Introduction

HOW SLUMS MATTER

En las villas, junto a la opresión humillante de la miseria impuesta, se preserva buena parte de la cultura nacional argentina.

—Hugo Ratier, *Villeros y villas miseria*

Urban poverty is one of the most influential—yet least understood—factors shaping our perception of Latin America.[1] According to the 2020 UN-Habitat Report on the state of the world's cities, 20 percent of the urban population in Latin America lives in slums (UN-Habitat 2020). While Argentina's capital is mostly perceived as a middle-class space or as "the Paris of the South," according to a common Eurocentric epithet, the presence of at least fifty precarious housing settlements and *villas miseria*— the Argentine term for slums—and the contemporary boom in cultural production representing their reality, foreground poverty as a defining element of Buenos Aires, one in which the tensions that undergird urban modernization are laid bare.[2] In this book I 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.

The 2022 Argentine National Census counted approximately 400,000 people living in villas miseria in Buenos Aires, 1.2 million if we consider the entire metropolitan area, accounting for roughly 15 percent of the city's

population (INDEC 2022).[3] The persistence of slums across the Argentine territory, as well as in other Latin American countries, shows that neither modernity nor capitalism can absorb these spaces. Among all the Argentine cities, I focus on Buenos Aires because it is there that villas miseria appeared first at the time of the city's modernization at the end of the nineteenth century, and it is there that most slums are still situated. Slums are present nonetheless in other cities across Argentina—most notably, Córdoba, the second-largest city in the country, where, according to the Registro Nacional de Barrios Populares, some 163 villas miseria have been counted in the metropolitan area. Similar numbers, approximately one hundred villas, are also present in the city of Rosario and its metropolitan area. Yet if the link between slums and culture is essential to explaining Argentine national culture, then it is not just any city, but Buenos Aires specifically, that must be considered. Buenos Aires is the place where this nexus has developed most consistently because the Argentine capital is the laboratory from which definitions of the nation have always been attempted.

Villas miseria represent heterogeneous urban spaces that trouble the dualities of slum/city, East/West, center/periphery, and first/third world. In his now classic *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams hinted at the impossibility of separating these dichotomous constructions from each other. "Whenever I consider the relations between country and city," says Williams, "and between birth and learning, I find this history active and continuous: the relations are not only of ideas and experiences, but of rent and interest, of situation and power; a wider system" (1973, 7). A similar intersection informs the title of this book, *The Slum and the City*, where the *and* deliberately points to a relation of interdependence. Both the slum and the city are essential to understanding Buenos Aires and Argentina—as, according to Williams, the city and the country are for a better comprehension of the English experience.

Other titles that examine the urban in the field of Latin American cultural studies have also troubled the seemingly neat oppositions between the slum and the city. Since these titles, most of them from the 1980s and '90s, inform the coming pages, it is worth glancing at them briefly now. Adrián Gorelik reveals in his *La grilla y el parque* (1998) how the grid and the park, despite implying different conceptions of public space, are equally involved in its emergence in the Buenos Aires of the first decades of the twentieth century. José Luis Romero, in his germinal *Latinoamérica: las ciudades y las ideas* (1986), defined the Buenos Aires of those years as the city of the two cultures: the more traditional culture of the center, upheld by the upper and middle classes, and a novel one, more marginal, related to the surrounding neighborhoods, where immigrants and *criollos* mixed.

Nonetheless, Romero pointed out that the peculiarity of Buenos Aires did not consist in the progressive mutual exclusion of the two parts but, rather, in a conflictual but growing integration between those two cultures, which contributed to the creation of a common city.[4]

Rosalba Campra's edited collection *La selva en el damero* (1989) points precisely to the porous border between the wild, undomesticated, element brought in from the countryside and the disciplined urban grid that was the product of a hierarchy of space established by the 1573 Laws of the Indies, through which the Spanish centralized the power of the church and the state in the main square (Altamirano 1989; Lejeune 2005). The further one lived from the main square, the poorer they were. For Aldo José Altamirano, the wild, countryside element would eventually overcome the city to such an extent that he would assert that "In Latin America, those that are quantitatively called 'pueblos jóvenes,' 'poblaciones,' 'favelas,' 'villas miseria,' 'barriadas,' are the city, the current city" (1989, 25).[5] The city becomes for him "a distant presence, lived in a space that is almost countryside" (25).[6]

In later studies, Gorelik (2009, 2022) picks up on two different modalities of being in the city—the margin and the center—to reveal the variety of connections developed since 1950 between Greater Buenos Aires, made up mostly of immigrants from the hinterland, and the European city, the center encircled within the Avenida General Paz.[7] Following the overthrow of the Peronist government in 1955, the European city was indeed disrupted by the villa miseria, allowing for "the interior consolidation of a fragment of that other world" (Gorelik 2009, 68).

More recently and more generally, a series of edited collections have addressed the importance of the relation slum-city in defining Latin American cities (Fischer, McCann, and Auyero 2014; Scorer 2016; Geraghty and Massidda 2019; Carman and Olejarczyk 2021). Felipe Hernández puts it clearly in the introduction to the collection of essays *Marginal Urbanism*: "Indeed, it is difficult to approach the study of Latin American cities, historically and in the present, without the notion that marginality has always been an inherent part of them" (2017, ix). (I would add that it is also impossible to understand the cultural production of Latin American cities without the concept of marginality.) Marginality, for Hernández, is moreover connected to forms of discrimination and segregation whose origins can be traced back to the colonial period.[8] It has thus been a trait of Latin American cities since their very foundations.

Scholars have tried to explain the presence of what seemed to be a "backward" element in Buenos Aires ever since its emphatically modern consolidation in the late nineteenth century. If we look back in time, we can find a discussion of the interdependence between the city and the

slum already in Ezequiel Martínez Estrada's *Radiografía de la pampa* ([1933] 1993), where the author characterizes the capital's profound *pampeano* character—the rural soul of the cosmopolitan Buenos Aires. In his 1957 *Cabeza de Goliat: Microscopía de Buenos Aires*, Martínez Estrada further troubles the city/country duality by describing what he sees as the four faces of Buenos Aires: the first foundational city of Pedro de Mendoza, the second foundational city of Juan de Garay, the city of the wars of independence, the city that looks to Europe—only to conclude that a symbiotic coexistence ties them all together (Martínez Estrada [1957] 1983).

Just as Sarmiento had defined the Argentine national spirit by evoking the conjunction of civilization and barbarism, the city of Buenos Aires can be understood through the correlations between city and country, between city and slum.[9] Both are also central to Argentine cultural heritage, although the role of slums in the construction of the nation's collective memory has often been dismissed by the colonizing view that foregrounds the city. Stuart Hall points to this effect of power relations influencing the discursive construction of common pasts in his foundational "Whose Heritage?": "The Heritage inevitably reflects the governing assumptions of its time and context. It is always inflected by the power and authority of those who have colonised the past, whose versions of history matter. These assumptions and co-ordinates of power are inhabited as natural—given, timeless, true and inevitable. But it takes only the passage of time, the shift of circumstances, or the reversals of history to reveal those assumptions as time- and context-bound, historically specific, and thus open to contestation, re-negotiation, and revision" (2005, 24). The cultural and activist effervescence of today's slums, together with their permanent position in the urban, urges us to reconsider their place in the nation's constructed and thus contestable cultural heritage. To bring to the surface the cultural production around slums not only amounts to rewriting "the margins into the center," as Hall (2005, 28) would put it, and redefining "Argentineness" in a more inclusive manner but it also troubles the very civilization/barbarism dichotomy.

As the reader will see, the cultural production I examine in the following pages challenges the perception of superiority predominantly ascribed to the city in relation to the slum by revealing the violence with which modernization and urbanization have been carried out. Some of the questions that will interest us revolve around the ways in which villas miseria and urbanization projects for the city have shaped each other. How have slums mattered culturally in Argentina? What are the major aesthetic categories for depicting poor people? In what ways do the poor trouble the modes of their representation? How do visual and literary works associated with the slum dispute modernizing projects? In what manners do work

and poverty intersect in villas miseria? As these questions make clear, I approach slums not as places of vulgarization nor as residues of industrial development but rather as spaces of production. Specifically, they appear as spaces that produce new aesthetics and cultural trends, while offering a vantage point to understand the city and its problematics.[10]

THE MATTER OF SLUMS

Since the United Nations reintroduced the term *slum* in the 1990s, poverty has regained prominence in academic and political discussions globally. In the context of Latin America, Brodwyn Fischer (2014) refers to how hemispheric and global phenomena have revived interest in the informal city and sparked a concomitant new boom in favela studies, which especially in Brazil, Chile, and Argentina, examine slums within local contexts of power, racial, and economic relations.[11] In the Argentine case, the exacerbation of the economic crisis during the early 2000s caused a significant increase in the number of poor people. This corresponded in the Argentine capital to a greater though insufficient political attention toward poverty that, in the last twenty years, has taken the form of various measures aimed at improving the living spaces and standard of living of the poorest sector. These measures include the Programa de Mejoramiento de Barrio (ongoing since 1997), the Asignación Universal por Hijo, and the program for urban development Programa de Crédito Argentino del Bicentenario para la Vivienda Única Familiar (PRO.CRE.AR) implemented during the government of Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) and then that of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015), PRO.CRE.AR II, administered by Alberto Fernández (2019–2023), as well as the promotion of the dubious slogan "zero poverty" by Mauricio Macri and his administration (2015–2019)—an administration also interested in eradicating or urbanizing the Villa 31, located near the Retiro station in the center of the city.

Villas miseria, their dwellers, and their issues have become a theme in Argentine media. This prominence has motivated a vast output and circulation of images and filmic, artistic, and literary narratives on places of poverty and their inhabitants. The recognition and affirmation of the slum is apparent in the contemporary literary production of writers such as Fernanda Laguna, Juan Martini, César Aira, Leonardo Oyola, Rodolfo Fogwill, Gabriela Cabezón Cámara, Ricardo Strafacce, Sergio Chejfec, and Alicia Dujovne Ortiz. The slum appears in Alejandro Marmo's artistic projects, in the *cartoneras* publishers, in Ricardo Ceppi's, Andy Goldstein's, and Dani Yako's social photography, and in cinema, both on the independent circuits with films such as *Estrellas* (2007) and in more mainstream productions such as *Elefante blanco* (2012).

The proliferation of cultural production from and around the villas miseria together with the many activist practices born out of shanties point to what I define as the "the matter" of slums, which reveals their relevance both as a material and cultural presence in the city. This view comes to counter the predominant perceptions, which have often portrayed villas miseria as spaces inhabited merely by criminals, outsiders, and victims of exploitation.[12] The very words *villa miseria* and *slum* are problematic because of the negative associations that these terms conjure up. They are typically used as pejorative terms. According to Alan Gilbert (2007), in his analysis of the word *slum*, slum dwellers are not just those who live in poor housing; they are considered by others to have some sort of defect. The most common emotion "that slums generate among non slum dwellers is fear of the people who live there; a fear that stimulates demand for gated communities, hand-guns and slum demolition" (704). By focusing on how slums matter culturally and socially for a better understanding of Buenos Aires, I aim in this book to reconsider the general connotations of the expression *villa miseria*.[13]

What does it mean, then, to write about the productivity of slums instead of focusing on issues of violence and exploitation? I would like to suggest that it entails a departure from the criminalizing and victimizing narratives often used to describe slums and their inhabitants, in order to offer new, more positive ways to approach spaces of poverty. This is not an attempt to romanticize the poor and their dwellings; it is a way of learning how to position ourselves from the vantage point of the villa miseria. The stakes of shifting position in this way can, perhaps, best be presented in terms of decolonial theory and what the scholar Aníbal Quijano (2011) called "the coloniality of power" and its tools: development, modernization, and urbanization, among others.[14] For Quijano the coloniality of power is the result of the hegemony of Eurocentrism as the perspective from which knowledge is attained and generated, which then creates a relation of dominance between Europe or the West (to also include the United States), and the others.

The Western-influenced mindset that views the city from its financial, cultural, historical center has so far colonized the general approach to the urban. In Latin America, this is particularly true if we think about the role that colonial urbanism has played in shaping the development of the continent's cities. Many have pointed out how the Laws of the Indies determined a great part of the sociospatial configuration of the cities founded by the Spanish.[15] Moreover, colonial urbanism, as we are reminded by Hernández, is not a trait of a distant premodern past. On the contrary, it is a "constitutive element of the very modernity of Latin American cities" along with the marginal spaces it has forged (2017, xxv). As Quijano's

theory might lead us to expect, this situation also has a clear racial dimension: the proportion of people of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) heritage in the villa miseria is higher than in the planned city, where there is a correspondingly larger proportion of people of primarily European heritage (Geler 2016). To position, then, in the villa miseria the vantage point on Buenos Aires, alludes to a possible detachment, what Walter Mignolo terms "delinking," from the Western knowledge that has determined the narrative on the city's cultural history (2011; Mignolo and Walsh 2018). Looking from the slum enables the recuperation of other stories and the surfacing of other perspectives on the urban.

The villa miseria, with its labyrinthine structure and ways of living, offers a mazelike perspective against the city grid imposed by the Laws of the Indies.[16] Akin to what Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) has proposed about the importance of visualization and images in how Indigenous worldviews deliver alternative points of view, the slum's mazelike perspective troubles dichotomous ways of seeing—developed/underdeveloped, center/periphery, West/East, North/South—that have organized and supported the Western coloniality of power. In the following chapters I urge scholars of Buenos Aires to revisit poverty's cultural role to better understand the city and its development.

SCRAP AESTHETICS

When Daniel Link (2010) provocatively declares that all Argentine culture starts with Esteban Echeverría's *El matadero* ([1871] 2006), he also implies that it all begins with waste. "If there is something in *El matadero* by Esteban Echeverría," writes Link, "it is an exasperated and obsessive description of the viscera, the residues, the rubbish. 'The filth of the slaughterhouse' inaugurates a literature and a topic: a pathology. 'Terrible shadow of Facundo, I'm going to raise you so that, shaking off the bloody dust that covers your ashes, you get up to explain to us the secret life and the internal convulsions that tear the bowels of a noble people apart!,' says the other beginning of the Argentine literature, *Facundo*, which abounds in blood, dust and ashes, residues, remains of the body, rubbish, shadow."[17] Two of the foundational texts of Argentine literature, *El matadero* and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo* ([1845] 2003), are obsessed with scraps. Waste has represented, since the beginning of Argentine literary culture, a central figure for the ways in which apparently rejected materials remain an inseparable part of the nation and its capital.

The margins and its scraps were also a major force in the literary works of the 1920s and '30s. We need only look to Roberto Arlt's *El juguete rabioso* ([1926] 1993)—translated and published in English as *Mad Toy* (2002)—in which the protagonist Silvio Astier's only way of interacting with a city

that is constantly casting him out is through crime. After being sexually harassed in a *conventillo* (tenement), Astier considers the interrelations between the vile, material side of Buenos Aires and a sort of spiritual, celestial aspect. He walks around the miserable, dirty streets of the *arrabal*,[18] full of trash and of potbellied, shabby, neglected women calling their dogs or children, only to realize that above him is the purest and clearest sky: "Above the bridge I saw the sea touching the slope of the sky and the sails of far-off boats" (Arlt 2002, 110). The Buenos Aires that appears, for instance, in Manuel Gálvez's *Nacha regules* (1920) or in Elías Castelnuovo's *Malditos* (1925), and more generally in the writers of the Boedo group, is also predominantly marginal and dirty.[19] Authors belonging to the Florida group were also interested in the urban margins. In Jorge Luis Borges's *Evaristo Carriego* (1930), for instance, the arrabal and its conventillos are converted into mythical spaces, home to the troublemakers, prostitutes, knife fights, criollos, and *compadritos* that would populate several of the author's literary works.[20]

The materiality of the margins and its waste is present even in Leopoldo Marechal's *Adán Buenosayres*, first published in 1948, when, following Adán's funeral, the group led by Samuel Tesler defines Buenos Aires as "the city of the Tobian mare" (Marechal [1948] 1994, 144).[21] The allusion to Rafael Tobias de Aguiar, a nineteenth-century Brazilian revolutionary leader who rode horses of peculiar fur with large, noticeable spots of two well differentiated colors, symbolically meant that Buenos Aires revealed its double condition in its fur or exterior: black and white, dark and light—that is, the terrestrial and the celestial, the material and the spiritual. The city comes to terms with its duality in Saavedra, where the group guided by Tesler often wanders. It is there that "the city and the desert come together in a combative embrace, like two giants engaged in a peculiar battle" (349).[22] The desert here is not only the pampa surrounding Buenos Aires, it has been extended to include *las orillas*, the city's margins, the outskirts, the shacks, and the trash pickers—so much so that at a certain point, for Marechal, the waste, the material part of the city, informs the image of Buenos Aires as a hen, whose flight is low, heavy, unable to reach the high skies of spirituality.

During Juan Domingo Perón's government from 1947 to 1955, the only cultural practices that could be promoted as authentically Argentine were those of the poor (Karush 2012). All cultural products of the period, and especially the films made during Peronism, celebrated the poor as the only authentic representatives of the nation.[23] This is the case of Tulio Demicheli's *Arrabalera* (1950), Lucas Demare's *El mercado de Abasto* (1955), Leopoldo Torres Ríos's *Pelota de trapo* (1948), and León Klimovsky's *Suburbio* (1951). The excess of residues coming from slums and dumps contin-

ued to surface in several major literary works of the following decade. It is there—as Link tells us—in David Viñas's *Dar la cara* (1962) and Rodolfo Walsh's *Operación Masacre* ([1957] 1994). The former sees the characters of Pelusa and Beto having their first sexual relation in an incinerator, while the latter investigates the executions carried out by the 1955 military dictatorship in the garbage dumps of José León Suárez (Link 2010).

The reader can understand, then, why it made sense for the Paraguayan-Argentine poet Oscar Fariña to convert José Hernández's *El gaucho Martín Fierro* ([1872] 2004)—the foundational epic poem of Argentine literature—into *El guacho Martín Fierro* (2011). After more of a century of scraps the cowboy, *el gaucho*, has become a homeless orphan, *el guacho*. The underworld fringe of the Argentine hero Martín Fierro is now located not in the vast expanses of the Pampas, or on the border, but in the slums of contemporary Buenos Aires.[24] The longstanding historical connection suggested here between culture and the urban edges, its waste and liminal spaces, should make somewhat clearer how the marginal and the leftovers have always mattered, how they have always been constitutive of Argentine culture. Moreover, whenever scraps entered the aesthetic realm of literary texts or visual sources, they became tools for defiance and critique. They signaled the violent side of Argentine culture in texts such as *El matadero*, *Facundo*, or *El juguete rabioso*. Subsequently, during the Peronist decade, they became the only true Argentina. And finally, they singled out the state's repression in Viñas's and Walsh's texts.

THRESHOLDS OF RESISTANCE

In the coming pages I do not seek to idealize slums, where living conditions are undoubtedly harsh. Nonetheless, in introducing this book, I would like to offer a sense of how slums' interstitial position in the city might theoretically allow for the development of spaces of autonomy and the forging of new social alliances. In the chapters of this book, focusing on a series of specific case studies, I describe in detail how this process unfolded at various moments in the twentieth and twenty-first century. If we allow for an understanding of the effects of urban planning not as monolithic or imposed only from above over the dispossessed, slums can be approached in all their creative power.[25] As Henri Lefebvre (1991) has shown, space is to be considered a social product founded upon the collective construction of values and meanings that influence both our perception and our spatial practices. Correspondingly, Edward Soja (1996) has proposed the concept of "third space," understood as the result of the interaction between physical space, symbolic space, and being in space. How individuals and societies interact with urban space is mediated by the way they live in the city, how this is built, and how they perceive it. These multifariously

influenced interactions produce and are produced by collective values in which the lower classes also participate. Néstor García Canclini (1997) and Paola Berenstein Jacques (2012) have specifically underlined the need to pay closer attention to the role played by the poor and by erratic subjects in the cultural creation of Latin American cities. In *Imaginarios urbanos* (1997), García Canclini defines the city as a space where multiple cultures and urban practices coexist, and where migrants have a fundamental role. In his study of Mexico City, he reveals, for example, the existence of three cities: the historical, the industrial, and the communicational, which allow for a contradictory coexistence of traditions and precariousness. More recently, in *Elogio aos errantes*, Berenstein Jacques (2012) has underlined erratic and vagabond practices in the city as forms of microresistance, or "micronarratives" that break with the idea of one great modern narration.

It is precisely the power of defiance of slums and their inhabitants that I seek to recuperate in this book. Conceptually, we can consider slums as an urban threshold insofar as they are in between the highly urbanized space of what Romero (1986) has defined as the "normalized" city and barren land.[26] As spaces halfway between nonplaces and anthropological places, as theorized by Marc Augé (1995), they are by their very nature territories that are difficult to define. On the one hand, these are relational spaces—akin to anthropological places—in which social bonds and identities are influenced by the place one occupies. The identity of *villeres* is intimately tied to the villa.[27] On the other hand, the villas also present an ephemeral character—typical of nonplaces—because of their precarious construction. However, although most of them originated as an ephemeral transition toward integration to normalized housing, many quickly consolidated as permanent places from which it became almost impossible to leave. It is not necessary to read books or reports to realize that the Argentine villas miseria, or their other Latin American iterations, such as the Venezuelan *ranchos*, the Mexican *colonias populares*, the Peruvian *barriadas*, the Brazilian *favelas*, and the Chilean *callampas*, are a permanent presence.

We can define *villas miseria* as a specific spatial configuration where part of the urban poor live. According to Cravino (2006), 10 percent of the population of the Buenos Aires metropolitan area lives in informal settlements. In Buenos Aires and other cities, however, not all the poor live in villas miseria and there exist other spaces that house the low-income sector: squatter settlements, poor neighborhoods, tenements, shantytowns. These are not always easy to distinguish from villas. Villas, moreover, are all different and change through time. Today's slums, as Javier Auyero and Débora Alejandra Swistun (2009) point out, are different from those of the 1950s and 1960s. While those were mostly the products of mass migration tied to the boom of import substitution industrialization (Grillo,

Lacarrieu, and Raggio 1995; Yujnovsky 1984; Portes 1972), today's villas are linked to deindustrialization (Rao 2006). Nonetheless, we can say that most villas in Buenos Aires are composed of self-built homes organized along narrow alleyways that lack basic municipal services such as potable water, sewers, waste collection, and basic infrastructure. Slum dwellers live and work in conditions of pervasive insecurity; they are exposed to disease, pollution, crime, overcrowding, and environmental hazards.

In *Flammable: Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown*, Auyero and Swistun (2009) give a detailed portrait of life amid hazards, garbage, and poison in one of Buenos Aires's villas miseria. Through collective ethnography, the authors specifically address the environmental and sanitary consequences caused by the proximity of Shell's petrochemical compound to Villa Inflamable in the southern part of the city. The story of Sandra Martínez and her family in the opening pages of *Flammable* offers a particularly vivid example of the harsh conditions slum dwellers have to endure. Sandra, a mother of four, lives on an insufficient unemployment subsidy, while her husband scavenges in search of resellable objects. While the family struggles to make ends meet, their biggest concern is their health. Two of their children—Julián, who suffers from convulsions, and Sofía, born with one leg shorter than the other—bear on their bodies the effects of lead poisoning and toxic contamination. Villeres not only have to endure pollution and the lack of basic infrastructure, they also have to live in violent environments. Cristian Alarcón's chronicles of drug trafficking and crime, *Cuando me muera quiero que me toquen cumbia* (2003) and *Si me querés, quereme transa* (2010), are possibly the best accounts of daily life in twenty-first-century villas miseria. Alarcón, especially in *Si me querés, quereme transa*, delves into the mechanisms, rules, and risks of the traffic of cocaine from the Andean Plateau to the slums of Buenos Aires. He reveals, in a style reminiscent of New Journalism, how the clans formed by Bolivian and Peruvian immigrants work in complicity with police forces, and how the relations and values that unite those families function. By becoming a witness to the survival of the immigrant and her or his need to settle, the reader understands how allegiances change and betrayals occur, how enemies are killed, but also how the maintenance of informal housing is financed by the community, and how earnings from drug trafficking become the motor for more legal businesses, be it selling food or clothes.

The slum is neither the center nor the periphery; it holds an in-between position within the urban fabric. Its intermediate quality resembles in some ways what the French semiotician Louis Marin attributes to utopia. For Marin, utopia is inserted between opposites and is, therefore, the discursive expression of the neutral, it is neither one nor the other of

the two opposite poles: "More's Utopia is neither England nor America, neither the Old nor the New World; it is the in-between . . . a third term " (1984, xiii). Villas function in a manner analogous to utopian discourse, not so much in its projections of positivity but because of their midway status. Utopia, Marin warns us, "is not only a distant country on the edge of the world; it is also the Other World, the world as 'other,' and the 'other' as world. Utopia is the reverse image of this world, its photographic negative" (242).

Villas are places of "otherness"—their inhabitants are racialized and socially stigmatized "others"—that become the sites from where the discourse of reality that is opposed to the discourse of the ideal city arises. It is there, Homi Bhabha puts it clearly, "where cultural meaning is most certainly reconstituted constantly" (quoted in F. Hernández 2010, 33). Slums not only transcend dualities such as periphery and center, third and first world, or East and West, they make visible the "great imbalances in the distribution of power" (Bhabha quoted in F. Hernández 2010, 97–99). Their in-betweenness, their threshold condition, allows for the appearance of practices that dispute hegemonic discourses about the urban. Like Michel Foucault's (1986) heterotopias, they are places of discontinuity, cracks in the mold and delegitimizations in the systems of classification through which power relations are articulated. Such territories, for Stavros Stavrides, provide a place for emergent social relations. "Emancipatory spatiality," in his words, "emerges in the creation and social use of thresholds" (2019, 2).

THE 1907 TENANTS' STRIKE

In what thresholds did emancipatory spatiality arise in Buenos Aires? Although the individual chapters of this book offer a number of examples in different contexts, it is worth considering one early, foundational example as an illustration of the general processes involved. At the beginning of the twentieth century, claims for broader rights and anarchist ideas merged in the 1907 Huelga de inquilinos (Tenants' Strike). Although, at the time, not all anarchists lived in the city's poor settlements and conventillos, the majority of workers and European immigrants already attuned to workers' liberation claims were concentrated mostly in those areas. As anarchism in Argentina was largely bound up with working-class immigrants located in low-income spaces, it was an essentially urban phenomenon and one of the political currents most influential on the modernization of the country throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century. The centers, places of recreation, education, and encounter for the movement were located in Buenos Aires adjacent to the majority of the tenements and, most of all, in the poorest neighborhoods of the south: Barracas, La Boca,
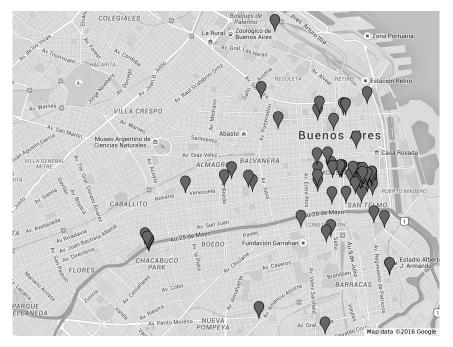
Figure I.1. Present-day map indicating the location of the tenement houses on strike between August and November 1907. The prevalence and intensification of the red markers in the southern area of the city should be noted. Google Maps, with locations marked by author.

and San Telmo.[28] If we map the coordinates of the conventillos that went on strike, we uncover a reorganization of urban space and an alternative cartography of the city constelled on the south side (see fig. I.1).[29]

The 1907 Huelga de inquilinos constituted both the threshold of the dispute over the meaning of twentieth-century Buenos Aires and the consolidation of the bond between the anarchist movement and the ways in which the working class and the poor demanded access to the city. With the tenants' strike the idea of dignified housing became a motive of struggle and spaces of poverty became fractures in the oligarchic model for Buenos Aires, revealing the limits of this modernization program. The lower classes participating in the anarchist protest were not the sick bodies abundant in hygienist representations of the time; they had turned into the agents of a challenge against the state, becoming organizers and participants in publications, assemblies, and demonstrations.[30]

The story goes that in 1906, the Federación Obrera Regional Argentina—a predominantly anarchist group active during the first three decades of the twentieth century—had begun a campaign to reduce rents.

At the beginning of 1907, however, there was, instead, a dramatic increase in municipal and territorial taxes, which tenements' landlords transferred immediately to renters. The Liga de Inquilinos suggested that tenants cease paying rent until the increase had been repealed. In the last days of August, as Juan Suriano describes, the inhabitants of the tenement Los Cuatro Diques, situated in Calle Ituzaingó 279-325 and property of Pedro Holterhoff, declared themselves on strike and presented "a set of conditions demanding a 30 percent reduction in rents, the abolition of the three-month deposit and flexibility in the expiration of payments, as well as substantial sanitary improvements" (1983, 14–15).[31]

The possibility of the tenants' strike's success depended as much on wide participation as on well-orchestrated demonstrations in which demands were communicated not only through signs, flags, and banners but also by bodily presence and a ritualized body language performed in the streets. The stable elements of the protest included slogans such as the typical "Long live anarchy!" or "Down with the bourgeoisie!" as well as banners claiming rights, trade union flags, and marching columns. The strike's organization was already a well-established concern in anarchist circles. Alberto Ghiraldo, the renowned writer of anarchist ideals, had expressed such concerns in the collection *Carne doliente* (1900), particularly with the short story "El rebelde." Here Ghiraldo used a dialogue between workers to lay out the strategy for a strike to become a true weapon. The instructions were clear: "Gather the bravest, the manliest, the most convinced," have them "present what they desire, then wait and wait very little," and if they receive a negative answer from their employer, they should "blow up a bridge, two bridges, ten bridges. Second. After the event. New presentation of what is desired. New negative. How is it answered? With the death of the manager" (172–73).[32]

During the Huelga de inquilinos the protests also featured a sit-in of tenement houses and mass concentrations on the streets of the city. The staging of the events, according to an article in the September 12, 1907, issue of the anarchist newspaper *La Protesta*, was in the hands of "comrades who do not rest" and of "large commissions of strikers [who] propagate the movement by infiltrating every place where misery is exploited and the poor are overcrowded together." The purpose of such a desired growth was for the groups to become "the first collective attack on the capitalist system in a way very different from the series of strikes made to obtain wage increases," as expressed in an October 16, 1907 article. The strike soon reached very dramatic outcomes. The tenements' situation was already tragic in itself, as "rooms devoid of all comforts turn the proletarian home into a site of martyrdom and disease," stated an article published on September 13, 1907.[33] The photographic archival material on the chil-

Figure I.2. The brooms protest, October 1907. Courtesy of Archivo General de la Nación, Buenos Aires.

Figure I.3. Eviction of a tenement house, 1907. Courtesy of Archivo General de la Nación, Buenos Aires.

dren's protest organized in support of the strike conveys the dramatic nature of the demonstrations (see fig. I.2). *La manifestación de las escobas*, the "broom protest" carried out by the children of the tenement houses in La Boca, synthesized the drama of "martyrdom and disease" in the faces of the little boys and girls. Their clothes reveal their belonging to the lower classes. But neither their rags nor their faces fully express the tragedy of their condition. Rather, the drama is manifested in the incipient action that crosses the group and specifically in the tense arm of the boy with the white shirt at the center of the image, who is being stopped from moving forward by a broom in an adult's hand.

By late September, the mobilization of tenants had reached a scope that had been unimaginable a month earlier. The residents of more than two thousand tenement houses (approximately 80 percent of the total tenements in Buenos Aires) had stopped paying rent, and the number of strikers was tallied at around one hundred thousand people (Suriano 1983). These numbers underline the extent of the fracture that was being inserted into the city space. The government, on the other hand, reacted to the protests that were destabilizing the city's homogeneity by physically repressing them. The elite's attempt to physically discipline the lower classes appears in an archival image showing the gesture of a tenement owner raising his arm over the tenants (see fig. I.3). Despite the government's repeated attempts to evict and expel the poor from the city, however, conventillos and poor settlements have endured through time. Through creative insurrections they have developed into social zones that have, in Franco "Bifo" Berardi's (2013) terms, become spaces of autonomy that can foster empathy and social solidarity. The tenants' strike teaches us, on one side, that dissident practices have been rooted in the spaces inhabited by Buenos Aires's poorest population ever since the city's modern urban development.[34] On the other, it points to the creative power—the well-organized protests, signs, flags, and banners—stemming from and circulating in spaces of dispossession. An understanding of this twofold implication of the Huelga de inquilinos frames the work that this book does in reading cultural production from and about slums.

DEFINING VILLAS MISERIA THROUGH LITERATURE

The focus of this book is, however, the cultural force acquired by villas miseria after the fall of Peronism in 1955 (chapter 1) through the twenty-first century (chapters 2 and 3), and their consolidation as sites of activist practices (chapter 4). Between 1936 and 1947, as a consequence of the exodus from the country to the city, the population of Buenos Aires grew at a yearly rate of 23 percent (de la Torre 2008). The displacement of people from the countryside compounded the already high number of

foreign immigrants, who had come to the country during the wave of international immigration of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth. Millions of Argentines, attracted by jobs in the new factories, ended up living on the edges of the cities (mainly Buenos Aires). In 1945, the conventillo was still the main accommodation for almost 10 percent of the inhabitants of Buenos Aires, though it could not supply sufficient housing for most of the newly arrived. Moreover, the rent freeze in 1943 and the ban on evictions promulgated by Perón in 1947 discouraged housing construction. Then in Argentina in the late 1950s, the degrading expression *villas miseria* was coined as a specific term to designate the accumulation of precarious dwellings occupied by the poorest sectors of the working classes. The term referred not to isolated houses but to community projects of territorial appropriation. Through the addition of the adjective *miseria*, the meaning of the noun *villa* (used to identify both neighborhoods and little villages) shifted to refer to a universe of indigence that in the collective imaginary was associated with the most neglected strata of society. Poor urban settlements have been recorded in Buenos Aires since the end of the nineteenth century, especially in the area that was then known as El Barrio de las Ranas (Codebò 2015; Snitcofsky 2015a, 2015b). As Valeria Laura Snitcofsky (2015b) explains, the term *villa* had been used as early as the 1930s to define Villa Desocupación, a settlement of mostly unemployed men located in a central area of Buenos Aires. However, the term was used to identify one specific villa and was associated mainly with the reality of unemployment. In the 1950s, in contrast, the term *villa*, connected to *miseria*, defined a different scenario, where slum dwellings had become a consistent trait in several areas of the city.

The stabilization of the term *villa miseria* was brought about in literature. In fact, it was Bernardo Verbitsky's *Villa Miseria también es América* ([1957] 2003), a novel based on a newspaper report and exposing the city's villas miseria to the wider public, that launched the literary consolidation of the generic use of this term to refer to Buenos Aires's slums. This novel was instrumental in fixing the cultural meaning of the city's slums among a substantial proportion of the public and the intellectuals of the time, and still influences our contemporary understanding (Liernur 2008).

The son of Russian-Jewish immigrant parents, Bernardo Verbitsky was born in Buenos Aires in 1907. As a young man he studied law and medicine but abandoned these to pursue a career that combined literature, screenwriting, journalism, and membership in the Academia Porteña del Lunfardo. By 1957 he had made a name for himself writing for *Crítica* and then *Noticias Gráficas*. In the latter, he held the column "Los libros por dentro," where he wrote book reviews and bibliographical notes. He dedicated most of his career to portraying both the glories and the miseries

of the city of Buenos Aires. His interest in the living conditions of the lower classes clearly marked his entire literary production, from *Es difícil empezar a vivir* (1941) to *Calles de tango* (1953) and *Un hombre de papel* (1966). Although he had already employed the term *villa miseria* in his 1955 newspaper articles in *Noticias Gráficas*, the novel *Villa Miseria también es América* represents the first time Verbitsky employed the expression *villa miseria* in his fiction to define the spaces occupied by the poorest sectors of the working classes.

According to Verbitsky (1974, 83), villas miseria did not have a generic name prior to his articles, but only individual names such as Villa Piolín, Villa Trapito, or Villa Jardín. With the novel, he was consolidating the use of the expression to single out and define a more ubiquitous urban reality.[35] The story portrays the life of a group of people living in an imaginary villa miseria located in Buenos Aires. It is written in a realist style reminiscent of the techniques employed by the Boedo group in the 1920s. Verbitsky's gaze, like the gaze of Elías Castelnuovo (1925, 1934), focuses on the presence of work and solidarity in villas miseria.[36] Amid eviction attempts, flooding, and fires, the narration's driving force is the communal installation of a water pump and the parallel stories of the protagonists Fabián, Godoy, Espantapájaros, Benítez, Codesido, Galeano, and Ramos. Verbitsky's writing produces the impression of a material and detailed villa—one that is much more material and detailed than that probably imagined hitherto by his middle-class readers, who would have been unlikely to wander in the city's slums. The reader is introduced to a fictional villa of the Gran Buenos Aires (the metropolitan area) near the Maldonado stream, inhabited by about 1,200 people. The villa's main street is only a "parody of a street" (B. Verbitsky [1957] 2003, 72). Its streets are covered with potholes, puddles, and trash, forming a labyrinth full of obstacles. Its eastern edge borders a factory while its boundary with the city is marked by the "Avenida"—a reference to the Avenida General Paz, which defined the limit between Buenos Aires and the outskirts. It is a space that does not repeat the regularity of the city that had grown according to the grid introduced by the Spanish since the second foundation of Buenos Aires in 1580.

Recent scholarship on Verbitsky's novel has interpreted the text's emphasis on the solidarity of collective bonds among its inhabitants as a celebration of the urban space of poverty. For Laura Podalsky (2004), Verbitsky's villa is the only communal place in the city, whose function is to reveal the center's destructive power. Gorelik (2009) has interpreted Verbitsky's slum as the symbol of the Latin American city in the future development of Buenos Aires; in a more recent essay (2016) he has returned to the relationship between the slum and Buenos Aires to propose the con-

cept of a "dual city." Verbitsky's gesture, however, is not toward duality. It is, rather, one of negotiation—a negotiation already inscribed in the unusual title of his work.[37] If it is true, as Gorelik indicates, that the villa in the novel represents the Latin American city, Verbitsky inserts it inside America as a challenge.

Villa Miseria también es América is an explicit, broadly left-wing, critique of the modernizing impulses of US American economic development policies promoted by CEPAL (United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean) and the Inter-American Development Bank. It counters the concept of the villa as an underdeveloped space lacking progress and contests the perception of its inhabitants as subjects in need of a moral education. Instead, in one part of the novel describing how slums have welcomed migrants from all over the country, Verbitsky states that "Villa Miseria is Villa Trabajo" ([1957] 2003, 52). Work runs through the novel. Women either work in textile industries or carry out house chores, while men are mostly employed in factories. Elba, for example, works at Hilotex, and Godoy and Ramos are both machinists. This view of the villa as a place of work and workers guided other representations at the time. Specifically, it also organized David José Kohon's narration of a city slum in the short film *Buenos Aires* (1966), where the protagonists all recount their work experiences. But the Villa Miseria of Verbitsky's novel is not only a place of work. It also retains the most human qualities of a typical neighborhood: sociability and solidarity. The daily life of its inhabitants shows the existence of a network of solidarity. The character Fabián makes this especially visible. Together with others, he is always available to help, from picking up the trash piling up in the villa to installing a water pump. According to him, "working together, as a team, with the awareness of being a community, [is] their only possible salvation" (B. Verbitsky [1957] 2003, 17). Villa Miseria is the place from which to think about alternatives to the institutionalized development project; for example, by installing a pump to provide a water supply in the slums. With Verbitsky the villa becomes the place from which to question the viability of Western concepts of modernization for the Latin American city. The novel ultimately reminds us that the villa is rather than is not. It is Buenos Aires; it is America.

THE VOICE OF THE SLUMS

At the same moment that the villa appeared in literature it also started to reveal itself as a space of resistance, complying with but also often questioning external representations of slums. This happened mostly because the villa's inhabitants started to consider villas as their permanent place of residence, which deeply influenced the crafting of their identity as a

new sector of society (Camelli 2017). One of the first platforms to channel the claims of people living in the slums of Buenos Aires was *La voz de las villas*, a long-lived periodical edited by the Federación de Villas y Barrios de Emergencia (FVBE; Slum and Emergency Neighborhoods Federation) from 1958 until 1976. The FVBE, founded by the Communist Party in collaboration with the villas' inhabitants, was the first political organization of the city's slums (Pastrana 1980). It was a collective organization that brought together the inhabitants of the slums of Buenos Aires to represent their claims, especially against government officials.

The FVBE's most important consequence was that it united the city's slums politically for the first time. It set the basis, moreover, for the emergence of other sectorial organizations related to slums in the years that followed, which had several symmetries with the modes of workers' organization that developed in factories.[38] It was as if people living in slums were extending to their dwellings the methods used in the workplace to claim broader rights. The weekly magazine *Nuestra Palabra*, published by the Communist Party, recommended in a September 17, 1963, article "that fight committees or commissions be set up in each block and that the delegates of the Central Neighborhood Commission be elected from there, so that all sectors of the neighborhood or town are represented."[39] The FVBE was in fact composed of neighborhood commissions and block delegates, echoing the ways in which workers were represented in factories but in a horizontal arrangement (Snitcofsky 2018).

Housing was one of the FVBE's main concerns throughout its twenty years of activity. In *La voz de las villas* from April 1970 we read that "the Federation of Villas and Emergency Neighborhoods is a social organization with men and women of all ages, creeds and opinions, who come together to fight for concrete aspirations, at the center of which is the housing problem and the goal of its definitive solution for all the workers who inhabit the slums."[40] The fight for adequate housing had begun concomitantly with the government's first attempts at eradicating the city's slums. More broadly, this was a fundamental clash between two different perceptions. The villeres perceived themselves as workers, with rights and responsibilities, against the image of the state that portrayed them as lazy and unproductive (Massidda 2013a).

In relation to this historical opposition between views of villeres either as workers or as good for nothing, it is important to remember the actual geographical proximity between many slums and factories or workplaces. Villa 31 had close ties with the neighboring harbor; Villa 19, also known as Villa INTA, was located near the INTA textile factory; Villa Ciudad Oculta near the livestock market; finally, Villa 21-24 was near the station of cargo trains. Moreover, villas miseria—as Verbitsky showed in

Villa Miseria también es América—were the sites of an ongoing communal task. Everybody worked to improve their dwellings by digging the earth and building drainage systems with the skills they had learned in their rural environment of origin. The betterment of the land plots where the first slums were settled had in fact been possible only because of the inhabitants' communal work (Snitcofsky 2015a).

Claims for better housing that began to be voiced in the 1950s persisted during the following decades and became particularly prominent whenever the state enacted new eradication plans. In 1970, at the height of the Plan de Erradicación de Villas de Emergencia (PEVE), which took place under Juan Carlos Onganía's dictatorship, *La voz de las villas* published housing demands. The FVBE requested in this case the abolition of the Eradication Law 17.605, the intervention of the state to regulate the price of land, and the material improvement of slums via the installation of streetlights, running water, drainpipes, sewers, and pavement. The FVBE was particularly critical of the houses built to replace the eradicated slums. According to them, the eradication law, rather than solving problems, would make the situation of villeres worse. "The 'transitory' houses, which are in the process of becoming permanent," they stated in *La voz de las villas* in April 1970, "are not enough to cover the most basic needs of any family and in many aspects are worse than those in the eradicated villas. On the other hand, according to the plan of this law, the long-awaited solution of permanent housing is not in sight."[41]

While voicing their claims through *La voz de las villas* the people who lived in the city's slums were not only resisting the various eradication attempts put forward by the state, they were also showing a degree of power for political negotiations. This, as Snitcofsky (2018) recounts, was clearly revealed in 1963, when a delegation of nearly fifty representatives of Buenos Aires's FVBE presented a report on the state of slums to the soon-to-be president, Arturo Illia. The document included a detailed account of all the problems that affected the two hundred thousand people living in the city's slums. It explained the effects of not having running water, electric lighting, bathrooms, or schools and being surrounded by trash and mud (Snitcofsky 2018). According to the testimony of one of the representatives reported in *Nuestra Palabra* on August 20, 1963, the slums delegation offered Illia their votes in exchange for his promise to solve the villas miseria's basic issues. In this way the FVBE's delegates were actively responding—as Partha Chatterjee has proposed of squatter communities in Asia—to the regime of governmentality "by seeking to constitute themselves as groups that deserve the attention of government" (2011, 15). By forming the Federación and requesting meetings with important politicians to demand an improvement of their housing conditions, the

inhabitants of the city's villas miseria were laying the basis of their capacity to negotiate with the government. Indeed, following the meeting between Illia and the delegates of the slums, the general conditions of the city's villas miseria were improved. Particularly, during Illia's mandate (1963–1966), running water and electricity were installed in several slums, and schools and health centers were built (Snitcofsky 2018).

If Verbitsky's novel molded the relationship between the slum and literature, then *La voz de las villas* marked the constitution of slum dwellers as a specific group, with particular demands and the power to voice them. As we will see in the following chapters, the conjuncture between culture, villas miseria, and community formation was also brought together by greater movements of writers, artists, and filmmakers interested in the life and materiality of slums.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

In chapter 1, "Excess Materials: Waste and the Visual Arts in the 1960s," I trace a genealogy of the intersection of culture and poverty in Buenos Aires in the 1960s. I begin the chapter by telling the story of how the villa miseria first emerged as a specific term in the 1950s. This story is set against the history of state-sponsored programs such as the 1958 Plan de emergencia, which sought to eradicate villas miseria, as well as the de facto government's developmentalist policies of the time. Within these policies, the villa is construed as a space of abnormality that needs to be eradicated or normalized. It is heavily associated with the idea of waste: material that needs to be eliminated. Looking at archival photographs and other documents, I describe in detail the kinds of material involved in the construction of the slum. As I describe in the succeeding part of the chapter, however, the emergence of the term *villa miseria* through associations with waste in the late 1950s provided the premise for a new countertechnique of depicting poverty adopted by Argentine visual artists, filmmakers, and writers in the 1960s. Within the Argentine visual arts of the 1960s, the use of waste became a critical methodology that troubled state discourse on slums and their debris. By showing the aesthetic power of trash and thus renarrating geographies of waste, artistic producers worked to subvert hegemonic representations of poor territories as undeveloped areas to be eliminated.

In chapter 2, "Poverty on Show: The Aestheticized City, Slum Literature, and Trash Books," I turn my attention to the cultural boom experienced by slums in the last three decades. I open the chapter by considering the different situation of the slum at the turn of the twenty-first century, pointing particularly to its newfound visibility in phenomena such as organized slum tourism. In contrast to the 1960s, but understandable only in

relation to the art of that earlier period (as partly its logical consequence), the representation of the villa miseria in the late 1990s and early 2000s involves processes of exposure that register it as excessive. As I describe in the chapter, the 1990s saw an increase in the exhibition of villeres tied to the increase of Argentina's poor population following the 2001 economic crash as well as to the surge of cultural products dealing with the slums of Buenos Aires. This cultural "overexposure" of the poor also coincided with the generalized aestheticization of urban space, best illustrated by the model of Puerto Madero and the project to upgrade Villa 31. All these instances corresponded to the rise of a voyeuristic gaze—a term that I use to indicate the predominant tourist approach that people employ in their interactions with cities.

Having established this context for the cultural production of the 1990s and early 2000s, I argue that it is in contemporary literature that the impact of the changes in the city's landscape and on the function of slums in Argentine culture most clearly manifested. The twofold implications of the voyeuristic gaze—beautification and desire of the unknown—are clearly shown in the contemporary phenomenon of slum novels. These reflect on the ambiguities created by the friction between the excessive exposure of the poor and their concomitant social exclusion and criminalization. To this end I go on to examine, within the context of the predominant urban model, a corpus of novels including Sergio Chejfec's *El aire* (1992), Cesar Aira's *La villa* (2001), Juan Martini's *Puerto Apache* (2002), and Gabriela Cabezón Cámara's *La virgen cabeza* (2009). In these novels, villas, due to their impenetrability, become territories where anything is imaginable, and newness arises. All the novels examined—despite their differences—do this by depicting slums as the extraordinary places from which the contradictions of the world become clear and alternative societies can be imagined.

I end the chapter with a discussion of the implications of a number of social projects, including the gallery Belleza y Felicidad and the publishing house Eloísa Cartonera. Eloísa Cartonera is known for printing books on recycled cardboard to reveal how the alliance between books, slums, and trash troubles mainstream ideas of how to make literature by opening up new possibilities. Where the Government of the City of Buenos Aires in the 1990s viewed the city and the slum in terms that reinforce the voyeuristic gaze of touristic consumption, Eloísa uses the aesthetic force of villas to question the very cultural system that aestheticizes them. Thinking and viewing the world from the villa miseria has always entailed a critical function. It did so in the 1960s, when leftist intellectuals—as examined in chapter 1—represented Argentine slums to question the concepts and politics of "underdevelopment" and "third world." Since the 1990s,

however, the slum in literature has served as the vantage point from which to observe the exacerbation of the stereotypes attached to villas in the context of the city's aestheticization.

Whereas in the first two chapters of this book I mostly consider work made about slums from outside of the slums, in the third chapter, "Speaking from La Villa: The Language of César González, Hip-Hop, Cumbia Villera, and Julio Arrieta," I move on to investigate the power of slums to create, as it were, "from below." The same period that saw the explosion of novels on slums examined in chapter 2 also saw the rise of several actors making culture from the villa miseria. These figures include César González and Julio Arrieta. González is a young poet, film director, and cultural figure from Villa Carlos Gardel, a slum in the outskirts of the city. Arrieta was a slum dweller, social activist, leader of a Peronist union, and director of a film production company, which, up until his death in 2011, provided the entertainment industry with "authentically" poor actors. In this chapter I focus mostly on the work of González and Arrieta. However, I also—at various moments—consider the work of hip-hop, rap, and cumbia villera artists such as Esteban El As, El Melly, Pablo Lescano, Pibes Chorros, Yerba Brava, Tita Print, Sudor Marika, and Kumbia Queers. These figures—as well as their venues and reception—I argue, all played an important role in creating culture from the slums of Buenos Aires. While critics have considered some of these figures individually, they have not been brought together or considered collectively as shapers of the cultural representation of slums and the relevance of creation of the margins in Buenos Aires. Drawing into dialogue a number of different artistic practices—poetry, film, music—I aim to fill this gap in current scholarship.

In chapter 4, "All That Matters Is at the Bottom: Militant Journalism and Activism in the Slums of Buenos Aires," I connect the creative power and cultural effervescence happening in villas miseria to forms of local activism from the last fifteen years. Whereas in chapter 3 I consider how hip-hop songs, films, and poetry produced within the slums convey a cultural challenge against the state- and media-promoted dualistic view of the villa as a place of crime and the city as the ideal of living, in this chapter I analyze how neighborhood organizations and other civic associations use different strategies to pose a similar challenge. To set the scene of resistance, I begin the chapter with three short sections establishing the context for an understanding of contemporary slum activism. The first of these is a discussion of Villa 31 and 31 bis and how its villeres employed different strategies to reveal the financial speculations concealed within the urbanization plans for this slum. On the basis of this example, in the following section I then propose a general theory of slums and activisms.

With this theoretical section I offer an insight into the present-day slum as the threshold of activism—as a space of emergency. At the end of the introductory section, I offer a brief history of militancy in the villas miseria of Buenos Aires.

In the main part of chapter 4 I then focus on how the slum has also become a laboratory for activist practices more generally in the last fifteen years by examining two different cultural phenomena. The first is the militant magazine *La Garganta Poderosa*, which was launched in 2011 shortly after the first urbanization law came into effect. *La Garganta Poderosa*, which translates to "the powerful throat," uses three central tactics of fighting for the slum. In the first place, it proclaims for itself a genealogy of anticolonial, anti-imperial, antistate, and antimilitary forebears, situating the slums as "resistance trenches." Secondly, although the magazine is not strictly a satirical publication, *La Garganta Poderosa*'s militancy emerged through the extensive use of satire. Throughout its issues, the magazine employs a satirical tone, both to challenge the municipal government's handling of slums and to convey the contents of slum culture and life. And finally, alongside its questioning of city policies, I show that a third important component of *La Garganta Poderosa*'s militancy involved representing slum culture while telling its history differently. Written by people living in the city's villas miseria, most of the pieces focus on showing some particular trait related to these spaces.

The second site of activism that I consider in detail in the chapter consists of the local organizations Corriente Villera Independiente (launched in 2010) and the more recent Asamblea Feminista La 31 y 31 bis (founded in 2018). Both employed their presence in the city's streets and most iconic squares, combined with a regular use of social media, to draw attention to the collective demands of popular neighborhoods. I consider, for instance, their intervention, the Carpa Villera (Slum Tent) set up in 2014, which stands out for its social and political repercussions. Bringing the history of the slum that this book narrates up to the present moment, I also examine their use of social media such as Facebook for organizing actions and channeling their claims, as, for instance, in their organization of soup kitchens during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Drawing together various strands from the book's four chapters, I end *The Slum and the City* with a set of conclusions considering the contemporary practice of producing maps—or rather, countermaps—of the villas miseria. Focusing on one particular countermapping group, Iconoclasistas, I describe the effort to visualize counterhegemonic uses of various Latin American territories in which the villa plays a key role. The members of Iconoclasistas present a geographical approach that challenges the disciplinary boundaries imposed by dominant representations of space

and provides something of an analogy to the project I have undertaken in this book. They do so by offering a multidisciplinary methodology essential for decolonizing the production of knowledge, which merges theory and praxis, and more specifically graphic design, art, and collective research. Iconoclasistas's countermaps, and especially those depicting the urban margins, reveal that effective dissident forms of representation that put forth the needs of villas misera must be collective. These new alliances—among geographers, villeres, feminists, artists, activists, and critics—that in the twenty-first century are created around slums are necessary to produce original and innovative forms of protests that place communal help and care at their core. As I argue across the length of this book, only such new alliances, fresh ways of collective thinking from multiple perspectives, can confront the complexity of the situation of structural inequality that villeres still face today.