

“Vos y yo estamos acá”: Lyric/Non-Lyric and Public Space in the Poetry of Andi Nachon

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The published works of Andi Nachon¹ (Buenos Aires, 1970) comprise more than half a dozen single-authored collections of poetry, inclusion in several recent anthologies, and her own anthology of Argentine women poets. Nachon’s poetry occupies, in form and technique, a space between the dominant trends of 1980s and 90s Argentine poetry—broadly speaking, the *neobarroco* and *objetivismo*²—while her themes take in contemporary pop culture, political memory and resistance, and what might be termed the psychogeography of the city. Ambiguity—of subject or narrative position; of syntax; of geographical or physical position; and of gender—characterizes much of her work.

One of the most notable features of the current poetic moment in Argentina, and particularly in Buenos Aires, is the presence of poetry in public

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¹ Her name appears as “Andi Nachón” in early collections, including *Monstruos* (Carrera). For most of her monographs, her surname appears without the accent. The covers of a number of her books dispense with capital letters for title and/or her name (“andi nachon”); her signature is the ambiguous “an.”

² In the very broadest terms, *neobarroco* poetry focused on the materiality and sensuousness of language, with reference points ranging from Góngora, García Lorca, José Lezama Lima, to Brazil’s *neo-concretistas* or neo-concrete poets. *Objetivismo*, in contrast, concentrated on the creation of objects in language, and reacted to the excess and sensuality of Perlongher, Espina, Echavarren and others, with poetry that was stripped of supposedly unnecessary components, including metaphors and even, at times, adjectives or adverbs. Literary references were mostly to Anglophone poets, not least Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Louis Zukofsky. *Objetivismo* played a central role in the emergence of a new poetry scene in the 1990s, around the *Diario de poesía*.

spaces. There are regular poetry reading events, both at dedicated venues (some are local government supported, such as La casa de la poesía or La casa de la lectura; others are independent ventures, such as Belleza y felicidad or Estación alógena) and in bars and cafés. This is not, however, the world of “slam” poetry as popularized in Anglophone countries, although some poets, such as Sagrado Sebakis (Sebastián Kishner), organise and participate in such events.³ Nachon’s own declamatory style is disconcerting. Although she is significantly above average height, she tends to read sitting down. Furthermore, her readings are relatively inexpressive, her voice quiet, and her demeanour almost apologetic at times, not least when confronted with applause.⁴ This is one of the means by which she simultaneously intervenes in public space while obliging readers and audiences to rethink the bases of such an intervention, questioning the presence of the lyric “I.”

This is especially relevant in late 1990s and early 2000s Buenos Aires. Susana Draper has written on what she calls the “spatial transformations” of the countries of the Southern Cone under dictatorship and during the so-called transitions to democracy. She focuses in particular on the emergence of new malls, often converted from former civic buildings and, in one infamous case in Uruguay, from a former prison; a similarly striking example would be the Galerías Pacífico in downtown Buenos Aires.⁵ Ricardo Piglia’s now famous comment on the change of bus stop signs in 1977 to “Zona de detención” [detention zone] (115), a sort of grotesque joke about the dangers of being out in the city under military occupation, highlights the particular relevance of such transformations for Nachon’s poetry. If the “*proceso*” dictatorship of the 1970s had sought to create a panoptic sense of surveillance and paranoia, and to close down the street as place of movement, exchange, and protest,⁶ then the post-dictatorship era saw the continuation of a series of measures that privatised public space: property booms, neighbourhood private security guards, and “clean ups” of areas such as the former transvestite “cruising” zone in Palermo. New forms of re-urbanisation saw the renovation of cheaper areas of the city in the shape of so-called *torres jardín*. A model of development known as “*palermización*” (the SoHo-style early-adopter-led property boom) became widespread and widely promoted across the city, not least in the wake of the economic crash and political debacle of 2001-2. Outside the city, there emerged

³ See the essays collected in Casas and Gräbner for an insight into the politics of poetry performance in a number of Spanish-speaking contexts. For information on poetry slams in Argentina see <<http://sebakis.wix.com/slamargentina>>.]

⁴ For a survey of the poetic effects of Argentine writers’ reading styles (of their own and of others’ poems) see Porrúa, *Caligrafía tonal*, chapter 4 “La puesta en voz de la poesía.”

⁵ For observations on writings of a similar period but a different genre, see Zimmer on the narratives of Fogwill. On Galerías Pacífico during the *proceso*, see Klein and Veiga.

⁶ See, for example, Taylor for the public performative aspects of *proceso* violence.

new private gated residential estates, the so-called *country*, often surrounded by areas of extreme poverty. All of this contributed to the reduction of shared public space in the city. Yet at the same time, the 2000s and 2010s have been marked by a re-emergence of public protest, both for and against the government of the day.

Against such a background, this essay sets out to examine a number of aspects of Nachon's poetry in relation to questions of poetry and public space: the context from which her earliest work emerges; its development of novel forms of address, in relation to comparable near-contemporary poets; explorations of space, including a form of psychogeography, in both her early collections and her volume *Taiga* (2000); and the subtle political engagements found in her poetry, including a later collection, *Plaza real* (2004). I then move on to look at her most recent poetry and its interaction with non-poetic forms. Questions of the lyric and what has been called by Baltrusch and Lourido (2012) and Casas (2012), among others, "non-lyric poetry," are central to these analyses. I argue that Nachon's work offers an important and innovative example of poetry's ability to analyse and intervene in public space.

1.

Nachon's earliest work, as found in the collections *Siam* (1990) and *W.A.R.Z.S.A.W.A.* (1996), is marked by a certain sparseness, in keeping with the poetry that was emerging in Argentina at that moment and being included in the pages, for example, of *Diario de poesía*. One example of her youthful form and aesthetics is the poem "No tengo":

No tengo

gineceo al que volver
mamá
los cuatro metros
el borde
constante de la cama y yo
bajo estos paraísos
la lluvia dorada
que no quiero
ser la hechicera
conociendo los límites
del zoológico
...
más que tragar
para volver

las sábanas blancas
y el sillón de mimbre
tras la ventana (*Villa Ballesta* 66-67)

I don't have

a gynaeceum to return to
mum
the four metres
the edge
constant of the bed and me
under these paradises
the golden rain
that I don't want
to be the enchantress
knowing the limits
of the zoo
...
more than swallowing
to return
the white sheets
and the wicker chair
behind the window⁷

The emergence of a domestic space that is immanent to the poem is a feature familiar to readers of her near contemporaries, such as Martín Gambarotta (one thinks of the opening of *Punctum* (1996)), with its simply described interiors and furnishings. Yet two features set this poem apart: firstly, the space described is immediately marked as feminine (the *gynaecēum* was the women's private quarters within the Ancient Greek house), and it is precisely this which the speaker tells the mother that is lacking. Secondly, this interior space is constantly put into contact with other spaces, both real (the zoo, which might place us in a fictional version of Palermo district of Buenos Aires, or any city in the world with a zoo) and imagined (the *paráisos*). Furthermore, the form of the poem, while including the short, concise sentences that one may come to associate with poetry of the 1990s, introduces a syntactical model that comes to be one of the most noticeable and consistent traits of her writing. Specifically, this is a tendency to create syntactical drift in verse. From the very opening, the

⁷ All translations are my own unless otherwise stated. Given some of the syntactic and prosodic features of Nachon's poems, the translations respect format and layout rather than idiomatic English.

poem cultivates enjambment; but, on several occasions, there is a contradiction between end-stopped sense and syntactical sense. Which way, for example, is one meant to read the sequence “la lluvia dorada que no quiero ser la hechicera”? Verbs have a tendency, as demonstrated by this poem, to work (or to agree) in more than one way; likewise clauses of place and time may become ambiguous as a result of the tension between verse and prose sense. In a section not quoted above, we read: “los pasos / en túnel de plátanos / una mujer / frontera” [the steps / in a tunnel of banana trees / a woman / frontier] and it is not clear what the relationship between “pasos” and the “mujer” is (66). The “mujer” is not equated, at least not grammatically, with the lyrical voice; the latter is strong in the opening and middle section, with a series of first person singular verbs and first person pronouns; yet after the appearance of the women the first person voice disappears and verbs move into the impersonal (“hay”) or infinitive (“tragar”, “volver”). Thus from her very earliest work, Nachon demonstrates twin yet conflicting tendencies: she creates a space and a voice that speaks from it; yet she blurs the details of the identity of the speaker and probes the limits of the (socially constructed) space. Thus Nachon crosses the boundaries between individuals and tests the limits of the spaces they are expected to occupy.

2.

A poem from what might be called Nachon’s first mature collection, *Taiga* (2000), “Surf,” explores the relationship between voices, spaces, and the crossing or destruction of boundaries.

Un acuario estalla y queda sólo agua. No marejadas, agua
chorreando los pisos, cuerpos se sacuden sin ser peces
sin ser nada. Buscaste el caos y deseaste
los límites arrasados. Este acuario pierde contención y eso que fue algo es restos
reminiscencia: el juego
de las cajas chinas se termina y el mundo dentro de otro y de sí, se apaga. Caos:
ausencia
de un mundo que te sostenga. No hay proceso, no habrá
rebeldía que enfrente nada. Plantas antes erectas pierden boscosidad, cuerpos
son despojados
de cualquier potestad, un mundo dentro de otro y así. Has amado
la ausencia de fronteras
sin contar que sólo se ve nada. Tolera este sistema apenas un metrónomo, la
mínima
alteración y tiemblan: grava, criaturas aterradas. Qué sistema. Ínfimas
irrupciones del movimiento inesperado. Este pez
marca su territorio y en él todo lo posible: soñas un mundo dentro de otro y así

se levantan cuevas, mareas, una sombra almizclada. El juego de las cajas chinas
una en la otra
y sí, la historia:
un límite que te contenga. Igual se obsequia la última sonrisa
al desconocido que nos admiró, se cuida la temperatura o el control
preciso de los filtros. Algún mundo nos comprende, una en la otra y así, el sueño,
tu historia. ¿Buscaste la irrupción
del desorden del sistema para quemar tus ojos viendo nada? No hay tempestad.
Un mundo tras otro: destruir tu acuario y destruir
la presencia de vos en el agua. (20-21).

A fish tank explodes and only water remains. No sea swells, water
soaking the floor, bodies flap without being fish
without being at all. You looked for chaos and you wanted
the limits destroyed. This fish tank loses its containment and what was something is
remains,
reminiscence: the game
of Chinese boxes is over and the world inside another and itself, is snuffed out.
Chaos:
absence
of a world to support you. There's no process, they'll be no
rebellion to confront anything. Plants once erect lose their boskiness, bodies
are despoiled
of any power, a world inside another and so on. You've loved
the absence of frontiers,
without reckoning that you just see nothing. This system barely tolerates a
metronome, the
minimum
alteration and they tremble: gravel, creatures struck down. What a system.
Infinitesimal
irruptions of the unexpected movement. This fish
marks its territory and in it all that's possible. You dream a world inside another
and so
up come caves, high tides, a musky shadow. The game of Chinese boxes one in the
other
and yes, the story:
a limit to contain you. All the same we gift the last smile
to the stranger who admired us, take care of the temperature or the
precise control of the filters. Some world comprises us, one in the other and so, the
dream,
your story. You looked for the irruption
of disorder in the system to burn your eyes seeing nothing? There's no storm.
One world after another: destroy your fish tank and destroy
the presence of you in the water.

The collection in which this poem is found has a distinctively small, landscape format; its typeface is miniscule; and accompanying some of the poems are tiny, *manga*-style black and white drawings. The immediate impression created by the volume is of a sort of cutesiness, alongside the importance of design and the book as an object, rather than simply a means of communication. This meeting between the visual, the artisanal, and the literary is one of the features of recent Argentine poetry highlighted by a number of critics, including Mazzoni and Selci (2006). But it is also deceptive, for the themes of the collection are anything but slight.

The opening phrase is a simple description of a complex event, namely the destruction of a fish tank. Yet the second sentence, running over three lines, contradicts such propositional straightforwardness. Instead we see the effects of the event. Spanish distinguishes between the fish in the water (*el pez*) and the fish on the plate (*el pescado*), but the fish in-between is nothing, “nada.” The negations are both communicated and heightened through “n” sounds; a domestic space comes immanently into being, only for the space within it to be destroyed, causing chaos.

The third line introduces a subject: you (“buscaste”). We encounter another distinctive feature of Nachon’s poetry, namely the use of an ambiguous second-person singular that is at once mode of address and implied subject of the poem. Here a comparison with two possible precursors, both well-known recent Argentine poets, is apposite.⁸ In Alejandra Pizarnik’s early poetry, a second person intrudes on the largely first person verbs. If the earliest work by Pizarnik is marked by an almost obsessive focus on the self, identity, and naming, the intrusion of a “you” elsewhere seems to contradict this egoism. In “Artes invisibles” we read “Tú que cantas todas mis muertes” [You who sing all my deaths] (80). The “I” is still a relentless presence in most of these poems, but there is also a “we,” as in the poem “Cenizas” [Ashes] (“Hemos dicho palabras” (82) [We’ve said words]), and there are poems which clearly present “tú” as an object of lust, love, or affection for the “I,” as in “El ausente” [The absent one]: “Sin ti / me torno en mis brazos” (97) [Without you / I turn on my arms].

Another pertinent comparison would be the poetry of Juana Bignozzi, which also employs ambiguous verb persons.⁹ Bignozzi cultivated what might be called an inclusive second-person in much of her poetry. Her “you,” even if it is

⁸ One must also mention Borges’s poem, “Mateo XXV, 30,” which begins in the first person but concludes: “todo eso te fue dado ... y todavía no has escrito el poema” (*Obra poética*, 182) [all that was given to you and still you haven’t written the poem].

⁹ Nachon once stated that Bignozzi had been “una suerte de maestra” [a sort of *maestro*] for her early poetry (conversation with the author, Casa de lectura, Buenos Aires, April 2011). Bignozzi’s collection *Partida en grandes líneas* (1997) includes the line, “y aquel florero que ahora es restos aceptaba agua y flores” (186) [and that vase that now is trash held water and flowers].

close to the poet herself, is often the object of gentle mockery. In part this relates to her attitude to the first person. In an interview, Bignozzi stated that

Lo que parece confesional nunca es una confesión sobre mi vida. Estas biografías las tomo prestadas de la gente de mi generación, que es la del sesenta. (15)

What appears confessional is never a confession about my life. I borrow these biographies from people of my generation, which is the sixties.

Thus speech and address in Bignozzi are never conducted from a stable position that could be regarded as a lyrical “I.” The humour, irony, and even occasional bitterness of the poems always pertain to a generalized and flexible group that does not exclude the poet herself and those who form part of her generation or share her political and literary trajectory.

What is never clear, though, is whether we should read exclusivity into Nachon’s use of verb person. If plurals can be exclusive or inclusive (the Spanish plural, *nosotros*, is etymologically exclusive [“~otros”] but now is used both inclusively and exclusively¹⁰), a second-person should exclude the speaker. Yet in the vernacular, in both Spanish and in English, “you,” “tú,” and “vos” stand in for the impersonal “one.” Nachon’s “vos” is both distinctively Argentine and grammatically vague, taking in an implied first-person speaker, a second person being addressed (including the reader), and a general, impersonal subject (again taking in the reader).

The ambiguity in verb person is reflected in Nachon’s syntax. As we saw above, in her earlier work, Nachon often leaves her reader uncertain over the direction in which the eye should travel, not least when colons are used. If the lack of end-stopped lines and the many caesurae create a shuttle effect between prosody and syntax, then colons ask the reader if we are dealing with a definition (i.e. a semantic continuity) or a break. In the poem above, is “historia” a “límite que te contenga” or, rather, is that latter phrase a conclusion of all that has gone before?

A further complicating factor is that of emotion: at times the speaker in Nachon’s poem seems positively infuriated with the other. If the “I” speaks for the “you,” there is also half a dialogue missing; the exclamation “Qué sistema” sounds like a frustrated response to the other’s attempt to explain the act of piscatorial violence. Further on, the speaker repeats phrases, as if disbelieving the logic or rationale behind the action: “¿Buscaste la irrupción del desorden ... ?” The conclusion is thus lapidary, even sententious: to destroy the fish tank is to destroy one’s own presence in the water; instead of chaos, and with it a sort of

¹⁰ I am grateful to JC Smith for this point.

late-romantic or even Punk freedom, the act of wanton destruction results in “nada.”

Thus two movements or dynamics lie at the heart of Nachon’s poem: the first is one beloved of the *neobarrocos*, the post-structuralist transgression of limits, the overcoming of dichotomies. This takes place in language (through verb person, syntax) and in the action of destroying the fish tank. The second, however, is something rather more pragmatic: with the loss of this manmade space, this “mundo dentro de otro,” this “juego de cajas chinas,” the subject itself is destroyed: “vos” is lost, and with it the implied speaker, implied other, and the heavily involved reader too. Nachon thus uses innovative modes of address to explore the relationship between violence and domestic or shared spaces.

3.

In the previous poem’s attention to manmade space, and the speaker’s and other’s implication therein, Nachon introduces a feature that is prominent in many of her pieces, namely a consideration of our relationship with the contemporary urban environment. In particular, it is possible to read Nachon’s poetry as a form of what has come to be known as psychogeography.¹¹

Las fiestas del mañana¹²

Más allá de esto: el colectivo se traslada a través de la tarde y vos
seguís su movimiento desde el asiento trasero,
sube el calor del motor, la señora
dice a su hija: ahí no. Alega exceso de zarandeo
saltos y detenciones serán más sentidos y la niña
calla ante tanta lógica. Disfrutás vos esta panorámica y el aire
entrando veloz desde la puerta, acaricia tu cara y acaricia más que esto
tal vez nada. Cruzamos la serie de antenas parabólicas, una serie de torres
eléctricas
o esta usina, de pronto, ocupa el cielo. Decir no es vano: cae sobre nosotros
el atardecer con todo su peso. Una mujer narra estrategias, la nena
observa atenta desde su puesto o un hombre
duerme el cansancio de la jornada –qué podrá
defendernos de esto–. Boulevard de paraísos
el túnel cruzado en un suspiro y está la moto

¹¹ I am grateful to María del Pilar Blanco for her comments on the links between Nachon’s poetry and psychogeography during a reading group held in November 2012 at Wadham College, Oxford, organised by Robin Fiddian.

¹² The poem’s title is at once an ironic reference to the boredom of bus travel and an example of an important reference point in Nachon’s poetry, namely rock music, in this case The Velvet Underground and Nico and their 1967 song “All Tomorrow’s Parties.”

que en el instante se vuelve irreconocible ante tu astigmatismo. Construcciones
 elevadas
 frente a tanto vértigo, murallas, torreones y ante todo
 después de esto: nada. Vas a leer en la apuesta
 de salirte de vos hasta que alguien
 irrumpa la letanía de hamacarte, mirar y olvidar. Vas a entregarte –manos detrás de
 la nuca–
 para que en el gesto se te permita perder: carteles,
 la barrera del tren cortando el paso. Cruzan vagones –de juguete, casi– un tren
 carguero,
 estuviste por decir. Algo así: el fastidio
 del grupo es también tuyo y esta gente es tan parte
 del diagrama como tu mirada. Un paraíso en la tierra, debieras decir, con precisión:
 todo
 para todos. El trencito, así como aparece se disuelve y demoramos ante el sol
 ahora rojo. Bajás la cabeza y la mujer, dos asientos delante, sentencia: “así
 son las cosas”. Qué
 debieras preguntar a ella que afirma saber: nuestras vidas, algo más que esto y más
 allá
 sabés no hay nada. El traslado recupera su curso: semáforos, curvas
 tomadas al tuntún, la idea
 del conductor guiando el aparato. (*Taiga* 14-15)

Tomorrow's Parties

Beyond all this: the local bus journeys through the afternoon and you
 follow its movement from the back seat,
 up rises the heat of the engine, the lady
 says to her daughter: not there. She claims there's too much jolting,
 jerks and halts will be felt more and the girl
 shuts up in the face of such logic. You enjoy this panorama and the air
 coming in quick from the door, it caresses your face and caresses more than this
 perhaps nothing. We pass by the series of satellite receivers, a series of electric
 pylons
 or this plant, suddenly, takes up the sky. Saying no is futile: over us falls
 the evening with all its weight. A woman recounts strategies, the girl
 looks on attentive from her place or a man
 sleeps off the tiredness of the working day—what could
 defend us from this. Boulevard of paradises
 the tunnel crossed in a sigh and there's the motorbike
 that in that instant turns unrecognizable to your astigmatism. Constructions
 elevated
 in the face of so much vertigo, walls, turrets and before everything
 after this: nothing. You'll read on the off-chance
 of leaving yourself until someone
 interrupts the litany of rocking, looking and forgetting. You'll give in—hands
 behind your head—

so that in that gesture you're allowed to miss: posters,
the barrier for the train blocking the way. Wagons cross—playthings, almost—a
freight train,
you were going to say. Something like that: the tiredness
of the group is also yours and these people are as much part
of the diagram as your gaze. A paradise on this earth, you should say, more
precisely: everything
for everyone. The little train, just as it appears dissolves and we pause before the
sun
now red. You lower your head and the woman, two seats ahead, sentences: “that’s
how
things are.” What,
you should ask the woman who says she knows: our lives, something more than
this and beyond
you know there’s nothing. The journey gets back on track: traffic lights, bends
taken any old how, the idea
of the driver guiding the machine.

The opening phrase “Más allá de esto” frames the rest of what we read both grammatically (it is followed by a colon) and thematically. The poem at once describes the very banal and indeed boring experience of travelling by bus. But our attention is drawn in two directions: firstly, through sensitive, or almost voyeuristic, focus on the action taking place within the bus (the actions, movements, conversation and back-story of the other passengers) and outside it (passing vehicles and the urban scenery); and, secondly, to the mental world that the external world of the bus conjures up.¹⁵ The phrase might also be taken ironically: for those on the bus, including the second-person who is addressed, in practical terms there is nothing else “beyond” this journey.

The form of the poem holds many similarities to “Surf,” not least the “vos” second-person verb form as subject of narration. This piece makes use of sound, such as the repeated almost onomatopoeic “t-r” sounds of the opening lines. Throughout there is a strong emphasis on sensation, as well as sense. The poem speaks of the other’s enjoyment, “Disfrutás vos,” and then performs the feeling of the wind’s caress in the following line, with the sibilants of “veloz” and the repeated “acaricia.” Separation—into speaking voice, other, and the passengers observed—soon gives way to a first-person plural subject, “Cruzamos.” The use of “o” [or] to connect sub-clauses (in lines 9 and 11) rather than “y” [and] gives

¹⁵ There is a small sub-genre of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts in Spanish dedicated to bus and tram travel: Benito Pérez Galdós’s story “La novela en el tranvía” [The Novel in the Tram]; Emilia Pardo Bazán’s “En tranvía” [By Tram]; Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera’s “La novela del tranvía” [The Tram Novel]; and of course from Argentina, Oliverio Girondo’s collection of poetry, *Veinte poemas para ser leídos en el tranvía* [Twenty Poems to Read on the Tram].

an almost cinematographic cut between different shots, interior and exterior to the bus. Thus the named and individualized speakers and actors are presented both as part of a group and, in the general uncertainty caused by the use of conjunctions, blurred into each other.

This blurring of boundaries is reinforced by the effects of vehicular speed and the imperfection of the body: “la moto / que en el instante se vuelve irreconocible ante tu astigmatismo.”¹⁴ Vision—and its failings—as well as speed of movement create a type of horizon, the point at which certainty is lost. As the point of view shifts outside, and into the distance, the eye must admit defeat: “después de esto: nada.” The poem considers the limits of perception; it also plays on the idea that the interior is a form of escape.¹⁵ Reading or sleeping are ways of abandoning one’s body and immediate surroundings; here the poem plays with the narrative point of view, for the “vos” does not see what the narrator describes, namely the scenery outside the window of the bus.

Like the fish tank of “Surf,” the bus proposes a space within a space, the inner worlds of the passengers inside the confined space of the bus in the city. But perhaps more than “Surf,” “Fiestas” attempts to trace non-destructive contact between these different levels, seeking productive connections beyond the level of the individual. If the violence of “Surf” destroyed the Chinese boxes, which gave meaning to human endeavours, “Fiestas” seeks a different way of breaking barriers. It does so, furthermore, in a more expressly public space.

The poem examines the way relationships are developed between the individual, strangers, and their surroundings in a moving urban environment. There is, therefore, in the poem, something akin to what in recent years has come to be known as psychogeography. This is elegantly summed up by Will Self as the investigation of “the manner in which the contemporary world warps the relationship between psyche and place” (11) or, in the words of Merlin Coverley, “the point at which psychology and geography collide” (10). Coverley cites Guy Debord as the central figure in the development of psychogeography, as urban wandering was one of the techniques cultivated by the Situationists; but he also mentions works by other urban drifters, not least Aragon’s *Paris Peasant* (1926) and an early predecessor, E.A. Poe’s “The Man in the Crowd” (1840).

Nachon’s particular engagement is to use the bus journey as a form of wandering (the “curvas / tomadas al tuntún” and the “idea / del conductor” both suggest that the destination may be unimportant). The solitary wanderer of psychogeography aims to shake up his or her relationship to the urban environment, seeking situations rather than the staged and artificial spectacles of

¹⁴ Nachon is, coincidentally, quite short sighted.

¹⁵ One thinks of an idea explored in the late, mystical poetry of Néstor Perlongher—for example his final collections *Aguas aéreas* and *El chorreo de las iluminaciones*—of a “salir de sí” [leaving oneself].

modern life. Nachon's bus traveller finds something like that on this journey: "el fastidio / del grupo es también tuyo y esta gente es tan parte / del diagrama como tu mirada." If the effect of the typical bus journey is to atomise, Nachon's traveller is put into communion with others and the surroundings. What, though, would be the "diagramme" in this case? The simple answer would be to relate the diagramme to the bus journey: the map of routes that now comes to incorporate a play of gazes and the passenger's imagination.¹⁶ Perhaps more tentatively, one might suggest that the poem is proposing the drawing of a many-dimensional network, connecting the subject of the sentence with those around him or her.¹⁷ The gaze, the "mirada" is what connects, within and outside the bus, and what is created is an idealized, shared world (a "paraíso," "todo / para todos").

Nachon's poems try to find shared and non-privatized spaces within an ever more privatized urban environment, and to write the experience of commonality and shared sensation. But it does this aware that not all will agree: the woman's "así son las cosas" is a lament for the inconveniences of modern life (her observations come and go in the poem, drifting in and out of perception; but everything that she says is a complaint or admonition of one sort or another). The speaker of the poem, addressing the second-person who has guided the action and observation, combines pragmatism and romanticism in response: "nuestras vidas, algo más que esto y más allá / sabés no hay nada." The opening phrase is repeated here in a slightly different form. If before the "Más allá de esto" encompassed the possibilities opened up from within the space of the bus (imagination, other passengers, the world outside) should this near repetition be read instead as another lament? In part, yes, for there is little that can be saved from the boredom of the bus journey. But there is something: "nuestras vidas," and the possibility that what is at hand can be transcended.¹⁸ Importantly, this is not purely idealism, but rather a search for contacts through imagination and writing. In this sense, the diagram we saw above might also be a meta-poetic reference to the poem itself, drawn as it is in quasi-Mallarmean shapes on the page.

¹⁶ The bus routes of Buenos Aires require their own book, the famous *Guía T*. Carlos Gamerro's *Las islas* (first published in 1998) includes a lengthy comic diversion on the problems of navigating the streets of Buenos Aires using said guide. For Eric Hobsbawm, Harry Beck's iconic London "tube" map, based on a 1931 design, was the last successful piece of avant-garde art.

¹⁷ Luciana di Leone has written on the cultivation of rhizomatic connections of citation, influence, and affect (with reference to Deleuze and Guattari's work) in the poetry and publications of Nachon. I am grateful to her for sharing her work with me.

¹⁸ One might consider the difference proposed by Gilles Deleuze in *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life* between "life" and "a life."

What is more, there is a further crossing to be found, between the abstract and the concrete, between the conceptual and the material. There is something quite comical about the almost simultaneous hyperbole and bathos in the phrase “la idea / del conductor guiando el aparato.” In part, there is a mimetic element: from the seat towards the back of the bus that the second-person protagonist seems to take; the driver of a typical Buenos Aires bus would be almost invisible (hidden by the ticket machine). Thus s/he exists only in the mind or, for the Funes-like empiricist, does not exist at all.¹⁹ Meanwhile, as those who have travelled on buses in the city know, the vehicle at times seems to move as if on autopilot, or as if possessing a dangerous mind of its own. Yet in the shuttle between the certainty that there is a driver and the mock-empiricist doubt, there reoccurs the same movement between resigned realism and what might be called pragmatic romanticism (which is to say, that *we have to* hope for something better) of the entire scene within the bus. Thus the atomization of the long-distant commute becomes the stage for discovering one’s social imbrications, in a form that one might suggest goes beyond the somewhat solitary and often, frankly, antisocial tendencies of recent incarnations of psychogeography. As Davidson puts it, “it is in the process of travel that the poets can achieve their subjectivity” (6).²⁰ Through breaking down the barriers around the poetic “yo” and others, Nachon creates a democratic, yet contested, space within and beyond the confines of the bus journey.

4.

Nachon’s poetry does not immediately smack of political protest or commitment, at least certainly not in the vein of the poetry of the 1960s, or even in the model of such contemporary grass-roots activism as the “Proyecto Yonofui” prison poetry workshops or the pro-Kirchnerista activists of *Poetas con Cristina*.²¹

¹⁹ Jorge Luis Borges’ short story “Funes el memorioso” features a protagonist who, as the result of an accident, develops a perfect memory. As a side-effect Funes also becomes a radical nominalist who refuses to believe, for example, that a dog seen at one moment from a given angle should be referred to by the same noun as (what for others would be) the same dog, when seen from a slightly different angle a moment or two later.

²⁰ For a radical rethinking of the legacy of Debord for contemporary emancipatory projects, see Gilman-Opalsky, “Why New Socialist Theory Needs Guy Debord.” Of particular note for the study of Nachon is his observation that Debord allows us to perceive a means to “counteract and reverse tendencies toward privatization in all of its guises” (126). The same author has also written on another rethinking of public space, namely the Zapatista uprising and communities in Mexico, and their creation of what he terms a “transgressive public sphere,” in contrast to the more conservative models of a public sphere proposed by Habermas et al. (*Unbound publics*).

²¹ “Proyecto Yonofui” [“Project I wasn’t” or “Project it wasn’t me”] runs poetry workshops in women’s prisons in which participants write about their experiences as an

However, the subtlety and nuance of her poetry is present in what must be read, at least initially, as a poem of political denunciation, “Madrugada en la avenida.”

Un chico, no más

seis o siete años
repite perfecto aquel
ademán del malabar con botellas
vacías
de agua mineral. Niño

en medio de la calle
día
insinuado en la frontera de esa
nuestra avenida más
ancha para el mundo. Alza las villa
vicencio contra el cielo, hace el gesto

vacío de atajar. (*Plaza real* 13)

“Dawn on the Avenue”

A kid, that’s all

six or seven years old
repeats perfectly that
gesture of juggling with

empty
mineral water bottles. Boy

attempt to prevent the dehumanising effects of jail. The name is drawn from Bart Simpson’s catchphrase, “I didn’t do it, nobody saw me do it...” (“Yo no fui” in Spanish). “Kirchnerista” or “K” for short refers to supporters of the democratically elected Peronist governments of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-present), encompassing progressive sectors and a large number of youth activists.

Peronism, today a political movement capable of covering all colours of the political spectrum, is named after its founder, Juan Domingo Perón, a military man who rose to be democratically elected president in the 1940s and 50s and then again in the 1970s. His movement was, at least initially, characterised by its working-class support, redistributionist policies, and populist rhetoric, in particular in the speeches of his second wife, Eva Duarte de Perón, better known as Evita.

in the middle of the road
day
insinuated on the border of that
our widest avenue
for the world. Raises the villa
vicencio against the sky makes the empty

gesture of catching.

On first reaction, one notes the date as immediately “post-crisis,” to use Andrea Giunta’s phrase.²² The collection from which the poem is drawn, *Plaza real*, has a dedication, “*a los que eligieron aquí / a los que partieron*” [to those who chose here / to those who departed], and an epigram, “*adonde quiera que vayas, ahí estaremos*” [wherever you go, we’ll be there] from the utopian sci-fi novel, *Blue Mars* (1996) by Kim Stanley Robinson. The collection thus opens with the same theme, treated in two very different genres and tones, namely that of exile or departure, from (implicitly) an Argentina beset by economic woes (and this was, one must remember, an era in which many Argentines emigrated, in particular to Europe, in many cases taking advantage of ancestral nationality and reversing the journey their forefathers and mothers had taken), or from an Earth on the brink of environmental and political catastrophe in Robinson’s futuristic fantasy.

The poem seems rather more quotidian than its framing. However, the themes introduced by the opening lines are taken up here, namely economic necessity and the possibility of transcending it. The poem’s title sets it at dawn, a moment of transition, of course, stated as “*día insinuado*.” As day is insinuated into night, the boy is “insinuated” into the heart of the city. Although one might read “villa” as simply a typographical game with the name of a popular brand of mineral water (named after a former spa resort near Mendoza), this presentation allows the *villa*—the *villas miserias* or slums of Buenos Aires—its presence alongside the boy. The boy is one of the traffic light street performers who appear in front of stopped cars, in this case it is implied on the Avenida 9 de Julio, often referred to as the world’s widest street. Given the width of the avenue in question, it is a long pause. The juxtaposition of the poor child performing for money on a vast stretch of patriotic civic urbanism is in itself an obvious and perhaps melodramatic denunciation of contemporary economic injustices. The parallelism between the syntax of two clauses of the second sentence (lines 6-9) would, optimistically, link the boy and the day. But something more complex is at stake than the sort of ironies beloved of social

²² The collection won a prize from the Fondo Nacional de las Artes in 2003 and was published in 2004.

realists and committed poets, namely a continued investigation of the creation of space. As Davidson remarks in his study of contemporary Anglophone poets, they “are not only trying to represent marginalized social positions and make them part of a broader cultural discourse, but they are also questioning that process of representation” (163-4).

Like “Surf” and “Las fiestas...” this is a poem that deals with boundaries and their crossing: poor and rich zones of the city, day and night; and, perhaps most importantly, inside and outside. Empty bottles, formerly sealed units containing water, fly into the air. The trick is not to drop (and break) the bottles. The broken empty bottle would at once represent the same form of destruction as that witnessed in “Surf,” and an event of total insignificance: the bottles have no worth other than their price as recycling materials or for the return of their deposits. Only in the boy’s juggling act does their relationship to the air around them and the ground beneath them start to take on significance. Thus the performative act creates a space within a space that existed unnoticed beforehand.

Given the sci-fi framing of the poem, and indeed of the collection as a whole, the image might also call to mind the “bone-throwing” sequence in Kubrick’s 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The director shows a battle or skirmish between groups of pre-historic apes. Victorious, one hurls a bone that has been used as a weapon triumphantly into the air. The bone rises and rolls, before a jump cut shows a space ship. The montage effect identifies a link between space travel in the future and our origins as human beings, in simultaneously bellicose and adventurous actions and instincts. In the last sentence of the poem (lines 11-13), the reader’s eye is drawn, like that of Kubrick’s spectator, to the flying, rotating object (bottle, bone). Unlike Kubrick’s viewer, to whom the message of this rather puzzling sequence is cinematically clarified, we instead fall towards the earth as the bottle is caught in the “gesto / vacío de atajar.” A line break and an implied pause emphasise both the suspense as we wait to see if this is a successful catch and the emptiness, of bottle and act. The “gesto vacío” is empty for the practical reason that the bottles are empty, as are the boy’s hands after each toss, and later as he asks for money from the drivers. But it is also that of art for art’s sake, of performance for no reward. This is the dialectic between the action being described (performing for money) and its artistic mimesis in the poem (describing performing for money, but not for money). The boy’s gesture is at once pragmatic—an attempt to earn some coins from momentarily entertained drivers; but it is also a gesture of inherently aesthetic pleasure, and one that the science fiction framing would hold as central to our development as human beings. The poem also reflects on itself, as a form of resistance to commodification and what David Harvey and others have called the “financialization of everything.”

In other poems from this collection, Nachon's engagement with the political moment is more direct, but still unconventional. "Por lealtad" [Out of Loyalty] is one of the longer poems in the collection *Plaza real*; the title is one of the political slogans²³ that appear alongside graffiti such as "*resistencia*" [resistance] "*libertad*" [liberty] and "*luche y se van*" [struggle and they'll be gone—a reference to dictatorial regimes and other forms of oppression].

...

Come el chico
su sandwich [*jic*] de milanesa, sobre la cadera
apoya el manubrio o esa mochila
que su espalda carga y lleva
con cierta nobleza. Y dice resistencia

gigante un graffitti [*jic*] sella el galpón
fábrica antes ahora esos
vidrios rotos para ventanas
que hablan de cuál
posible resistencia.

...

(26)

The kid eats
his schnitzel sandwich,²⁴ on his hip
rests the handlebar or that rucksack
that his back bears and carries
with a certain nobility. And it says resistance

gigantic a graffito stamps the works
factory before now those
broken panes for windows
that speak of which
possible resistance

"Lealtad" and "resistencia" are important terms in the language of Peronism; "resistencia" refers in particular to the Peronist "resistance" that emerged after the coup of 1955 and in opposition to the military dictatorships

²³ "Frente por la lealtad" [Loyalty Front] was the political grouping led by the former President Carlos Menem in the presidential elections of 2003, which were eventually won by Néstor Kirchner after Menem withdrew from the run-off election.

²⁴ The "sandwich de milanesa" is a popular snack or meal in Argentina; it is close in appearance and preparation to the Wiener schnitzel, but less exotic.

that followed. Note again Nachon's use of the ambiguity between end-stopped and enjambed lines: either the scene itself says "resistencia" or, reading on, it is the graffito. "Lealtad" is a word synonymous with the 17 October 1945 demonstrations against Perón's arrest, a key precursor to his eventual electoral success. Even the bicycle, intractably associated with gifts from Eva Perón to children across the country during the first Peronist administration, is an icon of political nostalgia.

At a narrative level, the poem seems to describe protestors attending a rally for a political party. It opens, "Por lealtad / se suben bicicletas al vagón" [Out of loyalty / bicycles are lifted onto the wagon]. The journey, into the evening, heading west, might describe protestors returning to the province, or specifically the Province of Buenos Aires (known for its electoral loyalty to Peronism²⁵). However, much of what is described could equally apply to a daily commute, by train and then bicycle. External references are to the world outside the carriage and the work that the travellers do: "Cada día trabajo y regreso" [Every day work and return]. The phrase has a typical Nachon ambiguity: are "trabajo" and "regreso" first person singular verbs, or nouns? In either case, the phrase is redolent of a famous Peronist slogan: "de la casa al trabajo y del trabajo a la casa" [from the home to work and from work to home].²⁶ Nachon thus highlights an irony: if Peronism at once tried to fill public spaces with images of the leader and his wife, while also closing off public space through the insistence on the priority of work and home, something of its potency survives in both working class culture and in mass protest; the latter, once must remember, was a key element in the rise of Peronism as a political force, when on 17 October 1945 thousands of Perón's supporters marched in protest at his arrest by the military dictatorship of the day, or in the annual rallies outside the presidential palace.

The poem speaks of different types of resistance, and it seems that the everyday struggle of the worker is Nachon's focus: "Resiste un cuerpo / horarios y resiste sólo / en fidelidad a eso que ahora / está partiendo" (26) [A body resists / work-hours and only resists / in fidelity to what now / is departing]; the physicality of work is also highlighted: "cuerpos / que conocen de tareas, cansancio o el descanso" (27) [bodies / that know tasks, fatigue or rest]. The speaker pays the same close attention to one particular passenger, the young man with the bicycle, that it did to the woman on the bus or the boy juggling bottles in the street: "esos ojos / niños del joven / asoman la gorra y reflejan

²⁵ The province has a long history of voting Peronist, and has had Peronist governors since 1987.

²⁶ For an excellent study of the relationship between space, poetry, work, and revolution, see Ross. Of particular interest is her reading of the poetry of Rimbaud and his "nonexpository, nondidactic" prose (28) as an insight into "the first realization of urban space as revolutionary space" (4) in the shape of the Paris Commune of 1871.

tantos brillos / sin decir dureza” [those eyes /childlike of the young man / peer out from the cap and reflect so many sparkles / not to mention toughness]. The worker or the protester has childlike eyes, looking out from under the peak of a cap, reflecting the low sun and tacitly the harsh conditions of work or travel. Nachon’s poem picks an anonymous face out from the crowd and portrays a certain innocence and dignity, but does so in a poem that sets the mass movement of individuals in a decades-old history of struggles and conflicts over work and workers’ rights. The poem thus implies a series of contrasts: the mass movement of the political rally against the everyday movement of the worker; the factory in use against the smashed factory of industrial decline.²⁷ It concludes on a note that could either be utopian or weary: the return journey taken “otra vez al oeste de qué / paraísos probables” [once again west of what / probable paradises]. The “probable” paradises to which the political activist might aspire are held back to the end of the poem, isolated on its own line like the “Por lealtad” of the opening. Yet the sense of repetition, both semantically in “otra vez” and in the two alliterations (“o – o” and “p – p,” the latter an echo of the opening), might call into question the practicability of these “paraísos,” or the sense of inevitability that the cycle of activist enthusiasm and political disappointment might hold.²⁸ Yet in the youth and resistance of the young man, Nachon’s poem finds hope.

5.

A more recent collection by Nachon might be seen as a venture into the “concept album.” As stated above, other art forms, not least graphic design and

²⁷ Worker-occupied factories or *fábricas tomadas* were just one of the more innovative forms of production that emerged in the wake of the 2001 crisis, as portrayed in Klein and Lewis’s 2004 documentary *The Take*.

²⁸ Again, the iconography of Peronism is almost inescapable here: one thinks of the emptying Plaza de Mayo during the 1974 May Day rallies, after left-wing and youth sectors abandoned the demonstration of popular support for Perón in opposition to the presence of right-wing figures in the President’s inner circle and his criticism of the “estúpidos” and “imberbes” [roughly, idiots and pre-pubescents] present at the rally. Another poem from the same collection, “Plaza real: puerto argentino” contrasts “la marcha esa ... por trabajo y hambre” (65) [that march ... for work and hunger] that took place “antes / de malvinas” [*sic*] (65) [before / malvinas] with a walk along the shore, watching fishermen, from the square that separates the Jorge Newbery airport from the shore and commemorates the Argentine claim to the Malvinas/Falklands. The speaker remembers one of the more poignant incidents of the war between the UK and Argentina, “recreos / donde las niñas tejían bufandas verdes que nunca / arribaron a destino” [playtimes / where the girls knitted green scarves that never / reached their destination], a reference to the knitting effort to provide warm clothes for Argentine conscripts.

photography intervene in her work. What might be called “sub-cultural” forms also appear, including skating, sci-fi, and various musical genres. Her collection, *Volumen I*, consists of poems and photographs. Each poem has a title more or less correctly translated from English of a band and a song (“La cura: Es viernes, estoy enamorado” is The Cure’s 1992 hit, “Friday I’m in Love”), in some case with a degree of inaccuracy that might improve the title as a poetic line: “Beso: para vos dios entregó piedra, entregó giro” is almost certainly Kiss’s “God Gave Rock’n’Roll to You II”; other titles offer references found in previous poems, such as “Terciopelo subterráneo: este domingo a la mañana” (see above).

Two poems without these musical references, “Skaters” and “Bikers,” bookend the collection. The latter takes up themes, images, and lexis from earlier poems:

No se atraviesan estas materias: entonces las rodeás. Caída repetida
ascenso y claro momento

ahí: en suspenso. Borde de la rampa

algo que no es aire te sostiene.

...

Un giro doble
rueda sobre nada
más firme que el deseo.

...

No te muevas ya

inexplicablemente
en ascenso inquebrantable tu bici te lleva

cruza borde de la rampa y sonreíme así
recuerdo así porque [*sic*]

vos y yo estamos acá. (*Volumen I*, “Bikers,” no page number)

These materials can’t be crossed: so you go round them. Fall again
ascent and clear moment

there: in suspense. Edge of the ramp

something that isn’t air holds you up.

...

A double turn
wheel/rolls on nothing
more firm than desire

...
Don't move yet

inexplicably
in unbreakable ascent your bike takes you

crosses the end of the ramp and smile at me like that
I remember like that why/because

you and I are here.

The poem offers a snapshot as the speaker watches someone perform tricks with a BMX bike on a ramp. Its syntax is, appropriately, somewhat staccato, if not telegraphic. The stopping of time is double: on the one hand, the poem describes one moment, capturing the image like a photograph. On the other, the poem describes the impossible effect of time appearing to stand still as one watches a feat of great daring or athleticism, in this case the leap from the lip of the ramp. Much of the poem will be familiar to readers of Nachon: images of liminality or movement in space; its form, with its drifting syntax; even the rather oxymoronic phrasing (“algo que no es aire,” “inexplicablemente”) here used to speak of the feet on pedals moving the wheel; or terms such as “resistencia.” The conclusion reworks an earlier tendency: the apostrophe to the ambiguous other here resolves itself into an encounter between the first-person speaker and an addressed “you.” In the relationship between them the scene finds its answer; the “porqué” [*sic*] of the encounter is the smile that is exchanged. The place they occupy, “acá,” is at once distinctly Argentine and much wider than that.²⁹ Yet this is not the relationship of a couple (“tu chica” is mentioned in the middle of the poem), or even an erotic exchange; the skater is described almost in abstract terms. Just like the young train passenger or the child juggling bottles in the street, the meeting is not the sexualized or fetishised meeting of the *flâneur* (or *flâneuse*) with the unnamed or unknown other, the eroticized flash of eyes in the crowd. Instead, this is a relationship of coexistence and equality, a momentary exchange whose value is immanent, rather than a promise of something to come or a reminder of what has been. Nachon thus rethinks interpersonal relationships in the public space using poetry’s capacity for direct address.

²⁹ “Acá” can be frustratingly vague in Argentine usage; yet it also has the sense of being a reference to the country itself, as in the “Del lado de acá” section of Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela* (1963), set in Argentina.

Hence the question of the non-lyric emerges in Nachon's poetry. As Baltrusch and Lourido write, in contrast to the "Romantic-Hegelian overtones that are widespread for the lyric genre" (15), many recent poetic productions explore non-lyric discourses. They continue:

The recognition of poetic subjects and subjectivities marked by factors of alterity and difference, and in the corresponding incorporation of discursive modulations and modalities that propose definitions of models of artistic production and transference that are different from the canonized and institutionalized ones. (15)

Our non-lyric perspective promotes the theoretical and critical consideration not only of an enunciative transference from an *I* to a *we*, but also of other phenomena like the appreciation of anonymity or the disintegration of the *work* as a finished, coherent, communicable and even translatable product. (15-6)

They conclude that contemporary poetry may be regarded, using Ludwig Wittgenstein's term, as a "form of life" (25). Elsewhere, in his introduction to non-lyric poetry, Arturo Casas follows José Guilherme Merquior's definition of the lyric as "*mimesis of states of mind* oriented towards the knowledge of universal human truths, using a discursivity that is highly organized or controlled"³⁰ (35). Non-lyric refutes the lyric, then, and "non-lyric poetic discourse begins with the decision to separate the self-representation of the discursive subject and his-her (moral, aesthetic, epistemic, ideological, etc.) singularity from the centre of its illocutive formation" (40). Nachon's poetry might thus be seen in the light of a process which Casas calls "*subjectification*," "the production of a new capacity of enunciation previously non-existent in a given field of experience" (42). Speaking on contemporary US and UK poets, Ian Davidson speaks of poems that "do not adopt a God-like position, that allows them to see their world across time or in its totality, but their world is seen from within" (164). Davidson argues that such poetic practices as found in the works of Reznikoff, O'Hara and others create a poetic space that is "thick with time" (164). These experiments in poetry "have provided 'spaces' within which radical or revolutionary perspectives can be developed," in particular radical ideas "that more normative mainstream cultural representations might seek to suppress" (1).

Nachon's poetry offers a sustained attempt to create a cultural space for shared experiences of the contemporary world. To do this, time and again she opens up the lyric voice to the world and the other, to the point that the control and focus implicit in the lyric is abandoned. She offers, therefore, another

³⁰ Italics in the original.

example of the non-lyric tendencies in Argentine poetry that stretch back through 1990s poetry (Gambarotta's *Punctum*), the late poetry of Néstor Perlongher, to the linguistic experiments of Ricardo Zelarayán, and beyond, thus creating, in her unique way, a space to be shared by all. Nachon's poetry operates as an intervention in the contemporary urban environment, against the backdrop of recent political crises, not least in relation to struggles over and in public space. Her novel forms of address include the speaker and the subject alongside the poet and the reader; while exploring the opportunities afforded by breaking traditional barriers—inside/outside, public/private, you/I—she shows herself aware of the risks that this may entail, and thus seeks a non-violent form of being with the other.

Acknowledgments

A version of this paper was presented at the University of Lancaster as part of the one-day symposium, "Contemporary Poetry in the Public Spaces," on 22 May 2013. I am grateful to Cornelia Gräbner for organising this event, and to the participants, in particular Daniel Chamberlain and Amit Thakkar, for their comments and suggestions. Another version was presented at the Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata in September 2014; I am grateful to Edgardo Berg and Nancy Fernández for their kind invitation and hospitality. I am also very grateful for Andi Nachon herself for her kindness and generosity during my visits to Buenos Aires in 2011, 2013 and 2014, the latter during a research trip supported by the Society of Authors' K. Blundell Trust, to whom I am also extremely grateful.

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