

Winter 2015

Review Of "Representing Argentinian Mothers: Medicine, Ideas, And Culture In The Modern Era, 1900–1946" By Y. Eraso

Diego Armus

Swarthmore College, darmus1@swarthmore.edu

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

Follow this and additional works at: <http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Diego Armus. (2015). "Review Of "Representing Argentinian Mothers: Medicine, Ideas, And Culture In The Modern Era, 1900–1946" By Y. Eraso". *Bulletin Of The History Of Medicine*. Volume 89, Issue 4. 828-829.
<http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/429>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.



PROJECT MUSE®

**Representing Argentinian Mothers: Medicine, Ideas,
and Culture in the Modern Era, 1900-1946 by Yolanda
Eraso (review)**

Diego Armus

Bulletin of the History of Medicine, Volume 89, Number 4, Winter 2015,
pp. 828-829 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/bhm.2015.0133](https://doi.org/10.1353/bhm.2015.0133)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/bhm/summary/v089/89.4.armus.html>

exposed to and often contracted TB—their patients, and the frequently brutal pre-streptomycin therapeutics.

The last two chapters provide an appropriate denouement to the story and bring the reader into the twenty-first century. The criticality of *M. tuberculosis* airborne transmission, the fielding of streptomycin and other anti-TB drugs, the subsequent development and spread of drug-resistance, and lack of an efficient immunological remind one that medical victory is often fleeting. Even vaccine-preventable diseases are being ignored today, as evidenced by the measles epidemics in Britain and Continental Europe (2012–13) and in the United States this year. Society must remain eternally vigilant for its health. And last, the narrative of World War II Army Nurse Margaret E. Gaule, in which dedicated service and TB infection led to a long struggle for disability benefits, provides a timely reminder that veterans, whether disabled by injury or disease, are a national responsibility. “*Good Tuberculosis Men*” is fine history and an engaging human story, and prompts us to contemplate the past to find practical solutions to current problems.

Stephen C. Craig

Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

Yolanda Eraso. *Representing Argentinian Mothers: Medicine, Ideas, and Culture in the Modern Era, 1900–1946*. *Clio Medica: Perspectives in Medical Humanities* 92. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013. xiii + 293 pp. Ill. \$91.00 (978-90-420-3704-5).

This book aims at connecting medicine, art, popular culture, gender, and ideology in modern Argentina. It does so displaying an intense use of discourses analysis.

Representing Argentinian Mothers is part of a Latin American historiography that has been growing at a very fast pace in the past decade. Three lines of inquiry, oftentimes overlapped, dominate. The first one is the history of biomedicine, aimed at reconstructing national medicines and doctors’ biographies. The second line of inquiry is the history of public health, centered on power relations, politics, public policy, the state, and the medical profession. Finally, the sociocultural history of disease emphasizes living material conditions, disease metaphors, the process of medicalization, disciplinary discourses and sociomedical control practices, and the perspectives and responses of the sick. While navigating these three approaches, Eraso’s narrative mainly focuses on representations of the maternal by different social and cultural registers during the first half of the twentieth century in secular Buenos Aires and the more Catholic provincial capital of Córdoba.

The book is organized into three parts, examining medical, textual, and visual registers. Part I, “The Medical Record,” deals with discourses, institutions, and to a lesser extent practices. It focuses on two sets of problems: on the one hand, it investigates the rise of obstetrics and pediatrics, the medicalization of childbirth, and the diverse medical discourses centered on motherhood; on the other hand,

it explores institutionalized eugenic practices. Part 2, “The Textual Record,” examines how six novels published between 1900s and 1950s and two local newspapers in Córdoba—one liberal and the other pro-Catholic—have talked and discussed motherhood ideas and ideals. Finally, in part 3, “The Visual Record,” both paintings and photojournalism offer the reader an incursion into a repertoire of images meant to give medical, journalistic, and literary representations of the maternal a very diverse visual support.

While discussing some topics, and by crossing disciplinary boundaries in a very effective way, *Representing Argentinian Mothers* looks into new territories and makes a very creative use of both new and well-known sources. It is the case of the imaginative exercise of comparison of discourses on motherhood between liberal and Catholic newspapers, or that of photojournalism, where images of weddings and brides do abound but not those of pregnant woman, revealing a quite interesting and to some extent paradoxical tension between the written and visual registers.

On other topics—discussed in the part of the book focused on the medical record—Eraso enriches current reinterpretations, as it is the case of the role of elite women active in beneficence societies and their contributions on matters associated with the making of state mother and child welfare policies.

On issues related to the history of eugenics vis-à-vis the maternal in Argentine medical institutions, the perspective is clearly revisionist. Included in chapter 2 of the book, this discussion contests the prevailing interpretation that underlines the predominance in Argentina of a soft, sanitary-oriented, and positive eugenics. Although Eraso positions herself along with a small and almost militant group of scholars who stress the existence of negative eugenic discourses, she indicates the need to go beyond legislation and ideological debates and instead examine medical knowledge and practices. In so doing, she assembles some evidence—quite limited indeed—based on medical literature and clinical cases of the 1930s and 1940s and concludes that the legal framework that banned definitive sterilization was insufficient to define doctors’ practices. In other words, doctors managed to practice it, especially not only to preserve the mother’s health and life but also to prevent the transmission of hereditary disorders. Interesting enough, Eraso’s very emphatic interpretation is relativized when she herself indicates its limitations: “we do not know exactly how widespread this practice was” (p. 83). Doubtless, this revisionist approach is a healthy one. But it needs much more concrete evidence, careful contextualization, and perspective in order to really modify the perdurable presence in Argentina of positive eugenics throughout the first half the twentieth century. At the end, perhaps, it is just a problem of incorporating some nuances into the current readings of the problem rather than pushing for forced, bold reinterpretations.

Representing Argentinian Mothers is a valuable addition to the historiography of medicine in modern Latin America. Its effort to articulate an interdisciplinary reading of medicine, gender, society, and culture is commendable.

Diego Armus
Swarthmore College