
Material Lusts: Socio-economic Desires in Nineteenth-century Spanish America

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Abstract

Novels such as Alberto Blest Gana's *Martín Rivas* (Chile, 1862) and Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera's *Blanca Sol* (Peru, 1889) exemplify nineteenth-century Latin American narratives in which lower-class women are trafficked to upper-class men, exchanging sex for social advancement and material gain, but at the same time, the narratives also critique such intersections of desire. These representations of the economies of desire structuring sexual and class relationships indicate an anxiety about the increasing fluidity of class barriers in societies making the transition from an economy based on agriculture to one based on industry, a transition accompanied by a growing middle class and a declining aristocracy. At a time when the increased circulation of capital meant commodification of goods, as well as of bodies, and the growth of markets both literal and figurative, these narratives call attention to the intersection of the personal and the economic and to its potential drawbacks.

Resumen

Novelas como *Martín Rivas* de Alberto Blest Gana (Chile, 1862) y *Blanca Sol* de Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera (Perú, 1889) ejemplifican la tendencia narrativa en el siglo XIX hispanoamericano de presentar historias en las que las mujeres de la clase baja son vendidas a los hombres de la clase alta por avances sociales. A la vez, las narrativas critican estas intersecciones de deseos. Así indican una ansiedad sobre la fluidez de las barreras de clase en las sociedades experimentado el cambio de una economía agrícola a una economía industrial, un cambio acompañado por el crecimiento de la clase media y la pérdida relativa de poder de la clase aristocrática. En un momento cuando la circulación aumentada de la capital significaba la cosificación de los bienes tanto como de los cuerpos, las novelas llaman la atención a las intersecciones de lo personal y lo económico y a las posibles desventajas.

In Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera's 1886 novel *Sacrificio y recompensa*, an upper-class man remarks to a lower-class woman of their relative social positions, 'tu oscuridad y mi alta posición social, sólo pueden confundirse por un camino,

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¿quieres que lo señale?’ (Cabello de Carbonera 2005: 68). This lascivious yet also status-conscious approach neatly encapsulates the way in which romantic love, sexual desire and material consumption are inextricably bound together in nineteenth-century Spanish American literature. Ineluctably connected are the threads of class striving, lust, and the bartering of women’s bodies in contracts of marriage or concubinage in order to ensure the rise in social status of an entire family. Thus as lower-class families desire to enhance their socio-economic status – or, at any rate, the appearance of status – upper-class men desire the sexualized bodies of lower-class women. Women are employed as objects of exchange, in Claude Lévi-Strauss’s formulation, to advance familial ambitions, sexual and class currency are interchangeable in this economy of desires. However, these exchanges are almost always represented negatively, and the sexual relationships formed as a result of these transactions lead to tragic outcomes for the people involved in them. At the same time that many nineteenth-century Spanish American writers offer up narratives in which sexual and class desires are mapped out in such a way that satisfying one lust also sates the other, then, they also critique such intersections of desire. These kinds of representations of the economies of desire which structure sexual and class relationships point towards an anxiety about the increasing fluidity of class barriers in societies making the transition from an economy based on agriculture to one based on industry, a transition accompanied by a growing middle class and a decline in the power and importance of the aristocracy. At a time when the increased circulation of capital meant commodification of goods and services as well as of bodies, and the growth of markets both literal and figurative, these narratives call attention to the intersection of the personal and the economic and to its potential drawbacks. They also make a series of telling statements about the commodification of women and the continuity of social structures.

The commodification of women and the traffic in women across class lines, with often disastrous results, is a common trope in nineteenth-century realist narrative throughout Europe, Britain and North America, as well as in Latin America. In Spain, novels such as Benito Pérez Galdós’s *La desheredada* (1881) and *Fortunata y Jacinta* (1886–1887) communicated forceful lessons about the undesirability of transgressing social boundaries through sexual liaisons and, as Jo Labanyi has argued, Spanish realist novels explicitly connected the circulation and exchange of women in prostitution, the marriage contract, and adultery to the economic circulation of goods and money. Arlene Young’s study (1999) of the lower middle class in the Victorian novel similarly highlights class and gender issues in British realist fiction, adducing examples ranging from Dickens to Wells and Gissing. French realist novelists, too, explored and critiqued the exchange dynamic that brought about the intersection of sexual and class desires, as we see in Honoré Balzac’s *La Cousine Bette* (1846) or *Eugénie Grandet* (1834).¹ United States authors such as Henry James, Edith Wharton and Theodore Dreiser

1 For more on the the objectification of humans, the relations between men and women, and the exchange of goods in the latter novel, see Schehr 2003.

created narratives about lower-class striving and the purchase of entry into the upper class with sexual and/or monetary favours.² In societies coping, or failing to cope, with industrialization, modernization and the sudden increase in social mobility, such narratives connect class and sexual tensions, putting them at the forefront.

Meanwhile, Spanish American authors, while confronting social changes that typically stemmed from political upheaval more than thoroughgoing economic transformations, also produced texts that upheld and questioned, sometimes simultaneously, gender and class norms. The dynamic in which a lower-class woman is bartered for social advancement is prominent throughout a range of narratives in nineteenth-century Spanish America, demonstrating that although industrialization there was partial and, compared to Europe and North America, late, the social changes brought about by the rapid, violent transition from rule by the Spanish crown to self-rule in the form of dictatorships or democracies caused significant tensions.³ In Lucio V. López's *La gran aldea* (Argentina, 1884), a wealthy older man, so ugly as to be portrayed as comical, marries the beautiful daughter of an upwardly mobile immigrant, while in Cirilo Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés* (Cuba, 1882), the mulatta women in the title character's family have a long tradition of affairs with upper-class white men, relations that lead not just to economic improvement for the lower-class families but to social preference in successive generations, as the children of these mixed-race relationships are paler and paler, allowing them to climb the social ladder of the society of free blacks in nineteenth-century Havana. The same narrative trope is also evident, albeit to a lesser extent, in such novels as José Mármol's *Amalia* (Argentina, 1855) and Juan León Mera's *Cumandá* (Ecuador, 1879). Here, specifically, my interest lies in an examination of the ways in which Alberto Blest Gana's *Martín Rivas* (Chile, 1862) and Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera's *Blanca Sol* (Peru, 1889) construct narratives that may be read as ensuring or undermining the continuation of the system of exchange.

At the same time as these foundational nineteenth-century Spanish American novels were being written, Karl Marx was writing and refining his own masterwork, *Das Kapital*, in which he codified many of the working definitions of the capitalist system which still hold true today. Thus Marx explains that commodities accrued value because of the social relations constructing that value:

If [...] we bear in mind that the value of commodities has a purely social reality, and that they acquire this reality only in so far as they are expressions or embodiments of one identical social substance, viz., human labour, it follows as a matter of course, that value can only manifest itself in the social relation of commodity to commodity. (1967: 47)

2 See, for example, Bowlby 1985, Kaplan 1988, and Vernon 1984.

3 Spain similarly experienced industrialization and modernization 'differently' from its European counterparts; as Labanyi remarks, 'Spain's modernity existed largely on paper' (2000: 24).

He stresses that value is formed through relations; there is no intrinsic value in material goods. Earlier, in an 1847 lecture later published in 1891 as 'Wage Labour and Capital', Marx outlines a very similar position: 'In production, men not only act upon nature but also on one another. They produce only by cooperating in a certain way and mutually exchanging their activities. In order to produce, they enter into specific, determinate connections and relations with one another' (2004: 662). Moreover, Marx claims, capital itself was comprised of exchange values as much as of material products. In order for capitalism to exist, people ('men' in Marx) must enter into relationships with one another that allow them to exchange goods and accumulate capital. Marx also offers the caveat that 'not every sum of commodities, of exchange values, is capital' (663) and explains that a sum of exchange values becomes capital 'by maintaining and multiplying itself as an independent social power, that is, as the power of a portion of society, by means of its exchange for direct, living labor power' (663). In *Das Kapital* he expresses this concept rather more brutally when he avers that those persons engaged in the exchange of commodities 'exist for one another merely as representatives of, and therefore, as owners of, commodities. [...]the characters who appear on the economic stage are but the personifications of the economic relations that exist between them' (Marx 1967: 85). Not only do commodities only accumulate value because of the social relations between those exchanging them, but '[a]ll commodities are non-use-values for their owners, and use-values for their non-owners. Consequently, they must all change hands' (85). Marx thus provides a compelling explanation for the ways in which material goods become imbued with social meaning, and for the ways in which capitalist societies function via the continued exchange of goods.

In his massive *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1947), Claude Lévi-Strauss famously develops the idea that kinship structures depend on the exogamous exchange of women due to the incest taboo. In discussing the principle of reciprocity which is at the heart of matrimonial (and other) exchanges, he claims, 'Implicitly or explicitly, the double assumption is found everywhere that reciprocal gifts constitute a means – normal or privileged, depending on the group – of transferring goods, or certain goods, and that these gifts are not offered principally or essentially with the idea of receiving a profit or advantage of an economic nature' (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 53). He differentiates the exchanges in so-called primitive cultures from 'commercial transactions in our own society' which do bring a 'tangible result' (54).

Yet while Lévi-Strauss focuses on non-capitalist societies, his development of the concept of exchange, and the notion that women function as objects of exchange, can, as we shall see, be adapted to enable us to read those types of exchanges in texts depicting capitalist societies. Indeed, Lévi-Strauss goes on to describe various moments in 'our own society' in which gift exchanges and rituals take place (gambling, ceremonial meals, etc.); moreover, and more importantly, women function as a special category in the exchange system. Exchange plays an essential role in

primitive society [...] because it embraces material objects, social values and women. But while in the case of merchandise this role has progressively diminished in importance in favour of other means of acquisition, as far as women are concerned, reciprocity has on the contrary maintained its fundamental function, on the one hand because women are the most precious possession. (1969: 62)

Here Lévi-Strauss clearly defines women as objects to be exchanged, and he glosses this affirmation by averring, 'the woman herself is nothing other than one of these gifts' (65). Later he bluntly states that

the total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman, where each owes and receives something, but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners between whom the exchange takes place. This remains true even when the girl's feelings are taken into account [...]. In acquiescing to the proposed union, she precipitates or allows the exchange to take place; she cannot alter its nature. This view must be kept in all strictness, even with regard to our own society, where marriage appears to be a contract between persons. (115)

And if this were not clear enough, he concludes, 'the relationship of reciprocity which is the basis of marriage is not established between men and women, but between men by means of women, who are merely the occasion of this relationship' (116).

Lévi-Strauss's theories about marriage and the role women play in marriage exchanges as objects of exchange, rather than as agents in their own exchange, can be read in conjunction with Marx's views about the exchange values accreted to goods, enabling a vision of women in capitalist societies as commodities available to be sold and purchased.

In her seminal essay 'The Traffic of Women', Gayle Rubin similarly reads Lévi-Strauss in conjunction with, and as a supplement to, Marx, in her efforts to understand the historic oppression of women. Briefly, Rubin focuses on the kinship systems analysed by Lévi-Strauss, since, as she explains, 'kinship systems are observable and empirical forms of sex/gender systems' (2004: 776). Rubin goes to Lévi-Strauss's apparent blind spot and emphasizes the way in which women must be constructed as objects – as commodities – in order for this system to function in the way that Lévi-Strauss observes that it does. As Rubin points out, 'To enter into a gift exchange as a partner, one must have something to give. If women are for men to dispose of, they are in no position to give themselves away' (779). She also indicates, "Exchange of women" is a shorthand for expressing that the social relations of a kinship system specify that men have certain rights in their female kin, and that women do not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin' (780). Rubin's aim is, at least in part, to understand the ways in which the subordination of women is socially constructed. It is telling, and perhaps in Rubin's case peculiar, that Lévi-Strauss's and Rubin's examples come primarily from so-called 'primitive tribes' rather than from capitalist societies, especially when Rubin calls for a Marxist

analysis of sex/gender systems towards the end of her essay, and most especially when, even in the brief excerpts from Lévi-Strauss included here, we can see that the authors of these theories themselves explicitly connect the concepts they are handling to 'our own society'. Such moments point the way to the possibility, even the desirability, of using the notion of the exchange (or traffic) in women as demarcated by Lévi-Strauss and Rubin to understand the ways in which certain relations in nineteenth-century Spanish American novels are structured and, further, to understand the social, political, and economic anxieties constructed and represented by those textual relations.

If and when women are exchanged in a capitalist or proto-capitalist society, the purpose is not merely to guarantee exogamy, as Rubin makes clear. When women are interchanged in a capitalist system, then, we must examine their value as objects of exchange within that system. In *Martín Rivas* (Chile, 1862), Blest Gana constructs a narrative in which lower-class women, exemplified by the Molina sisters, are often sold or traded. Indeed, sex and money are so intertwined in the novel that every declaration of romantic and sexual interest must be accompanied by a reference to money or the lack thereof. In brief, *Martín Rivas* focuses on two families, the lower-class Molinas and the upper-class Encinas. The Molina family consists of a mother, Bernarda; a brother, Amador; and two sisters, Adelaida and Edelmira. Adelaida, the older sister, attempts to parlay her sexual attractions into social advancement first by becoming the mistress of the upper-class, yet impoverished, Rafael San Luis, and then by tricking the equally upper-class Agustín Encina into marriage. Of Adelaida the narrator comments, 'Adelaida pertenecía a una clase social que aspira siempre a las consideraciones de que la clase superior disfruta' (Blest Gana 1986: 213). The use of the phrase 'aspira siempre' suggests that such social striving is never consummated and that the 'gente de medio pelo', as Blest Gana refers to the lower middle class, will not be able to ascend the social ladder; they can aspire but they cannot attain. As Mónica Meléndez notes, Adelaida, lacking the resources of the upper class, has only her sexual charms to trade for social advancement:

Adelaida, en la ausencia de la educación, el dinero, las conexiones sociales [...] utiliza su belleza y el lenguaje seductor como capital 'coporal' con el que aspira a la deseada movilidad. El picholeo funciona como un espacio autorizado por la familia para exhibir a las jóvenes en estado de matrimonio y seleccionarles el candidato económico y socialmente apto. (2005: 70)

The raucous parties at the Molina household, organized by Bernarda and her son, Amador, serve as a marketplace for displaying the family's goods: the nubile Adelaida and Edelmira.

It is intriguing that of Adelaida's two liaisons only one results in the fall of the man involved, the first. The explicit inference to be drawn is that Rafael San Luis is ruined because he consummated his relationship with Adelaida, while Agustín apparently does not manage to engage in sexual intercourse with her. While San Luis's affair with Adelaida has concluded by the time the action of the novel begins, the repercussions of that affair continue to affect the behaviour of the

characters and to function as dramatic plot devices. One possible reason for San Luis's relative poverty when the novel begins may well be that he has spent his money on the Molinas; as he tells Martín, 'empleé todos mis recursos pecuniaros en mejorar la condición material de la familia de doña Bernarda' (Blest Gana 1986: 82). In other words, in return for Adelaida's sexual favours, Rafael assumes the economic burden of maintaining her entire family. Indeed, Rafael's problem seems to be largely that he does not have enough capital to purchase Adelaida. When he is speaking with Bernarda, he lays out the transactional terms bluntly: 'es absolutamente imposible que me case con su hija [...]. Tengo doce mil pesos que heredé de mi padre; prometo reconocer a mi hijo y dar a Adelaida la mitad de esta suma' (220–21), and he later raises this to 8,000 pesos, a full two-thirds of his inheritance. Bernarda, however, would prefer to exchange Adelaida for both social advancement and economic gain, and refuses this offer; yet her efforts to barter her daughter fail, as San Luis adamantly refuses to marry Adelaida, recognize their son, and raise the family into the upper class. Shortly thereafter Martín, in an effort to help San Luis, astutely recognizes that it is Amador, the 'man' of the family, who is most interested in exchanging his sister for cash and who, more importantly, has the power to do so; as he says, 'Amador es codicioso. [...] Le pagaremos unos quinientos pesos porque obtenga de su madre la promesa de desistir de su presentación' (222). This interaction clearly demonstrates that when women are exchanged, it is for the benefit of their family members rather than on behalf of the women themselves.

San Luis's downfall is, at least on the surface, brought about by Bernarda's dramatic revelation to San Luis's prospective in-laws of the existence of his and Adelaida's son. On the other hand, the extensive subplot involving Rafael's efforts to make enough money to be accepted by the family of his upper-class fiancée, Matilde, strongly suggests that, in fact, Rafael's economic insufficiency, and the inability of the majority of the Chilean upper class to manufacture anything rather than live off their rents, is to blame. Rafael is unable to find a means of production, in contrast with Martín himself and with the Encinas, who profit from the mines in the provinces; his scheme for ensuring financial stability involves acquiring control of a desirable piece of land and renting it out, rather than farming the land himself or mining it. One might also note that, ironically, it is the very productivity of Rafael's relationship with Adelaida that results in the collapse of both their hopes for social advancement; Adelaida has borne a son, and it is the sight of this child that convinces Matilde to abandon Rafael. Once revealed, the baby is never again referred to in the narrative, not even in the epilogue, in which all other loose ends are neatly tied up.

After the birth of Adelaida's son, her brother arranges a sham marriage to the upper-class Agustín Encina, planning to use this supposed marriage to acquire wealth. Indeed, Adelaida's worth is precisely calculated, as her family seeks to extort 1,000 pesos from Agustín in return for their silence about the supposed marriage. This figure is arrived at on the basis of Bernarda's scrupulous calculations:

En su enumeración entraron, además de los vestidos de color, una buena basquiña negra y un mantón de espumilla para ella [...S]acó la cuenta del número de varas de género de hilo que entraban en una docena de camisas para Adelaida, con más el importe de los vuelos bordados que debían adornarlas, el de dos decenas de medias, varios pares de botines franceses y diversos artículos de primera necesidad para la que, según ella, estaba destinada a figurar en breve en la más escogida sociedad de Santiago. (Blest Gana 1986: 147)

Tellingly, the items Bernarda plans to purchase would mark her and her daughter as members of a higher class than that to which they in fact belong. As Patricia Vilches has noted, 'A través del lazo matrimonial de Adelaida y Agustín, Doña Bernarda expresa concretamente un deseo imperioso de poseer bienes materiales para exigirles respeto a los demás' (Vilches 2005: 169); that is, the acquisition of upper-class clothing is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. It is not the commodities themselves (the items of apparel) that are important but the use-value with which they are infused (their ability to convey a particular message about social status).

In this vein Lisa D. Reyes has remarked, 'Bernarda does not worry about her daughters' happiness in trying to arrange their marriages; she thinks only of the possible gain. [...] Bernarda is a bad mother, but we are also confronted with the image of a female child as a commodity, as something that can be bought and sold and whose feeling [sic] are not important' (1992: 37).

Not only, however, is anachronistic for Reyes to call Bernarda a 'bad mother' for her failure to take into account her daughters' feelings; I would argue that on the contrary, it simply does not matter if she is a 'bad mother' or not, because the social system dictates that female offspring are to be bartered for social advancement. Indeed, Reyes' critique serves to emphasize the fact that Bernarda and her family are operating within a system that makes women into exchange commodities. Within that system, in fact, Bernarda may well be a 'good' mother, or at least one who understands the dictates of the system, even if she is ineffectual at arranging the transactions she desires. Her very ineffectuality may be attributed to her gender; it is men who conduct transactions involving women, not women themselves, as we have seen. Mónica Meléndez provides a more nuanced view of Bernarda when she indicates, 'Bernarda manipula los aspectos nocivos de la entretención que la tradición ha enraizado en las costumbres de la nación y los maneja en favor de su agenda: la movilidad social de sus hijas a través del enlace nupcial con la clase pudente' (2005: 69–70). Despite this deeply rooted, multigenerational desire for social mobility, however, Bernarda's daughters are clearly cognizant of the fact that they may be able to climb the economic ladder but not the social one. Thus Edelmira comments to Martín, 'A nosotras [...] no se nos ama como las ricas' (Blest Gana 1986: 71), or, as Adelaida bitterly remarks to Agustín early in the novel, 'nunca se casaría [Ud.] conmigo' (110). Hence the ruse to trap him into marriage. In Blest Gana's world, that ruse must fail, as must Bernarda's attempts to force San Luis into marriage with Adelaida; when sex and status are linked, they must always be forcibly decoupled.

The way in which the women of the novel, and in particular Edelmira, are represented as consuming the ideology of love is also an incisive commentary on the successful production of discourses that naturalize the exchange system. The case of Edelmira is particularly important for what it says about the ways in which the exchange of women enables the continued survival of the capitalist system. Indeed, the example of Edelmira shows that the system creates narrative structures that work to make women complicit in their own disempowerment. Edelmira's decision to marry Ricardo Castaños, the soldier guarding Martín after his imprisonment for political rebellion, in exchange for Martín's literal and figurative freedom is a prime example of how the traffic in women can work to convince women to buy into a system that ultimately oppresses them. Edelmira, a stalwart consumer of romantic novels of the type which Blest Gana himself once wrote, convinces herself that she is in love with Martín; 'había encontrado en Martín', comments Blest Gana's narrator, 'el tipo de héroe que las mujeres aficionadas a la lectura de novelas se forjan en la juventud' (112). Moreover, she persuades herself, or allows herself to be persuaded, that in order to live up to the ideal of womanhood projected by those novels she must sacrifice her own happiness, which she construes as, if not marriage to Martín, at least her continued independence as a spinster. By agreeing to marry Castaños in exchange for Martín's freedom, Edelmira uses her body not to buy advancement for herself but for Martín; she in fact loses by the exchange by investing her exchange value in Martín, an exchange – and loss – cruelly underscored by their chance meeting at the end of the novel with their respective new partners. Writing to his sister of the encounter, Martín says, 'la tranquilidad y aun alegría que noté en sus palabras [de Edelmira] las desmentía la melancólica expresión de sus ojos' (353).

The narrative constructed for Edelmira is that of the 'mujer abnegada', willingly sacrificing herself for the happiness of others; but this narrative functions to perpetuate a system in which women are exchanged in order to enable the continued transfer of capital and commodities and in which class boundaries are not permanently transgressed. By enabling Martín to marry Leonor – by enabling, in other words, Leonor's exchange – Edelmira's 'sacrifice' permits the closed-circuit exchange of women within the upper class, for although Martín is an impoverished provincial, it is circumstances, not birth, that have brought him low, and he manipulates those circumstances in order to climb back into the right place; he is not striving for a place that is out of his reach, as the Molina family does.⁴

If lower-class women and their male kin in *Martín Rivas* fail in their efforts at social advancement through sexual liaisons, in Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera's novel *Blanca Sol* (Peru, 1889) women are apparently far more successful at trading

4 Interestingly, Mónica Meléndez contrasts Bernarda with Martín: '[S]u historia [la de Bernarda] puede contrastarse con la de Martín. A diferencia de ella, la movilidad social del protagonista se concreta mediante la conducta moral y el trabajo. Por el contrario, los valores de Bernarda desordenan y transgreden mientras que los de Martín consolidan el orden mediante la moderación y la promesa de una futura familia estructurada en estos nuevos ideales' (2005: 70).

their bodies for improved economic status. While Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* is the clear forerunner of *Martín Rivas*, the inspiration for *Blanca Sol* is Zola's *Nana*, although Cabello de Carbonera's heroine ends rather than begins the novel as a prostitute. '*Blanca Sol* es una novela que sigue muy de cerca, aunque con correcciones y modificaciones, el método experimental propagado por Zola y Claude Bernard' (Peluffo 2002: 41).⁵ Here is Cabello de Carbonera's eponymous heroine's life plan, as she baldly puts it: 'Ya me casaré con algún hombre rico, que pague todas nuestras deudas' (2004: 42) – debts that she, her mother, and her aunts have incurred in their ceaseless consumption of luxury items. Blanca does marry a wealthy man, but unlike many other nineteenth-century novels, *Blanca Sol* begins with the protagonist's marriage rather than ending with it. Thus Cabello de Carbonera delineates the aftermath of this imprudent marriage, and in the novel's conclusion Blanca becomes a prostitute in actuality, selling herself to many different men, after having, in essence, prostituted herself in her marriage by 'selling' herself via a marriage contract to her husband.

The character who supposedly contrasts with Blanca is the pious, impoverished seamstress Josefina, who manages to win the heart and hand of the eminently eligible bachelor Alcides Lescanti – also Blanca's object of desire – and thus to escape crushing poverty. Peluffo comments, for example, 'se podría decir que toda la novela se estructura alrededor de la antinomia entre dos figuras culturales aparentemente opuestas: "la oscura costurera de la calle Sauce" [Josefina] vs. la luminosa y encandilante figura de Blanca Sol' (2002: 46). Although these characters are apparently in opposition, nonetheless, they are in fact playing out different versions of the same exchange system, in which they barter themselves to wealthy men. In Blanca's case, both in her marriage and subsequent prostitution, this exchange is explicitly sexual in nature. As the narrator describes Blanca's wedding night: 'Después de haber paseado a Blanca por todos los lujosos salones de la casa, [su esposo] llevola a la alcoba nupcial, donde ella de una sola mirada abarcó y midió todo el lujo y esplendidez, con que estaba decorada y volviéndose a él, lanzose a su cuello ebria de alegría exclamando: –¡Oh qué feliz soy!' (Cabello de Carbonera 2004: 51). It is in the bedroom that Blanca and her husband seal their deal, but not until after Blanca has toured her new possessions and, importantly, measured ('midió') them, weighing their luxury and splendour; only then does she throw herself into her new husband's arms.

While I stated earlier that the counterpart to Blanca is the virtuous Josefina, the exchange of sexual favours for material gain is hinted at in that relationship as well, making them points on a spectrum rather than opposing figures. When Blanca goes to Alcides' house, she enters his bedroom in a revealing

5 For more on Cabello de Carbonera's relationship to naturalism and her use of Zola as a model, see Epple 1987, Guerra-Cunningham 1987, Peluffo 2002. Both Peluffo and Pinto Vargas discuss the novel's tumultuous reception at the time of its publication (Pinto Vargas 2003: 530–33). Ferreira comments specifically on the situation faced by women writers in Peru after the War of the Pacific: 'durante el período de reconstrucción del Perú, después de la guerra con Chile, los letrados optaron por una "modernización tradicionalista" que fue bastante más represiva con la mujer que en las décadas anteriores' (2004: 161).

scene: 'Blanca penetró con paso apresurado hasta el centro de la alcoba' and sees 'un cuadro bellísimo colocado a la cabecera del lecho [...] reconoció uno de esos cuadros, que el refinamiento del arte ha ideado para ocultar un retrato bajo la apariencia de un cuadro [...] quedó a su vista un retrato de mujer: era el de Josefina' (187). In short, Alcides has Josefina, or at least a representation of her, hidden not only in his bedroom, but at the head of his bed; the sexual implications are clear, and not just to the reader, as Blanca destroys the portrait in a rage fuelled by sexual jealousy. Josefina, too, has parlayed sexual charms into social advancement. Finally, in the novel's conclusion the fact that Blanca is for sale is made explicit, as she chooses a series of upper-class men as clients, thinking, '¡mañana habrá dinero para pagar mis deudas!' (211), in a clear echo of the early quote about marrying a wealthy man. Blanca's effort to climb the social ladder results in her husband's insanity and her family's sudden plunge down the economic scale.

While Josefina does manage to marry Alcides and to 'rise' above her economic status, Cabello de Carbonera carefully marks her as an exceptional case. First, she was originally from the upper class: 'pertenecía al número de esas desgraciadas familias, que con harta frecuencia, vemos víctimas del cruel destino, que desde las más elevadas cumbres de la fortuna y la aristocracia, vense, por fatal sucesión de acontecimientos, sepultadas en los abismos de la miseria y condenadas a los más rudos trabajos' (117). Second, she is an orphan, devoid of family; her return to economic success is a solitary one, and she is not attempting to lift her entire extended family with her. Note, too, that in Josefina's case she is marrying the son of an Italian immigrant, himself a new arrival to the aristocracy. Finally, as does Edelmira in *Martín Rivas*, Josefina subscribes to the discourses of romantic love that cause her to accept her insertion into a system in which she has no free will; like Lévi-Strauss's women, she is an object in the exchange, not a partner. Indeed, in the decisive moment when Alcides, after a lengthy search through Lima for the vanished Josefina, at last discovers her, it is because she has fainted at a street fair, enabling him to carry away her unconscious body. Here Josefina is described as 'pálida, inerte [...] asemejándose más a una muerta, que a un ser lleno de vida y juventud' (165). She is transformed into an object to be possessed; it is not a coincidence that Alcides, rather than deliver Josefina to her home in the safety of a chaperone, takes her to his own house, in a foreshadowing of her later installation there as his wife/sexual property.

Much of the novel's codification of anxiety about the transgression of socio-economic boundaries can be read against the historical backdrop of the collapse of the world guano market in the early 1870s and the ensuing economic depression that struck Peru, whose economy at that time was largely based on the sale of guano for fertilizer. The guano boom of the 1850s and 1860s had led to the rise of an upper-middle class prone to 'occasional orgies of public display and conspicuous consumption' (Klarén 2000: 169), a phenomenon documented – and critiqued – in *Blanca Sol*. The rapid growth in wealth brought about by the guano boom meant the development of a new class of plutocrats; as Juan Armando

Epple explains, '[l]a clase dirigente que surge con el guano (y que se transforma en una oligarquía exportadora) desplaza a las viejas oligarquías provincianas, ligando la economía del país al movimiento de intercambio internacional' (1987: 28). Lima society underwent a rapid, dramatic transformation as an aristocracy of wealth pushed aside the aristocracy of birth. But when guano exports plummeted in the early 1870s, the country was forced into bankruptcy, an economic disaster quickly followed by the military disaster of the War of the Pacific (1879–1883). Peru's failure to capitalize on the guano bonanza has frequently been seen as owing to the ineptitude and greed of the élite classes of Lima (Klarén 2000: 182).

It is possible to read *Blanca Sol* as advocating the return to traditional values, as Epple does. Indeed, he avers that the novel coincides with the literary models of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when 'no se cuestionaban tanto las bases institucionales de la sociedad como las situaciones anómalas' (1987: 38), and implicit in his assertion is the belief that the novel suffers by virtue of this supposedly old-fashioned approach to morality. Yet it is also possible to read the novel as an indictment of the 'valores morales tradicionales' that construct women's roles in society solely on the basis of their use-value in exchange situations. Sew though she might, Josefina cannot turn her labour power into useful commodities until Alcides recognizes that her body, her sexual attractiveness, is a useful commodity in and of itself, just as Blanca's life is a series of exchanges (her body to Seraffín, her body to the unnamed, unnumbered men at the novel's end) at the end of which she is materially wealthy yet socially impoverished.

Much as Epple does, Lucía Guerra Cunningham views *Blanca Sol* as showing, through the title character, the ways in which Peruvian society has lost its traditional system of ethics, and argues that Blanca's journey in the novel leads her to understand the facts of this loss: 'su verdadera iniciación reside en el conocimiento de la degradación de los valores que ella inocentemente asumió y en la consecuente decisión de marginalizarse de dicho orden para, en su rol degradado de prostituta, contradictoriamente reforzarlo sin alcanzar el nivel de la auténtica subversión' (1987: 41). Again, Guerra Cunningham reads the novel as presenting the possibility of a response to the loss of traditional values; for her, an effective critique would entail the subversion of the established order, although she does not specify how this subversion would be achieved. Yet, as I have suggested, another possible reading of the novel offers the opportunity to examine the ways in which Cabello de Carbonera illuminates the underpinnings of the exchange structures that circulate women as commodities in order to maintain a particular social system. In this case, whether or not the Peruvian aristocracy is based on newly acquired wealth or on generations of social privilege, it remains a social system that requires the reciprocal exchange of women to consolidate the social bonds that keep a patriarchal structure in effect. So, as Rocío Ferreira points out, Cabello de Carbonera 'presenta desde la ficción una crítica del lugar ambiguo, marginal e inescapable que se le adscribe al sujeto femenino en la sociedad limeña decimonónica. Cabello construye su análisis a

través de un detallado recorrido panóptico de la construcción de una economía sexual patriarcal institucionalizada' (2004: 162).

Both Blest Gana and Cabello de Carbonera construct narratives about, in Rubin's phrase, the traffic in women, enabling us to see the ways in which the exchange of women functions as part of a greater whole, a socio-economic structure that depends on the trade in women and that subsumes this trade to a larger system of exchange of commodities and goods. Both texts also demonstrate a notable anxiety about the possibility that the class structure may be disrupted by a breakdown in the way that women are trafficked; if they are permanently exchanged across class boundaries, that is, such exchange may lead to the collapse of the class structure. If we read these novels as exemplifying class tensions in the nineteenth century, then, the force of this anxiety might be explained as a general disquiet about the socio-economic transformations occurring across Spanish America. We have seen in the case of *Blanca Sol* a specific historical moment and its possible repercussions in the novel, but such tensions were common in the nineteenth century.

Victor Bulmer-Thomas gives a succinct explanation of the 'export-led growth machine' that provided the developmental model for Latin America's integration into the world economy in the nineteenth century. As he points out, 'three mechanisms are particularly important in the export-led growth machine: capital (including innovation and the transfer of technology), labor, and the state' (1994: 16). For our purposes the most important element is not capital per se but labour. Bulmer-Thomas continues,

The size of the domestic market is a function not only of population but also of purchasing power. [...] A skilled labor force based on wage labor represents not only an important concentration of purchasing power for sellers in the nonexport economy but also a potential source of future entrepreneurs who are able to take their skills and knowledge to other branches of the economy. (16–17)

The rise of this skilled labour force is a likely source for elite tensions. On the one hand, elites need the skilled labour force to provide the labour that mines, often literally, raw goods and exports them, providing elite owners and entrepreneurs with capital and affluence and to help nations make the move towards the highly desirable goal of progress. On the other hand, the growth of what would become, or threatened to become, a substantial middle class posed a threat to elite control, as lower-class strivers sought to appropriate a lifestyle previously associated with the upper class, acquiring the physical and metaphorical trappings of the upper class and potentially deluding others about their own class origins as they moved through the social structure. Appropriately, Pierre Bourdieu begins his masterful study of class structures, *Distinction*, with the affirmation, 'there is an economy of cultural goods' (1984: 1) and goes on to comment on a range of goods and activities as markers of class. While his study explicitly focuses on French culture of the second half of the twentieth century, many of the categories he employs are applicable to the novels under analysis here. Thus when Bourdieu comments, for example, that 'the working class meal

is characterized by plenty [...] and above all by freedom' (1984: 194), we are reminded of the excessive parties at the Molina home and Blest Gana's lengthy descriptions of the abundant food and drink there, consumed by guests both seated at the dining room table and overflowing into the living room, in contrast to the formal, staid dinners at the Encina house. Likewise Bourdieu notes that when it comes to clothing, the lower classes 'make a realistic or [...] functionalist use of clothing' (200) in contrast to the middle class, which displays 'anxiety about external appearances' (201), putting us in mind of the scene in which Blanca orders 'seis vestidos serios, pero muy elegantes y lujosos. Era lo menos que creía necesitar para la asistencia a algunas fiesta religiosas' (Cabello de Carbonera 2004: 56). In short, Bourdieu avers that class distinctions can be best perceived – and constructed – through taste, which he defines as 'an acquired disposition to "differentiate" and "appreciate", as Kant says – in other words, to establish and mark differences by a process of distinction' (1984: 466). The upwardly mobile members of the lower class who people *Martín Rivas* and *Blanca Sol*, among other novels, are in search precisely of that 'acquired disposition', the 'good taste' that will allow them to pass as part of the middle classes, whose makeup was increasingly in flux as the nineteenth century progressed. And it is precisely this acquisition, be it through imitation, consumption of goods, or sexual exchanges, that creates anxiety for the gatekeeping upper classes. Novels such as *Martín Rivas* and *Blanca Sol*, among others, encode messages about the undesirability of transgressing class boundaries. When the lower classes strive to raise their status via sexual-economic liaisons, these liaisons are punished, and this punishment is inscribed, as we have seen, on the bodies of women. What these texts reveal, whether by design or accident, is that the traffic in women both sustains and depends on the system structuring the movement of commodities. As such the system is fundamentally a closed one. Movement across the classes may be momentarily desirable, but it is inevitably condemned.

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