

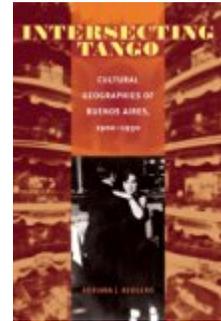


Adriana J. Bergero. *Intersecting Tango: Cultural Geographies of Buenos Aires, 1900-1930*. Illuminations: Cultural Formations of the Americas Series. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008. x + 476 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8229-4318-1; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8229-5985-4.

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Literary Landscapes: Cultural Representations of Gender and Working-Class Buenos Aires, 1900-1930

In *Intersecting Tangos*, Adriana J. Bergero draws from a diverse array of printed texts to illustrate the stark urban environment that early twentieth-century Buenos Aires posed to its economically marginal population. Set during the city's era of accelerated modernization, Bergero argues that urban texts, redolent with themes of prostitution, suicide, urban poverty, and dislocated gender roles and identities, reveal the ways in which the city's nonelite experienced the seismic shifts of the era. While the title of the book purports to present a view of the "cultural geographies" of Buenos Aires, the resultant study actually focuses on the cultural representations of the city's working classes, emphasizing fraught gender relations, rather than on the physical city itself.

The texts that form the basis of the study include internationally recognized literature (such as the works of Jorge Luis Borges and Roberto Arlt, popular playwrights recognized primarily by an Argentine audience), city plans, tango lyrics, school textbooks, governmental reports, newspaper and magazine articles, and classified advertisements, among others. Bergero weaves her discussion of primary texts with secondary literature drawn from a variety of important literary and urban theorists. Overall, she provides a sharply drawn picture of the dark underbelly of Buenos Aires that was envisioned, or "imagined" as she describes it, largely by its professional classes: that of an untamable city, where society's economic marginals (immigrants, women, the working

classes) could find no respite. They were relegated to work in slaughterhouses or factories, or as prostitutes rather than partaking in the wealth of the nation, which by 1914, according to David Rock, after almost twenty years of growth, had left Argentina with a "per capita income [equaling] that of Germany and higher than in Spain, Italy, Sweden, and Switzerland.[1] As suggested here, by focusing on the dark matter of tango's themes, Bergero skims over the fact that the era of her study is one of great economic wealth and the movement of many into the middle classes. If one did not know any better, it is easy to assume that this is an era of per capita decline given Bergero's tendency to rely on cultural representations as historical realities. Her rigorous undertaking of theory stops short of addressing the very difficult set of questions defined by the study's scope of inquiry: To what degree do these cultural representations present us with a picture of the contemporaneous society that is depicted and to what degree do these representations remark on the fears of those who produced and consumed them? Is the map really the territory?

Bergero's book is organized in three parts. The first, "Urban Ceremonies and Social Distances," concerns itself most closely with urban spaces, as chapters are titled "The Jockey Club," "Palaces and Residences," "Parks, Plazas, and Calle Florida," "Passages, Public Spaces, and Cultural Crossings," "Theaters and Cafés," and "*Conventillos*." The chapter headings, here and throughout the

book, serve more as points of rumination rather than as exhaustive explorations of the topics chosen. It is difficult to understand why Bergero consolidates theatrical spaces with those of cafes since the rich cultural milieu of popular theater and the abundance of plays that deal with the city's geographies seem more than deserving of a chapter of its own. "Conventillos" concerns itself more with the language, *lunfardo*, that developed there than with the physical locations of the tenement houses themselves. Drawing from a discussion of Paul Rodaway's *Sensuous Geographies* (1994), Bergero consistently argues for an expansive understanding of the term "cultural geographies," one that downplays physical space in favor of cultural representations and ways in which people "cognitively" or "sensorially" experience the city (p. 43). Despite this emphasis, it would have been helpful to have a map of the city somewhere in the text so that readers could understand the relationship between physical venue, city center, and city suburbs or outskirts. Overall, in part 1, Bergero illustrates the deliberate separation of social classes via the construction of the city's hallmark spaces, most of which were designed to be used by the upper rather than the working classes. The argument, however, may leave its audience with an inaccurate feel for a more economically segregated city than that which actually existed.[2]

The heart of the book's main interest, gender, can be found in the next two thematically overlapping parts, "Muñecas Bravas of Buenos Aires" and "Gender and Politics." Here, Bergero extends an impressive reach into published discourses on the seismic shifts that wrought Argentine society as women entered the workforce, challenging traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. In both sections, she illustrates gender conflict and transformations amid a city wracked by economic dislocations as a result of incipient industrialization. While her organization reflects the myriad dislocations found in actual urban explorations, from a reader's point of view, it seems unwieldy with too much thematic overlapping from one chapter to the next. I am not sure why readers have to wait one hundred pages for a discussion of part 2's heading, referring to how working-class women were often viewed as "brazen dolls," for example. Chapter 7, "Paradigms and Deviations," discusses textbook depictions of idealized female behaviors that are then contrasted with cultural representations of prostitutes; images of work are at the heart of chapters 8, "Work, the Body, and Dislocations of Identity," and 9, "Chains of Desire." Chapter 10, "Palaces of Temptations," explores the rise of consumerism and department stores. A very brief

eleven-page chapter, "Beauties, Femmes Fatales, Tramps, Vamps, and Vampires," returns to many of these themes, although underscoring city's misogynistic characteristics more overtly.

While "Muñecas Bravas" focuses on women at work and women in the public sphere, part 3, "Gender and Politics," deals with the connection between political organization and representations of gender as well as early notions of identity politics. Chapter 14, "New Alliances—Old Causes," comments on change and continuity between the rise of the expanding yet still limited democracy offered by the Unión Cívica Radical party's rise to power in 1916 and the military coup that ended this "democratic experiment" in 1930, by analyzing textual representations of the anarchist activity of the 1919's *Semana Trágica* (Tragic Week) with those depicting Uriburu's coup in 1930. Chapters 15 through 18 move away from explicit notions of political movements, emphasizing textual depictions of sexual and gender identities. Chapter 20 returns to the physical spaces of the *barrio*, but how that should be understood differently from the *arrabales* (poor quarters) of the earlier part of the book is unclear. For the first time, however, Bergero addresses the mass cultural production of the era by genre, exploring how melodrama infiltrated a variety of texts, including tango lyrics, in order to serve as a "discursive strategy that endorsed the socially correct (*lo acertado*)—about social control" (p. 373).

Bergero does a remarkable job uncovering literary themes that are assumed to have been somewhat verboten as topics of discussion in the public sphere, including abortion, birth control, suicide, and wet-nursing. By focusing on tango, and tango-generated plays, and music, the cultural production of the era is a bit skewed to that of tragedies and tragic themes. As I know from my own work, in the 1910s and 1920s, up to two hundred original nationally authored stage plays were produced each year, covering a wide range of themes, not only dystopian ones. While, as Bergero argues, there was a preponderance of attention devoted to images of poverty and marginality, popular theater and mainstream magazines, such as *Caras y Caretas*, *P.B.T.*, and others, were also intent on defining middle-class social mobility, and national identity, very often using comedic formats to do so, topics that Bergero largely overlooks.

Intersecting Tangos also problematically moves from text to text without examining the different ways in which those texts may have circulated throughout society. Was Borges's *Emma Zunz* (1949) read in the same

way and by the same audience as popular stage plays, urban newspaper articles, and congressional studies and reports? That is to say, Bergero leaves unaddressed a number of questions about how broadly published texts circulated and how the audience of the texts might have responded to them in a variety of ways, questions highlighted in works like Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984 and 1991). For example, Bergero notes that the same school textbooks were used over a period of thirty years or more, claiming that the same gender messages were consistently imposed on students. However, it is almost impossible to imagine that changing social and historical contexts could have resulted in their being taught and received the same way over a span of three decades. It also would have been refreshing to see Bergero draw some connections to more urban literary studies from beyond Buenos Aires, a city that holds many similarities to turn-of-the-century U.S. ones. In particular, Carl Smith's *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman* (1995) and Michael Denning's *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (1987) cover very similar thematic territory, focusing on literary representations of cities, in the case of Smith, and connections between the consumption and production of texts, in the case of Denning.

In sum, *Intersecting Tangos* evidences an extensive knowledge about urban and literary theory and fin-de-siècle urban spaces of Buenos Aires as contemporane-

ously constructed in the printed press. It emphasizes the ways in which these publications represented male and female gender identities and relations during an era of massive demographic and economic transformation. While Bergero should be commended for not ghettoizing a discussion of gender relations to one chapter, clearer organization would have helped guide readers through the complexity of overlapping and interwoven themes that she explores in parts 2 and 3. The inclusion of at least one map of the city would have allowed readers, especially those not familiar with Buenos Aires, to more easily follow the relationship between social class, urban space, and cultural representations. Bergero's emphasis on gender leaves the "ethnic" city relatively unexplored, however, and this is during an era in which second generation immigrants were intent on becoming Argentine. Ultimately, Bergero's identification and analysis of themes of the socially marginal may tell us more about the concerns and fears of the upper and middle classes than of the lives of the working classes, a conjecture that she leaves surprisingly unexplored.

Notes

[1]. David Rock, *Argentina 1516-1982: From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 172.

[2]. See José C. Moya, *Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), chap. 4.

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