

## Introduction Mediating Urban Identities

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The street corner where, intrigued, I followed the changes for several weeks, is no longer a rundown corner in Buenos Aires. For a few days it was an old recycled corner, but once that phase was over it became a universal place that could easily be found anywhere because it no longer had any meaning.

—Beatriz Sarlo, *Instantáneas*

Beatriz Sarlo's verbal snapshot of the installation of an advertising marquee on a building at the corner of a street in Buenos Aires is one in a book of snapshots (*Instantáneas*) that leaves little doubt about how much the city and everyday life at the end of the twentieth century were already part of a globalized urban experience. The ironic loss of meaning discovered in a street corner following its acquisition of a new role in communications is among several themes that permeate her book as she ponders how times have changed. Sexuality and morality in a new age, fast food, and the influence of mass media on the judiciary and politics are also among the topics that attract her attention. Yet, for all the universalization she finds, there is no mistaking the Argentine capital as a constant point of reference, or the location of the places and urban culture she describes in her book. The street corner may have changed its specificity, but it is still a part of Buenos Aires.

Sarlo's city corner and her reaction to its changes, as well as her reactions to other aspects of contemporary Buenos Aires, exemplify the dynamic relationships formed between individuals or groups and urban environments. The connections to place evoked by her experiences seem simple enough, but they

are also a source for reflection on the complex interaction between people and familiar urban places, and how these places engage many aspects of identity and culture. Such, in effect, is the subject of this volume, which presents a series of contributions intended to explore aspects of that interaction in a number of major cities of Latin/o America.

Not every area or country in the region is represented. The primary centers of Mexico City and Buenos Aires figure significantly. The secondary capitals Havana, Bogotá, and Lima are also included, and there is space for Asunción, one of the lesser known capitals of South America, as well as Recife and Salvador, two of the smaller state capitals of Brazil. The inclusion of a chapter on Los Angeles to represent Latina/o North America requires no explanation, given the visibility of that city's Latina/o population, although a preference for Detroit over other cities, such as New York or Miami, is less obvious. Yet the Motor City is also a representative choice, a reminder that, regardless of size, whether in the United States or Canada, few cities in North America have remained impervious to the Latina/o diaspora.

Half the contributions included in this volume examine representations of urban worlds in music, art, film, writing, and photography, including some snapshots in the more conventional sense of the term. The other half are developed from consideration of particular events, conditions, and practices of urban life. In bringing this range of works together, we have sought to provide a group of reflections on how the relationship between cities and their inhabitants is culturally mediated in ways that contribute both to the construction of identities by urban dwellers and to the attribution of identity to the city. As a group, the chapters describe a heterogeneous ensemble of urban phenomena, but they are connected by their common link to the representation or performance of urban identities and culture.

Given the spectrum of phenomena examined, the notion of culture invoked is broad enough to embrace the two kinds of contributions mentioned: those taking the lived urban experience as their source and those focused on symbolic representations of experience through different forms of cultural expression. Understood in this context, culture encompasses the full range of human behavior and its products, whether embodied in thought, language, actions, or material artifacts. It includes what are conventionally known as the arts, but also embraces social, economic, political, and religious practices and therefore touches on matters of ideology (in the broad sense of this term). Culture, that is, corresponds to the range that Abril Trigo has claimed for the objects forming the field of inquiry for cultural studies: "what can be read as a cultural text, what carries a sociohistorical symbolic meaning and is intertwined with vari-

ous discursive formations, could become a legitimate object of inquiry, from art to literature, to sports and media, to social lifestyles, beliefs and feelings” (2004, 4). For Trigo, as for this volume, the study of “the cultural,” to use his term, presupposes no *a priori* exclusion on what may be studied or on the disciplinary perspective from which it may be approached.

Placing this volume within a broad understanding of culture has opened it to urban life in general, as well as the representation of urban life in symbolic form. At the same time, the recognition that the urban is a field engaged by many academic disciplines has prompted inviting a wide array of perspectives. As Anthony D. King has remarked, interest in the city is no longer so confined as it once was: “The discourse of the city, at one time simply a privileged territory in the social sciences on which generally white, western, and usually male urban sociologists, geographers, anthropologists, or city planners inscribed their theoretical models, or where urban and architectural historians told their different stories, has increasingly become the happy-hunting-ground of film theorists, poets, art historians, writers, television producers, literary critics, and postmodern cultural connoisseurs of all kinds in the humanities” (1996, 2). Monographic studies in English of urban Latin/o America tend to focus on single cities and a limited range of issues or cultural phenomena. They also fall squarely on one side or other of the social sciences/humanities divide.<sup>1</sup> In comparison with such texts, our volume clearly benefits from the scope afforded by anthologies where discussion of a greater number of cities by specialists from a variety of disciplines is facilitated by a common theme.<sup>2</sup>

That the source of the chapters in this volume includes both the humanities and social sciences is reflected to some extent in the organization of our content in three clusters. The first of these combines discussions of the imagined city, representations of the urban in popular music, film, literature, and art. The second is concerned with peripheries in the form of images of peripheral cities and the condition of urban communities located on the social margins. The third cluster highlights aspects of the notion of performance: the (re)enactment of rituals and practices that organize and symbolically represent social beliefs, values, and traditions. Rather than constituting three mutually exclusive groups of contributions, these clusters primarily serve to sequence the chapters. The imagined city, for example, does not figure solely in the first cluster, and the concepts of the peripheral and performance recur across the entire collection, giving a measure of overlap that permits the chapters to dialogue regardless of where they are situated in the volume or of the disciplines they engage. However, variations in the volume resulting from the inclusion of chapters from different disciplinary perspectives is not smoothed over. Indeed, to echo King’s

comments concerning a book with a similarly multifarious content: “This book sets out to *be uneven*” (1996, 5; original emphasis). Rather than focus on a single urban phenomenon manifested in a variety of cities, our collection highlights urban diversity in order to exemplify the many contexts from which identities are constructed. At the same time, we have expressly sought to confront the reader with a range of urban topics that will satisfy both the disciplinary curiosity of Latin Americanists working from particular perspectives and the interests of those for whom the study of Latin/o America is a multidisciplinary activity.

The relation of the collection as a whole to the concept of identity and to its manifestation through consideration of contemporary urban Latin/o America is explored by Abril Trigo in the volume’s concluding chapter. Taking the intensity with which the dialectics of identity unfold in urban milieus as his point of departure, Trigo responds to his reading of the contributions through drawing them into a theorization of identity. He shows how they exemplify urban practices in the formation of identity and the exercise of citizenship, whether through co-optation by, or through resistance to, the prevailing social imaginary. Consumption and commodification also underlie Trigo’s consideration of identity in relation to history and memory, as well as his consideration of the formation of identity through the experience of urban space, a formation he finds expressed in all the chapters in the volume.

Just as this collection prompts a reflection on the thematics of identity, it is also concerned, like Beatriz Sarlo’s snapshots, with particular places. Her anecdote about a street corner in Buenos Aires is a striking illustration of the ties between individuals and familiar locations. The changes to the corner erase former meanings so that it no longer speaks to her in the same way as before. It has ceased to embody for her what Tim Cresswell describes as “the most straightforward and common definition of place—a meaningful location” (2004, 7). Expressed differently, the new face and function of the corner disturb Sarlo’s “sense of place,” a term that refers to the subjective or affective and psychological connections people have with places (Cresswell 2004, 7–8). Such connections, as the now classic studies by Gaston Bachelard (1964) and Yi-Fu Tuan (1974 and 1977) have recognized, are especially strong with the places of one’s origin, childhood, and adolescence, but are felt in relation to all the places known and frequented during a lifetime, including those known only through the mediation of forms of representation, such as film or literature. Place and the experience of place are thus among the elements that enter into constructions of identity. People feel themselves to be, or are thought of by others as being, *porteño*, *limeño* or *santiaguino*, with all that such attributions of urban identity entail, including feelings of association that derive both from individual experience and from

collective meanings about cities and their spaces shared by nations and communities. In this respect, a sense of place is not only a reaction to material space, but an “idea, concept and way of being-in-the-world” (Cresswell 2004, 20).

In light of the intimate nature of sense of place, broad categorizations of the kind described by José Luis Romero (2001) in his history of urban Latin America, such as “criollo cities,” “patrician cities,” or “bourgeois cities,” fall short of providing the multiple contexts from which identities are constructed. A similar observation might be made of Ángel Rama’s *The Lettered City* (1996), which is centered on the relationship between the power of written discourse and the foundation and growth of cities in Latin America. His book drew attention to the humanistic dimension of urban space and has been very influential, but not without controversy.<sup>3</sup> Since 1996, the consideration of Latin American cities as sites of production of popular culture, with the wealth of phenomena they embrace, has moved writing on the city beyond the range of Rama’s study. His lettered city is an instructive metaphor but misses much of the organic side of city life and growth, caught more fully in Carlos Monsiváis’s images of urban chaos (1995). Nor does Rama’s study catch the concept of the city as subjective experience, a concept described by Armando Silva (1992) and Néstor García Canclini (1997). The cultural complexity of the city has found fuller expression, in this respect, in Latin America’s urban chronicles, a genre to which Sarlo’s *Instantáneas* and some of her earlier publications belong (see Sarlo 1994).<sup>4</sup>

The precise issues tackled in this volume are confronted from the disciplinary perspectives and interests of each author and are theoretically contextualized in relation to positions prompted by consideration of these issues, without necessarily engaging discourses concerned with the theorization and analysis of place. Nevertheless, the collective focus on the urban, and the attention given to questions of culture and identity, inevitably draw place and its meanings into the equation, establishing in the process a territory where the chapters intersect and complement one another.

Humanistic representations of urban life offer some of the fullest explorations of the affective and psychological connections to place. As Angela Prysthon relates in her chapter, the emergence of a vibrant film industry in northeastern Brazil has created the opportunity to display cities such as Recife and Salvador on screens dominated by Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, and to break with hitherto stereotypical conceptions of northeastern urban life and culture, in favor of self-representation and greater authenticity. Whether in the context of picturesque cityscapes or poverty-stricken barrios, the dramas of individual *nordestinos*, often against a soundtrack of the region’s popular musical cultures, reveal a close relationship between place and a sense of local identity.

In some cases, the intimate relationships formed with the city, as represented in the films described by Prysthon, are a source of conflict. As such, they have elements in common with films from postdictatorship, neoliberal Argentina of the late 1990s in which individuals find themselves adrift in Buenos Aires, striving to reconnect with familiar places. These characters experience an extreme form of the disaffection expressed in Sarlo's *Instantáneas*, to which (not coincidentally) Geoffrey Kantaris alludes in his commentary on three films set in the same city.

If questions of identity and individuals' sense of urban places loom large in symbolic representations of city life, it is because of these places' corresponding significance in lived experience. Thus, how city dwellers identify with their environment also figures significantly in contributions directly concerned with the practices of urban life. Gisela Cánepa's commentary on Andean festivals highlights, above all, the agency the festivals give to Andean migrants who claim a place in the city that corresponds to their origins and their sense of identity. The fact that their assertion is challenged by a criollo counterclaim does not diminish its legitimacy but serves only to emphasize how much a sense of place may be shaped in a field of competing interests. The two contributions to this volume on U.S. cities make a similar case for other migrant communities. The sense of place prevailing in the population of Los Angeles, when considered in light of the city's restaurant industry, described by Juan Buriel and Rodolfo Torres, sees Latinas/os cast as Others whose labor confines them to the service sector and whose culture is an object of consumption. Similarly, as Catherine Benamou argues in her chapter on media, dominant constructions of Detroit either exclude the Latina/o population from the public sphere or grant it only limited, not to say stereotypical, recognition, notwithstanding its historical presence and identification with the city.

As the preceding comments imply, a sense of place not only entails subjective attachments to particular locations such as Sarlo's street corner, but encompasses a range of phenomena that includes ethnicity, social and economic class, gender, cultural practices, and the practices of everyday life. Among these factors, whether in the form of historical events from the city's past or of historical meanings attached to locations or built structures, history is singularly significant. A sense of place and identity have strong connections to the past through memory, and are often symbolically represented through buildings whose prominence, architectural design, and continuing presence as tacit witnesses of the passage of time make them visible markers of history (see Cresswell 2004, 85–93). Hence, the historic center of a former colonial city may become the symbol of an official urban identity at the same time that it holds other meanings for

contemporary communities, as the politics of ownership of the center of Lima exemplify. Similarly, contesting claims inform the representation of Havana in the lyrics of Gerardo Alfonso's songs, as Robin Moore discusses. Whereas the naming of buildings in some songs is consistent with an officially sanctioned identity, this identity is undercut by references to the everyday in the same or other songs, creating a tension in Alfonso's oeuvre between the monumental city that represents the past and a sense of place rooted in the contemporary lived experiences of people in the parks, streets, and buildings of Havana. By contrast, the relative lack of importance attached to contemporary life is a problem in the work of the two chroniclers of Asunción analyzed by Amanda Holmes. Although both writers are advocates of modernization, they are also inclined to nostalgia and to identify with a city that looks primarily to its past.

A different example of the effects of memory may be had from the occasion in 1999, analyzed by Andrea Noble, when members of the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional [Zapatista Army of National Liberation]) brought their campaign to Mexico City. Their presence relives a moment in 1914 when the city was occupied by Zapatista and Villista troops during the Mexican Revolution, so that the new occupation engages the past and its inscription on urban places, subjecting it to a rereading or reconstruction. Noble's account of the EZLN in the Mexican capital also affirms the idea that sense of place does not emanate from the place itself, but rather from the meanings that people derive from or ascribe to it in light of how they use it. As Cresswell remarks, "Place is the raw material for the creative production of identity rather than an a priori label of identity" (2004, 39). His conclusion is reached after a survey of the work of several authors who have advanced the notion that places are constructions resulting from their occupation and use: "Seamon [1980], Pred [1984], Thrift [1983], de Certeau [1988,] and others show us how place is constituted through reiterative social practices—place is made and remade on a daily basis" (2004, 39).

The principle of the construction of place through iterative social practice is well exemplified in this volume by Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste's study of the public transportation system inaugurated in Bogotá at the beginning of the millenium and subsequently imitated in other urban centers in Colombia. The system is intended to solve problems of transportation but has also had considerable impact on the construction of spaces by the city's population. Above all, it is seen to embody the intention of a central government set on imprinting its presence, and therefore its authority and view of social order, on the cities where the system operates.

On a much smaller scale, the two novels by the Argentinean César Aira,

as studied by Richard Young, focus on a particular barrio in Buenos Aires. In both works, the barrio is constructed as it is revealed and given meaning by the movements and activities of individuals whose discovery of the places they encounter is shaped by relationships formed with them. The process is akin to how other cities are discovered, as described in other contributions: the Havana the songwriter finds not just in its buildings but in the lived experiences of its inhabitants; the festivals and public processions that shape the meaning of Lima for Andean migrants; the view of Los Angeles obtained from a consideration of the preparation and consumption of restaurant food; and the image of Latina/o Detroit that emerges from its relationship to the media.

Among all these representations, the embodiment of Mexico City in the art of Teresa Margolles, analyzed by Anny Brooksbank-Jones, is especially noteworthy as an example of the city as a construction. The degree of abstraction possible through artistic practices and performance art allows Margolles to interpret the relationship of the human body, the urban environment, and lived experience in a highly dramatic form. Her treatment of human remains not only engages the traditional ethos of death associated with Mexico City, but also captures the city as a bodily experience lived for some of its inhabitants in the cultures of marginality and violence.

The idea that the identities of places are constructed in relation to how they are inhabited and what people do in them is often expressed through the concept of performance.<sup>5</sup> For Nigel Thrift, “performance is, at this moment, one of the most pervasive metaphors in the human sciences . . . precisely because it provides a way of understanding meaning as not residing in something but as generated through processes” (Thrift 2008, 124–25). When viewed from the perspective of this metaphor, places and their meaning are works in progress, in a continuous process of becoming determined by the behavior or performance of those who occupy or inhabit them. The performative character of public spectacles has been compellingly described by Daniel M. Goldstein (2004), whose study of festive celebrations and vigilante violence in Villa Pagador, a barrio on the outskirts of the Bolivian city of Cochabamba, examines the two kinds of activity as spectacles involving representations of identity, claims for recognition, and assertions of belonging to inhabited places. The spectacles studied by Goldstein belong squarely within the concept of performance enunciated by Thrift, and refer to actions that give meaning to those who perform them and to the places where they are performed. Referring to people doing what they are, performance therefore embraces not only participation in the programmed rituals of iterative festivals, but also collective community actions that often have a deceptive air of spontaneity, as well as the individual practices of public and



private life pursued in accordance with social convention (see Cresswell 2004, 35–37).

In one way or another, performance of the city figures in all the chapters in this collection. The spectacular city is notably on display in Lima in the religious processions of Andean migrants, and is also visible in Latina/o Detroiters' celebrations of national holidays, the festive occasions serving in both instances as assertions of claims for belonging and recognition. The annual book fair in Havana, as discussed by Antoni Kapcia and Par Kumaraswami, is a different kind of occasion for performing the city, one that spectacularizes a nationally sanctioned official culture. There is also something of the spectacle in the repetition of urban history in the appearances of members of the EZLN in Mexico City, but discussions of transportation in Bogotá and the consumption of Mexican culture by Angelinos have more to do with performances of the city in the practices of everyday life, notwithstanding their deeper political implications. In contrast to such collective activities, the city is performed on a smaller scale in the examples of film, literature, music, and art explored in the volume, explored with a greater focus on the activities of particular individuals and their symbolic representation of urban life.

The religious processions in Lima are not that city's only source of spectacle. As Gisela Cánepa notes, the processions are staged within an historic center that is a designated World Heritage site and is therefore a spectacle on its own merits. Such assets have, as in such other places around the world as London, Prague, and Jerusalem, also turned Lima into a tourist city (see Judd and Fainstein 1999) and made tourism an important resource in the national economy. The spectacularization of the city through promotion of both its historic architecture and its celebration of traditional cultural practices has consequently made objects of consumption of the city and its citizens, drawing them into a global market and contributing to a complex situation in which local interests and identities complement and compete with the demands of a society experiencing the effects of globalization. In this respect, the contemporary condition of Lima has much in common with other urban centers of Latin/o America.

Although globalization and its impacts on urban environments are not subjects of central concern for this volume, the relation between the global and the local surfaces either directly or implicitly in all of the chapters. The interaction between these two dimensions of contemporary urban life are experienced worldwide in a variety of ways, and in ways not easily disentangled (see Massey 2005, 177–85), with significant effects on how people construct the spaces they live in and the sense of identity such places create. The loss experienced by Beatriz Sarlo through changes at a familiar street corner, like many of the reac-

tions recounted in *Instantáneas*, is a response to the cultural homogenization that accompanies globalization. It is not unlike the sense of uniformity and loss of urban specificity resulting from construction of the identical systems of urban transportation in different Colombian cities, documented in Fernández L'Hoeste's chapter.

The difficulty experienced by Latina/o communities in North American cities to compete locally against dominant global trends is described in two chapters. In globalized, multicultural Los Angeles, Mexicans constitute a low-income labor pool for the restaurant industry and their culture is consumed as the exotic Other, while Latina/o Detroiters struggle for visibility in a globalized media. Three chapters—on northeastern cinema in Brazil, the art of Teresa Margolles, and the presence of members of the EZLN in Mexico City—highlight specific endeavors to assert the presence of the local and the marginalized on a global stage; by contrast, discussions on Asunción and Havana reveal a tendency to shun contemporary global networks, the former through nostalgia for the past and the latter in response to economic and cultural isolation. Among all the cities discussed, however, the opposition between the local and the global is at its most conflictive in representations of Buenos Aires, a consequence in part of the impact of neoliberal economics during the postdictatorship period and the persistence of memories of the violence of recent history.

If global economic trends, cultural homogeneity, or the invisibility of cultural minorities are of interest for these chapters, it is because of their specific effects on local communities. These effects constitute a notable series within the complex of factors that give particular places their perceived character both for those who inhabit them and for those who visit or study them. Yet, although these chapters seek to describe particular cities and identities configured in light of the cultural practices and social phenomena associated with them, the idea of any permanent sense of place is elusive. Cities and how they are experienced are fluid spaces, as Beatriz Sarlo became only too keenly aware. We have already referred to urban spaces as works in progress, a condition that the era of globalization has merely exaggerated (see Massey 1997). How places are perceived depends above all on the angle from which they are seen. Reflecting on the role of topology in urbanism and on the rhetorical basis of knowledge, James S. Duncan remarks, "Pre-given reality is thus not so much a transparently viewed object of representation as it is the material from which something new is fashioned" (1996, 254). The apparent predominance of some of this "material" may sometimes cause certain places to be viewed stereotypically, especially in the popular imagination. Yet even academic rhetoric of description entails a process of selection; whether in the form of artistic representation or in the form of

a particular social practice, each contribution in this volume has taken a certain cultural phenomenon to serve as the lens through which to examine aspects of urban life. These phenomena are approached from the perspective of specific methodologies and are seen within the constraints of particular periods of time.

Thus the images presented here, and the identities constructed by citizens of themselves and their cities, are ephemeral, transient views. They may be thought of as snapshots that portray what for a given time and under given circumstances are some of the salient characteristics of urban life in Latin/o America. It is as such that they have their value and contribute to our overall understanding of the region and its cities.