When we speak of the “nation” or “identity,” we could say, actually, that we are being “spoken” by those words. (Verdesio, “La República” 97)

Introduction: The Nation as Told through Indigenous Genocide
Starting in school, Uruguayan children learn that they are mostly the descendants of Europeans. They are taught that the Charrúas, the indigenous nation most identified with the region, were almost all killed in an ambush at Salsipuedes in 1831. This historical moment is narrated in history and anthropology texts, in literature, and in the arts. There are also commemorative ceremonies, field trips, and there is a monument of the “last Charrúas” in central Montevideo. In this essay I consider how the narration of this historical episode underpins the construction of the national space and of a hegemonic national subject. I suggest that the story of Salsipuedes constructs Uruguay as a neo-Europe, setting it apart from the rest of Latin America, and simultaneously allows for a metaphoric cultural hybridity that roots the nation in the land.

Uruguay’s identification with whiteness and Europe is not unique. During their formation, most of the American nation-states attempted to minimize the presence of racialized peoples and cultures (Radcliffe and Westwood; Wade; Skidmore). This Eurocentrism was driven by the desire to be considered among the modern and rational nations, when modernity and rationality were constructed as white, European virtues (Mignolo). One of the aspects that distinguishes Uruguay, however, is its almost complete erasure of indigenous presence and the rejection of mestizaje (racial hybridity) as a national marker. As has been well documented, the discourse
of *mestizaje* is one of the ways in which Latin American nations have “managed” racial diversity. By incorporating colorful elements of indigenous and African cultures, a unique national identity is articulated (Wade; Radcliffe and Westwood). At the same time, *mestizaje* tends to retain a hierarchy that privileges whiteness and is inherently about diluting the “darker” elements and “whitening” the population (Wade, *Race and Ethnicity* 32). Yet some Latin American elites, exemplified by Argentine statesman Domingo Sarmiento (1811–1888), decried any form of racial miscegenation. Sarmiento saw *mestizaje* as one of the fundamental obstacles impeding Argentina’s and Latin America’s path towards progress and modernity. His views were deeply influential in the Southern Cone, so that “while Mexicans preached racial hybridity to construct the ‘cosmic race’ proposed by Vasconcelos, Argentines imagined themselves as a chunk of white Europe tacked on to the southern part of the continent, and Uruguayans ‘stated’ that they were already purely white because they did not have the ‘Indian problem’” (Sapriza 23).

I am not the first to draw attention to Uruguay’s neo-European identity and understand my research as building upon the work of scholars who have been pointing to the Eurocentric basis of the Uruguayan imaginary. Verdesio notes that the “expert knowledges” of history and archaeology have been complicit by at best minimizing and at worst inferiorizing the presence of the indigenous societies that preceded the Uruguayan republic (*La Mudable*). Hugo Achugar (“El Parnaso”) and Gerardo Caetano show how identification with Europe was encouraged via the educational system, immigration policies, the arts, and literature. Along with others (Cosse and Markarian; Porzecanski; Sapriza; Rodríguez), they have noted the racializing implications of the myth of *La Suiza de América*, “The Switzerland of America.” Relying on an identification with Eurocentric ideals, the myth is that Uruguay was (in its golden age, until the 1960s) an exception in Latin America, because of its perceived relative prosperity, the level of education of its citizens, its history of democratic government, and its cosmopolitanism. At the crux of this myth is the absence of an indigenous population. Alicia Migdal puts it bluntly, “Uruguay was like a sum of exceptionalities . . . so literate, so cultured, so European, so Indianless” (184). How did Uruguay become *tan sin indios*, “so Indianless”? I suggest that the fact that Uruguay could think of itself as neo-European or white is not a simple reflection of the origin of the population, but of how the national space was discursively produced.4

To begin my argument, I reiterate the claims that the nation is “imagined” (Anderson) and “narrated” (Bhabha). As Étienne Balibar contends, “no modern nation possesses a given ‘ethnic’ basis, even when it arises out of a national independence struggle” (221). This challenges the idea that nations are based on a primordial attachment between the people and the land, or that there is an “essential” national character. The meaning of the nation is produced in and through narratives in multiple sites, including history, literature, theater, television, newspapers, and the