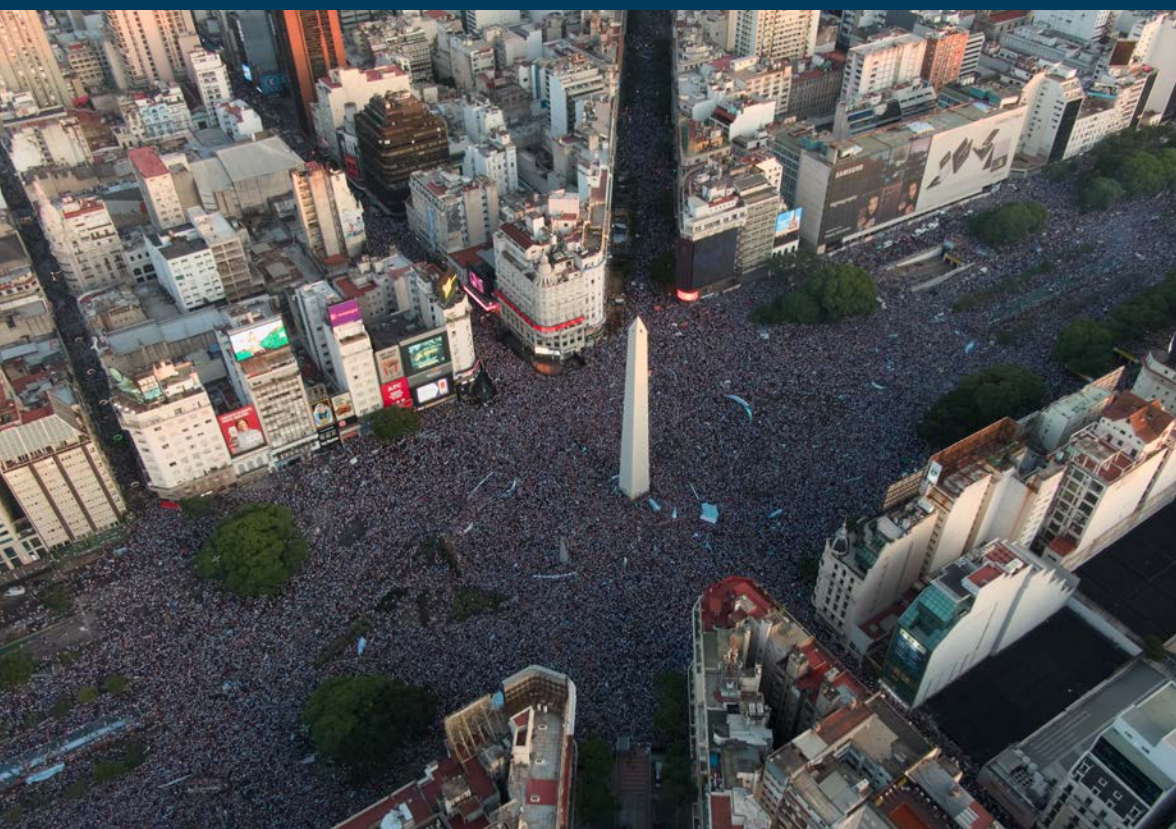


# THE BUENOS AIRES READER



HISTORY, CULTURE, POLITICS

*Diego Armus and Lisa Ubelaker Andrade, editors*

## The Buenos Aires Reader

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HISTORY, CULTURE, POLITICS

*Diego Armus and Lisa Ubelaker Andrade, editors*

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS    *Durham and London*    2024

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To Lauri, my *porteña* in New York City

—Diego

To Nico, Olivia, and Simón, my favorite *porteños* of all

—Lisa

And to Buenos Aires, which gave us both a lifetime  
of questions and curiosity

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# Contents

Acknowledgments xiii

Introduction i

Buenos Aires: A Brief History of the Last Five Hundred Years 7

## I The Living City 25

Shopping in the City, *Ezequiel Martínez Estrada* 37

From Yellow Fever to COVID-19: Epidemics and Inequalities in the City,  
*Benigno Lugones, Guillermo Rawson, Andrés D'Elía, Nora Cortiñas,*  
*and Adolfo Pérez Esquivel* 39

The *Colectivo*, an Innovation for the Modern City, *Anonymous*  
*and César Fernández Moreno* 43

New Neighborhoods and the Expansion of City Life, *Conrado*  
*Nalé Roxlo, Alberto Vázquez, and Pablo Riggio* 46

Green Spaces, *Ricardo Lorenzo, "Borocotó"* 48

Neighborhood Associations, *Corporación Mitre, Boedo Neighborhood*  
*Association, and Unión Vecinal* 50

El Once: The Changing Character of an Iconic Jewish Neighborhood,  
*César Tiempo and Marcelo Cohen* 52

The Single-Family Home as a Cultural and Political Ideal,  
*Sameer Makarius and Mundo Peronista* 54

Vertical Living, *Homero Expósito* 57

Dictatorship and the Razing of the City's Villas, *City Housing Office,*  
*Magtara Feres, and Eduardo Blaustein* 59

The Permanence of "Emergency" Settlements, *Anonymous,*  
*David Fernández, and Dalma Villalba* 61

Contrasts in Greater Buenos Aires, *Various Authors and Claudia Piñeiro* 64

## II Taking to the Street 67

Celebrations in the Plaza in the Early Nineteenth Century, *Carlos E.*  
*Pellegrini, John Parish Robertson, and William Parish Robertson* 79

The Plaza and the Demands of the People, *José María Tagiman*  
*and Vicente Fidel López* 81

The Streets of Revelry: Carnaval, <i>Anonymous and Eustaquio Pellicer</i>	82
Workers Take to the Street, <i>Anonymous and Various Authors</i>	86
The Church in the Street, <i>Anonymous and Caras y Caretas</i>	89
The Plaza de Mayo and Juan Perón, <i>Anonymous and Mundo Peronista</i>	92
The Writing on the Wall, <i>Anonymous, Alejo Santander, and Tano Verón</i>	95
Public Violence, <i>Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias–Montoneros</i>	99
The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, <i>Eduardo Longoni, Adriana Lestido, Renée Epelbaum, and Marjorie Agosín</i>	101
The Plaza as a Site of “Consensus,” <i>Revista Gente</i>	105
The <i>Escrache</i> , <i>Julieta Colomer and Anabella Arrascaeta</i>	106
A White Tent Occupies the Plaza, <i>Luis Bruschtein</i>	109
Public Kitchens and <i>Piquetes</i> , <i>Hilda</i>	111
Ni Una Menos, Not One Less, <i>Ni Una Menos, Verónica Abdala, and Carolina Yuriko Arakaki</i>	113
Streets of Celebration, <i>Gastón Pérez Mazás and Pedro Lipcovich</i>	116

### III Eating in Buenos Aires 119

Mate as Ritual, <i>Lalo Mir</i>	129
Nineteenth-Century Meals, <i>Lucio V. Mansilla</i>	132
Anti-imperialism and Beef, <i>Lisandro de la Torre, José Peter, and Caras y Caretas</i>	134
Food and Crisis, <i>Juan González Yuste</i>	137
The <i>Asado</i> : A Food Ritual, <i>Eduardo Archetti, Anonymous, and Nicolás Olivari</i>	139
Patriotic Cooking, <i>Cía Sansinena</i>	142
Domestic Labors, <i>Marisa Avigliano</i>	143
The Chocotorta and Changing Ideas of Women’s Work, <i>Marité Mabragaña and Hernán Firpo</i>	145
Anarchist Pastries, <i>Anonymous and El Obrero</i>	147
Neighborhood Businesses, <i>Bernardo González Arrili</i>	150
The Café, <i>Alberto Mario Salas and Anonymous</i>	152
Pizza, <i>Norberto Folino</i>	155
Food and Nostalgia, <i>Julio Cortázar</i>	156
The <i>Bodegón</i> , <i>Nicolás Olivari</i>	158
A Twenty-First-Century Culinary Scene, <i>Lis Ra</i>	160

### IV Hinchas, Cracks, and Potreros in the City of Soccer 163

Health, Civilization, and Sport, <i>Enrique Romero Brest and Anonymous</i>	173
Social Classes Converge at the Racetrack, <i>Modesto Papavero and Last Reason</i>	175

D  
U



The Philosophers of Local Sport, <i>El Gráfico</i> and <i>Dante Panzeri</i>	177
<i>El Pibe</i> , <i>Billiken</i> and <i>Pedro Orgambide</i>	180
The Right to Play: Women and the Game, <i>Mónica Santino</i> and <i>Emilia Rojas</i>	182
Maradona, <i>Maradonear</i> , <i>Eduardo Galeano</i> and <i>Jorge Giner</i>	184
The Dream, <i>Reinaldo Yiso</i> and <i>Lucio Arce</i>	186
The Fans: <i>La Hinchada</i> , <i>Roberto Fontanarrosa</i>	189
An <i>Hincha</i> Is Born, Not Made, <i>Juan Sasturian</i>	192
Stadium Songs, <i>River Plate Fans</i> and <i>San Lorenzo Fans</i>	194
The Thrill of the Superclásico, <i>Héctor Negro</i>	196
Violence, <i>Clarín</i>	198
Soccer, Politics, and Protest, <i>El Gráfico</i>	200
Toward an Inclusive Future, <i>Inés Arrondo</i> and <i>Analía Fernández Fuks</i>	202

## V Reading, Watching, and Listening in Buenos Aires 205

Education and Civilization, <i>Domingo Faustino Sarmiento</i>	217
Writing Becomes a Profession, <i>José González Carbalho</i>	219
New Vanguardists, <i>Martín Fierro</i> and <i>Revista Claridad</i>	221
Media, Gender, and Feminist Thought, <i>Grete Stern</i> and <i>Feminaria</i>	223
The Pampa in the City, via Radio, <i>Andrés González Pulido</i>	225
The Cinema, a Barrio Institution, <i>José Pablo Feinmann</i>	227
The Buenos Aires Middle Class, on Screen, <i>Atlántida</i>	229
Radio, Television, and Celebrity Culture, <i>Carlos Ulanovsky</i> , <i>Clarín</i> , and <i>Beatriz Sarlo</i>	231
An Open Letter to the Dictatorship, <i>Rodolfo Walsh</i>	234
Humor under Censorship, <i>Humor Registrado</i> , <i>Andrés Cascioli</i> , and <i>Tomás Lüders</i>	236
Broad Audiences and Burned Books, <i>Amanda Toubes</i> , <i>Ricardo Figueira</i> , <i>Boris Spivacow</i> , and <i>Delia Maunás</i>	238
Press under Dictatorship, <i>Robert Cox</i> and <i>Luis Bruschtein</i>	241
The Bookstore, a Downtown Institution, <i>Jennifer Croft</i> and <i>Rubén Vela</i>	244

## VI The City at Night 247

The City of Fury, <i>Manuel Romero</i> and <i>Gustavo Cerati</i>	259
Nights at the Colón, <i>El Mosquito</i> and <i>Manuel Mujica Lainez</i>	262
Evening Theater, on Stage and in the Street, <i>Leónidas Barletta</i> , <i>Clarín</i> , and <i>Carlos Somigliana</i>	264
Tango and the Melodrama of the <i>Milonguita</i> , <i>Samuel Linning</i>	267
The Iconic Gardel, <i>Edmundo Eichelbaum</i> and <i>Juan José Sebreli</i>	269
Decent Tango, <i>Clara Gertz</i>	271

Piazzola and the Reinvention of Tango, <i>Diana Piazzola</i>	273
Sex, <i>Telos</i> , and Regulation, <i>Fernando S. and César A.</i>	275
Queer Nights, Policed, <i>Luis Troitiño, Juan Queiroz, Cristian Trincado, and María Luisa Peralta</i>	277
State Terror in the Dark, <i>CONADEP (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons)</i>	280
Rebellious Rock, <i>Jorge Hipólito Meijide and Charly García</i>	282
Sounds of Folk Cross Social Lines, <i>Anonymous and María Seoane</i>	286
Global/Local Sounds: <i>Cumbia Villera</i> and Argentine Trap, <i>Daniel Riera, Bizarrap, and Julio Leiva</i>	289
The <i>Boliche</i> , <i>Olivia Gallo</i>	292

## VII Written Cities 295

Visual Cities, <i>Laura Malosetti Costa, Antonio Berni, and Marta Minujín</i>	303
The City Abandoned, <i>José Mármol</i>	307
Buenos Aires as Paris, <i>Adolfo Posada, Marcel Duchamp, and José María Vargas Vila</i>	308
Local Identity and Cosmopolitanism, <i>Aníbal Latino and Georges Clemenceau</i>	310
Arrivals and Departures, <i>Sylvia Molloy</i>	312
The City of Psychoanalysis, <i>Elisabeth Roudinesco</i>	314
Portraits of Buenos Aires, <i>Sara Facio and Facundo de Zuviría</i>	316
The Neighborhood and the City Center, <i>José Luis Romero</i>	318
A New Urban Folklore, <i>Evaristo Carriego and Homero Manzi</i>	321
Sketches of Buenos Aires, <i>Roberto Arlt</i>	323
The Beautiful and Mundane Urban Grid, <i>Alberto Gerchunoff, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, and Alfonsina Storni</i>	325
Catholic Encounters with the Peronist City, <i>Delfina Bunge de Gálvez</i>	327
"Cabecita negra," <i>Germán Rozenmacher</i>	329
The City under Military Control, <i>Jorge Asís and Ricardo Piglia</i>	331
The Villa, from Without and Within, <i>Sergio Chejfec, César Aira, and César González</i>	333
Social Mobility, <i>Tulio Halperín Donghi</i>	335
White-Collar Workers, <i>Roberto Mariani and Alfonsina Storni</i>	337
Critiques of the Buenos Aires Middle Class, <i>Juan José Sebreli</i>	339
Writing the Middle Classes, <i>Juan Carlos Torre and Guillermo Oliveto</i>	341
Enduring City, <i>María Elena Walsh and Bersuit Vergarabat</i>	344

Suggestions for Further Reading and Viewing	347
Acknowledgment of Copyrights and Sources	359
Index	371

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This *Reader* also owes its existence to a spirit of collaboration, and its contents—its syntheses and its inevitable shortcomings—are the result of many years of ongoing conversations, debates, discussions, and compromises over how and what to translate and share of the city's story, and how to interpret it. The result is a text that reflects two paths: Diego, who is from Buenos Aires, has lived and taught Argentina's history in the United States since the late 1990s; Lisa, who is from the United States, encountered Buenos Aires (at Diego's introduction) in 2004 and has lived and taught there since 2013. In the university classroom, we have both taught Argentina's past, but as immigrants, we also have faced more everyday questions that leave us scattering for answers: every *porteño* living abroad has been asked to explain, "How did you end up here?"; every foreigner who has immigrated to Buenos Aires has been asked, "Why are you here?" We wanted to tell this city's history as we have always wished to have explained it, to create a book that made Buenos

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Aires legible without oversimplification, and to share our love for its particularities without over-romanticization. In the process, and as we debated each line of writing, points of momentary disagreement and conflicting generational perspectives became rather refreshing opportunities for us to rediscover, better communicate, or even relearn the city's past and present. In this way, each book page, with its flaws and successes, reflects that collaboration.

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xiv *Acknowledgments*  
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# Introduction

“The City of Fury”: That is the nickname locals have bestowed on the city of Buenos Aires. The title comes from a 1988 rock anthem of the same name—a hit performed by the band Soda Stereo, written by lead vocalist Gustavo Cerati. In the song, the narrator awakes in the evening and spends the night flying through the streets of Buenos Aires, a place teeming with energy. The melody and rhythm transmit the beat of the streets still humming in the early hours of morning; the lyrics reflect the city’s poetry, its spirit of creativity. In the chorus, you can hear the echoes of nocturnal crowds: a city alive.

The nickname stuck because the song not only conveyed Buenos Aires’s vibrant energy but also reflected a shared, unsettling sense of struggle. Cerati’s song was written during a period when Buenos Aires and Argentina had recently emerged from the depths of state terror; the violence of a dictatorship had been brought to light. The song was first recorded in a year marked by record inflation, when the value of the Argentine currency plummeted daily. Cerati sings of a city that is his but that “belongs to no one”; and as the sun rises, the narrator collapses. “The City of Fury” expressed entangled feelings of love for the life and ingenuity of Buenos Aires, as well as the fraught experiences of instability and turmoil.

Cerati was not the first to pair such contrasting feelings about Buenos Aires in song. Long before the golden age of Argentine rock, tangos spoke of a city that was both thrilling and challenging. The iconic singer Carlos Gardel crooned an ode to “nocturnal Corrientes Street, its *milongas* [tango halls], its night owls, and finer people [ . . . ] the brilliance of its spectacular lights, dizzy and grinning; it was there that I lost my youth.” The writer Ernesto Sabato also wrote of a “frenzy and hardness” of Buenos Aires in his tango “Al Buenos Aires que se fue” (“The Buenos Aires That Is No More”); the narrator in that piece looks for relief by walking the city’s quieter streets and flowered plazas. In songs like these, experiences of love and coming of age in Buenos Aires’s more quaint neighborhoods contrasted against the lively seductions of its nightlife downtown and the enthralling cultures of horse racing and soccer. The songs often included words in *lunfardo*—a local slang still in use today that modifies and combines words from Spanish and Italian, as well as French, English, Guaraní, Quechua, Portuguese, Bantu, and other African

languages. They emanated the diverse experiences and origins of the city's working and middle classes during many decades of the twentieth century.

The Buenos Aires that appears in these songs bears little resemblance to the clichéd representation of Buenos Aires as the “Paris of South America.” This phrase, often used in travel guides, points visitors toward the city's majestic domes and turrets, its most elegant cafés, and the many landmarks built by the wealthy elite at the turn of the twentieth century.

While these spaces are a critical part of Buenos Aires and its history, residents and visitors who have tried to understand Buenos Aires with any depth have inevitably had to contend with a more nuanced reality. In fact, the city's best-known writers have lamented their inability to neatly convey its multifaceted complexity. Julio Cortázar wrote of a city so populated by ideas and diverse realities that it was impenetrable: Buenos Aires was, he said, “unattainable, enigmatic, impossible; one can't ring every doorbell. [. . .] We have invented Buenos Aires as friend, as servant, but it rejects us, it belongs to no one, though we attempted to possess it through love, violence, wanderings, in the dark poetry of bars and labor.”<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, who returned to Buenos Aires as a subject time and again, wrote in one of his early poems, “The city is in me, like a poem that I have not been able to put into words.”<sup>2</sup> The writer Victoria Ocampo commented that any Argentine who read those lines by Borges would feel a sense of recognition and surprise, akin to looking in a mirror.<sup>3</sup>

How can we ever grasp this elusive Buenos Aires? We see these descriptions as an invitation to view the city as a place with many faces and pathways of entry, a home to people with vastly different experiences. We bring together (and translate into English) texts that reflect a multitude of viewpoints and forms of expression, including essays and documents as well as photographs, letters, comics, articles, poems, songs, manifestos, fiction, interviews, paintings—a vast array of testimonies.

Buenos Aires is revealed here as a city of creativity and arts, one made up of the aromas of *asado* (barbecue), the clattering of restaurants crowded with family and friends; quiet plazas where *mate* (a shared drink) is passed and neighbors mingle; soccer stadiums where rowdy fans jump while chanting *canciones de cancha* (stadium songs). Yet it is also a city marked by political upheavals and conflict, the struggles of staggering economic crises, as well as inequality, deep poverty, diverse middle classes, and ostentatious displays of wealth. It is both a city of the night and a daytime cauldron, bubbling with the energies of protestors, graffiti, street art, and commentators of all kinds. These voices make their demands heard in the street, on the walls, and in the press—a tradition of entrenched disagreements peppered with moments of shared joy and celebration.

*The Buenos Aires Reader* brings together stories and accounts of this city that might otherwise be inaccessible to English readers. The *Reader* is built

around seven themes that we believe are important entry points to understand the uniqueness of Buenos Aires. We chose these themes because they are significant ways that *porteños* (the people of Buenos Aires) view themselves and because they are topics that writers and residents have repeatedly returned to as central to the city's story. They are also common areas of curiosity and fascination for the city's many visitors.

In each of its seven parts, the *Reader* provides an opportunity to take a deeper look at a theme, as well as to investigate ideas and debates about gender, class, sexuality, race, religion, inequalities, and politics. A short introduction at the beginning of each part offers an overview of the subject and connects its selections with each other and to the larger picture.

Our hope is that you explore this *Reader* as you might a city. Although you can certainly read this book in order, from beginning to end, the introductions to each part can also be used as a field guide to form your own itinerary of exploration. By following your own interests and curiosity, you can embark on a personalized journey, deepening your understanding through the wide array of testimonies and documents.

You might begin by walking the cobblestone streets in the historic downtown neighborhood of San Telmo or strolling the central square of the Plaza de Mayo. Part I, "The Living City," looks closely at how the city built out from this historic center to become a sprawling metropolis. It invites you to consider window shopping on Florida Street but also to veer off this typical tourist circuit and see the eclectic architecture of historic homes in the city's many neighborhoods, to enjoy the culture of its plazas and neighborhood parks.

This part also shows how epidemics impacted the city map and highlighted the struggles of the most marginalized neighborhoods. It offers tribute to the city's history of public transport, including its buses and their eccentric decorations. It illuminates the contrasts of Greater Buenos Aires—a zone beyond the city borders that features sprawling, luxury gated-community developments as well as millions of people struggling to get by.

A typical scene downtown, where a crowd of protestors drums, grills, and waves banners, turns you toward part II, "Taking to the Street," which tells the long history of mass celebration, collective action, and protest in Buenos Aires. It highlights street mobilizations past and present: early festivities in the plazas, religious and labor rallies, mass gatherings for Peronism, the solemn protest of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo during the dictatorship, public demonstrations following the return to democracy, and the performances and marches of the contemporary feminist movement, among others.

Part II also guides you through streets covered in colorful graffiti, murals, and banners—and explores the rich tradition behind the millions of people gathered at the Obelisk monument to celebrate Argentina's 2022 World Cup win.

Part III, “Eating in Buenos Aires,” invites you to rethink the cultures and roots of Buenos Aires’s food traditions, searching through its legendary café-lined streets and considering the stories behind the city’s most typical foods. Drinking *mate*, for example, brings friends and family together in a social ritual and a celebration of life. Other selections explore the political action behind the city’s famous *factura* pastries, celebrate the city’s emblematic cake (the dulce de leche–layered chocotorta), or consider the impact of migrations, class, and gender on how, where, and what *porteños* eat.

It is impossible to know Buenos Aires without discussing its most passionate pastime. Part IV, “*Hinchas*, *Cracks*, and *Potrereros* in the City of Soccer,” traces Buenos Aires’s intense love for *fútbol* (soccer). Local team allegiances run deep. Encounter the intensity of *hinchas* (fans) in their poems, songs, stories, and interviews; discover the sport’s legendary beginnings, historic rivalries, and fans’ emotional investment in their neighborhood clubs. This part also examines soccer’s histories of politics, violence, and exclusion. The sport has shaped local identities, created icons, and—some have argued—nurtured a distinctive local style of play.

The city’s many bookstores offer a quiet counter to the rowdy thrill of the stadium. These cherished spaces reflect Buenos Aires’s reputation as a city of readers (and writers). Part V, “Reading, Watching, and Listening in Buenos Aires,” delves into the profound and prolific presence of print media: the city’s publishing industry and its newspapers and magazines; the risks and collusions connected to printing during times of censorship; and the importance of film, radio, and television industries in making Buenos Aires a vital producer of Spanish-language media.

Part VI, “The City at Night,” explores Buenos Aires’s dynamic nightlife as a space of creativity. The city comes alive long after sunset, spilling over with new energy. You can enjoy vanguard theater and the sounds of tango, the city’s most iconic dance. You can consider other realms of the night—the echoes of rebellion and state repression in Buenos Aires rock, and the persistence of youth cultures despite censorship. The cloak of night was a setting for violent kidnappings during the 1976–83 civic-military dictatorship, as well as enduring LGBTQ+ nightlife in the face of police oppression.

Finally, part VII, “Written Cities,” explores artists’ and writers’ abundant representations of the city, its people and character. We invite you to consider how the city has been envisaged through collage, photography, and paint; and to listen to fervent debates about Buenos Aires’s character from those who see it as “middle class,” “cosmopolitan,” “modern,” “fragmented,” “inclusive,” and unequal. In the pens of its many writers, we find stories of resistance under authoritarianism and odes to a spirit of resilience and survival.

There are many itineraries that you might take with this *Reader*. Our hope is that we have communicated the diversity, energy, and often-inharmonious



perspectives of Buenos Aires in such a way that readers will be able to appreciate the city's rich past and present.

Finally, we want to point out two key supplementary texts: first, the very brief chronological summary of five hundred years of history, located just after this introduction; and second, "Suggestions for Further Reading," where you can find a list of works of scholarship that have shaped *The Buenos Aires Reader*, as well as recommended films and fiction that will deepen your experience of the City of Fury.

### Notes

1. From Alicia D'Amico, Sara Facio, and Julio Cortázar, *Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1968), 45–46.
2. Jorge Luis Borges, "Vanilocuencia," in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* [poems] (Buenos Aires: Imprenta Serantes, 1923).
3. Victoria Ocampo, "Visión de Jorge Luis Borges," *Cuadernos: Revista Mensual*, no. 55 (December 1961): 18.

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