

## **Life is but a Game: Simulacra and Deceit in Argentine Literature and Culture** **Eliana Miller '20**

During the 2019-20 academic year, I am writing an Honors thesis in Hispanic Studies focusing on card games, board games and games as metaphor in Argentine literature and culture. Through my research, I am examining the following questions: *How are games simulations of realities and how are they used to escape reality? How is one's reality morphed through the act of playing games, particularly those that involve lying? When is play political? And how do authors from the Southern cone use games as narrative structures to develop characters, critique social dynamics and discuss literature itself?* My thesis is two-pronged: first, a study of games in Argentine literature, then a journalistic chronicle documenting the history and popularity of card games and board games in Buenos Aires. The latter endeavor is what brought me to Argentina this past winter break, a trip which was funded by the Grua/O'Connell Research Award and the Latin American Studies Research Award.

Most of my time in Buenos Aires was spent playing. I approached strangers in the parks all across the city and observed them playing chess, dominos and *truco*, a popular Argentine card game. I took field notes and interviewed people of all ages about their game-playing habits and even participated in a few matches, though I lost nearly every game I played. I also spent time in public libraries reading articles and books not available in the US about Argentine culture and game-playing.

The bulk of my research came from interactions with a group of older men at the Plaza Intendente Casares in Palermo, a neighborhood in northern Buenos Aires. They have played *truco* every day in the plaza for the past 30 years, and many of my conversations with them revolved around how *truco* has affected their mindsets and their political views. *Truco* is an Argentine-creole card game with two to six players that utilizes *naipes*, a specialized Spanish deck, and has its own language, filled with subtle hand signals and facial expressions. Players must deceive their opponents through a mischievous double-talk, all the while adhering to rules of honor and respect. Much of my thesis focuses on the juxtaposition between the order and honor necessary for a fair game—rules are to be followed, other players are to be respected—and the lying necessary for a fun and lively game—bluffing, deceit and rule-bending are also the backbone of play.

In an effort to explore this juxtaposition further, I visited the Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA), which was once a clandestine detention center during the 1976-83 Argentine dictatorship and is now a museum and memorial for the 30,000 people who disappeared during this time period. At ESMA, I learned about how games perpetuated the military's rule, from the 1978 Soccer World Cup, which diverted the international media's coverage of President Jorge Rafael Videla's violence, to the games that torturers played with their victims inside of ESMA. After my visit, I continued chatting with locals about their game-playing practices and rituals but began to focus more specifically on how the dictatorship affected these habits.

My time in Buenos Aires not only provided me with the interviews and field notes necessary for writing the second part of my thesis, but also helped me expand the scope of my work and begin exploring the political effects of play in contemporary Latin America.

**Faculty Mentor: Carolyn Wolfenzon**

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