

Review: Sendra Ferrer, Olga. *Barcelona, City of Margins*.

Alessio Piras

University of New Mexico

Sendra Ferrer, Olga. *Barcelona, City of Margins*. U Toronto Press, 2022. Pp. 268. ISBN: 978-1-4875-0848-7.

Olga Sendra Ferrer's *Barcelona, City of Margins* focuses on the Francoist Barcelona of the 1950s and 1960s, shaping a theory of margins with a vast horizon of application to other cities or epochs in Barcelona or elsewhere. Ferrer structures her book in six chapters with an introduction and conclusion. She reads Barcelona through literature and photography, focusing on the representation of marginal people, urban spaces, and their interaction with the city in a moment of change defined as the 'urban turn.'

According to the author, starting in 1957, the Francoist regime put in motion a set of urban transformations to deal with immigrant slums and to open the city to the first waves of international tourists. The process must be understood in the context of a national political strategy of openness, which started when Francisco Franco decided to end the autocratic economic regime and open the country to international investment in exchange for international recognition. From the regime's point of view, it was supposed to be a win-win agreement with the Western democratic world, led by the US and the EEC. However, as Ferrer underlines, it was the first step in the regime's crumbling from the inside. In her enlightening introduction Ferrer argues that the economic growth and the new opportunities given to the Spanish population, thanks to this openness, create the premises for social aggregation and democratic consciousness in social areas that represented, at the time, the margins of Barcelona. As those who lived in the margins crossed the center of the urban space, they constituted the first basis of dissent towards the regime.

The dissent led to the first neighborhood associations and contributed to the reconstruction of workers' and students' unions. Ferrer builds strong connections between this dissent and urban transformations suffered by Barcelona during this crucial period for the future of democratic Spain. The urban change concerned suburbs and outskirts, leaving untouched the bourgeois grid. It was a process where those who lived above planned the city of those who lived below, without considering the everyday practice of the urban space and the people who lived in it. This kind of urbanization aims to control citizens and avoid any hint of rebellion among the working class and immigrants.

However, as Ferrer shows, the consequence is creating a space for dissent to challenge the status quo. In this way, *Barcelona, City of Margins* is the latest delivery in a tradition of urban studies that can be traced back to Henri Lefebvre.

In chapter one, Ferrer expands her theorization of the margin in the context of Francoism. The reader dives into the dictatorship, urban space, and marginality as a tool of dissent that structures itself as a social and political protest. In this chapter, the author makes more explicit her broad objective to “trace the search for an—until then—absent Barcelona that will form the pillars of a new way to understand the city socially and physically” (22). This absent city would arise because of the urban turn that radically modifies the panorama of urban centers, implying “a material change in the physiognomy of cities that allows the creation of interstices of dissent, giving shape to a public space that will be the foundation of a democratic city” (22).

In chapters two to four, Ferrer applies her theoretical model. She deepens her study through literature and photography, analyzing Francisco Candel’s *Donde la ciudad cambia su nombre* (1957) and other more recent texts related to it, alongside the photographic works of Joan Colom and Isabel Steva Hernández, known as Colita. The three chapters are cohesive since the three authors proposed a similar, although different, point of view on the city. Candel, to whom Ferrer dedicates chapter two, is the precursor: he realized in journalism and literature something new for Barcelona by creating a literary space on the margins of the outskirts and suburbs. Candel gave the shantytowns of the Zona Franca a centrality they had never had previously. Most importantly, Candel grew up and lived for many years in one of those slums as an immigrant from the province of Valencia. The writer’s strength is his internal point of view on the margin as he formed a part of it.

In chapters three and four, Ferrer contextualizes Joan Colom and Colita in the artistic movement of the late 1950s and 1960s when Barcelona became the avant-garde of democracy in Spain as opposed to Madrid, which was strictly controlled by the regime. Colom and Colita came out of the bourgeois grid and pointed their lens towards the margin, putting it to the center, as Francisco Candel did in his writings. Ferrer compares Joan Colom’s ‘masculine gaze’ with Colita’s ‘feminine sight.’ The first focuses on a similar operation as Francisco Candel’s, with a general representation of the margin, especially in the shantytowns. The second, Colita, challenges “the constitution of gender through urban space” (144), giving new visibility to women. She does it both in the urban suburbs like the Raval, immortalizing prostitutes, and in the bourgeois offices of the leftist publisher Anagrama. As Ferrer argues throughout her work, Candel, Colom, and Colita gave centrality to the body as the privileged manifestation of margin and dissent through urban space.

Unfortunately, except for Jaime Gil de Biedma in the introduction, Francisco Candel is the only writer used by Ferrer in the book. We miss a more significant

Piras / Sendra Ferrer. *Barcelona, City of Margins*.

presence of another Catalan Spanish-speaking writer, Juan Marsé, who could have been a relevant contribution to the discussion. The character of Pijoaparte in Marsé's *Últimas tardes con Teresa* would represent a perfect example of margin. Marsé dealt with the margin in Barcelona (politically, socially, and racially) during the 1960s in the same line as Francisco Candel, showing how the margin did not turn into dissent since the immigrant from Southern Spain remains trapped in its subordinate status. At the same time, it would have been worthwhile to dedicate some words to Carmen Laforet's *Nada* as a precedent in which, during the 1940s, dissent was impossible. Finally, in the conclusive chapter, the author mentions the documentary *Barraques: La ciutat oblidada* (2010). Here, we miss the mention of *Can Tunís* (2007), the Spanish-speaking documentary on the demolition of Can Tunís shantytowns, one of the neighborhoods that Candel used in his writings.

In conclusion, *Barcelona, City of Margins* is a new take on Barcelona's history and urban geography that contributes to defining the relationship between the urban space and the margin in a Western city. Olga Sendra Ferrer offers a strong point of view not only on the city but also on Francoism. The relevance of this work goes beyond the borders of Barcelona, and opens new avenues in cultural studies related to the urban space. Ferrer's work can also be a relevant tool for studying post-Francoist Spain. The theory proposed by the author can be applied to the movies, literature, and photography of Barcelona in both the post-Olympic era and 21st-century. Therefore, it is pertinent to scholars of Hispanic cultural studies who focus on the Catalan city in more recent times.