

Book Review

– *Public Pages. Reading Along the Latin American Streetscape*, by Marcy Schwartz. University of Texas Press, 2018

Public Pages is an interdisciplinary, qualitative study of contemporary public reading initiatives in a selected number of Latin American urban contexts. Schwartz is interested in studying how these projects promote reading literature and how they aim to create a community around books. The case studies, most of them dedicated to Argentinian projects, are organised within five chapters and structured top-down: starting with big institutional campaigns in the first chapter and ending with alternative, grassroots initiatives in the last one. In order to map the trajectories of these programs, the author integrates various levels of analysis, combining the study of municipal policies and organisational strategies with discursive analysis of literary texts and material culture like book covers and promotion material.

The first chapter focusses on the UNESCO World Book Capital campaigns in Buenos Aires (2011) and Bogotá (2007) and analyses the activities that the municipalities, together with other institutions like schools and libraries, organized to promote reading to new audiences while at the same time celebrating the literary traditions of the respective cities. The second chapter analyses programs in Santiago de Chile and Bogotá that inserted literature in the public space through the diffusion of free books in buses and metros. These projects formed part of municipal programs that intended to contribute to, what Schwartz calls, an atmosphere of *convivencia* (i.e. sociability). In the third chapter, Schwartz maps out how, during the Argentinian crisis, local neighbourhood associations incorporated literature in their solidarity activities and activism, for example, by starting a community library or diffusing poetry through their newsletters. Other examples of community organising are the *cartonera* collectives, analysed in the fourth chapter. These small publishing houses recycle cardboard to make books. The social and ecological preoccupations of the editors are reflected in the making process but also in the forms of distribution and the diverse literary activities organised in the neighbourhoods they operate in. The last chapter is dedicated to the memory centres in Argentina that created libraries of books that were banned during the dictatorship.

Apart from restoring these censured works of literature, the centres organise activities in these libraries around the themes of political oppression, human rights and the freedom of expression and imagination.

The author discusses these case studies in relation to the theoretical concept of the ‘public’ as it has been developed both in Europe (i.e. Habermas) and in Latin America (i.e. Ángel Rama and his notion of the lettered city). Schwartz’s main argument is that, by taking literature out on the streets, these reading programs seek to rethink the use of the public space and to incite feelings of civic belonging and new forms of social interaction between citizens through books. These initiatives respond in creative ways to neoliberal policies of privatisation, reclaiming on a small scale the public space that has been dominated by the logic of financial gain, creating, citing Hardt and Negri, “joyful encounters” (p. 236) between individuals through activities related to literature. Schwartz shows how these initiatives creatively navigate between the institutional and the independent, the commercial and the social, the public and the private, making use or forming part of existent, modern infrastructures, and municipal policies, while at the same time challenging the individualising politics that underlie them.

It is clear that in the midst of what we could call a legitimacy crisis of the humanities in general, and literary studies in particular, Schwartz’s work aims to contribute to the much-debated relationship between literature and society. Not surprisingly, most of the studied initiatives, especially the more general programs that aim to promote literature to a big audience like the UNESCO World Book Capital campaigns and the programs that circulate free books in public transportation, are fuelled by a strong optimism about the impact and the supposed positive social and political effects of the act of reading literature itself, an assumption that is being sustained by Schwartz throughout her study. The general assumptions underlying these reading programs reflect a recent, popular belief that reading fiction promotes active citizenship and sociability, echoing the work of humanist philosophers like Marta Nussbaum who insists on the value of literature for the community and for the working of democracy. But does reading literature really makes us better human beings or more active citizens? Apart from the fact that in Schwartz’s study there is no substantial evidence presented for a causal relation between reading a book in the metro in Santiago and the incitement of social interaction, we have to keep in mind, like Felski (2008) sustains in line with cultural studies’ and reception studies’ findings, that “aesthetic objects may acquire very different meanings in altered contexts; the transaction between texts and readers are varied, contingent, and often unpredictable (p. 9).” Literature itself is not inherently “good”, and books are not necessarily our “friends”, as Marta Nussbaum would like us to believe, says Felski. Just as much as books can enchant, inspire or connect us, they can also shock, oppress, divide, or, just as much, leave us indifferent.

The analytical chapters in Schwartz’s study would have benefited from a more critical distance from the optimistic mission statements made by the or-

ganizers of the reading programs. It seems that the social dimension that Schwartz attributes to these initiatives does not necessarily reside in the act of reading literature itself – as we said in line with Felski, reading a book does not automatically incite social behaviour – but more in the performative aspects of the projects, i.e. organising pedagogical and social activities in the public space, in this case related to literature. Some of the reading programs in *Public Pages* prove, indeed, as the author states multiple times, that reading is not necessarily a solitary practice but instead can be a very social activity that can connect people in the midst of challenging political climates. In particular, the chapters on the *cartoneras* and the commemorative activities organised in the libraries of banned books in Argentina are inspiring. However, they are most of all convincing examples on how activities related to literature in the public space can contribute to community organising and the creation of political awareness about a specific topic like recycling or human rights.

References

Felski, R. 2008. *Uses of literature*. Malden: Blackwell publishing.

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