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*The Slum and the City: Culture and Dissidence in the Villas
Miseria of Buenos Aires* by Agnese Codebò (review)

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contexto latinoamericano, al respecto cabe señalar que el subtítulo referido a la literatura “hispanica” puede equívocamente sesgar esta dimensión. Por todos estos sentidos y, especialmente por su rigor, profundidad y voluntad inclusiva y dialogante, el libro puede considerarse como una generosa cantera para futuras investigaciones de estudios literarios trasatlánticos.

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Poverty in Latin America, after being conventionally erased or transformed into *costumbrismo* in the culture of the first half of the 20th century, has since taken on cultural protagonism. Since the 1960s, the slum has been depicted in novels and films that represent the margins from the center, but more recently those who inhabit the social margins have become important producers of culture, representing themselves and their relationship with the center and in the process radically modifying the images of Latin American cities.

Agnese Codebò's *The Slum and the City: Culture and Dissidence in the Villas Miseria of Buenos Aires* offers an account of this cultural protagonism in Argentina's capital city. She aims to “address the role of poverty in shaping perceptions of Buenos Aires by focusing on the cultural production by the lower strata of the working class and on representations of this social sector in literature and the visual arts from the 1950s on” (3). Expanding on this, she writes that “it is precisely the power of defiance of slums and their inhabitants that I seek to recuperate in this book” (12). She accomplishes this goal admirably, offering a panorama of the entire 20th century to the present while focusing on the mid-century appearance of the villa in novels and films and the increase in self-representation in films, novels, music, journalism and in contemporary activism that resists the threats of real estate speculation.

Codebò's book is a timely contribution to a U.S. academy that has recently seen a boom in scholarly production on the Latin American slum. The favela of Brazil has been more spectacular, but as the Argentine economy has traversed sustained crises the villa miseria has become increasingly present, particularly in the fear cultivated by politicians and the media. The introduction, titled “How Slums Matter,” is critical reading for those new to the theme, providing a theoretical basis for thinking about the villa and a clear, concise review of the history and literature. Chapter 1 is titled “Excess Materials: Waste and the Visual Arts in the 1960s.” It traces the emergence of the villa as a concept in Argentine culture in the late 1950s and 1960s, then tells of the eradication attempts by various dictatorships justified by the developmentalist notion that the villas were delaying the modernization of the city, before exploring some of those who contest this idea. These include the visual artist Antonio Berni, whose Juanito Laguna series of canvases included discarded

objects that the artist found in the villas, and political filmmakers like David José Kohon and Fernando Birri, who documented work done by villeros.

In Chapter 2, “Poverty on Show: The Aestheticized City, Slum Literature and Trash Books,” Codebò centers on the often-exploitative cultural boom around the villa since the 1990s. She discusses the gentrification of Puerto Madero and the attempts to “upgrade” the Villa 31—the most central and visible of the villas—as well as a group of novels set in villas but written by non-villeros. The chapter then moves onto situate the already well-known, though remarkable publishing project of the Eloísa Cartonera press, whose books, many written and illustrated by villeros, integrate recuperated materials. Chapter 3, “Speaking From La Villa: The Language of César González, Hip-Hop, Cumbia Villera, and Julio Arrieta,” explores how cultural production from the villa “foreground(s) poverty as a defining element of Buenos Aires, one in which tensions that undergird urban modernization are laid bare” (3). In it, Codebò discusses the writer and filmmaker César González and the Peronist *puntero* and villero talent agent, Julio Arrieta. Codebò also explores how hip-hop and cumbia artists have contributed to a reformulation of the images of the villa in Argentine culture. This engaging chapter is key for understanding contemporary urban Argentina.

Chapter 4, “All That Matters is at the Bottom: Militant Journalism and Activism in the Slums of Buenos Aires,” explores efforts from the villa to contest the imposition by government and speculators of urbanization projects that appear socially progressive, but which are designed to eventually displace villeros. The sections on the media organization La Garganta Poderosa and villa assemblies are perhaps the most important contributions of the book, for their revelation of contemporary operations of capital to privatize the land on which Villa 31 stands. While this might sound like the same old sad story, Codebò’s contextualization of it as exacerbated by the pandemic is very enlightening, especially given the sometimes-successful collective efforts by villa dwellers. The conclusion, “New Alliances,” describes “countermapping” by the group Iconoclastas that seeks to “decolonize the production of knowledge” (28) about the villa.

Codebò’s book is very timely and mostly well researched, though she does not always thoroughly account for the existing research, such as when she asserts that César González’ “artistic production has not been systematically analyzed so far, except for a couple of journalistic articles in the local press as well as on the web” (82). Here she could have consulted articles by Carlos Luis Bosch and Rocío Gordon, from 2017 and 2018. While Chapter 1 covers some important films of the 1960s, it omits others that might have made for a more complex account of 20th century filmic representations of poverty. Two that come to mind are the shorts *Quema* (Alberto Fischerman, 1962), which creatively documents a space she discusses, and *El principio del fin* (Ricardo Alventosa, 1968), on a villa eradication project carried out by the military government of Juan Carlos Onganía. A consideration of these might have filled out what is nonetheless an intelligent, stimulating and important account of the cultural presence of Buenos Aires’ villa miseria.