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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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Published on H-Urban (September, 2011)

Commissioned by Alexander Vari

Modern Buenos Aires, A Loveless City

This sprawling attempt to examine the new urban "imaginaries" unleashed by Argentina's early twentieth-century experience of modernity is by turns illuminating and exasperating. The author, an Argentine-born, Spanish-trained, and U.S.-based literary critic, demonstrates an impressive command of the myriad "social texts" produced in Buenos Aires between roughly 1880 and 1940, juxtaposing urban novels, tango lyrics, popular magazine stories and advertisements, photographs, plays, criminological literature, and many other sources in order to tease out the dislocations of an urbanizing and industrializing society (p. 6). While the book's title is misleading, in that it overstates the focus on the tango and on cultural geography (best viewed as two compelling parts of the analysis, rather than its core), the text itself constitutes the most extended investigation of the cultural and experiential dimensions of urban modernization yet attempted for Argentina's capital city. In another innovative twist, Adriana J. Bergero dedicates at least half of her long study to transformations in urban gender identities and bodily relationships, unpacking the many anxious discourses on female labor and sexuality that she sees as central to the onset of modernity in Buenos Aires. The resulting picture is rather bleak–"maps of pain" in a "loveless city" (p. 433). Although this view of modern Buenos Aires is one-sided in terms of the social experiences of Argentines in an age of considerable economic growth, social mobility, immigrant assimilation, and democratization, the book forces us to ask ourselves why so much of Argentina's cultural production at the beginning of the twentieth century emphasized trauma, loneliness, melancholia, criminality, sexual impotence, and other hardships of city life.

The book is divided into three sections, each of which grapples with the arrival of modernity in Buenos Aires in a unique way. The first, "Urban Ceremonies and Social Distances," establishes a fundamental tension between the city of privilege, aesthetic enchantment, and social order that Argentina's modernizing elite sought to create in Buenos Aires after 1880 and what Bergero calls the "grotesque city." This "vulgar, insolent, and fractious" metropolis, where customs and languages mixed, marginal spaces persisted, and physical bodies could not be concealed, found its imaginative home in popular culture, especially the tango and the theater (p. 75). A sort of unresolved, class-inflected culture war emerged between these two competing sets of urban imaginaries, creating bitter struggles over the spaces of the modern city but also providing cognitive maps for *porteños* (inhabitants of Buenos Aires) to navigate their rapidly changing surroundings. Following a similar logic, the book's second section, "*Muñecas Bravas* of Buenos Aires," examines the misogynistic bourgeois and academic discourses that sought to control women's bodies and identities as they entered the workforce and gained greater mobility outside the home. Here, however, popular culture–also dominated by male voices–offered less compensation to the victims, investing women with a new symbolic strength to dominate men sexually and emotionally, but only as vamps, femmes fatales, or prostitutes who ultimately needed to be cajoled back into the airy, enchanting femininity celebrated in both literary *modernismo* and commercial advertising. Finally, in "Gender and Politics," the book's longest and least coherent sec-

tion, Bergero explains the surfeit of melodrama in Argentine literature and the tango as a (again largely male) response to the twin failures–political and cultural–of escaping earlier imaginaries of modernity as Argentina attempted an unsuccessful democratic transition in the late 1910s and 1920s.

Such experiential and symbolic considerations were largely excluded from the pioneering urban histories of modern Buenos Aires by James R. Scobie, Charles S. Sargent, and Guy Bourdé in the 1970s, which treated spatial developments and sociological issues, and they were introduced only slowly into the social histories of the "popular sectors" that dominated Argentine urban historiography in the 1980s and 1990s.[1] That left the analysis of urban cultural modernity to literary scholars such as Beatriz Sarlo, whose landmark study *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930* (1988) oddly receives no comment here, and to the "maverick" interdisciplinary historian Francis Korn, whose provocative but elliptical interpretations have always been difficult for others to incorporate.[2] Though Bergero does draw on an ample bibliography of writings on early twentieth-century Buenos Aires and makes effective use of theoretical and comparative studies by Richard Sennett, Stephen Kern, and Donatella Mazzoleni to explain the class, gender, and bodily divisions written onto the new urban landscape, she seems to resist any clear attempt to revise previous interpretations of modern Buenos Aires or to compare the Argentine experience to that of other modernizing cities.[3] Urban historians who take up the challenge of assimilating the many micro-level insights of this book will be forced to make such larger historiographical connections themselves, since even other relevant and now classic studies of how texts orient urban dwellers to the essentially unknowable modern city–works by Peter Fritzsche, Richard Terdiman, Judith R. Walkowitz, and Ángel Rama–find no place in Bergero's analysis.[4]

When paired with the grand scope and the hyperbolically pessimistic tone of the book, this unwillingness to contextualize her interpretation of Buenos Aires in relation to other cities or other studies of the Argentine metropolis leaves the impression that *Intersecting Tango* belongs more to the essayistic *pensador* tradition of Ezequiel Martínez Estrada's *X-ray of the Pampa* (1933) than to the prosaic realm of scholarly debate.[5] There is, in fact, a long line of such works by Raúl Scalabrini Ortíz, Juan José Sebreli, and even Martínez Estrada himself that "think Buenos Aires" and its relationship to national culture, drawing on an eclectic mix of history, literature, and sociology.[6] While clearly more academic in its references and analytical in its engagement with texts, Bergero's book shares with this earlier tradition a search for the roots of Argentine identity in the malaise of the modern city, as well as a tendency to formulate sweeping cultural assessments. To her credit, Bergero is the first to recognize that her subject grew out of her control, stating early on that her study is "overambitious" and ultimately represents more of a "personal cognitive map" of the modernizing port city than a succinct interpretation of a historical problem (pp. 1, ix). One naturally thinks of the difficulties Walter Benjamin faced in pulling the disparate strands of his *Arcades* project (ca. 1927–40) together into a coherent whole.[7]

Intersecting Tango is also very much an idiosyncratic insider's account. Readers with little prior knowledge of Buenos Aires or of Argentine intellectual history may feel that not enough was done to help them orient themselves to local landmarks, whether physical or cultural. For a book purportedly on urban geography, it is surprising that no maps are provided and that place-names are assumed to be commonly understood. Somewhat more guidance is given about the backgrounds of authors and publications, though nonspecialists may wish to read this book with both a city map and a biographical dictionary in hand. That said, those who are already familiar with the cultural life of the Argentine metropolis in the early twentieth century will be dazzled by Bergero's extensive and intimate knowledge of its many representations, which she subjects to relentless and often scintillating close textual analysis. Of special note are: her readings of the popular illustrated magazine *Caras y Caretas*, which she uses to great effect to examine gender and social conventions; her highly original discussion of the "antigravitational" aesthetic of feminine fashion and mobility (p. 175); her fresh spatial interpretations of classic works of urban literature, like Manuel Gálvez's *Historia de arrabal* (1922) and Roberto Arlt's *Aguafuertes porteñas* (1933); and, though it only comes in full at the book's end, her analysis of the tango as "the most spectacular cross-sectional, intersecting space in all Argentinean culture" (p. 385).

Ultimately, it is this loose, back-loaded structure, in which the "trees" of close reading take center stage (chapters begin and end with texts, not problems) and the "forest" of broader argumentation comes into view only belatedly and in pieces, that will frustrate historically minded readers most. The logical and methodological threads holding together so many textual analyses are surely known to Bergero, but she resists exposing and ex-

plaining them, which accentuates the sensation of moving toward an unknown destination. Perhaps this is a device used to help us experience in some small way the dislocations of "the monumental polymorphism of modernity's transition," but it also limits our understanding of the cultural changes that separated this period from others in the city's history (p. 420). The absence of a narrative and the frequent juxtaposition of texts from different decades (including some, such as Jorge Luis Borges's story "Emma Zunz" [1948], that are well outside her temporal frame) give the study a strongly synchronic character, raising the question of when the apparently long transitional trauma of adjusting to urban modernity finally came to an end, if it ever did. Even Bergero's intended chronology becomes confusing at times, since the book's introduction suggests the primary focus will be on the period from 1916 to 1938, rather than the 1900–30 range indicated in the title.

Urban historians should also be warned that a fair amount of error has crept into this study. The author's claim that "no iota of doubt could be found in the elite's implementation of modernity" is contradicted by an extensive and growing historiography on this group's ambivalences and internal tensions (p. 3). The image of premodern Buenos Aires as a *Gran Aldea* ("great village") dates not to "colonial times," as suggested here, but was elaborated in response to the changes wrought by growth and modernization during the nineteenth century (p. 15). It is also incorrect that the suburban periphery "filled the perimeter of the federal district" by 1887 (p. 404). In that year, the district limits were drawn some seven times larger than the built area of the city in anticipation of future growth. Only in 1936 was the municipal zone "filled," though some satellite suburbanization to the north and south did occur decades earlier. On a more mundane level, Enrique Gómez Carrillo's *El encanto de Buenos Aires* was published in 1914, following Argentina's centennial celebrations, not 1921 (p. 22). Similarly, Bergero mistakenly attributes the landscaping of Palermo Park in 1875 to Charles Thays, though the noted French landscape artist only arrived in Buenos Aires in 1889 and became head of the parks department in 1891 (p. 45).

These criticisms aside, Bergero is to be applauded for tackling such a new and unwieldy topic and for applying the techniques of literary analysis to a broad range of cultural documents that many historians still overlook. While *Intersecting Tango* will likely be used regularly only by Argentine specialists and their graduate students, and even then more often in parts than in full (chapters 4, 7, 9, 19, and 20 are recommended for this purpose), other scholars may discover elements of this study that fit their own concerns about the relationship between the experience of modernity and the city. Urban cultural historians who believe that the modern metropolis is incomprehensible outside of the texts that establish its landmarks and chart its itineraries will find ample evidence on display here. Gender historians interested in the anxieties unleashed by the freedom of women to move their bodies throughout the urban landscape will be treated to an intriguing examination of the struggle between the "systolic" (conformist or conventional) and "diastolic" (self-actualizing) imaginaries (p. 154). Social historians will be fascinated by the creation of new spaces of social "laterality" in the margins of Buenos Aires, away from elite control, and in new forms of popular expression (p. 69). Lastly, tango historians can expect a unique and provocative analysis of what Bergero calls the "need to weep" in tango lyrics, though they may also feel that not enough of this book focuses on demonstrating her thesis that the famous Argentine song and dance was the most important nexus of cultural intersection in modern Buenos Aires (p. 422).

Notes

[1]. "PEHESA: An Argentine Social-History Group," *Latin American Research Review* 18, no. 2 (1983): 118-124; Diego Armus, ed., *Mundo urbano y cultural popular: Estudios de historia social argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1990); and Leandro H. Gutiérrez and Luis Alberto Romero, *Sectores populares, cultura y política: Buenos Aires en la entreguerra* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1995).

[2]. Beatriz Sarlo, *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Nueva Visión, 1988); and Francis Korn, *Buenos Aires, 1895: Una ciudad moderna* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Instituto, 1981).

[3]. Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994); Stephen Kern, *Anatomy and Destiny: A Cultural History of the Human Body* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975); and Donatella Mazzoleni, ed., *La cittá e l'immaginario* (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 1985).

[4]. Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Judith R. Walkowitz, *The City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago

Press, 1992); and Ángel Rama, *The Lettered City* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

[5]. *Pensador* (literally, "thinker") is used in Latin American cultural history to distinguish writer-intellectuals from academically trained scholars.

[6]. Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, *X-Ray of the Pampa* (1933; repr., Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971); Raúl Scalabrini Ortíz, *El hombre que está solo y espera* (Buenos Aires: Manuel Gleizer, 1931); Juan José Sebreli, *Buenos Aires, vida cotidiana y alienación* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veinte, 1965); and Ezequiel Martínez Estrada: *La cabeza de Goliat. Microscopía de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1946).

[7]. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999).

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Citation: Brian Bockelman. Review of Bergero, Adriana J., *Intersecting Tango: Cultural Geographies of Buenos Aires, 1900-1930.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. September, 2011.

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