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Catriona McAllister's *Literary Reimaginings of Argentina's Independence: History, Fiction, Politics* analyzes five literary narratives and one play, published between 1984 and 2010, explicating Argentina's independence as a way to understand contemporary politics and the politicized history of the texts themselves. McAllister uncovers, and at times, recovers, the construction of political meaning behind historical narratives, conveying how these “discursive narratives” use the past to reframe and redefine politically and socially constructed expressions of power.

McAllister argues that extant approaches to writing about literature and history fail to engage them on their own terms as political, historical, and literary instruments. The texts she analyzes, she convincingly argues, lose depth if they are just approached through postmodernism; through the lens of the new historical novel; or through Linda Hutcheon’s concept of “historiographic metafiction,” developed in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988). These analyses might pitch the narratives as merely “unmasking” political ideologies or expressing forms of “cultural resistance.” Instead, McAllister pursues a nuanced examination of how contemporary literary constructs of the past reveal new dimensions of the nation and its political transformations. The strength of the book lies in McAllister’s analysis of how writers “reimagine” independence in ways that intersect with questions of power related to history, literature, and politics. She insists that “the self-reflexive play with history in these texts ... goes beyond an ambiguous blurring of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ to become a self-conscious engagement with the political traditions that have shaped Argentina” (p. 132).

McAllister makes a convincing case for choosing a variety of texts that explicitly engage with the nation's past through its formation narrative. Most Argentines, after all, have been taught the story of national independence or partaken in national holidays celebrating them. The somewhat recent bicentennial celebrations (2010) of Argentine independence have also turned attention to contemporary narratives of the nation's founding,
further justifying the importance of independence narratives. The “literary reimaginings” of the book’s title remind us of how frequently and powerfully contemporary Argentines write against homogenous visions of independence. By showing how contemporary writers engage with literary representations of independence, through themes of revolution, political violence, democracy, literature, nation-building, and the construction of knowledge, McAllister draws a compelling story showing how political discourses create new paths for understanding political power as it is expressed in the public sphere.

More specifically, McAllister establishes the role of Bartolomé Mitre (1821-1906) in founding the idea of the nation in the mid-nineteenth century with two of his texts that explore and define the próceres, or heroes, of the Argentine nation. These include Mitre’s histories of Manuel Belgrano (Historia de Belgrano y de la independencia argentina [1857]) and José de San Martin (Historia de San Martín y de la emancipación sudamericana [1869]). Mitre, McAllister argues, serves as an example of how Argentine politicians and intellectuals fused politics, history, and literature and provided an “official history” of the nation, seamless and clear, which then became embedded into the national educational curriculum and rituals of independence. This official history begins in 1857 with the aforementioned biographies, extended through the publication of Galería de celebridades Argentinas (1857), edited with Domingo F. Sarmiento.

McAllister conceives of Argentine independence as structured as a “dual epic,” one centered in Buenos Aires, known as the May Revolution, which established self-rule there on May 25, 1810. The other side of the coin is independence as a military epic, celebrated on July 9 of each year, to commemorate the Congress of Tucumán, which ended the bonds of the United Province of the Rio de la Plata with the Spanish Crown in 1816. Indeed, this is the framework that historian Jaime Rodriguez (The Independence of Spanish America [1998]) identified as being the key contours of Latin American independence movements: the rise of a “great political revolution” that sought to create a modern nation-state inspired by liberal democracy as well as the emergence of “a fragmented insurgency” that focused on local autonomy and used force to achieve it. A case can be made that the writers that McAllister chooses to analyze have focused more on the fragmentation narrative of the nation-state than on its official history. Regardless, the play between these two visions of independence seems to be at the heart of most of the texts explored here. That is, in my read, the selected authors seem more intent on questioning the meaning of history, power, and literature, by focusing on the marginalia of independence narratives, than on explicitly engaging with the heroic narratives of Mitre.

McAllister also identifies the limited reach of the texts she has selected, most obviously in relationship to social history. While the texts give insight into notions of masculinity, especially as it relates to nation-building, women and people of color (except in chapter 3) are largely absent. These texts, that is, do not reframe independence by reinscribing women and people of color into the founding of the nation. This is not Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Hamilton. Her interest in the selected texts are firmly in the political history of the nation, which tends to center on the próceres (independence’s putative heroes), educational curriculum, and military battles. I did want to know more about the selection process of the texts: Were many texts discarded? Why do female authors not engage with narratives of independence?

The book is structured around an introduction that details the literary movements and critical theories from which her work arises. She follows this with three substantive chapters, each of which pairs two texts together. The texts have all been well-selected to elicit greater meaning from a
particular theme of independence and the contemporary era and political context from which the texts emerge. Brief biographical information on the authors appears, but Literary Reimaginings privileges the text over the authorship of them.

In chapter 1, McAllister analyzes Martín Caparrós's *Ansay ó los infortunios de la gloria* (1987) and Andrés Rivera's *La revolución es un sueño eterno* (1984), highlighting how Argentina's recent civic-military dictatorship (1976-83) and the Argentine military's failed mission to wrest the Malvinas Islands from British control (1982) might be read into these narratives of independence. Neither text under inquiry has received a great deal of scholarly attention. Both texts attempt to reclaim the symbols of the nation in order to move diverse political views forward “to carve out similarities between these historical heroic exploits and their own projects, seeking to insert their fight within a national historical context” (p. 31). The authors also engage with the idea of guerrilla struggles and the utopian hopes of those who wage them, especially amid defeat, and national conversations related to armed struggle.

Caparrós’s novel tells the story of independence from the point of view of a Spanish commander, questioning when and how a society defines a revolutionary fighter and at what point such a figure might turn into an authoritarian leader. The text reorients the typical perspective of independence, selecting here to focus on those who were on the losing side of the struggle. It also engages with the idea that the victors might be oppressors. Her exploration of these texts gives insight into how leftist revolutionary organizations (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo [ERP] and the Montoneros) in Argentina were viewed after the return to democracy in 1984.

Rivera rewrites independence through another figure of independence, Juan José Castelli, one of the more radical actors of independence who is not typically central to the official history. Through the narrator, Rivera’s novel highlights the limits of written historical sources, calling attention to these limits to reveal the nuances of the past. The text asks the reader to understand independence not as an opening up toward democracy but rather as a transfer of power, suggesting more continuity with the past than heralding revolutionary change. It takes a Marxist focus to highlight the limited nature of political change that independence achieved.

In chapter 2, McAllister analyzes Martín Kohan’s *El informe: San Martín y el otro cruce de los Andes* (1997) and Osvaldo Soriano’s *El ojo de la patria* (1992). Kohan has written other novels that explore the era of the 1976-82 military regime (*Dos veces junio* [2002] and *Ciencias morales* [2007]), with *El informe* invoking postmodern techniques to “self-consciously” address Argentine identity narratives. Both texts center on a prócer of national independence but do so by invoking the degree to which they are simultaneously present/absent. *El informe* is a parody, drawing from the author’s innate knowledge of the history of independence, the subject of Kohan’s doctoral thesis. Changing important geographic and temporal indicators, Kohan’s novel most closely shadows Mitre’s model of independence war hero in *Historia de San Martín* but significantly changes it by largely omitting San Martín from the story and by relocating the essential setting to Mendoza. According to McAllister, *El informe*, thus, unravels or calls attention to the literary genre of epic. Significantly, he adds the faces of defeated Spaniards to his description of battle strategies, reminding the reader of the use and cost of violence in independence, evoking the legacy of contemporary military dictatorships as well.

Soriano’s *El ojo de la patria* presents an intriguing blend of spy novel with science fiction, drawing in part from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), as well as invoking John Le Carré, the author of the James Bond novels. The protagonist of the novel is charged with transporting the body of mummified independence hero, who has been
“enhanced,” through the inclusion of a computer system with his body. The system is inefficient and full of glitches. McAllister reads *El ojo de la patria*, set against the end of the Cold War, as a critique of capitalism and the ways the Cold War’s end also provided a demise to ideological polarization of the era. At the same time, it critiques the narrative of the past as being problematically fused to a dystopic future. By bringing these two disparate novels together, McAllister shows how “the idea of patria” is thrown into crisis by both novels.

In chapter 3, McAllister explores two texts, Washington Cucurto’s (Cucurto is a literary persona created by the poet Santiago Vega, itself a name that invokes the mythical gaucho Santos Vega) *1810: La Revolución de Mayo vivida por los negros* (2008) and Manuel Santos Iñurrieta’s *Mariano Moreno y un teatro de operaciones: Seria comedia política* (2010), asking what they reveal about the “popular,” a term that conveys both a Peronist perspective of embracing the popular classes as part of political rule and a Marxist one that centers the proletariat in its meaning. Both texts explore the concept of *el pueblo* as citizen (homogenous, unified) against *el pueblo* as the popular class that is in opposition to the economic and cultural elite. Here it would have been nice to see McAllister make a connection between the “popular” and the iconic line from May 25, 1810: “El pueblo quiere saber de que se trata” (The people want to know what this is about) an anonymous shout from the commoners who were omitted from the cabildo during the popular assembly that decided the fate of the viceroy in the “Great Week of May” 1810. The line has since been used to demand governmental transparency.

McAllister situates the shifting meaning of the pueblo within the context of historical revisionism related to the nation’s long-standing concept of the nation being bifurcated into “civilization” or “barbarism,” where liberal elites originally stood as civilizers in the official history of the nation and caudillos (political strong men like Juan Manuel de Rosas and Juan Domingo Perón) cast as barbarians. Peronist rhetoric overturned these ideas. McAllister explains, “Peronism’s ‘incultura’ therefore became associated with overthrowing the niceties of liberal historiography: barbarism was celebrated through an alternative historical canon and ‘civilization’ came to be perceived as part of a liberal project belonging to the anti-national, economically powerful classes” (p. 103). In McAllister’s reading, traditional liberal narratives of history uphold the interests of the economic elite.

Cucurto’s novel embraces the term “popular,” in all its excesses and connotations with the non-civilized, taking the reader “on a chaotic journey through a sex-, alcohol-, and drug-fuelled tale of clandestine homosexual love affairs and self-interested scheming” (p. 107). Cucurto’s *1810*, that is, presents a carnivalesque exploration or dismantling of the notions of civilization or barbarism. The reader enters into the popular universe created by the text in order to “target the intersection of cultural norms, exclusionary discourses of national identity, and the distribution of political and economic power associated with the liberal project” (p. 120). Cucurto delivers a sense of the barbaric on its own terms, rejecting the terms set out by the liberal elites’ notion of both civilization and barbarism.

Santos Iñurrieta’s *Mariano Moreno y un teatro de operaciones* is a “self-reflexive” piece of theater work that embraces Bertold Brecht’s theatrical conventions of breaking the fourth wall, being metahistorical, and being self-aware as a work of theater. The play was also connected to the nation’s bicentennial, performed as part of the bicentenary program of the Centro Cultural de la Cooperación Floreal Gorini in Buenos Aires of which the author was the coordinator. Santos Iñurrieta conflates different temporal periods in the play, having the independence warrior, Juana Azurduy, speak the words of Eva Perón’s May Day speeches. Notably, the play represents Domingo French and Antonio Luis Beruti, revolutionary figures, as puppets who narrate the nation’s history by using...
childlike language. This carries a particular pedagogical purpose to connect with school children and public audiences; one of Santos Inurrieta’s goals as a playwright and performer is to humanize the “heroes” of the official history narratives, to present them as real people with quirks and inconveniences.

McAllister brings the discussion of this play full circle back to where she began: both Caparrós’s Ansay and Santos Inurrieta’s works invoke the figure of independence leader Mariano Moreno but in quite different ways. McAllister attributes the different interpretations of Moreno to the different eras in which each text was written. If Caparrós leaned on an interpretation of Moreno as being a Jacobin, a radical promoter of social change, Santos Inurrieta casts him anew as a left-wing revolutionary, arising from a shifting discourse about the left in Argentina. Santos Inurrieta celebrates the left for its ongoing commitment to revolutionary change—perhaps strengthened by capitalism’s failure in Argentina in 2001. Santos Inurrieta’s theater highlights the need to check neoliberal economic structures. McAllister also highlights Santos Inurrieta’s inclusion of women and his sense of pan-Latin Americanism, drawing from a shared sense of hemispheric unity and fracturing, all reminiscent of the messages of the celebrations of independence in 2010 in South America.

I might now offer a couple of suggestions from the point of a view of a historian. While I understand that the idea of an official history presents a convenient straw man, so to speak, from which to position these texts against, it suggests a vision of nineteenth-century elites, which is a bit more uniform than we know the nineteenth century to actually have been. Indeed, one element of the official history, which might have been more clearly established, is the degree to which Mitre and other nineteenth-century historians blended fact and fiction to substantiate the importance of Buenos Aires as the center of the nation. Suggestions that Mitre and Sarmiento were close collaborators skirt over the great divide between the men on the meaning of the Argentine nation itself. This issue came to a head in the 1874 presidential election when the two men squared off and Mitre revolted when the election did not go his way.

By over-relying on a tidy but incomplete narrative of the official history, McAllister overlooks some details of how the historical figures engaged with Black Argentines as part of the nation-building project, a topic particularly relevant to chapter 3. Some attention to Mitre’s own use of history to connect Liberal elites to the popular classes would have shown the deeper historical roots that complicate notions of the popular in the political evolution of Argentina. Mitre’s essay “El negro Falucho” (“Falucho, the Black man”) was published just two weeks before the May festivities in 1857. In this essay, Mitre created a character, Falucho (taken from the name of an actual soldier), who, the story goes, refuses to raise the Spanish flag in the independence battles in the Andes, and was subsequently killed for defying Spanish orders. Mitre’s story was written to shore up popular support for Buenos Aires in the wake of Rosas’s defeat.

The authors McAllister investigates emerge out of a long tradition of writers directly engaging with the idea of “patriotic” history in order to critique contemporary political transformations. This was particularly the domain of playwrights in the nineteenth century and include Bernabé Demaria’s La América Libre (1860), Nemesio Trejo’s La Fiesta de Don Marcos (1890), and José Antonio Saldías and Raúl Casariego’s play El ciudadano distinguido (1914). Each play was written during a particularly fraught moment of politics and history: during the consolidation of the nation after the fall of Rosas; amid the uprising against President Miguel Juárez Celman’s rule, known as the Revolution of the Park in 1890; and in the wake of the Saenz Peña law of 1912, which made voting compulsory for men and whose effects were re-
flected in the Radical Party's win in the 1916 election.

As written, *Literary Reimaginings* appeals to a specific audience of English speakers who are well acquainted with contemporary Argentine literature. It seems clear that McAllister does not want to center the authors in her explication of how the texts engage with literature, politics, and power. She does not want to establish nor to reinvent a canon around a group of male writers. However, a bit more of an overview and a guide to the importance and the international impact of the authors seems to me would have been an easy way to expand the reach of the texts. She might have nudged an English-speaking audience in the general direction of these authors as a group who emerge out of Peronism, who are explicitly political in their engagement with literature, and who themselves have suffered from the political violence of the 1976-83 military dictatorship. The authors are well known nationally and, in most cases, internationally, as evidenced by such accolades as literary awards, as well as through the fact that their works have been translated and adapted to film and stage. They are committed to a political project in their writings. Many of the authors have been shaped by Peronism (1946-55 and 1973-74) and were affected by the military dictatorship of 1976-1983, which was stridently and violently anti-Peronist. Caparrós (1957-), for example, worked as a journalist in Argentina and went into exile in Paris, France, as a result of the 1976 military coup. He currently lives in Madrid, Spain. McAllister argues that these experiences can be seen in his centering themes of human rights and democracy in his works.

Rivera (1928-2016), the son of immigrants from Poland and Ukraine, was a member of the Communist Party, and he worked in textile factories. Like Caparrós, he found his voice as a writer first through journalism. Rivera has written other novels related to historical figures. *El farmer* is a novel about the Argentine caudillo, Juan Manuel de Rosas’s life in exile in Southampton, England. Pompeyo Audívert adapted the novel as a play (2019), with Rodrigo De la Serna in the lead role. Rivera also wrote *Ese manco Paz* (2002) about José María Paz, who fought in Argentine wars of independence.

Kohan (1967-), a professor of literature at the University of Buenos Aires, explores the connection between history and literature in his works. He often sets his novels against the backdrop of the 1976-83 military regime, exploring the intimacy of characters’ interior lives against the era’s political repression.

Like most of the authors, Soriano (1943-97) was a journalist as well as a writer of fiction. Notably, he worked with Jacobo Timerman, at *La opinión* newspaper, which Timmerman founded. (Timmerman wrote about his persecution by the military, as well as the repression of *La Opinión* in *Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number* [1981].) Soriano went into exile in Belgium and France as a result of the military dictatorship. His novels often engage with Argentine history and culture through the detective genre and by embracing humor as well. His novel *No habrá más penas ni olvido* (1980) was made into a film, distributed in the English-speaking world as *Funny Dirty Little War* (1983).

Cucurto, a literary persona created by the poet Vega (1973-), is often compared to Charles Bukowski, since they both take the perspective of society’s marginalized and discarded as a point from which to create poetry. He has defined his work as belonging to *realismo atolondrado* (headlong realism), which playfully mixes genre, language, and advocacy for society’s forgotten ones.

Finally, Santos Ifurrieta (1990-), the youngest of the authors, has long been a part of independent theater in Argentina, employing cooperative and collaborative structures in the development of plays. He sees theater as a space for social transformation. In particular, he and his theatrical projects/organizations have focused on “epic theater,”
using theater to make histories of national “heroes” relevant and accessible to contemporary audiences.

In addition, by invoking the importance of the public sphere, I would have liked to see some grounding regarding reading as a practice and its connection to the wider populace. The texts seem to be directed to an intellectual readership rather than to a mass audience. Who reads these novels? What is their scope and reach throughout the public sphere, measured potentially by the number of copies printed, or their being assigned as part of a college curriculum? How relevant are these texts to the Argentine public?

Writing this review as a historian from the United States, watching the culture wars play out between politicians and historians over the teaching of US history in public schools, I was struck by how this group of writers embraced the past with unflinching audacity, creativity, and intellectual depth. Was there any pushback in the political realm against these texts? Were they too obscure to reach a popular audience or for politicians to view them as a threat? Does the author foresee that these texts will influence the shape of future educational curricula?

In sum, this book should be read by scholars of literature, history, semiotics, and cultural studies, and not be limited to Argentina. However, that being said, many scholars of Argentine culture, history, and politics will find something exciting in this text. McAllister shows how writers have engaged with foundational narratives to critique the past and the present and to question how society organizes power. These writers seem to have unfettered freedom to “play” with themes rife with patriotic meaning, without fearing that politicians might censor them. (Although, here, McAllister does note that the revisionist institute of history begun by President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was closed by the president who followed her, Mauricio Macri.) McAllister’s work contributes to our understanding of the staying power of democracy in Argentina, forty years after its return in 1983, despite massive economic and political challenges. Argentina, according to these writers and McAllister’s deft analysis of their works, has not been afraid to look beneath the foundational rock of the nation and to connect those findings to the present moment. Ultimately, McAllister argues, it is a choice to rewrite independence. By allowing authors to explore the multidimensional national pasts and presents, she shows the unique way literature supports democracy: writers excavate the present through the past, encouraging a public engagement with history, politics, literature, and power. It is a compelling argument to show how a lack of fear about reimagining the past can serve as a cornerstone of democratic engagement. I hope that this excellent book propels other scholars to pursue answers to some of the questions I am left with in the Americas more broadly.

Note

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