

“De Donde Sos?” The Impossible Union of Blackness and Argentinidad

By

Arielle C. Knight

Class of 2011

A thesis submitted to the  
faculty of Wesleyan University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
with Departmental Honors in African American Studies

To have one's belonging lodged in a metaphor is voluptuous intrigue; to inhabit a trope; to be a kind of fiction. To live in the Black Diaspora is I think to live as a fiction  
--Dionne Brand

## Table of Contents

---

Acknowledgements

4

Introduction

5

Chapter One

Myth-Making as Reality-Making: Confronting Blackness as Myth in Argentina's  
Racial Discourse

29

Chapter Two

Diaspora, Community and the Urban Imagination: Creating a Black Space in a White  
City

61

Chapter Three

A Movement of Blackness in Vogue: Commodifying Cultural Resistance Movements

86

Concluding Thoughts

112

Bibliography

114

## Acknowledgements

---

There are too many to thank for making this work a reality. First and foremost I must acknowledge my many families in Buenos Aires, Argentina who helped me to do this work by keeping me alive. To my Catalina and my Sam without whom I certainly would not have survived. Thank you for helping me to see the beauty in the ugliest of places and for making Buenos Aires our home despite how difficult it was at times. *Gracias a Maria Santaliz y Gabriela Schamir mi familia Argentina. Amo a ustedes con todo mi corazón y ese trabajo no pudiera existido sin su apoyo y amor. Les agradezco por enseñarme como ser parte de una familia y por dándome más de un lugar para vivir sino un hogar. Gracias a los militantes Afro de Buenos Aires y El Movimiento AfroCultural. Seguimos emancipándonos.*

To my lovely housemates, thank you for loving and living with me throughout the best and worst of times. Thank you for holding me up every time I was on the verge of falling and allowing me to take over the house with my books and my craziness.

To my advisor Ann duCille, thank you so much for your patience and faith in me throughout this process.

To Professor Gina Ulysse, there are no words that can describe my gratitude to you. Thank you for all of the advice and guidance. Most of all thank you for being *that* person for me here at Wesleyan.

Thank you to the Wesleyan Black Alumni Council for allowing me to pursue my research through the generous funding of the Memorial Prize.

To all my many mothers and parents, Mom, Dad, Aunty Peta, Aunty Oliva, Grandma Vie, Grandpa, Adrienne, Lawrence, Debbie, Kristina, Lauren, Jerome thank you for raising me right.

To all my lovers and friends, thank you for the last minute editing, all-nighters, for feeding me, listening to me and dancing with me. Thank you for your light and laughter and being able to act the fool at the most inappropriate of times Most of all thanks for reminding me that life is bigger than the contents of this project. It is just a beginning.

Finally, I must thank my body for carrying me through to the end despite many days and nights of ill-treatment.

This thesis is about questioning the impact of partial truths. This work was prompted by the experiences I had while living, studying and researching in Argentina intermittently over the course of one year. Travelling to Argentina unaware of the complicated history of Black people in that nation, I was confronted with a puzzling assertion by mainstream society: “There are no Black people here, they don’t exist.” This story initially seemed untrue and was proven to be so by the living, breathing, speaking presence of Black people that I eventually encountered. As puzzled as I was by this obvious contradiction, I was deeply unsettled by the way it was woven into the social fabric of Argentine society. I cannot recall the number of times I was asked the question, “De donde sos?” (Where are you from?). I quickly realized that it was less about my obvious American demeanor and more about the fact that, by virtue of my blackness, I *had* to be from somewhere else.

Many people I encountered literally could not recognize that a Black person could be Argentine. More often than not they assumed that I was Brazilian—sometimes accusing me of lying when I told them that I was American. These experiences served as the springboard for a personal and intellectual quest to find out why so many people believed so fervently in this story; these encounters inspired me to research the ways that Blacks living in Argentina experienced the impossible union

of blackness and Argentinidad. Moreover, daily reminders that my blackness was out of place in Argentina were the catalysts for me to begin looking for a community where I could feel that sense of belonging. This search led me to the Black cultural center, Centro AfroCultural, which would later become the site of my research in Buenos Aires. It was during my time in Argentina that I felt a deep and urgent need to “be with my people,” a need which challenged me to examine critically the power of a Black identity to cross many different boundaries. Despite differences of language and culture and national origin, there was something more that sent me looking for a Black community in Buenos Aires. Having found that community at the Centro AfroCultural, I kept coming back as a means of survival. This project is a humble attempt to interrogate my findings.

This thesis “De Donde Sos?” *The Impossible Union of Blackness and Argentinidad*” explores the cultural and spatial politics of Black identities in the city of Buenos Aires. More specifically, I consider the ways that Argentina’s identity as the Latin American exception—racially white and European—is actually a product of the nationalist race ideology *blanqueamiento*. In the book *Africans in the Americas*, historians Micheal Conniff and Thomas Davis describe the aims of *blanqueamiento* as a policy which “sought to diminish the Black presence if not eliminate it, by favoring white immigration and suppressing Black culture” (1994: 223). These aims

underscore the essence of *blanqueamiento*, an ideology that valorizes and normalizes whiteness while stigmatizing blackness as a negative valence of identity.

I seek to understand how the broader socio-historical context of *blanqueamiento* has created a myth of Black non-existence in Argentina. This myth is articulated by white Argentines through the common expression, “ellos no existen,”<sup>1</sup> an expression that dictates that African-descended people always belong to some other nation, never Argentina. I am interested in how this historically founded myth affects the experiences of Black people living in the city of Buenos Aires today.

The interrelated concepts of historical myth and partial truths have been analyzed from numerous perspectives within the field of Black Studies.<sup>2</sup> In one of the earliest of such publications anthropologist Melville Herskovits argues that the “*myth of the Negro Past*” is one of the foundations of race prejudice in America (1941). Other works, like those of Haitian sociologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot<sup>3</sup> and Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop,<sup>4</sup> have challenged notions of historical truth. They interrogate the process by which subjective realities are translated into dominant historical narratives. My use of the word *myth* is situated within these works of Black Studies and also relies on the salient analysis of French literary theorist Roland

---

<sup>1</sup>“ They don’t exist”

<sup>2</sup> I will use the term Black Studies and African-American studies interchangeably throughout this work although I acknowledge disputes within the field which argue that the term “African-American Studies” marks the study of Black people in America as Other to the unmarked (white) American Studies.

<sup>3</sup> In reference to *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*(1995)

<sup>4</sup> In reference to *The Origin of African Civilization: Myth or Reality* (1989)

Barthes. In his collection *Mythologies*, Barthes argues that myths are “semiological systems” that determine the meaning ascribed to objects and images separate from their actual physical properties whereby “social usage is added to pure matter” (1972: 109). He writes:

Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation, but that of a statement of fact (1972: 109-143).

Just as Barthes suggests, the myth of Black non-existence in Argentina has been historically uncontested as fact. Dominantly understood as an inevitable process rather than an institutionalized white-supremacist racial formation, the story of the disappearance of Black people in Argentina takes on the characteristics of myth. This work considers some of the contemporary implications of this history.

Ultimately, I explore how the ideology of *blanqueamiento* has forced Blacks in Argentina into a precarious and contentious relationship with the nation-state, society and their stringent racialized narratives of belonging. I contend that in response to exclusionary ideas of the nation and its citizens, African-descended people form alternative communities and identities rooted in African Diasporic identification. Using the *Movimiento AfroCultural* as a case study, I will show how one organization of activists in Buenos Aires is initiating a space-centered movement that is simultaneously conversant with historical phantoms and their contemporary



haunting. Hence I focus on the ways that spaces are sites of power as well as locations for alternative narrative-making and counter-hegemony. As a result, I reveal how a movement of resistance is aimed at re-writing historic fallacies in an attempt to create space for Black identities in *Argentinidad*.

My aim is to make some contribution to the growing body of literature that examines constructions of blackness, national identity and the historical process of myth-making in Argentina (Picotti 2001, Peñazola 2007, Solomianski 2003, Geler 2005, Galen 2010). While previous works have explored contemporary racial and cultural politics, there is a significant gap in the literature. This body of work which purports to challenge constructed fictions of Black identity is missing the perspectives of those who have been historically absent or misrepresented. There has been very little ethnographic work done on Black communities in Argentina, with the exception of a handful of scholars. These scholars, who are mainly coming out of academic institutions in Argentina, include anthropologist Alejandro Frigerio who has produced the most extensive collection of ethnographies (Frigerio, 2000a, 2000b), including his compelling essay *Blacks in Argentina: Contested Representations of Culture and Ethnicity* (2000a). Other ethnographic works that deal with Black community in Argentina include one essay by anthropologist Laura Lopez entitled “*Identidades en Juego Alrededor del Candombe*”(1999), and another co-authored by Frigerio and anthropologist Eva Lamborghini, entitled *El Candombe (Uruguayo) en*

*Buenos Aires: (Proponiendo) Nuevos Imaginarios Urbanos en La Ciudad*

“Blanca”(2009). These are the few works which have attempted to include life histories and more subjective narrative voices in studies concerning blackness in Argentina. As scholars of Black Studies have historically argued, African-descended people are not passive subjects of historic circumstance (Gates 1989, Higginbotham 1992, Steinberg 2007, Hintzen and Rahier 2010). The case of Buenos Aires is no different, but I found that contemporary scholarship, in too many instances, has been complicit in rendering Blacks voiceless if not invisible by failing to include their perspectives.

Throughout this work I make numerous references to Diasporas and African Diaspora communities. My use of word Diaspora here is based upon Khachig Tölölyan’s definition. In *Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment*, Tölölyan argues that Diaspora, a Greek term once exclusively used to discuss the dispersal of Armenians, Greeks and Jewish people, has now come to describe many different “communities of dispersion” making homes in locations outside of their homeland (1996: 3-5). The term Diaspora, which has become overwhelmingly popular in academia as of late, is typically defined by several main characteristics. Principle among these is the “uprooting and resettlement” of large numbers of people outside of the homeland and the creation of community in a new location. Any definition of Diaspora must also include dispersal, displacement, and

resettlement as central tropes (Saffran 1991, Clifford 1994). Another key component is some maintenance of collective memory as a means of preserving a discrete identity. A sense of the homeland often accompanied by notions of returning to this place of origin (real or imagined) is characteristic of Diasporan communities (Tölölyan 1996; Clifford, 1994).

In African-American Studies applications of the term Diaspora emerged out of nineteenth and early twentieth century Pan-African discourses. Works like W.E.B DuBois' *Dusk of Dawn* (1940) and Edward Blyden's 1867 address "Liberia as a Means, Not an End," among others (Nkrumah 1970, Padmore 1956) were the intellectual foundations for a movement of solidarity and consciousness between dispersed African and African-descended people. In the twentieth century parallel movements emerged in Hispanophone and Francophone<sup>5</sup> societies through articulations of Negrismo<sup>6</sup> and Négritude<sup>7</sup> (Whitten and Torres 1998: 7, Simeon-Jones 2010: 7-178). However, the Negrismo Movement did not gain the trans-hemispheric popularity enjoyed by Negritude movements and Pan-Africanism, but instead remained largely confined to Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico (Badiane 2010). Pan-Africanism is most often associated with the series of international congresses that

---

<sup>5</sup> Hispanophone refers to the Spanish-speaking world and Francophone refers to the French-speaking world

<sup>6</sup> Negrismo, which was Latin American counter-part to Négritude, similarly emphasized self-pride and valorization of blackness. This movement took hold most fervently in Cuba through the works of Afro-Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén.

<sup>7</sup> According to Whitten and Torres (1998) Négritude was a movement within the Francophone nations. Introduced by Aimé Césaire in 1974, the movement which denotes the inherent positive aesthetic qualities of blackness and Black identity, was aimed at the destruction of stereotypical/negative portrayals of blackness.

took place between 1919 and 1944. However, hemispheric Black political movements of such proportions never took hold in Latin America. Moreover, when they did appear it was not until much later. Between 1977 and 1984, a series of congresses were held in Latin America. They were based on the model of earlier international congresses and their aim was to forge solidarity among people of African descent throughout Latin America's Diaspora (Luz 1995: 337-341).

Emergent from the intellectual roots of movements like Negritude, Pan-Africanism and to a lesser extent, Negrismo, the African Diaspora presented a way to conceptualize and analyze Black experiences and identity formation throughout the world (Benesch and Fabre 2004). In the seminal work *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, Joséph Harris offers the main tenets of African Diaspora studies: First, "the global dispersion (voluntary and involuntary) of Africans throughout history and subsequently, "the emergence of a cultural identity abroad based on origin and social condition" (Harris 1993:3). Harris' definition offers a foundational understanding of the African Diaspora to which more contemporary investigations have added an emphasis on continued experiences of subjugation and exclusion in forging Africa Diasporic identity (Hamilton 2007, Butler 1999, Walker 2001). Percy Hintzen contends, for example, that Diasporic identification emerges out of the "cultural politics of exclusion" (2007: 252). In the context of African Diasporic identities, Hintzen and others assert that racialized experiences of exclusion become a

basis for the development of a Diasporic consciousness. Moreover, these experiences are often situated in the sphere of the nation, precluding people of African descent from claiming the rights and recognition of national identity and citizenship. Thus, Diasporic identification proffers the power to not only reinvent identity and community outside of the nation, but also in doing so presents a collective presence within the nation.

Literature on the African Diaspora gestures toward Benedict Anderson's notion of the "imagined" community, which posits the nation-state as a fabricated object of invention (Oboe and Scacchi 2008). The idea of imagined communities is useful for understanding the African Diaspora because it is a concept which helps to displace territorially bounded nationalist conceptions of identity. Paul Gilroy's much-lauded study of the circum-Atlantic world makes explicit this anti-nationalist thrust through the conceptual framework of the "black Atlantic," a formation that has the potential to transcend the structures of the nation-state and the "constraints of ethnicity and national particularity" (Gilroy 1999:19). The idea of nation and national identity as contested space for people of African descent is thus central to the development of African Diaspora identities and will be explored in subsequent chapters as integral to Black cultural politics in Buenos Aires.

## Research Perspectives and Methodology

---

My fieldwork took place in Buenos Aires, Argentina between July 2009 and August 2010. The foundation of the research depended primarily on ethnographic methods. I mainly engaged in participation-observation and conducted a series of informal interviews with members of the *Movimiento AfroCultural* community. In addition, I analyzed various textual sources both historical and contemporary ranging from online and print journals to blogs and newspaper articles. Since the formal stage of my research began after my initial six month stay in Buenos Aires, I had already developed a relationship with many of my contacts outside of that of researcher and subject. This was useful to me in numerous ways. I became connected to a broader community of African-descended people and cultural activists who were willing to let me sit in on meetings or attend events that I might not have otherwise accessed. In addition, I attended events at the cultural center, Centro AfroCultural, where I also met many people. This Center is home to the *Movimiento AfroCultural (MAC)*, an Afro-activist group, founded in 1987. The organization describes their mission in this statement from their website:

*Como organización cultural nos dedicamos íntegra y exclusivamente a la investigación, difusión y enseñanza de la cultura afro americana en todos sus aspectos, creando un espacio cultural de contención social, recuperación y concientización de los valores culturales*<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Web link goes to the MAC Blogspot site where the MAC mission statement is posted

(As an organization, we are dedicated entirely and exclusively to the research, diffusion and teaching of African American culture in all of its aspects. We are creating a cultural space of social contestation, recuperation and consciousness-raising and conscientization of our cultural values).<sup>9</sup>

As their mission statement suggests, the MAC is committed to using African-derived cultures as a means of combating negative constructions of Black identity endemic to Argentine society. They are also one of the few Afro-activist organizations in Buenos Aires to have their own location, a cultural center in the city's historic Black neighborhood. My primary findings are based on an investigation of this Center. The time I spent observing and interacting with communities in that space was as formative to my work as the many informal conversations I was able to have with the people I met there. The majority of the historical information that I offer about the *Movimiento AfroCultural* was collected from secondary sources, though I selectively draw from sources either closely associated with or produced by the organization. The group maintains an extensive blog which helped me to stay connected to activities at the Center and also to understand some of the events that had happened there in the past.

---

August 25, 2008.<http://movimientoAfroCultural.blogspot.com/search?updated-min=2008-01-01T00%3A00%3A00-02%3A00&updated-max=2009-01-01T00%3A00%3A00-02%3A00&max-results=5>

<sup>9</sup> My translation

The MAC is an organization founded and run by Afro-Uruguayan “*trabajadores culturales*.”<sup>10</sup> They initially intrigued me because they were working to create community out of Buenos Aires’ incongruous Black population. My decision to examine the cultural politics of Black identity in *Argentina* by looking at an *Afro-Uruguayan* organization stems from an interest in exploring broader understandings of Black community and identity. Two issues in particular emerged from this decision. The first was influenced by anthropologist Alejandro Frigerio’s assertion that Afro-Argentines are no longer able to speak for their own identity because they have been replaced by Afro-Uruguayan and Afro-Brazilian activists who promote their cultures as representative of all Black culture in Argentina. It is important to acknowledge that the politics of authenticity and representation are sources of conflict between African-descended communities in Buenos Aires. These conflicts most definitely affected some individual and group feeling toward the MAC. Despite these conflicts, I believe that the *Centro AfroCultural* is the best place from which to examine the formation of communities that transcend nationalist boundaries. Their space has become a gathering place for the many different African-descended people in Buenos Aires. As this project is concerned with the formation of African Diasporic identity as an alternative basis for community-identification, the MAC was the ideal site for my research.

---

<sup>10</sup> Literally translated means “cultural workers,” but refers to artists doing cultural awareness work



The second issue that I would like to address is the argument that a Diasporic identity can serve to further perceptions of Black subjects as *Other*, outside of the identity of the nation. One of the results of the myth “*ellos no existen*” is that Blacks are never seen as Argentine regardless of how long they or their families have been there. There are many activist organizations like the groups *Misibama*<sup>11</sup> and *Africa Vive* that articulate their politics based on a desire for recognition as Afro-Argentines. This argument is expressed most vocally from the group *Misibama*, who identify as *Afro-Argentinos del Tronco Colonial*.<sup>12</sup> These are individuals who claim to trace their descendents back to African slaves brought to Argentina during the colonial period and Trans-Atlantic slave trade. They maintain cultural and historical particularity through a hyphenated nationalist identity. These groups have stated a t desire for an acknowledgment of the historical wrongs perpetrated against their *direct* ancestors and a reconciliation of antithetical constructions of Black and Argentine identities.<sup>13</sup>

How is the MAC different from these organizations? Similarly, the MAC is motivated by a desire to counter constructions of Argentine national identity that negate the contributions of African-descended people. However, they do not attempt to reach this goal by asking to be recognized as Afro-Argentine. Instead, they demand that the nation and society at large recognize the significance and presence of Blacks

---

<sup>11</sup> Access Misibama website at <http://bakongoCandombeafroargentino.blogspot.com/>

<sup>12</sup> Afro-Argentines of the colonial period

<sup>13</sup> This is a link to *Misibamba*'s official statement of identity in which the group asserts their particular claims to Afro-Argentine identity and rejection of “historically inexact” terms like African descended. <http://www.misibamba.org/archivos/Afroargentino%20del%20tronco%20colonial.pdf>

and their cultures as a part of the history and continuous making of the nation. They demand that Argentina and its citizens develop a racial conscience—one that would necessitate an acknowledgment and acceptance of the fact that the foundations of Argentine national identity are based on racist, anti-black, anti-indigenous, ideologies. This is different from making claims to an Afro-Argentine identity. The MAC is most concerned with the history of Black erasure in Argentina as part of ongoing liberation struggle that connects people of African descent irrespective of territorial boundaries. This position gestures toward an African Diasporic understanding of Black liberation which I will explore later in this work. The MAC confronts at the local level, a global capitalist system of power that continues to perpetuate Blacks subjugation.

The work in this thesis comes out of a similar perspective. A history of Black erasure in Argentina continues to dictate how people of African-descent, not exclusively Afro-Argentine, experience and create their lives in Buenos Aires. Given my focus, I was inevitably implicated in the research process. As a result, I use my own experiences to interrogate how blackness functions in certain spaces, always careful to consider the ways that my other subjectivities—race, gender, class, language—were implicated in all of my interactions. I venture beyond simply framing my body as a site for interrogating racialized social and cultural practices in Buenos

Aires. In order to situate how my blackness functioned in that space, my research perspectives rely heavily on Sheila Walker's framework of Afrogenic scholarship.

In her introduction to *(Re)Writing/Righting the Pan-American Discourse* (2001), Walker argues that an Afrogenic perspective is grounded in ways of creating and interacting with knowledge that challenge the dominance of Eurocentric interpretive models. She suggests that scholars coming from African Diasporic communities are better equipped in some ways to bring interpretive and analytical perspectives to research based on their own experiences of belonging to these communities. The imperative is to acknowledge the African Diaspora as having developed counter-dominant ways of knowing and interacting with the world. Walker writes, "African Diasporan societies have consciously articulated and unconsciously acted out distinctive epistemologies and hermeneutics, which it behooves scholars to discover and use as points of departure and as road maps for descriptive and analytical efforts" (2001: 9). Efforts at interrogating Diaspora as alternative sites of narrative-making are grounded in these Afrogenic models. This perspective also informs my decision to look at the cultural politics of the MAC, a group that I found to be not only deeply concerned with displacing Eurocentric versions and misrepresentations of history, but with Diasporic articulations of history and identity as a counter-narrative.

There are advantages and disadvantages in attempting to understand a social movement through the lens of one group of social actors. The difficulty in trying to understand the organizational tactics and ideological underpinnings of a movement like the one taking place in Buenos Aires is that many of these groups collaborate on some issues, but wholly disagree about others, particularly when it come to articulations of a Black identity. For this reason, there is considerable disagreement over whether this collection of social, cultural and political actors can even be called a movement. Sociologists and social movement theorists McCarthy and Mayer assert that social movements depend, as a necessary precursor, on the existence of a collective identity (1977). This rigid definition at times does not accommodate the complex intersections of racial categories or African Diasporic identifications and (dis) identifications that require equally expansive rubrics of analysis.

The difficulty of African-descended communities in Argentina in articulating a collective identity is directly tied to the history of racial formations in Latin America and Argentina where racial categories were used to disaggregate non-white peoples. According to African-American Studies scholars Paschel and Sawyer, inscribed in these racial categories were, “norms and incentives that encouraged people of African

descent to choose to identify with intermediate colors” (2009: 14). Thus, historically people of African descent, when permitted, tended to not identify with a Black racial identity in order to gain access to the privileges associated with proximity to whiteness. Contemporary attempts to create collective Black identity require a break from this historical legacy, an objective that is further problematized by the ambiguous nature of blackness as a fluid racial category in Latin America (Hamilton 2007, Sarduy and Stubbs 1991).

Sociologist Tianna Paschel and Mark Sawyer suggest thinking “about blackness as a social and political category rather than a biological construct,” and an identity that “includes dimensions of self-identification, performativity, discrimination experiences, and identification with a political struggle labeled as black” (2008: 14). This understanding of blackness is useful for a number of reasons, primarily because it sheds light on the multiplicity of meaning engendered by blackness as a category of identification and analysis, but also because it enlightens us on the complexities of using blackness as the basis for creating a collective identity.

African-descended people choose to mobilize around identity in differing way, this is yet another obstacle in the formation of a cohesive Black movement in Buenos Aires. My observations of the dynamics within the African-descended community in Buenos Aires revealed that although most Black activists identified as being a part of an *Afro* movement, many did not agree with a single unified agenda or strategy of

organizing. It is a movement composed of a heterogeneous group of activists whose experiences of a Black identity are often deeply influenced by translocal factors and a multiplicity of histories. In her work on Blacks as political subjects in Argentina, anthropologist Laura Lopez writes: “the people who dedicate themselves to afro activism bring different histories of organizing linked to their particular experiences of blackness in their countries of origin.”<sup>14</sup> For example, the groups of Afro-Argentines claiming direct ancestry from African slaves represent one particular positioning within a Black Argentine movement. The claims of this group are exemplary of the many ways that articulations of identity function as political strategies. While the group of ordinary Afro-Argentines rejects approaches to cultural and political representations based in a Diasporic Black identity, they still fit into the larger *Afro* movement in Buenos Aires.

Any tendency to articulate the *Afro* movement in Buenos Aires as singular or cohesive would be a misrepresentation of the complex and varied ways in which African-descended people and their allies are choosing to mobilize. To speak exclusively of a collective Black or *Afro* cultural identity is not possible. To speak exclusively of a collective political identity would also imply a homogeneity that does not exist. This is but one of the challenges that I faced as a researcher attempting to

---

<sup>14</sup> Lopez, Laura. Los Afrodescendientes Como Sujetos Politicos en Argentina.(Libro Final)  
“las personas que se dedicaron a la militancia afro traían diferentes historias de organización y luchas ligadas a sus experiencias particulares como “negros” en su país de origen.”

understand the disjointed, sporadic yet vibrant movement of Black cultural politics in Buenos Aires.

Throughout this work, I make use of certain terminology for particular reasons. Because this work deals with a diverse group of individuals from varying nations throughout Africa and the Americas, each with its own locally informed history of racial classification and identification, I am careful to read racial identity based on both the local context and individual's self-identification. The categorization of blackness has a complex history in Argentina and Latin America as a whole because here, in contrast to the dichotomous black/white binary characteristic of U.S race relations, the racial classification systems are defined by a much more fluid multiplicity of identification that continue to change over time. Singular hemispheric conceptions of Black racial identities simply do not exist in Latin America. For example, someone who identifies as Black in one nation can cross the border into a neighboring country and find that they have become ladino, trigueño, or even white.

When speaking of African-descended communities in Buenos Aires I will use "Black" and "African-descended" interchangeably to denote individuals living in Argentina who self-identify as having ancestry originating in part from Africa. There are times when it is important to note national origin; in such instances I use hyphenated distinctions such as Afro-Uruguayan, Afro-Peruvian or Afro-Argentine. Other times I make use of terms that are hyphenated together with the abbreviation

*Afro*, as in “afro-activist,” the English translation of the word “*militante afro*,” used to identify activists who are of African-descent. “*Afro*” is literally an abbreviation for “*africano*” meaning “African,” but is also used colloquially to mean “Black” or to denote African roots/connections.

While the use of the words “Black” or “negro” is very much a part of the colloquial lexicon of Buenos Aires, it also carries many negative connotations. As a result, representatives from communities throughout Latin America’s African Diaspora officially adopted the term “African-descended” at the 2001 World Conference Against Racism. Where I describe individuals or groups as African-descended, it can be assumed that they have self-identified in this way. In circumstances when I was made to identify an individual’s race based on my own observations, I have attempted only to describe rather than ascribe a racial identity. While my work is based on the knowledge that race is a social construct<sup>15</sup>, I recognize that race does refer to observable phenotypical characteristics that are prescribed socio-historic significance in varying local contexts. Lastly, I use the term “African Diaspora” instead of “Black Diaspora” in order to maintain Africa as the spatial rather than racial referent. Here I am taking my cues from the work of Diaspora scholar Paul

---

<sup>15</sup>The notion of race as a social construct is foundational to African-American Studies and countless works across disciplines have been devoted to interrogating the topic including: David R. Roediger’s *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (1994), Ian F. Lopez’s *The Social Construction of Race* (1999), Ruth Frankenburg’s *White Women, Race Matters* (1993).



Tiyambe Zeleza, who argues that, “rarely are Diasporas from other regions draped in color” (Zeleza 2005: 40).

## Chapter Outline

---

In the first chapter, “Myth-Making as Reality-Making: Confronting Blackness as Myth in Argentina’s Racial Discourse,” I explore the myth of Black non-existence in Argentina and its ramification for people of African descent living in the capital city of Buenos Aires today. In order to begin to challenge naturalized understandings of Argentina as racially white, I trace the makings of blackness and the nation back to the early nineteenth century. I make use of the works of Arlene Torres and Norman Whitten as well as George Reid Andrew’s historiography, along with others which highlight the impact of nationalist ideologies in the making of race relations in Latin America. Using these works, this chapter focuses on how discourses of race and practices of racial prejudice in Argentina have been shaped by an ideology of *blanqueamiento* and the accompanying narrative of Black non-existence. I use this chapter to show that the present-day exclusion of African-descended people from claims to a national identity and social belonging in Buenos Aires is part of an intentioned historical process. By interrogating the power of myth and historical narratives to create reality, I ultimately inquire, how do a majority of Argentines

continue to accept as reality, the fictional narratives of Black non-existence in spite of the physical presence of African-descended people in Argentina? In this chapter I will present an analysis that interrogates the experiences and representations of blackness in Buenos Aires to illuminate the wholly subjective concept of how narrative are encountered.

In the second chapter, “Diaspora, Community, and the Urban Imagination: Creating a Black Space in the White City,” I examine the Black cultural-political movement in Buenos Aires through the work of one Afro-activist organization, *Movimiento AfroCultural* (MAC). By examining the strategies employed by this organization, I show that, although Black-identified subjects experience everyday forms of exclusions and denial; they are not simply victims of an intrinsically racist societal structure. They actively fight historically constructed fictions that continue to negate and regulate their presence in the metropolitan imagination. I focus on the efforts of the MAC to foster African Diasporic community in Buenos Aires through the creation of a physical and symbolic space, the *Centro AfroCultural*. To address the socio-historical processes inscribed in spaces, I use an approach influenced by bell hook’s framework of “Homeplaces” as sites of resistance (1990). Just as hooks has done in her examination of the African-American home and the politics of making spaces, my aim is to show that there are “radical political dimensions” in creating spaces for identities and communities of resistance in white supremacist societies

(1990:42). hook's "Homeplaces" and works like *Anthropology of Space and Place* (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003), and Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991)—all dealing with spatial dimensions of power and resistance —provide the theoretical basis for my examination of the *Centro AfroCultural*. By analyzing racialized socio-historic processes as they are manifested in space, I engage in a critical dialogue with the MAC cultural center as a site that both transgresses beyond and negotiates within the larger system of power in Buenos Aires.

In the concluding chapter, "Blackness in Vogue: Commodifying Cultural Resistance Movements," I consider the *Movimiento AfroCultural* in the context of contemporary shifts of Black identity politics in Argentina. In particular, I focus on how global tendencies toward multicultural state policies have influenced the politics of difference in Buenos Aires and the work of cultural activist organizations like the MAC. To situate trends of Black identity politics in Buenos Aires within a hemispheric and global perspective, I make use of the work of Stuart Hall who posits that the current postmodern moment is marked by an "ambivalent fascination with difference." Hall contends that although we are currently witnessing a global de-centering of Eurocentric models of cultural production, Black culture continues to be a "contradictory space" (1993: 2-4). Following Hall, I examine a trend which I have labeled "blackness in vogue" in the city of Buenos Aires. Proposing that this term highlights the superficial commodification of all things Black, I argue that dominant

structures have sought to incorporate blackness into their midst through the frameworks and rhetoric of multiculturalism and diversity without attending to the deep-seated realities of institutionalized racism and racial inequality. I examine how policies of multicultural diversity serve to mediate Argentina's classification as a third-world nation by allowing Buenos Aires to co-opt the cosmopolitan identity of a global city without challenging representations of Argentina as a culturally and racially homogeneous nation.

Finally, in the conclusion I offer some final thoughts on confronting exclusion in Argentina beyond the myth of Black non-existence. Building on the work of other Black Studies scholars who have questioned whether visibility, as goal of Black identity politics, is viable, I contemplate how a movement for Black visibility in Buenos Aires can be understood in its myriad complexities and contradictions.

**Chapter One**  
**Myth-Making as Reality-Making: Confronting Blackness as Myth in Argentina's**  
**Racial Discourse**

---

In 1996, during a diplomatic trip to the United States, when asked about the Black population of Argentina, President Carlos Menem remarked “En Argentina no existen los negros; ese problema lo tiene Brasil.” (Black people do not exist in Argentina, Brazil has that problem). Menem’s comment was revelatory of the complex and unreconciled relationship between race and national identity in Argentina, a relationship that continues to inform the treatment of racial and ethnic minorities in the present day. Menem was articulating what many white Argentines have come to know as uncontested fact, that they are a nation of racially white and culturally European immigrants. So deeply ingrained is this fact, it serves to render Black people into impossibilities or “phantasmagorical remnants” (Penaloza, 2007: 219).

Even if most Argentines believe Menem’s claim that there are currently no Black people in Argentina, his statement is all the more puzzling in light of the fact that Blacks once constituted a documented 30 percent of Buenos Aires’ population and as much as 64 percent of the population in some interior regions of the country (Molina and Lopez, 2001: 333). One need only take a stroll through one of Buenos Aires’ expansive historical museums to notice that Blacks are represented in images

dating back to the colonial era. Though the representations are often limited and stereotypical (Molina and Lopez 2001), they offer evidence that Black people were once an important part of Argentine society. In order to contextualize the contemporary predicament of Blacks in Argentina it is necessary to outline briefly their history from slavery to erasure and resurgence in order to pinpoint the moments where Blacks were “disappeared” from the official narratives of *Argentinidad*.

There are a number of works which have attempted an analysis of the history and culture of Black people in Argentina. One of the earliest of these publications is Vicente Rossi’s *Cosas de Negros*, published in Argentina in 1926. The Uruguayan-born historian provides a cultural history of Black people in the Rio de la Plata region and is often cited for explicitly crediting Blacks in Argentina for the creation of Tango. However, the merit of the work was largely overshadowed by its many overtly racist assertions, indicated first and foremost by the title, “Cosas de Negros,” which is an Argentine expression meaning “a poorly done or substandard job.” The phrase is a direct reference to stereotypes of Black people as child-like and lazy, incapable of completing even the simplest of tasks (Andrews 1980: 213). The limited perspective of Rossi’s work was improved in subsequent publications including, Ricardo Rodriguez Molas *El Negro en Rio de La Plata* (1970). Other publications include works by Nestor Oderigo (1974), Marta Goldberg (1976) and Marta Maffia (1986). However, by far the most comprehensive examination of Blacks in Argentina post-abolition is that of

historian George Reid Andrews in the book *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires 1800-1900* (1980). Andrews was the first of these scholars to address explicitly what he called the “riddle of disappearance” (1980: 3). His work offers extensive demographic and historical details about Blacks in Argentine society and is an essential tool in fully understanding the contemporary context of Argentine race relations.

In the following chapter, “Myth-Making as Reality-Making: Confronting Blackness as Myth in Argentina’s Racial Discourse,” I provide an overview of the history of Blacks presence in Argentina to expose the origins of their constructed non-existence. I begin in the colonial period when enslaved Africans were brought to the port of Buenos Aires through the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Synthesizing previous scholarship on the subject, I examine the role of Afro-Argentines in the city’s local labor economy and the development of a complex racial caste system. Continuing, I consider changes in racial ideologies in the post-abolition era, examining the rise of *blanqueamiento* and the Unitarian model that guided the formation of Argentine national identity. I focus on the decline in the city’s Black population during the nation-building era, critiquing dominant explanations for the disappearance of Blacks in Argentina. I finish by looking at the ways in which acceptance of the myth of Black’s non-existence has shaped representations and treatment of Afro-Argentines and other African-descended people in Buenos Aires today.

## Africans and Their Descendents in Rio de La Plata

---

The city of Buenos Aires is located between the Atlantic Ocean on the East and the Rio de la Plata River to the North. In spite of its location, which seemed to foretell its success as a major commercial port, trade limitations imposed by the Spanish crown ensured that Buenos Aires remained a relatively unimportant and undeveloped port until the later part of its long colonial era (1500-1810). In 1766 the Viceroyalty of la Plata was established. It encompassed the present-day nations of Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay and Paraguay, with the capital located in Buenos Aires. The establishment of this Viceroyalty opened up Buenos Aires and the region to growth in population and commerce, but trade restrictions still inhibited the economic development of the area. In particular, Spanish trade policies designed to maintain tight control over colonial commerce, restricted European trade and the import of African slaves to a select few colonial cities. However, as early as 1534, the first royal permit allowed for slaves to be transported into Rio de la Plata and in the early 1700s a small number of *licencias*,<sup>16</sup> authorized the port of Buenos Aires to conduct a limited amount of trade. The Spanish crown also granted *asientos*, permits specifically authorizing certain individuals, companies and nations (the British) to sell slaves in the Spanish colonies (Skidmore and Smith, 2005: 13-24). Due to the fact that these *asientos* were not sufficient to satisfy the city's demand for slave labor and

---

<sup>16</sup> royal permits



because trade and commerce limitations in Buenos Aires proved difficult to enforce, the trading of illegal human contraband was rampant. It was a common practice in Buenos Aires for ships to dock in the port under the guise of emergency docking or repairs, when nightfall came, small numbers of slaves were unloaded and either “confiscated” by local authorities and sold at low cost to those who were in on the scam. In other case, slaves arriving as illegal contraband would be escorted out of the city, later to be “discovered”, escorted back into the city and sold under somewhat legal auspices as “*negros decaminandos*”<sup>17</sup> (Andrews 1980: 24-63). Official documentation shows that between 1595 and 1680 some 22,892 African slaves were legally transported to Buenos Aires under the Spanish *licencias*, but most scholars suggest that this is only a small fraction of the actual number (Andrews 1980: 24). Of the slaves arriving in Buenos Aires, historians show that large numbers came from West Africa, Congo, Angola and Mozambique; a small percentage arrived in Buenos Aires indirectly, by way of Bahia, Brazil, thus their African origin was unknown (Andrews 1980, Molina and Lopez 2001).

Of the slaves arriving in Buenos Aires legally and illegally, the majority did not remain in the city, but stayed for a brief amount of time before heading to other inland destinations. The city served as the entry point for lucrative mining centers in Potosi Bolivia, Chile and Paraguay, where African slave labor was used to replace the

---

<sup>17</sup> Blacks lost their way

dying indigenous labor population. Andrews highlights two significant economic factors affecting the development of Latin American slave societies. First, in regions where the indigenous population could not meet labor demands they were often replenished with larger numbers of African slaves, as was the case in the Andean mines of Potosi. Second, in places where local economies were well integrated into global economy through export there was typically a higher demand for large sources of cheap exhaustible labor. For instance, in places like Brazil, Hispanola and the British Caribbean, crops like sugar, coffees, and tobacco, were cultivated for large scale export to Europe and elsewhere around the globe (Conniff and Davis 1994). The sprawling pampa grasslands of Argentina never developed labor intensive plantation systems typically. Agricultural production in Argentina was centered on large wheat and cattle producing *estancias*<sup>18</sup> which required fewer laborers.

Barring the existence of these two conditions, the demand for slave labor in the Argentina was concentrated in urban centers like Buenos Aires and Cordoba where slave labor was centered on domestic services and artisan craft work. While these labor economies did not necessitate the large slave labor force demanded elsewhere, many African slaves remained to work in Argentina. Between 1778 and 1810, the last years of colonial rule in Argentina, Black people constituted large numbers of the population in some interior regions. For instance in the northwest

---

<sup>18</sup> Large farm estates of the Argentine pampas

region of Catamarca, they constituted 50 percent and in the city of Cordoba 44 percent. At this time, roughly 30 percent of the population of Buenos Aires was African or of African descent (Molina and Lopez 2001: 333).

During the colonial era, slaves formed an integral and visible part of the city's social and economic make-up. As artisans, they crafted the tools used to cultivate the large ranches in addition to providing the manual labor for those lands. In the urban economy slaves were involved in a number of occupations though they were most highly visible as domestic servants. A sign of class standing, Black servants were a must for families aspiring to be counted among the high class. George Andrews notes, "no respectable Argentine woman would think of going to mass without a Black maidservant to carry her rug and attend to her during the services" (1980: 31). This observation suggests the ways in which black domestics were integrated into the social and economic fabric of Argentine society.

While domestic slaves could raise one's standing in society, they did not bring in any income, thus slaves also worked as artisans and by 1770 most of the craftsmen in Buenos Aires were Black. These artisans were particularly important to the urban economy because white slave owners would often hire out the labor of the slaves in order to earn a profit (Meisel 2006: 278). The process of hiring out slave labor was important because it gave some slaves the opportunity to earn additional income and the possibility to buy their freedom eventually. For a short period of time the process

of hiring out also gave slaves a relative degree of freedom to move about the city (Meisel 2006: 278). This freedom was quickly curtailed by a set of laws known as *Regime de Castas*.<sup>19</sup> This series of legal codes which were implemented throughout the Spanish and Portuguese slave colonies codified the inferiority of non-whites, especially Blacks and mulattos who were designated to the lowest social and economic rungs of society and restricted the movement of those so identified (Andrews 2004).

The *Regimes de Casta* used racial categories to govern the behavior of non-whites in Argentine society and thus served a dual purpose, first to ensure that only European and colonial whites occupied the highest social and economic statuses by designating certain non-manual and prestigious occupations for whites only. The second purpose was to solidify the connection between blackness and socio-economic degradation. The laws were highly effective in accomplishing both of these aims (Meisel 2006: 279). They successfully cemented Blacks' socio-economic subordination by precluding them to certain jobs. For example, in Buenos Aires, where many Blacks worked as artisans, these laws restricted them from joining artisan guilds or reaching the master's level of the craft. Thus they were limited to the lowest possible tasks with little means for upward economic mobility (Meisel 2006: 279).

This is a trend which Andrews notes carried over into the post-abolition period, he

---

<sup>19</sup> The *Regimes de Casta* was codes which legally solidified whites' possession of certain economic and social rights and benefits. For a detailed description of the rights and benefits accorded to whites based on these legal codes see Andrews' *Afro-Latin America 1800-2000* (2004).

argues that Black people largely maintained the same occupations in both slavery and post-slavery labor economies, which he describes as “ the least desirable, most degrading, unhealthiest and worst paying jobs”(1980: 39). This type of work also cemented the connection between “non-white racial status and manual labor” (Andrews 2004: 44).

Not only did they solidify social roles based on racial identity, but the *Regime de Castas* also attempted to curtail instances of racial mixing by confining non-whites to certain spaces in the city (Andrews 2004: 44). To this end, the laws were overwhelmingly unsuccessful. In Argentina, the caste system determined non-white individuals’ legal status and distinguished between *morenos*, individuals of African descent, and *pardos* people of mixed descent, including any combination of racial mixtures (Andrews 2004: 8-9). According to historian Winthrop Wright, the racial caste systems were based on the Spanish ideology of “limpieza de sangre.”<sup>20</sup> Wright notes that the use of race to divide colonial society, “allowed them [Spaniards] to distinguish themselves from illegitimate individuals and subordinate groups” (1990: 22-23). In spite of this caste system occurrences of racial mixing were rampant in colonial Argentina and throughout Latin America (Andrews 2004: 48).

The story of nineteenth-century Latin America is one of great social upheaval and transformation, as colonies in the Americas fought to establish sovereign nations.

---

<sup>20</sup> Purity of the bloodline (Winthrop 1990: 22)

Former colonies were faced with the immense challenge of shedding colonial personas and establishing new national identities. In 1810, Argentina was formally established as an independent nation. Free from the shackles of the Spanish imperial rule Argentina, like many other newly founded Latin American nations was faced with grand a dilemma. Deeply inspired by the ideals of the French and American revolutions, Latin American independence struggles espoused the ideas of national sovereignty, ironically evoking images of slavery and bondage to describe their liberation from Spanish rule. The rhetoric of enlightened liberalism and revolution was at odds with the oppressive system of racial domination that persisted in the form of slavery. Thus, the revolution of 1810 in Argentina marked the beginning of the prolonged and gradual abolition of slavery. The first legal step toward abolition was the 1812 *Ley de libertad de vientre*<sup>21</sup> which established the freedom of children born to enslaved mothers. (Abreu 1996, Andrews 1980) The process of abolition culminated in 1853 when slavery was officially abolished through the implementation of a new national constitution, though it was not officially adopted in Buenos Aires until 1861 (Molina and Lopez 2001).

By the end of the colonial period in the Americas, untold millions had been transported from Africa to the Americas under the condition of human bondage. They constituted not only the labor base for a global economy, but also shaped the

---

<sup>21</sup>Law of the Free Womb

very fabric of the Americas in every way imaginable; Argentina was no exception. The role of Black and indigenous peoples would need to be addressed in the context of the new nation. In *Abolition and the Politics of Identity*, historian Kim Butler suggests that power structures were reinscribed in the post-abolition period. “By exploring beneath the veneer of de jure abolition,” she writes, “it becomes increasingly clear that abolition was but one point in a protracted transitional era in the Afro-Atlantic world, during which patterns of hegemony established under slavery were transposed into the new conditions of post-emancipation societies” (Butler, 1999: 123). She suggests that African Diaspora scholars analyze the abolition period as a time of dynamic re-negotiation, when post-slavery societies established new practical and social codes to regulate racial identities.

In Argentina, the independence era may have ushered in movements aimed at ending slavery, but the post-emancipation era was marked by the same structures of de-facto segregation typical of almost all post-slavery societies, including segregated schools and public facilities (Eudell, 2002). In fact, during the era following the abolition of slavery in 1853, Argentina set out on a new ideological course through which Black people and African-derived cultures were systematically erased from constructions of the nation. Black and indigenous people were antithetical to the desired identity of the new Argentine nation.

## Blanqueamiento, Racial-Mixing and the Making of Modern Argentina

---

During the early nineteenth century, Argentina was most heavily influenced by the Unitarian ideologies of progression and development. The importance of this perspective in shaping national policy in Argentina is best evidenced by the influential works of President Domingo Sarmiento, also known as Argentina's "father of education." Sarmiento, who served as the seventh president of Argentina from 1868-1874, was a "self-made man" and skilled writer. He was deeply influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment and committed to a vision of radically improving the Argentine nation (Criscenti 1993: 8). He earned the title "father of education" for his commitment to increasing access to public education for all the nation's children. Sarmiento himself only attended school through the primary level, but was self-educated through his own volition, later holding a post as professor of Philosophy at the University of Chile (Dorn 1993: 77). He was also a member of the "Generation of the 1880s," a group of intellectuals composed of the city's wealthy mercantile class and the "cattle ranching bourgeoisie of the provinces" (Andrews 1980, 101). This group of men was responsible for implementing a political agenda based on what they understood to be liberal progressivism. Integral to this perspective, was a belief in the racial ideology of *blanqueamiento*.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Whitening



In their co-edited anthology *Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean*, anthropologists Norman Whitten and Arlene Torres define *blanqueamiento* as an “ethnic movement –coterminous with the socioeconomic advancement governed by the ideology of development.” They posit that *blanqueamiento* was an “unconscious psychological process” characteristic of underdeveloped nations in the twentieth century. It was an ideology deeply based in the principle of white supremacy as *blanqueamiento* blamed “those classed as Black and indigenous for the worsening state of the nation” (1998: 9). Contrary to Whitten and Torres’ explanation, the manifestations of *blanqueamiento* in Argentina were by no means an unconscious process, but rather state implemented policies for developing the nation.

Sarmiento and other Argentine intellectuals of the era were committed to the idea that Western Europe was innately superior to Spain, and particularly to the mestizo culture that had developed out of the intermingling of Spanish and indigenous blood in Argentina. Sarmiento believed that the only way to civilize the barbaric natives of Argentina was through the introduction of European immigrants. Because Argentine blood had already been diluted through inter-racial mixing, Sarmiento determined that only the intermixing with Europeans could correct the inferiority and barbarism of their indigenous blood. Many of his ideas were founded on theories of scientific racism and social Darwinism popular at that time. These theories claimed to prove scientifically the biological differences between and among

racism.<sup>23</sup> Influenced heavily by these scientific and philosophical theories which argued white superiority over all other races, Sarmiento and the intellectuals of the 1880s set Argentina on the ideological pursuit of whiteness.

By co-opting a narrative that denied the presence of Black and indigenous people and their cultures, Argentina sought to assume a racially white, culturally European identity. Malawian historian Paul Zeleza proposes that the valorization of whiteness is best understood as a process of establishing “*limpieza ideológica*” (ideological cleanliness) (2005:34). He describes it as the process of creating a society that was modern—defined as white and European—not only by encouraging European immigration, which they did<sup>24</sup>, but also by the manipulation of the national image and identity. The writings of Latin American sociologist José Ingenieros best demonstrate the way that *limpieza ideológica* was understood and pursued not only as an ideal, but also as a foundational tenant for the creation Argentine identity.

In the book *Sociología Argentina* Ingenieros writes, “Europeanization is not, in our opinion, a hope ...it is inevitability” (Ingenieros, 1913: 228-229). This small

---

<sup>23</sup> Social Darwinism applied Darwin’s theories of natural selection to human evolution and used these theories to argue based on “scientific evidence,” that superiority and inferiority of different racial group. This concept led to related theories of Eugenics. For theoretical foundations of Social Darwinism See Houston Stewart Chamberlin’s *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, and Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race*

<sup>24</sup>George Reid Andrew’s exhaustive demographic work show that public policy designed to grow the population led to huge increases in population size, the population size. Between 1869 and 1895 it increased from 1.8 to 4.0 million and by 1914 it had increased to 7.9 million. This growth can be attributed in large part to policies encouraging European immigrations exclusively and by 1914 30% of Buenos Aires’ population was made-up of European immigrants. Section 25 of the 1853 Constitution of Argentina stated that “The Federal Government shall foster **European** immigration; and may not restrict, limit or burden with any tax whatsoever, the entry into the Argentine territory of foreigners who arrive for the purpose of tilling the soil, improving industries, and introducing and teaching arts and sciences.”

excerpt demonstrates Ingenieros belief that the process of natural selection would ultimately do away with “colored races” once they came into contact with whites. In other sections of the text he cites as proof, examples of indigenous extinction in Argentina (Molina and Lopez 2001: 233). Yet he fails to reveal the causes of their “extinction,” posing it as a natural and “inevitable” process. In reality, military campaigns aimed at securing Argentina’s far-reaching territories resulted in the extermination and decline of indigenous communities. These campaigns which spanned the mid and late eighteenth century are currently debated by historians, some of whom argue that they were explicitly aimed at indigenous genocide (Rock, 2002). Representations of the inevitability or natural occurrence of white superiority in Argentina were a large part of the racial discourse during the nation-building era, roughly 1810- 1890s. The writings of intellectuals like Sarmiento and Ingenieros represent the philosophical underpinnings of *blanqueamiento*. As an institutionalized practice, pursued through legal and political channels, *blanqueamiento* was advanced by a number of different strategies, though always portrayed as a natural process.

Whereas in the colonial era laws were put in place to inhibit racial mixing, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were marked by state sanctioned support of miscegenation as one of the primary methods of “whitening” the Argentine population. Argentina, like most former slave societies enacted a system of social benefits in accordance with whiteness. However, unlike other post-slavery societies,

in Argentina, instead of maintaining de facto segregation laws to keep non-whites apart from white society, the racial mixing of Blacks and mulattos with white European immigrants was encouraged as a tactic to lighten gradually and eventually erase markers of the country's non-white population (Frigerio, 2006). In the colonial period legal sanctions restricted who could marry whom, but the civil code of 1871 did away with these restrictions and opened the door for interracial marriages. George Reid Andrews cites an early twentieth century Argentine magazine article as telling the story of a Black woman who gave birth to triplets, two white and one black. The article goes on to praise the woman for “enlarging the Fatherland” —an example that suggests the extent to which racial mixing was not only encouraged but deemed socially acceptable. In his essay “Changing Attitudes toward Interracial Marriage in Nineteenth-Century Buenos Aires,” historian Jeffery Shumway shows that the number of interracial marriages increased after independence as legal barriers and social attitudes changed over time. (Andrews 1980: 106, Shumway 2001: 202).

Racial mixing offered many social benefits for people of African descent to escape the stigmas associated with blackness. In his essay “Los Afro-Descendientes de Argentina-Mitos y Realidad,” William Cowles suggests that the process of whitening the population was driven by Afro-Argentines' desire for white partners.

*Durante el periodo del esclavitud y después un proceso de miscegenación empezó que trajo beneficios sociales para la población negras porque los negro trataron a blanquear sus mismos. Después al final del siglo XIX, el gobierno de Argentina*

*adoptó un policía que decía que Argentina era una nación blanca...y ellos podían usar el deseo de la población negra para blanquear les mismos para construir una Argentina Blanca (Cowles, 2007, 26).*

(The process of miscegenation began during and after the period of slavery, it brought social benefits for the black population because blacks were able to whiten themselves. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Argentine government adopted a policy of saying that Argentina was a white nation...and they were able to use the desire of the black population to whiten themselves as a tool to construct a white Argentina.)<sup>25</sup>

I want to problematize Cowles' use of the word "desire" in this excerpt as he fails to distinguish between Blacks' desire for whiteness and their desire for the social benefits of whiteness. Since the colonial era with the establishment of systems like *gracias a sacar*,<sup>26</sup> which allowed non-white people to be legally re-categorized as white, whiteness was invested with social, economic, and political power, just as blackness and African ancestry were imbued with negative social value and low-status (Wright 1990: 24). Thus, when Black people, women in particular, sought white partners they were not simply acting upon their desires, but rather negotiating with the terms of dominant power. Historian Claire Healy observes that racial mixing could be understood as form of agency for African descended people. She writes,

*"Consciente de su situación precaria en una sociedad que miró a la negritud enfáticamente como algo negativo, ellos [Afro-argentinos] buscaron alternativos para que no fuera perpetuamente "el otro". La aculturación y miscegenación estuvieron las opciones mas elegidos"* (Healy year: 34).

---

<sup>25</sup> My translation

<sup>26</sup> Literally translated to mean "Thanks for the exclusion"

(Conscious of their precarious situation in a society that emphatically looked upon blackness as something negative, they [Afro-Argentines] looked for alternative ways of not being perpetually “Other,” assimilation and miscegenation were the most commonly elected options).<sup>27</sup>

By using their reproductive capacities to increase social capital for their offspring, Black women who were perpetually disempowered by their racial identity were able to enact some degree of agency. The assertion “no ser negro,”<sup>28</sup> became an act of maneuvering in a white dominated society as altering the phenotypic make-up of one’s children, allowed them to pass as white or more importantly as “not black.” (Frigerio 2000:5).

Racial passing has been the topic of much inquiry in the field of African-American Studies. Author Nella Larsen’s fictional book *Passing* (1927) is often credited for garnering the interest in the phenomenon, however it is a strategy that has been studied by academics throughout the Americas (Frigerio 2000, Rappaport 2009, Fischer and O’Hara 2009). In *Crossing the Line*, Gayle Wald writes that passing emerged as a practice “from subjects’ desire to control the terms of their racial definition, rather than subject to the definitions of white supremacy” (Wald 2000: 6). As Wald posits, passing was a transgressive means of “negotiating racial oppression” in white supremacist hierarchies, however, in the context of post-colonial Buenos Aires, it had devastating results for Afro-Argentine communities.

---

<sup>27</sup> My translation

<sup>28</sup> Not Black

The ability to pass relied not only on physical appearances, but, most significantly on assimilation into the customs of dominant culture, a culture which sought to disavow all association with the social and cultural practices that defined Afro-Argentine identity. Andrews notes that Black people could not be socially integrated into Argentine society until they were genetically integrated, meaning people with features that clearly established their African ancestry were “prohibited entry into white society” (Andrews, 1980:200). Although they represented a decreasing number over time, such “outcasts” were able to sustain Afro-Argentine communities precisely because of their exclusion from white society. It is for this reason that Afro-Argentine communities with distinct cultural identities persist into the present-day. At the same time, mixed-race people who could and did pass as white, were able to be socially and culturally assimilated. Thus the biological process of miscegenation served not only to alter phenotypic markers of African ancestry but also to “erase” the cultural practices that established Afro-descended persons as both distinctly Argentine and Black.

I place the word “erase” in quotations because it was an erasure only in theory. There are countless examples of cultural practices coming out of Argentina’s Black communities which were incorporated into dominant white society without an acknowledgment of their African roots. Principal among these is the Tango, a syncretic musical and dance form that combined African and European rhythms, and

which, ironically, has become the national symbol of Argentine cultural identity. Though a discussion of the whitening of Tango would be a worthwhile endeavor, it does not lend itself explicitly to the arguments I make in this work, nonetheless, Tango is an example of how narrative imperatives were complicit in the disappearance of Blacks from Argentina's popular imagination.

### **Debunking the Myth of Black Inexistence**

---

Thus far, I have shown that Afro-Argentine arrived in Buenos Aires as a result of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, constituting a key presence in the city well into the nation-building era. Throughout this time, blackness was attributed negative value in Argentine society, consistent with almost all slavery and post-slavery societies. I have discussed how whiteness and the ability to be recognized as white were strategies that increased upward social and economic mobility. I have also examined how, through the intentional pursuit of a white and European society, *blanqueamiento* was espoused as both an ideological position and a strategy implemented at the legal and social levels. I demonstrated how phenomena such as miscegenation and passing reinforced the goal of whitening Argentina's population. I continue these arguments by showing how such phenomena are part of an unchallenged and widely believed set of justifications that explain how Argentina became a white nation. The disappearance of Afro-Argentines is framed as the convergence of unfortunate circumstances and



natural processes rather than the consequence of an intentioned social project. I focus here on examining how these explanations undermine attempts to assign culpability to white supremacist ideologies and fail to tell the whole story of Buenos Aires' shrinking Black population.

Census data indicates that in 1810, Africans and African-descended people made up approximately 30 percent of the population in Buenos Aires (Andrews 1980). By 1887, that percentage had decreased to 2 percent. A Argentine magazine *Clarín*<sup>29</sup> asks, "Why, in 1810 were one in three porteños black and by the end of the nineteenth-century only 8,000 Africans or Afro-Argentines remained?" (*Revista Clarín*, 2009) The article represents an important move toward questioning the narrative of the disappearance of Afro-Argentines. Publicizing these questions is perhaps one of the most effective ways of challenging the wide-spread belief in partial truths. During my time in Argentina, I was astounded by the sheer pervasiveness of false historical narratives. In the public discourse on the "disappearance" of the Black population much of what is taken as fact is informed by myth and partial truths. The majority of the people I encountered in Buenos Aires offered me a few well-rehearsed explanations as to why there were "no Black people in Argentina." Some suggested that Argentina never had a slave economy; thus they asserted, very few people of African descent ever lived in the country. Others alleged that African and Afro-

---

<sup>29</sup> *Clarín* is a widely read news publication in Buenos Aires.

Argentines were used as cannon fodder and were killed fighting as soldiers on the front lines of Argentina's independence and border wars. Still more explanations pointed to the poor socio-economic conditions within Afro-Argentine communities as the cause of low birth rates, high death rates and a higher susceptibility to the yellow fever and cholera epidemics of the late nineteenth-century, all of which led to their demise.

Each of these explanations is based in part on some historically valid occurrence. Comparatively speaking Argentina did not receive nearly as many African slaves during the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade as nations like Brazil and Colombia, although it was a major arrival point for slaves entering the Americas. Moreover, historical records point to the high participation of Black males in The War of the Triple Alliance between 1864 -1870, during which Black soldiers were placed on the front lines (Andrews, 1980). Further, during Argentina's independence wars, many African-descended men joined the military, tempted by the prospect of manumission. The high death rates of Black males left a large discrepancy between the numbers of Black men and women, which in turn resulted in lower birth rates in Afro-Argentine communities. In the post-slavery era, poverty contributed to poor health and high mortality rates within freed Black communities (Andrews, 1980). However, there is no statistical data to support claims that the yellow fever epidemics of the time killed a disproportionate number of Buenos Aires' Black population. While these

explanations, based in partial truth, serve to explain decreases in Argentina's Black population, many scholars note that these theories have been rendered more or less irrelevant because there has been little attempt to prove or disprove their accuracy (Molina and Lopez 2000, Andrews 1980). Moreover, other factors as discussed below, have contributed to the emergence of white homogeneity in Argentina.

The effective political organizing by Argentina's African-descended activists eventually led to an official attempt at their recognition. In 2010, the national census finally included an option for those identified as Black or as having African-ancestry. This was the first time since 1887 that a national census actually included such an option. Not only did national censuses post-1887 not include a question about Black racial identity or African-ancestry, post- independence the introduction of the category *trigueño*, meaning wheat colored, allowed people who had been previously categorized as Black or African-descended to now identify with a more racially ambiguous grouping. During the colonial era the terms, *mulatto*, *moreno* and *pardo* were indicators of a number of racial mixtures that included African ancestry (Geler 2010:57). Whereas these terms were based on the presence of African "blood," the term *trigueño*, referred to pigment rather than race, and thus could be used to identify mixed race people without alluding directly to their African ancestry (Andrews 1980:84-86, Frigerio 2000). More importantly, for the purposes of the census, individuals identifying as *trigueño* could also be counted as white. After the

1887 census there was only one option for indicating a mixed-race or Black identity: previously *blanco o moreno/prado* (white or mixed race/African) the new option was simply *blanco o de color* (white or of color), (Frigerio 2000, Andrews 1980), removing “Black” as an official racial category and effectively making it impossible for any Argentine to specify African ancestry. With the introduction of *trigueño* encompassing a broad range of phenotypic features, fewer people qualified for recognition as Black. Thus, Argentina seemed to reduce its Black population exponentially in just a few short years. In actuality, the ambiguity of racial categories meant fewer people in society identified as Black and fewer people were categorized as Black in official demographic terms. This went a long way toward advancing the image of Argentina as a homogenous white nation, since, according to the census numerically speaking, there were no Black people in Argentina (Frigerio 2000a, 2000b).

Of the explanations I have presented, none can account for contemporary claims of “no existen.” Based in historical occurrences, these arguments do not explain the continued denial of African descendant’s claims to belonging. After decades of immigration through which Blacks from Africa and others from neighboring Latin American nations have come to live in Argentina, the myth persists (Frigerio and Lamborghini 2009). I believe that there are several reasons for the steadfastness of this myth

In 1908 Argentine sociologist José Ingenieros wrote; “The indigenous races, externally alien to our political and social national identity, are now reduced to near extinction... Blacks have also become extinct...In Buenos Aires a Black Argentinean is an object of curiosity” (Molina and Lopez 2000: 243).<sup>30</sup> Ingenieros, writing in the early twentieth century, was certainly presumptuous in his claims of Black extinction, especially in light of the documented existence of Afro-Argentine mutual aid societies and social organizations, the last of which closed in 1976. Nevertheless, I argue that of the explanations I presented in the previous section, Ingenieros’s assertion is the one which best explains Black non-existence in Argentina. They do not exist because Argentines *say* that they don’t exist and have repeated this narrative for long enough that it has become true. Norman Whitten and Arlene Torres call this practice the “rhetorical strategy of reification.” By this they mean, “reification occurs when people consciously read symbolic, religious, moral or ideological properties into categorical social relationships, as though these properties actually existed” (1998: 24). Regardless of an actual Black presence in Argentina, white Argentines cling to the notion that “there are no Black people here,” and Argentine national identity is unable to be embodied by a Black body.

In 2002, Pocha Lamadrid, an Afro-Argentine activist well-known in the Black community, made national headlines when she was arrested while travelling through

---

<sup>30</sup> excerpt from Jose Ingenieros’ *Formacion de Una raza Argentina*

Ezeiza National Airport in Buenos Aires. Lamadrid, is a member of one of the oldest Afro-Argentine families and one of the few who can trace their ancestry back to the first African slaves brought to Buenos Aires. She was born in 1946 in the federal capital of Buenos Aires and has lived there her entire life. Lamadrid was detained while travelling to attend a conference in Panama. She was suspected of carrying a counterfeit passport and was detained in a police cell for over six hours. In an interview with *Clarín* magazine Lamadrid recalls the experience saying that when she attempted to pass through security, airport authorities examined her passport before shouting out loudly, “this passport is fake, come and search her.” While she was being searched the police questioned her, asking if she spoke Spanish and if she was Peruvian. In the end they determined that the passport could not be a real Argentinean passport because Lamadrid was a Black woman (Kinigsberg, “Detenida”). This incident is a perfect example of how African-descended people are made invisible in Argentina. The police asked Lamadrid if she was Peruvian in an attempt to render her identity intelligible. The fact of Lamadrid’s blackness and the fact of her Argentine nationality were literally incomprehensible to these authorities.

The historic denial of Blacks presence disallows space for people of African descent in Argentina’s national imagination. Historically founded constructions of Argentina as white and European mean that the identities of people of African descent continue to be antithetical to nationalist conceptions of what is “truly”

Argentine. People like Lamadrid find that there are no spaces for an identity that is both Afro and Argentine. This is evidenced by the fact that the children of Black immigrants never become Argentine<sup>31</sup> no matter how long they have been there, when, after only a few generations, those of white European descent do. (Maffia 2006).

In July 2010 I met Viki M, an African-descended woman born and raised in Argentina. She is a citizen of the nation who identifies as Afro-Argentine even though both of her parents are Afro-Uruguayan. She told me that at times it can be very difficult to try and convince people that she is Argentine. Viki has started a project with some of her friends to raise consciousness about their experiences of “no existen.” They made t-shirts with the words “Y vos, de donde sos” emblazoned across the center. The translation is “And you? Where are you from? When I asked Viki why they made these t-shirts she remarked, “It just makes things easier” she says, “I am sick of talking about it.”

Many of the younger people I spoke with echoed Viki’s remarks. Their parents may be from some other Latin American country but they are distinctly porteño,<sup>32</sup> born and raised in Buenos Aires. Still people never associate them with Argentina even if they have been there for their whole lives. In a conversation I had a

---

<sup>31</sup> By “become Argentine” I am not referring to citizenship. I mean that they are not recognized in society as being Argentine, hence the question “de donde sos” (where are you from) which assumes that no Black person is from Argentina.

<sup>32</sup> Porteño is a way of referring to those whose mannerisms are typically characteristic of people from Buenos Aires. The term literally translates to means “people of the port”

young man Afro-Argentine man whose family is from Brazil, he told me, “if you are Black in Argentina the first thing people ask you is where you’re from. If you say you’re from *here* the next question is always, ‘where are you really from?’

I found that some African-descended people who had been living in Buenos Aires for many years or who were Argentine citizens born in the country, still identified most strongly with the national identities of their parents and grandparents. The most indicative example of this is the large community of Cape-Verdeans living just outside of Buenos Aires. Cape-Verdeans arrived in Argentina in the 1920s and 30s taking advantage of their Portuguese passports to gain entry into the country as Europeans. I met some fourth and fifth generation Cape-Verdeans in Buenos Aires who after so much time living in Argentina, still did not identify as Afro-Argentine. This is indicative of the fact that the Cape-Verdean community is a Diaspora community, but also of the fact that their identity as Cape-Verdeans has been reinforced by preclusions from claims to an Argentine identity (Maffia, 2005, Ricardo 2006).

In the essay “*Diaspora, Globalization and the Politics of Identity*,” Percy Hintzen claims that scholars are best served by understanding Diaspora as “the cultural politics of the un-included and non-included deployed in highly localized arenas.” He argues that the rights of citizens as delineated by the nation are predicated on the state’s ability to define clearly those who do and do not belong to a



homogenous, unified national identity. Hintzen proposes that Diasporas and diasporic consciousness emerge as means of mediating the exclusionary nature of the nations-state that often places non-western, non-white peoples outside the realm of national belonging (2010, 2007). Diasporas represent contestations to the dominance of the nation-state as the singular referent for identity formation. Externalized subjects seek out other ways of identifying and forming communities, in the case of African-descended people, one of the ways they have historically contested their exclusion from the full benefits and belonging of citizenship is by imagining themselves as part of the deterritorialized denationalized space of the African Diaspora. The racially excluded (Black) subject creates new identities determined by a “cultural politics of exclusion” (Hintzen 2010: 2007) While exclusion is undoubtedly an impetus for the creation of alternative identities in the African Diaspora, implicated in the politics of exclusion is a history of forced displacement and subjugation. African-descended people were never conceived as part of the imagined communities of nations because they arrived in the Americas as property, thus, nationality was from point of arrival, contested terrain.

African-descended people create identities to both resist exclusion and contest it, in light of their rejection from *Argentinidad*. To the extent that Black people are welcomed or accepted in Buenos Aires it is because they are sometimes exotic and fascinating. In an interview with an Afro-Colombian musician, he spoke of the

struggle for Blacks in Argentina to assert identities outside of these limitations. He said, “In here [motions to bar/disco area] I’m the cool guy, everyone wants to get close to me, talk to me, but out there on the streets, I am a threat.” His experiences show that the acceptability of blackness only varies to the extent that white Argentines permit. Anthropologist Alejandro Frigerio speaks to this occurrence. He suggests that, when trying to understand race relations in Argentina “it is necessary to distinguish between attitudes in distinct social contexts.” He says “in Argentina there exists...hard and soft areas of racism or valorization of blackness (Frigerio 2002:91). Regardless of these differing contexts, it is clear that the historic legacy of “no existen,” is alive and present in the capital city. Blackness continues to be the non-normative identity against which Argentines define and celebrate their exceptionality.

Buenos Aires, the “Paris of Latin America,” aspires to be like the global cosmopolitan cities of the world, yet is place where the roots of identity are based on the exclusion of difference. Whether in the disco or on the street, Black people in Buenos Aires experience the city as a highly race conscious space. I found myself to be hyperaware of my blackness because of the many stares and comments I received from white Argentines. Though they were most often not malicious, the constant remarking upon racial difference reinforced the deep-seated understanding of Argentina as a racially homogenous place. In this context, I was most captivated by the places and spaces where marginalized people were able to create belonging.

Because the city of Buenos Aires, like all metropolitan spaces, contains social processes in the urban landscape, the creation of physical spaces of belonging is one way for marginal subjects to contest their exclusion.

In this chapter I outlined how Buenos Aires came to represent itself as racially white and culturally European through the denial of black and indigenous peoples and their cultures. I explored the myth of Black non-existence, showing how the valorization of whiteness implicitly constructed the undesirability of blackness and its negation. I also highlighted some of the implications of these historical narratives on the experiences and representations of African-descended people in Buenos Aires today. Having now explained the historical making of blackness and the nation in Argentina, I will further my examination of Black identity through an examination of alternative communities, practices and spaces of resistance.



## Chapter Two

### Diaspora, Community and the Urban Imagination: Creating a Black Space in a White City

---

History shows that African-descended people throughout the Americas have never been passive victims of systems that repeatedly exploit, denigrate and impoverish them. Scholars of African American studies have long examined systems like global capitalism, under which empires were built on the backs of African slaves and de-facto segregation which perpetuated Black's oppression long after the abolition of slavery in the Americas. Yet, of equal interest are the forms of resistance that have arisen in response to these systems. In fact, movements of Black resistance span the existence of the circum-Atlantic.

The earliest indications of Black resistance to white domination were evident before African people even arrived in the Americas as some of the newly enslaved chose to die rather than endure the horrors of the Middle Passage (Brand 2001). In the colonial era, Black resistance resulted in slave uprisings and revolts in cities and plantations (Landers and Robinson 2006), and over time Africans in the Americas developed more subtle strategies of resistance. Cultural expression became the mode for manifesting opposition. Music and dance encoded with subversive messages were a means of decrying the conditions of captivity (Mercer, 2005: 47). Pan-African intellectual W.E.B DuBois claims that the Negro spiritual was “the one true

expression of a people's sorrow, despair and hope" (DuBois 1903) and contemporary Diaspora scholar Paul Gilroy adds, that "Black Americans were sustained...healed and nurtured by the translation of their experience into art" (1999:78). Both Gilroy and DuBois speak to the centrality of performance and expressive cultural forms in communicating shared experiences of domination.

In Argentina, even as the myth of Black non-existence had firmly taken hold, Afro-Argentines preserved parts of their community identity through expressive music and dance forms. During the 1960s and 1970s, members of an Afro-Argentine recreational society called the Shimmy Club organized Candombe<sup>33</sup> balls during which Buenos Aires' Black population could gather free from the scrutiny of white society (Frigerio 2000b). Once they entered the ballroom, Black Argentines enforced by a set of social codes that differed greatly from those of dominant society, primarily because they inverted racial hierarchies. There were rules that dictated who could dance and when. At certain times in the evening no whites were permitted to take part and only the very experienced older dancers commanded the floor. One Afro-Argentine recalls that, "all the Blacks danced, the elders danced... 'Eh, eh, eh barilo, eh, eh, eh, barilo,' and they all knew each other..." He goes on to describe the dances ending in the early hours of the morning when party-goers would pour into the streets loudly playing the drums (qtd. in Frigerio 2000b). What called out to me in

---

<sup>33</sup> Not to be confused with the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé, Candombe refers to a variety of music and dance particular to the Rio de la Plata region (Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Chile).

these recollections of the Shimmy Club were the moments of community recognition. The man talks about the norms and values that were deemed important, acknowledging the elders, respecting the dance. Despite assertions that Black people no longer existed in Buenos Aires, the club was an affirmation of the contrary. It both sustained and affirmed Black's community identity in the city.

As early as 1971, Argentina was swept up in the wave of authoritarian military regimes that took hold in many Latin American nations. For fear of political dissention, the regime prohibited almost all forms of public gathering and in 1974 the Shimmy Club was forced to close its doors. After the club closed-down Afro-Argentines lost their only gathering place in Buenos Aires and what little visibility the location garnered them. Without a place to gather, they struggled to foster a community that would allow them to resist being subsumed into a white European cultural identity. The closing of the Shimmy Club effectively dispersed Buenos Aires' Black community, demonstrating how important community presence had been as a form of resistance. In the absence of a public gathering space, Afro-Argentines virtually disappeared from mention in newspapers and other media sources (Frigerio 2000b). The Shimmy Club was an example of the power of place. The significance of the Club was not only that it afforded Afro-Argentines opportunities to gather, but also that it gave them a place to be *seen* gathering in the city.

So much of the authority of representation is vested in the metropolitan landscape. It is no mere coincidence that former Argentine president Domingo Faustino Sarmiento believed the modern European city to be the highest level of human progress and development (Criscenti 1993). The ideology of *blanqueamiento* continues to be deeply embedded in Buenos Aires' social geography, such that urban spaces are continuations of racial hierarchy and power. In *Power and Knowledge*, social theorist Michel Foucault writes, "a whole history remains to be written of spaces- which would at the same time be the history of powers (both terms in the plural)—from the great strategics of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat" (Foucault, 1980: 149). Just as Foucault implicates power in spaces, resistance to spatialized power ideologies is also leveled at urban geographies. Spaces are both mediums and materials in the production of hegemonic power structures and counter-hegemonic resistance.

The use of spaces as sites for understanding social processes requires a deconstruction of fixed notions of geographies. In *The Production of Space*, (1991) French sociologist Henri Lefebvre maintains that spaces and society are constitutive of one another and that discrimination, marginalization and racial hierarchies are spatially replicated. Using Lefebvre's theories of space to frame conceptualizations of urban spaces in Buenos Aires, I argue that within the historically constituted



relationship between dispossessed African Diaspora communities and the Argentine state, spaces are vital sites for contestation and contradiction.

In this chapter, I begin by examining how the *Movimiento AfroCultural* functions as a cultural-political movement. Through an analysis of the MAC spatial politics, I show how locations both physical and symbolic are critical sites for their creation of a collective identity. I explore the ways in which their occupation of physical space in Buenos Aires has allowed the MAC to build a sense of community and visibility for Blacks in the city. With this emphasis my objective is to ultimately show how spaces are implicated in social processes.

In order to make this point, I have divided the chapter into three sections. First, I begin by demonstrating how the Center AfroCultural functions as a site for African Diasporic identification. During the course of my research, I came to know many Afro activists, cultural workers, and organizers. While their work contributes to the of actions and initiatives of an Afro movement writ large, no other group seemed as effective in fostering community out of a Black population that is both heterogeneous and disparate. I attribute much of this success to the MAC's ability to secure a physical space in Buenos Aires. Next, I go on to interrogate the self-characterization of the *Centro AfroCultural* as the last urban *quilombo*<sup>34</sup>, exploring how time, space and collective memory are represented by the MAC's use of the

---

<sup>34</sup> The word "quilombo" is the name for historic maroon slave communities in Brazil.

image of the quilombo. Finally, I conclude by showing the importance of the *Centro AfroCultural* in altering the city's geo-historical landscape, challenging the idea of Black non-existence by carving out recognized physical spaces that are positively associated with Black people and their culture, both present and historic.

### **The MAC and the Space**

In an online statement of motivation, the *Movimiento AfroCultural* declares,

Consideramos que la cultura afro ha sido sistemáticamente negada, tanto por el Estado como por el sistema educativo y eso ha ocasionado la marginación y la invisibilización de esta comunidad.

(We consider that African-derived culture has been systematically negated by the state and education systems and this has occasioned the marginalization and invisibility of this community.)<sup>35</sup>

Founded in 2000, under the direction of an Afro-Uruguayan, Diego Bonga, the MAC is a place-based movement of counterculture. This means that its members attempt to create a physical space where African-derived culture is imbued with positive value and where members of all communities can learn about the true history of Blacks in Argentina. Prior to the MAC, Bonga and six other Uruguayan *trabajadores culturales* created a group called *Grupo Cultural Afro*, which they founded in 1987 (Frigerio 2000a). The goal of the original group was to spread knowledge and awareness of African-descendants and their culture through Candombe. Candombe is the product

---

<sup>35</sup> My translation, Taken directly from MAC online posting <http://www.mateamargo.org/agencia/node/139>

of the many different African nations that converged in Rio de la Plata during the era of slavery. Typically characterized by polyphonic rhythms played on a variety of drums, the music and dance traditions are thought to have originated in central Africa. The presence of Candombe can be found in the history of both Argentine and Uruguayan cultures, as I mentioned earlier, Afro-Argentines at the Shimmy Club gathered to dance Candombe.

The MAC facility is located in San Telmo, a neighborhood that is home to some of the longest running Candombe *comparsas*.<sup>36</sup> The *comparsas* regularly gather to play Candombe music, parading through the streets of San Telmo each weekend. These gatherings, “*llamadas de Candombe*,” continue to be an extremely important part of keeping *Afro* culture alive in Buenos Aires. San Telmo was historically known as the “*barrio del tambor*,”<sup>37</sup> because it was the place where the city’s African population lived and gathered to practice Candombe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While this historic continuity is undoubtedly significant, it is also important to note that the styles of Candombe music and dance played by these historic Black communities is not the same as the styled played by contemporary *comparsas*. In the contemporary context there are much more prominent associations between Candombe and Uruguayan culture.

---

<sup>36</sup>Carnival groups

<sup>37</sup> Neighborhood of the drum

Because the founding members of the group were all Uruguayan, and many skilled *Candomberos*, they fittingly chose to emphasize the potential of Candombe as a politicized cultural form. The group was conceived out of the belief that the tradition of Uruguayan Candombe could be used as a tool to “vindicate the Black culture of the River Plate area” (Frigerio 2000a). By organizing parades, instructional courses and performances, the group hoped to combat the perceived loss of Afro-rioplatense<sup>38</sup> culture within African-descended communities and its total absence in society at large.

The *Grupo Cultural Afro* gained some visibility in Buenos Aires’ cultural arts scene through a number of performances in recognized cultural centers, universities and other spaces throughout the city and was even invited to give a public presentation of African-derived modalities in one of the city’s well-reputed cultural centers, Ricardo Rojas. In 1990 the group launched a massive effort to organize a large-scale Candombe ensemble to play in the city’s carnival that same year. The carnival project was an ambitious attempt to gather many different groups of *Candomberos* in order to unify Buenos Aires’ Afro-Uruguayan community. Its goal was also to draw public attention to the city’s black heritage (Frigerio and Lamborghini 2009).

---

<sup>38</sup> Rioplatense literally refers to the regions surrounding the River Plate and is generally understood to refer to the particular language and cultural features shared by inhabitants of this region.

I have very briefly referenced the work of the Grupo AfroCultural, which spanned a period from 1987 through the late 90s, in order to highlight the continuities and changes between the original *Grupo AfroCultural* and the later *Movimiento AfroCultural*. One could argue that while the *Grupo AfroCultural* organized an agenda structured by their goals of increasing visibility for Black culture and history; they were largely focused on achieving and fostering these goals through the Afro-Uruguayan communities. In the period following the late-90s, a number of events occurred that prompted the group to begin moving beyond a nationalistic perspective to a more Diasporic standpoint. I will show that these events were deeply influenced by the racialized processes inscribed in public spaces.

In 1996 one of the founding members of the organization, José Acosta Martínez, was killed after an encounter with police in Buenos Aires. The case, which was shrouded in suspicious circumstances, is now widely acknowledged as having been racially motivated. According to reports (COFAVI, 2002), Martínez supposedly intervened in the defense of a few Afro-Brazilians, who he believed were being unfairly targeted by police outside of a nightclub. In the ensuing altercation Martínez was arrested and taken into police custody. Shortly thereafter he was pronounced dead as the result of a cocaine overdose. Although substantial evidence suggests that Martínez suffered traumatic injuries from a beating, the case was quickly closed.

Martínez's death shed light on the fact that racially motivated acts of physical violence could and did occur against African-descended people in Buenos Aires. In *Never Meant to Survive: Genocides and Utopias in Black Diaspora Communities*, (2008: xxi). João Costa Vargas examines the connection between the many dead and dying Black people in urban ghettos and the idea of an "anti-black genocide." According to Vargas, anti-black genocide refers to the "...—physical, spiritual and political" death of black people and communities" (2008: xx). He proposes that incidents of police violence against Blacks are just one of the ways in which white supremacist ideologies permeate physical spaces. The targeting of Black bodies as suspect, susceptible to police brutality renders the urban environment into a hostile racialized space. While the rhetoric of organizations like Grupo AfroCultural had up until then been leveled at invisibility narratives, historical erasure and social-cultural othering—forms of subjugation that Pierre Bourdieu terms "symbolic violence,"—the death of José Martínez indicated that a movement for positive representation alone would not suffice.

While actions of *the Grupo AfroCultural* spoke most specifically to Afro-Uruguayans communities, the violence enacted against Martínez transcended the boundaries of nationalistic identity. In the aftermath of the murder, Martínez's brother Angel Martínez, organized another *comparsa* dedicated to José's memory. Even more ambitious than the first *comparsa*, this second featured groups

representing many African-descended communities, including a group of Afro-Brazilians dancers and another of African drummers (“*Homenaje*”).

Bonga indicates that the tragic death of José Martínez served as an important turning point for the organization. In an interview with the magazine *Quilombo*, he references his death as an example of Blacks’ continued struggle toward emancipation. He is quoted saying, “...*esta lucha que aun no termina, mucha gente murió por eso y todavía estamos emancipándonos*” (this struggle is still not over, many people have died and because of this we are still emancipating ourselves) (Dinah, 2007). Bonga claims that after this incident, there was a shift in the group’s motivation from simply using culture as a means of education and awareness to “conscientizing blackness”<sup>39</sup> for liberatory ends. Both the death of José Martínez and the subsequent closing of the MAC cultural center were catalysts for the emergence of a community movement towards Black solidarity.

In 2000, the *Grupo AfroCultural* was formally established under the new name *Movimiento AfroCultural*, a move which was in line with their shift towards a clearly defined activist identity. Though Bonga and the others did not originally conceive of the organization as an overt political project, their actions in the early part of the new millennium signaled a shift toward making more demands on the city government. The MAC took over operations at the former *Grupo AfroCultural* location in

---

<sup>39</sup> Reference to Paulo Friere conscientização, from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1967)

*Barracas*, a working-class neighborhood in the northeastern section of the city. The Center in *Barracas* offered cultural-based activities to the greater community and used the space to provide homes for members of the MAC and other African-descended families. Before the MAC occupied the space for its use as a cultural center, it was an empty building abandoned by its previous owners because of a massive debt to the city. In 2009, city officials returned to retake the property which had been neglected for over a decade and issued an eviction warning which gave the MAC only a few weeks to vacate the property.

In recent decades there has been significant conflict in Buenos Aires around the massive illegal occupation of buildings by the city's urban poor. Though the MAC's *Barracas* location only housed about sixteen families, however these *casas tomadas* or *edificios usurpados*, (occupied buildings) have been known to house hundreds of urban squatter. The *casas tomadas*—typically associated with the poverty and stigmatized as being sites of criminal activity— actually provide homes to many of the city's Black, brown and immigrant population. The eviction of the MAC was part of a widespread crack-down to begin regulating these spaces. The way in which the group responded to the eviction is exemplary of how a struggle of spatial belonging took on racialized dimensions, and was ultimately the catalyst for expressions of solidarity and collective Black identity.



In March 2009, only a few weeks after MAC received the orders to vacate their space, the group held a day of resistance as an event to protest the eviction. They issued this targeted press release:

**¡BASTA de racismo!**

**¡BASTA de desalojo permanente y genocida!**

*Ahora más que nunca necesitamos de la solidaridad y el apoyo de todos los sectores, para que se sumen a esta lucha que no es sólo nuestra ni solamente por un espacio, sino contra la opresión y el genocidio que lleva más de 500 años, contra la imposición de una cultura sobre otra, contra el exterminio de la diversidad*

[Now more than ever we need solidarity and support from all groups, in order to grow this struggle which is not only our struggle nor only about a space, but against the oppression and the genocide that has lasted for over 500 years, against the imposition of one culture over another, against the extermination of diversity] (Press Release, Movimiento AfroCultural, March 2009)<sup>40</sup>

The events of the day were attended by many including African-descended people who had previously been uninvolved in the groups undertaking (“Desalojo”). In the weeks that followed they organized many protests outside of the buildings of city officials and were featured in a number of newspaper articles including a piece in La Nacion, one of Buenos Aires’ most widely read print and online publications. The campaign to fight the eviction gained attention and support not only from Blacks, but from poor, indigenous and other marginalized individuals, though the central point of the message remained focused on the fight as a continuation of historic Black

---

<sup>40</sup> My Translation

struggles. The fight for the space touched upon many unreconciled race and class issues, making it relevant for other communities beyond the MAC.

Ultimately they successfully forced the city to respond to their protests, primarily because the group framed the eviction as a violation of their basic human rights as well as the National Congress and city constitution, official documents which guaranteed cultural democracy. The MAC demanded that the city provide an alternative space for them to continue their cultural work and supply living subsidies for the families that were to be displaced. In the end, after many meetings and negotiations with officials, the city issued Resolution 1081 which formally established the AfroCultural program under the charge of the Office of the Subsecretary of Culture to be co-administered by the group *Movimiento AfroCultural*. The MAC would take over the facilities of a cultural center in the neighborhood of San Telmo, a decided upgrade from the Barracas location, though only a few miles away.

It is important to note that although the MAC was incorporated into the city government, they maintain the autonomy to decide how they use the space. This is likely due to the fact that the city does not directly fund the upkeep of the facility or the activities that take place at the Centro AfroCultural. They are “co-administrators” for the most part in name only. (Note: I was unable to determine what type of compensation the families received, although initial offers from the state stipulated

20,000 pesos/month<sup>41</sup> as a living subsidy per family—an amount that was deemed insufficient by the group)

### **Barrio Del Tambor and the Last Urban Quilombo**

---

The eviction was a significant turning point for the MAC in that it garnered awareness of the organization and incited membership from other African-descended communities. The rhetoric of an African Diasporic struggle helped the group to gain traction for their cause, but it was their ability to turn a private dispute into an indictment against society that allowed for the making of Diasporic identification with the struggle. During the time that the MAC faced eviction from the Barracas location they evoked an image of the cultural center as the “ultimo quilombo urbano.”<sup>42</sup> The word quilombo refers to historic fugitive slave communities that once existed in Brazil. When I asked Bonga why they chose to identify with the image of the quilombo he responded:

*“la cultura quilombola es vivir en libertad y luchar por territorio, por el hogar, por los vínculos sociales y culturales afro originarios.”*

---

<sup>41</sup> 20,000 equal approximately 5,000 USD

<sup>42</sup> The last urban quilombo

(The quilombola culture is about living and fighting for territory, for home, for the social and cultural links to our African origins)<sup>43</sup>

The MAC connected with the image of quilombos not only as historic locations, but as sites that embodied of a particular way of life. According to Oscar Chamosa, whose work follows the transformation of African nations into New World Black communities, the word quilombo can be traced back to the marauding Imbangala warriors of sixteenth and seventeenth century Angola. Citing the work of Joséph Stewart, Chamosa notes that “the kilombo was a masculine initiation ritual that cemented a new loyalty (to the Imbangala warlords) among roaming bands of warriors from detached lineages and clans.”(2003:354) Tracing the genealogy of the more well-known New World concept of quilombo, Chamosa brings together the work of several scholars who draw parallels between the meaning and manifestation of the term in the context of Brazil with its earlier use in Angola. He shows that quilombos and kilombos on both sides of the Atlantic involved the ceremonious integration of individuals from disparate nations and ethnic groups into a single community, suggesting that the semantic resemblance between the words kilombo and quilombo as well as the community ideologies they embodied, were both trans-oceanic carry-overs. The quilombo was a site where disparate African nations formed cohesive communities. Representations of the *Centro AfroCultural* as the last urban

---

<sup>43</sup> personal interview

quilombo aim to create a comparable community out of Buenos Aires' disparate African Diaspora population.

The *Centro AfroCultural* has indeed become a community for many different African Diasporic people. I witnessed countless events in the space that seemed more like family reunions than official programs. There was something to be said for the effect of so many Black people gathered in one space as compared to the relative whiteness of the rest of the city. I only witnessed such large gatherings of African-descended people in two other places. The first was in the working-class neighborhood of Once, where Dominican women of African descent work as prostitutes in a square that is aptly called Plaza *Miserere*.<sup>44</sup> The second place was in a commercial shopping district in the downtown area. The district is filled with vendors and shops and known to be the place where you can buy cheap gold jewelry from the many Senegalese street vendors who line the blocks. Both the women in the plaza and the street vendors are stigmatized for the work that they engage in. They form a part of an unofficial and unauthorized sector of the urban economy and landscape. In contrast to the spaces that these, which are marginal to the urban metropolitan identity, the *Centro AfroCultural* is centrally located; it is a space where Black bodies are allowed full subjectivity, where they are celebrated rather than suspect.

---

<sup>44</sup> Pronunciation of the word "miserere" in Spanish sounds much like the English word misery

The Center is located on one of San Telmo's busiest tourist thoroughfares. It is by all accounts a modest facility; yet it has a presence that begs passersby to stop and explore for a moment. The outside of the building is surrounded by a large open courtyard overlooked by a kitschy mural typical of recreational and community centers. Even the large iron gates surrounding the facility, which I rarely witnessed unopened, are painted a bright sunshine yellow that stands out against the grey and brown of the neighboring buildings. One of my earliest encounters with the *Centro AfroCultural* occurred in July of 2009. While this visit was perhaps less memorable than other times I spent at the Center over a period of several months, I do remember being struck by one thing in particular. Apart from the nondescript banquet hall, the center displays a small exhibit of photographs, musical instruments and crafts from the African Diaspora which offers visitors a bite-sized sampling of artifacts.

One of the images on display was the graphic photograph best known as "The Scourged Back."<sup>45</sup> This photograph was immediately recognizable to me as it forms part of a set of iconic images of African-American suffering with which most Black Americans are familiar. It is fair to say that this image and others like it are one of the ways that African Americans experience a connection to the history of slavery as personal history. The image of a man who is simply described as "a slave named

---

<sup>45</sup> This photograph printed in the July 4, 1863 issue of Harper's Weekly, displays the severely beaten body of a captured runaway slave from Louisiana. It was widely disseminated by American abolitionist to decry the horrors of slavery.

Gordon,” and other images like it are more than just old photographs. In their anonymity, they have the potential to be any African-American’s unnamed ancestors. Seeing this image displayed in the *Centro AfroCultural* evoked a similar response from me as the image of the quilombo might for Latin American Blacks passing through the center. Though mine was a simple and seemingly vague moment of recognition it speaks to the idea of material, sites, stories and images as the basis of what Gilroy calls a “mnemonic function.” These images shape a group consciousness of collective history irrespective of national origins or geographic specificity (1993).

### **Centro AfroCultural as a Site of Diasporic Identification**

---

After this first visit to the MAC, over the course my research I spent many hours in the *Centro AfroCultural* and the surrounding neighborhood of San Telmo. I will explain how I came to find the cultural center, as my own discovery of it speaks more broadly to the ways that places become sites of identification particularly for African-descended people navigating the racialized metropolitan space that is Buenos Aires.

The first time I visited the Center I had gone to the San Telmo’s weekly artisanal fair to meet a friend of mine, Geisa, a fair-skinned Afro-Brazilian girl from Rio de Janeiro who was also spending the semester abroad in Argentina. I quickly

learned that there was a code between African-descended people in Buenos Aires. The code occasions, at the very least, a subtle acknowledgment through a smile or nod, but I found more often than not it also led to conversations and on the rare occasion, new friendships. This is how I met Geisa. After commiserating over stories of the stares and shouts we received as Black women in Buenos Aires and our mutual love of Micheal Jackson, our friendship was solidified.

On that particular day, we decided to spend the afternoon together wandering the streets of San Telmo. Because the fair is such a huge tourist attraction there are typically many Black Americans and African-descended people. Geisa and I together did not draw as much attention as we normally did in other spaces. Towards the end of the afternoon, just as the sun went down and most of the street vendors began packing up, we could hear the sound of drumming at a distance. Geisa was familiar with the Candombe processions and described to me the crowds of people that typically joined to dance behind. She told me that the processions happened every Sunday at dusk and suggested we find them because there would be many people like *us* playing the drums and dancing in the streets. With her persuasion we followed the sound of the drumming and joined the *comparsa* procession for several blocks. We ended up dancing through the streets with a group Candomberos, many of whom I



identified as African-descended<sup>46</sup>. The *comparsa* marched down the street in mob of people loosely divided into sections. The drummers formed about two rows and followed the direction of one leader, an older Black man whose signals dictated the rhythms. In front of the drum section was a group of men and women dancing in a coordinated step which I reminded me of the popular dance from home, the cha-cha slide. Behind and alongside the drummers were crowds of both spectators and individuals simply there to enjoy the revelry, bobbing along to the beat of the drums as the group made its way down the block. Geisa and I stayed with the procession until it reached its final destination, the MAC facility on Calle Defensa. Though Geisa was familiar with the processions, neither of us had ever been to the Centro AfroCultural.

When we entered the facility the first person we met was Diego Bonga. In introductory conversation that ensued we spoke for a minute as the rest of the group packed the drums away. During our brief conversation Diego insisted that we return to the Center to participate in a Capoeira Angola class later that week. Geisa was thrilled to find that they offered capoeira, something she had done since childhood, and I was just happy to have found other Black folks. For the first time since my arrival in Buenos Aires, I found myself in a room where the majority of the people were Black and brown. Though we were unable to stay at the center for more than a

---

<sup>46</sup> As I asserted earlier, racial categories are based on self-identification in Latin America. I am careful to only speculate about someone's being African-descended until they have affirmed a Black identity

few moments, as we left, we both excitedly acknowledged how glad we were to have found the place, promising to return as soon as we could.

My encounter with the *comparsa* and the cultural center was a shared moment of identification between Geisa and me. Though our understandings of black identity were shaped by very different cultural backgrounds and racial contexts, both she and I were drawn to the Candombe *comparsa* and the cultural center precisely because of our desire to “be with people like us.” There was never a moment of confusion about the “us” we each referred to, despite the many differences that separated Geisa and me from each other and from the group of Candomberos in the street. It was a moment that I recognized as African Diasporic identification.

Initially, Geisa and I felt at comfortable in the *Centro AfroCultural* because of the way in which, as Black people in Buenos Aires, we had been made to feel like outsiders in so many other spaces. However, our experiences of exclusion over the course of several months in Buenos Aires were not the basis of our shared sense of belonging in that space. We did not each suddenly realize that we felt comfortable around other African-descended people only after experiencing racism in Argentina. Our initial encounter with the *Centro AfroCultural* compels an interrogation of places as sites of diasporic identification and more broadly raises questions about black identity and the politics of belonging in the African Diaspora.

In *Rethinking the African Diaspora: Global Dimensions*, African-American Studies scholar Ruth Simms Hamilton proposes that Diasporas are “communities of consciousness.” She suggests that common experiences of racialized oppression including—discrimination, prejudice and political disenfranchisement—become “sites of subject formation.” Meaning, not only that Black identities are shaped by these experiences, but also by collective contestations to the practices, institutions and ideologies of oppression. More specifically she writes,

All global African peoples have struggled to be subjects of their own history; to establish places and spaces of meaning and material survival; to create institutions that offer venues for and visions of a just society. These social experiences and relations inscribing processes of collective identity reformation... ‘*produce the conditions* for the construction of group identities’” (2007: 9).

I am interested in Hamilton’s assertion that African-descended people create “places and spaces of meaning.” She rightfully acknowledges that identification with Diaspora and relationships to Diasporic communities are not fixed. Black identities are constantly being made and remade, thus, Diasporic identification is marked by both “process and condition” constantly changing in response to local contexts (Kelley and Patterson). What makes the *Centro AfroCultural* a place of meaning and African Diasporic identification? In thinking about how I was led to the Center and why I continued to return thereafter, a single image comes to mind, one of me unburdening my blackness. I only realized in the space of the Center that I had been

carrying my Black skin around Buenos Aires like a heavy load, the weight of which could only be felt in its absence.

The notion that Black people are invisible in Argentina is a contradictory assertion. They are invisible to the extent that they are not recognized as parts of the Argentine identity, however at the interpersonal level; Black subjects garner much attention for their “rarity.” I can recall countless experiences of riding the bus in Buenos Aires and being surveyed from head to toe. It was not uncommon to hear someone audibly whisper, “*mira la morocha*<sup>47</sup>,” (look at the Black girl). Many times during conversations with members of the MAC community we would swap absurd stories of white Argentines making spectacles of us. These occurrences, termed hyper visibility, have been analyzed comprehensively by many Black Studies scholars (Fanon 1967, Ulysse 2007, Hammonds 2004, Yancy 2008). The experience of being hypervisble, for me and for many of the people that I spoke with at the MAC, made the *Centro AfroCultural* feel like a safe haven, a place where being Black did not mean being a spectacle.

There are many reasons that people choose to identify with spaces beyond their material properties. Thus, far I have demonstrated how the MAC created a place of belonging for African-descended people and worked to address institutionalized systems of racism through the medium of Black culture. In the next chapter I will

---

<sup>47</sup> Morocha is used colloquially to refer to people with dark skin and dark hair, can be used when speaking about white people, but is also a more polite way of referring to black or brown skin people.

broaden my scope to assess other sites where Black culture is performed, practiced and viewed.

### Chapter Three

## A Movement of Blackness en Vogue: Commodifying Cultural Resistance Movements

---

How does one assess the impact of projects that often strive for difficult-to-measure results like stimulating dialogue, raising consciousness, or empowering a community?

--Nina Fleshin

During the course of my ethnographic work in Buenos Aires, I wondered how as a researcher I could determine the success of a cultural movement as a politics of liberation. This chapter explores the dissonance between what I experienced to be a city brimming with representations of all things ethnic, in contrast to the treatment of Blacks and ethnic minorities<sup>48</sup> in social and political spheres. Afro-descendants and other ethnic minorities in Buenos Aires are permitted to “color” the urban landscape in strategically-predetermined ways without fundamentally disrupting the foundational idea of the nation as white and European (Surrenti 2009, Frigerio 2009, Lacarrieu 2003). Ultimately, I will reveal how narratives of multiculturalism in Argentina are complicit with exclusionary notions of *Argentinedad*.

---

<sup>48</sup> Blacks Studies and Cultural Studies problematized the use of the term “minority” on the basis that it is complicit with the language of white Eurocentric patriarchal hegemony, though I found the term to be still widely used in literature of Latin American studies. I problematize its use here because the term presupposes a relationship of dominant and minor cultures, attaching racial and ethnic identifiers to some but not all peoples and cultures. Argentina like the U.S is a nation composed of many cultures, however ,by virtue of their whiteness, European immigrant and their descendents, are absorbed into understandings of Argentine identity, while black and indigenous cultures are designated minority status.

Although concessions won by overtly political projects are quantifiable, at least in part, by legal or constitutional amendments, how does one measure a movement aimed at eradicating an ideology or set of beliefs? In strictly material terms, the MAC's ability to secure a location from the city of Buenos Aires can be considered a major victory, as they were able to reterritorialize a neighborhood that the city's Black population once occupied. On the other hand, the incorporation of the MAC into the very system that continues to orchestrate the exclusion of Black people complicates this "victory." Stuart Hall implores us to abandon the "zero-sum cultural game" which suggests that there are distinct winners or losers in the struggle to displace cultural hegemony. In particular, he acknowledges that "spaces 'won' for differences are few and far between, that they are very carefully policed and regulated...that there is always a price of incorporation to be paid when the cutting edge of difference and transgression is blunted into specularization." He writes, "I know that what replaces invisibility is the kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility" (1996: 3). I maintain the importance of the MAC in revitalizing the cultural geo-historical landscape in San Telmo and the importance of the *barrio del tambor* in reviving the memory of African-descendants in Buenos Aires. Nonetheless, it is also significant to note, as Hall suggests, the conditions under which these concessions are made, to pay attention to the price that is paid.

Power structures are unlikely to make concessions that are not, at least in some measure, to their own benefit. The allocation of a space in San Telmo is appropriate or sanctionable in a way that would not be possible in other sectors of the city. For example, if the city were to place the MAC in a neighborhood like Puerto Madero, a new and rapidly-developing center of commerce and foreign exchange, it would be a very different symbolic gesture. While the *Centro AfroCultural* is a site of great significance for the Afro movement, it is also important to acknowledge how the allocation or *relegation* of the MAC facility in San Telmo represents a particular process of negotiation and capitulation in which state hegemonic power is not wholly displaced. That is to say: the MAC invoking a particular continuity with the memory of a Black presence in San Telmo joined with the city's interest in promoting the neighborhood as a historic district and tourist attraction, resulting in a convergence of opportunity for both sides. While the performances that take place at the *Centro AfroCultural* are undeniably transgressive; the allocation of a space in San Telmo has other implications. Fixing African-descendents to a particular historical moment, symbolically and spatially regulates Black urban subjects and their cultures. The tendency to designate Black culture as static and unchanging has been a common motif in the historic treatment of Africa and members of the Diaspora. Thus, placing the *Centro AfroCultural* in a historic neighborhood was a way of asserting that Black people belong to a long-gone or pre-modern era of Argentine history.



Latin American Studies scholar Fernanda Peñazola suggests that the conceptualization of African-descendants as static remnants of a colonial past is one of the results of the narrative of invisibility. This is just one example of the ways in which cultural activist work aimed at destabilizing fictional constructions of blackness, become entangled with the “reductive versions of culture” perpetuated by these myths (2007:229). While this acknowledgment does not by any means discount the progress made by the MAC, the community that they build and the liberation philosophy that they embody, it does demonstrate the great difficulty of confronting a state government adept at strategies of appeasement.

It became clearer to me throughout my research that there are many blurred edges between transgression and incorporation. In this chapter, I explore the vacillating boundary that marks the space between these two objectives: a space defined by the collision of Afro-activist movements seeking to use culture as a tool of social transformation, and city policies of multiculturalism that seek to incorporate these social actors through a discourse of diversity. This has also resulted in the appropriation and commodification of Black culture in Buenos Aires, a trend that I call “blackness in vogue.”<sup>49</sup> My purpose is to unpack the phenomenon that threatens to depoliticize the MAC's performance culture as a liberation ideology. To do so, I interrogate the problematic interest that white Argentines have in Black culture. This

---

<sup>49</sup>Reference to David Levering Lewis' “When Harlem was in Vogue” (1981)

is not a novel phenomenon, rather a manifestation of what anthropologist Renato Resaldo calls "imperialist nostalgia," the desire of a dominator to reclaim something whose existence they "intentionally altered or destroyed" (1989:107). In Buenos Aires, Black culture, once stigmatized and deliberately erased, is now an object of fascination for hip white Argentines.

### **Problematizing Multiculturalism in Contemporary Latin America**

During the late 1980s and 1990s, state policies of multiculturalism were introduced in many Latin American nations via widespread constitutional amendments. In 1994, Argentina's constitution was amended to incorporate language that acknowledged and granted special rights to certain indigenous populations and which also redefined the nation as "multiethnic" (Hau, 2009: 1). The tenants of liberal multiculturalism in Latin American democracies<sup>50</sup> were articulated through language that asserted nations as "multi-ethnic," "multicultural," or "pluriethnic," acknowledging, for the first time in many places, the specific histories of marginalized peoples. These changes, which were largely prompted by well-organized local and transnational indigenous rights groups, resulted in much of the legislation specifically addressing indigenous communities. Nevertheless, they were seen as victories for all ethnic minorities because the idea of multi-ethnicity stands in direct contrast to

---

<sup>50</sup> See language used in constitutional amendments in Colombia 1991, Nicaragua 1987 and Ecuador 1998

racializing national ideologies like *blanqueamiento* historically used to downplay the contributions of African-descendants and indigenous peoples. Throughout Latin America and specifically in the Andean regions of the continent, this new language legally recognized the unique identities of ethnic minorities. The shift toward a multicultural rhetoric is observed to be a hemispheric if not global phenomenon. Yet, articulations of multiculturalism throughout Latin America display varying degrees of consistency in their application as political and social agendas. In some places like Ecuador and Colombia, these constitutional amendments conferred land and language rights to certain communities<sup>51</sup> (Sieder 2002). In other places like Argentina, multiculturalism as a political project resulted in fewer policy changes and has been described by some as “light multiculturalism” (qtd Frigerio 2009). The different applications of these political policies in Latin America speak to the multiplicity of meanings (both theoretical and practical) engendered by the word “multicultural,” a term that is equally celebrated and criticized.<sup>52</sup> In particular, urban anthropologist John Nagle suggests that scholars have taken issue with the term because of its interpretive limitations. Multiculturalism approaches cultures as hermetically closed off entities, impervious to outside influences.

---

<sup>51</sup>Land reform legislation has been implemented with varying degrees of success; many of the promises made by these governments have yet to be fulfilled.

<sup>52</sup> For more extensive work on debates about “Multiculturalism” see Diane Ravitch “Multiculturalism: E Pluribus Plures” and Ronald Takaki “Multiculturalism: Battleground or Meeting Ground”

As I examine the implications of multiculturalism, I defined the term in a conceptual framework that reflects its application in the context of cultural politics in Argentina. The rhetoric of multiculturalism evoked in Argentine national discourse is best described through the idea of “pluralist multiculturalism” (Prato 2009:5). It is a position that celebrates the “cultural mosaic” created by diversity, with each piece of the mosaic adding some individual quality under the larger umbrella of the nation. This type of multiculturalism is supported through exhibitions of ethnicity and culture. It praises difference for the cross-cultural exchanges that it facilitates but does not critically address the unequal relationships that arise from difference. Ultimately, this perspective interprets cultural diversity as the successful end result of multicultural policies.

There is a general consensus that diversity in its simplest manifestation is a positive objective, but too often these can obscure an understanding of its applicability as a policy for addressing multiple facets of inequity. In a simple yet keen observation, urban anthropologist Giuliana Prato suggests that we ask “whether multiculturalism (not only as a theory, but more crucially, as a political practice) does promote equality of opportunity,” and “whether the protection...of cultural diversity alone eliminate(s) discrimination” (2009: 7). Prato's provocation serves to destabilize the assumption that multiculturalism as a political practice *is* inherently concerned with redressing systems of inequity. As seen in parts of Latin America, multicultural

policies addressing inequity have resulted in civil rights and collective right legislation. Conversely, multicultural policies that seek only to promote the *recognition* of cultural diversity can actually divert attention away from a political agenda that addresses the historical wrongs and/or the continued marginalization of ethnic minorities in other realms. The celebration of cultural diversity in itself does not accomplish social transformations. In the context of my argument I find that it is necessary to problematize this conflation by closely looking at the diversity paradigm of multiculturalism. Cultural theorist David Bennett argues:

State-managed multiculturalisms reify and eroticize alterity; addressing ethnic and racial difference as a question of ‘identity’ rather than history and politics, they translate alterity as cultural diversity, treating difference (a relation) as an intrinsic property of ‘cultures’ and as a value (a socially enriching one), to be represented as such (1998: 4).

The so-called cross-cultural exchanges that arise out of diversity initiatives display a high degree of ambivalence to the power dynamics present in cultural interactions. Diversity as such can become a euphemism for what is more accurately called “imperial cosmopolitanism” (Nagle 2009:29). Defined as the consumption of ethnic culture by privileged elites, imperial cosmopolitanism is a process in which western Eurocentric culture is understood as the unmarked norm. Ethnic cultures defined strictly by their relational alterity or otherness, are consumed as “ethnic flavor,” presented as diversity. Through this process, raced, classed, gendered and cultural

hierarchies are sustained and the global city retains its image as a multicultural cosmopolitan space (Nagle, 2009).

### **Contested Understandings of Multiculturalism in the Global City**

---

A discussion of multicultural politics in Buenos Aires would be incomplete without a brief overview of the impacts of the forces of globalization and transnationalism on national politics. Social scientist Alex Dupuy generally defines globalization as the “increasing integration and interdependence of the countries, economies and peoples of the world,” (Dupuy, 2001:93). This process has effectively increased the ability of international corporations to exert influence over domestic issues like national politics and policy. Argentina’s adoption of a multicultural rhetoric cannot be read separately from the shift in rhetoric throughout Latin America. It is true that these changes came about in response to demands made by activist communities; however, it is important to note that many of these local organizations were supported by international agencies like the United Nations, World Bank, UNESCO, and the Inter-American Development Bank (Paschel and Sawyer 2008). In her work on multicultural policy-making in Argentina, anthropologist Monica Laccarieu suggests that these organizations, helped to propel

multiculturalism into the forefront by supporting initiatives that celebrate diversity as a valued and enriching quality of any global city (Frigerio 2009, Laccarieu 2003).

In “Taking Race Seriously,” cultural anthropologist Galen Joséph examines the discourse of whiteness as a manifestation of Argentine’s anxieties over their position in the global hierarchy. Namely, Joseph examines the disjunction between Argentina’s first world aspirations and third-world realities. The history of Argentine nationhood speaks to these anxieties and reveals a nation and city (Buenos Aires) self-consciously vying to be recognized among the great modern European cities of the world.<sup>53</sup> Joseph further shows how whiteness is used to compensate for Argentina’s perceived third-worldness. “Whiteness crystallizes as a form of ‘cultural capital,’” he writes, “a sign of belonging to an idealized European or first-world” (Joseph 2010: 345, Bourdieu 1984). The Argentine cultural value system is predicated on a desire to resemble western European modernity. In the past this resemblance has been symbolically achieved through the trope of whiteness. However, in the contemporary era of globalization, the new standard for evaluating modern “first-worldness” is undoubtedly linked to the idea of the multicultural “global city”(Nagle, 2009: 7-15 ).

A certain brand of multiculturalism is now used as one measure of a city’s cosmopolitanism. For example, London and New York are counted among the great global cities of the world, in part because they are centers of global commerce, but

---

<sup>53</sup> See Galen Joseph’s “Taking race Seriously: Whiteness in Argentina” For an analysis of anxieties of development and modernity in shaping Argentine identity.

also because they offer particular cultural environments. These environments are highly transnational, exhibiting a porousness that allows for the rapid movement of goods, capital, and culture from around the world. These urban spaces are also often highly cosmopolitan, sites where cultures collide in processes of exchange that are as complex, integrated and interconnected as the economic processes that characterize them. Multiculturalism and the rhetoric of diversity have become trademarks of these modern global cities. In effect, certain displays or experiences of culture are positive to the image of these cities. Social scientist Silvia Surrenti calls this the “consumption of experiences,” a phenomenon that she views in tandem with increasingly orientalized Western societies (2009:202). The global city offers the chance to experience sanitized versions of almost any culture in the world, all from a single geographic location. Benefitting from images of diversity and cross-cultural exchange the experiences that they engender are transformed into commodities to be consumed by foreign tourists and locals alike.

We are thus led to wonder how a national rhetoric of multiculturalism that celebrates difference can coexist with assertions of an Argentine national identity that is imagined to be homogeneously white? The truth is that multiculturalism as it is implemented in Argentina is surprisingly compatible with exclusionary conceptions of the nation. Multiculturalism in Buenos Aires is mainly pursued through state-sponsored cultural spaces and cultural festivals, performances and events. A prime



example is the annual *Ferias de Colectividades*, which is a cultural fair. The city hosts a website for the event in which they offer an overview of the objectives of the fair:

*El encuentro reunirá alrededor de 50 stands, que ofrecerán vestimentas y trajes típicos, artesanías, gastronomía, productos regionales, música, canto y danzas. Con la intención de promover la integración, la cultura y el turismo en nuestro país, la feria reunirá colectividades de distintos países y regiones.*

[The gathering will unite around 50 stands that will offer traditional dresses and suits, artesanal good, food, regional crafts, music, singing and dance. With the intention of promoting integration, culture and *tourism* in our country, the fair will unite collectives from distinct countries and regions]<sup>54</sup>

The event and its announcement promote the false notion that integration is somehow achieved through regulated moments of contact. Events like this one demonstrate the ways in which cultural difference is translated into economic opportunity (hooks, 1992). More troubling than the consumptive relationship created by an event like the *feria de colectividades*, is how revealing it was of the apolitical goals of Argentina's multicultural agenda. Larger unreconciled issues of racial and ethnic difference are subsumed into superficial performances of cultural diversity that do nothing to address the daily exclusion of these subjects in Argentine society and imagined national identity. By displaying these cultures as objects of alterity to be consumed, events like the fair further displace ethnic minorities and their cultures outside of the identity of the nation, thus reinforcing constructions of Argentina as

---

<sup>54</sup> My translation

This link goes to the *feria de colectividades* homepage <http://cultura.buenosaires.gov.ar>

racially homogenous. Brian Nagle suggests that multicultural narratives in Buenos Aires are at least one way in which marginal subjects are able to find a degree of recognition in the imagined community, if not as part of the national identity at least as contributors to a vibrant cultural landscape (Nagle, 2009). This position is a sweeping concession that, in the case of Buenos Aires, can only strengthen the perceived fact of Argentine whiteness that Afro-activists and other social movements attempt to dismantle.

Interrogations of multiculturalism and the diversity paradigm call into question assumptions that claim state-sponsored initiatives to be pathways toward equality of opportunity and multi-ethnic and racial belonging. The continued denial of African-descended people in Argentine society is living testimony to the contrary. In fact, the designation of Black culture as alterity is accomplished through both narratives of multiculturalism and whiteness. However, multicultural narratives do endorse certain superficial excursions into the unknown cultures of the Other. I am interested in what happens when Black culture, denied as part of Argentina's national identity, is taken up by Argentines as an object of fascination to be consumed by whites looking for "a bit of the Other?" (hooks 1992: 367).

## Blackness in Vogue: Commodification, Appreciation, Appropriation

---

During the time I spent conducting research in Argentina many people believed that Buenos Aires' Black cultural landscape was undergoing a moment of significant activity. On any given night I could participate in a Candombe class, see an African drumming showcase, or listen to Brazilian samba music in a performing arts center; however, I found that unlike the Centro AfroCultural, these spaces offered performances and classes that were de-historicized and apolitical. Yet, the increased visibility of activist organizations like the MAC and the growing interest among white Argentines in practicing Black cultural forms was deemed by some<sup>55</sup> to signal a "Black renaissance." The evocation of a black renaissance is almost laughable in light of the treatment of African-descendent people in Buenos Aires as fictive spectacles. I employ the image of "blackness in vogue" in order to critique assumptions that a saturation of white interest in adopting Black culture is tantamount to a renaissance movement. If this were true, the renaissance would have begun long ago. In fact the renaissance would have flourished by the mid-nineteenth century when it was not uncommon to see white Argentines parading through the streets of Buenos Aires in

---

<sup>55</sup> This is sentiment that I heard echoed from Black and white people in Buenos Aires. Anthropologist Alejandro Frigerio uses the term "black renaissance" to describe the current state of Black cultural politics in Buenos Aires.

blackface (Chasteen 2004: 59-63). The term "blackness in vogue," counters the conflation of Afro-activism with white appropriations of blackness.

To begin any critique of the cultural politics of appropriation, my analysis must deal first with the politics of authenticity. My work is situated with that of the many Black Studies scholars who have asserted that analyses of Black performances and performance identity must come out of an anti-essentialist and self-representational point of reference ( Rahier 1999, Ulysse 2007, Mercer 2008).

Following Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic analytics, my assessment of the Black cultural field in Buenos Aires is grounded in the view that there is no authentic origin that owns puritanical claims to Black Atlantic cultures. Rather, the creation of culture is an ongoing process of making and remaking with global dimensions that are not tied to any one people or locality. Nor is it true that certain bodies are inherently endowed with the ability to speak for black culture. bell hooks, echoing art critic Jill MacDougall, asserts that African-American performance is a critical ethnography with each individual representing a partial truth that metonymically speaks to some aspect of Black experience. Likewise, performances of Black cultures are not confined to black bodies; just as performances located outside of black bodies do not naturally signal commodification or appropriation. What I interrogated in this work are the racialized and (de)politicized dimensions of performances and representations of Black culture in Buenos Aires.

There is no shortage of opportunities to experience culture in Buenos Aires. It is a city that lends itself to both the cultural connoisseur and urban explorer. During the early weeks of my first trip to Buenos Aires, I gave in to all of the tourist traps, indulging in lunches at over-priced but “historically significant” cafes and visiting all of the city’s important cultural sites. One of the declared “must-dos” for tourists in Buenos Aires is a popular improvisational drumming show called La Bomba del Tiempo, which takes place weekly in an outdoor auditorium. Each Monday night the show draws a large crowd of hippy Argentines and foreign tourists who come to hear the rhythmic improvisations. Of the group of seventeen to twenty drummers, two are African-descended. Although the music is clearly influenced by African-derived rhythms, La Bomba is not marketed as a black cultural performance, but rather a performance that borrows from black culture. In point of fact, La Bomba is a highly commercial tourist attraction. During my time in Argentina I was exposed to a number of events similar to performances like La Bomba. The audiences are composed of mostly white Argentines and foreign tourists; the entrance fees are often higher than other local venues and the performers are typically white.

Due to La Bomba’s commercial success it offers a particularly salient example of how whites in Argentina engage with black culture as commodity. Commodification is defined as the process of turning a material or immaterial object into a commodity, in which something enters freely or is coerced into a relationship

of exchange (Ganahl 2001:1). White artists and performers who borrow the aesthetic qualities of Black cultural forms for profit and white spectators who pay to experience Black culture both epitomize this process. The commodification of Black bodies and Black cultures is one relationship of exchange that has been present since the foundation of the Americas. Kobena Mercer writes that the “‘big story’ of twentieth-century modernity” is best captured by the phrase “black innovation/white imitation.”<sup>56</sup> Mercer posits that historically, African-descended people developed cultural forms encoded with hidden signifiers of resistance, when white people attempted to imitate these forms, they were then “detached from their initial meanings” (Mercer 2008: 146).

White bodies’ performing Black culture necessarily represents a site for critical analysis, if only in light of historical appropriations of Black culture by whites. For instance, what contradictions arise when whites portray themselves as experts or representatives of a particular Black cultural practice in Buenos Aires? In the early stages of my research in Buenos Aires, it was easier to find Black culture than it was to find Black people. While doing research online I found a group of capoeiristas located in Buenos Aires, hoping to gain some insight into the Afro-Brazilian community, I contacted the organization and set up an interview. When I finally met face to face with the group of all white Argentines, I could see that they were as stunned by my

---

epidermal makeup as I was by theirs. I was continually surprised to find that white audiences and white practitioners dominated spaces of Black culture. They ranged from groups like the white capoeiristas I interviewed, who were genuinely interested in pursuing Black culture as a hobby to instances of fetishistic voyeurism which I will describe further.

Toward the end of my fieldwork, I attended a gathering hosted by the online magazine *Revista Quilombo*.<sup>57</sup> The magazine offers a comprehensive overview of Black cultural happenings in the city and features interviews with African-descended activists, while also advertising cultural events, forums and even rallies. The site was a great source of information for me during the process of my research, thus I was excited to partake in a celebration of its success. When I arrived at the location I made my way through the crowd and quickly became aware of the dynamics of the space. The crowd was filled with hip young white Argentines, a number of whom I observed to be wearing kente cloth printed shirts and other African-inspired attire. In one section of the room there was a small stand serving what was advertised to be “African stew.” A group of people had formed a small drum circle in one corner and there was an outdoor patio where a film about Afro-Bolivian drum-making was being projected on a large white wall. I also quickly noticed that I was again the only brown

---

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.revistaquilombo.com.ar/>

person in the room, which at that point was less surprising to me than the barrage of undifferentiated displays of Black culture.

From the moment of my arrival, no one in the party had made any attempt at speaking to me. It seemed that everyone was acquainted with one another and I began to feel out of place. Just as I was preparing to leave, I noticed an older woman of African descent across the room and I made my way over to where she was standing. We introduced ourselves and she remarked almost immediately, “You know we are the only ones here?” I nodded, asking if she knew why more people hadn’t come. She replied saying that the event was “not for us.” We spoke briefly about other things; later exchanging information before I made my way out of the party feeling somewhat dejected.

In retrospect, though it was not what I expected, the Revista Quilombo party turned out to be an illuminative experience. I assumed that because the online magazine was one of the few places on the web devoted to Afro-activist work, that organizers behind the scenes would be individuals associated with the Afro movement. However, their proximity to the movement did not appear to engender self-reflexive cultural awareness or a connection to actual Black people.

When the party turned out to be filled with the same cultural trespassers I had found in other spaces, I was alerted to the possibility that perhaps even the Black activism has been incorporated into the frivolous consumption of culture in Buenos



Aires. The event prompted me to consider what happens when Afro activism and white appropriations of Blackness are conflated under the umbrella of multiculturalism or worse, the rhetoric of a Black renaissance.

In his investigation of multiculturalism and the global city urban anthropologist John Nagle writes, “[E]thnicity is in. Cultural difference is in. Consumption of the Other is all the rage” (Nagle 2009:1, qtd. Hutnyk and Sharma). These proclamations are the subtext beneath assertion of a Black renaissance. The idea of blackness in vogue correctly identifies this phenomenon as “fetishistic voyeurism.” In *Appropriating Blackness*, performance artist and Black Studies scholar Patrick Johnson offers this lucid description of the term. He says:

There is a long tradition of voyeurism as a means of putting cultures not just on display, but at a condescending distance...thus the consequences of fetishistic voyeurism are not only the maintenance of the status quo, but also the establishment sometimes of shallow, unself-reflexive appropriations of Blackness (Johnson 2003: 8)

The discomfort I experienced at the *Revista Quilombo* party came about as a result of my stumbling upon a voyeuristic moment. In the space of the magazine party, white Argentines engaged in an active consumption of Black culture. The absence of Black bodies in the space was further highlighted by the presence of cultural symbols as a stand in for actual moments of contact between races. Void of any social or political contextualization or self-reflexivity, these white forays into Black culture could not be

understood as anything but appropriative, especially in a place like Buenos Aires where blackness is comfortably celebrated in one context and denied in another.

### **Negotiating Transgression and Incorporation**

---

During a class forum I had the opportunity to speak about my research with scholar Vijay Prashad. He inquired why racial and ethnic minorities continue to contest structures of exclusion and racism by organizing around performance based cultural forms. For Prashad, the idea of using performance as a channel for inclusion seemed almost to beg for consumptive reception by dominant society. I've discussed some of the ways that Black culture is an object of consumption and fascination for white audiences and practitioners in Buenos Aires, yet the process of consumption that Prashad poses as inevitability is challenged by the work of Afro-activists who use Black performance culture as a transgressive form of resistance. Afro-activists negotiate their position relative to the local community and develop new strategies of resistance to avoid being subsumed by multicultural agendas or white encroachment. It is important to distinguish between the types of work that are done by cultural

activists versus the forms of engagement interrogated in the previous section of this work. Whereas other performances of Black culture seek varying ends—whether profit or entertainment or interest based—Afro-activists groups like the MAC ground their performances in a liberation struggle. Drawing parallels with other historic Black struggles, the MAC is invested in Black culture as a legitimate means of social transformation.

Numerous works in Black studies have examined culture and performance as sites of radical liberation (hooks 1995, Mercer 2008, Williams 2008). In “Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition,” bell hooks identifies Black performance as a ritual practice integral to the creation and articulation of identity. Her basic assertion stems from an understanding of performance as a liberatory act of emancipation, a way of speaking when there are no other channels of representation. She says “all performance practice has, for African Americans, been central to the process of decolonization in white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks 1995:214). Moreover, examples of performance as liberation have been present throughout the history of the African Diaspora, as it is an ideology that is deeply ingrained in African Diasporic forms of resistance. Take for instance the work of Brazilian civil rights leader and Pan-Africanist Abdias Nascimento who created the Black Experimental Theater in the 1944. Nascimento sought to challenge Black’s exclusion from the full rights of Brazilian citizenship through dramaturgy (Williams 2008:59-

62). The theater troupe, which featured only Black actors and actresses, produced social and political critique through their on-stage performances. Nascimento aimed at using the theater not only as a means of confronting racist ideologies, but of creating positive constructions of Blackness in Brazil.

Similar to the Experimental Black Theater, I found that the MAC also used culture as a medium for social transformation and critique. In an interview with *Revista Quilombo* magazine, MAC director Diego Bonga spoke of the purpose of teaching African-derived cultural forms. He said:

*hacer de la cultura afro una herramienta de construcción, de reparación social, para enmendar...tiene que dar posibilidades para que haya un cambio real y para eso, primero, tenemos que cambiar las personas”*

( [the purpose is ] to make African-derived culture a tool of construction, of social reparation, to make amendments...it has to create the possibility that there will be real change, in order to do this you need to change people).<sup>58</sup>  
(Dinah)

I found that the idea of “changing people” was a practice that the MAC authentically pursued. On one occasion when I visited the *Centro AfroCultural* during a particularly busy afternoon, members of the MAC were playing Capoeira in a circle outside and a group of mostly white people had gathered around to watch. Some had cameras and took them out in order to capture videos and photos of the performance. Members of the MAC quickly informed them that picture-taking was not allowed.

---

<sup>58</sup> My translation

The majority of the spectators put their cameras away without complaint and the group continued to play. However, several minutes later, a middle-aged white man, one of the same people who had previously attempted to take photos, was again caught snapping images of the group. At that point, Marta, a member of the MAC who was drumming in the circle, stood up from where she was seated and began to chant, “no somos monos, no saca fotos” (we are not monkeys, do not take photos). It was a tense moment and the man quickly packed away his belongings and left, visibly perturbed. Once they had finished playing I saw Marta approach a group of people and proceed to explain her behavior. She told them that the MAC does not allow visitors to take pictures because they are not on exhibition. She went on to say that their goal was not to amuse, but rather to educate and raise consciousness about the continued struggles of African-descended people in Argentina. She explained that when people capture an image and leave without entering the Center or reading the informative pamphlets that explain the group’s mission, it turns the performance into circus act, mere spectacle.

Marta was careful to distinguish the work that the MAC does from other displays of Black culture in Buenos Aires whose primary purpose is profit and/or entertainment. Her evocation of performing monkeys was a clear reference to stereotypical images of Black people performing for white’s enjoyment. Refusing to play into the man’s desire for a distanced encounter with Black culture, Marta

demanded a confrontation of the racial dynamics of consumption represented by the simple act of taking a photo.

In “Eating the Other,” bell hooks writes that a “mutual recognition of racism” and its impacts, “is the only standpoint that makes possible an encounter between races that is not based on denial and fantasy.” She argues that the “ever present reality of racist domination and white supremacy,” when unacknowledged, renders “problematic the desire of white people to have contact with the Other” (1992: 371). Though the man at the MAC ultimately left without speaking to anyone, Marta was able to connect with the small group of people she spoke with after the performance. This moment of interpersonal contact presented the opportunity for recognition that hooks proposes as the solution to the problematic desire for contact between racial dominator and dominated. Through their insistence on culture as a medium for social and political transformations, the MAC adamantly rejected constructions of Black people and their culture as objects of consumption, exoticification or otherness. They also opposed approaches to difference that depoliticized performance culture and normalized relationships of consumption between white Argentines and the cultures of Black and brown people.

One of the main issues with challenging racist ideologies in Argentina is that, at the interpersonal level, most white Argentines deny that racism exists. There are few social precedents for confronting racism in this culture of denial. I found that

many conversations I had with white Argentines about race became caught up in debates about Black's historic erasure from Argentine society. Some of these conversations ended in assertions that racism was not possible because all Argentines are the same race. In creating opportunities for dialogue between and among races, the MAC attempts what policies of multiculturalism failed to endeavor, a confrontation of the racist foundations of Argentine society and possibilities for genuine rectification.

The introduction of this work began with the phrase “De Donde Sos,”<sup>59</sup> an interrogation that reinforces the idea that Black people do not belong. This expression was my point of departure to explore the myth of Black non-existence in Argentina and to show how it has persisted, adapted and been contested over time. I discovered that although dominant historical narratives constitute and maintain systems of power, marginalized people create counter-narratives in the fractured spaces of reality and discourse. I have shown that the *Movimiento AfroCultural* is a group actively engaged in the production and reinvention of these counter-narratives. Though Black people have been barred from claims to *Argentinidad*, the MAC reinvents the terms of exclusion, using it instead as an impetus for the making of African Diasporic identity. As a result of my interaction with the MAC, the question “De Donde Sos,” which first alerted me to my absolute otherness in Buenos Aires, no longer simply signals Black exclusion, but in the context of African Diasporism means that not belonging in one place can lead to the creation of belonging to many places.

I have examined the *Centro AfroCultural* as a site where African Diasporic communities of resistance are created. They directly challenge the notion that Black people and their cultures only belong in Buenos Aires to the extent that they can be

---

<sup>59</sup> “Where are you from?”



appropriated by white society. I analyzed MAC performances of culture as critical resistance in contrast with the rampant appropriation and commodification of Black culture in Buenos Aires. The works of many African-American Studies scholars precede me in underscoring a need to question how Black people and their cultures are rendered visible (Ellision 1952, Mercer 2008, Carby 2005). In her Black feminist text “White Woman Listen,” Hazel Carby writes, “the Black women’s critique of history has not only involved us coming to terms with ‘absences,’ we have also been outraged by the ways it has made us visible, when it has chosen to see us” (Carby 2005).

Following Carby and countless others, I have attempted to dissociate the assumed link between visibility and empowerment in my analysis of Black cultural politics in Argentina. To do so I have examined the current interest of Buenos Aires’ multicultural policies in promoting displays of cultural difference. By showing the compatibility of multiculturalism with the white supremacist ideology of *blanqueamiento*, I demonstrated how the uncritical celebration of cultural difference can be a mask for the preservation of white Eurocentric dominance.

I have devoted much of this project to the examination of myths. While living and studying in Argentina I became obsessed with the idea that whole lives could be shaped by the repetition of a single narrative. Through the life-stories of the people that I met and the communities that embraced me during my brief stint in Buenos

Aires, I was deeply inspired to participate in the construction of counter-narratives. I wanted to create something that would, in some small way, contribute to the many truths that make up our reality. In retrospect, the idea of truth is one that eludes me. The act of writing about a movement that is ongoing is disconcerting. The MAC is not the same place that it was when I encountered it, thus, any assertions I have made are based on a particular place and time. There is no real way to conclude this work except to say that movement in itself is a victory. Seguimos Existiendo.

- Abreu, Martha. 1996. "Slave Mothers and Freed Children: Emancipation and Female Space in Debates on the 'Free Womb' Law, Rio De Janeiro, 1871." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 28.3 567-80. JSTOR. Web.
- Andrews, George R. 1980. *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*. 1st ed. Madison: University of Wisconsin, Print.
- Andrews, George R. 2004. *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000*. Oxford: Oxford UP, Print.
- Badiane, Mamadou. 2010. *The Changing Face of Afro-Caribbean Cultural Identity: Negrismo and Négritude*. Lanham: Lexington. Print.
- Barthes, Roland. 1972. *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, Print.
- Benesch, Klaus, and Geneviève Fabre 2004. *African Diasporas in the New and Old Worlds: Consciousness and Imagination*. Amsterdam: Rodopi. Print.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, Print
- Brand, Dionne. 2001. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, Print.
- Butler, Kim. 1999. "In the Afro-Atlantic Diaspora: Toward A Comparative Approach." *Crossing Boundaries: Comparative History of Black People in Diaspora*. By Darlene Clark. Hine and Jacqueline McLeod. Bloomington: Indiana UP, Print.
- Chasteen, John Charles. 2004 *National Rhythms, African Roots: the Deep History of Latin American Popular Dance*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico. Print.
- Clifford, James 1994. "Diasporas." *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Further Inflections: Toward Ethnographies of the Future. pp. 302-338.
- Conniff, Michael L., and Thomas J. Davis. 1994. *Africans in the Americas: a History of the Black Diaspora*. New York: St. Martin's, Print.
- Cowles, William 2007. "Los Afro-Descendientes de Argentina-Mitos y Realidad" SIT Southern Cone-Regional Integration, Development and Social Change, Print.
- Criscenti, Joseph T. *Sarmiento and His Argentina*. 1993. Boulder (Colorado): L. Rienner, Print.
- Eudell, Demetrius Lynn. 2002. *The Political Languages of Emancipation in the British Caribbean and the U.S. South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, Print.

- Diop, Cheikh Anta., and Cheikh Anta. Diop. 1974. *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*. New York: L. Hill, Print.
- DuBois, W.E.B. 1995. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Signet Classic, Print.
- Dzidzienyo, Anani, and Suzanne Oboler. 2005. *Neither Enemies nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks, Afro-Latinos*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, Print.
- Frigerio, Alejandro. "Black in Argentina: Contested Representations of Culture and Ethnicity." Meeting of the Latin American Studies Association. Florida 2000a. *Cultura Negra En El Cono Sur: Representaciones En Conflicto*. [Buenos Aires]: Facultad De Ciencias Sociales Y Económicas De La Universidad Católica Argentina. Print.
- . 2000b. Creando un movimiento negro en un país "blanco": activismo político y cultural afro en Argentina. *Afro-Asia* 39, revista del Centro de Estudios Afro-Orientais (CEAO) 21
- Eva Lamborghini. "El Candombe (uruguayo) En Buenos Aires: (Proponiendo) Nuevos Imaginarios Urbanos En La Ciudad "blanca"" *Cuadernos De Antropología Social* 30 (2009): 93-118. Web.
- . 2002. "Negros" y "Blancos" en Buenos Aires: repensando nuestras categorías raciales. *Temas de Patrimonio Cultural Buenos Aires Negra. Identidad y Cultura*. Buenos Aires. 1.
- Fisher, Andrew B., and Matthew D. O'Hara. 2009. *Imperial Subjects: Race and Identity in Colonial Latin America*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, Print.
- Foucault, Michel, and Colin Gordon. 1980. *Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon, Print.
- Gates, Henry Louis. 1989. *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "racial" Self*. New York: Oxford UP, Print.
- Galen, Joséph. 2011. "Taking Race Seriously: Whiteness in Argentina's National and Transnational Imaginary." *Identities* 7.3 (2000): 333-71. Web. Feb.-Mar.
- Geler, Lea. 2010. *Andares Negros, Caminos Blancos: Afroporteños, Estado Y Nación : Argentina a Fines Del Siglo XIX*. Rosario: Prohistoria Ediciones, Print.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, Print. Miami. 16-18 Mar. 2000. Address.
- Hall, S. 1990. *Cultural Identity and Diaspora. Identity: Community, Culture and Difference*. J. Rutherford. London, Lawrence And Wishart Ltd. 1: 239.
- . 1996. "What Is 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Stuart Hall Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* London: Routledge,. Print.
- Hamilton, Ruth Simms. 2007. *Routes of Passage: Rethinking the African Diaspora*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP,. Print.
- Harris, Joséph E. 1982. *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*. Washington,

- D.C.: Howard UP, Print.
- Hau, Matthias Vom. 2009. *'We Have Always Lived Here': Indigenous Movements, Citizenship and Poverty in Argentina*. Working paper no. 99. Manchester: Brooks World Poverty Institute, Print.
- Herskovits, Melville J. 1941. *The Myth of the Negro past*. New York: London, Print.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn B. 2011. "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race." *Signs* 17.2 (1992): 251-74. *JSTOR*. Web. 5 Apr.
- Hine, Darlene Clark., and Jacqueline McLeod. 1999 Kim Butler, "Abolition and the Politics of Identity in the Afro-Atlantic Diaspora: Toward a Comparative Approach." *Crossing Boundaries: Comparative History of Black People in Diaspora*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 123. Print
- Hintzen, Percy C. 2007. "Diaspora, Globalization and the Politics of Identity." *Culture, Politics, Race and Diaspora: the Thought of Stuart Hall*. By Brian Meeks. Kingston, Jamaica: Randle, 249-68. Print.
- hooks, bell. 2006. "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance." Print. Rpt. in *Media and Cultural Studies*. Ed. Meenakshi G. Durham and Douglas M. Keller. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell,. Print.
- .1990. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston, MA: South End, Print.
- Kelley, Robin D. G Patterson Ruby and Tiffany.2000.  
 "Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World." *African Studies Review* Vol. 43, No. 1, Special Issue on the Diaspora Apr., , pp. 11-45 Published by: African Studies Association
- Kinigsberg, Yanina 2002 :ESTUVO SEIS HORAS DETENIDA POR LA POLICIA AERONAUTICA Una Mujer Denunció Que La Discriminaron Por Ser Negra." *Clarín* 24 Aug.Web.
- Lamborghini, Eva and Frigerio, Alejandro.2009. "El Candombe (uruguayo) En Buenos Aires: (Proponiendo) Nuevos Imaginarios Urbanos En La Ciudad "blanca"" *Cuadernos De Antropología Social* 30: 93-118. Web.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 2007. *The Production of Space*. Oxford. Blackwell, 1991. Print.
- Levitt, Peggy, Schiller Glick "Conceptualizing Simultaneity." *Sociology of Diaspora* New Delhi, Rawat Publications,
- Lopez, Laura. 2009. "Los Afrodescendientes Como Sujetos Politicos En Argentina." *Afroargentinos Hoy Invisibilizacion Identidad Y Movilizacion Social*. Comp. Marta Maffia and Gladys Lechini. 1st ed. Vol. 1. Buenos Aires, Print.
- Low, Setha M., and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga. *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003. Print.
- Lupiya, Beauty; Kristensen, J W; Reference: *New African*, 377 (September 1999), p.20-23

- Luz da Alejandrina. 1995. Uruguay. *No Longer Invisible: Afro-Latin Americans Today*. London: Minority Rights Publications, Print
- Maffia, Marta M 2006. "Dimensiones Diasporicas De La Comunidad Caboverdiana." *Temas De Partrimonio Cultural* 16. Ed. Leticia Maronese. Buenos Aires: Comision Para La Preservacion Del Patrimonio Historico Cultural, 11-400. Print.
- McCarthy, J. D., and Mayer N. Zald. 1977. "'Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory.'" *American Journal of Sociology*: 1212-1241.
- Meeks, Brian. 2007. *Culture, Politics, Race and Diaspora: the Thought of Stuart Hall*. Kingston, Jamaica: Randle, Print
- Meisel, Seth. 2006. "The Fruit of Freedom: Slaves and Citizens in Early Republican Argentina." Print. Rpt. in *Slaves, Subjects, and Subversives*. Ed. Jane G. Landers and Barry M. Robinson. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, Print.
- Mercer, Kobena., Elam, Harry Justin., and Kennell A. Jackson. 2005. "Diaspora Aesthetics and Visual Culture." *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 141-83. Print.
- MOVIMIENTO AFROCULTURAL BONGA. 2011. "MOVIMIENTO AFROCULTURAL BONGA." *Comunicacion Humanitaria Estrategica*. Web. Mar.-Apr. <<http://www.mateamargo.org/agencia/node/139>>.
- Nagle, John. 2009. *Multiculturalism's Double Bind: Creating Inclusivity, Cosmopolitanism and Difference*. Farnham, England: Ashgate, Print.
- Naro, N. P., Ed. (2003). *Blacks, Coloureds and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century*. London, Institute of Latin American Studies.
- Nkrumah, Kwame. *Consciencism; Philosophy and Ideology for De-colonization*. New York: Monthly Review, 1970. Print.
- Oboe, Annalisa, and Anna Scacchi. *Recharting the Black Atlantic: Modern Cultures, Local Communities, Global Connections*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Paschel, Tianna S., and Mark Q. Sawyer. 2008. "Contesting Politics as Usual: Black Social Movements, Globalization and Race Policy in Latin America." *Souls* 10.3 197-214. *CDL Journals Account*. Web. 3 Mar. 2011.
- Padmore, George. 1956. *Pan-Africanism or Communism? The Coming Struggle for Africa*. New York: Roy, Print.
- Peñazola, Fernanda. "Mapping Constructions of Blackness in Argentina." *Ibero-Americanisches Institute* (2007): 211-34. Web. Jan.-Feb. 2011c
- Picotti, Dina V. 2001. *El Negro En La Argentina Presencia Y Negacion*. Buenos Aires: Editores De América Latina, Print
- Prato, Giuliana B. 2009. *Beyond Multiculturalism: Views from Anthropology*.

- Farnham, England: Ashgate, Print.
- Rahier, Jean, Percy C. Hintzen, and Felipe Smith. 2010. *Global Circuits of Blackness: Interrogating the African Diaspora*. Urbana: University of Illinois, Print.
- Rocha, Carlos, A. 2006. "Colectividad Caboverdeana." *Temas De Patrimonio Cultural* 16. Ed. Leticia Maronese. Buenos Aires: Comision Para La Preservacion Del Patrimonio Historico Cultural, 283-303. Print.
- Rosaldo, Renato. 2011. "Imperialist Nostalgia." *Representations* 26 (1989): 107-22. JSTOR. Web. Feb.-Mar.
- Rossi, Vicente. 1926. *Cosas De Negros*. Córdoba Print.
- Rock, David. 2002. *State Building and Political Movements in Argentina, 1860-1916*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, Print.
- Saffran, Willian. 1991.: "Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return." *Diaspora* 1.1 (83).
- Sarduy, Pedro P., and Jean Stubbs. 1995. Introduction. *No Longer Invisible: Afro-Latin Americans Today*. London: Minority Rights Publications, Web.
- Sieder, Rachel. 2002. *Multiculturalism in Latin America: Indigenous Rights, Diversity, and Democracy*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, Print.
- Simeon-Jones, Kersuze. 2010. *Literary and Sociopolitical Writings of the Black Diaspora in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, Print.
- Skidmore, Thomas E., and Peter H. Smith. 2005. *Modern Latin America*. New York: Oxford UP, Print.
- Surrenti, Silvia. 2009. "The Consumption of Experience and the Ethnic Market: Cosmopolitan Identity Beyond Multiculturalism." *Beyond Multiculturalism: Views from Anthropology*. By Giuliana B. Prato. Farnham, England: Ashgate, 201-11. Print.
- Solomianski, Alejandro. 2003. *Identidades Secretas: La Negritud Argentina*. Rosario, Argentina: B. Viterbo Editora, Print.
- Steinberg, Stephen. *Race Relations a Critique*. Stanford (Calif.): Stanford Social Sciences, 2007. Print.
- Tölölyan, Khachig. "Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment." *Diaspora* 5.1 (1996): 3-23. Print.
- Traore, Boubacar. "Aportes O Herencia De La Cultura Aricana En La Argentina: Una Reflexion Sobre El Discurso Historico." Print. Rpt. in *Temas De Patrimonio Cultural*. By Leticia Maronese. 1st ed. Buenos Aires: Ministerio De Cultura, 2006. 145-57. Print.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1995. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, MA: Beacon, Print.

- Walker, Sheila S. 2001. *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, Print.
- Wald, Gayle. 2000. *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-century U.S. Literature and Culture*. Durham [N.C.: Duke UP, Print.
- Wright, Winthrop R. 1990 *Café Con Leche: Race, Class, and National Image in Venezuela*. Austin: University of Texas,. Print.
- Zezeza, P. T. 2005. "Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic." *African Affairs* 104.414 35-68. Print. (2001). World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, United Nations.