

*The Greater Pampas: Politics, Ecology, and the Rise of Capitalism in the Río de la Plata
Grasslands (1770–1920)*

Santiago Bestilleiro Lettini

This dissertation project will examine an ecological region, the Río de la Plata grasslands, in the long nineteenth century. Expanding over more than 265,000 sq. mi., these temperate prairies currently cover the eastern territory of Argentina, all of Uruguay, and southern Brazil. While these plains, commonly known as Pampas, constitute a transnational and prenational unity, their political division has led to incomplete examinations of their past. This work will study these grasslands by introducing a new regional map based on their ecological cohesion rather than on the resulting national states. In other words, this project conceives the Pampas as a biome ultimately divided into three countries.

Parallel to the formation of those political entities, the Pampas underwent a profound reconfiguration, not because they had remained “unaltered” until then, but because of the depth and acceleration of the changes brought by the expansion of agrarian capitalism. Infused by an increasing demand for hides, meat, wool, and cereals in international markets, the prairie was materially and conceptually transformed. Early interpretations of the grasslands as a “desert” gave way to a general reevaluation of them as a “resource.” In that process, the new states emerged as sponsors and guardians of the Pampas’ productive potential.

This work will explore how changing perceptions of this region’s potential reshaped it politically, ecologically, and economically with long-lasting implications. By the early twentieth century, the “desert” had been widely reconceived as the respective “national landscape” of Argentina, Uruguay, and Southern Brazil, with productivity as a quintessential attribute. This dissertation will study the itinerary of that perception through different representations that politicians, intellectuals, artists, scientists, and the press offered of the grasslands’ landscape. That “nationalization” of nature can only be fully understood not by examining the effects it had on the Argentine, Uruguayan, or Southern Brazilian Pampas, but on the ‘Greater Pampas’ as a whole.