Her final concluding chapter explores testimony in relation to the threshold of pain and absence (the “spectral”, following Derrida) – sustaining the tension between what is visible and invisible, what is possible to engage and what is not, through the various umbrales traversing testimonies.

This volume contributes in significant ways to understanding testimony’s continuing relevance for survivors of the dictatorship and redemocratization in Argentina. It also contributes to theoretical understandings of testimony and survival, in addition to memory studies in the wake of political violence and trauma. Indeed, Forcinito’s analysis of multiple umbrales in Argentine testimonies (as manifested in various testimonial genres) helps us reflect on the processual nature of truth, testimony, and survival itself. However, while she explores the value of the concept umbral for studying testimony in her analysis, it would be helpful to further reinforce how the progression of chapters helps develop the argument overall.

As the trial process continues in Argentina, this sustained attention to the social significance of testimony (in juridical and non-juridical spaces) will be important. As Forcinito describes so comprehensively, the experience is never fully resolved and the umbrales continue to exist – representing both possibilities for meaningful engagement, as well as limits to full understanding. This also underscores that although the trauma of that past is not fully resolved and may not be, the value resides in the ongoing work of testimonial practices to help shape the subjectivity of survivors and Argentina’s democracy.

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Never mind the footnotes, the caveats, the sadly necessary literature review. Strip out the sometimes clumsy language and the glib-sounding title and cut to the heart of the matter. Natalia Milanesio has written that most wondrous of things, a history monograph that would make excellent television. This is social history with analytic heft and narrative drive. Hollywood should option it tomorrow. Consider this: The boom in popular consumption spurred by Peronist policies came at the very moment that Argentine executives took over the local advertising agencies, displacing the previous envoys from New York. Ad men and empowered workers were as important in the dreamworld of Argen-
tine goods as industrialists or assertive state officials. Come to think of it, with all this great material, how is “Mad Men Criollo: Down Argentine Way” not already in production?

Nothing will come of this suggestion, of course, and any North American attempt to grapple with what Milanesio has uncovered would very quickly run aground on clichés about Perón and Evita. There is an irony there, for Milanesio has very deliberately turned away from high politics, from the endless politico-ideological analysis of Perón, to focus on the larger cultural and social history of an era of dramatic transformations. Peronism is missing from the title but remains central to the book, as suggested by the cover photo of a bustling store presided over by official portraits of the general and his wife. In this richly researched and tightly argued book, Milanesio offers both new approaches for thinking about this endlessly studied phenomenon and new license for taking our leave of it, and setting off in different and uncharted directions.

The first half of the book sketches out the social and cultural landscape of rapidly increasing consumption. Her first chapter focuses on “the structural conditions and political decisions that contributed to the emergence of the worker-consumer” (17), but even here, she highlights unfamiliar aspects of familiar themes, such as the way mass consumption compelled the state to undertake serious food inspections for the first time. The second and third chapters are the heart of the book, exploring the transformation of advertising and expansion of commercial culture produced by industrialization and Peronist wage policy. While a sizable domestic market already existed in Argentina, as Fernando Rocchi and others have shown, it was radically expanded and reshaped as “low-income sectors went from irrelevant to fundamental for admen and their clients” (57). Instead of focusing all their efforts on the high-end of the market in Buenos Aires, advertisers turned their attention to workers, to the interior and especially to working-class women. This involved a profound modernization and nationalization of the profession, evident in the much greater use of surveys, the more sophisticated and playful repertoire of ads, and the dramatic expansion of revenues, from “an estimated 50 million pesos in 1945 to 2.5 billion in 1954” (85). While attentive to the particular agency (and distortions!) of the admen, Milanesio is centrally concerned with the emergence of a new commercial culture, and the active role that the desires and aspirations of working-class women and men played in it. The state is present throughout, though hardly as omnipotent as in many earlier accounts of Peronism. Indeed, by closely examining a range of other actors, Milanesio provides readers with a better grasp of the motivations, contradictions, and limits of the state.

The second half of the book turns to the impact of this consumption, looking at questions of taste, class, and meaning. In her powerful fourth chapter, she
traces how more equal access to markets produced greater class polarization. Consider her treatment of dress. The figure of the “descamisado” suggested that, in the rhetoric of Peronists and anti-Peronists alike, “style was considered a clear symbol of status that unmistakably conveyed to others what one did for a living and one’s political affiliation” (144). Yet this assumption of class correspondence, already dubious in 1945, was radically destabilized by greater buying power, as workers could no longer be distinguished by their clothing. Drawing on press accounts, memoirs and oral histories, Milanesio carefully maps the “class tensions born out of a newly inclusive commercial culture” (144), centering her analysis, for example, on a cartoon about a middle-class woman whose elegant dress was allegedly borrowed from her maid. Across the board, Milanesio finds middle-class anxieties about working-class consumption at the root of emerging political polarization in this period. Building on these insights, she turns in her fifth chapter to an exploration of how consumption remade the field of gender, and experiences of courtship, romance and power. In the closing chapter, she draws on a set of oral history interviews to examine what consumption meant to everyday Argentines, providing both an opening for future research and an interesting coda to the efforts of admen, activists, and state officials to invest consumption with meaning back in the 1940s.

Milanesio’s book serves as a useful complement, and in some key ways counterpoint, to the more state-centered vision of consumption offered by Eduardo Elena’s recent study. It overlaps in suggestive ways with Inés Pérez’ important new book on gender, consumption, and the modernization of the household. Her attention to advertising and commercial culture, meanwhile, opens up new perspectives for the extensive work on industrialization by scholars like Rocchi, Claudio Belini or Marcelo Rougier. While this book has already found many readers among those interested in Peronism, it should also find a place among the extensive but until now strikingly insular literature on consumption in Europe and the United States, given the intriguing parallels and contrasts of this case. Beyond these inevitable connections with the literatures of Argentina and the North Atlantic, one can only hope that it also succeeds in reaching audiences across Latin America, like Argentine advertising did in this period, offering a fresh new take on challenges shared across much of the twentieth-century world.

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