

LO AFRO DE LA IDENTIDAD ARGENTINA: BLACKNESS AND MESTIZAJE IN  
ARGENTINA

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## ABSTRACT:

The history and significance of the black population in Argentina has only begun to be researched in earnest in the last four decades. This work will focus on mestizaje and blackness in Argentina, analyzing the experiences of Afro-Argentines in the nation-building process between 1870 and 1910. Particular focus will be given to how Afro-Argentines grappled with the “disappearance” of their community in this same time period. Rather than unambiguous physical “disappearance” of the Afro-Argentine caused by death in wars or epidemics, this work will explore the idea that the Afro-Argentine was also rapidly and thoroughly incorporated into a larger “Argentine race.” Using predominantly primary sources, this work will provide a more nuanced look at this aspect of the Afro-Argentine “disappearance,” as well as the how ideas of blackness have filtered into contemporary Argentine culture.

## Introduction

“*No hay negros en Argentina.*” Were you to ask people on the streets of Buenos Aires about the presence of Afro-Argentines, this is likely the response you would receive. In fact, the mere combination of “Afro” and “Argentine” (*Afroargentino*) would likely incite more than a few raised eyebrows from respondents. In small part, this mentality owes to the relatively modest size of the present-day Afro-Argentine community in Buenos Aires. In fact, without a deliberate effort, an impromptu meeting with a black Argentine in Buenos Aires is unlikely. The lack of formal recognition and cultural understanding of African heritage in Argentina is not only due to the size of the community, but is also a result of the Eurocentric mindset and calculated policies aimed towards the Europeanization of Argentina. According “[t]o the Argentine ruling and cultural elites after 1862 [point of national unification], only a European-oriented—and based—culture was acceptable.”<sup>1</sup> The goals of the Argentine elite were widely achieved. In fact, Argentina has reached a level of and cultural homogeneity unmatched by most American countries. Between the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, the idea of an “Argentine race” emerged and was broadly accepted by Argentines of all socioeconomic backgrounds. A euphemism for white and European, the “Argentine race” installs a rigid interpretation of race in Argentina that has allowed for little consideration of the subject outside of the status quo.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Donald S. Castro, “The Afro-argentine Payador Tradition: The Art of Gabino Ezeiza,” *Afro-Hispanic Review*, 13[2], 13.

<sup>2</sup> Ezequiel Adamovsky, *Historia de la clase media argentina: apogeo y decadencia de una ilusión, 1919-2003* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2009).

These rigid ideas about race have impeded the development of a substantial conversation about the role of afro-descendants in Argentina. For example, *mestizaje* is one of the most prolific areas of study for academics who focus on Latin America.<sup>3</sup> As a subject, however, *mestizaje* is overlooked in parts of the Southern Cone, and particularly in Argentina. The reasons for this neglect are numerous. The most important are the lack of conspicuous racial diversity in modern-day Argentina combined with the ostensible lack of interest in subjects related to race, and therefore conflict, in the country. In today's context, countries like Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia offer undeniably more obvious cases for the study of *mestizaje*. Because of the contemporary implications and debates surrounding race and ethnicity in these countries, they have received inordinately more treatment from academics than Argentina in the area of *mestizaje*.<sup>456</sup>

In the last three decades, though, Argentina has begun to garner more attention from academia in the area of race studies and this work continues this trend. In particular, this work seeks to shed light on how Afro-Argentines grappled with the “disappearance” of their

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<sup>3</sup> *Mestizaje* is a multi-dimensional concept. For the purposes of this work, it is used to simply to describe the mixing of cultures, both genetically and socially. While *mestizaje* is most commonly used to describe mixing between Amerindians and Europeans, this work will primarily use it to describe the mixing of European and African-descended populations in Argentina.

<sup>4</sup> See more on contemporary perceptions of *mestizaje* and blackness in Mexico in: Christina A. Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> For an interesting analytical take on on race and “color” with case studies on Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, and Peru, see: Edward Telles, *Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> For a historic look at race and *mestizaje* in Colombia, see: Joanne Rappaport, *The Disappearing Mestizo: Configuring Difference in the Colonial New Kingdom of Granada*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

community during times of rapid demographic change in Argentina's nation-building period. It will be seen that, in addition to an unambiguous physical "disappearance" of the Afro-Argentine caused by death in wars or epidemics, the Afro-Argentine was also rapidly and thoroughly incorporated into the larger "Argentine race." This work will provide a more in-depth look and analysis of the important role played by mestizaje in the "disappearance" of the Afro-Argentine. It will also demonstrate that where mestizaje tends to lead to the creation of a second ethnorracial group or "other" in most Latin American countries (e.g., the mestizo in Mexico) the mixing of races and ethnicities in Argentina results in a more homogenous, and more white, national identity. This work will argue that influential Afro-Argentine poets, journalists, and musicians were not blind to this phenomenon, and addressed it directly and individually, and that its effects are still clearly identifiable in contemporary Argentine attitudes towards race and multiculturalism.

This work is divided into three parts. Part I begins by establishing the historical and cultural context of race in Argentina, as well as forming the theoretical framework of the Argentine nation-building period. Part II centers on the key moment of erasure in the "disappearance" of the Afro-Argentine from the country's collective narrative and imagination. In this section a number of primary sources are used to demonstrate that mestizaje in Argentina was real and recognized by influential Afro-Argentines of the era. Important sources of information are articles from *Afro-Porteño* newspapers, literary works by Afro-Argentine writers and poets, lyrics from Afro-Argentine musicians, archival documents, and ethnographic studies about Afro-descendants in Argentina. These sources will be used to deepen the understanding of how Afro-Argentines grappled with the emergence of a national identity that explicitly sought to exclude them from Argentina's national story. Part III will tie in topics explored in parts I and II

in an effort to understand contemporary concepts of blackness and multiculturalism in Argentina, particularly as it pertains to official recognition by the Argentine government.

### Review of Literature

The subject of Afro-Argentine history and blackness in Argentina has only been considered seriously in the last forty years, with the greatest volume of academic works being published in the last twenty years. Since the year 2000, the number of book-length works and peer-reviewed articles focusing on the subject of Afro-Argentines has increased markedly. This section highlights the most noteworthy of these articles and monographs, particularly *vis-à-vis* the focus of this work.

The most influential and prolific monograph on Afro-Argentines is George Reid Andrews'<sup>7</sup> *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1800-1900*.<sup>8</sup> Published first in English in 1980, and later in Spanish in 1989, Reid Andrews' work was instrumental in introducing Afro-Argentine history to academics from around the world and bringing the experiences of black populations in Argentina to the forefront. Although there were scholarly works on Afro-Argentines before Reid Andrews' book, his was the first to present a comprehensive and systematic study of the subject. Based on extensive archival research throughout Argentina, Reid Andrews conclusively establishes that the Afro-Argentine population in Buenos Aires persisted, and remained active, into the beginning of the twentieth century. This was a departure from

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<sup>7</sup> George Reid Andrews is a Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Pittsburgh. He has also written influential books on the black diaspora in Brazil and Uruguay, as well as the far-reaching *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000*.

<sup>8</sup> Andrews, George Reid. *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1800-1900*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1980.

previous scholarship on the subject, which widely understood the Afro-Argentine population to have all but “disappeared” by the middle of the nineteenth century. This finding was critical in motivating other academics to pursue the subject of the Afro-Argentine “disappearance,” and has likewise been instrumental in the creation of this work.

In 1996, Marvin A. Lewis, Professor Emeritus at the University of Missouri and renowned academic of Afro-Hispanic discourse, expanded upon Reid Andrews’ work with his own, *Afro-Argentine Discourse: Another Dimension of the Black Diaspora*.<sup>9</sup> Lewis’ work brings to light literary works by Afro-Argentines previously unrecognized or altogether unknown. Lewis’ book, which has extensive quotations, provides access to rare poems, song lyrics, and newspaper articles that are otherwise inaccessible. The richness of Afro-Argentine literature and periodicals from the early twentieth century that are unearthed in Lewis’ research are invaluable additions to the subject and serve as further confirmation of Reid Andrews’ understanding of Afro-Argentine culture and influence surviving into the twentieth century.

Since the year 2000, the study of Afro-Argentines in Argentine universities has increased significantly. In 2003, Alejandro Solomianski<sup>10</sup> published *Identidades secretas: la negrituda argentina*.<sup>11</sup> Solomianski’s book continued the task of recovering Afro-Argentine intellectual and literary production, focusing on music lyrics from tangos and hymns. Solomianski is particularly successful in challenging the idea of Argentine “whiteness” by inserting the Afro-

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<sup>9</sup> Lewis, Marvin A., *Afro-Argentine Discourse: Another Dimension of the Black Diaspora*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Alejandro Solomianski is professor of Spanish at California State University, Los Angeles.

<sup>11</sup> Solomianski, Alejandro. *Identidades secretas: la negritud argentina*. Rosario, Argentina: Beatriz Viterbo, 2003.



Argentine voice into a chronological telling of Argentine history. Another Argentine academic, Lea Geler, researcher at CONICET/IEEG<sup>12</sup> and professor of history at the University of Barcelona, is likely the most prolific investigator of the subject at present. Along with Florencia Guzmán, Geler co-edited the 2013 monograph *Cartografías afrolatinoamericanas: Perspectivas situadas para análisis transfronterizos*, which, in Geler's chapter, highlights the significance of Afro-Argentine theatre at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> Geler has also published numerous articles related to Afro-Argentines, blackness, and, most relevant to this work, mestizaje in Argentina.

The recently published *Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina* is a who's who of those currently researching race studies and Afro-Argentines, and is the product of increased interest in race studies in Argentina in the last decade.<sup>14</sup> Divided into eleven chapters, the book focuses on the role race played during Argentina's nation-building period in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With an interdisciplinary list of authors, both North American and Argentine, the work is perhaps the most comprehensive on the subject since Reid Andrews (who pens the monograph's epilogue), and should be considered an authoritative reference for those interested in the idea of mestizaje or "racial democracy" in Argentina.

This review of literature is by no means exhaustive. It does, however, represent the key academic players on the subject. It also demonstrates how, despite the increasing popularity and

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<sup>12</sup> Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas / Instituto Interdisciplinario de Estudios de Género

<sup>13</sup> Florencia Guzmán and Lea Geler, *Cartografías afrolatinoamericanas: Perspectivas situadas para análisis transfronterizos*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Alberto, Paulina L., and Eduardo Elena. *Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

intrigue of Afro-Argentine history among academics, the subject remains ripe for academic treatment.

## **PART I: Historical and Cultural Context of Race in Argentina**

Despite present-day demographics, the Afro-Argentine population was once quite significant, putting it more in line with other countries in the region like Brazil or Colombia. In fact, well before any officially sanctioned censuses, Father Chomé wrote in the early eighteenth century that of the 40,000 people residing in Buenos Aires, 20,000 were black slaves.<sup>15</sup>

According to the first official census data in 1778, nearly 30 percent of the population of Buenos Aires was of African descent.<sup>16</sup> Of the 24,363 people residing in Buenos Aires, 7,236 were black.<sup>17</sup> This trend continued into the nineteenth century, where, in 1810, the total population of Buenos Aires had increased to 25,404, and the percent of Afro-Argentines had increased slightly to 30.1 percent (9,615).<sup>18</sup>

Henry Marie Brackenridge, a member of a U.S. delegation to Buenos Aires, made note of the black population of Buenos Aires in 1817, saying: "... [T]he mixture of negroes and mulattoes, is by no means remarkable, not as great, perhaps, as in Baltimore, and the proportion of the military, such as we might have seen in one of our own towns, during the last war, with

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<sup>15</sup> Concolorcorvo, *El lazarrillo de los ciegos caminantes*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ediciones Argentinas de la Editorial Solar, 1942.

<sup>16</sup> This paper does not make the claim that these demographic numbers should be taken at face value. There is no way to know how this data was collected and to what extent these numbers are representative of the Afro-Argentine population at the time. However, this census data does provide important data that helps to create the bigger picture of the Afro-Argentine story. (It can be presumed unlikely that census workers over reported numbers of Afro-Argentines. If anything, they are underreported.)

<sup>17</sup> José Luis Moreno, *Población y sociedad en el Buenos Aires rural a mediados del siglo XVIII*. Rosario, Argentina: Anuario de Investigaciones Históricas, Número 114, 1965.

<sup>18</sup> Marta B. Goldberg, "La población negra y mulata de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 1810-1840," *Desarrollo Económico* 16 (61). Buenos Aires, Argentina: *Desarrollo Económico* 16 (1976): 75–99.

the exception of the black troops, which, in this city, constitute a principal part of the regular force.”<sup>19</sup>

On first read, this quote seems unexceptional, but it is noteworthy for several reasons. Based on the Maryland State Archives, the total population of Baltimore City in 1820 was 62,738.<sup>20</sup> The number of black people, both free and enslaved, at the same time was 14,678. This means that, in 1820, a little more than 23% of the City of Baltimore was black. Mr. Brackenridge was remarkably accurate in his comparison because, in 1822, the census of the City of Buenos Aires reported 24.7% of the city’s population as black.<sup>21</sup> Comparing the two cities’ current black populations illustrates how they have diverged since the early nineteenth century. According to the City of Baltimore, the current population of the city is more than 60% black.<sup>22</sup> According to the 2010 census in Argentina, where nearly half of the population lives in the City or Province of Buenos Aires, only 149,493 of more than 40 million reported to be Afro-Argentine, well less than 0.5% of the population.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> H.M. Brackenridge, *Voyage to Buenos Ayres, Performed in the Years 1817 and 1818, by Order of the American Government*. London: Sir R. Phillips, 1820. 64-65.

<sup>20</sup> Maryland State Archives, *Black Marylanders 1820: African American Population by Country, Status, & Gender*. <http://slavery.msa.maryland.gov/html/research/census1820.html>

<sup>21</sup> Reid Andrews, George. *Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*. 66.

<sup>22</sup> City of Baltimore. *Baltimore City Demographics at a Glance: A Closer Look at the composition of Baltimore City*. [http://planning.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/2a\\_City%20Profile%20-%203.30.16\\_0.pdf](http://planning.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/2a_City%20Profile%20-%203.30.16_0.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Censo Nacional de Argentina de 2010. Cuadro P42. Total del país. Población afrodescendiente en viviendas particulares por sexo, según grupo de edad. Año 2010.

This comparison is imperfect, not least because Buenos Aires was, and continues to be, a significantly larger city than Baltimore and the two cities' social situations invariably differed dramatically over time. Still, though, the contrast between the two cities that Mr. Brackenridge made 200 years ago highlights how ideas of blackness and national identity (*Argentinidad*) in Argentina trended in opposite directions when compared to other important port cities in the Americas with significant histories of slavery.

Before Brackenridge's trip to Buenos Aires in 1817, race relations in the city had been much more in line with other countries in the Americas, like Brazil, Colombia, and the United States. Although on a smaller scale, slaves existed throughout Argentina well into the nineteenth century, and the Port of Buenos Aires was frequented by European slave ships (*barcos negreros*). Ships began arriving early in the seventeenth century. In a document from 1602, the *Real Hacienda* (the courts that represented the Spanish crown in Buenos Aires) formally denounced the entrance of slave ships into the Port of Buenos Aires from Brazil, as they did not have the proper paperwork.<sup>24</sup> This is emblematic of much of the slave trade in Buenos Aires, wherein most of the slaves arrived on Portuguese ships from Brazil, often without the proper paperwork.<sup>25</sup> Slave ships continued to arrive in Buenos Aires until the nineteenth century, which became a principal entry point for slaves that were destined for parts of the Argentine interior, Bolivia, or Peru. Another document, from 1805, questions the ownership of eighty slaves that were brought from on the Portuguese ship *Príncipe Regente*, with the destination of Peru.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Archivo General de la Nación: 4 19-1-4.

<sup>25</sup> George Reid Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Archivo General de la Nación: (6) 4 35-3-5.

These two documents bookend the more than 200-year history Buenos Aires as a port of call for *barcos negreros* in South America.

Many of the slaves that arrived in Buenos Aires, however, stayed in the city. In the early nineteenth century, a requisite part of being part of the upper class in Buenos Aires was to have one, or several, domestic slaves. Documentation from this period containing information about the sale of slaves in Buenos Aires abounds. In 1814, for example, Ángel Mariano Sánchez wrote to Doña Manuela Núñez regarding the sale of a black slave, Uamada, and her sixteen year-old daughter, Fandelaria, for 450 pesos.<sup>27</sup>



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<sup>27</sup> Archivo General de la Nación: (1128) 4 23-8-6.

Figure 1: The following two sketches are from *Abolición de la Esclavitud en el Río de la Plata* by Alberto González Arzac.<sup>28</sup> The original caption for this works reads: “El negrito de servicio, de punta en blanco, lleva el tapiz en blanco donce se arrodillarán sus armas.”



Figure 2 Original caption reads: Alcides D’Orbigny, al visitar Buenos Aires, señaló el humano trato que recibían los negros esclavos. Este grabado – ‘el negrito del mate’—ilustra su libro de viajes por América.”<sup>29</sup>

These sketches demonstrate the lives of domestic slaves in Buenos Aires in early nineteenth century. According to the original caption, Alberto González Arzac wrote that Alcides D’Orbigny<sup>30</sup> described the “humane treatment” of black slaves in Buenos Aires.

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<sup>28</sup> González Arzac, Alberto. *Abolición de la Esclavitud en el Río de la Plata*, Buenos Aires: D.A.E.S.A. 1848. 39.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>30</sup> A French traveler who made extensive comments and drawings of the Americas, particularly South America, in the 1820s and 1830s.

González Arzac writes about Emeric Essex Vidal's<sup>31</sup> *Observaciones sobre Buenos Aires y Montevideo*: "... [D]ecía (Vidal) que aquí [en Buenos Aires] la esclavitud era verdadera libertad comparada con la de otras naciones, y en términos generales los cronistas revelan que las familias porteñas daban un trato relativamente humanitario a sus siervos."<sup>32</sup>

Blacks were also synonymous with everyday life for the lower classes in Buenos Aires for the first half of the nineteenth century. Most paintings or depictions of blacks, both free and enslaved, are as street vendors or artisans.<sup>33 34</sup> Whether or not blacks in Argentina received better treatment than in other countries in the nineteenth century, it is clear that they were very much incorporated into the social fabric of Buenos Aires until the latter part of the century.

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<sup>31</sup> Essex Vidal was a British marine who became famous for his paintings of Buenos Aires and Montevideo between 1826 and 1829.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 17. Translation: "He said that here [in Buenos Aires] slavery was really shared freedom when compared to other countries, and in general terms journalists revealed that families in Buenos Aires gave relatively humane treatment to their slaves."

<sup>33</sup> Historian Lyman Johnson has written quite extensively on the lives of black artisans in Buenos Aires in the nineteenth century. See: Johnson, Lyman L. "The Impact of Racial Discrimination on Black Artisans in Colonial Buenos Aires." *Social History* 6, no. 3 (1981): 301-16.

<sup>34</sup> On the 25 of May, it is common for young Argentine schoolgirls to dress up as the "negra condombero" by wearing white dresses, red bandannas on their head, and painting their faces black. Appropriateness aside, this is one of the few instances in which there is an instance of wide-spread cultural recognition of Argentine's black past. The reason for the celebration of the "negra condombero" is not clear, but the consensus seems to be that it is to celebrate the black (usually female) street vendors in Buenos Aires at the time of the wars of independence.



By 1887, however, the Afro-Argentine population of Buenos Aires had plummeted to below two percent<sup>35</sup>, lower than it had been more than seventy years before.<sup>36</sup> In 1895, the second national census reported that the total national population of black and mixed-race peoples was 8,005.<sup>37</sup> This phenomenon became known as “the disappearance,” and has been a point of interest and research among scholars for the last three decades. In *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1800-1900*, George Reid Andrews sums up the chief factors that historians now commonly use to interpret the decline in the Afro-Argentine population: “... [T]he decline of Buenos Aires’s black population has usually been explained in terms of four factors: the abolition of the slave trade, high mortality rates and relatively low fertility rates among the Afro-Argentine population; very high death rates among black males during the wars of the 1810-1870 period; *and race mixture and gradual lightening.*”<sup>38</sup>

Black Argentine men died in large numbers in Argentina’s wars for independence between 1810-1820, as well as in the countless civil wars that would follow. One document from 1813, for example, includes a detailed list of enslaved black men in Buenos Aires that were to be enlisted in the army. The document begins saying, “*Razón de los esclavos que hay en el cuartel*

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<sup>35</sup> There is no way to account for biases in reporting blackness in census data, but it likely to account for a number that underrepresents the true Afro-Argentine population of the time.

<sup>36</sup> Francisco Latinza. *Censo general de la población, edificación, comercio e industrias de la ciudad de Buenos Aires: 1887*. Buenos Aires: Compañía Sud-Americana de Billetes de Banco, 1887.

<sup>37</sup> República Argentina. *Segundo censo de la República Argentina efectuado en 10 de mayo de 1895*.

<sup>38</sup> George Reid Andrews. *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1800-1900*. 68. Emphasis my own.

*con especificación de su edad y su aptitud para tomar las armas.*”<sup>39</sup> The document goes on to list a number of men, ranging in age from 15 to 40, who were to be taken from their owners and conscribed into the Argentine Army. Other documents reveal that some slave owners fought to keep their slaves from being sent to fight under San Martín. In 1815, for example, Doña Juana Inés Pérez wrote to request the return of slaves from the the Argentine Army. She wrote, “*Expediente promovido ... sobre la devolución de cuatro esclabos [sic]... que se hallan en el servicio de las armas.*”<sup>40</sup> Documents like these, and countless others, further underscore the prolific nature of slavery in Argentina in the nineteenth century, even in the country’s urban capital. They also give a human face to a part of Argentine history that has little space in current Argentine myth, and even less formal recognition.

Mass conscription into the army, combined with numerous yellow fever epidemics and significant emigration to neighboring Uruguay and Brazil, partially explain the sharp decline in the Afro-Argentine population. In Reid Andrew’s monograph, the last factor leading to the “disappearance” was the way in which race-mixing contributed to the collapse of the Afro-Argentine population, i.e., *mestizaje*. The topic is not, however, substantially addressed. Moreover, the possibility of shifts in the national identity narrative are not addressed at all. In fact, the argument of accepting *mestizaje* as a worthwhile area of study in Argentina has only

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<sup>39</sup> Archivo General de la Nación: 9 10-7-2.

English translation: “Reason (list) of the slaves that there are in the barracks/unit with specification of their age and ability to take up arms.”

<sup>40</sup> Archivo General de la Nación: (970) 4 23-8-2.

English translation: “Document requesting... the return of four slaves... that currently find themselves in the armed services.”

been made earnestly in the last decade.<sup>41</sup> In order to understand how ideas of blackness and race mixing have become so well-hidden in contemporary Argentine culture, it is key to understand Argentina nation-building period.

### Gobernar es Poblar: A panacea for progress

As with most countries Latin America, elites in Argentina sought to create a national narrative to bring their country together in the post-independence period. This effort began in earnest following Argentina's formal independence from Spain in 1816 and, to an extent, continues until today. For this work, and for the sake of clarity, the "nation-building period" refers to 1870 to 1920. Working with this time period helps to refine the scope of the research while encompassing a period that includes key demographic shifts as well as the most concerted efforts by elites in Argentina to form a cohesive national identity.

As mentioned, the ambitions of Argentine elites were not distinct from their Latin American counterparts. What does distinguish Argentina from other Latin American countries, like Brazil or Mexico, is its comparative success in creating not only a national identity, but a national reality, based on the fundamental notion of the "superiority" of white European people and culture.<sup>42</sup> This contemporary notion of Argentine national identity is the result of more than

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<sup>41</sup> Lea Geler, an Argentine academic and professor of history at the University of Barcelona, is the only person to give significant attention to the idea of *mestizaje* in Argentina. Her ideas are addressed in Parts II and III.

<sup>42</sup> This means to say that Argentine elites were successful in creating a population of majority European descendants. This likely has less to do with their concerted efforts to entice immigrants from Europe, as many countries, especially Brazil, were successful in doing the same. Rather, the territory that is now Argentina has fewer indigenous peoples, most of which were eradicated in the *Conquistas del Desierto*, and had dramatically fewer slaves than Brazil.

a century of determined, and oftentimes institutionalized, efforts by the Argentine elite to achieve “modernity” and “progress” based on a U.S. model of attracting as much “desirable” European immigration as possible.<sup>43</sup> The results of these efforts can be seen in much of contemporary Argentine culture, most notably in the idea of “Argentine exceptionalism.”<sup>44</sup> It is, in large part, for this reason that there continue to be few examples of official recognition of Afro-Argentine influence on Argentine identity despite its pronounced historical role. The combination of “Afro” and “Argentine” flies in the face of how many contemporary Argentines view themselves and their country’s history.

La cuestión de la inmigración es el interés más grave que tiene la República Argentina es estos momentos; el Congreso debe ser previsor adoptando todas las medidas prudentes para realizar estos dos grandes propósitos: atraer hacia nuestra patria a todos los habitantes del mundo que quieran vivir en ella e inculcar en el corazón de los extranjeros el sentimiento de nuestra nacionalidad.<sup>45</sup>

The question of immigration is one of the most important for the Argentine Republic at the current time; Congress should adopt prudent measures to achieve these two goals: to attract to Argentina all of the habitants of the world that want to live in her border and include in the foreigners’ hearts the feeling of our nationality.<sup>46</sup>

Congressman Estanislao Zeballos spoke these words before the Argentine Congress in 1897. Capturing the elite sentiment of the time, Zeballos underscores the importance of

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<sup>43</sup> See; *Ley 817 de La Inmigración y Colonización*, which helped to set up offices throughout Europe to promote European immigration to Argentina.

<sup>44</sup> Argentine Exceptionalism, much like (U.S.) American Exceptionalism, is, simply defined, the idea Argentina is more developed, and thus superior, to other Latin American countries. And that Argentines have certain innate characteristics that separate them from other Latin Americans.

<sup>45</sup> Congreso Nacional, Cámara de Diputados, *Diario de Sesiones*, 21 October 1897.

<sup>46</sup> Translation my own

immigration for Argentina's future.<sup>47</sup> Despite the wording of the Estanislao Zeballos' speech, it is clear that "all of the inhabitants of the world" refers only to Europeans based on the subsequent actions of the Argentine government. At the end of the nineteenth century, for example, many Latin American countries were jockeying to entice the "best" immigrants from Europe by opening agencies in the major European capitals. Argentina opened many agencies based on the provisions in the *Ley 817 de La Inmigración y Colonización*. In his book *The Afro-Argentine in Argentine Culture*, Donald Castro describes this, saying: "In most cases, consular staff headed these propaganda offices demonstrating their multiple functions: to foster immigration, foreign capital investments, and new market outlets for home country products. The major countries involved were Mexico, Chile, Brazil, Perú, Venezuela, Uruguay, and Argentina." No such agencies were functioning outside of Europe, making clear the Argentine elites' ideas of modernization were directly dependent on mass European immigration.

This liberal elite, often synonymous with the literary movement known as the *Generación del '37*, made their views on Argentina's path towards modernity a clear and dichotomous choice between civilization and barbarism.<sup>48</sup> Understood in this dichotomy is the idea that non-European populations would prevent Argentina from aspiring to greatness, while an influx of white European immigrants would provide Argentina a path towards modernization based on the U.S. model, which was revered by most Argentine elites.<sup>49</sup> This policy of

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<sup>47</sup> In fact, Argentine elites like Juan Bautista Alberdi equated "civilization" to European whiteness quite often in their writings: Juan Bautista Alberdi and Clodomiro Zavalía, *Bases Y Puntos De Partida Para La Organización Política De La República De Argentina*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Estrada, 1943. 68.

<sup>48</sup> Sarmiento, Domingo F. *Civilization and Barbarism*. New York: Penguin Group, 1998.

<sup>49</sup> "Based on the U.S. model" does not mean to say that Argentines modeled themselves on U.S. Americans exactly, but rather that they saw it as an admirable model vis-à-vis European

encouraging European immigration to Argentina became known as *gobernar es poblar* (“To govern is to populate”).

In the nineteenth century many elites in Argentina advocated not only for European immigration, but for an increased focus on attracting immigrants from Northern Europe, primarily Scandinavia, Ireland, and England. Bernardino Rivadavia, the first president of Argentina from 1826, was notoriously skeptical of increased Spanish immigration to Argentina, despite being a Spanish descendent himself.<sup>50</sup> Rivadavia promoted increased European immigration to Argentina from before his time in office, even saying that it was, “... the practical and perhaps the only way of destroying the decadent Spanish caste system and habits and to create a new homogeneous, industrious and moral society.”<sup>51</sup> In fact, Rivadavia anticipated later policies by sending a special commission to Ireland in 1824 in an attempt to persuade the poor and unemployed in Ireland to emigrate to Argentina.<sup>52</sup>

By the first decade of the twentieth century, Argentine elites had given up on the idea of enticing large numbers of Northern immigrants and were wholly embracing the reality of mass

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immigration. In fact, by the turn of the twentieth century, many elites in Argentina had wholeheartedly embraced the ideas espoused in José Enrique Rodó’s *Ariel*, published in 1900. *Arielismo*, as it became to be known, accepted Latin American’s Hispanic, and thus Western, culture to be the most admirable, preferable even to Anglo-Saxon culture. Argentine elites so embraced the ideas of Rodó, in fact, that a center devoted solely to studying the work was based in Buenos Aires for many years.

<sup>50</sup> It is also widely rumored that Rivadavia had African ancestry, and often powdered his to lighten his complexion.

<sup>51</sup> Palcos, Alberto, *Rivadavia: Ejecutor del pensamiento de mayo*, 2 vols. Santa Fe: Editorial de la Universidad Nacional de La Plata, 1960. 290.

<sup>52</sup> Alsina, Juan A., *La inmigración europea en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Imprenta Felipe S. Alsina, 1898. 24.

immigration from Southern Europe, primarily Italy. In his book *El problema del inmigrante y el problema agrario en la Argentina*, former Minister of Agriculture Damián Torina wrote:

La sucinta distribución que precede, nos permite afirmar con entera exactitud, que la raza latina, cuya primera simiente arrojó el conquistador español en lo que es hoy la Republica Argentina, es la que sigue predominando con mayor fuerza ahora, robustecida y consolidada con las ponderosas adiciones que le aportan Italia, España y demás países latinos....<sup>53</sup>

We can confirm with exactness that the Latin Race, whose seeds were first sewn by Spaniards in what is today the Argentine Republic, is the race that continues to dominate, with great strength, immigration, making it stronger and more consolidated with important additions from Italy, Spain, and other Latin countries....

Torina's words exemplify the Argentine government's consistent dedication to fomenting immigration from Europe. Although the countries they targeted for increased immigration varied throughout the century following independence, the consensus always, and exclusively, favoured European immigration as Argentina's best path towards modernity.

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<sup>53</sup> Torina, Damián M., *El problema del inmigrante y el problema agrario*, Buenos Aires: 1912.



The painting above, “Llegada del ferrocarril a Córdoba,” by Luis Gonzaga Cony, clearly ties the supremacy of European culture to Argentina’s cultural and technological advancement.<sup>54</sup> In this instance, the painting celebrates the connection of two of Argentina’s most important cities, Buenos Aires and Córdoba, by rail. The representation of a semi-nude, enslaved black man in the bottom right corner of the painting speaks volumes about where the Argentine elite

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<sup>54</sup> Gonzaga Cony, Luis. *Llegada del ferrocarril a Córdoba*. 1871. Oil on canvas. 162.5 cm. X 205 cm. Museo Emilio Caraffa. Córdoba, Argentina.



thought Afro-Argentines belonged in the new national order. Likewise, the Roman iconography makes clear that many in Argentina attributed the Argentina's economic successes to its European, and European-descended, population.

Argentine efforts in attracting European immigrants in the nineteenth century were tremendously effective.<sup>55</sup> In the nineteenth century, Argentina received more European immigrants than any other Latin American country and, when compared to its population before the mass arrival of immigrants, Argentina received more European immigrants proportionally than the United States.<sup>56</sup> By the beginning of the twentieth century, the sense that the Argentine populace was melding into a homogenous "Argentine race" became more pronounced.<sup>57</sup> This "Argentine race" was, in the mind of most Argentines, unequivocally white and European, marking the beginning of the modern Argentine exceptionalism based its perceived racial and cultural superiority to other Latin American countries.

It is clear, then, that from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century, the way in which Argentines understood and experienced race saw a dramatic change. Blacks went from being an undeniable part of society, to being actively rejected by elites, to almost completely forgotten by society at large.

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<sup>55</sup> *Ley de Inmigración y Colonización Número 817*

<sup>56</sup> Donald S. Castro. *The Afro-Argentine in Argentine Culture, El Negro del Acordeón*. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001. 2.

## **PART II: “Disappearance” in Plain Sight: The Moment of Erasure and the Afro-Argentine**

Gauchos, tango, and the European milieu of Buenos Aires; these are all things typically associated with Argentina, and rightly so. For many, the image of a sultry couple dancing the tango on the cobblestone streets of San Telmo, surrounded by the faded glory of European architecture, is an unquestionable validation of European influence in Argentina. Likewise, the image of a gaucho on the pampa, in full garb, preparing a classic *asado*, is nothing short of national folklore. To assume that these characteristics of contemporary Argentine national identity accurately reflect the country’s post-independence nation-building period, however, would be to ignore the important non-European contributions, most notably those of the Afro-Argentine population. Although not acknowledged, many of Argentina’s most beloved cultural traits, including gauchos and the tango, are deeply rooted in Afro-Argentine traditions. For this reason, further understanding of the process by which black Argentines’ lost their recognition in Argentine society is an important task.

The widespread acceptance of the “Argentine race” as exclusively European oversimplifies the way in which Argentines view race. The most acute of these complications is the outright denial by many in Argentina that Afro-Argentines exist. Argentine historian Lea Geler is one of the few academics to champion the study of *mestizaje* in Argentina and has published many works relating to Afro-Argentines in the last decade. She coined the term “*racial negritud*,” a racial construction that considers racism in Argentina as, “... ‘non-existent,’” and “... commonly denied on the grounds that there are no racially black people in the country to be

racist against.”<sup>58</sup> Ideas of Argentine identity are now so concretely paired with the ideas of “racial negritud,” that any person without outwardly “black” phenotypical characteristics is not considered to be Argentine at all, argues Geler.<sup>59</sup> The Argentine anthropologist Alejandro Frigerio explains how blackness in Argentina is limited only to those with obviously African features: “... [L]a adscripción de la categoría de negro [se pertenece] tan solo a quienes tienen tez oscura y cabello mota.”<sup>60</sup> This means that in Buenos Aires, even if a person self-identifies as black, she is not accepted by society at large as truly Afro-Argentine unless she has dark skin and curly hair. This undergirds the idea of and mixing of race in Argentina as resulting in a “whiter” populations, rather than creating an “other” as in most other Latin American countries.

Geler explores this phenomenon in her chapter in *Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina*, “African decent and whiteness in Buenos Aires: Impossible mestizajes in the white capital city.” In her ethnographic study, the first with the explicit goal of exploring mestizaje in Buenos Aires, Geler interviewed three Argentine women who are phenotypically white by Argentine standards, but “recognize themselves as descendants of enslaved Africans.”<sup>61</sup> One of the interviewees, Nora, did not know of her African heritage until she read the translation of George Reid

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<sup>58</sup> Alberto, Paulina L., and Eduardo Elena. *Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 219.

<sup>59</sup> Argentines gauge phenotypically black features is the exact opposite from the United States are Canada where the stricter “one drop” rule is often the norm. See more: Christine B. Hickman, “The Devil and the One Drop Rule: Racial Categories, African Americans, and the U.S. Census.” *Michigan Law Review* 95, no. 5 (1997): 1161.

<sup>60</sup> Alejandro Frigerio. “Negros” y “Blancos” en Buenos Aires: *Repasando nuestras categorías raciales*. Universidad Católica Argentina/CONICET.

Translation: “The adscription of of black only belongs to those with dark skin and thick (mota) hair.” Translation my own.

<sup>61</sup> *Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina*. 221.

Andrew's foundational book, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*, which was not published in Spanish until 1989, nearly a decade after its original publication in English. Upon reading Reid Andrews' book, which was the first of its kind to be published in Argentina, Nora came to realize that her grandfather was a prominent figure in the Afro-Argentine community at the turn of the twentieth century. Nora describes this in saying: "I realized that my family had been black...."<sup>62</sup> Nora's story highlights the power of race-mixing and whitening in Argentina, wherein the descendant of prominent Afro-Argentine could lose all connection to her African ancestry in a single generation. Nora even goes as far as to say that she "had been black," inferring an impossibility of being black in the present. This also calls to attention an important and understudied aspect of Argentine *mestizaje*: race-mixing in Argentina, be it between whites and blacks or whites and indigenous peoples, *did not result in mestizos or mulattos recognized by the state*. This is in stark contrast to other Latin American countries like Mexico, Colombia, or Brazil. With stories like Nora's in mind, this section will explore writings from Afro-Argentine writers and musicians from the nation-building period (1870-1920) in an effort to understand how they reacted to the erasure of their community and cultural contributions by an emerging, and evermore dominant, national identity that did not welcome them and their families into the national narrative. One way to understand how this phenomenon of "disappearing" came to pass is by examining the words of Afro-Argentines from the height of the nation-building period in Argentina.

The literary scene from the Río de la Plata is celebrated throughout Latin America. However, there continues to be very little, if any, recognition of Afro-Argentine writers, whose

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 221.

plethora of works stand to provide a richness of ideas and diversity. In the nineteenth century, numerous *Afroporteño* newspapers were created in Buenos Aires.<sup>63</sup> *El Proletario*, *La Broma*, *El Unionista*, *La Perla*, and *El Aspirante*, to name a few, served as platforms for Afro-Argentines writers to engage in the critical discussions of their day. Examining them provides a compelling look at how Afro-Argentines dealt with the shifting state of blackness and race-mixing in Argentina in the early twentieth century.

A principal objective of many Afro-Porteño periodicals was to provide a countercurrent to the scientific racism taking hold in Argentina at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1887, an article from *La Juventud* makes the newspaper's position on the changing state of affairs in Argentina quite clear:

Parece que va despertando nuestra sociedad del letargo en que yacía ... Esto nos demuestra que nuestro trabajo no es estéril ... Hemos de sostener *La Broma* [another Afro-Porteño newspaper] cueste lo que cueste, porque sabemos que ella es necesaria para batallar en los futuros días de la lucha ardiente de la inteligencia contra la ignorancia ... Cuenta con esforzados paladines y militan en sus filas hombres de corazón y voluntad."<sup>64</sup>

It seems that our society is awakening from the lethargy in which it lay ... This shows us that our work is not sterile ... We must support *La Broma* [another Afro-Porteño newspaper] no matter what, because we know that it is necessary in the future to continue the fierce struggle of intelligence versus ignorance ... It [the fight] relies on hard-hitting warriors and militants in the ranks men of heart and will."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Lea Geler writes of the robust nature of Afro-Porteño periodicals in her article: "Guardianes del progreso: Los periódicos afroporteños entre 1873 y 1882": "La proliferación de periódicos que encontramos allí [en Buenos Aires] es impactante, sobre todo tratándose de una comunidad relativamente pequeña y en general con pocos recursos económicos.": Lea Geler, "Guardianes del progreso. Los periódicos afroporteños entre 1873 y 1882." *Anuario De Estudios Americanos* 65, 1. Seville, Spain: (2008) 199-226.

<sup>64</sup> *La Juventud*, "Nuestra misión", 21 January 1878.

<sup>65</sup> Translation my own

The sentiments of this article speak directly to the scientific racism and desire for increased European immigration explained in Part I, and are common among the mission statements of many Afro-Porteño periodicals: to “... in future days battle in the fiery struggle of intelligence versus ignorance.” “Ignorance” in this instance undoubtedly refers to the scientific racism that directly challenged Afro-Argentines’ place in Argentine culture, asserting that, as will be expounded upon in this chapter, that only European immigration could move Argentina towards “modernity.”

A year later, in 1879, another Afro-Argentine Newspaper, *La Perla*, shared similar sentiments: “Ella [the newspaper] marchará por la vía del progreso marcando lentamente la obra de nuestra reorganización: que debe abrir paso a nuestro futuro.”<sup>66</sup> *La Perla* recognizes the precarious position of the Afro-Argentine community in 1879, and lays out a steps for reorganization in an attempt to ensure a better future, or any future, for the community.

### The moment of erasure: Interpreting the Afro-Argentine struggle in lyrics

Other than the tango, one of the most defining musical expressions in Argentina, as well as in many Southern Cone countries, is the *payada*. A *payada* is a style of performance art in which two guitar-wielding *payadores* sing in verse, oftentimes in a jovial, or even dueling, fashion. Although *payada* is now broadly linked with gaucho culture, it is actually, as described by Marvin Lewis as “a lineal descendent of the African tradition of musical contests of skill, a

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<sup>66</sup> *La Perla*, “Nuestro periódico”, 8 June 1879.

“The paper will continue down the road of progress, slowly marking the work of our reorganization that should open a path to our future.” Translation my own

tradition which has produced similar phenomena in every American country where there is a large black population.”<sup>67</sup> The *payada* is even a fundamental part of the touchstone “Gauchesque” poem “Martín Fierro,” wherein Gauchos’ contributions to national development in Argentina was first introduced, although simultaneously belittled. The Afro foundation of the *payada* and gaucho culture continues to be undervalued and underexplored as a way of understanding how their practitioners expressed their experiences in the Argentine nation-building period. Three of the most celebrated Afro-Argentine *criollista* writers are Higinio Cazón, Luis García Morel, and Gabino Ezeiza. All were known for both their musical and literary prowess, and were fundamental to the development of the *payada* in Argentina. Marvin A. Lewis writes of Higinio Cazón, Luis García Morel, and Gabino Ezeiza: ... “[They] are recognized as first-rate artist/performers in the long Argentine tradition of oral popular culture. Subsequently, a limited number of their poems have been anthologized and accepted as part of the national literature.”<sup>68</sup> It is for this reason that their voices, as self-identified Afro-Argentines, is important for this analyses. As musicians and performers, their thoughts can certainly be seen as representative of popular Afro-Argentines culture and thought of the time.

Higinio Cazón’s poem “*El ombú coposo*” is an example of how Afro-Argentines embraced their surroundings in the Argentine Pampa, carving out their place in the *criollista* movement.<sup>69</sup> This movement provides a compelling framework for examining these Afro-Argentines writers’

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<sup>67</sup> *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*, 170.

<sup>68</sup> Marvin A. Lewis, *Afro-Argentine Discourse*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996. 75.

<sup>69</sup> The simplest way to understand the *criollista* movement is as a literary regionalism that was used by many in Latin American to write about their surroundings and lives in a uniquely American way.

perceived position in Argentina because of its important link to emergence of a new, uniquely Argentine, norm. Oscar Chamosa describes the writers of the criollista movement as having the power to, "... endow gaucho characters with moral virtues and physical abilities that defined the proper Argentine male."<sup>70</sup>

After having discovered her lover, presumably dead, under an *ombú* tree, the third stanza of "*El ombú coposo*" beings, somewhat whimsically:

Un puñalito incrustado/con esmeralda tenía, / en su mano relucía/inclinando al corazón / al lado de él sentó / sus sollozos reprimía / con la mayor sangre fría / lo clavó en su pecho hermoso / cayó media agonizante/bajo del ombú coposo

Levantó atemorizado / después de pasado el mal / corre, le arranca el puñal / la joven había espirado. / loco, ciego y atlontrado / alto el puñal elevó / en su pecho lo clavó / con un desprecio grandioso / así fue el fin de los dos / bajo el ombú coposo<sup>71 72</sup>

The poem succeeds in combining traditional scenes of the Argentine pampa (the ombú tree) with a more traditional style of romantic poetry. The work could easily be understood as alluding to the loss of life among blacks during the wars for independence, as well as during outbreaks of disease, in which their populations were disproportionately affected. It can also be argued that the poem implies that some black Argentines felt despondent after their sacrifices for Argentina were neither valued nor rewarded: "*en su pecho lo clavó / con un desprecio grandioso.*" As Cazón wrote this collection of poems between 1889 and 1909, one must also consider this as the writer's response to his rapidly changing reality. As a resident of Buenos

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<sup>70</sup> Oscar Chamosa, *The Argentine Folklore Movement: Sugar Elites, Criollo Workers, and the Politics of Cultural Nationalism, 1900-1955*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010.

<sup>71</sup> Cazón, Higinio. *Alegrías y pesares: canciones nacionales*. Buenos Aires: Mauci, n.d.

<sup>72</sup> Translation in appendix



Aires, having grown up on the pampa, Cazón would have had a front-row seat to the dramatic demographic shift, with hundreds of thousands of European immigrants arriving. Cazón and his counterparts would have also witnessed many of the Argentine elite, literary giants like Borges included, accepting European scientific racism as Argentina's best path towards their ideal of modernity. With this in mind, the ombú tree, a classic motif of the pampa, represents the area where many black Argentines first found their freedom as guachos decades earlier. The dramatic death of the two protagonists alludes to much more than just a Romeo and Juliet-like romance, but rather what Cazón saw as the decline of the Afro-Argentine represented by a black couple and thus, perhaps, the death of the Black Argentine's ability to be sustained into the twentieth century.

In "El gaucho", Cazón pushes the theme of the Argentine pampa and gaucho yet more:

Del gaucho; ¡ya ni recuerdo! / de ese tipo va quedando / todos se van acabando /  
como una raza maldita<sup>73</sup> / darle honor se necesita / porque el paisano luchó / y  
toda su sangre dio / por esta tierra bendita.<sup>74 75</sup>

This poem references indirectly, though powerfully, the connection between Afro-Argentines and gauchos. Without mentioning that many gauchos in the twentieth century were themselves escaped slaves, or descendants of escaped slaves, Cazón establishes a clear connection between the plight of the gaucho and that of the Afro-Argentine. Both groups were instrumental in the independence movement and the subsequent formation of national identity. Another important

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<sup>73</sup> Emphasis my own

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Translation in appendix

aspect is the poet's reference to the "*tierra bendita*." This reinforces a key tenet of *Criollismo*, stalwartly embracing one's nationality. In the case of Afro-Argentine poets, this is particularly poignant in that they are embracing their love for Argentina, despite being part of an "inferior race"<sup>76</sup> in the eyes of many of their countrymen. This interpretation, however accurate, could oversimplify Cazón's view of Argentine culture of the time. More compelling is Cazón's reference to a "raza maldita" and how its people "se van acabando." Again, with the historical period as context, this can be interpreted as Cazón's attempt to provide a countercurrent to the popular narrative in Argentina by recognizing the disappearance of the Afro-Argentine community.

Cazón continues:

Vean los hechos nacionales / Busquen un hecho de guerra, / Que no esté  
representado / El paisano de esta tierra / Sarmiento—solía decir / El último en  
recompensas / Y el duro para morir<sup>77 78</sup>

This poem ends by buttressing the idea of pride in one's *patria*. In pointing out the participation of the gauchos in the wars for independence, the poet is underlining how, despite their lower level in society, they were willing to give up their lives for the greater good, and in the search of

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<sup>76</sup> Sarmiento, Domingo Faustino, and José Ingenieros. *Conflicto y armonías de las razas en América*. Buenos Aires: "La Cultura Argentina", 1915. 241. Here, Sarmiento writes: "El fenómeno, empero, de la importación de una raza inferior, negra, africana, por motivos de provecho de la agricultura en país en estado de colonización, como la América del Sur y la del Norte, sin excluir las Antillas, es un hecho tan reciente que todavía no pueden apreciarse las consecuencias remotas de su presencia, en el estado libre que han adquirido con la emancipación en los Estados Unidos...."

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Translation in appendix

acceptance into Argentine society. Although Cazón only mentions the plight of black Argentines indirectly through the gauchos, his quoting of Sarmiento is a much less subtle reference. This because Sarmiento was known for his espousal of European scientific racism, pushing hard to bring more Europeans to Argentina to offset the black and indigenous populations. His views towards Afro-Argentines are summed up in his book “*Conflictos y Armonías de Las Razas en América*,”: “*Los negros tienen cierta nobleza aun en la esclavitud, siendo calidad esencial de su carácter, la fidelidad.*”<sup>79</sup>

Applying the same logic as the previous analysis, the lines “*Vean los hechos nacionales / busquen un hecho de guerra / que no esté representado / el paisano de esta tierra*” take on significantly more meaning. The “*hechos nacionales*” referring to the Argentine society’s turn away from a multiracial society to one only welcoming to white Europeans. “*Busquen un hecho de guerra*” is a powerful indictment of the results of the policies of the Argentine elite as well as gloomy foreshadowing of the future of the Afro-Argentine.

Gabino Ezeiza is another of the most striking Afro-Argentine poets. Perhaps more than any other, he embraces *criollista* approach and the gaucho lifestyle. He masterfully connects Argentine aspects (the Pampa, *gaucho*, the *asado*) with altogether African elements. In “*En la plata*” he narrates:

Aquí viven bien los hijos / de Polonia y de la Francia / campeon por su arrogancia  
/ todos los hijos de Albión / aquí el griego, el austriaco / el español e italiano / le  
llamamos nuestro hermano/bendita sea esa unión

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<sup>79</sup> *Conflicto Y Armonías De Las Razas En América*. 185.

Translation my own: Blacks have a certain nobility even in slavery, being an essential quality of their character: loyalty.

Bendito sea esta pueblo / que en tal forma se levanta / que tuvo una causa santa /  
la que lo independizó ./ que no ha borrado su origen / siendo una cuna de bravos /  
y los que fueron esclavos aquí libertad les dio.<sup>80 81</sup>

In *Afro-Argentine Discourse*, Marvin Lewis writes that “[I]t is often assumed that Ezeiza lost his sense of identity as a black man in the “criollization” process....”<sup>82</sup> With the challenges faced by blacks in Argentina, it is reasonable why some might make this claim. As seen with Cazón, a balance between being true to *criollismo* and developing an Afro-Argentine dialogue can be struck, but playing within the bounds of *criollismo* does, at times, limit a writer’s ability to include overtly Afrocentric themes. Poems like “En la plata” help create a sense, though perhaps a false one, of a more inclusive Argentine society, supporting the idea of a “creole” representing people of all color, living up to its original meaning. At its core, “En la plata” presents an optimistic view vis-à-vis the future of blacks in Argentina, and could even be interpreted as an attempt by Ezeiza to start an honest discussion with his predominately white audience.

This poem demonstrates an important aspect of Ezeiza’s opinion on *mestizaje* at the turn of the twentieth century in Argentina. He speaks to how the “arrogance” of the European immigrants in Argentina allowed them to “rise up.” He makes clear his belief that this group of people had created an important “union” that, in his mind, black Argentines should be proud to be part of, calling Argentines of European descent their “brothers.” The most interesting part of this poem is: “y los que fueron esclavos / aquí libertad les dio.” Choosing not to speak about how the

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<sup>80</sup> Gabino Ezeiza. *Canciones del payador Gabino Ezeiza*. Montevideo: Librería Argentina, 1885.

<sup>81</sup> Translation in appendix

<sup>82</sup> *Afro-Argentine Discourse*. 120.

Afro-Argentine community had not “*borrado su origen*,” Ezeiza rather highlight the emerging freedoms afforded to his community since the wars for independence. It can be inferred, then, that Ezeiza prioritized freedoms for the Afro-Argentine community over its “survival.” And, importantly, recognized and, to an extent, espoused the idea of an Argentina with culture based on European ideals.

In the poem “*Yo soy*”, Ezeiza takes a very distinct approach, bluntly pointing out the injustices faced by Afro-Argentines:

Soy de la raza de Falucho / que sin herencia se queda/engranaje de una rueda/que arrastró un carro triunfal; / viejo escudo que ha salvado / la vida a quien la llevaba / y con desdén lo arrojaba/cuando le llegó a estorbar

Here the poet demonstrates his dissatisfaction with how Afro-Argentines have been exploited for national causes, like war, but were shamelessly discarded as lesser members of Argentine society after they had served their purpose. The poet alludes to this same sentiment by claiming “I am of the race of Falucho,” who is a mythicized (black) figure from the Argentine wars for independence. (It is said that, while fighting the Spanish alongside San Martín, Falucho refused to raise the Spanish flag and concede defeat, rather choosing to be shot and killed while proclaiming “*Viva Buenos Aires!*”<sup>83</sup>) “*Yo soy*” indicates that black Argentines have received very little in return for their devotion to Argentina, being used as a “*engranaje de un rueda*.” At the turn of the nineteenth century, the Argentine economy was quickly becoming one of the most powerful in the world. Writers like Ezeiza, however, would have recognized that the fortunes of blacks in Argentina were not improving alongside the fortunes of the country. Works like “*Yo*

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<sup>83</sup> Davies, Carole Boyce. *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora: Origins, Experiences, and Culture*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2008. 425.

soy” are an excellent example of how a work can have varying interpretations according to its audience and mode of consumption. For example, a white man reading this in a newspaper is undoubtedly going to understand something totally different from a black family hearing it performed as a *payada*.

Donald Castro describes Ezeiza as the “payador of the payadores,” recounting some of his most infamous *payada* encounters and giving credence to his prowess in the poetic art.<sup>84</sup> He goes on to explain that, “Ezeiza did not present himself as a black payador, he was simply a payador. His poetry is quiet and unassuming. The topics are traditional ones: patriotism, romantic love, country scenes etc.”<sup>85</sup> This description confirms that Ezeiza used his position as a privileged black man in Argentine to society to fully commit himself to the *Criollismo* movement. It is this that makes “Un oriental: ausente de su patria” such an unusual and interesting work.

The stanzas “en que gigantes palmeras / ver tu cielo tropical”, Ezeiza is making a complete break from the norm of describing scenes of the pampa. In fact, it is quite clear that he is not referring to any scene in Argentina or Uruguay. He uses many metaphors to describe the pain he feels to be separated from “donde mi [de Ezeiza] nació.” Ezeiza is searching for his sense of African heritage, which had eluded him as an Afro-Argentine. The sense of estrangement and loss in the poet’s words is undeniable, and certainly stands out when compared to the rest of Ezeiza’s works. Most interestingly, he applies the tenets of *criollismo* to alleviate this pressure

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<sup>84</sup> Castro, Donald S. 1994. “The Afro-argentine Payador Tradition: The Art of Gabino Ezeiza”. *Afro-hispanic Review* 13 (2). William Luis: 9–17. 13.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

and to talk about, presumably, Africa. In this way he creates a work that would be familiar to all reading in Argentina, but would still achieve his goal of delivering an Afrocentric message. In this sense, Ezeiza takes a less ominous view of the Afro-Argentine's position in Argentina at the end of the nineteenth century.

African rhythms were also foundational in the development of the Argentine tango, just as they were in the respective musical styles in countries throughout Latin America. John Chasteen describes this appropriation artfully as a “transgressive dance” becoming the “official national rhythm.”<sup>86</sup> In time of *Criollismo* and the *payada*, the tango was being developed from the Habanera in the neighborhoods of Buenos Aires. One such work that dates to 1880, whose author is lost to history, is a great example of a transition piece:

(Chorus)

Baila, baila tú, muango negro /y la benda meneala bien/que ni el mismo carianga  
puela / con su glacia y su lusidé

Voz con el limbo compla los neglos/que en la aflica cleada está/para hacelo selvir  
de infame /

a la muestra fatalitá

Pobre negro baila candombe/y el quisanche plonto templa / para bailar en la  
cancha unidos /

los tres días de carnaval <sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Chasteen, John Charles. *National Rhythms, African Roots: The Deep History of Latin American Popular Dance*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004. 6.

<sup>87</sup> Pablo Cirio, Norberto. *En la lucha curtida del camino... Antología de la literatura oral y escrita afroargentina*. Buenos Aires: INADI, 2008. 101-102.

Written in the slave dialect of the time, and with many African references, this early tango maintains much from its Habanera roots. *bozal* and other African words interwoven into the poem make it clear that the writer or writers likely had stronger ties to their African roots than many of the payada writers from later on in the nineteenth century. Interestingly, a sense of shame is portrayed in the work, “*pobre negro baila candombe / y el quisanche plonto temple / para bailar en la cancha unidos / los tres días de carnaval.*” Reference to the “poor black” that continues to dance the *candombe*, and using more traditional Habanera instruments (e.g. *quisanche*), to celebrate Carnival.<sup>88</sup> This tango could well be an indictment of those Afro-Argentines that had not embraced more “American” or “Argentine” customs. This is, simultaneously, an affirmation of the nation-building project of the Argentine elite and a melancholic understanding of the future of Afro identity and culture in Argentina.

Understanding the Afro-Argentine experience is more complex than in other countries where populations of African descendants continue to be prominent, and where their histories and contributions to society have been better recorded. However, the words of Afro-Argentines offer a compelling insight into how this group interacted with their environment, and how they tried to adjust to their rapidly changing surroundings at the turn of the twentieth century. These pieces of literature also bring into focus the significant and underappreciated historical influence of Afro-Argentines on the development of Argentine identity.

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<sup>88</sup> Although Carnival is celebrated in Argentina, many Argentine tend to associate with Brazil or Uruguay (which has a more prominent Afro population).



### **PART III: Contemporary Concepts of Blackness and Multiculturalism in Argentina**

Be it as slaves, soldiers, or musicians, Afro-Argentines were an unalienable part of the country's culture until the turn of the twentieth century. Because of the efforts during the nation building period, the contributions, and in some cases the existence, of the Afro-Argentine community have been rendered invisible. This trend held strong through most of the century, with a continued drought of Afro-Argentine periodicals and cultural organizations, and less recognition of the Afro-Argentine community by the government. At the turn of the twenty-first century, during the Kirchner administrations, there was a resurgence in efforts to recognize the current Afro-Argentine population, its historical importance, as well as encouraging others to understand and embrace their own African roots.

In 2010, the Argentine national census had an option for "*Afroargentino*" for the first time in its history. The *Instituto Nacional contra la Discriminación, la Xenofobia y el Racismo* (INADI) even disseminated a video advertisement encouraging others to recognize their African ancestry on the census. In the video, a group of Afro-Argentines repeat the phrases, "*Estoy orgulloso de ser afroargentino / Estoy orgulloso de ser afrodescendiente / Mis abuelos vinieron de África.*" At the end of the video, an Afro-Argentine woman says, "*Queremos conocer cuántas y cuántos afroargentinos somos. El 27 de octubre [2010], el próximo censo nacional, nos permitiría saber.*"<sup>89</sup> Gradually, many in Argentina are waking up to the idea that African influence is in the music, flavors, and dances of Argentina, but not in its history books. This

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<sup>89</sup> YouTube. "Soy afroargentino/a: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RD6bjXALw-g>. October 2010.

Translation: I'm proud to be Afro-Argentina / I am proud to be an Afro-descendent / My grandparents came from Africa. We want to know how many Afro-Argentines there are. On October 27<sup>th</sup> [2010], the next national census will give us the opportunity to find out.

chapter will explore how Afro-Argentine culture, and blackness more generally, are understood in contemporary Argentina.

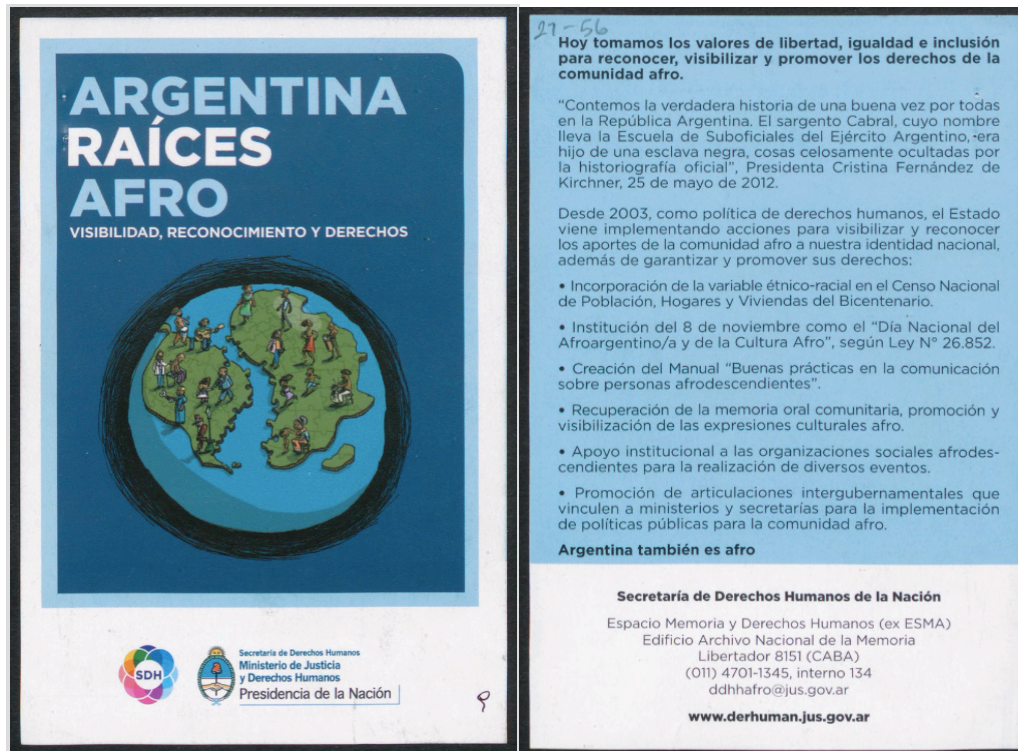


Figure 3 Flyer courtesy of the Princeton University Library's Digital Archive of Latin American and Caribbean Ephemera.<sup>90</sup>

The scans above are of flyers disseminated by the Argentine government in 2015. The following is my translation:

"Today we take the values of liberty, equality and inclusion in order to recognize, give visibility to and promote the rights of the afro community.

'Let's tell the true history for once and for all in the Argentine Republic. Sargent Cabral, from the School of Officers of the Argentine Army, was the son of a black slave. Something jealously hidden from the official historiography [of Argentina],' President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, 25 May 2012

Since 2003, as a policy of human rights, the State has been implementing actions to give visibility to, and recognize, the contributions of the afro community to our

<sup>90</sup> Front: "Argentina: African Roots. Visibility, Recognition, and Rights."

national identity, as well as guaranteeing and promoting its [the community's] rights:

Incorporation of the ethno-racial options in the National Census.

Establishment as the 8th of November as the “National Day of the Afro-Argentine and Afro Culture,” according to Law number 26.852.

Creation of the manual ‘Good practices in communication about afro-descendant people.’

Recuperation of the oral history, as well as promotion of afro cultural expressions.

Institutional aid for Afro-Argentina social organizations in order to develop a variety of events.

Promotion of intergovernmental interactions that connect ministers and secretaries in order to implement public policy for the afro community.

### **Argentina is afro too”<sup>91</sup>**

As little as fifteen years ago, this kind of government-sponsored initiative highlighting the its accomplishments in recognizing the Afro-Argentine community, and committing to further such actions, would have been unimaginable. The increase of formal recognition of the existing Afro-Argentine community is emblematic of an increase, however small, in understanding the Afro-Argentine community by the Argentine population. This chapter will connect the information from chapters I and II to the contemporary discussion of blackness and multiculturalism in Argentina in an effort to understand how this change has been made possible. The chapter will begin by explaining how the progress listed in the flyer above was facilitated by Argentine academics, activists, and civil society. It will finish by exploring the current understanding of blackness in Argentina *vis-à-vis* linguistics, focusing specifically on the wide-ranging use of the word “negro” in Argentine Spanish.

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<sup>91</sup> Emphasis taken from original document.

There are numerous causes for the burgeoning interest in the Afro-Argentine community, both at the government and public levels. The first are academic studies whose findings are bleeding into popular culture via mass media and social networks. The second cause is an increased and stronger presence of Afro-Argentine activist groups, which not only organize formal talks and presentations regarding new academic works related to blacks in Argentina, but also appear at festivals and parades throughout Argentina.

Continuing the long history of Afro-Argentine periodicals, *El Afroargentino* was brought back in 2015 to provide a voice for the community. In its first editorial, its editor Federico Pita wrote: “*Más de un siglo ha pasado desde la aparición del último periódico afroporteño, y ríos de tinta han corrido anunciando nuestra pronta e inminente desaparición. EL AFROARGENTINO se levanta para con orgullo para decir [sic] ¡Acá estamos! Siempre estuvimos, nunca desaparecimos y siempre estaremos.*”<sup>92</sup> In the time between the appearance of *La Juventud* in 1887 to *El Afroargentino* in 2016, the world of the Afro-Argentine has changed dramatically. However, their purpose has remained remarkably similar: to carve out a space for themselves within an unaccepting or ignorant society. This demonstrates the devastating effectiveness of the nation-building period *vis-à-vis* discounting black contributions to Argentine history.

*El Afroargentino* falls under the organizational umbrella of DIAFAR, *Diáspora Africana en la Argentina* (African Diaspora in Argentina), which organizes numerous cultural events in

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<sup>92</sup> Pita, Federico, *Acá Estamos, El Afroargentino*. Editorial 1. <https://www.elafroargentino.com/editorial>

Translation my own: “More than a century has passed since the appearance of the last *afroporteño* newspaper, and rivers of ink have run announcing our quick and imminent disappearance. *El Afroargentino* is now here to proudly say, “Here we are!” We’ve always been here, we never disappeared, and we will always be here.”

Buenos Aires.<sup>93</sup> In 2016 alone, the group organized history workshops, art shows, musical events, and special presentations, all focused on the Afro community in Argentina. DIAFAR also has its own radio station, *radio DIAFAR*, which plays exclusively “black music,” with a “special emphasis on Argentine hip-hop”.<sup>94</sup> The station also has regular programming, like *Conciencia Negra*, that focuses on the black experience in Argentina, described as “*Un encuentro semanal con toda la actualidad política y social desde una perspectiva afrocentrica.*”<sup>95</sup> The mere possibility to access an “Afrocentric perspective” in Argentina represents progress in familiarizing Argentines with the Afro-Argentine community. Likewise, organizations like DIAFAR were instrumental in influencing recognition by the leftist Kirchner governments.

Argentine academics have also been key in bringing the Afro-Argentine community to the forefront. Several archaeological slave sites are being given renewed attention. In his paper, “Afro-Argentine Archaeology: A Case of Short-Sighted Academic Racism During the Early Twentieth Century,” Daniel Schávelzon, the founder of the Center for Urban Archaeology at the University of Buenos Aires, does just this. He wrote about an archaeological site (*Arroyo de Leyes*) in *Santa Fé la Vieja*, Argentina that was formerly a settlement of free and enslaved blacks. He explains that the site was discovered more than fifty years ago, but was ignored by academics because “its

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<sup>93</sup> It is important to note the political nature of groups like DIAFAR, which is far to the left by any political measure. (On *El Afroargentino*'s website, for example, there is an advertisement for the Black Panthers Party.) It is no coincidence that most of the success in gaining formal recognition for the Afro-Argentine community came under leftist administrations (both Kirchners). It is unclear if advancements will continue under the center-right Macri administration.

<sup>94</sup> <http://www.diafar.org/radio/>

<sup>95</sup> <http://www.diafar.org/radio/index.php/programas/5-programa-conciencia-negra>

Translation: A weekly encounter with all of the political news from an Afrocentric perspective

objects remained a forbidden topic in academic circles.”<sup>96</sup> Emblematic of race studies more generally in Argentina, the site is now receiving the attention it warrants and is open to the public for touring.

Genetic studies are also becoming more popular among some academics. An effort by American and Argentine academics that provides genetic testing for a group of 300 Argentines is currently underway.<sup>97</sup> The ambitious project, which is being conducted in the city of *Luján*, just outside of Buenos Aires, has the goal directly of challenging Argentines’ perceptions of themselves and what it means to be Argentine. The investigators interview the participants before the genetic tests, directly after the results are given to the participants, and again several months after. The results will also be displayed in a mobile exhibit, with the goal of spreading the findings to as many in the Argentine public as possible. Although the results are not yet available, and it is unclear if the investigators will find the amount of “unexpected” African ancestry they anticipate, projects like these certainly facilitate the conversation surrounding race in Argentina.

#### The use of the word “negro” in Argentina

A person who spends any substantial amount of time in Argentina is likely to note the prolific and confounding use of the word “negro.” This is an aspect of blackness, or *negritud*, that is as compelling as it is difficult to define. It is compelling because, in a country that claims to be “free of racism” because of its inherent lack of phenotypically distinguishable minorities (“*No hay negros en Argentina*”), the word “negro” is bandished liberally by many. This

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<sup>96</sup> Schávelzon, Daniel. “Afro-Argentine Archaeology: A Case of Short-Sighted Academic Racism During the Early Twentieth Century.” Buenos Aires: University of Buenos Aires Center for Urban Archaeology.

<sup>97</sup> See: Professor Gabriel Cabana (University of Tennessee): Genetic Ancestry, Race, and National Belonging in Argentina (complete citation)

particular kind of blackness is not, in theory, based on a person's phenotype, i.e., countenance, hair, or skin color. Rather, a person's "blackness" is determined by their social class or, more generally, their *manera de ser*, or way of being. These phrases are primarily, however not exclusively, used by upper middle-class Argentina.

To be sure, the word can be used affectionately. The current president of Argentina, Mauricio Macri, refers to his wife, Juliana Awada, as "negrita," for example.<sup>98</sup> However, the word "negro" carries predominately negative connotations in Argentina. In his article "*La fascinación argentina por los 'chinos' los 'negros' y los 'gallegos,'*" BBC journalist Ignacio de los Reyes dates the derogatory use of the word "negro" back to 1945 and the rise of Juan Perón. He explained, "In 1945, with the arrival of the ex-president Juan Perón's power, the concept of "negro peronistas" becomes more popular."<sup>99</sup> De los Reyes quoted Argentine academic and author of *Mitomanías Argentinas* Alejandro Grimson:

"En Buenos Aires la sociedad se piensa a sí misma como muy blanca, una ciudad europea en una América mestiza. Pero en octubre de 1945 entran los obreros a reclamar la libertad de Perón. Y esos obreros no tienen nada que ver con lo que los intelectuales o políticos esperaban de ellos: o tienen ascendencia indígena, o se adhieren a un líder político rechazado por la élite, o no se visten bien. Por una razón o por otra aparece la noción de las cabecitas negras o negros peronistas. Hay muchísimo más racismo y clasismo de lo que los argentinos están dispuestos a admitir."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> "Juliana Awada, la mujer que le cambió el estilo a Macri." Clarín, 23 Nov 2015, [http://www.clarin.com/politica/mauricio\\_macri-juliana\\_awada-elecciones\\_2015\\_0\\_r1GxuglFwQg.html](http://www.clarin.com/politica/mauricio_macri-juliana_awada-elecciones_2015_0_r1GxuglFwQg.html)

<sup>99</sup> "La fascinación argentina por los 'chinos' los 'negros' y los 'gallegos.'" BBC Mundo, 25 Sept 2015, [http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/09/150923\\_fooc\\_argentina\\_apodos\\_chino\\_negro\\_gall\\_ego\\_irm](http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/09/150923_fooc_argentina_apodos_chino_negro_gall_ego_irm).

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. Translation: In Buenos Aires, society think of itself as very white, a European city in a "mestizo" America. But in October of 1945 the workers come in to claim their freedom from Perón. And these workers are not what the intellectuals or politicians expected: they were of indigenous ancestry, or they followed a political leader that was not recognized by the elite, or

This description of the development of the word “negro” supports the idea that it has little to do with a person’s phenotype, but rather their perceived position in society by elites. Still, though, it is no coincidence that the elite in Argentina at the middle of the twentieth century associated the lower classes, and opposite political views, with blackness. The contemporary use of the word continues to have the same fundamental malice.

The most common example of how the word “negro” and other related epithets are used in Argentine Spanish is simply “*negro*.” This is generally used to describe someone of a lower class or who has “poor taste.” For example, it would not be uncommon to hear someone say “*Este lugar está lleno de negros*” (This place is full of “negros”) to say that a place is frequented by a group of people that he or she would not want to be associated with, presumably because they are perceived to be of a lower social class. Another example is *negro(s) cabeza(s) or just cabeza(s)*, (“black head(s),” “head(s).” This is a negative, and particularly aggressive, way used to describe a poor person, and is somewhat interchangeable with *villero*, “villager,” or a person that resides in the slums of Buenos Aires which are called villas, or villages.<sup>101</sup> An equivalent in American English might be “thug,” which is equally loaded with racial connotations. “*Negro de alma*,” or “black soul,” is someone that is the opposite of “pure” and “virtuous,” i.e., white.

These are only a few examples how how the word “negro” is used in Argentina. They represent the complexity of blackness in Argentina, confirming the idea that blackness is much less related to phenotype than it is to a person’s *manera de ser*. Understanding how the term “negro” is used in Argentina makes it easier to understand the difficulties a person might face

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they did not dress well. For one reason or another, the notion of “cabecitas negras” or “negros peronistas” is created. There is a lot more racism and classism than Argentines are willing to admit.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.



when choosing to identify as Afro-Argentine or, quite literally, *negro*. It is not simply a race or ethnicity, but also carries many negative social connotations, which could understandably dissuade some from identifying as black.

Understanding contemporary attitudes is key to tracking how ideas of blackness have filtered through Argentine society since the turn of the twentieth century. Under the Kirchner administration between 2003-2015, the Afro-Argentine community made many important strides in terms of formal recognition by the government. The importance of an Argentine president giving a speech about the significance of the Afro-Argentine in the history of the country cannot be overstated. Academic studies are also pushing the conversation in the public sphere, and allowing many in Argentina a way to begin to reconsider the country's afro past and present. Blackness still continues to be a complex, oftentimes stigmatized, subject in Argentina, and the day when a person can identify as *afroargentino* without quizzical looks and offensive questions is still far in the future.

### **Conclusion**

This work has attempted to bridge different periods of Afro-Argentine history to better appreciate how ideas of blackness, and the black experience itself, have varied in Argentina. In examining writings from influential Afro-Argentines from the turn of the twentieth century, and exploring how blackness is perceived in contemporary Argentina, this work underscores a significant and underappreciated countercurrent to popular ideas surrounding the formation of Argentine national identity. Primarily, Afro-Argentines were completely aware of their community's precarious standing in Argentina at the turn of the twentieth century and reflected these worries through poetry, song, and journalism. It is clear from this analysis that future studies focused on *mestizaje* in Argentina could provide interesting insight into how race-mixing

and blackness in Argentina differ from other Latin American countries. The idea of European, and thus racial, exceptionalism in Argentina being so powerful as to cause race-mixing in Argentina to create a homogenous “white” populace, without seeing the overt creation of an “other” group as in Mexico or Brazil, is particularly compelling.

This thesis demonstrates how some Afro-Argentines responded to massive demographic and cultural shifts in Argentina that effectively absorbed and obscured their community at the turn of the twentieth century. This study, though limited in scope, validates the need for continued study of mestizaje in Argentina and its effect on the national narrative and the perception of blackness and multiculturalism. Despite lacking the outwardly recognizable features of Latin American mestizaje, as in Brazil or Mexico, Argentina offers an interesting case for how whitening and European cultural dominance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced a culture that gives almost no recognition to some of its most important cultural identifiers’ African roots. Focusing solely on the deaths of Afro-Argentines in the late nineteenth century, be it by war or epidemic, is an oversimplification of the “disappearance” story. This thesis has presented evidence that it is possible for a national identity to be so powerful that an ethnoracial group, in this case Afro-Argentines, can disappear in plain sight.

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## Appendix of Archival Sources

Research for this work was carried out in the *Archivo General de la Nación (AGN)*, in Buenos Aires, in May and June of 2016. I have listed the documents cited from the archive with the following format: Archivo General de la Nación: (47) 4 24-5-6. The first number in parentheses is the document number, or *número de expediente*, which is not always present. The second number is the room, or *sala*, in which the document is stored. The final three hyphenated numbers indicate the document's exact location on the shelves of the room.

Archivo General de la Nación: 4 19-1-4.

Archivo General de la Nación: (6) 4 35-3-5.

Archivo General de la Nación: (1128) 4 23-8-6.

Archivo General de la Nación: 9 10-7-2.

Archivo General de la Nación: (970) 4 23-8-2.

Translations:

El ombú coposo:

An emerald emblazoned dagger he had / in his hand it gleamed / leaning towards the heart /  
beside him sat / his sobs repressed / in the coldest blooded way / he stuck it in his beautiful chest  
/ he fell, half dying / under the ombú tree

She got up in awe / after the evil had passed / she ran, she pulled out the dagger / the young girl  
had exhaled. / crazy, blind and slighted / she lifted the dagger high / in her breast she stuck / with  
great contempt / that was the end of the two under the ombú tree

El gaucho:

About the gaucho; I do not even remember! / That guy stays / they all run out / Like a damned  
race / give him honor he needs / because the countryman fought / and all his blood he gave / for  
this blessed land. ...

See the national facts / Look for a fact of war, / That is not represented / The countryman of this  
land / Sarmiento - used to say / The last in rewards / And the hardest to die

En la plata:

Here live the sons of Poland and France / they champion for their arrogance / all the children of  
Albion / here Greek, Austrian / Spanish and Italian / we call our brother / blessed be that union

Blessed be this people / that in such a way rises / that had a holy cause / that made it  
independent, / that has not erased its origin / being a cradle of the brave / and those who were  
slaves, freedom here gave them.

Yo soy:

I am of the race of Falucho / that without inheritance is left / gear of a wheel / that dragged a  
triumphal car / old shield that has saved / the life to who took it / and with disdain it threw it /  
when it hindered him