's caretaker, lives with her husband and two youngest children in a small one-bedroom house attached to the school. Like most folks in the area, she cannot afford a car, and relies on the train to commute to Las Heras, where she teaches. On any given day, Cecilia will call the stationmaster at Las Heras to inquire whether the train will make its way to Lobos, and hence Speratti along the way. When the train does not operate, Cecilia often travels the 9km to Las Heras by foot, unless she is able to catch a ride with a *capataz* or supervisor from a neighboring farm. As the train is rarely on schedule, Cecilia relies on her sharpened sense of faraway train horns and rumbling rails to head to the Speratti flag stop, texting neighbors and colleagues to inform them of the train's imminent arrival. The train's erratic schedule, its unexpected appearances in areas where railroad crossing barriers are nonexistent and dense fog often shrouds visibility, have, in fact, led to fatalities.

Temporal insecurity in this region derives not only from the train's uncertain appearance, its erratic frequency, but also from its fluctuating speed and the unpredictable duration of travel. Although only 9km separate Cecilia's home in Speratti from her work in Las Heras, the trip by train can take anywhere between 15 minutes

and an hour and a half. Some days the train runs so slowly that it would almost be faster to walk.

Along the Merlo-Lobos branch, as in other diesel branches that run through the rural and semi-rural hinterlands of Buenos Aires, dilapidated rails have forced conductors to lower the train's circulation speed, in some particularly rough sections of track to as low as 20 km/h (around 12mph). Train conductors, in fact, are given a daily report [*boletín del día*] with the recommended maximum speeds for navigating specific segments of track. Precautionary speed has been routinized by infrastructural precarity.²⁶ The deteriorated state of tracks, which limits speed of travel, can be traced to dwindling maintenance: as concession companies such as TBA cut back on costs, they drastically reduced the size and number of track maintenance crews, tasked with traveling the length of railway branches and performing maintenance work.²⁷

Remoteness can result not only from physical distance to urban centers, but also, I propose, from the temporal dislocations produced by erratic, infrequent, or otherwise unreliable transport. In rural and semi-rural Buenos Aires, the increased slowness and unpunctuality of trains have rendered places like Speratti, bypassed by asphalt, increasingly remote – what here I call “space-time dilation.”²⁸ Along the Merlo-Lobos branch, the unpredictability of mobility has reshaped everyday life. “We have known and unknown people,” Cecilia, the school caretaker, says of her family's experience with the train over the last decade. “We will ask ourselves, ‘What happened to, say, Juan?’” The people they have met on the train have gradually moved to other towns with “better access, more vehicles.” “Because of the train, because of the train they cannot arrive [to work] on time,” she explained. When I visited Cecilia in 2014, her eldest son, a high school student who could not afford to miss class, was living with his grandparents in Las Heras. “It is hard on us, you see. Him being there...It changes us as a family, and what happens to us, happens to others, to the rest,” Cecilia continued, listing other neighboring families, mainly farm caretakers and domestic employees, who have become split across locales or uprooted to Las Heras.

²⁶ In railway parlance, conductors are required to circulate “*a precaución*,” with precaution.

²⁷ Another example of how poor track maintenance shapes and limits rail mobility is the proliferation of weeds. Train services have on occasion been cancelled on these diesel branches because of weeds: where weeds cover rails and impede proper friction between the train wheel and the rail, trains are prone to skid. Weed proliferation was invoked by my interlocutors as a sign of dwindling track maintenance crews, unable to keep up with the rampant growth of vegetation.

²⁸ Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin (2001) argue that selective connectivity is an increasingly prevalent feature of the networked city and its hinterland, as infrastructure networks bring certain places closer together while bypassing others. The authors term the increasing fragmentation of the social and material fabric of cities –the proliferation of local disconnections in times of increasing global connection-- “splintering urbanism” (Graham & Marvin 2001: 33). In this article, I contribute to this literature by showing how, even where material connections exist (in the form, for instance, of a railway branch), selective maintenance of infrastructure and erratic schedules can render mobility and connectivity unpredictable.

Railroad Emergency

This article has offered an historical overview of the concessioning of Buenos Aires' metropolitan railroad system in the 1990s, and an ethnographic account of the temporal dislocations through which railroad workers and commuters experienced this restructuring of the public-private relationship, as station clocks disappeared and train timetables became increasingly unreliable and unavailable.²⁹ Emboldened by generous state subsidies that were not hinged on performance, concession companies such as TBA had little incentive to offer reliable service. Fluctuating passenger demand did little to hurt their pockets: concessionaires made their profits not by selling tickets, the price of which was kept artificially low, but by cutting back on costs and pocketing subsidies. Shifting work and maintenance practices, including changes in train checkup protocol and drastic reductions in track maintenance crews, contributed to the further deterioration of obsolete infrastructure and aging rolling stock. Technical malfunctions, often attributed to improper maintenance, led to interruptions in service and delays, as services were cancelled and train units were taken out of circulation for repair, exacerbating the sense of uncertainty that came to characterize train travel in Buenos Aires. If railroad infrastructure was meant to order movement through space and time, its deterioration in a context of *desidia* (neglect) and *desguace* (gutting out) had drastically *disordering* effects.

Railroad decay points to the unraveling of the promise of modernity, predicated on coordination, connectivity, and time-space compression. Improperly maintained infrastructure and infrequent train service, I have argued, produced "time-space dilation," particularly in the rural and semi-rural hinterlands of Buenos Aires, where reduced circulation speed (on account of the careful navigation required by dilapidated

²⁹ Shortly before I began fieldwork, countdown clocks were introduced in railroad stations. These clocks purportedly displayed the number of minutes until the arrival of the next train (and sometimes, of one or two subsequent trains), perhaps in an effort to thwart the ubiquitous question, "*¿Cuándo llega el próximo tren?*" ("When will the next train arrive?"), posed by waiting passengers to station personnel, who rarely possessed this much-desired information. Yet time as marked by these countdown clocks rarely coincided with clock-time. For example, a countdown clock might indicate that a train would arrive in 5 minutes, yet those 5 minutes might be equivalent to 7, 10, or 15 minutes in actual clock-time (as measured by a watch or cell phone). Thus, the number 5 displayed on a countdown clock might take several minutes to switch to number 4. Sometimes a number would increase, instead of decreasing, for instance jumping from 5 minutes to 20 minutes, as trains appeared to retrocede. Other times, a train would be pulling into a station, but the countdown clock would still be announcing that the train's arrival was 5 minutes away. In some stations, such as San Isidro (on the Mitre line), countdown clocks hung near analog clocks whose hands stood still, a palimpsest of alternative times. Capricious countdown clocks thus only exacerbated the temporal dislocation (and the space-time dilation I allude to in this article) experienced by passengers. In the San Martín line's terminal station of Retiro, in turn, a large signboard listing the next train services does not display the official time, but rather an approximate time that gets renewed periodically. As Juan, a commuter-activist, noted, this approximated time has the effect of disguising service delays. For instance, at 17:45 (5:45 pm) the board might indicate that it is 17:41 (5:41 pm), and thus a train scheduled to leave at 17:43 that has not yet departed is still "on time," per this signboard's time-amendment.

tracks and the risk of derailment), increased time of travel, and unpredictable train schedules had the effect of rendering locales further apart. Ethnographic attention to the speed and frequency of connectivity underscores that remoteness and proximity are historical conditions, insofar as they are shaped by infrastructures of mobility and their shifting affordances.³⁰ That is, aging infrastructure itself can reconfigure local topologies of connectivity, dictating the speed and frequency of mobility-as-connectivity.

The stories told by Carlos, Sergio, Ramón, and Cecilia are supported by reports penned by the Nation's General Audit Office (AGN). In its audits of the metropolitan railroad system, AGN found that improper maintenance, waning investments, and poor oversight by the Secretary of Transport and the CNRT (the National Commission for the Regulation of Transport) colluded to produce an increasingly precarious passenger train service (Presidencia AGN 2013a). It concluded, too, that the Presidential decree of 2002 declaring a state of emergency in the railroad system only exacerbated railroad precarity by exempting concession companies from investing in infrastructure and rolling stock and increasing state subsidies despite poor performance. Increased subsidies did not, in fact, translate into better train services, AGN found, and the quality of these continued to deteriorate between 2003 and 2012, a period often acknowledged as one of economic recovery under the presidencies of Néstor Kirchner's and his wife and successor Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

As early as 2003 AGN concluded that improper maintenance was impacting public safety. It found that barriers at railroad crossings often malfunctioned; the signaling system was obsolete; electrified third rails were missing proper insulation and posed a hazard for pedestrians crossing tracks; access to stations was often blocked; and security personnel were lacking. By 2008, a restriction on speed of circulation was imposed in most railroad lines due to the poor state of track infrastructure: as a precautionary measure, trains were to circulate at a maximum speed of 40 km/h (Presidencia AGN 2013a). Deteriorated tracks were also seen as accounting for more than half of the derailments in the Sarmiento line, and over 90% of derailments in the Mitre line (both managed by Trains of Buenos Aires, TBA).

Under the so-called railroad emergency, the substrate of uncertainty that permeated the everyday was increasingly punctuated by accidents, most frequently at level crossings. With trains running late and off-schedule, barriers often remained down for long stretches of time with no train in sight. Some malfunctioning barriers would remain partially lowered for hours on end, the monotonous sound of their bell (*campana*) a regular refrain in the cacophonous urban soundscape. Faced with the

³⁰ The buried tracks of two now-defunct railroad lines at the junction by Empalme Lobos hint at a more mobile and connected past, when railroad traffic warranted the existence of a large station and a coffee shop, now crumbling. Cecilia's husband, Julio, remembers a more punctual past: "Before, the train would arrive on time. *Five* minutes late, but the guard knew that someone was waiting."

prospect of waiting idly for an indeterminate period, motorcycles, cars, and even buses would often drive around these barriers. (At some level crossings along the Merlo-Lobos branch, barriers were missing altogether). Between 2002 and 2012, there were nearly 20 collisions between trains and other vehicles at level crossings (Presidencia AGN 2013b). The largest of these, which became known as *la Tragedia de Flores* (the Flores Tragedy) occurred in September 2011, when a train from the Sarmiento line collided into a bus that was crossing the tracks, and then into another train, leaving 11 dead and 228 injured (Presidencia AGN 2013b). Beyond mere temporal uncertainty and the concomitant disordering of everyday life, the off-schedule circulation of trains thus posed a serious risk, particularly for those who, due to limited economic means and lack of access to alternate routes, had become *prisioneros del tren* (train prisoners), in the words of one of my interlocutors, depending disproportionately on trains for their mobility.

The social cost of the subsidized concessioning of the metropolitan railroad system, as Verónica Pérez (2012) has argued, was borne by commuters, who suffered the decreasing quality of train services and some of whom, by 2003, began resorting to acts of vandalism in protest (Pérez and Rebón 2017). Metropolitano S.A., in fact, lost its concession of the San Martín line in 2005 and of the Roca and Belgrano Sur lines in 2007 due to contractual breaches. Despite evincing a similarly poor performance, TBA, however, retained management of the Sarmiento and Mitre lines, shielded by a tight web of favors and complicity that tied company directors with government officials. It took a large-scale, high-profile railroad tragedy, the *Tragedia de Once*, for TBA's concession to be revoked.

Coda

Carlos, who in the early 1990s was sent to salvage railroad clocks, is now in his 60s and when we last met in 2014 was making a living in the National Railroad Museum, preparing railroad objects for display. Himself a vestige of bygone railroad days, he was surrounded by railroad relics, tasked with repairing them for display. His workshop sat on a second floor, tucked out of sight and out of reach for museum visitors, overlooking the Mitre line's terminal station in Retiro. The sound of train horns punctuated his workday. Spare parts were hard to come by, with the dusty museum's sparse budget, and Carlos had had to master the art of mimicry in his repairs. Despite being the only museum employee who was a former railroad worker, and despite his storytelling skills, he had been banned from serving as a museum guide—due to the fact that he was not a *kirchnerista* (i.e. a supporter of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, President at the time), he suspected. The precarity of his job situation had become corporealized: on one of my visits, he rolled up his shirt sleeves to reveal his psoriasis, flaking skin that appeared to mimic the peeling paint of his office walls; this was a manifestation, he insisted, of his anxiety over his uncertain future. Two of his

sons were working in the railway system, and Carlos had kept his private clock workshop to supplement his meager museum income. Given the clocksmith tradition of inscribing one's initials and dates of intervention on a clock's reverse side, Carlos occasionally came across clocks that he himself repaired in the 1970s or 1980s. "We are materialists, we are part of the material," he smiled. He himself had become something of a collector, amassing railway goods he had found in antiques fairs.

Three or four times a year, Carlos met up with other former railway workers, most laid off in the 1990s, to share an *asado* (barbecue), and play *fútbol* (soccer) and *truco* (a popular Argentine card game). Around fifteen of them would meet up, some of whom were working as *remiseros*, private cab drivers. "We always tell the same stories," he laughed, and I was left wondering whether his efforts at restoring railroad artifacts and communalism were also a way of restoring the self. "I am a romantic of my trade, that is why everyone says I am the last one," he said, "Yes, it is true, I am the last one. The one who has remained... They have all disappeared."

Figure 3.
Carlos' desk. Beyond, a view of Retiro terminal station (Mitre line). March 2014.



Source: photo by author

Sources

- Presidencia Auditoría General de la Nación, 2013a. Transporte Ferroviario 2. Informe sectorial del Presidente de la Auditoría General de la Nación Dr. Leandro Despouy. [Received in CD and electronic format from the AGN]
- Presidencia Auditoría General de la Nación, 2013b. Accidentes Ferroviarios y las Tragedias de Once, Flores y Zanjitas. Informe especial del Presidente de la Auditoría General de la Nación Dr. Leandro Despouy. [Received in CD and electronic format from the AGN]
- Servicio de Hidrografía Naval, Información Sobre la Hora Oficial y Frecuencia Patrón. Ministerio de Defensa. Presidencia de la Nación. Accessed from <http://www.hidro.gov.ar/observatorio/lahora.asp?n=5> on 12/2/016.

Bibliography

- Aguiar, Marian, 2011. *Tracking Modernity: India's Railway and the Culture of Mobility*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Auyero, Javier, 2012. *Patients of the State: The Politics of Waiting in Argentina*. Duke University Press, Durham.
- Bear, Laura, 2016. Time as Technique. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 45: 29.1-29.16
- Bullentini, Ailín, 2008. Rebelión de relojes en el oeste. Página 12 17/10/2008. Accessed from <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/sociedad/3-113476-2008-10-17.html>
- Bilinkis, Santiago, 2015. "Relojes adelantados." *La Nación* 07/12/2015. Accessed from <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1809412-relojes-adelantados> on 2/12/2016.
- Carse, Ashley, 2012. "Nature as Infrastructure: Making and managing the Panama Canal watershed." *Social Studies of Science* 42, 4: 539-563.
- Dawdy, Shannon, 2010. "Clockpunk Anthropology and the Ruins of Modernity". *Current Anthropology* 51, 6: 761-793.
- Dodghson, R. A, 1998. Human geography at the end of time? Some thoughts on the notion of time-space compression. *Environment and Planning D: Space and Society*, 17: 607-620
- Fleming, Mark, 2016. Mass Transit Workers and Neoliberal Time Discipline in San Francisco. *American Anthropologist* 118, 4: 784-795.
- Galison, Peter, 2003. *Einstein's Clocks, Poincaré's Maps. Empires of Time*. W. W. Norton, New York.
- Giddens, Anthony, 1991. "Introduction." *The Consequences of Modernity*. Polity Press, Cambridge.

- Graham, Stephen and Simon Marvin. 2001. *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition*. Routledge, London and New York.
- Harvey, David, 1990. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Blackwell Publishing, Cambridge and Oxford.
- López, Mario Justo and Jorge Waddell (eds.), 2007. *Nueva historia del ferrocarril en la Argentina. 150 años de política ferroviaria*. Lumiere, Buenos Aires.
- Martínez, Juan Pablo, 2007. "1977-2006: El ciclo de las reformas traumáticas." In López, M. J. and Waddell, J. (eds.), *Nueva historia del ferrocarril en la Argentina. 150 años de política ferroviaria* (: 209-286). Lumiere, Buenos Aires.
- Massey, Doreen, 2005. *For Space*. Sage, London.
- Munn, Nancy, 1992. *The Cultural Anthropology of Time: A Critical Essay*. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 21: 93-123.
- Pérez, Verónica, 2012. "Generación y sostenimiento de un ámbito privilegiado de acumulación en el transporte ferroviario de pasajeros (1990-2003)." *Observatorio de la Economía Latinoamericana* N° 167, May 2012. Accessed from <http://www.eumed.net/cursecon/ecolat/ar/2012/v:html>
- Pérez, Verónica and Julián Rebón (eds.) 2017. *La perturbación como motor de la historia. Los ferrocarriles metropolitanos durante el kirchnerismo*. Biblos, Buenos Aires.
- Prasad, Ritika, 2013. 'Time-Sense': Railways and Temporality in Colonial India. *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 47, 4: 1252-1282.
- Rebón, Julián, Gustavo Quintana, et al, 2010. "Trenes en llamas. La discomformidad social entre los usuarios del sistema público de transporte ferroviario del área metropolitana de Buenos Aires." *Theomai*, 21: 76-96
- Rieznik, Marina, 2012. *Telégrafos, trenes y la temporalidad argentina a fines del siglo XIX. Sincronía y territorio nacional*. Editorial Académica Española, Saarbrücken.
- Ruchansky, Emilio, 2008. "'Lo que se evita es que haya picos de demanda'." *Página 12* 10/18/2008. Accessed from <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/sociedad/subnotas/3-36042-2008-10-18.html> on 12/2/2016.
- Salerno, Elena, 2014. *The Historiography of Railways in Argentina. Between Foreign Investment, Nationalism, and Liberalism*. *Mobility in History* Vol. 5: 105-120.
- Schivelbusch, Wolfgang, 1986 [1977]. *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles.
- Schvarzer, Jorge and Teresita Gómez, 2006. *La gran empresa de los argentinos. El Ferrocarril del Oeste (1854-1862)*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, Buenos Aires.
- Shever, Elana, 2012. *Resources for Reform. Oil and Neoliberalism in Argentina*. Stanford University Press, Stanford.

- Soldano, Daniela, 2013. "Confinamientos, movilidad e intercambios. Una investigación sobre las condiciones y los modos de vida en la periferia del Gran Buenos Aires." In Carman, María, Neiva Vieira da Cunha and Ramiro Segura (eds.), *Segregación y diferencia en la ciudad*. FLACSO (Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales)-Sede Ecuador, CLACSO (Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales) y MIDUVI (Ministerio de Desarrollo Urbano y Vivienda), Quito.
- Swanson, Heather, 2015. "Placing a Golden Spike at the Golden Spike: Landscapes of the Anthropocene." In Hannah, Dehlia and Sara Krajewski, *Placing the Golden Spike: Landscapes of the Anthropocene*. INOVA (Institute of Visual Arts), University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, Milwaukee.
- Verdery, Katherine, 1996. *The 'Etatization' of Time in Ceausescu's Romania*. In *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next*. Princeton University Press, Princeton. Accessed from <http://www.faculty.fairfield.edu/dcrawford/verdery.pdf> on 1/31/2017.
- Videla, Eduardo, 2008. "¿Y ahora?" *Página 12* 10/18/2008. Accessed from <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/sociedad/3-113557-2008-10-18.html> on 12/2/2016.
- Wright, Winthrop R. 1974. *British-Owned Railways in Argentina*. Latin American Monographs No. 34, Institute of Latin American Studies. University of Texas Press. Austin.