

**Review / Reseña**

Jarman, Rebecca. *Representing the Barrios: Culture, Politics, and Urban Poverty in Twentieth-Century Caracas*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023. 352 pp.

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It is not an easy task to engage the most canonical works of twentieth century Venezuelan literature and culture to reveal a paradoxical blind spot in the existing scholarship—something that is ever present, even fetishized, while constantly displaced and blurred. This is exactly what Rebecca Jarman has achieved in *Representing the Barrios* by uncovering and explaining the consistent presence of *el barrio* (the slum) in the cultural imagination of Venezuela. Equally important is the fact that, while doing this almost archeological work, she subtly sheds light onto core aspects of the contemporary political discourse of the country, still entangled in the aftermath of the Bolivarian Revolution. In doing so, we understand the dramatic circumstances of the present within a longer history of the nation, the state, and “the people.”

*Representing the Barrios* goes into the heart of recent Venezuelan history, revealing the multifaceted role of modernization, urban poverty, and culture in shaping national identity and politics. A meticulous and elegant analysis uncovers the overlooked importance of the *barrio* as a central theme in twentieth-century Venezuelan literature and cinema, challenging existing critical perspectives and elucidating the complexities of cultural engagements (particularly, but not exclusively, lettered) with poverty and marginalization.

Jarman argues that *barrios* have become a crucial focal point in Venezuelan society, attracting the attention of writers, artists, filmmakers, and politicians alike. These marginalized communities, often depicted as places of crime or revolutionary turmoil, are simultaneously fetishized and exploited, serving as both a source of inspiration and a target for political manipulation. Through a rich tapestry of literary analysis, cultural criticism, and historical introspection, Jarman paints a vivid portrait of *barrios* as dynamic spaces of resistance and resilience. She skillfully navigates the complexities of representation, exposing the tensions and contradictions inherent to certain depictions of urban poverty. While the concept is not part of her analysis, I can't avoid thinking about the notion of "the abject," that which attracts and repels, when pondering representations that, it must be said, are all but external to the realities of such vibrant although martialized urban communities.

*Representing the Barrios* is structured into four parts that trace the development of Venezuela's contradictory and unequal modernization and its dealings with the urban periphery. In fact, the periodization coincides with different attempts by the Venezuelan state to "territorialize" (control or obliterate) the *barrios* against popular resistance. The first part begins with the military regime of Juan Vicente Gómez (1908-1935) and the emergence of an organized political opposition known as the Generation of 28, a faction of which later evolved into the social-democratic party Acción Democrática (AD), which came to dominate Venezuelan politics in the twentieth century. Experimenting with political models inspired in the Mexican Revolution, AD claimed to break with the legacies of the earlier dictatorship, including its positivist intelligentsia. In doing so, it sought, but largely failed, to secure electoral support from low-income urban sectors by promoting democracy, welfare, and education; instead, it would turn its attention to the countryside and a continued discourse of "civilization versus barbarism."

The second part considers the brief period of democracy known as *Trienio Adeco* (1945-1948), culminating in another authoritarian rule, the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1952-1958). This new government viewed *barrios* as an obstacle to achieving certain vision of modernity, thus its solution took the form of demolitions and displacements/relocations. Informal settlements were demolished to be replaced by housing projects that, in turn, would transform their residents into "modern and obedient citizens." The end of this regime gave way to four decades of bipartisanship known as *puntofijismo*, dominated by AD and COPEI (Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente). The third part of the book addresses

the violence that accompanied the transition to *puntofijismo*, well into the 1970s. The first decade of democracy saw the emergence of armed urban insurgency and, subsequently, the aggressive policing of those parts of the city that posed a challenge to the bipartisan order. The last part of the book focuses on the economic crisis of 1983, under Jaime Lusinchi (1984-1989), and the Caracazo riots of 1989, during the second presidency of Carlos Andrés Pérez. In this period, inspired by neoliberal policies, the state withdrew from the *barrios* in the provision of basic services. Could we speculate that, in this moment, the long tradition of “disciplining the barrio” led to a policy of erasure or direct obliteration? The fact is that, when conflict emerged, the deployment of brutal military and police repression was reminiscent of the strategies employed by prior governments.

The book closes with the beginnings of the Bolivarian Revolution, led by Hugo Chávez (1999-2013), which promised to bring the urban margins to the center of state formation, while resurrecting welfare programs. The final section of the book examines several stories emerging in the wake of *El Deslave*, or the Vargas Tragedy. A catastrophic landslide caused tens of thousands of deaths and coincided with Chávez’s first constitutional referendum. Due to its scale and impact, the event gained special prominence in the national imagination and, as Jarman argues, generated narratives that connect with the long tradition of “destructions and preservations” of, what I would call, the spaces or territories of the people. In this long history, the author manages to keep the *barrio* as an uneasy protagonist.

In the often-polarizing field of Venezuelan studies, *Representing the Barrios* offers a nuanced and provocative examination of the cultural and political significance of marginalized communities. Erudite and innovative, this book provides insight into the mentalities that constructed inassimilable subjects and spaces (*los marginales* and *el barrio*) which, in turn, undermined the nation. As the old saying goes, “de aquellos polvos, estos lodos”.