

CONVERGING AND DIVERGING DIASPORIC IDENTITIES
IN BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA

By

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To my family for their love and support throughout this journey

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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By

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Chair: Faye V. Harrison
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The existing literature on blackness in Argentina suggests that Afro-Argentines historically have been rendered invisible to dominant Argentine society through whitening immigration policies, military service, disease epidemics, and discursive elimination as part of a national agenda to create an Argentine people. In reality, all blacks are visible in Argentine society; they just are not recognized as being a part of it (and sometimes not even recognized as being black or Afro-descendant). The physical features of many Afro-descendants make them stand out from the local population that through *mestizaje* or racial mixing has few individuals that would be identified on the extremes of "black" or "white."

Due to recent regional and international immigration, foreign blacks are residing in Argentina in noticeably higher numbers. While Afro-Brazilians are certainly the most popular blacks in Argentine society, Afro-Cubans, African immigrants, Afro-Uruguayans, Dominicans, and other blacks have a major influence on the Argentine perception of blackness. Although it appears that blackness rarely goes unnoticed, it is deliberately ignored until critical moments of tension or decision making. My research examines the

intricacies and contours that emerge when new diasporas intersect with more established diasporic situations, as in the case of black immigrants interacting with native-born Afro-Argentines. I analyze how both regional ethnic groups (Afro-Argentines, Africans, and other Afro-Latin Americans) and disparate nation-states (the U.S., Brazil, and South Africa) have shaped Argentina's racial politics.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: THE CITY AND ITS PEOPLE

The capital city of Buenos Aires is the center of most activities in Argentina¹, serving as the hub of transportation, commerce, communication, education, health care, politics, and many more significant aspects of social life in the nation. Most products and services are routed through the capital at some point. This follows a pattern that is very typical of many Latin American and Caribbean nations, in which the capital city is the most developed and receives the most resources. According to results of the 2001 census, the population of the city of Buenos Aires is just over three million, which is about nine percent of the total population of the nation² (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos (INDEC) 2001). More recent data estimate the current population of the country to be approximately 40 million (World Bank 2010).

There is an ongoing desire to model the nation and people of Argentina after the European archetypes of France and England (Needell 1995) and more recently, the United States. Additionally, a very visible heavy dependency on the U.S. manifests itself daily in many forms. In the city of Buenos Aires, I saw just as much news and programming from the U.S. as from Argentina. Almost every shopping and eating experience in the city has U.S. artists as its soundtrack. Most Argentines have a high cultural literacy of the U.S., including their understandings of race relations. Argentines are constantly tapped into what the U.S. is doing, thinking, and feeling because it could ultimately affect them in a significant way. Argentine society as a whole is quite well informed about global politics and economic shifts, as it cannot afford to live otherwise.

Disappearing Act For The Ages

In the days when Argentina was still a Spanish colony, you could not go anywhere without seeing a *negro*. *Negros* left their delicate palm and fingerprints on the bricks that comprised some of the most important buildings in the nation. The population of *negros* stretched from the banks of the newly settled Rio de la Plata to the unmapped regions of the country's interior. On any given day, you could see *negras* with baskets of treats dancing on their heads as they maneuvered down the narrow city streets. You also could find these women on the banks of the river washing the clothing of the colonial elite. They even fed their master's children from their own breasts. *Negros* worked in the butcher shops and other dirty city jobs no one wanted to do. They were the smiths, carpenters, and handymen for Argentine society. They cooked for, cleaned, loved, and preened the people we know today as *Porteños*—the homegrown residents of Buenos Aires. The success of Argentine society lay on the backs and shoulders of *negros*. You could not go anywhere without seeing them.

One day, the number of *negros* started to dwindle. They were sent off to war and even promised freedom, but most of them died on the front lines. Then, the plagues came; the yellow fever was the worst, and their bodies were too weak to resist. Realizing there were so few *negros* remaining, some of them left the country to cross the border into nations like Uruguay and Brazil. Then, the next day, it seems, they were gone. You could not find a single *negro* anywhere. Or, so that is what they told me-- "they" being individuals that are black, brown, white, and every racial category in between. Why is it that everywhere I went in the city of Buenos Aires, I saw *negros*? I saw so many of them on a daily basis that I questioned if *blanqueamiento*³ had redefined them according to local racial ideology.

This work is not centered on the question of why Afro-Argentines “disappeared.” Historian George Reid Andrews already has provided a thorough explanation of that enigma with his historical analysis of the Argentine census (1980). I have chosen to focus on the interactions among present-day ethnic blocs of Africans and Afro-descendants that currently reside in the nation. Borrowing from Geertz’s notion of ethnic bloc formation, Whitten and Torres note that,

An ethnic bloc constitutes a conscious reference group for those who share recurrent processes of self-identification. Ethnic blocs may be based on criteria such as common residence, language, tradition, and custom. Indeed, the bases for bloc identity may slip and slide around the criteria themselves, as the bloc itself becomes increasingly strong (1998:8).

When ethnic bloc formation is a reflection of the larger hegemonic order, it does not necessarily accommodate racial others. For some individuals, disenfranchisement results from being racialized as black and thus precludes complete participation in dominant society. In nations where the ideology of *blanqueamiento* is prevalent, blacks can counter their exclusion from nationalist consolidation through the formation of their own ethnic blocs (Whitten and Torres 1998).

Those who are included in the nation are European descendants, and they have defined Argentina as *the* European nation in Latin America. The city of Buenos Aires is the capital of all things Argentine. Walking down the bustling streets of the city center, you immediately are captivated by grandiose buildings with slick European façades. You watch children play in plazas artfully accented by classical Greek and Roman style statues. At first glance, *Porteños* seem almost uniformly olive skinned with rich dark hair. On closer inspection, and after months of living in the midst of this cosmopolitan metropolis, I realized that there is a great heterogeneity in the physical characteristics of *Porteños* as well.

Though Argentine society is highly racialized, it is one in which issues of race are suppressed, contributing to the denial of racism and the “disappearance” or diminished visibility of Afro-Argentines through the consequences of whitening immigration policies, military service, disease epidemics, and discursive elimination as part of a national agenda to create an Argentine people (Andrews 1980; Coria 1997; Lewis 1996; Picotti 2001a; Schávelzon 2003). By visibility, I mean dominant society’s perceptions of, recognition of, and reactions to blackness. Also notable is the adamant denial of African contributions to the cultural heritage of the nation, even while the very emblems of Argentineness like tango, *gauchos*⁴, and *mondongo*⁵ have African influences (Lanuza 1942; Picotti 2001b; Rossi and Becco 2001; Savigliano 1995; Thompson 1984).

Due to regional and international immigration, foreign blacks are residing in Argentina in noticeably higher numbers. Afro-Brazilians are by far the most popular blacks in the Argentine imaginary. Their employment is based mostly in the commodification of black culture, as they typically work as dance instructors, beauticians, cooks in Brazilian restaurants, and party entertainers. The global influence of Brazilian media and the popularity of Brazilian tourist destinations also have made black Brazilians seem more accessible than other blocs of Afro-descendants or Africans. Afro-descendants from other Latin American countries, including Cuba, Uruguay, and the Dominican Republic, and African immigrants also have had a significant impact on current Argentine perceptions of blackness.

Summary of Research Questions, Theoretical Framework/Analysis, and Methods

In her essay “Building on a Rehistoricized Anthropology of the Afro-Atlantic,” Faye Harrison stresses the need for anthropologists to conduct “fine-grained analyses, across a range of different sites, of the ways that contemporary diasporic situations intersect

and interplay" (2006:386). My work takes on this challenge in an attempt to understand inter-ethnic relationships among blacks in Buenos Aires. In Argentina exists a situation in which members of new diasporas and immigrations interact with descendants of the old African Diaspora from the colonial era. Harrison goes on to note "when different diasporic peoples come into contact or converge in the same intercultural space, pan-African consciousness and diasporic solidarity do not automatically emerge from some essential sameness that all African descendants supposedly share" (2006:387). I had to construct my research questions to better understand the complexities of the convergence and divergence of diasporic identities in Buenos Aires.

Research Questions

While conducting research for this project, I had three specific questions. First, I questioned the significance of racial identification in Argentina where blackness has been denied since the end of the colonial era. This included examining how individuals self-identify and the fluctuations which lie within the broader categories of race, color, and nation. I also desired to understand how racism is experienced among Africans and Afro-descendants in present-day Argentina through the lived experiences of blackness. Finally, I wanted to identify the black ethnic blocs that reside in Argentina and the parts they play in the revitalization of black identities in the nation. Towards this goal, I explored the role of interethnic relations in attempts to create blackness as a unifying political identity to promote social justice.

Theoretical Framework/Analysis

While no singular theoretical framework encompasses the dynamics of Argentine race relations, by combining the contributions of Charles Hale, Homi Bhaba, and João Costa Vargas, I can approximate the intricacies of the situation. Hale's concept of

neoliberal multiculturalism allows for an analysis of the hegemonic way race operates in different sectors of society. Balancing this macro-level analysis is Bhaba's counter-hegemonic concept of incommensurable exchange, which is more apt for analyzing the micro-politics of race relations, especially among ethnic blocs of Africans and Afro-descendants. Finally Vargas's notion of the hyperconsciousness of race helps deconstruct how Afro-Argentines possibly situate themselves in Argentina's racial landscape. It is the increased awareness of the importance of race in Argentine society that mediates both inter-ethnic relations among black ethnic blocs as well as their interactions with dominant Argentine society.

Hale's work is firmly situated in Gramscian theory and thus shares some theoretical insights with the research of two predecessors: Brackette Williams and Edmund T. Gordon. Williams borrows Gramsci's concept of transformist hegemony to deconstruct how everyday interactions among Guyanese of different ethnic ancestries contribute to the process of postcolonial nation building in Guyana. In a transformist hegemony, heterogeneous ethnic groups are incorporated, if only superficially, as part of a larger hegemonic project but remain marginalized and devalued without the ability to challenge the larger power structure (Williams 1991). The colonial past with its constructions of race, class, and ethnicity are implicated in this process, as individuals who see themselves as very different socially and politically attempt to create a cohesive nation. Gordon adapts Gramsci's hegemonic notion of political common sense to develop the concept of Creole political common sense as a framework for understanding identity formation among Nicaraguan Creoles, who constitute the major Afro-descendant ethnicity on the Atlantic coast. He defines Creole political common

sense as “an amalgam of related and contradictory, similar and disparate historically produced ideas and practices concerning the ‘natural’ order of political relationships and practices” (Gordon 1998:189). Gordon notes how unequal power relations structure politics and identity formation among Nicaraguan Creoles.

Hale’s research with ladinos in Guatemala demonstrates how neoliberal multiculturalism functions in multi-ethnic states. He notes that ladinos, who hold an intermediary position in the Guatemalan racial hierarchy, profess the values of cultural equality yet refuse to critique their own privilege in relation to the Mayan minority. This, in turn, helps ladinos maintain their superior position in the racial hierarchy. Their racial ambivalence towards the status of the Maya paves the way for neoliberal multiculturalism, which is an ideology that preserves defined boundaries between different ethnic blocs in order to uphold social cohesion without critiquing underlying power structures (Hale 2006). Though neo-liberal multiculturalism represents a reformed approach to race and ethnic relations, one that seemingly embraces and recognizes the rights and cultural distinctiveness of the Maya, it duplicates existing power dynamics. As a project of the state, neoliberal multiculturalism coincides with the initiatives of state agencies as well as international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In Argentina, this is demonstrated through various international and local state sponsored programs.

Williams, Gordon, and Hale take into consideration the nuances of Caribbean and Latin American racial ideologies. Within their models, there are contradictory tensions occurring within what dominant society recognizes as a single racial identity due to the pressures that each bloc has to negotiate. Diverse ethnic blocs are internally stratified

within different levels of the racial hierarchy in the national imaginary. While all blocs are subjected to similar forms of racism, there are tensions created as each bloc tries to fight for a higher position within the hierarchy. In the Argentine context, this translates into racial ambivalence on the part of what seems to be the majority of Afro-Argentines towards the identity claims of other Afro-descendants and Africans. Their unwillingness or inability to identify as a part of a larger group of blacks has stifled the struggle against anti-black racism in Argentina considerably. As the most politically significant bloc of Afro-descendants in the nation, Afro-Argentines are vital to any sort of movement organized around black identity. To further complicate the situation, in the racial landscape of Argentina, “black” is not always equated to being African or of African descent, nor is it consistently associated with “*negro*,” which is more popularly a class defined subjectivity.

While the analysis of hegemony assists in understanding how the black ethnic blocs in Argentina fit into the larger socio-political frameworks, a different type of analysis is needed to fully grasp inter-ethnic relations among these blocs. Bhaba’s concept of incommensurable exchange proves useful for approaching these types of micro-level social interactions. He suggests that scholars studying identities of marginalized groups should think beyond “initial categories and initiatory subjects and focus on those interstitial moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of ‘differences’ ” (Bhaba 1994:269). In Argentina, this convergence and divergence of differences is what can lead to incommensurable notions of black identity. But, as Bhaba highlights, it also can open up the possibility of collective identifications (1994).

In his research on black Brazilians, Vargas recognizes that social relations were marked by what he defined as a hyperconsciousness of race, which is always accompanied by the negation of the importance race plays in daily life. Vargas adduces that “by silencing the relevance of race in social relations, the hyperconsciousness/negation of the race dialectic obscures the role that race plays in determining one’s position in the historical structures of power and resources” (2004:446). In Argentina, the hyperconsciousness of race leads to the hyper-visibility of individuals racialized as black. This occurs because of the salience of the national mythology of a disappeared black population. Thus, black bodies are even more visible and considered out of place than perhaps in other Latin American national contexts.

Methods

To better comprehend black identities in Argentina, I gathered data using interviews, direct observation, and participant observation. I use the extended case method, as elaborated by sociologist Michael Burawoy, as a methodological framework. Though participant observation does not always give rise to the extended case method, as a framework it helps maximize the potential of participant observation. The extended case method has its origins in grounded theory, but unlike grounded theory, it uses existing theoretical paradigms as a point of departure. Both the extended case method and grounded theory hold that “micro and macro are discrete and causally related levels of reality and generalizations can be derived from the comparison of particular social situations” (Burawoy 1991:274). Unlike grounded theory, by using the extended case method, I can maximize the potential of participant observation as an anthropological tool not just for data collection but also as a means to generate novel theoretical ideas.

It can help elucidate how theoretical concepts are manifested on the ground in Argentina.

Argentine Racial Categories Explained⁶

When I entered the field in August of 2007, my original research questioned why and how foreign blacks had become highly visible, yet Argentina's own native population of Afro-descendants continued to be rendered invisible. I soon realized that the visual perception of blackness was not the issue; instead, the dominant society more often chose not to identify these individuals as having African ancestry. I define a black person as an individual that self-identifies as African or of African descendant.⁷ In Argentina, these individuals refer to themselves as *negros*.⁸ Those with dark complexions call themselves *negros de posta* or *negros de piel* to be distinguished from two other blocs that also use the same term.⁹ People of heavy indigenous ancestry commonly are referred to as *negro* and sometimes self-identify as such. Many in the working class also use the term as a way of expressing a political position of class-based disenfranchisement.

The racial categories I delineate in this work are not mutually exclusive. Individuals can, and often do, identify in a variety of ways heavily depending on their situational context. As Hall notes, the multiple ways in which people self-identify can, in some instances, be contradictory (2003). I use emic racial descriptors for my research participants¹⁰. By doing this, I can better ascertain the significance of racial identity in Argentina.

Dominant Argentine society dismisses dark-skinned Afro-Argentines as foreigners. Those with lighter complexions simply are deemed to not really be black, thus negating the negative experiences they have associated with their racialization as black people.

While all Africans and Afro-descendants are visible in Argentine society, they just are not recognized as being a part of it (and sometimes not even recognized as being black). The physical features of most Afro-descendants make them stand out from the local *criollos* who are of mixed descent including European, Indian, and African ancestry (although the non-European lines are usually eliminated discursively). As a result of *mestizaje* or racial mixing, the *criollo* population has few individuals that would be identified on the extremes of “black” or “white.” *Criollo*, like all racial categories, is heterogeneous and contains within it a hierarchy of class and color. Though “black” or “*negro*” is a term commonly used to identify people, “white” is not.

Members of dominant Argentine society do not readily identify themselves as “white,” though culturally it is their European inheritance that is preferred and acknowledged. The only time I witnessed these individuals self-identify as white was when they were speaking to someone they knew who used that racial category, like people from the U.S. Even then, I noticed it was an awkward afterthought to use this term as a self-identifier. Often times, these individuals referred to themselves as European descendants, Europeans, or more specifically, as Spanish and/or Italian. A disclaimer that they know in Europe they would never be accepted as Europeans usually quickly followed this. Argentina’s dominant racial group envisions itself tragically as a collective of *Sudacas*, a derogatory term referring to their origins as South Americans and their place on the global racial hierarchy as lesser world citizens. These Argentines recognize themselves as the descendants of Europe’s “less desirable” populations of Spaniards and Italians that immigrated in high numbers during the early 1900s during a broadening of immigration policies meant to encourage the immigration

of individuals with Nordic phenotypes, cultural values, and practices (Andrews 1980). *Criollo* and European are not mutually exclusive categories, as the same individuals sometimes use both as identifiers. Many self-identifying Afro-descendants also identify as *criollo*. In the text, I use the term “white” in reference to individuals who are phenotypically white and have not identified in any other manner.

There are several other blocs of non-blacks in Argentine society. By “non-black,” I mean individuals who do not phenotypically display any African ancestry nor are of known African ancestry but have not self-identified as any other racial category. Among those that I noticed are the *Turcos*, which translates directly to “Turks” but in reality, is used to refer to all individuals of Arab or Middle Eastern ancestry. The term *Chino*¹¹ literally translated is “Chinese” but is used to refer to anyone of Asian ancestry. Among the visible Asian populations in Argentina are the Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese. Of note, I rarely heard anyone self identify as *Indio* or *Indígena* (Indian or Indigenous), though people identify others in this manner.

In Argentina, there are several blocs within the broader racial category of black. The first of those are the Afro-Argentines who are descendants of enslaved Africans in the nation. Many of them refer to themselves as *Afro-Argentinos del tronco colonial* or *Coloniales* as a way of noting this ancestry. I sometimes also use the term “Colonial Afro-Argentine” to refer to individuals from this bloc. The next bloc consists of Cape Verdean immigrants, who immigrated in the early 1900s, and their descendants. The vast majority of these individuals refer to themselves as *Caboverdeanos* or Cape Verdeans, regardless of whether they were born on the islands or in Argentina. The overwhelming majority of African immigrants in Argentina are West Africans from

Senegal, Nigeria, and Ghana. The Senegalese are the largest in number and the most visible, as they often work as street vendors of costume jewelry. First generation Afro-Argentines are those born in Argentina with at least one parent who is African or of African descent. Other Afro-Latin Americans who are not as numerous in the country are Uruguayans, Dominicans, Cubans, Venezuelans, and Brazilians. Uruguayans and Brazilians are the largest populations of foreign Afro-Latin Americans residing in Argentina. Afro-Brazilians immigrated in large numbers in the mid 1990s to work in the entertainment industry. At the time, the value of the Argentine *peso* was tied to the U.S. dollar and much stronger than the Brazilian *real*.

Afro-Brazilians have a peculiar place in the Argentine imaginary that most likely is linked to the high visibility of their jobs as performers. Curiously, in Argentina, “Brazilian” is equated to “black.” This conflation of race and nationality means that most people that are phenotypically black, especially those with darker complexions, are assumed to be Brazilian. Unfortunately, Argentina has a very contentious relationship with Brazil. Many Argentines confess to being extremely jealous of Brazilians: they have better soccer players, nicer beaches, a world famous *Carnaval*, women with more shapely bodies, and much deeper tans. Worst of all, Brazilians have the ability to enjoy life and get over its obstacles. This is something that Argentines have not been able to learn, as they tend to be characterized as very fatalistic and easily self-defeating. Other Latin Americans and Argentines themselves note that Argentines generally are very quick to blame others for their problems and rarely hold themselves accountable for their own destiny, even when it is painfully obvious that no one else is to blame.

Exacerbating tensions, the Brazilian *real* is has become much stronger than the Argentine *peso*.

Towards an Understanding of the *Porteño*

Porteños easily could be the most despised people in Latin America. They have been described as heartless, soulless, unscrupulous, and selfish people that are only concerned with their own individual wellbeing. Surprisingly, it is *Porteños* themselves who give some of the harshest critiques of their compatriots. Much to the dismay of residents from outside the capital city, the *Porteño* tends to be the global representative of the Argentine. In spite of their bad reputations as the snobs of Latin America, *Porteños* are an impressively self-deprecating people. While I characterized them as constantly being in a state of depression, I was corrected and informed by them that they are better described as melancholic. They seem eternally fatalistic and pessimistic about their lives and the world in general. I was reminded by Argentines on several occasions that they are number one in the world for psychotherapy, which has become an integral part of their culture. At times, I felt like I was living in a nation that is trapped in an identity crisis. On many occasions, I listened to *Porteños* lamenting that they are “boat people” with no true homeland or sense of belonging. There is a constant discourse of melancholy, disenfranchisement, and displacement among the *Porteño* middle class. Argentines are extremely critical of their homeland, but *Porteños* are especially carping, even loathing the geographical location as at the “butt of the world.” This purportedly inferior geographic position is translated as being reflective of all types of social and economic inferiorities on a global scale.

Argentines are known for being extremely discriminatory, and *Porteños* are characterized as being the worst in this respect. I remember meeting a beautiful

twenty-year old woman who could not get hired as a receptionist because of her dark hair since the employer was looking for a blonde. Being overweight is one of the greatest sins you can commit in Argentine society, where my psychologist friends describe the nation as having an epidemic of eating disorders. Though more so for women than men, curly hair can also be a stain on one's beauty. While a dark tan is acceptable, any obvious features of otherness, especially of blackness or indigeneity, are altered with plastic surgery by those who feel it is necessary for their success and can afford it. These *Porteño* personality traits often were mentioned in my conversations with research consultants and others about my project.

One might wonder, in a project about blacks in Argentina, why devote a great deal of the focus on blocs that are not Afro-Argentines? To really understand the situation of any present-day black ethnic bloc in Argentina, you have to put them in the context of the other Africans and Afro-descendants in the nation. All black blocs are, for the most part, generally aware of the existence and activities of the other blocs, though their direct communication might be minimal. Writing about them in any other way would be a misrepresentation of the current state of racial politics in Argentina. Afro-Argentines and their problematic history within the nation are usually in the background of the actions and decisions of Africans and Afro-descendants in Argentina, whether as individuals or part of an organization. Dominant society has placed Afro-Argentines in a position where they continue to live in the shadows of Argentine history, as relics of the past rather than stakeholders in the nation's present and future.

Structure of the Study

This work consists of eight chapters including the introduction and conclusion. In this introductory chapter, "The City and Its People," I provide an overview of the city and

the different ethnic blocs that make up the population of Argentina as well as outlining the structure of the document. In the second chapter, “Adventures in Fieldwork: Methods and Madness on Site,” I speak specifically about the challenges of working part-time while conducting research alone in a large city with research consultants spread throughout it. I also address the challenge of maintaining personal relationships with feuding individuals and gathering useful data in the field. In the third chapter, “Birth of a *Negro* Nation,” I employ the notion of neoliberal multiculturalism to explore the history of black political organization in Argentina and specifically, the pivotal role of an Afro-Argentine in the process. In the fourth chapter, “Will the Real *Negros* Please Stand Up? The Politics of Blackness in Argentina,” I continue the discussion on the disappearance of Argentina’s native black population with a look at their erasure from public politics through the framework of incommensurable exchange; here I discuss the bloc’s resurgence in the last decade as well as other blocs involved in black activism in Argentina, most of which have female leaders. In the fifth chapter, “A Million Little Ways: Racism at Work, at Play and Everyday,” I reveal the way race and anti-black racism are operationalized on a daily basis in Argentine society through the analytical framework of Vargas’s hyperconsciousness of race. In the sixth chapter, “Undercover Brothers and Sisters? *Mestizaje*, Mixedness, and Passing in Argentina,” I concentrate on the complexity of self-identification among Afro-Argentines and how this contributes to the myth of their disappearance. For this chapter, I bring the concepts of incommensurable exchange and hyperconsciousness of race into dialogue, highlighting how they articulate. Chapter seven, “Can You Relate? Family, Friends and Romance in the Diaspora,” discusses the complications of history, race, and relationships among the

black residents of Argentina by using the framework of hyperconsciousness of race. In the eighth and final chapter, “The Future of black Buenos Aires,” I put forth thoughts on the future of blacks in Argentina through a discussion of the most recent developments and suggestions for future directions of research

¹ The cities of Rosario, Santa Fe and Córdoba, Cordoba are also important industrial centers in Argentina.

² The results of the 2010 Census were not available at the time this document was written.

³ Blanqueamiento refers to the biological and cultural processes of whitening a group of people. It was a major part of nation building agendas in Latin America in the early 20th century (See Whitten and Torres 1998).

⁴ Gauchos are Argentine cowboys and an important part of national folklore.

⁵ Mondongo is a traditional Argentine dish from the countryside. It has cow stomach as its base and is commonly elaborated with tomato sauce, onions, beans, sausage, and spices.

⁶ In this text I use the racial categories that my research consultants and other Argentine residents use. In cases when an individual has not self-identified in a particular manner I do so utilizing a category that other residents would most likely use to identify that person.

⁷ Several scholars have argued that hypo-descent, which was once characterized as a U.S. convention, has parallel mechanisms in Latin America (Burdick 1998, Sheriff 2001, Wade 1993). Ethnographic evidence I have gathered suggests that in Argentina people with African ancestry are singled out in an exclusionary way in moments of critical decision making like obtaining employment, receiving good medical care, or being allowed to advance to the next grade in school.

⁸ There is a lot debate around the use of the term negro in Argentina and other parts of Latin America. I heard non-black and black Argentines use the term as well as other Afro-Latin Americans. Several non-black Argentines said it was considered extremely rude to call a person of obvious African descent negro, even if you know the person. It is more common to hear Argentines call blacks Morenos (a person of mixed descent with browner skin) or Morochos (a person of mixed descent with dark hair and light skin) as negro can be and is often used as an insult.

⁹ This work focuses on self-identified negros. Though they are not the focus of this project, there are Africans and Afro-descendants in Argentina who do not self identify as black.

¹⁰ I use pseudonyms for all individuals and organizations.

¹¹ The term chino can also be used as an affectionate nickname in the same way that negro is sometimes used.

CHAPTER 2 ADVENTURES IN FIELDWORK: METHODS AND MADNESS ON SITE

While doing fieldwork, the scholar inevitably inserts herself into the personal histories of those with whom she works. The relationships formed are the negotiations of mountains of differences as the researcher and the others discover where their paths converge and diverge. These very differences provide a rich context for the growth of the scholar and the emergence of new theoretical ideas, especially for anthropologists of color. As Harrison illuminates,

[m]ultiple consciousness and vision are rooted in some combination and interpenetration of national, racial, sexual, or class oppressions. This form of critical consciousness emerges from the tension between, on one hand, membership in a Western society, a Western-dominated profession, or a relatively privileged class or social category, and, on the other hand, belonging to or having an organic relationship with an oppressed social category or people (1997:90).

During my research, I always made a sincere effort to build real relationships with people, which required a considerable investment of time. This often involved simple acts like stopping by a consultant's house for a brief visit if I were within thirty minutes of travel and had at least an hour to devote to them. Additionally, I truly listened to what they said whether it was critique, praise, complaints, all the while taking copious notes. Emerging myself in the everyday lives of local blacks helped me educate their understandings of blackness and their place in Argentina's racial landscape.

Because of my subject position as a black female raised in the U.S. and researching the African Diaspora in Latin America, I have a personal connection and interest in the lives of my research consultants, Africans and Afro-descendants in Argentina. I wanted to be involved in the activities of the black organizations as a resident of Buenos Aires and a researcher. My involvement also helped me feel less

isolated and like I belonged to a community of activism-oriented individuals. Furthermore, as an observing participant in these organizations I was able to reciprocate with the people I researched for sharing information and their lives with me. I was cautious about the organizations with which I affiliated myself, as I was well aware of the rumors and distrust within black organizations regarding their leadership. I told all the leaders that I would need to attend a few meetings and learn more about their respective organizations before I could commit to any projects. This was to my advantage as I discovered the group that at first appeared to be the most proactive had a leader that regularly ostracized his members and made little place for women in his organization. In spite of differences in opinion, I gave everyone the same opportunity to speak with me, to befriend me, and to simply spend time with me. This meant that I frequently found myself spending time with people whose ideas and perspectives varied greatly from my own.

After realizing the high tensions among the different black associations, I soon questioned what I had gotten myself into. In a situation of inter-ethnic conflict, forming certain relationships inevitably would force me to sacrifice others. Interestingly, most of my consultants did not necessarily see me as taking any particular side; instead, they saw me as an outsider who most likely did not fully understand the real situation. This was definitely to my advantage as it allowed me to maneuver in and out of the various feuding camps practically unscathed. Through my dedication and devotion to truly building relationships with people, I had few casualties. I somehow managed to earn the respect of many people who I am fairly certain to this day do not necessarily like me but wanted to speak with me to make sure that I correctly recorded their side of the

story. Convincing people to donate their time to a research project is an accomplishment within itself. The madness involved in sorting out the messiness of the field experience gave way to a more thoughtful analysis of what I observed and experienced.

Methodological Framework

Because participant observation is my principal data collection method, I use the extended case method as a methodological framework since it highlights how participant observation can potentially contribute to the construction of theory. Michael Burawoy defines the extended case method as reconstructing "theory out of data collected through participant observation" (1991:271) by using preexisting theory as a guideline. For this research project, I began with theoretical ideas about identity formation and the multiple interpretations of blackness in the African Diaspora. The extended case method is a revision of grounded theory that reworks it in light of how most social science research is performed. Grounded theory operates on the principle that theoretical generalizations can be derived solely from data. In contrast, the extended case method "takes the social situation as the point of empirical examination and works with given general concepts and laws about states, economies, legal orders, and the like to understand how those micro situations are shaped by wider structures" (Burawoy 1991:282). It recognizes that participant observation can provide fertile ground for the generation of new theory and takes advantage of that potential. As Burawoy notes, "[o]nce one highlights systemic forces and the way they create and sustain patterns of domination in the micro situation, the application of social theory turns to building social movements" (1991:283). This framework facilitates the

translation of my research into concrete actions that positively impact the lives of those I study.

By describing Africans and Afro-descendants in Argentina as having converging and diverging diasporic identities, I reveal a particular understanding of these individuals due to my U.S. upbringing and scholarly training. Drawing on Faye Harrison's perspective, I apply a diasporic framework to my analysis, which "allows anthropologists to apply to the study of black life a diachronic and global perspective that is especially sensitive to and cognizant of the part racial exploitation has played in the expansion, consolidation, and 'modernization' of capitalism" (1988:117).

On Being a Black-American Female and Conducting Research in Buenos Aires

As a black woman researching the African Diaspora in Argentina, there is an element of self-reflexivity involved in my research. As bell hooks suggests, by including the personal in my work, I can take abstract concepts and make them more real (Olson and Hirsh 1995). By practicing what Irma McClaurin coins autoethnography, I can provide a uniquely "native" theoretical perspective for interpreting my research (2001). As a type of near native anthropologist or "halfie" which Lila Abu-Lughod defines as a person "whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage" (1991:137), I am immersed deeply in my positionalities and cannot avoid them. Thus, I make the hybridity of my identity transparent in my work through situating myself as a subject "simultaneously touched by life experience and swayed by professional concerns" (Narayan 1993:682). As Harrison highlights, the "multiple consciousness based on nationality, race, color, class, and gender can be heightened by ethnographic experience and then in turn converted into a useful research instrument" (1997:91).

Self-reflexivity does not always insinuate a positive experience for the researcher. Black women, in particular, can be the subject of heightened or more overtly sexualized and racialized harassment in many Latin American contexts due to the interplay between race, class, and gender in these nations. In her research in Brazil, Kia Lilly Caldwell notes that these personalized experiences with racism can convert our theoretical understandings of gender and race in the African diaspora to experiential ones (2007). Furthermore, she emphasizes that "reflexive examination of our multiple identities and positionalities is essential to developing theory and practice that is informed by and relevant to the realities of African diaspora communities" (Caldwell 2007:xxii). France Winddance Twine faced similar problems in Brazil as both non-blacks and blacks who did not know her often assumed she was a prostitute (2000). As a single black female researcher, many of the same assumptions were made about me. These types of incidents also present opportunities for scholarly growth. Harrison reminds us that the peripheral space created by such trials in the field also can be "a creatively variegated space in which scholars--among them racial minorities, women, Third World, and left-wing activists--have pursued important new developments" (2008:13). These types of negative field site encounters not only help anthropologists empathize with their research consultants but also provide a better understanding of local racial politics.

Going into the field, I knew my own identity would create another layer of interest in my research. As a Liberian adopted by a single white mother from Pennsylvania and raised in Texas, I found my own constellation of identifications engaged in contested ways throughout my fieldwork in Buenos Aires, Argentina. I anticipated that my

blackness would facilitate my gaining access to local black populations, but I did not anticipate to what degree my Americanness would create obstacles for my research. Caldwell describes her field experience in Brazil in which her national identity as a U.S. citizen created distance between her and her Afro-Brazilian activist research participants (2007). Having experienced similar isolation during his research in Brazil, Michael Hanchard realized that as black scholars from the U.S., our own bodies are contested sites of local race relations and "vectors for the confluence of race, gender, and national identity" (2000:183). While the American aspect of my identity posed challenges, I had not considered how my Africanness would play into the local inter-ethnic dynamics.

Local black ethnic blocs generally view Africans as hardworking, intelligent, and savvy entrepreneurs. Interestingly, African immigrants were the only ones that thought of me as an African. Afro-Latinos, including Afro-Argentines, saw me as an American, which created a tension that was not present with African immigrants. Argentines of African descent interact with Americans with caution, and rightly so. Afro-Argentines, in particular, expressed feeling that they have been exploited by local non-black social scientists as well as foreign black and non-black researchers. There is some degree of empathy that blacks have towards black U.S. scholars since they think of the U.S. as an extremely racist society in which the existence of a black professional is an anomaly. I found being an African-American female researcher particularly challenging in an outwardly chauvinistic society. To make matters worse, I was violating cultural norms of gendered behavior by traveling by myself, working to support myself, and wanting to live alone. Additionally, all the myths of the black woman seemed amplified in Argentina

because of the belief that Afro-Argentine women no longer exist. Therefore, black women are an even more exotic rarity and, thus, even more deserving of constant harassment and sexual taunts.

blacks tend to characterize non-black Argentines as racist and extremely discriminatory. I anticipated receiving a myriad of racist treatment from non-black Argentines, which I did. The first half of my stay, I lived in a middle class neighborhood in the center of the city that is mostly populated by local Euro Argentines and white tourists. In that area of the city, I experienced very little racialized harassment. This is most likely due to the fact that tourists are so commonplace there. I then moved to a working class neighborhood full of *criollo* Argentines, as well as Bolivian, Paraguayan, and Afro-Dominican immigrants. My immediate Afro-descendant and non-black neighbors in this neighborhood (mostly immigrants) treated me well or indifferently, but once I left the neighborhood and entered the business areas, I was harassed constantly with sexualized racial taunts and other racially motivated actions. At first, I made it a point to correct such behaviors with a brief comment on their racist nature, but I quickly realized that doing this on a daily basis was just too exhausting and time consuming. It seems that race outweighs class in a society that views itself as non-racist due to the perceived absence of its native population of Afro-descendants.

Blackness, of course, does not give a scholar immediate access to black people. Research relationships, like all social interactions, must be negotiated. Perhaps more troubling than the racialized elements of my identity is my nationality. Americanness is troublesome everywhere as we carry the politics and specifically, the racial politics of our nation with us. For U.S. scholars, sometimes blackness itself is seen as negating

the researcher's nationality. Harrison notes that, in addition, color, class, gender, and nationality can affect how research participants receive the scholar, such that expected roles must constantly be negotiated (1997). Tony Whitehead expressed similar issues of concern based on his fieldwork in Jamaica (1986). In both situations, these African-American scholars had to adjust their behaviors and attitudes according to local perceptions of their identities. I found myself coping with similar issues during my fieldwork.

I was even more suspect as an American because I did not fit the stereotype of a typical American researcher. Americans often have ample funding to do research abroad, though I repeatedly explained that I had no funding and was working several part time jobs (teaching English and cooking for families) to support myself. American visitors to Argentina also typically come from middle and upper class backgrounds, but I come from a single parent working class background. Americans are imagined to be blonde haired, blue eyed, but I am a dark skinned, coarse haired individual. I was out of type for even an African-American researcher because of my class status. I survived on regular use of public transportation, resided in a working class neighborhood, and never traveled to exotic tourist destinations. My inability to meet the prerequisites of Americanness just seemed to confuse many of my consultants more than anything. One capricious African leader suddenly stopped communicating with me because he determined I must be a spy.¹ Peggy Golde describes this common accusation of the anthropologist as being a spy as a mode of defensive behavior or resistance on the part of the host community and a way for a group to preserve itself. She explains, "These accusations and suspicions have frequently been explained as reactions to an

ambiguous figure or as the result of prior negative contact with foreigners” (Golde 1970:8). Blacks in Argentina are no strangers to social scientists, both Argentine and foreign, who want to make them the subject of their inquiry. Though most of these researchers were not black, to my surprise, my Americanness outweighed my blackness in the minds of the majority of my research consultants.

Finding a Room of My Own

A multitude of assumptions are made about a person based on the neighborhood in which she lives. In Buenos Aires, the neighborhood in which a person resides is believed to tell volumes about who she is as a person, not just her class level, but also her disposition and pastimes. My first priority upon arrival in Buenos Aires was to find a living situation and adequate housing to facilitate my research. My attempts at arranging housing from abroad were futile since I only had access to tourist priced apartments. However, Carla, an Afro-Brazilian research consultant in her late thirties whom I had met during my preliminary fieldwork, offered me a room in her home.

Carla lived in a rapidly gentrifying zone of a large middle class neighborhood in the northwestern part of the city with her pre-teen daughter, her mother, and husband. Increased tourism in the area had caused a dramatic rise in property values and the cost of living. Investors had opened a bevy of trendy clothing boutiques catering to crowds of western tourists spending in dollars and euros. Carla had bought her modestly sized house over ten years ago when it was practically in ruins and on the verge of being destroyed. Back then, the neighborhood was just another slowly rotting, ignored sector of the city. She invested the time and money to turn it into a warm, inhabitable, and inviting home. It is rare for blacks to own homes in the capital city, and

a black woman owning a two story home in that neighborhood is even more of an oddity.

Though I was grateful for Carla's generosity, I knew my lifestyle as a young independent researcher would not coordinate well with the quiet family life she had created at home. I needed to be able to come home at all hours of the night and have regular phone and internet access. I had spent the last ten years living with roommates who did not depend on me for anything, so I had become accustomed to addressing only my immediate needs. Additionally, Carla was in the middle of some major home renovations that were months behind schedule due to the shoddy work of various contractors. This meant that every morning for weeks on end, I was awakened around eight with the sounds of drilling and hammering. Going into the situation, I knew the living arrangements would be short term, and after living with Carla for a few months, she agreed that I should move out.

Before entering the field, my dream was to live in a black neighborhood of Buenos Aires. Afro-Argentines used to be found in high concentrations near Rio de la Plata in the southeast neighborhoods of San Telmo and Monserrat (Páez Vilaró 2001), but in the present day, they rarely are found living in Buenos Aires. They are now located in very small numbers scattered throughout the city, but the highest concentration lives just outside of its borders in the adjacent neighborhoods of the province of Buenos Aires. Members of black immigrant blocs are scattered throughout the city but also are situated in higher concentrations in the same southeast neighborhoods Afro-Argentines once inhabited during the colonial era. These areas are mostly populated by working class and working poor residents, both foreign and Argentine. The neighborhoods are

characterized by dominant society as being dangerous, rundown, having too many immigrants, and being the center of illegal activities related to drugs and prostitution. People thought I was crazy for desiring and trying so hard to find housing in these districts.

Moving to a new apartment was much more complicated than I anticipated, because it is very difficult to buy or even rent housing inside the capital city. All property owners require renters to put up a *garantía* or collateral to rent. This *garantía* is often more than double the value of the property the individual seeks to rent. Those who do not have immediate access to inherited wealth usually list the property of a family member, often times in the interior of the country. Exceptions to this practice are made for tourists who are simply charged several times the normal rental fee. Individuals with limited networks, social capital, and income are shut out of renting. Many working poor and immigrants rent in the city's cheap hotels on a weekly or monthly basis, where their own safety and that of their belongings are in constant jeopardy. They are also very vulnerable to the whims of hotel managers and can be thrown out onto the street at any point without much notice. Blacks are disproportionately represented among Argentina's poor, and structural racism has prevented their access to "free"² education, getting higher paying jobs, and even living inside Buenos Aires.

After realizing that it would not be possible for me to rent an apartment through typical means, I went to my research contacts to find help with housing. I had met Gisela through her boyfriend Fabian, a musician who is a first generation Afro-Argentine from an Afro-Uruguayan father and a Euro-Argentine mother. Gisela's mother Francisca is an Afro-Argentine descended from enslaved Africans, and her father Teodoro is an

Argentine descendant of Italian immigrants. Gisela knew I was in need of housing, so she asked her parents if they would be willing to rent me her old room in their apartment. Though they had not rented out any of their rooms in the past, they empathized with my situation and allowed me to live with them. I lived in their home nestled in a working class area of the city for six months, until the end of my research stay.

It was important for me to be able to observe what daily life was like for blacks in the city, and living among them was the best way to do that. I had always lived in a very ethnically and racially diverse environment, so my new neighborhood on the southeast side of the city felt more like home with its mix of Afro-Latinos, Asians, indigenous people, and *criollos*. There was something extremely comforting about walking home and always seeing a number of black people about their business on the streets, shopping, working, and just hanging out. Also important to me was the fact that I was not subjected to the same level of constant stares, barrage of racist comments, and discriminatory treatment as I was in other areas of the city. The residents were friendly, polite, and trusting of me even though they did not know me personally. I once bought some contact solution at a pharmacy in the area, and the pharmacist said I could pay him the next day if I did not have enough money at the time. I knew this was not the norm in the typical big city neighborhood. My new neighborhood was no safe haven either. There was a murder up the block from my apartment and an armed robbery around the corner, but I still found myself feeling more at home there than anywhere else.

Reflecting on my housing situation, if I had received the funding I requested for research, it would have been easy to opt for a posh apartment in a middle to upper class neighborhood and to buy into the myths of the criminality and poverty associated with non-whites in poorer areas. According to my research consultants, this is what many American scholars they had encountered in Buenos Aires did. Other anthropologists have made similar choices in housing as I did, independent of their economic situations to better understand the communities they research (Liebow 1967; Stack 1974; Thomas-Houston 2005; Twine 1998). As a result of my living situation, I was thankfully in a position where I could be more receptive and perceptive of the racial dynamics around me. My experience was enhanced by my struggles.

Visually Capturing “Good Material”

I entered the field with the hope that I would be able to gather a great deal of footage on the everyday existence of blacks in Argentina, whether through videotaping interviews, events, or informal interactions. I was pleased with the information I gathered, but because of its sensitive nature, my best material went without ever being captured on film. My consultants felt free enough to reveal how they truly felt about those around them, which often meant expressing some unpopular viewpoints. They felt this freedom as long as they were not being recorded on film or even a voice recorder. This meant I had to rely heavily on handwritten notes for data collection.

Another issue that was constantly brought to my attention was the potential theft of my equipment. Though camcorders and digital cameras are fairly easy to find in Buenos Aires, all electronics (as well as real estate, cars, and appliances) are priced in dollars, making them less accessible to the general public. Even in the wealthiest neighborhoods of the city that tend to have their own private security in addition to the

city police force, theft is very high. Several of my consultants had been victims of non-violent and violent theft. Blacks are especially favored targets for theft. Argentines view all blacks as foreigners and thus always carrying money or something of value. I was constantly aware of the threat of being robbed; fortunately, I was never the victim of theft or any other crime.

While it is wise to heed the advice of locals, we must be cognizant of the prejudices that sometimes help shape those suggestions. I, unfortunately, learned this the hard way. I spent New Year's with an Afro-Argentine consultant Bruno who has family that lives in the province of Buenos Aires. The area is generally characterized as working class and working poor. When my consultants (both black and non-black) that live in the city found out where I was going, they warned me not to bring any electronics since they were certain I would be robbed. After hearing these types of statements multiple times, I was convinced and left my camcorder at home. When I met up with Bruno and his children to take the bus, we ended up waiting on a deserted street corner alone in the middle of the night without any disturbances. I could have recorded every single moment of my trip there with no problem. The neighborhood where his family resides is quite peaceful and the neighbors were pleasant. They lived in a close knit community where people know almost everyone's whereabouts and the areas to avoid. His family was also very friendly, expressive, jovial, and really wanted to be filmed so that they would have a record of the event. It was a great opportunity that I missed and still regret to this day. I learned the best way to capture good material is to trust consultants to lead me safely to it.

Researching Black People In A Country Where “There Are No Blacks”

Sampling

My views of race going into the field, of course, influenced how I approached my research. I was not just looking for people who I would personally categorize as African and Afro-descendant, but those who considered themselves to fall within these categories in a country where they might have been able to pass as other ethnicities. I was not raised in African-American culture and learned what I know about it more through independent research than the formal education system. Growing up as an African outside of an African community, I automatically was placed in the category of black, though I was not readily accepted by the majority of my African-American peers. This is not to say we did not share common experiences of discrimination, isolation, or even similar class backgrounds; however, from my own life experience in the U.S., I knew how slippery the category of blackness could be. I came to understand race to be an exclusionary category that creates communities of displaced individuals at the same time that it could be a unifying principle.

The majority of the individuals in my sample are African and Afro-descendant and was recruited through snowball sampling. As the title of my dissertation suggests, I see these people as part of larger diasporas; thus I applied a diasporic framework in selecting them. Harrison explains that this approach is "dynamic and flexible enough to recognize that forms of racial/class oppression vary over time and space, and that various historically-specific intersections of race and class may give rise to situations wherein a distinctive 'black' racial identity does not obtain" (1988:117). My research participants might not see themselves as part of a diaspora or even as Afro-descendants. Harrison goes on to explain that

even where 'race' is not a major organizing principle or structural feature, the diaspora concept suggests that historical ties to Africa and/or the legacy of slavery, plantation agriculture, and the 'triangular trade' (E. Williams 1944) may have had some direct or indirect impact upon regional and national patterns of sociocultural and economic development (1988:117).

Therefore, this approach allows my research to be informed by a critical examination of history and how various historical events inform the creation and maintenance of larger societal structures, which affect the micro-politics of identity in Argentina.

Finding blacks in Buenos Aires seemed like a daunting challenge at first, but I began by identifying some key leaders among the black organizations through online research. Unfortunately, many of these individuals turned out to be problematic figures. In spite of this, I was able to locate the majority of consultants through recommendations from others. I quickly realized that blacks are scattered throughout Buenos Aires rather than concentrated in ethnic enclaves. The majority of them are not members of formalized social groups or NGOs. My methods, then, could not be solely centered on the activities of organized groups. In light of this, I attended as many events associated with black themes as possible. I soon discovered that events labeled *Afro* are popular in the city but rarely have people of Afro-descent in attendance or running them. I participated in the activities of local black associations, and as more people found out about me and my research, they began to notify me about events that would be of interest. I also spoke to Argentine scholars researching similar topics, and I reached out to people at local embassies that had an interest in my research. Specifically, I communicated with representatives of the embassies of the United States and South Africa. Both embassies created programming in an attempt to connect with local blocs of Africans and Afro-descendants.

My sample for this project consisted of 64 research participants (Table 2-1) whom I had an opportunity to interview or speak with more informally on a regular basis. They ranged in age from their mid 20s to late 70s. Among these individuals are 23 Afro-Argentines: 15 from colonial line, seven first generation, and one second generation. Of the Afro-Argentines from the colonial line, 10 are female and five are male. From the first generation, there are four males and three females. There is one female from the second generation. In the group of 13 Africans, nine are male, and four are female. The Afro-Brazilians include four males and six females. There is one male Afro-Uruguayan, one female Afro-Ecuadorian, one female Afro-Colombian, and one male Cape Verdean and one female Cape Verdean who also identifies as Afro-Argentine. Among the 14 non-blacks included are 13 Argentines and one Brazilian. Of the non-Afro-descendants, 10 are male, and three are female. I use the same racial categories my interviewees use. These categories are not mutually exclusive, but I group participants according to how they most strongly identify.

Data Collecting Methods

My research methods included interviews, participant observation, direct observation, and the collection of archival material related to blacks in Argentina including newspaper articles, photos, books, musical recordings, and magazines. Once I had gained their trust and they became familiar with the goals of my project, my research participants often helped lead me to relevant materials, individuals, and events. It was by combining these methods that I was able to achieve a clearer understanding of inter-group interactions as well as overall racial dynamics.

The format of most of my interviews went from unstructured into more structured, which allowed me to gather a great quantity and variety of information. During the

interviews, I had many of my consultants go through their personal photos with me. I found this extremely helpful and revealing in terms of discussing how they constructed racial identity. Though I wanted to gather as much footage as possible, I found it very difficult to get many interactions videotaped because of the sensitive data around questions of racial identity that were revealed. I was able to tape a small number of interviews, parties, dance classes, and some general meetings of the African Diaspora Working Group. I also attended various formal and informal events related to black culture throughout my stay and regularly attended Afro-Brazilian dance classes taught by a research consultant who is a second generation Afro-Argentine³. Finally, archival data in the form of photos, newspaper and magazine articles, and books helped provide contextual narratives about blackness in Argentine society.

Participant observation has become the cornerstone of what is considered sound anthropological research; yet, often times, it is unclear exactly what one does as a participant observer. I found myself doing a lot of hanging out. I hung out in homes, workplaces, restaurants, bars, parks, cultural centers, schools, and sometimes even hospitals. There is a great time investment involved in the work of anthropology. It takes time for the researcher to recognize patterns, gain people's trust, prove she can be a useful community member, and turn research consultants into field site friends. Virginia Dominguez acknowledges the importance of these types of relationships in the field as it is

difficult, to do ethnographic work on a community of people some of whose values are utterly at odds with the researcher's and yet care enough about coming to understand them to insist on not going public until the researcher reaches the point of really caring about at least some of them (2000:385).

Good anthropology cannot be done with a kamikaze style approach. Our entrance must be announced, our weaknesses revealed, and our strengths called upon to service the communities we live in. As scholars, we are part of the communities we research while on site, even if only briefly. When we leave, there will be a void that can only be filled with our presence. It is up to us to determine how we will maintain those relationships we worked so hard to develop.

Though scholars working with community organizations often do not take on such active roles as I did, I felt the project necessitated a more intense degree of participation for several reasons. As a black woman living in Argentina, I was very familiar and empathetic with the concerns of my research consultants. As McClaurin reminds us,

[w]e construct a complex ethnographic world from our data, our field experiences, our knowledge as 'natives,' halfies, woman, other, that is contradictory, multilayered, engaged, and as close to representing the social reality of the people we study as we can get. This strategy not only reshapes ethnographic practice but transforms it into ethnographic praxis (action) (McClaurin 2001:61).

The organizations with which I worked closely were addressing experiences and issues we shared as racialized and marginalized individuals living in Argentina. My participation provided a chance for increasing the camaraderie between me as a researcher and those I studied as well as helped diminish my feelings of isolation as a black person residing in a city where blacks are the constant targets of everyday racist practices. Finally, by taking a more active role with the local black organizations, I was able to reciprocate for their assistance with my research project. Overall, I would classify my close involvement with these organizations as a variation of participant observation rather than any overt effort in taking an active role in local racial politics. I recognized that ultimately I was a temporary resident, and because of that status, I

could not commit to any agenda at the same level as the locals. While I was able to help plant the seeds of various initiatives, I would not be present to deal with the repercussions.

The Participant Observer in Action

Leaving the field, I cynically was tempted to agree with my foreign black consultants that described Argentina as a society that is *atrasada* or "behind" in terms of race relations. The racist encounters and treatment that are part of the every day lives of blacks in Argentine society are almost tantamount to what many young people would consider pre-Civil Rights era folklore in the U.S. Argentina is definitely facing many challenges in dealing with its multi-ethnic past and present. There are many parallels that can be made with blacks in other parts of the Americas, but particularities in economic development, major political shifts with military rule, and a contrived historical erasure of Afro-descendants are more than just nuances that must be taken into consideration. Through the time I spent with Africans and Afro-descendants in the country, I witnessed and shared in the painfully deep and psychologically taxing experiences of exclusion and isolation. I partially attribute the recent mobilization around black identity and the revaluation of blackness to the social and political exclusion felt by Africans and Afro-descendants in the cultural landscape of Argentina.

Identity formation is a constant process that carries us through many different transformations and ways of identifying in a lifetime (Hall 2003). It is also something whose subtleties can be highlighted and made more accessible through ethnography. Through the following three vignettes, I demonstrate how, as a researcher, I navigated the terrains of blackness in interactions with Africans and Afro-descendants in Argentina. The first describes a cultural fair where representatives of the different

immigrant populations in Argentina set up stands with traditional goods. I talk about my experience working at the event with Carla, an Afro-Brazilian who has lived in Argentina for about fifteen years. The next one takes place at the Nigerian Democracy Day celebration where I had been chosen by the organizers to be the mistress of ceremonies partially because of my African roots. The final account is of a racist encounter described to me by Francisca, an Afro-Argentine research consultant with whom I resided for several months. My experiences in the field reveal the ways in which black identities are being reworked in a nation where the presence of Afro-Argentines has been denied since the end of the colonial era.

Working the Cultural Fair

I was residing with Carla when one evening she told me she wanted to resume participating in the city's *ferias de colectividades* or cultural fairs. These types of state sponsored events are an attempt to create a public discourse of multiculturalism while maintaining the racial hierarchy (Hale 2006). They were originally conceptualized as a way for Argentines to become familiar with immigrant cultures and to integrate the immigrants into Argentine society as well. Carla is a creative woman with a wide array of talents including the production of traditional Brazilian arts and crafts and Brazilian food. She was more involved with the fairs about five years previously when they were run by the state government during a time when they were more focused on educating the public about different cultures. The fairs have become privatized and run by Argentines who do not have the same interests but are more concerned with earning a profit from the vendors. Though there are several fairs conveniently close to her home, Carla said she could not attend those. She felt other people in the fair circuit would find out and gossip that she was too good to sell at the fairs in more working class

neighborhoods further away from downtown. Carla does, after all, reside in what recent years has become one of the trendiest neighborhoods in the city of Buenos Aires.

I volunteered to help Carla run her tent at the fair as a way to pay her back for her generosity. It was also a great research opportunity that would allow me to observe inter-ethnic interactions in that setting. We attended a very large and popular fair in a large neighborhood located on the western border of the capital. The local attendees of the event typically are employed as maids, bus drivers, and construction workers. In Carla's tent, she sold dolls, home décor, and food. By selling goods at the fair, she generated some extra income to help support her family.

Carla put me in charge of greeting potential customers and helping explain what the food items contained. Argentine fair goers would ask a lot of specific questions about Brazilian life and culture. Sometimes, they would even fondly mention a vacation they or a relative had taken in Brazil, all with the assumption that I was Brazilian. At first, I was quick to politely explain that I am actually from the U.S. and not Brazilian, but this just seemed to confuse fairgoers and put a damper on the whole fantasy of Brazil into which I was already incorporated. Argentines conflate Brazilian with black and even use the terms interchangeably to describe people. After a few of these encounters, Carla and I realized that it was my mistaken identity that was helping her goods sell. It was more beneficial to her sales for me to not correct the customers. After all, I have all the makings of a good Brazilian. I enjoy Brazilian music, dance, and food. I am friendly and personable and somewhat knowledgeable about the Brazilian products I was selling because of what I had learned from Carla. I also speak Portuguese, wear my hair in braids, and am dark skinned. Even more insinuating was

the fact that I was working at a Brazilian tent, dressed in the colors of the Brazilian flag, and selling Brazilian products alongside Brazilians at a cultural fair. I easily had become Brazilian by association.

After my enlightening and exhausting experience standing on my feet for ten hours at the fair, I decided I had learned enough and most likely would not be returning to the fair circuit. I instead volunteered to entertain Carla's daughter and mother at home while she worked the fair. Carla recently had brought her mother from Brazil, who because of several health problems could not spend many hours outside exposed to the elements. Her daughter was eleven years old and no longer enjoyed helping her mom sell goods. Soon, Carla started doubting if attending the fairs was truly worth all of the trouble. Fairs are expensive to attend if a vendor does not sell a high quantity of goods. Additionally, they are located quite far from her home, and the transportation to get there and back is costly. After about three fairs, Carla decided that they were too much of an expense and inconvenience for her to participate. I did, however, appreciate the opportunity to have attended a cultural fair before her retirement and learned much in the process about Argentines' imaginaries of blackness as being something quintessentially Brazilian.

Mc'ing Nigerian Democracy Day

I had become friends with David, the vice president of the Nigerian Organization of Argentina. He worked in an office downtown near one of the places I taught English. I would sometimes drop by to speak or have coffee with him and find out about the latest happenings of the organization. I attended his group's organizational meeting but only once because they met late in the evenings at David's house, which was located on the eastern, less maintained outskirts of the city. On one visit to David's office, he

invited me to one of the largest events of the year, Nigerian Democracy Day, which was coming up a week later. I recalled that during the organizational meeting, one of the elder gentlemen emphasized that this year's Democracy Day event must go well because it would be important for improving the image of Africans in Argentina. David wanted my assurance that I would be there, so I confirmed that I would be present and would be willing to photograph the event for him. He even called me the day before to remind me.

The Nigerian Democracy Day celebration is an annual event held at the end of May and hosted by the Nigerian Organization. Every year, the location changes depending on the space the city government can let them use for free. This year, the organization was allocated a choice location in the middle of one of the busiest business districts of downtown. The building additionally had the advantage of belonging to the state's largest and most prestigious university. These factors helped contribute to the attendance of over 200 guests, though the start time of five o'clock meant that many people had to leave work early to attend. Like a good American, I arrived at the hour the event was to begin---prepared with my camera and camcorder. However, the event started late because we waited for one of the panelists to finish teaching a class.

Upon my arrival, David nervously ran over to where I was seated near the front of the room to remind me that I would be introducing the panelists as we had supposedly discussed the previous day. I did not recall ever agreeing to be the master of ceremonies for the event, nor did I even know who was on the panel I was supposed to introduce. To make matters worse, I was completely unprepared and inappropriately dressed to be speaking in front of a crowd and representing a respectable association.

I tried to get out of it by suggesting some other members in attendance, but both David and Paul, the president of the organization, insisted. I reluctantly accepted and took my place at the end of the table at the front of the room. My role as announcer went rather smoothly, and the event was again a success.

I could not help but wonder why the leaders of the Nigerian Organization of Argentina were so insistent on having me play the role of master of ceremonies. I later found out that Paul and David had a conversation discussing who would be appropriate to announce the event. A few years prior, they had invited Claudia, an articulate and intelligent local Afro-Argentine leader of Cape Verdean descent that figures prominently in the media, to serve as master of ceremonies. They soon discovered that they did not agree with the way she was operating within the black ethnic blocs. They cut off communication with her shortly afterwards. The previous year, they had Antonio, an eloquent and confident young Afro-Uruguayan member of a local black NGO, host. Because he is openly gay, which David described as a “defect,” the other African men were not happy with him representing the organization in that public forum.

Before Nigerian Democracy Day, I had conducted a few formal and informal interviews with the president and vice president of the organization, but nothing had led me to anticipate that I would be included in the organization’s activities in this manner. I also had attended a small number of their events, but in none of these had I imagined that they had claimed me as a fellow member. It seemed, however, that I had suddenly become Nigerian by some sort of popular vote. Either that or my African origin was enough of a compelling reason for my inclusion. Though I had already explained to the leaders that I was raised outside of African culture, I still was treated as a long lost

African daughter who just needed some guidance to rediscover her roots. During her fieldwork in Nigeria, Gloria Marshall experienced similar treatment by her Nigerian research consultants as a long lost relative from far away. As a Bahamian raised in South Florida, Marshall did not meet African ideas of an American who they thought of as white and Southern Baptist since that was all they had been exposed to in 1961 (Marshall 1970). Similar to my situation, her status as a single black woman prompted her African hosts to take care of her as if she were a family member.

The presentation of certificates of recognition at the end of the event confirmed my speculations. My certificate was announced last, and Paul very enthusiastically presented it to me. He made a very nice commentary on how happy he was to have an African sister in Argentina doing research on blacks and participating in this event. He then thanked me with a big warm hug and kiss on the cheek. I was now being celebrated for being an African in Argentina.

Living with Blackness

The way I met Francisca stands out from how I met my other research consultants. I was in a small bar watching Fabian perform Cuban music with a small band of musicians. Fabian's sister was also in attendance, and she introduced me to his girlfriend Gisela who was watching the performance with her parents. I looked to the back of the tiny, dark, crowded bar and noticed that Gisela's mother appeared to be a very light skinned Afro-descendant. I asked Gisela, and she confirmed that her mother is Afro-Argentine. I later arranged to do an interview with both of them at Gisela's apartment.

During my formal interview with Francisca, she made it seem as if race was never much of an issue in her life, though she recognized herself as being an Afro-

descendant. She spoke of her two decades long career as a computer programmer for a French company, and her experiences of being treated very well by everyone there. She spoke of how she had recently heard a radio interview with a known Argentine scholar who researches Afro-Argentines and was enthusiastic about sharing this information with me. She also mentioned attending a classical music concert featuring compositions by Joseph Bourlogne who is known as the “black Mozart.”

Francisca, in her sixties, then went into some detail about her family history. She talked about growing up in the northwest province of Santa Fe under the protection of her blonde-haired, blue-eyed cousins who themselves had a *mulata* mother. They managed to shield Francisca from racist comments during her childhood. She moved to Buenos Aires at sixteen and attended high school with a lot of Jewish girls. They were the ones that befriended her and invited her over to their houses. The other girls never talked to her, which she attributes to the fact that she was friends with Jews. This led her to tell the story about the bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires and how her daughter Gisela had passed the building just minutes before it exploded. Francisca emphasized that Jews are very much discriminated against in Argentina. She then told another story about a light skinned black man who was the target of racist slurs on a bus and reported it to the authorities. In her home province of Santa Fe, there was a scandal over a newspaper ad specifying a patron looking for a white maid. The man who posted it was reported as well. Her summary of all of these accounts was that she lives in a very racist country, even though she herself has not had any major problems with racism.

I almost was inclined to fully believe Francisca's assessment of racism in Argentina. Maybe the situation was not that bad for Afro-descendants, and the few things we saw in the news were just isolated incidents. This all changed after an incident that occurred after I moved in with her. One day, Francisca came home irate after picking up her four-year-old granddaughter from school. She ran to the phone and called a good friend to tell her what had happened, emphatically recounting the story. When she got off the phone, she looked for me in another room of the house and repeated the story to me. The female teacher that was releasing the children at the daycare made it a point not to ever greet Francisca and had made her wait until all the other kids had been called before she was allowed to get her granddaughter. Francisca knew she was being discriminated against, so she purposefully put herself at the front of the line and still received the same treatment. Francisca referred to the employee as a racist and said the woman was probably wondering why a "*negra de mierda*"⁴ is picking up a little blonde girl.

Contrary to what I believed from our formal interview, Francisca is very conscious of the everyday racist practices and ideas that circulate in Argentina society. She probably faces them more often than she reveals. I do not know with certainty if Francisca saw me as an American from the U.S., a fellow black person, or a researcher interested in race relations in Argentina. She might have understood me to be all three in that moment, and she wanted to make sure I and all of those close to her were aware of the racist treatment she was receiving as a black woman in modern day Argentina. I think Francisca's life could very easily typify the reality of the few Afro-Argentines that reside in the capital city. They must deemphasize their blackness to gain access to

more social capital and an improved standard of living. Nonetheless, every so often, they are reminded of their “true” place in Argentine society.

Studying Race where Racism “Does Not Exist”

My own understandings of race are indubitably influenced by my personal history and subject position as a black female raised in the United States. This knowledge impacts my interpretation of how my black research consultants see race. The displacement that racialization can cause occurs not only geographically through diasporic movements and other types of migrations but also in the realm of local ideology. Racially marked individuals are made to feel that they are not a part of dominant society and cannot be because of differences in phenotype that are interpreted as indicative of cross-cultural incompatibility. The accounts described in this chapter are windows into the myriad of viewpoints held by Africans and Afro-descendants in Buenos Aires. Through these, it is possible to get a general idea of how each ethnic bloc understands the way race is operating in relation to its own concepts of identity in Argentina.

The Afro-Brazilian perspective on race is that racism is a problem that is in Argentina, Brazil, and everywhere else in the world. There is some debate as to which country is worse in terms of racist treatment towards blacks, but there is a general consensus that Brazil is no racial paradise. Most of their jobs are highly dependent on heavy interaction with non-black Argentine patrons, so they tend to offer few public critiques of racism. Racism is just another part of the everyday experience as blacks and foreigners. It is something they do not like but have to live with. Afro-Brazilians, as a whole, do not see much progress being made towards the recognition of black populations and anti-racist struggles, so they stay out of public racial politics in

Argentina. The few that have chosen to be in the public eye are seen as misrepresenting Brazilians by playing to racist stereotypes of black Brazilians as carefree, disorganized, and incapable of discussing serious social issues.

Nigerians and other Africans are very much aware that racism exists in Argentina and recognize Argentines as perpetrators of it. They see racism as just another obstacle to their goals of long-term success in the nation. They believe that hard work eventually will trump racist attitudes. In the Nigerian imaginary, Afro-Argentines are failing as a bloc because of the lack of male leadership. They have lost a sense of who they are as black people and have even let their strong African genes and cultural values get “washed out” through intermarriage with whites. This is ironic, considering that the overwhelming majority of African males have Euro-Argentine partners and children that are first generation Argentines of African descent.

For Afro-Argentines, racism seems to be the private burden of their insular ethnic bloc. Several confessed to me in confidence that racism is a major problem in Argentina. They usually had several stories of their own racist encounters as well as those of friends and families. Afro-Argentines are upset and ashamed that they continue to be the targets of discriminatory treatment, yet at the same time, they avoid any public participation in protesting racism. It is not that they have given up on claiming black identities or fighting racist attitudes, but rather they consciously have chosen to retreat from doing so in public forums. Afro-Argentines’ sense of racial consciousness is still very strong and demonstrated through musical, dance, culinary, and other traditions that are passed down through generations. They have decided to make these inaccessible for public viewing and critique. As a people, they have not

been defeated, and their deliberate withdrawal allows them the freedom to express themselves in the private domain of their homes and closed invitation community events. Though it is rare to see them in public actively seeking racial equality, many believe they are the only rightful inheritors of state policies benefiting blacks.

As scholars, through the study of less visible populations, we can better understand the everyday realities of race and racism in a nation. These understandings are essential to gain insight into the histories and social practices that make certain blocs invisible. A concept like blackness can be construed in a variety of ways in the eyes of different black populations, all with their own unique histories and perspectives. These should all be considered because identity is by nature relational, contextual, and constantly being reworked (Romanucci-Ross and De Vos 1995; Taussig 1980). The handful of scholars that have researched blackness in Argentina tend only to focus their work on a single bloc like Afro-Argentines, Cape Verdeans, or Afro-Brazilians (Frigerio and Ribeiro 2002; Ortiz Oderigo and Cirio 2008; Picotti 2001b). However, blackness articulates in different ways within multiple ethnic blocs in the same geographical area, though they might all share a convergent African diasporic identity. Additionally, each bloc is contributing to how Argentine society understands blackness. We must do more than just affirm the existence of blacks in areas where they have been rendered invisible. While researching the history of this process is important, what is really lacking is an understanding of the everyday lives of black individuals. It is within these accounts that we find evidence of what race means and how racism is operationalized locally. Argentina is an important site for understanding the resurgence of black

identities that is occurring throughout Latin America, as it represents an extreme case of the invisibility of Africans and Afro-descendants.

¹ His assumption was not that I was a spy of any particular government, but that I wanted to participate in his group's activities so that I could pass the information along to rival groups who would then steal his group's ideas or sabotage their plans.

² The education system is free through a bachelor's level degree in Argentina. State universities are the top institutions and extremely competitive. A degree from them would greatly increase your chances of finding desirable employment. In order to get into state universities you have to score very high on the entrance exams. Students who are best prepared for these have attended private schools all their lives in addition to having tutors work with them at home. Thus, what appears to be a "free" education on the surface is, in fact, only accessible to those in higher income brackets.

³ I define a second generation Afro-Argentine as a person who has at least one grandparent that is an African or Afro-descendant.

⁴ "*Negro de mierda*" is a popular racist insult used against people of all racial groups. It can roughly be translated to "nigger."

Table 2-1. Research Participants

Nationality (Self-identified)	Male	Female	Total
Colonial Afro-Argentine	5	10	15
1 st Gen. Afro-Argentine	4	3	7
2 nd Gen. Afro-Argentine	0	1	1
Cape Verdean	1	0	1
Afro-Brazilian	4	6	10
Afro-Uruguayan	1	0	1
Afro-Ecuadorian	1	0	1
Afro-Colombian	0	1	1
Africans	9	4	13
Non-Afro-descendant	10	4	14
Total Participants	35	29	64

CHAPTER 3
BIRTH OF A *NEGRO* NATION:
THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE ARGENTINE BLACK MOVEMENT

The examples I employ throughout this work are indicative of my United States upbringing and scholarly formation. The title of this chapter is especially reflective of this particular perspective as it references D.W. Griffith's 1915 feature film *The Birth of a Nation*. Bogle notes that, as the first Hollywood blockbuster, the film was also the first motion picture to address the subject matter of blacks in U.S. society. *The Birth of a Nation* was record breaking in its creation, execution, and popularity. In the narrative, after the abolition of slavery, the nation is in chaos because blacks are out of control. The Ku Klux Klan then heroically surfaces as the only hope. Bogle explains that,

[f]or D.W. Griffith there was a moral order at work in the universe. If that order were ever thrown out of whack, he believed chaos would ensue. Griffith's thesis was sound, relatively exciting, and even classic in a purely Shakespearean sense. But in articulating his thesis, Griffith seemed to be saying that things were in order only when whites were in control and when the American negro was kept in his place (1973:10).

Some of the film's black characters resist but are ultimately defeated. In spite of their defeat, there are still complexities within these racist portrayals. It is only near the close of the picture, when the Ku Klux Klan marches in to restore order in the form of white supremacy, that the nation is born. In the eyes of dominant white society, all black types are represented in the movie and effectively silenced through these representations. When blacks are "put in their place" by removing their voice, the nation can truly be born, grow, and prosper.

Though the film is a commentary on U.S. race relations, the ideologies it espouses are not unique to that country. Argentina as a nation was solidified by declaring blackness was not legitimately a part of it, in spite of the historic roles blacks

played in laying the foundation of Argentine society. From a hegemonic perspective, the nation is truly born with the introduction of whitening initiatives in the early 1900s and the subsequent removal of blacks from the national discourse. White supremacy in Argentina takes many forms. Most notably, it occurs through the denial of the presence of Afro-descendants and their contributions to national culture. Like Griffith's film, white supremacy does not exist without vigorous opposition and debate, though official histories have made these marginalized voices inaudible.

Creating a political movement centered on black identity is especially challenging in Latin America where hypo-descent is not the dominant racial ideology. In Argentina, this situation is complicated by the mythology of a disappeared black population and a significant number of Afro-Argentines who do not readily identify as black. In spite of these challenges, a small number of Africans and Afro-decedents are in the process of politically mobilizing. The term "movement" has been an important part of their discourse, more as a goal than a reflection of the current state of racial politics. Some black organizations have even incorporated the term into their name. In this chapter, I provide some background to better understand the origins of present political activities that could someday lead to a full-fledged movement by mapping the location of Afro-descendants and African immigrants within civil society and the nation-state.

The Foundations of Organized Activities around Black Identity

For many, it is difficult to imagine modern day Argentina as a nation with a thriving black population and even less so a politically active one that mobilizes around black identity. In Argentina, as in many other nations with the presence of the African Diaspora, there has long been resistance to dominant society's notion of pure European origins. This is evidenced in the existence of the black press, mutual aid societies, and

many other black organizations (Andrews 1980; Lewis 1996) as well as African based cultural practices that contribute to Argentine popular culture (Lanuza 1942; Picotti 1998; Rossi and Becco 2001; Savigliano 1995; Thompson 1984).

In Argentina, there are several organizations involved in the public politics of race, which I define as organized, public efforts to mobilize individuals around black identity. The Argentine government created the National Institute against Discrimination (NIAD) in the late 1990s and the recently established Refugee Assistance Organization to help combat the problems that plague black ethnic blocs at a state level. International governments also play an important role with the Embassies of South Africa, Brazil, and the United States, all actively participating in public racial politics. The most active black organizations in Argentina include the Nigerian Organization, the Afro-Indigenous Coalition, and the African Diaspora Working Group. To contextualize the role of these black organizations in the expression of modern-day racial politics, I focus on a moment that serves as a concrete marker of organized black political activity on a national scale, one that originally incorporated a Pan-Africanist vision.

The Afro-Argentine at the helm of black political organization was Martin Escobar (Fig.3-1) who began his activism in his late thirties. Many local blacks as well as non-black allies recognize Escobar as the founding father of their current activities centered on black identity. Escobar was a handsome, dark skinned man with a distinct presence that drew people in. He had the look of Hollywood royalty and the dynamism of the greats, in the United States context, like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. He remains well respected by everyone as a man who tried to raise consciousness among blacks as well as unite them. On the other hand, in more recent years, he is

remembered as a man who had some very harsh critiques of his fellow Afro-Argentines and especially of those who have presented themselves as leaders of organized coalitions of Africans and Afro-descendants. This did not make him any less respected of a figure, but it did make some black leaders reluctant to introduce me to him.

Unfortunately, Escobar had a debilitating stroke about six years ago, which left him with limited mobility and speech capacity. His son Dominique, a reggae artist with a strong Rastafarian ideology, shared his father's history, legacy, and vision with me. This vision led Escobar to go into exile for twenty years in Switzerland during the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* or the military dictatorship that influenced the nation from the mid 1960s to the early 1980s. Escobar was a major activist and is now idolized by local blacks and their non-black allies.

A cofounder of early black activism in Argentina and a close friend of Escobar is Paul, an eloquent, intelligent, middle-aged Nigerian man who arrived in Argentina in the late 1970s. Paul continues to be respected among local blacks and is currently the president of the Nigerian Organization of Argentina. He revealed that in 1982 he and six other black men of different national origins including Afro-Argentines formed an organization to discuss black politics and mobilize blacks in Argentina, but it dissolved after personal conflicts could not be resolved.

Argentina's Africans and Afro-descendants are still in the initial stages of forming unified political activities. In the past fifteen years, several black organizations have been created, but few have engaged in public politics or even had this as a goal. A small delegation of Black activists from Argentina attended the 2001 United Nations World Conference against Racism, though the effects of their participation in this

international dialogue remain to be seen. As several local and foreign blacks note, things happen very slowly in Argentina. Escobar and Paul helped plant the seeds of political mobilization, but along the way, the activist drive really lost momentum. By contextualizing these and other efforts of mobilization within the realm of Argentine racial politics, we can better understand how this process has unfolded historically.

Race, Peronism, and the *Conflicto Con el Campo*

Through their research on the U.S. healthcare system, H. E. Page and Brooke Thomas remind us that spaces inside the city, like those within institutional walls, can be racially marked as white. They identify this white public space noting,

[e]ither in its material or symbolic dimensions, white public space is comprised of all the places where racism is reproduced by the professional class. That space may entail particular or generalized locations, sites, patterns, configurations, tactics, or devices that routinely, discursively, and sometimes coercively privilege Euro Americans over non-whites. Its material resources are formidable institutions that include the territories they claim or the markets they control (Page and Thomas 1997:94).

We can broaden this characterization to understand the racial landscape in Argentina. By *Porteños* defining the capital city of Buenos Aires as the “Paris of Latin America” and themselves as “Europeans,” they have in a way marked that entire landscape as white public space. In Argentine folklore, *Porteños* are lighter in skin color, have straight hair, and have a greater knowledge base of elite European cultural practices than the rest of Argentina’s population. Guano notes that in the city of Buenos Aires “whiteness and membership in the urban middle class tacitly establish who has the right to speak for the Argentine nation” (2003:161). This notion of whiteness as a indicator of belonging not only to the city, but the nation, only intensified after the 2001 economic crisis at which point Buenos Aires’ middle class residents tried to rationalize their own disenfranchisement by creating a discourse of how the city’s “modernity was being

eroded by the presence of a *mestizo* lower class" (Guano 2004:69). Through a series of formal and informal cultural practices, there is a distance maintained between dominant society and racial others.

The literal physical marginalization of blacks, as manifested in their relocation outside the city of Buenos Aires, is reflective of their location on the periphery of the Argentine imaginary. Inside the city limits black goods, services, and bodies are consumed, but not otherwise integrated into Argentine life. Mimi Sheller's work on consumption, though situated in the Caribbean, is useful in understanding these types of historic racial/spatial relationships and how they reveal the legacy of slavery through patterns of economic exploitation. Sheller broadly defines consumption as "a way of understanding a broad set of relations that are at once economic, political, cultural, social, and emotional" (2003:5). This paradigm of consumption can be adapted from a transnational scale to the national level to better apprehend the relationship between the residents of *villas miserias*¹ and low income housing and the members of dominant Argentine society who do not acknowledge them as belonging to the nation or even contributing to its development. The consumption framework is mobilized to comprehend relationships between dominant western societies and the formerly colonized who remain disenfranchised. Sheller notes that slavery "is not only an economic relation; it is also a cultural, symbolic, spiritual, bodily and affective relation, thus its legacies are manifold" (2003:4). These marginal racialized bodies are consumed in the form of unpaid or underpaid labor by dominant societies. All the while a spatial distance is maintained between these laborers and those that consume them.

The cheap labor of *negros* is critical to the production of Argentina's most precious commodity—beef. Fresh beef is practically consumed on a daily basis by the average Argentine, and it holds a high cultural value. It is considered a dietary staple and widely accessible across income levels. You commonly see makeshift grills perched on the sidewalk of a construction site or behind houses in the *villas miserias* in addition to professional models in the backyards and balconies of the upper classes. The most popular restaurants anywhere serve *asado* (grilled cuts of beef with its accompanying sides of entrails, sausages, chicken, pork, and salads) along with other menu items. The *asado* is the king of Argentine cuisine, a regular weekend activity that involves an entire day of socializing and of course a mandatory part of all special occasions from birthdays to Christmas. The 2008 Agricultural Strike or *Conflicto con el Campo* put an abrupt pause to this important everyday cultural practice. The price of beef increased astronomically leading to dramatically reduced consumption and rapidly increasing discontent with the newly elected government.

The issues of race and racism in Argentina for the most part had managed to escape national media attention until the *Conflicto con el Campo* captured the headlines for months. The stage was set in October of 2007 when Cristina Kirchner went from being First Lady to the President of Argentina. Though she represented the same political party as her husband and predecessor, this change combined with global economic shifts helped foment a major conflict between the government and agricultural producers. The *Conflicto con el Campo* quickly evolved into a discussion about race and class as poor *negro* farmers claimed to be the target of racial and economic

discrimination while their wealthy, lighter skinned *criollo* colleagues would be less affected by the strains of new tax policies.

In Argentina the label of *negro* is most often used as a marker of subordinate status. Though the anthropological dialogue on the role class has played in the lives of Afro-descendants in Latin America has a long history (Yelvington 2001), we can reexamine class-based discourse as a neo-liberal expression of racism. As Faye Harrison elucidates, race may sometimes be displaced or refracted upon other vectors of inequality, like class, in public discourses, especially those that deny race's relevance (2002). But class discourses may be mobilized in ways to discount the salience of race, which has long been common in Latin America. There is significant overlap in the two categories of *negro*, though class defined *negros* might not acknowledge they are also being racially marked as other by the hegemony. The discussion of *negros*, darker skinned individuals who self-identify as having indigenous ancestry, and discrimination was all over the media. But the other *negros*, the Africans and Afro-descendants, did not present themselves in these public debates in spite of common concerns and parallel histories of subjugation. Argentine society, though highly racialized, is one in which issues of race are suppressed, contributing to denial of racism and the "disappearance" or diminished visibility of Afro-Argentines.

The *Conflicto con el Campo* represented the complexity of ideas about blackness in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where an emerging black Movement has been slow to develop. The latest manifestation of the Peronist government began a year of political changes and rough transitions that translated into private conflicts. Tensions were

already high within the local black ethnic blocs, which had long been heavily factionalized, as well as outside of it.

These public racial debates have their origins in the policies of the Peronist government (1940s-1950s) that championed the working class and mobilized it to support their political agenda (Svampa 1994). Both blacks and non-blacks note that the Peronist government popularized the practice of giving free handouts to the lower class in exchange for political support creating a non-critical constituent that easily could be manipulated with cheap bribes. Historically, blacks have disproportionately been some of the most economically and socially marginalized members of Argentine society, positioning them as benefactors of Peronist policies.

Lupe and Pedro are Afro-Argentines in their thirties whose family lines date back to the colonial period. They note that Peronism was a movement of laborers in the 1940s and 1950s to help the working class and the nation's poorest. The Peronists did not make any explicit effort to recognize or assist any racial or ethnic minority, including Afro-descendants who would identify as such as in the case of some Afro-Argentines. They created free public hospitals, affordable housing for the lower class located just outside of the city of Buenos Aires, and provided paid vacation leave for all workers. Of all of these benefits, the housing offered the greatest opportunity for Afro-Argentines. One of the most well-known neighborhoods that was created out of these housing initiatives is Barrio Perón, which continues to have a high percentage of Afro-Argentines as its residents. It is not known if the removal of Afro-Argentines and other racialized blocs from the capital city was a subversive part of the Peronist agenda or just a "fortuitous" side effect, but it is an undeniable contributor to their lack of visibility. These

policies were the next phase in the nation building project following the whitening policies that were enacted in the early 1900s.

Though neoliberalism is a more recent policy framework, consolidated in the last thirty years, its ideological foundation may have rationalized the benefits of certain Argentine policies in more contemporary terms. Specifically, the construction of Barrio Perón in the late 1940s, which relocated all *negros* outside of the capital city and away from the highest quality goods, services, and resources of the nation, demonstrates this exercise of cultural hegemony. Perpetuating a colonial pattern, blacks would have to continue to go through whites to have their basic needs met as quality hospitals, schools, and businesses were not a part of the new neighborhood designs. These types of policies were created to benefit *negros*, yet maintain their position in the bottom of the economic strata. On the surface Peronists had finally incorporated the too often forgotten *negros* who had historically been excluded from Argentine polity, but they did so in a manner that did not upset the status quo.

Recent accounts of Argentine history justify the creation of Barrio Perón by revising it through the lens of neoliberal multiculturalism. In this retelling of history, Afro-Argentines have been provided for well by the government, and thus have no reason to empathize with the concerns of other black ethnic blocs. This helps foster what Hale defines as racial ambivalence (2006) among Afro-Argentines towards other black ethnic blocs that have a different position in the racial hierarchy established by dominant society. Because of the intersections of race and class through these types of practices, some Afro-Argentines even have the “privilege” of not being marked as black.

Racial ambivalence as a political sensibility provides a firm foundation for neoliberal multiculturalism.

Paul offers a different perspective on the *negro* in Argentine society. His viewpoint is indubitably influenced by his subjectivity as Nigerian who immigrated to Argentina in the 1970s, briefly served in its military, and served as an adviser in the 1984 Peronist Caucus of the Argentine House of Representatives. He later joined the Radical Caucus, which was more inline with his political ideology. Paul initially attended Peronist rallies where he was accepted as *negro*, but at the time, he was unaware of the meanings of that term within the Argentine context. He explains that, for the Peronist, *negro* is a synonym for poor, rather than referring to any specific ethnic origins or phenotype. Argentina's historical whitening agenda has contributed to the redefinition of the term *negro*, which before the rise of Peronism had referred to skin color, though the term often was avoided because of racist ideas about blackness.

According to Paul, racial mixing in Argentina has generated a new category of *negros* that falls between the classic categories of white and black. Argentine society does not differentiate between the new class-defined *negros* that are popularly despised for their laziness and dependence on the state and the *negros* who are the descendents of enslaved Africans and African immigrants. The new *negros* are notably very poor and work as farm hands, factory workers, or other low paying unskilled labor positions. Perón mobilized the class-defined *negros* along with his wife Eva who popularized the term *cabecitas negras*, which is now considered a slur. In Paul's opinion, the conflation of terms combined with the absence of a strong black identity among Afro-Argentines has permitted poor, non Afro-descendants to usurp the identity of *negro*.

Ivan, a non-black ally of the politically organizing blacks in Argentina, a state employee, and an African Studies professor adds that the Peronists were notoriously corrupt. He agrees that they introduced race into the Argentine political dialogue, but the Peronist class defined *negro* was the darker skinned person of indigenous descent. Argentines of known African descent possibly could have contributed to the Peronist discourse on *el negro*, especially in the interior of the country where historically many industries were dependent on slave labor.

Ivan acknowledges that it is not clear why Peronists chose this term over others in circulation such as *mestizo* or *criollo*, both of which imply a mixed heritage. *Negros* of African descent participated in modernity through Peronist policies that benefited the working class, though race itself as a grounds of discrimination was never specifically focused on for unknown reasons. Ivan suggests that perhaps it was easier to exchange their concerns for racial equality for the benefits of the Peronist agenda. Part of the legacy of the Peronists is that they are the only visible non Afro-descendant organization in Argentina that uses *negro* as a synonym for a political identity.

Then the smoke came. It was mid-April and the city had been wrapped in a never ending curtain of smoke for almost two weeks. It was one of those rare moments in history when politics literally took one's breath away. For days, there was no sun, no moon, no wind, no rain, and all we could do was pray for the ability to hold our breath just a little bit longer. Several subway lines were closed, congesting already packed street traffic even more. The usually buzzing city sidewalks were empty at night, as no one wanted to be exposed to the smoke unless they had to be, and during the day, people abandoned the outside tables to eat crammed inside tiny restaurants. In some

neighborhoods of *Capital*², individuals had to be hospitalized for smoke inhalation. City officials recommended that people wear masks in those areas to filter the smoke. The news media claimed that the smoke was derived from just some misdirected farmers in the bordering province of Entre Rios who decided to slash and burn their fields to fertilize them, but the explanation was very suspicious. The timing was just too perfect, and nothing like this had ever happened in the history of the Rio de la Plata region.

One of the black leaders, who is also an engineer, explained that this was “political smoke.” Two hundred ninety different fires were set in areas bordering Capital Federal causing the toxic waves. This was an intentional and well-planned political protest against Cristina Kirchner’s government. If an agreement was reached between the agriculturalists and the state, then the smoke would disappear. The people who set the fires would not be punished because in Argentina real justice is rare.

The agriculturalists had taken our city from us, and damn it, we wanted it back. Just when it seemed like they had won, the winds changed and the smoke finally cleared. <Sigh>. Exhale. I was sure I had forgotten how. It seemed like an eternity since I last exhaled.

Argentine State’s Interventions

National Institute Against Discrimination

The Argentine state has very few direct interventions in issues related to race. The main medium for transmitting its political position maintaining a desirable public image is NIAD. Within the organization’s literature it cites several pieces of international human rights legislation as its model, lists a 24-hour hotline, and details copious recommendations for legislation. Two research consultants familiar with the organization told me what they knew about its composition and history.

NIAD was created in 1992 primarily by a coalition of Jewish Argentines with the help of the non-Jewish Arab interest bloc but did not start functioning until 1994. Jews and Arabs immigrated to Argentina at the end of the 19th century during a massive wave of European immigration and have since been aligned in the city of Buenos Aires through common business ventures, mainly related to providing credit for business ventures (Klich 2006). These blocs are by far the most powerful and well-organized minorities in Argentina and the only ones that can successfully compete with non-blacks for political and economic power. They have the most clout in these realms and have some of the most powerful leaders of the nation associated with them. Former President Carlos Menem, of Lebanese origin, funded a prominent, opulent mosque in the city of Buenos Aires.

The president of NIAD is elected by a special committee, rather than a popular vote. One of the current directors of the organization is Arab and the other two are Armenian Jews. The board comes from an NGO and not the state, though NIAD is a state agency. No blacks figure on the board of directors and of its approximately 120 employees, only five are black (all Afro-Argentine). Only one of those is an actual state employee. The principle agenda of NIAD is to protect the interests of its founders who are also its donors.

The public accesses the resources of NIAD through filing a formal discrimination complaint. Lupe, NIAD's only Afro-Argentine state employee, explained that it takes two months for the organization to respond to complaints because of their heavy caseload. They have five lawyers and two advisers that help review the cases and make recommendations of how they can be resolved. Those involving racially motivated

violence are not the responsibility of NIAD but the police force. The popular opinion of the majority of Argentina's residents is that the police are notoriously corrupt, discriminatory, and violent. Most people prefer simply to avoid contact with them to prevent incurring problems.

To file a complaint with NIAD, a grievant has to show tangible proof of discrimination such as in the case of an application that specifies it will not consider blacks for the position. This is especially necessary for more subtle cases of discrimination when other explanations could be valid. Afro-Argentines from the colonial line have filed more than 500 complaints since the organization was founded. When minors are involved, NIAD legally cannot handle the case as it only deals with adults. NIAD has no jurisprudence, so it cannot create legislation, and under the office of the Secretary of the Interior, it has little influence in lawmaking. Ultimately, the organization has no purview over legal processes.

NIAD as an institution is viewed widely by blacks and non-blacks as ineffective and only serving a symbolic purpose, rather than affecting policy and enacting real change. The organization sponsors numerous events and gives away expensive, full color publications about itself but ultimately, helps maintain the status quo by ensuring that social inequalities remain while the marginalized individuals who are most likely to complain about them are appeased with colorful certificates and cocktail receptions.

Among the symbolic actions of NIAD was a funding competition it held for underrepresented groups (Afro-descendants were specifically listed among others) to win \$15,000 pesos to put towards a project. The ad for this competition appeared in the *Buenos Aires Herald*, an English language newspaper primarily read by foreigners who

are among NIAD's wealthy donors. The ad, which was completely in Spanish, did not appear in the two most widely read national newspapers, *Clarín* and *La Nación*, nor did it appear in the popular *Página 12*. It was highly unlikely that any of the ethnic blocs the ad purportedly targeted actually saw it, but NIAD can claim this minimal effort as part of its community outreach. The previous year's African Diaspora Working Group applied to fund an event, but an employee of NIAD won the competition and for unclear reasons, still had not executed the project for which she had received the funds. This only fueled the rumors and contributed to the divisions among black blocs.

NIAD is seen as only responding to crisis situations in which the government's image is at stake. Then, it basically plays the role of the public relations department of the state. This was best illustrated during the *Conflicto con el Campo* when the president of NIAD, Graciela Hernandez, appeared on TV holding the hand of a poor *negro* (class defined) farmer and walking through the halls of the NIAD building. Graciela is a non-black Argentine popularly identified as a *criollo* or person of mixed origins that include indigenous and European. As a government organization, NIAD cannot and will not address the role the state plays in perpetuating discrimination. A research consultant who worked on the test census project to count Afro-Argentines believes that NIAD would not directly support the project because it conflicts with the state's discourse on a non-existent black population. NIAD refuses to address the messy issue of race and privileges other categories like "immigrant" or "woman," ignoring the specialized issues that accompany racial discrimination.

An Afro-Brazilian research consultant recognizes that NIAD, like most state institutions, does not want to teach people how to defend themselves. In reality it is just

a mechanism for the state to monitor and control national and foreign marginal populations. It is a paternalistic organization comprised of whites who like to rescue blacks in their free time. I witnessed evidence of my consultant's observations at the Woman's Day event sponsored by NIAD. Women from varying social, economic, and racial backgrounds were lumped together with a representative from each bloc speaking briefly. A woman with AIDS, who lives in a *villa miseria*, made an emotional, heart-wrenching plea for help. President Hernandez announced that she would put her in immediate contact with the Minister of Health office, a gesture that received thunderous applause. This was one of the rare occasions in which NIAD was forced to take action, but one has to sacrifice her dignity and beg in a public, televised forum before the state will vow to take the actions it has already promised.

The creation of NIAD is in itself a function of neoliberal multiculturalism. As a neoliberal expression of racism, it can serve as "a progressive response to past societal ills that has a menacing potential to perpetuate the problem in a new guise" (Hale 2006:12). The funding competition for underrepresented groups illustrates this quite well. NIAD choosing to only recognize Afro-descendants as one coherent, singular group has several purposes. First, it sets the disparate ethnic blocs against each other to compete to represent all Afro-descendants through the project. Consequently, it ensures they will not work together to challenge the underlying power structures that constitute the racial hierarchy. This further promotes individual opportunism and corruption among already marginalized people while reconfirming racist myths about blacks being disorganized, unintelligent, and untrustworthy. Through this practice Afro-Argentines in particular remain invisible as they are lumped together with immigrant

blocs that have very different histories and relationships with the state. Though NIAD did not directly support the test census, the census helped confirm the state agenda and national mythology that “there are no blacks in Argentina.” Because of their geographic location outside of the capital city, Afro-Argentines tend to have the least access to the state’s resources and therefore are the least prepared to compete with more literate blocs that have a better understanding of how state bureaucracies function. Thus in accordance with the neoliberal multicultural ideology, distinct boundaries are maintained between cultures under the guise of promoting social cohesion (Hale 2006).

black ethnic blocs in Argentina have a great amount of respect for the Jewish blocs whom they consider extremely well organized with a political agenda they have fought successfully to implement. Though blacks are less familiar with the Arab community, they are viewed in a similar manner. Several consultants even noted that Jews, Arabs, and blacks face ethnic and religious discrimination in Argentina. The animosity blacks have displayed in NIAD is not directed towards the other ethnic minority blocs but towards other black blocs. NIAD has become a battleground where the different blocs of blacks face off and compete for minimal resources. Many blacks recognize that these public confrontations in front of an important potential donor have only hurt the black cause. Afro-Argentines feel that they should be the only blacks receiving aid from the state because of their history in the nation. Contrarily, the other black ethnic blocs see the Afro-Argentines as not sufficiently politically active, disorganized, divided and undeserving of assistance. One positive contribution of NIAD is that it has recognized the colonial line of Afro-Argentines, helping make them more visible.

Refugee Assistance Organization

The Refugee Assistance Organization is a recently created government intervention that deals primarily with African refugees in Argentina. The Buenos Aires branch of the organization had been open less than a year when I met Vicente, an Argentine of European descent in his later twenties, who explained its history and duties. Vicente and an older colleague created the organization under a government initiative presented by the Minister of the Public, an autonomous sector. The Refugee Assistance Organization is not its own government ministry. In late 2006 the organization heard of several violent episodes of attacks involving African refugees in Rosario, Santa Fe (a province in the northwest of the country). Vicente, a law student interested in human rights issues, spent more than a year visiting African refugee camps. The seven employees of the organization include psychologists, a social worker, and a biologist with anthropological training who also has spent time in African countries.

There are a few NGOs in Argentina that have included African refugees as part of their projects, but most of them are affiliated with a Christian church. The majority of African refugees that arrive in Argentina come from Muslim countries. The main problem that the Refugee Assistance Organization has with the other organizations is that they blanket all refugees together, instead of addressing the specific needs of African refugees. One of the Catholic organizations, through funding from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), pays for the hotels that the African refugees live in, provided that they prove they are in the process of soliciting refugee status. They also give the refugees \$80 pesos per week (about \$25 U.S. dollars) and free Spanish classes. Another Christian organization provides them with free clothing.

The Refugee Assistance Organization has 116 registered refugees all under the age of twenty-one. Of these only five are female, one of which is African. Almost all of the refugees sell jewelry and live in poorly maintained motels with Argentines and immigrants from other countries. Currently African refugees are spread across more than twenty-five motels in different parts of the city. They often have Argentine friends (even girlfriends) and friends from other countries that are not African. In Buenos Aires the interactions between refugees and locals is usually not violent but infrequent. In Rosario, the interactions with refugees have been more violent, but the general public tends to interact more with them.

The Refugee Assistance Organization has an extremely limited budget and difficulty finding people who will volunteer their time to help. Vicente said that no black organization had come forward to create links with his organization. He admitted to seeing a lot of divisions among the Africans and Afro-descendants in Buenos Aires. On the other hand, Vicente made it clear that the refugees do not want to be used for any organization's or individual's personal gain, so they are very skeptical and cautious of the existing black blocs. Generally, the African refugees do not even want to work with other Africans, even those from their homeland, because they think they will exploit them as well. They prefer to live alone, and attempts to unite African refugees under one roof have all failed.

International Embassy Interventions: South Africa, Brazil, and The U.S.

The Embassy of South Africa has been the most prominent embassy supporting local black politics. Their representative William (Fig.3-2), under an African Union initiative to reach out to the diaspora, was involved closely in many programs targeting blacks in Argentina. William, a dynamic, personable, and insightful individual, had been

called from his law practice to work in the Mandela Administration as a diplomat. As a black South African, he understood anti-racist struggles first hand. He was raised by a single mother in a poor working-class family, so he could empathize with the problems facing blacks in Argentina. He has a sincere Pan-Africanist vision, which he shares with the many friends he made within the local black ethnic blocs. He and I quickly became friends and he served as a father figure to me and many other blacks who reside in Buenos Aires. His wife and he are looked upon for guidance and considered exemplars of good African values, which they extend to all members of the diaspora regardless of origin.

The Embassy of South Africa, via William's urging, recently has enacted concrete measures to support Africans and Afro-descendants in Argentina. They provided a large donation to reimburse the organizers of the previous year's Africa Week. The event was not a great success and ended up serving as a background for publicizing private conflicts among the black leaders rather than drawing them together. The embassy also sponsored a small coalition of delegates from Argentina that attended a Pan-African conference in Brazil the past year. Unfortunately, that conference was so disorganized and lacking in direction that the representatives could not even produce a report of their activities there. Finally, the Embassy of South Africa provided scholarships for two black female students enrolled in the African Studies Master's Program at a local university. William seemed disappointed that one of the students had not finished the program in a timely manner in spite of being fully funded. The embassy kept funding projects though it did not see the fruits of its labor. This was a

source of growing frustration for William, as it became harder to justify supporting organizations that did not respond in a way that promotes their own advancement.

William also helped create a library in the Southern Cape Verdean Alliance building, located just south of the capital city in the province of Buenos Aires where large number of Cape Verdeans have lived historically due to shipping industry ties. Additionally, William is trying to negotiate the purchase of an antique home in San Telmo, a historically black neighborhood, which contains remains of slave quarters in its basement.

As a part of its diasporic mission, the Embassy of South Africa extended an invitation to its events to all black organizations. The embassy rented out one of the most prestigious exhibit spaces in the country for a month long celebration of African culture extending from Africa Day on May twenty fifth. They invited all of the black ethnic blocs to take advantage of this highly visible space and hold events there free of charge. Only one poorly planned and executed but well attended Afro-Brazilian event took place in the center. Guests had harsh critiques of the sloppily assembled, disorganized commemoration of the abolition of slavery in Brazil. Many Brazilians even noted that black Brazilians do not participate in such commemorations because this adheres to the dominant discourse of helpless black slaves saved by the generous white princess Isabella. The event organizer, a black Brazilian named Horacio, did not have experience in organizing these types of events, nor was he knowledgeable of the historical background of the commemoration. He used the opportunity to promote himself and his individual projects. Horacio organized the event to commemorate the abolition of slavery in Brazil and was seemingly oblivious to the critiques of the Brazilian

holiday. This is consistent with the behavior of the majority of the black public figures, behavior that had come under harsh scrutiny from those within black blocs and contributed to their divisions.

By the end of my year-long stay, William had all but lost hope in unifying the black ethnic blocs. Key individuals made it clear that they would not work together under any circumstances. William decided that the blacks residing in Buenos Aires really do not know what they want to achieve, which is a significant obstacle. In Argentina, blacks, as a whole, do not have a sense of the global issues concerning the diaspora. Initially, William thought the Argentine state did not care about blacks, but he now realizes that they already had exhausted their efforts to reach out to local blacks. Ten years ago, the Argentine Department of Social Welfare held a meeting and asked Afro-Argentines what the state could do for them. No one knew what they wanted consequently, they all just sat there and complained about general social injustices rather than presenting specific initiatives. They had no long-term objectives then, and they still had not solidified any to date. William, fatally optimistic, wants to help the black blocs in Argentina revive this dialogue and approach the government with some concrete objectives. He noted that African embassies take a “wait and see” attitude when it comes to supporting local black organizations since they want to see projects realized in a timely manner. The other African diplomats warned William when he arrived in the country almost two years ago that it was futile to try to work with local blacks because they refuse to overcome their infighting. But William would not give up that easily.

In February, the United States Embassy held its first black History Month event in Argentina. The initiative was created by Kelley, an African-American foreign service

officer whom I later befriended and Rosa, a Latina from the U.S. who was a political officer and very familiar with African-American history. Kelly had great interest in meeting Afro-Argentines and other blacks that reside in Argentina as well as learning Argentina's black history. The embassy had two other black U.S. employees, Nadine who is in the military, and Leonard who is also a foreign service officer. Neither of them was involved in the planning and organizing of the event, but Leonard was in attendance with some of his colleagues.

Kelly, the principal organizer of the event contacted Claudia, an Afro-Argentine of Cape Verdean descent, who after fifteen years is once again the president of the Southern Cape Verdean Alliance. Claudia, an academic studying in a Master's program, is regularly featured in media articles about Afro-Argentines and is a self-appointed spokesperson for the blacks in the nation. She frequently travels internationally to conferences in Europe, Latin America, and the U.S. Claudia is a very well connected woman with networks that stretch internationally. The first time I met her was at my university in 2005, which was a stop on a U.S. university tour she did to present the documentary *Afro-Argentines*, in which she was prominently featured. Claudia, now in her late 40s, was a young scholar at Escobar's side when he helped lay the foundations for the current political mobilization around black identity. She greatly admires and respects him though it had been years since she has had contact with him.

Claudia assured Kelly that she would bring a large group of about twenty to thirty Afro-Argentines to the event as well as a group of five performers to dance on stage. Kelly was very excited as it would be the first time she had contact with Argentina's native black population. She arranged for her busy colleagues to leave their offices and

escort the guests of honor to the auditorium where the event was held. Kelly ordered abundant hors d'oeuvre and wine to make the reception that followed extra special.

I found out about the black History Month event through a black U.S. ex-patriot who had been living in Argentina for a couple of years and put me in contact with Leonard. I arrived early and was introduced to the ambassador, his wife, and another diplomat. I sat in the front row with another African-American woman and her Panamanian friend. Claudia arrived shortly afterwards and was sincerely surprised to see me at the event. She brought with her two elder members of the Southern Cape Verdean Alliance, a young female dancer of Cape Verdean descent, and an African drummer who performed with the dancer. No other local blacks came and the organizers later told me that they were very unhappy with the turn out.

Claudia sat on stage with Kelley and a translator. Kelley gave an impressive presentation highlighting the history and significance of the event as well as noteworthy blacks in U.S. history and their contributions. Claudia was asked by the embassy organizers to speak about how the U.S. Civil Right Movement has inspired the Cape Verdean community's activism. She provided a rather indirect answer to the question, so I asked her what the Cape Verdeans, as the most organized and visible blacks in Argentina, had done to unite black ethnic blocs in Argentina and promote activities that politically unified Africans and Afro-descendants. Claudia, in an indirect way, said they were working on that but proudly noted her organization has been in existence for 80 years. After the presentation, the Cape Verdean dancer and the drummer performed a Nigerian *orisha* dance, which I found odd since the majority of the bloc are professed Catholics. These types of activities help reinvent traditions that do not otherwise exist

and can help draw together distinct diasporic groups (Copeland-Carson 2004). By the way the two performed, it was apparent they had not rehearsed together. No explanation was provided about the dance, costumes, or its connections to local black culture, so it all seemed very out of context.

This was not Claudia's first encounter with the U.S. Embassy. Recently, the embassy had sponsored her to study issues related to Civil Rights at Spelman College. They asked Claudia to recommend others to participate in the program, but she had yet to provide them with any names. The organizers later requested the same from me, so I provided them with my contact information, and we had a private, informal meeting to discuss the current state of Africans and Afro-descendants in Argentina.

I attended the African Diaspora Working Group meeting where at least twenty Afro-descendants were present, and Claudia announced that she had been invited to the U.S. Embassy event. She failed to mention that the embassy requested the presence and participation of local black blocs. I spoke to several of my research consultants, with whom Claudia also has contact, about the event. Every one of them said they would have liked to attend but were not even aware of the function.

That same evening of the embassy event Kelley attended an African Diaspora Working Group fundraising dinner in which the drummer provided an inspired performance with two African dancers, also friends of Claudia, with whom he regularly performed. Kelley expressed her deep disappointment in Claudia for failing to come through for the embassy event when she had all of the resources to provide them with the best representation possible. Kelley also began to question Claudia's role in the various black collectives. This was the same critique of Claudia that I would hear

repeated from various members of local black ethnic blocs. While the U.S. Embassy event was successfully organized, the embassy was naïve of the divisions between blocs, which prevented the participation of local blacks.

The Brazilian Embassy has been the most reluctant to support the black cause. Argentines very strongly associate blackness with Brazilianness. The embassy seems to resent this and makes clear efforts to divorce itself from its black image. The Brazilian Embassy has a history of refusing to sponsor events that associate Brazil with black people. One research consultant from a well-established dance school designed a performance honoring the African cultural heritage of Brazil. When she went to the embassy to see what type of support they could offer, she was told by a representative that “Brazil has nothing to do with Africa.” An Afro-Brazilian consultant who is a well-respected dance instructor presented a creative work to members of the embassy who refused to sponsor her doing it. She later saw her project carried out by a non-black individual associated with the embassy who did not give her credit for her ideas.

Within the last year, the Brazilian embassy hired Catelina, an Afro-Brazilian professional, as part of its staff. Blacks realize that the presence of a black face in the embassy is not necessarily indicative of a change in vision regarding black populations. Catelina is a very friendly, diplomatic, soft-spoken individual who usually took a moderate stance on issues to maintain an open dialogue in tense situations. She participated in several of the African Diaspora Working Group meetings and was usually present at large events sponsored by black ethnic blocs but as a guest and not an official representative of the embassy. This included several of the Afro-Brazilian sponsored events. Among those was a party held to showcase two local legends of

Afro-Brazilian music. Catelina was present along with two non-black diplomatic colleagues from the embassy who had never attended a black Brazilian sponsored event. The non-black women were presented with flowers, applause, and a long recognition speech thanking them for their support. The middle aged Afro-Brazilian female host has a reputation for creating functions in the name of all blacks to increase her personal income. Critics of her overly gracious performance in front of the whites assured me that she was probably planning another money-making event with them where they would share the profits. Unfortunately, this pattern of behavior was all too common among blacks.

Both the U.S. and South Africa have come to define themselves as multi-cultural states, while as of recent Argentina is superficially redefining itself in this manner to participate in popular global notions of modernity. The inclusion of local Africans and Afro-descendants in their activities can be interpreted as reflective of the neoliberal multicultural agenda of these nations. The recognition of these ethnic blocs and their subsequent legitimization through participation in the activities of high profile embassies of nations that are the international paradigms for understanding blackness, has its positive attributes. On the other hand, it is almost exclusively folkloric expressions that are embraced in these settings. In state selected forums, including those of Argentina, blacks are occasionally allowed to publicly air their grievances to other minorities and non-essential state representatives. When these gatherings close, little more has transpired than a cathartic group therapy session organized by state officials. These embassies have successfully expanded their national political ideologies abroad to

legitimate domestic struggles, but they have simultaneously helped sustain Argentina's neoliberal multicultural agenda.

Reality of a *Negro* Nation

Where were all the African and African descent *negros* when the *Conflicto con el Campo* was being played out very publicly on a national stage? Perhaps blacks did not want to be associated with those *negros* that were protesting in the Plaza de Mayo. Dominant society considers the *negros* of the Peronists to be ignorant, lazy, and undignified masses that easily can be swayed by the few crumbs of bread thrown in their direction. As Guano notes, middle class white Argentine residents in the city of Buenos Aires still uphold the discourse Sarmiento, one of the founding fathers of Argentina and an architect of the project to refashion it into a European nation (Guano 2003). In the minds of these individuals, non-whites are the barbarians responsible for the economic downturn of Argentina and for stifling its advance towards modernity. Since the mid 90s, some black cultural expressions like different dance and music styles, are publicly welcome in the city though African based religious practices are not (Frigerio 2001). Black people, on the other hand, are not received warmly as evidenced in the accounts of my research consultants, my own observations and lived experiences, and news articles documenting violence towards blacks. In spite of these realities, there is a very strong denial of racism in Argentina and anti-black racism in particular.

One major obstacle in uniting black ethnic blocs is that they do not truly embrace the diaspora concept and have a difficult time seeing the commonalities between the different national factions. They most likely just need some serious self critique and introspection before being able to advance. Blacks from different blocs have varied

opinions and positions and let these get in the way of presenting a united front when necessary. William suggested that the leaders just need an impetus to propel them forward.

There are enough Argentines of African descent and other blacks to have a unified critical mass of activists and a successful political movement in Argentina. The resources needed to make real change happen are already within the existing blocs. The main problem is that most of the individuals of African descent, both Argentine and foreign, do not identify as such. Among Argentines, in general, there is very strong resistance to having the racially defined *negro* included as part of the national identity.

The Argentine government cannot be blamed as the villains in this modern-day racial drama, nor can they be expected to be the saviors or heroes of blacks. It has made some concrete efforts to recognize blacks and even offer them some resources. The Argentine state has faced international pressure to adopt neoliberal multicultural practices so that it can be akin to the nations after which it models itself (the U.S., France, and England) and to truly participate in international politics. As overt expressions of racism are no longer acceptable, the state accepts a broader ideology of antiracism filtered through a neoliberal lens. Outside of government programs, blacks in Argentina have allies (black and non-black) inside and outside of the political realm willing and ready to help them gain recognition. Many blacks discuss the local African and Afro-descendant blocs as a family. Unfortunately, these blocs in Argentina suffer from a variety of problems such that some blacks describe them as a very dysfunctional family. In the following chapter, I detail the relationship between the various black ethnic blocs and individual members in public racial politics.

¹ Shanty towns

² *Capital Federal* is the name Argentines commonly use to differentiate the city of Buenos Aires from the province of Buenos Aires. Sometimes it is simply shortened to *Capital*.



Figure 3-1. Escobar.



Figure 3-2. William and the Researcher.

CHAPTER 4 WILL THE REAL *NEGROS* PLEASE STAND UP?

While dominant Argentine society has its own definitions of the word *negro*, the term is also defined and understood in different ways by the various black ethnic blocs in Buenos Aires. The “real” *negros* are those that adhere to the ideals of blackness as each bloc defines them. Homi Bhaba’s concept of incommensurable exchange is useful in understanding these differing perspectives on the familiar concept of black identity and their effects on inter-ethnic relationships. He briefly outlines this counter-hegemonic theoretical notion in the afterwords of Angelika Bammer’s edited edition *Displacements: Cultural Identities In Question* (1994). The book critically examines the politics of identity as understood through the lived experiences of individuals displaced from their homelands through political conflicts, natural disasters, and other types of interruptions, as well as individuals displaced within their own nations through processes of colonization. Though the focus of Bammer’s text is not on African diasporic subjects, the concept of displacement is useful for understanding the identities of members of both old and new African diasporas in present-day societies.

Bhaba states that in “communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings, and priorities may not be collaborative and dialogical, but profoundly antagonistic, conflictual, and even incommensurable” (1994:270). In the Argentine context, this incommensurable exchange inevitably creates great obstacles in organizing around black identity as there are multiple, and sometimes conflicting, definitions of it. Though Afro-Argentines, African and Afro-descendants immigrants might share Africa as a real or imagined homeland, their respective identities are often performed in very different ways.

Bammer notes that “the politics of identity, in short, is a constant process of negotiation” (1994:xv). I witnessed an illustration of the continuous negotiation of the complexities of identity in Argentina during a meeting of a Pan-African NGO in which Afro-descendants and non-Afro-descendants were present.

Performing Black Politics in Argentina

It was mid February when I took a bus to an office in the *microcentro*¹ for the almost weekly meeting of the African Diaspora Working Group (Fig 4-1). I had been an active member of the association since arriving in Argentina about five months previous to the gathering. There were around thirty people at that evening’s meeting, which was one of the biggest crowds we ever had. Almost half of those present were obviously African or of African descent. That evening’s discussion focused on how to advertise a large community event the organization would be hosting.

Ivan, a white Argentine ally and a cofounder of the group, brought up a point he and I discussed before, which is the importance of having black faces representing the event in the press. This would not only place blacks at the center of the event, but also help contest the myth that they are nonexistent or insignificant in Argentina. Privately, other members had discussed the same idea, but this was the first time it was vocalized in front of the entire association. A very lively discussion ensued, one that was embedded with feelings of isolation, questions of diasporic identity, and resentment against the white paternalism that dominated *Afro*² events and their organizational meetings. This was the first time that many of the blacks there, especially the Afro-Argentines from the colonial line, had ever publicly contested how they had been represented. It was a momentous occasion, but not without its tension.

When we started the debate, an older phenotypically white woman ceremoniously got up to leave but first declared that we did not even realize how important she is. This everyday performance of identity (Goffman 1959) was indeed a site of its negotiation in the context of social relations (Guss 2000). She went from quietly passing for non-black to strongly asserting her blackness in the forum of that meeting. After the woman's departure, Olivia, a well known Afro-Brazilian woman in her fifties and head of a small, familial organization of party entertainers, lamented how we had made her friend feel so unwelcome that she had to leave. At a later meeting Olivia, who usually only speaks out to promote her own events, made it a point to announce that she did not want the African Diaspora Working Group to ever talk about race again since that just makes people feel uncomfortable. Olivia also noted her offended friend was an Afro-descendant (a closet Afro-Argentine, I later discovered). Felipe, a well respected, mild-mannered African businessman, ever so politely managed to communicate that the woman had published some lackluster, irrelevant books on African masks. His comment only echoed the "who gives a shit" attitude of the meetings other attendees and we continued on with the discussion.

Berta, an Afro-Argentine of the colonial line in her sixties, told Olivia that if her friend was so important, she should have introduced her. Berta rarely speaks publicly about racial issues in these types of forums but expressed her strong dislike for scholars like that woman who never go into the *villas*³ where her family lives, but assert the authority to write about Afro-Argentines and claim to be "experts." Berta proclaimed that since she is the subject of these types of books, she also has as much authority and is just as important as the published author. Furthermore she added, that if the

woman who left really felt confident in her black identity she would have made it known and participated in the discussion identifying herself as having African ancestry.

Berta's ability to see herself outside the racially marked categories in which she had been ascribed made her critically self-aware (Rony 1996). This was a proud moment for those of us who knew Berta who is usually more reserved, shy, and takes a backseat to other leaders like Claudia who are of a higher economic class and educational level. Claudia is the most visible black leader and a first generation Afro-Argentine of Cape Verdean descent in her fifties. Berta eloquently expressed what many scholars had yet to understand.

Claudia sat in her seat noticeably silent during the debate. She did not speak up at any moment to defend the rationale of her black colleagues and their non-black allies, but instead took a more passive stance while others explained and justified the media strategy. Other people, both black and non-black, later informed me that this was the established pattern Claudia, the self-proclaimed "radical," had created. In the presence of whites, she refuses to contest even the most vehement racist assaults, but when she is in the company of blacks alone, she recites the discourse of a black militant.

Though ethnic and racial minority blocs can deliberately commodify and objectify their cultural identities while participating in the globalization of culture (Wade 1999), the Argentine context provides some special challenges. The vehement denial of racism, especially anti-black racism, strengthens white dominance while limiting the capacity of blacks to control their own representations. Popular stereotypes of blacks suggest they are incapable of successfully organizing and executing any event, even ones that specifically focus on black culture.

The meeting illustrated that the tables had been turned abruptly and some members of dominant society were not having it. Later in the meeting, a middle aged white scholar announced that she felt slighted and also left. The two white women that left claimed they did so because they were being unfairly excluded. In reality, I think they felt uncomfortable in that space, where it was obvious white privilege was not going to reign. Berta and Felipe made very out-of-character interventions that helped solidify the mission of the African Diaspora Working Group. It was clear that the experiences of blacks and their opinions would be the most valued in the context of an event about the black residents of Buenos Aires. Then, an epiphany happened. The two older, white female, published scholars sitting beside Claudia offered to help cook and wash dishes at the organization's fundraiser. This led me to believe that perhaps there was hope.

Black Organizations that Are Most Visibly Active in Public Politics

Buenos Aires has no shortage of black organizations and new ones seem to appear over night. The majority of these, with very few exceptions, consist of individuals who create a non-governmental organization (usually consisting of that person and a family member) as a means to improve their standard of living through government resources. Many blacks not associated with any particular group cite this as one of the main reasons they decline to participate in public politics.

There are a few clearly marked black factions that have the misfortune of functioning like rival soccer teams. They usually only come together to berate each other and usually do so in a very public format. These camps are headed by Karen (an Afro-Argentine from the colonial line), Claudia, Berta, Isac (an immigrant from the Ivory Coast), and Paul (a Nigerian immigrant). Claudia and Berta have a continued relationship of strategic collaboration laced with tension. In the past, the leaders have

attempted to work together, but their efforts were short lived. Individuals who try to navigate between the established black associations find themselves pressured to choose a side. A large quantity of gossip is spread by each camp, rooted in deep seeded personal conflicts, jealousy, and opportunism (economic and otherwise).

During my stay in Argentina, I attended the activities of multiple organizations, but worked closely with only a few. There are a small number of groups that are rather well organized but whose activities are not detailed in this analysis. The first is the black Diaspora of Argentina whose members include individuals from a variety of national backgrounds. Shortly after I arrived in Buenos Aires, I attended a few of their events and informed them that I would like time to get to know their association better before committing to any projects with them. Their leader, Isaac, found this approach unacceptable and quickly cut off further communication with me without explanation. When I attempted to reconnect with him, I was told that the group prefers to work in secret for fear of others stealing their ideas. Ironically, it was Isaac who other blacks accused of stealing their ideas.

I also attended some of the events of the Southern Cape Verdean Alliance of which Claudia is the president. A second association of Cape Verdeans, which predates the southern group, also exists. They are located just north of the Capital in the northern dock city of Mar de Plata. Claudia informed me that she and the former president Alfredo, a mentor of hers and a respected elder in the Cape Verdean community, had invited Afro-Argentines and other blacks to use their building and resources as well as form an umbrella black coalition with them. The offer was rejected by the others stating that there was too much difference between the groups to

accomplish this. Overwhelmingly, blacks in Argentina do not view the Southern Cape Verdean Alliance as attempting to make any political interventions and the types of events that the Cape Verdeans have held supported this sentiment. Claudia and Alfredo have found it nearly impossible to mobilize their members for the black cause.

The Nigerian Organization (Fig. 4-2) of Argentina is arguably the most consistently and visibly active in public politics. Its president, Paul, and the other members are probably the only black organization in the city of Buenos Aires that is really taken seriously and respected by the Argentine government. Paul has professional working relationships with different Argentine businessmen as well as teaches at a local university, which most likely has a positive impact on the group's reputation. The other black leaders also respect the Nigerian Organization as evidenced at the Nigerian Democracy Day event. Though feuding, the black leaders of the other associations showed up on a Thursday afternoon to attend the celebration.

While the Nigerians pride themselves on being a self-sufficient group and financing all of their own events so they have no need to charge the public, they have also successfully garnered local government support. Their organization has a newspaper that ceased print publication in 2003 for cost saving reasons, but it is now online. The publication, printed in English with a Spanish version in the works, is mainly about happenings in Nigeria but contains a few special events and news from Argentina.

All of the members of the Nigerian Organization are male and tend to be independent businessmen. David, an officer in the group in his late thirties, works as a computer technician and in the Argentine Nigerian Chamber of Commerce, which has

been in existence since 1974. He boasted that the organization's events usually have very high black attendance as well as various news outlets that come to document them. Black events in Buenos Aires have the unfortunate reputation of being highly disorganized, but outsiders have commended the Nigerians for breaking that mold. I met two Nigerian women who were familiar with the association but do not attend any of the group's activities because of a lack of time and interest. They left me with the impression that the Nigerian Organization had not actively encouraged their participation either. One of the women, Hope, participated in the previous year's Africa Week independently as a Nigerian woman. David did not agree with this because he felt she was inadvertently representing Nigerians without the consent of the group.

An organization outside of Buenos Aires in the province of Santa Fe, but with close connections to the residents of the province and city, is the Afro-Indian Coalition. The association's headquarters are in the northwest province of Santa Fe in the home of its founders Alicia, an Afro Argentine from the colonial line, and her husband Emilio, an Argentine of mixed decent who refers to himself as *criollo*. Their group, like many black associations in Argentina, principally consists of family members but is very active in public politics. They have garnered local government support as well as that of blacks outside of their family network. The organization's efforts have resulted in a successful radio program (the only black one in the country), plays, academic and non-academic publications, conferences, and a library all centered around black and indigenous themes. In 2003, a devastating flood destroyed the library's 20,000 book collection, but with the help of donations, they were able to begin to restore it. Alicia

and Emiliano have accomplished their projects through the prudent use of personal networks and minimal economic resources.

Alicia and Emiliano's joint activism began in the early 1990s and since then has led them to participate in several global conferences in Brazil, South Africa, India, and the U.S. as well as Argentine hosted conferences. They have amicable relationships with the black groups in Buenos Aires and travel to *Capital* for special events when time and money allow.

I attended the Afro-Indigenous Coalition's 20th Anniversary Celebration with William and his wife Nancy. William was invited to lead a film discussion about apartheid in South Africa and make connections with Argentine anti-racist struggles. Claudia was notably absent from the celebration though the date had been pushed back because the agricultural strike had cut off the highway routes. Also in attendance were activists of African descent from Haiti, Colombia, and other provinces of Argentina as well as a few non-black allies. The weekend long event enjoyed high attendance and insightful debate.

The black organization with which I had the most consistent contact and participation was the African Diaspora Working Group. Its membership was truly representative of the black populations that reside in the nation and included Afro-Argentines (of the colonial line, first generation, and of Cape Verdean descent), other Afro-Latinos, and African immigrants. Non-black members were Argentines of European descent and included an anthropologist, a lawyer, and a historian. The organization did not make itself a separate NGO as too many ineffective black NGOs were already in existence. Instead, it functioned using the affiliation and resources of

The Southern Cape Verdean Alliance and the African Association of the River Plate, two black NGOs already in existence and whose leaders were members of the African Diaspora Working Group. William from the Embassy of South Africa was also a very active member in the association but after a few months decided to play a more secondary role because of critiques that his embassy was manipulating the association.

The African Diaspora Working Group organized the African Diaspora Movement Weekend as a small community event at a cultural center in the southeast part of the city to allow the public to become familiar with and interact with local Africans and Afro-descendants via workshops, shows, and discussion sessions. A few moderately successful fundraisers helped finance the event, but the majority of the funds came from Ivan, a member of the African Diaspora Working Group executive committee, who was not reimbursed for what was supposed to be a temporary donation. Invitations were extended to all African embassies as well as embassies of nations with large Afro-descent populations, but only William from the Embassy of South Africa was present. NIAD also was invited, but they chose not to participate without providing any specific explanation, though everyone was well aware that its employees were from rival factions.

The three-day event was ultimately well organized, well executed, and well attended with about 200 guests each day. It exceeded the expectations of the organizers with its warm, friendly, atmosphere when in the past, it was not uncommon to have dramatic public arguments erupt during these types of events. A few small media outlets came including an online black culture magazine (run by non-blacks and with a majority non-black readership) that had advertised the event on their site. While

attendance was high, panelists and organizers noted that black attendance was very low. They constituted less than a sixth of the crowd, which included the organizers. Many of the blacks did not return for the second day's activities and their total attendance was less than that of the previous year's event.

Unfortunately, many African and Afro-descent embassies wanted nothing to do with the African Diaspora Working Group mainly because of the bad reputation of some of its leaders and because of the general notion that the local black organizations are disorganized since they refuse to work together under one umbrella. These same reasons also prevented black dissenters from participating in this group and any other black associations.

Obama Drama: U.S. Racial Politics and Black Consciousness in Buenos Aires

Everybody loves a black man.

I mean, everything in the world loves you. White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is cut off a nigger's privates. And if that ain't love and respect I don't know what is. And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed. I knew a white woman wouldn't leave the house after 6 o'clock for fear one of you would snatch her. Now ain't that love? They think rape soon's they see you, and if they don't get the rape they looking for, they scream it anyway just so the search won't be in vain. Colored women worry themselves into bad health just trying to hang on to your cuffs. Even little children—white and black, boys and girls—spend all their childhood eating their hearts out 'cause they think you don't love them. And if that ain't enough, you love yourselves. Nothing in this world loves a black man more than another black man. You hear of solitary white men, but niggers? Can't stay away from one another a while day. So. It looks to me like you the envy of the world (Morrison 1973:103-104).

Yes, everybody loves a black man. Everybody loves Obama. Our native son had won over the world, or so it seemed—but I was not buying it. I have never been a fan of fiction because I think real life is crazy and unbelievable enough, but I could not help but

think of this quote from *Sula*. Why was it that all of a sudden everybody in the world loves a black man? Of all people, Argentines who still do not acknowledge their own Afro-descendants were suddenly head over heels for a black leader. This was not consistent with any lived reality blacks have experienced on this side of the Atlantic over the centuries. Nor was this consistent with global attitudes towards blackness and how those translate into local inequalities. Black was now sleek, sexy, young, intelligent, biracial and accompanied by an elegant wife and two adorable children. How could you not fall in love with that?

It was June, and I was watching CNN with William, a good friend of mine and a South African diplomat. It was just announced that Obama had won as the Democratic Party's nominee. I had quickly grown apathetic to the idea of real change and genuine hope after so many months of experiencing the (denied) troubled racial climate of Argentina. William reminded me to be excited and hopeful about Obama. He noted that his people said Mandela was not experienced, and he turned out to be a great president. Obama could have the same impact, but first we just have to give him the chance.

It is hard to be hopeful about anything when you are living in a country surrounded by the world's greatest pessimists. *Porteños* proudly wear that black cloud of melancholy over their heads as if it were the latest fashionable Parisian hat. *Porteños* and all Argentines live their lives just waiting for the next big disaster and another opportunity for their own government and the world to screw them over. No one is hopeful about anything in Argentina. The present is bleak, but the future is surely worse. It seems that everyone goes to the therapist, and you quickly start to

understand why. Argentines live from economic crisis to economic crisis using those to mark the stages of their lives rather than the births of nieces and nephews or the passing of a good friend.

William was called from his law career to serve in Mandela's administration. He wanted me to fan that little flickering flame of hope before I drowned in the sea of pessimism that is simply called life in Argentina. He knew, as he so eloquently stated, that this was our moment and "my country and my people need me."

Obama had excited black and non-black members of Argentine society and the Obama drama seemed never ending. Its roots already were well established by early March when I was invited to a digital videoconference at the U.S. Embassy by its organizers who I had met at their black History Month event.

As I entered the embassy, I thought it must be surprising for Argentines to walk in and see the large photo of a very black Condoleezza Rice on the wall to the right of President Bush. Their image of the U.S. (not to mention their image of black women) is not one in which blacks have any economic or political power, but I think that might be changing with the Obama campaign.

In the security line, I ran into Karen, who worked as an advisor to the president of NIAD and came to represent the organization. We sat in the front row at the conference since we arrived early. The embassy people were unaware that Karen, an Afro-Argentine, would be present for the conference, but of course they were elated that she came. Before the conference, Karen formally introduced herself to the event organizer and noted that she is the representative of the colonial line of Afro-Argentines while Claudia, who was present at the black History Month event, represented the Cape

Verdean line of Afro-Argentines. Karen revealed to me that she had no knowledge of the previous embassy event celebrating black history, or she would have attended. It was quite entertaining to see the look of shock and surprise on the faces of the non-black Argentines present when they heard Karen, a medium toned black woman, introduce herself as an Argentine. Undoubtedly, that was the first time any of them had knowingly had contact with an Afro-Argentine.

The video conference was held with Dr. Jones, a political science professor at a large Texas university. He was a heavy set, medium toned black man in his late 50s and spoke with a thick southern accent. Dr. Jones had visited Argentina two years ago on an invitation from the U.S. Embassy to lead a lecture on race relations in the U.S. at three universities in Buenos Aires. He was very interested in its black population, though he knew very little about it. He spoke briefly on multiculturalism and then addressed questions from the audience in Argentina. Among the Argentines in the audience were a lawyer, former public administrators, reporters, and political scientists.

Of course, there were a lot of questions about Obama. I took advantage of the interest and asked Dr. Jones the global significance of having a viable black presidential candidate in the U.S., especially to multicultural nations, like Argentina, in which ethnic and racial minorities still were struggling to be recognized. My friend Kelly, who works at the U.S. embassy, was sitting in the back and later told me that the Argentines were looking around confused by this description of their country. We met up for a snack after the conference and both noted that two Argentines had made comments referring to what a great job Argentina had done with racial integration. Kelly and I could not help but laugh at that misguided notion, noting how both resident and foreign blacks are

made to feel uncomfortable and unwanted through everyday practices of racism. Anti-black racism is alive and well in Argentina, and we knew it all too well through our own personal experiences and those of our friends.

It was only a few days after the conference when I realized that I could not escape Obama if I wanted to. He was on the minds of all of my research consultants, coworkers, and other friends. It was as if there were no other candidate in the race.

At the end of my interview with Diana, an Afro-Argentine woman in her late sixties from the colonial line, she asked me about Obama and if I thought he could win. She told me she is really rooting for him and says it will mean a lot to people here if he wins. That evening, I returned home to the apartment of Teodoro, an Argentine man in his 70s of Italian descent, and Francisca, a light skinned Afro-Argentine in her late 60s, where I rent a room. Teodoro excitedly told me that he thinks Obama could win. He says the U.S. will have its first black president since he is sure Obama can beat McCain. Teodoro noted that even as far as Japan, they are rooting for Obama—the world seems to want him to win.

At the end of March, I attended the Nigerian Organization's meeting in the apartment of Dave, a Nigerian immigrant in his late thirties who had lived in the country for several years. Early in the meeting one of the elder gentlemen self identified as a democratic person, and David joked that he is Obama. The whole group of about fifteen men laughed. They had Obama on the brain as they were occupied with organizing themselves politically in Argentina.

In mid June, I participated in and helped run a community event sponsored by the African Diaspora Working Group. We had two discussion forums designed to address

the state of the African Diaspora in Argentina. As usual, the non-black Argentines spent a lot of time fawning over Obama and talking about how great it is that the U.S. could have a black president. The idea is always that the U.S. has problems with race, so it is good that they are finally dealing with them. Argentina, on the other hand, does not have these sorts of problems. During yesterday's chat Alfredo, an impassioned light skinned Afro-Argentine activist in his twenties, said that everyone in Argentina is happy that Obama may be the first black president of the U.S., but they will not do anything to have a black politician here. A middle-aged non-black Argentine female panelist noted that for the last eight years the most powerful woman in the world, Condoleezza Rice, is black. Once again, the focus had been shifted quickly off of Argentina's own racial problems.

It was the end of June and I was sent to a NIAD immigration forum meeting as a representative of the African Diaspora Working Group along with Sofia, a dark skinned Afro-Brazilian woman in her mid thirties. We were the only blacks present. At the meeting, many grievances and concerns were expressed about the European Union's new anti-immigrant legislation, but of course, someone brought up Obama. An Argentine woman said the relationship between the U.S. and Latin America would not change at all if he is elected president. Many Latin Americans believed that because Obama is a representative of an oppressed minority group in the United States, he would be more empathetic towards the needs and concerns of minority populations internationally. Perhaps I do not have that terminal pessimism that Argentines do, but that man has his work cut out for him.

It was the first day of August, and I went to visit my seventy something year old friend Josefina at the theater pension house where she lives. She had a small black and white picture of Obama cut out from the newspaper sharing the frame with the picture of her beloved deceased brother. Obama had migrated from standing alone on the dresser to sharing this special place. A small framed picture of Eva Perón is nearby on her dresser, and they are all surrounded by her saints. Obama had become a brother and a saint for so many.

Josefina recently added the photo of Obama after a visit from her niece who tragically lost her daughter to a heart attack a few months ago. She told me she was praying for him to win and that, "God wants the U.S. to have a black president because the people there deserve it. They have fought so hard for their rights." I remembered Josefina's story about how in the 70s she prayed in front of a life size Jesus statue for the Argentine national soccer team to win the championship, and they did through penalties. I knew this was serious. She seemed a little depressed, but somehow, Obama reminded her that there is hope in the world.

Later in the week, I arrived back to my apartment after a long day of conducting interviews. It was late in the evening, and Gisela, the daughter of Francisca and Teodoro (in her early 30s), was just sitting down to eat dinner after a terrible day. She was so distracted crossing the street that she literally almost got run over by a car. I shared some of my homemade fish curry with her, and we chatted a bit over dinner. She asked about Obama and said on TV she saw some black Americans at one of his talks holding up signs asking what he was going to do for them. I told her that Obama is no messiah and that the mess is too big for any single administration to clean up, but he

can make some positive changes. That seemed to lift her spirits a little. Wow, this man was more powerful than he could ever imagine. He had not even won yet but had managed to bring much needed hope to so many people.

I thought back a few days earlier to my discussion with Kim, a U.S. ex-patriot and Asian-American in her mid twenties working in Buenos Aires as an English teacher. She made me contemplate about our generation in terms of race. We are the first to have a viable presidential candidate that is not white. As Kim noted, the black male is probably the most discriminated person in the U.S. Our generation always grew up with a fighting chance, but we will never fully understand how the previous generations fought to give us that chance. When we leave the comfort of our home country, we start to see the ugly reality of racialized societies in other parts of the world, and sometimes, it is just too much. "You have to hear Obama's Philadelphia speech. It could go down as one of the greatest of all time," she told me. She was very excited.

The world is watching and waiting for Obama, counting the months, the days, the minutes until he takes office. Everyone in Argentina is anxious and ready for a black U.S. president, but when will Argentina produce its own black leaders? When will it acknowledge its own black population? First things first.

Understanding Black Politics in Argentina

The most popular stages for racial politics in Argentina are the state sponsored *ferias de colectividades* (cultural fairs). These events are an attempt to create a public discourse of multiculturalism while maintaining the racial hierarchy. This neoliberal multiculturalism is best understood as "a progressive response to past societal ills that has a menacing potential to perpetuate the problem in a new guise" (Hale 2006:12). These types of events often help reinforce racial stereotypes rather than break them

down with the sale of traditional food and goods, but little sincere exchanges between members of cultural groups. The nature of sustained social interactions with outsiders helps these ethnic groups maintain the boundaries that define them (Barth 1998). Several blocs have managed to use state sponsored cultural events to their advantage while remaining quite insular. Jews, Arabs, local and some immigrant indigenous populations have all experienced some significant level of political gains by strategically utilizing state mechanisms. The fruits of these efforts can be seen in the form of secured funding for projects, offices for their organizations, and participation and recognition at some state sponsored events. Blacks are notably at the bottom of the racial hierarchy and historically among the last to be considered for state recognition and subsequently to receive resources. While blacks are certainly not waiting for the state to save them, the state has done little to rectify its historic marginalization of these groups, which has contributed to their current state of disenfranchisement.

All black groups face the challenge of trying to attract new members from the resident populations of Africans and Afro-descendants, but the organizations' bad reputations for being corrupt, disorganized, and arguing in public impedes these goals. Black leaders are quick to point the finger of blame at each other. Their grudges are deep seeded, have been sustained for years, and some of them are even between members of the same family. The black leaders in *Capital* are the most visible and set the tone for engagement with national and international organizations. They are seen as individuals who enjoy the spotlight but refuse to accept the responsibility of good leadership. They are slow to enact change, will not publicly challenge injustices, and are resistant to anyone who wants to alter the way things are run. These factors have

led many black residents consciously to decide not to be associated with any of the organized black groups in the city of Buenos Aires, even if they have had contact and affiliation with those organizations in the past.

While blackness is now “in fashion,” as many resident blacks have noted, the entry of blacks themselves into the political realm has not been facilitated. It is often blacks who have created obstacles that inhibit their own visibility and advancement. For many the attitude is that the fewer blacks present in the political decision making arena, the better so that those with the knowledge of how to maneuver through the bureaucracy and manipulate the few resources allocated, can divide them amongst themselves.

Paul who is a senior boy scout noted that even that organization is divided. Argentina as a nation operates on a divisive political system. It is only when the country is under pressure that people join together. The Jews, one of the most admired collectives because of their organization, are even divided. All political parties have internal divisions and they only form alliances to gain more power. Even with this insight, Paul does not want to “waste any more time” on the Afro-Argentines. He agrees with William’s notion that the problem with black Argentines is that there are few real leaders among them and that they dilute the group’s cultural and demographic strength through intermarriage with whites.

There is a definite need for concrete plans of action that are implemented and jointly carried out through collaborative efforts. The black leaders refuse to work together, but government and other organizations recognize and support collation movements like what indigenous, Jewish, Arab, and other minority populations have

formed. With the combined talents and resources of the current black leaders, Argentina has everything needed for a successful black movement.

One has to wonder why the black political cause is becoming more popular in Argentina and how this affects Afro-Argentines from the colonial line. The recent mobilization around black identity is partially a response to pressure from non-Argentine blacks residing in the country who have strong histories related to blackness. These individuals of African and Afro-Latin descent understand the challenges and sacrifices that are an inherent part of the struggle for racial equality and have seen the rewards of those efforts. They also experience a bit of culture shock when they see the current state of Argentina's native black population and in general, the discriminatory manner in which blacks are treated. Non-Argentine blacks are additionally much more informed about the global status of Africans and Afro-descendants and are more likely to reflect a Pan-African ideology that helps them identify with blacks.

Adding to these influences are regional pressures from blacks in Latin America who are already in the process of mobilizing around black identity (Andrews 1980; Andrews 2004; Sawyer 2006). Argentine society is most familiar with the activities of Brazilian and Uruguayan blacks as those nations share borders with their country. Finally, the undeniable influence of U.S. politics has fomented interest in black politics. The front-runner in the presidential election is a black man, and Argentines very excitedly discussed the implications of this in the context of U.S. racial politics. They still envision the U.S. as a place of violent racial conflict and are stuck with a pre-Civil Rights vision of racial politics in that nation.

The role of non-blacks in the black movement, specifically individuals of European descent who could be classified as white, is a source of major controversy. In Argentina, there is an established norm of whites representing black culture and making great economic gains off of this. Many blacks have complained that they must compete with these whites who often propagate racist ideas about blacks in order to secure their white clientele who might otherwise be convinced that a black person more authentically represents black culture. Blacks and non-blacks have the racist interpretation that the presence of whites at a black event legitimizes it by giving it the appearance of being serious and well organized. In the case of many black events, white intellectuals, performers, and participants usually are privileged over blacks and play central roles. In spite of these attitudes and beliefs, almost all of the blacks involved in black politics have partners of predominantly European descent.

Central to understanding black politics in Argentina is the role of Afro-Argentines. Many blacks, including other Afro-Argentines, feel that this group creates the most obstacles and resistance to black projects that would benefit all black residents. Many Afro-Argentines feel that they are the only rightful inheritors of benefits targeted at blacks in Argentina. Their resistance and attitude have prevented the realization of community centers and other concrete projects targeting Africans and Afro-descendants. Afro-Argentine men stay out of black politics for the most part, which truly disturbs the African men who view them as avoiding their obligations as males. Most of the black leaders are female, leading the males to cite gender as a source of the leadership problems. The Afro-Argentines that step forward as leaders do not have skills and preparation to be effective in those positions. These individuals tend to refuse

outside help and are not willing to collaborate with other blacks. The motivations for their participation, and blacks from other groups, are also questionable as many black organizations are created and function as means of personal economic gain in a nation with a consistently precarious economy and a black population that is disproportionately represented in the lowest income sector.

blacks in Argentina also are challenged with finding Afro-descendants who are willing to identify as such. The majority of the Afro-Argentines of the Cape Verdean descent and the Cape Verdean immigrants do not view themselves as African, let alone black, hindering any possible collaboration to back black causes. Claudia and her predecessor were the only two exceptions that I knew of. Africans and Afro-descendants view Cape Verdeans as not interested in furthering themselves through education and as being satisfied with the racist status quo. Afro-Argentines and Afro-Latinos who attempted to integrate themselves with the Southern Cape Verdean Alliance through participation in their activities were treated very coldly. They note there is a discourse of welcome and inclusiveness, but the personal engagement is distant and cold. They feel they were only invited to events when a cover was charged so that the group could make money off them. I was told that the northern group is more active and inclusive, but I did not have the opportunity to interact with their members.

There is a consensus among blacks that Afro-Argentines, theoretically, should be the leaders of the Argentine black Movement, but they are not prepared to do so or even interested in taking on this responsibility. Afro-Argentines often are accused by other blacks as having no sense of black identity and lacking black consciousness to the extent that they would allow themselves to disappear. What is perceived to be their

political indifference is attributed as part of the reason blacks in Argentina have to fight so hard now for recognition. Afro-Argentine identity, like all identities within in the diaspora, "is best understood as a tactical positioning within a world of shifting transnational interrelationships" (Gordon 1998:264). A complex history full of identity shifts has led to complex identifications within the ethnic bloc. Hanchard (1994), Gordon (1998), and Thomas-Houston (2005) have noted the difficulties of having people of visible African descent mobilize around black identity and related political causes in their own nations. I, too, was affected by the growing sense of frustration with Afro-Argentines.

These critiques fail to take into account some important factors. The Argentine state has done everything in its power to eliminate Afro-descendants and all other non-whites from the official history of the nation (Andrews 1980; Molina 2001). Historically, there has been no benefit to being black in Argentina. Blackness has, in fact, made people the target of discriminatory practices that made Afro-descendants the first to be killed in battle, the most vulnerable to disease epidemics and the everyday racist practices that prevent them from obtaining employment and getting the same quality healthcare as their non-black counterparts. Afro-Argentines are all too aware of what it means to be black. What appears to be a lack of racial awareness is instead a reflection of a hyperconsciousness of the debilitating role race plays in their daily lives (Vargas 2004). History has not allowed them the luxury of forgetting.



Figure 4-1. African Diaspora Working Group Meeting



Figure 4-2. Nigerian Organization Meeting

CHAPTER 5
MILLION LITTLE WAYS: RACISM AT WORK, AT PLAY,
AND EVERY DAY IN ARGENTINA

João Costa Vargas frames his discussion of Brazilian race relations in terms of a hyperconsciousness of race. He suggests, “Brazilian social relations—their practices and their representations—are marked by a hyperconsciousness of race. Such hyperconsciousness, while symptomatic of how Brazilians classify and position themselves in the life world, is manifested by the often vehement negation of the importance of race” (Vargas 2004:444). As Vargas notes, “[t]his negation forcefully suggests that race is neither an analytical and morally valid tool, nor plays a central role in determining Brazilian social relations, hierarchies, and distribution of power and resources” (2004:444). The Argentine case presents parallel examples of how the hyperconsciousness of race functions in a different national context. In the city of Buenos Aires, this hyperconscious causes the hyper-visibility of Africans and Afro-descendants contributing to making them the victims of a variety of racialized violence. Local newspapers have reported a range of offenses including forcing black Dominican women into prostitution (Carbajal 2002), police violence towards African street vendors (Página 12 2009), and vicious racially imbued verbal attacks (Paikin 2003).

Harrison (2002) and Mullings (2005) remind us that racisms are constantly changing and take on local forms and new incarnations. Mullings emphasizes that

the enduring duality of race lies in the complicated fact that race is always simultaneously imposed from above and experienced from below; the imposition of race inevitably creates the structural context for producing oppositional sites of resistance as well as creative spaces for the articulation of subaltern consciousness, culture, and opposition (2005:682).

This resistance has been documented in the organized efforts of Afro-Latin Americans to mobilize against anti-black racism (Cottrol 2007; Minority Rights Group 1995).

In spite of the reality of racism in Argentina, Argentines, like many Latin Americans, hold class as the most important factor in explaining social inequalities. In reality, class is never operating independently but in conjunction with race and gender, which are important components of the class structure (Yelvington 1995). Furthermore, the prevailing Argentine belief is that the absence of black people in the nation means the absence of racism. According to this line of thought, black people bring racial problems. There is a palpable sense of pride surrounding the mythological nonexistence of racism. As Telles notes, Latin Americans consider themselves superior to the United States in regards to issues of race (2004).

Many Argentines, in particular, enjoy pointing out how the United States and Brazil have a great quantity of racial discord in contrast to the situation in their country, implying an ethnic and racial homogeneity. Some Argentines will acknowledge racism against Bolivians, Peruvians, Paraguayans, Jews, and their own indigenous population, yet they staunchly deny the existence of anti-black racism. Racism against the acknowledged blocs is based on how far these individuals are from whiteness or the white ideal, physically and culturally. According to the racial paradigm, blacks are the furthest from the white ideal, yet Argentines will not acknowledge that they are also racist against these populations. Argentines are undoubtedly part of what Sheller calls the economic and symbolic relations of consumption that constitute transatlantic consumer cultures (2003). As full participants in a globalized world, they receive a constant flow of ideas about blackness (mostly negative stereotypes) yet insist they are incapable of this form of racism.

As a black researcher interested in issues related to race, it was no stretch of the imagination to understand how blackness could operate in the daily lives of black people in Argentina. Of course, I was a foreigner living there, but in reality all blacks are commonly perceived as being foreigners by non-black Argentines because of the dominant racial mythology that Argentina no longer has its own native black populations. As blacks residing in Argentina, we constantly live in the eye of the storm knowing that the slightest change in conditions means that things can take a drastic turn for the worse. As favored targets of violence, we will be the first to be beaten, robbed, raped, or made to disappear. We are at the margin of the margins and thus, the most vulnerable to everything in an already unstable society. Each morning we wake up and think, “Maybe today will be the day that we can walk on the street and not be treated like a *negro*.” Maybe today they will let us forget about the color of our skin and subsequent inferiority. Maybe today we will be treated like ladies and gentlemen instead of *putas negras* and *negros de mierda*. Maybe today we can walk down two city blocks without hearing them call us racialized names and pointing out our difference to the world. Every day we wake up and think “maybe today” only to realize that today never seems to come.

In this chapter, I discuss some of the everyday encounters with racism that my research consultants and I faced living in Buenos Aires. At the beginning of my field experience, I meticulously recorded every racist and racialized encounter. Around the midpoint of my stay, I decided it was too emotionally exhausting and time consuming to continue to record all of these types of events. Doing so required me to relive them again, which detracted from my ability to focus on the overall project. Almost all of my

black interviewees described Argentina as a nation that is *atrasada* or behind the rest of the world in confronting issues of race. This is a brief account of the fears, frustration, tears, and exhaustion as well as feelings of helplessness and hopelessness we shared on a regular basis.

This Is How They Treat You in Your Own Home

Home is usually thought of as a safe haven where you can escape the maladies of the outside world. One's home is her dominion where guests must respect the owner and her rules. Home would seemingly be a place where you should be able to escape racist treatment, but that is not always the case. During the few months I spent living with Carla, an Afro-Brazilian research consultant, her home was in a series of renovations. She went through a series of contractors because of the incredibly bad work they produced. Carla explained that in Argentina shoddy work is acceptable for blacks who are considered lesser clients with lower expectations. Carla had even visited buildings that the same contractors had worked on previous to hiring them to ensure the quality of work she could expect, yet what they produced for her was a disgrace.

One morning, well into the botched construction project of creating a set of stairs, I overheard an exchange between Carla and a man from the gas company that she had called to do a mandatory inspection. My room was located just above the kitchen where the two were speaking. From the derogatory tone and the demeaning language of the man, I knew it was literally only a matter of seconds before a huge conflict would erupt. As I predicted, a shouting match ensued, and the gas company employee lost.

The maid, a Paraguayan woman, opened the door to let the man in and signaled that the lady of the owner the house was in the kitchen. When the man saw Carla, he

looked her up and down and from this point on, proceeded to talk down to her and give her dirty looks. He trampled through the space briskly pointing to things, jotting down some notes quickly, and saying everything was hooked up wrong in the kitchen. Carla said that she recognized that look that people give her as if to say, “Oh great, now I have to talk to this black woman.” She has had plenty of experiences with this type of racist treatment. She pointed out to the gas company employee that she demands he treat her with the same respect he gives a white Argentine. The man was shocked by the confrontation, and in his paralyzed state, Carla grabbed him by the arm and threw him out of her house. The surprised reaction of the man is the typical response those from dominant society have when they hear a black person defend herself. The common belief is that blacks are subservient and accommodating, so you can treat them how you please.

Reflecting on this disturbing, yet repeated experience, Carla concluded that blacks in Argentina have to learn everything—construction, medicine, law—because we have to know when we are receiving substandard service. The only way to do that is to learn these professions ourselves. Obviously, no one has the time or resources to learn it all. We are left with the realization that we cannot trust the professionals around us to give us professional treatment and service; thus we can never let our guard down. I knew that living in a constant defensive state could not be healthy, but in Argentina, it is just survival.

Lessons Learned

The school system provides the indoctrination and enculturation of a society’s children. So much can be learned within the classrooms of the institutes of formal

education. As Susana, a black Brazilian, explained to me, there are schools where Jewish kids can learn to be Jews, but there is no where she can send her child to learn what it means to be black. Unfortunately, black children learn all too well what their blackness means inside of the classrooms of Argentina.

When it comes to school for blacks in Argentina, kids are mean, but teachers are much worse. A favorite tactic of non-black Argentine instructors is to keep black students from advancing to the next grade in spite of consistently satisfactory and high grades. In the Argentine imaginary, it is impossible for a child to be smart and black. Ricardo, a first generation Afro-Argentine in his thirties, was held back in fourth grade by a racist teacher. His parents fought and had to file a formal complaint before he was able to get back into the correct grade. Susana had a problem with her daughter's teacher who also tried to hold her back a grade without cause. In a matter of months, two Afro-Argentine male schoolmates also were held behind by the same instructor. Black children must learn "their place" in society early on. It does not matter how intelligent they really are or how hard they study; in the end, they are just *negros*.

What children learn from their own observations is just as disturbing. I was waiting at a bus stop with Bruno, an Afro-Argentine, and his young children. His twelve year old son became angry at his older sister and called her a *negra desgraciada* (disgraceful black) among other racist epithets using the word *negro*. His father very calmly corrected him by telling him to watch his tongue. Bruno and other black parents know that educating a racially conscious child in Argentina is sometimes an uphill battle. Ana, an Afro-Brazilian, was sending her daughter to a "good" school where she had a Jewish woman as a teacher. The woman would constantly make comments about how

the child must have a lot of family problems. The teacher had invented an entire narrative about the child as a poor black girl from a broken home whose mother was forced to work to support her family. In reality, the girl was living a middle class existence very similar to that of her non-black classmates. The constant negative commentary made the child draw a very insightful conclusion. She came home one day and told her mother, "I think my teacher resents me being smart and black." Wow, kids really do say the darndest things.

Night on the Town

Buenos Aires has a very vivid and active nightlife. It is indeed a city that never sleeps. Argentines, like most fine city folk, enjoy frequenting businesses where they can get five star treatment. A truly refined establishment must have dark skinned black males (usually African immigrants) serving their patrons as doormen, bartenders, and security guards. Just like in the days of the colony, the *negros* are present to make the lives of members in dominant society more comfortable.

A new adult nightclub opened in a middle class neighborhood of the city near a research participant's home. I noticed a tall, dark skinned young black man dressed in a white suit with tails, white gloves, and matching top hat opening the door for patrons. The locale is owned by a retired Argentine vedette or burlesque dancer now in her fifties. One day, I stopped to speak to the doorman and discovered that he, like many Senegalese immigrants, sells costume jewelry on the streets during the day. He did not seem very enthusiastic about the job, but a friend had helped him find the job since he really needed the money. I knew other males in similarly dire economic situations that

had passed up doorman jobs because of their racist implications, so I could not help but wonder what was going through the man's mind as he opened that door.

On some rare occasions, members of dominant Argentine society are kind enough to invite *negros* to attend their parties, not just serve them drinks or entertain them. Leo, a non-black Argentine male in his late twenties with dyed blonde hair and overly tanned skin, made a couple of appearances at the meetings of the African Diaspora Working Group. He came to announce his photo exhibit in hopes of getting an audience, especially one with black people to validate his work on African refugee children. He promptly left after promoting his event. The members of the working group, as an act of solidarity, attended the opening of Leo's photo exhibit along with several of Leo's wealthy friends. Leo, obviously a member of Argentina's elite, spent several months traveling throughout Africa as a freelance journalist. At the event, he made half-hearted claims negating the exhibit was in self-promotion. He emphasized how the real focus of his photo display was to bring attention to the plight of poor African children, yet he provided no means for the audience to donate to causes. He then invited Felipe, a middle aged, always impeccably dressed, African member of the Working Group, to speak about the organization. According to a non-black Argentine member, Leo referred to Felipe as "boy" in the great racist tradition. He then closed with a story about how "we're all the same" using the fact of his playing golf in Kenya with his two black bodyguards as a way to substantiate his belief in this premise. After the exhibit, Leo never reappeared at another meeting of the Working Group.

Linda, a colonial Afro-Argentine, told me of an encounter she and her boyfriend Ernesto, a first generation Afro-Argentine, witnessed involving their friend Joseph, an

African immigrant in his forties. Joseph resides in a working class section of the city of Buenos Aires but during the summer, helps operate a bar in a popular vacation spot in the provinces. A non-black Argentine patron came in with a glass bottle, which is not permitted. Joseph politely informed the young man that he needed to take the bottle outside. The patron refused, so Joseph stood up to confront him verbally, and four non-black Argentine bouncers came from behind and grabbed Joseph. One of the bouncers had him locked by the neck in a chokehold. Linda and Ernesto were outraged at what had happened. Ernesto went after the bouncer who had attacked their friend, explaining that Joseph, who was dressed in a polo shirt and nice jeans, was the manager. To make matters worse, the non-black club owners came by to tell Joseph to calm down and to claim that what had happened was no big deal. The bouncers received no punishment, and Joseph spent the rest of the night at the bar with an upset look on his face. The bouncers attacking Joseph is a common strategy white Argentines use to harass and eventually eliminate blacks from working in and owning businesses. I also heard stories of black store owners that had their businesses mysteriously burned down and repeatedly robbed.

More blatantly violent racist attacks are also common, though rarely discussed in public forum. Ricardo is a first generation Afro-Argentine from a South African father and an Argentine mother who is the descendant of Italian immigrants. He is a rock musician in the process of developing his career. During an interview in his studio, he told me the story of a run in he had with a gang of Argentine Skinheads. Ricardo was walking on the street when suddenly five Skinheads jumped on him and started beating him with their fists. There were many witnesses, as it was the middle of the afternoon

on a busy street. No one intervened. Ricardo felt that if he were white, someone would have helped him. When Argentines see a black male getting beaten, especially one with dreads, they think he must somehow deserve the attack. For many like Ricardo, blackness singles them out as the worthy victim of such violence.

We Know All about You *Negras*

There is a long-standing, popular mythology surrounding the *negra* or black female globally. The popular folklore of black females in the Argentine imaginary is that all black women are whores. Racialized mythologies are exacerbated by the invisibility of native blacks and the hyper-visibility of foreign blacks. Foreign black women stand out even more in the Argentine context where they are seen as yet more exotic and hyper-sexual. This occurs to the extent that the term *Dominicana* (a Dominican woman), the overwhelming majority of whom is Afro-descendant, has become synonymous with “prostitute” in Argentina.

I was sitting with my friend Pedro at a popular café in the busy business sector of downtown Buenos Aires. He interrupts our casual conversation to point out a woman sitting near us that he suspects is a prostitute. Then Pedro points out potential clients that frequent that location looking for prostitutes. The café we were in was well known for being a meeting place for those involved in prostitution. We finished our coffee and exited the building. Pedro then prefaces his next statement by saying, “I probably shouldn’t be telling you this, but” He proceeds to walk me across the street and down a few blocks full of brothels disguised as high-end bars and cafés. All of the businesses had a doorman at the front and often two sets of doors at the entrance to prevent passersby from seeing inside. Any windows that faced the street were opaque

or two way glass. The doors were never propped open for ventilation, though that is a common practice for Argentine businesses. Almost all Argentine businesses leave their doors propped open for ventilation, as the majority of them do not have central air. I noticed a few young women dressed in revealing tops and miniskirts smoking outside of one of the bars with a doorman or bouncer close by them. We were in the epicenter of the middle and upper class red light district, and none of the individuals working there were black.

White prostitutes are protected from the critical glare of society, nestled inside hidden brothels that appeared to be well maintained. They work in a safer section of town serving middle and upper class clientele. According to cultural codes of decency, they were not walking the streets looking for clients. These women even had staff at the business that acted as a sort of bodyguard. Of course, not all white prostitutes have access to these networks of brothels, but black women are noticeably absent from these businesses. Pedro said he had never seen black women working in those locales.

The men within lower income brackets go to the streets of the working class southeast neighborhoods to find prostitutes. These areas are known to have large immigrant populations, which include a significant number of Afro-Dominicans. It is common to see black prostitutes mixed in with prostitutes from other racial groups walking the streets at night. Black prostitutes are cheaper in price and thus devalued even in the world of prostitution, in spite of being imagined as more sexually skilled and promiscuous than white women. While the white prostitutes are hidden away in their disguised brothels in the middle of downtown, the poorer black women are on the

streets, making them much more visible in this profession. According to Argentine racial mythology, the majority of prostitutes are black women. Additionally, these black women are faulted for creating the perception of all *negras* as whores. As an Afro-Brazilian research participant pointed out, there are many more white women working as prostitutes in Argentina than black ones based on demographics alone. Despite this reality, the *puta negra* (black whore) is one of the most powerful racist assumptions in Argentine society.

The powerful draw of the *negra* as a hypersexual racial type becomes even more apparent when you leave the city limits. William told me of an official diplomatic visit he made to a youth center in a neighborhood on the southwest border of the city of Buenos Aires. The area is known to have a large number of Afro-Argentine families. The majority of the residents are working poor. Because the neighborhood is classified as very dangerous, William's embassy sent a security entourage to accompany him. William noted he grew up in a similar area in South Africa. They left their vehicle in one section, and the bodyguards walked him to the center where he would show an African film to raise consciousness and empower young black youth. He noticed directly in front of the youth center was a dilapidated house with curtains hanging in the doorway instead of a door, indicating a high traffic area. Young black women around age sixteen to twenty five were hanging out in front of the old house. William described wealthy older white men in suits constantly entering and exiting the building. The men had parked their expensive cars in the same area where William left his vehicle. The men then took taxis to the old house that was obviously functioning as a brothel.

While these Afro-Argentine sex workers are not part of any official tourist project, they are exoticized by non-black Argentine males and thus a reflection of how blackness is marketed globally as a sexual commodity (Hargrove 2005). White Argentine men were going to great lengths and investing time and money just to frequent this brothel to have sex with black Argentine prostitutes. These men were definitely Argentine as this is not an area that would be recommended to foreigners. Potential foreign clients would be sent somewhere more comfortable, safer and upscale within the city limits. Though popular discourse denies the presence of black Argentines, there is a powerful sector of dominant society that acknowledges their existence, but only as sexual servants.

On Our Block

Even the most mundane tasks are complicated by the web that racism weaves. While shopping at locales like grocery stores and pharmacies, blacks receive the special treatment of “private security” as Carla likes to call it. I was shopping in a small costume jewelry store one day with Carla when a security guard that worked there started following us although the store was full of people. Carla said they always suspect the black customer is going to steal something and ignore the white blonde woman dressed in fine clothing stuffing things under her jacket. She had actually observed this happening in the same store on a previous visit. On another occasion, I was grocery shopping with my South African friend in a large chain supermarket near his home in an upper middle class neighborhood. Upon entering, we were immediately followed around the store by its security guard. When I realized what was going on, I stopped in my tracks and stared the man down. Shocked and embarrassed, he quickly

looked away and shuffled over to the next isle. This is the typical reaction for one-on-one confrontations involving black females and white males in public places.

The myth of the dangerous black male can work in his favor in everyday street interactions. Any single person rarely will come up to an adult black male and show aggression towards him. Of course, this same myth works against him in confrontations involving authorities like the police. It is almost always a pack of four or five police officers that confronts a single black male. I had heard multiple accounts of a group of police accosting everyone from Senegalese street vendors to a preadolescent first generation Afro-Argentine.

I personally saw this all too common scenario play out before my eyes while dining at the small restaurant of Joseph, a Congolese friend. I was sitting outside of his family operated business when one police car that was passing stopped. Within minutes, three police cars with at least five officers were on site. They stated the business was in violation of the law because they were serving alcohol before a certain hour on a Sunday. Such an offense most likely would not even merit a warning in that neighborhood that is well known for having a high crime rate. Indubitably, part of the motivation for involving so many officers is that each wants his slice of any potential extortion. Blacks automatically are viewed as foreigners, easy targets, and having money on them. As expected, the officers threatened to write out large citations and close down Joseph's business unless he paid them off. He preferred to take his chances fighting the citations in court rather than play into the corruption of law enforcement.

In private spaces, black women are especially vulnerable. I was walking towards my apartment late one night with my Colombian friend Rosalinda after a meeting. As we approached my front door, we saw a street on the next block obstructed with several police cars and a crowd of onlookers. When we entered the apartment, Teodoro told us that the owner of the hotel on the next block found the body of a twenty two year old (black) Dominican woman who was pregnant (Oprandi 2008). She was living in the motel with her boyfriend who was named as a suspect. A friend of the murdered woman, also a black Dominican woman, was being interviewed by the news crew and noted that these types of crimes often happen to *Dominicanas*, and nothing is done. Teodoro's wife Francisca dismissed the murder implying "they are all prostitutes and into drugs," so these types of crimes ultimately happen to them.

Almost as disturbing as the murder was the way the young male *criollo* news reporter on site kept looking around nervously while delivering the story as if to say, "Oh God, I'm in the black neighborhood; something's going to happen to me any minute." The man works for a popular, low budget, tabloid style TV news program. From what I observed on mainstream news shows, the reporter is not white enough to work for a big station where the most brown skin they would allow is a summer tan on their employees, unless they are there to serve them lunch. The report called the murder a "crime of passion" implicating the boyfriend who was missing (although they had no evidence). For the news crew and dominant society, it was just a dead pregnant hooker/Dominican, and since black women are inherently promiscuous, this must have motivated a man to murder her.

I later found out through a friend who had seen a brief update on the story that the murdered Dominican woman had left prostitution and was in a committed relationship. The televised news coverage left out these details and preferred to insinuate that she was working as a prostitute. They also conveniently omitted the nationality of the woman's partner, the prime suspect, leading the audience to believe he is definitely a non-black Argentine. They also mistakenly said the crime happened in the next neighborhood down when it happened in my neighborhood. Since the victim was a black Dominican/prostitute, it must have automatically happened in the neighborhood infamous for high crime and prostitution.

Ironically, only a few months before, the news channels incessantly were running a story about a murdered blonde, white, Argentine woman Lidia who was by all accounts a high class prostitute. The story literally ran for three weeks while the story of the murdered Dominican woman appeared for five minutes during an entire evening of programming. Lidia married a much older, very wealthy man that was linked to illegal activities. He was suspected to have been involved in the plot to kill her after he found out about her philandering. The news ran video footage of Lidia looking miserable at her own wedding. Then, they proceeded to read a regularly updated laundry list of the men they knew she slept with, which included a gardener. Throughout the entire coverage the reporters were careful to never call her a prostitute or use any word that could be interpreted as such. While the murdered Dominican woman remained nameless and frozen in the Argentine imaginary as a prostitute, Lidia was framed as a poor victim deserving of constant attention and pity.

Performing Blackness for Argentine Television

Some of the best evidence of the way Argentines imagine blackness lies within the mass media portrayals of black people. Many blacks, foreign and native, periodically have found work in minor television and even film roles. They are typically cast as servants, athletes, savages, and witch doctors. The pay is as negligible and demeaning as the roles themselves. Real talent is sacrificed for stereotypical racialized behavior. Several of my African and Afro-descent interviewees had attended casting calls for various Argentine companies as a way of earning some additional income. I had seen many questionable racialized representations of blackness in the Argentine media, so I wanted to attend a casting call myself to better understand how those participating in the process were interpreting its racialized elements.

I accompanied Rosana, an Afro-Brazilian in her eighties, to a casting call for a popular Argentine cell phone company. It was held in a large home in a residential middle class neighborhood of Buenos Aires. I ran into an African acquaintance who also was auditioning, and he informed me that they wanted twenty *negros* for the ad. The auditions ran from the morning to the late afternoon, and we saw many familiar black faces pass through. Many of the blacks present had experience acting and had worked as entertainers in Argentina and other countries. None of them was offered lead roles for the commercial, which was a montage of several comedic sequences.

Before entering the room for my audition, I read the description of the role, which was posted in small print on a piece of paper taped to the wall near the sign in desk. It said “*una chica dentro de una olla, mientras es cocinada por una tribu. . .*” (a girl in a pot is cooked by a tribe). I entered the audition room, and there was a twenty

something year old young man with a high-end consumer video camera on a tripod. I noted his accent was different, so I asked him where he was from. He told me he was Colombian. In my introduction, I told him that I was anthropologist, to which he replied that I probably knew more about the dances and cultures than he did, so he just wanted me to invent something that would resemble a tribal dance. I wanted to know who would be playing the girl in the pot, and he insisted that she had to be blonde so that she looked like a tourist and really out of place in Africa. I then was given instructions to do a tribal dance, so I asked from which part of Africa. The director said “the Belgium Congo.” I did an intentionally lackluster dance and made a “scary, possessed” face as instructed. My audition was a disaster, just as I had hoped and planned.

One of Rosana’s friends Cynthia, an Afro-Uruguayan woman in her fifties, was also at the casting call. She went in to audition immediately after me, and the director asked her if she knew what part of Africa her ancestors were from. Perhaps the conversation I had with him had made him think a little more. Cynthia’s son used to earn quite a bit of money working in commercials. He is a light skinned black man and was chosen for some very high paying foreign ads as well. One day, he stopped going to casting calls, but he would not say why. He then began to constantly complain about the racism in Argentina, which makes me suspect that he had some sort of racialized incident during an audition.

Cynthia said she would not be getting a call back because, according to the producers, she is too light skinned to play the role of an African savage. They want very dark skinned people to play the African cannibals. Cynthia told us about a quota which requires ten percent of actors in U.S. ads and movies to be black. She said things are

at least fifty years behind for blacks in Argentina, which is why they cannot make any demands.

blacks at the casting call seemed to know the whole premise of the ad was ridiculous and for the most part laughed it off. As Twine discovered through her research in Brazil, blacks living under the ideology of Latin American racial democracy often cope with racism in ways that usually sustain racial inequalities (1998). I think most of them sensed that, in its essence, the ad was racist and wrong, but they just dismissed it laughingly as the “crazy” way Argentines think. I heard one young man repeatedly describe the ad as crazy while smiling and shaking his head. In spite of this, the blacks present played the role assigned without really questioning who would see the end product. I found out that the ad would be run in Argentina, which did not come as a surprise. There are a limited number of places where these kinds of representations of blacks would still be considered acceptable. A month later when watching TV, I saw the commercial for which I had auditioned. It was overall ridiculous, and its use of blacks was a very naturalized stereotypically racist representation.

Racism on the Road

While racial profiling is a familiar experience for blacks and other non-whites globally, I found the way it played out in Argentina especially interesting. Not only is “driving while black” considered suspicious, but simply having a black person in one’s vehicle is an offense. The underlying assumption is that blacks are involved in illegal activity; thus for the infamously corrupt Argentine police forces, there is a greater possibility of extorting money from them.

I had just arrived in Buenos Aires and was running errands one morning with Belen, an Afro-Brazilian woman in her forties, and her white Argentine husband when our vehicle was signaled to stop by some police stationed on the side of a busy avenue. They asked to see her husband's license and registration and then made him open up the trunk. Aldofo said that when the car was brand new, he was stopped constantly. He seemed quite ambivalent to a fact that his wife pointed out. He is much more frequently stopped when Belen is in the car with him. Aldofo, who describes himself as *criollo*, is very light skinned, and his wife is a darker skinned black woman. When they ride in their newer model car together, the combination of factors causes them to receive a lot of attention from the police.

Darker skinned blacks are not the only Afro-descendants that get stopped for "driving while black." Bernardo, a light skinned Afro-Argentine male in his sixties, came into the capital city to pick up Kelly and me for a visit to a historic Afro-Argentine site. We were on our way to Chascomus, which lays just outside of the city of Buenos Aires, to see the *Capilla de los negros*, a small chapel that always has been cared for by the same Afro-Argentine family since the colonial era. Bernardo owns a very old, barely functioning car that frequently breaks down, even though he works as a principal at an alternative school for adults located in the province of Buenos Aires. Car ownership is extremely rare among blacks because of all the expenses associated with it. Had Bernardo been driving alone in his vehicle, he could easily pass for non-black and the condition of his vehicle would make him an unlikely target for a police stop. Because he was in the car with us, two dark skinned black women, he was quickly signaled to pull over by the police that were stationed on the side of highway.

Bernardo made sure that neither Kelly nor I said a word so that our foreign accents would not make us any more suspicious to the police. He told the police we were all poor teachers, (Bernardo and I really were) so they would know we had no money to offer them. He was going to be let go without a fine, but one of the police officers was angry with the other, so in retaliation, he wrote an eighty peso ticket for a seatbelt violation to Bernardo. Kelly felt bad about the incident and offered some money to help cover the ticket. We visited the office to pay the ticket, and when the men working there saw what it was for, they told us to not worry about it since it was considered “ridiculous” by any municipality’s standards. This underscores how absurd and exceptional the ticket that had been given to Bernardo was and that it was motivated by something other than a legitimate vehicle infraction.

blacks traveling on public transportation also are targeted in discriminatory ways. Isaac filed a lot of formal discrimination complaints with the Argentine government shortly after arriving in Buenos Aires in the mid -1990s from his African homeland. At the time, he would ride the bus home after working a long day in construction. One day a white Argentine man came up to him in the bus and said, “*un negro, que feo*” (a black man, how ugly). Isaac initially reacted calmly by telling the bus driver to stop at the nearest police station so he could file a complaint, but the driver refused. Isaac then threatened that he would throw the man who made the comment out the window if the driver did not stop, but the driver still refused. Finally, Isaac got up, grabbed the white Argentine by the collar and hung his head out the window. The other passengers in the bus became alarmed, and of course, the driver stopped at the nearest police station. Isaac says that the blacks living in Argentina will not file complaints against racism, but

he has seen evidence that other minorities in Argentina and other places in Latin America will. According to him, the lack of records of racist activity is why Argentines claim they do not have racism in their country.

I have had several of my own encounters with racism involving public transportation. On my way to a bus stop in the working class neighborhood where I resided, I saw a woman in her seventies on the sidewalk walking towards me. She was on the arm of a younger woman in her fifties who was assisting her as she appeared to have limited mobility. Both of the women could be classified as white Argentines. The older woman saw me walking calmly towards her and froze in fear as if to say, "Oh no, a black person!" The other woman tried unsuccessfully to pull her along, but the older woman refused to move until I had passed them.

The subway is a very popular form of public transportation in the city of Buenos Aires. Along with thousands of passengers you find an abundance of ambulatory vendors on the subway. They are usually *criollo* working poor, often residents of the shantytowns that lay just outside the city limits. These vendors sell an array of goods like socks, office supplies, housewares, and snacks in prices that range from a few cents to about ten pesos. One afternoon on my way home from work, I was riding the subway and a middle aged male vendor was selling some hair accessories. In typical fashion, he offered the products to seated customers, and since I was busy texting on my cell phone, I shook my head, but he placed the item in my lap anyway. I then put the product in the empty seat next to me, which is the normal protocol, since I had no intention of buying it. When the man returned to collect his unsold products and money, I signaled that I had put it in the seat next to me. He became very angry and accused

me of stealing the hair accessories, which were worth less than a peso. He then made a big scene and tried to make me hand the product in the seat next to me to him. I refused and told him to get it himself. He mumbled something under his breath, so I pointed out to him that all blacks are not thieves. I felt this was especially poignant since people with his ethnic markers of darker skin tones and curly black hair are labeled with the slur *cabecitas negras*, so they too are just *negros*. I told him that it did not make sense that a *negro* would racially discriminate against another *negra*.

Another day while waiting for the subway to arrive an indigent *criolla* girl, about eight years old, came up to me and said, “*negra, me das suerte?*” (Black girl, will you give me luck?). The belief in Argentina is that blacks are magical (usually skilled in black magic), so touching them is considered good luck. In the past, I have had several complete strangers come up to me, grab my hand, and vigorously rub it claiming this was for luck. I calmly explained to the young girl that this belief is inherently racist and that she cannot repeat what she had said to anyone because it angers blacks when they hear such racist statements. The girl obviously had learned this from those around her, but I held on to the slight hope that my intervention would at least make her think twice, if not stop this type of behavior.

Stuff that Makes Us Sick

One afternoon, I went to hang out with Trisha in a large middle class neighborhood of the city. Trisha is an Asian American New Yorker whom I met at an English institute where we both worked. Since the weather was pleasant, we decided to eat lunch seated at an outdoor table of a local restaurant. We were in an area that was extremely popular for local tourism as it contained several gardens, parks, and museums that

Argentines frequent on weekends and holidays. While Trisha and I were waiting for our meal, a group of two white Argentine males and a white Argentine female approached our table and asked if they could take a picture with me. They politely explained that one of the males is from a province in the interior of the country and thus, had never seen “people like me.” They avoided actually saying the word *negro* because it is widely considered an insult. I calmly told them they could not take the photo while Trisha literally sat across from me in such shock that her mouth was gaping open. In typical *Porteña* fashion, the waitress butted in and in solidarity with the people on the street, tried to convince me to allow the picture of her customer and further justified their tourist desire to photograph a *negra* by saying, “They’re not from here, just let them take a picture.” I explained to the waitress that if the roles were reversed it would not have been acceptable, to which she agreed, but she still insisted that I should allow them to take the picture and became visibly irritated that I would not pose for the photo for the Argentine tourists. It was as if I was hurting local tourism by not cooperating. Overall, the tourist group was polite and apologized if they had offended me before going away.

After the interaction, Trisha was so stunned that she could hardly eat. We were both quite sickened by the whole situation. Trisha’s outrage brought out the New Yorker in her as she cursed the tourists, blurting out among other things, “Are you fucking kidding me?” She really wanted to say this to their faces, but was in such a state of shock, she literally could not move. What I found most interesting was that the Argentine tourists were obviously at least middle class from their dress, expensive cameras, and the sheer ability to travel to Buenos Aires on vacation. They were not the poor, humble people from the interior that they tried to pass themselves off as. Also of

note is that they had no sincere interest in me as a person. They did not ask where I was from or why I was in Buenos Aires. They only were interested in me as an exotic object to place in their photo.

While the stress from racist encounters like these can literally leave us feeling ill, blacks often find themselves sickened by the inadequate attention they are given through the health care system. Ana, an Afro-Brazilian in her early thirties, told me that she checked out of a well known private hospital in worse condition than she entered. When she tried to make a complaint about the racist manner in which the nurses treated her, those in charge offered her some pills to “calm her down.” She was surprised that the nurse who was indigenous in appearance would be racially profiling her when she too had most likely experienced racist treatment. When Ana asked the physician for more information regarding her condition and the medication she was being given, the doctor was very rude and told her just to take what she had been prescribed. She says when she enters a hospital to be treated with her white Argentine husband, they tell him everything instead of her, but at least she is treated more respectfully.

This was not the first time that Ana has had problems at that hospital. Medical care is free in Argentina through state facilities, and those in Buenos Aires are considered to be very good. Private hospitals are thought to provide you with an even more superior level of attention, so it is hard to believe that you still get treated poorly in these facilities when paying such high fees. When Ana was at the same hospital about four months ago to have her daughter examined, the female physician treating her was very disrespectful. While one doctor was examining the child with her shirt off, another female physician just barged in and started gossiping about a colleague. Ana had to

ask them to please examine her sick child and stop gossiping. They were extremely rude to her and continued to neglect the child, so Ana wrote a formal complaint noting that non-blacks are treated more respectfully. The director of the hospital called Ana a few days later saying that it was not possible that in Argentina she would be treated in a racist manner. Ana spent two hours on the phone explaining and trying to educate the woman.

You Have To Fight More Here than Anywhere

I was sitting at the computer one night researching online and came across an article by a well known Euro-Argentine male scholar who researches Afro-Brazilian religious practices in Argentina. In the article, the scholar referenced anthropologist Sansone's concept of hard and soft racism and how it also can be applied to understanding racial dynamics in Argentina. According to Sansone, "hard" racism is that in which color affects power and social relations while "soft" racism occurs in social spheres in which race does not necessarily impede these interactions (2003). The way Sansone is theorizing about race is informed by his positionality as a white male scholar. While I find his distinctions intriguing, I question their value for those who actually have to live in black bodies. Ironically, it seems that "soft" racism is always taken hard. In the end, "soft" racism is "hard" racism making the dichotomy seem false as evidenced by the experiences of blacks in Argentina.

Racism in any form leaves a person feeling demoralized, frustrated, helpless, and alone. "Soft" racism has us locked up in our houses because we just do not want to deal with another day of being treated in a racist manner. It prevents us from freely expressing our emotions, dancing the way we like, and even dressing in the manner we please. It controls our life, our demeanor, and our recreation. Racism in any form is

very pervasive, restricting, and psychologically damaging. Ironically, in a country where psychology is a regular part of the culture, blacks cannot even find the professional help they need to deal with the problem of racism because it is so strongly denied by Argentine society.

My research consultants and I would joke privately about the racist treatment we constantly received in Argentina as a way of coping. Of course, behind the humor is great sadness, a sense of being all alone in this battle, and traumatized by the daily assaults. This type of humor “opens up a discursive space within which it becomes possible to speak about matters that are otherwise naturalized, unquestioned, or silenced” (Goldstein 2003). It is the everyday subtleties of racism that really chip away at the human spirit leaving a legacy of isolation, loneliness, and a lack of self worth. It would be one thing if we only received racist treatment every once in a while, but every single day is just too overwhelming. As Esperanza, a twenty something first generation Afro-Argentine stated, you have to fight harder in Argentina than in other countries.

What is considered benign racism can easily, and often does, lead to violent forms of racist expression. Thus, it seems just as dangerous as overt racism, if not more so since it is the same malady in a disguised latent form. The typical outward response towards racism for its perpetrators and victims is silence. Silence has become an integral part of Argentine life and identity due to a painful history of military rule as well as the nation’s reputation as a Nazi haven because of its role in protecting and even helping transport Nazis post World War II so that they could avoid being prosecuted (Goñi 2002). Ricardo’s encounter with the Skinheads becomes even more complicated

when this particular history is considered. Also of note is that Argentina has yet to prosecute its own criminals from the dictatorship era.

This particular history has ensured that Argentines are raised to never get involved, no matter what. I listened to stories from interviewees about friends and family members that were made to disappear. During the dictatorship, getting involved in other people's issues could mean one's disappearance and subsequent death one's friends and family. I was out on the street with some black research participants when we passed a poster of a young man in his twenties who recently had disappeared after filing a complaint against a man heavily involved in the 1970s military government. My consultant estimated that only about twenty of the 400 *militares* involved in those crimes had actually been prosecuted. Those that were prosecuted usually were just placed under house arrest in their opulent luxury homes in the city's most exclusive neighborhoods. Thus, Argentines continue to live under this silent terrorist threat. Keeping silent kept you alive. Generations of Argentines were enculturated with this ideology, a burdensome inheritance passed down to present day society encouraging them to ignore the racialized injustices they see around them.

Sheriff reminds us that despite the lack of open conversations about race, silence regarding issues of race is an integral part of racial discourse, and its roles and meanings can challenge dominant racial mythology (2001). The most frustrating part of the legacy of racial silence in Argentina is a denial of racism so deep that racist ideologies and behaviors are excused and even normalized. There is a truly palpable lack of collective shame around racism, which provides an intensive culture shock to outsiders, especially black foreigners. Almost all of the black Americans I met did not

want to ever return to Argentina because of the racist treatment they received on an almost daily basis.

As black people, we take pride in our ability to resist, to survive, and to overcome. The reality is we are all fragile. Even the strongest of our kind is completely destructible. All it takes is one wrong glance, one little snicker, a simple sneer to let us know that we are lesser people than they are. In this society, blackness negates one's everything-ness—humanness, worthiness, capableness—everything. In Argentina, there is nowhere we can go for help and no one equipped to help us with the psychological trauma of racism. There is nothing more terrifying than being trapped inside yourself. As Carla describes it, "*Somos todos locos*; I guess we are all just crazy." Although we all have the same or similar experiences, racism always is negated by dominant society. We blacks know they do not really want us in Argentina. We know this because every day they remind us in a million little ways.

¹ The center of the very large city of Buenos Aires.

² The term *Afro* is used in Argentina by Afro-descendants, Africans, and some of their allies as a synonym for black or African descent.

³ Shanty towns usually located on the edges of the city or in the more rural areas of the provinces.

CHAPTER 6
UNDERCOVER BROTHERS AND SISTERS? *MESTIZAJE*, *BLANQUEAMIENTO*, AND
PASSING IN BUENOS AIRES

Conceptually, *mestizaje*, *blanqueamiento*, and passing have all played integral roles in shaping Argentina's national mythology as the "European" nation in Latin America. In conjunction, they have successfully obfuscated the historical presence of Afro-descendants in the country. Latin American racial ideology does not operate on hypo-descent, thus not all Afro-descendants are considered black. The two terms are not synonymous as in the U.S. context. Due to the high degree of race mixture, brownness rather than blackness has become the marker of identity for Afro-descendants (Andrews 2004). Though *mestizaje* is the master symbol for identity in the region, it is in tension with negritude, which has a long history with politically conscious Afro-descendants in the region (Whitten and Torres 1998). The Argentine variant of *mestizaje*, *criollismo*, hides the heterogeneous ethnic past and makes it irrelevant by the image of the *criollo*, or individual of mixed European descent (Segato 1991).

Though white supremacy is at the foundation of dominant racial ideology throughout the Americas, perhaps it is even more insidious as the base for *mestizaje*, because it is cloaked in the guise of incorporating racial others. *Mestizaje* has been a powerful symbol in Latin America and the Caribbean meant to unify the different racial groups that comprise the region (Freyre 1956; Ortiz 1995). This same mythology has allowed for both the inclusion and exclusion of Indians and blacks in the region (Wade 1993). *Mestizaje*, with its encouragement of intermixing between racial groups, served as a path of upward social mobility (Siegrist de Gentile and Ghirardi 2008) in Argentina and perhaps even facilitated racial passing.

The persistence of racial passing contradicts the dominance of the myth of *mestizaje*. If all racial groups were integrated successfully into one people, then there would be no need for individuals to try to pass as members of a different racial group. Afro-Argentines that pass, whether deliberately or unintentionally, are not necessarily trying to obtain whiteness, but to escape blackness. They have the ultimate goal of moving towards whiteness or whitening as much as they are allowed within the racial rubric of Argentine society. In some instances, place of residence works in combination with phenotype as an identifier of race (Rahier 1998; Simmons 2009). Light-skinned blacks participating in the middle class cosmopolitan life of the city of Buenos Aires are not likely to be classified as Afro-descendants. These individuals could fall into the category of non-black racial others but simultaneously be excluded from belonging to the group of European descendants that constitute dominant society. On the other hand, if passing is intentional, it can be interpreted as a historical form of resistance to white supremacy in Latin America as people of mixed origins have successfully gained upward mobility (Andrews 2004). However, in Latin America, not all Afro-descendants are classified as black or even as being of African descent. Individuals, like me, who were raised in the U.S. under a racial system of hypo-descent, are more likely to place all Afro-descendants in the same category. This is not representative of the reality of racial classification in Argentina or elsewhere in the region, but a reflection of one's socialization. Even when Afro-descendants choose not to claim black identity, physical and cultural markers can identify them as black in the eyes of both the dominant society and other Afro-descendants.

Comparatively examining the systems of racialization in the Americas, the emphasis has been on defining mixedness in Latin America and the Caribbean, while in the U.S. it has been on demarcating whiteness. Because of the binary system of racial classification in the U.S., the development of whiteness studies has led to an in depth interrogation of the racial category. The literature examining whiteness recognizes it as being very heavily class defined (Hartigan 1999; Hill and McCall 2009; Roediger 2007; Wade 1993). Frankenberg identifies three dimensions of whiteness: “a location of structural advantage, a place from which white people look at themselves and the rest of society, and a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed” (1993:1). In the U.S., not all people who are now considered to be white historically have been classified as such. The Irish went through a series of social and political changes before they were reclassified as whites (Smedley 1992). Also notable is the process of whitening that the Jewish minority underwent (Brodkin 1998). Facilitating the transformation of these blocs from racialized minorities to members of dominant U.S. society was their phenotype, though there are cultural and ethnic markers symbolically associated with Irish Americans and Jewish Americans. Certain contexts evoke symbols that mark Irishness or Jewishness, thus challenging their achieved whiteness.

While “white” or “*blanco*” is not a racial term that is in currency in Argentina, whiteness is a very salient concept in the nation. Due to the racial structuring of Argentina, dominant society does not define itself as white but rather, as of European origins. I did sometimes hear blacks and non-blacks use “Argentine” as if it were synonymous to white. As mentioned previously, white is not synonymous with European in the Argentine context. Many Argentines trace their lineage through

Spanish and Italian ancestors. In the early 1900s when these ethnic blocs immigrated, many of them were likened to blacks and treated as second class citizens. In an attempt to whiten the population, culturally and phenotypically, the founders of the nation modeled the country after England and France (Solomianski 2003). Argentines have not been able to successfully attain whiteness but among the populations of Latin America, have effectively secured a stake in Europeaness.

As Ginetta Candelario notes in her research on Dominican identity, not identifying with blackness is not necessarily a matter of self-delusion but could be a response to white supremacy, local histories, and international relations (2007). In Argentina, many light skinned Afro-descendants perhaps choose not to identify as black for similar reasons. This choice, however, reflects an increased consciousness of the role blackness plays in the lives of Africans and Afro-descendants (Vargas 2004) as well as incommensurable ideas about what black identity is and which individuals can claim it (Bhaba 1994).

I See Black People

William and I were sitting at lunch at the small restaurant in a galleria next to his office when a young woman walked in with a male friend. William took one quick glance at her and told me she had an “African” figure, which he interpreted as a small waist and a full behind. The woman had very light skin, dyed auburn hair that appeared to be straightened, and full lips as well. William, a South African male in his sixties, assured me that he knows an “African” body when he sees one. He never commented on whether he considered “coloured” people African as well in terms of their physical features, considering that he did not grow up in a society with a bipolar racial classification system. He realized what many foreign and local blacks have noticed: in

Argentina, there is potentially a significant amount of passing going on. People like William and I suffer from “I see black people” syndrome all the time. Every day, we run into those members of Argentine society that seem to be passing clandestinely for non-black. Of course, dominant society thinks we are crazy or just vehemently denies that these individuals could ever be classified as black.

There is a secret to having success in this game of tongue in cheek racial profiling. It is considerably easy for a black foreigner to spot an “undercover” Afro-Argentine after being in the country for only a short amount of time. First, we notice obvious and more subtle characteristics of *la raza* or the race that are independent of skin color like hair texture, nose shape, fullness of the lips, and body shape. Once we have identified an individual with these traits that we suspect to be an Afro-descendant, we make eye contact with her, maintain our glance, and then casually approach this person in a friendly manner to greet her. If she should start running in the opposite direction, then she is definitely an Afro-descendant. You have stumbled upon a centuries old dirty little secret. As she runs away as inconspicuously as possible, she is probably thinking, “Damn, you foreigners for trying to out us!”

At the beginning of my fieldwork stay, I diligently recorded every time I encountered a person I suspected to be an “undercover” brother or sister, Afro-descendants who are passing for non-black. This soon became too tedious as I realized the city was full of them. William, a diplomat with a heavy involvement in the effort to mobilize blacks in Argentina around black identity, came to the same realization. I told him that based on my ethnographic research, I believe approximately ten percent of the Argentine population is of African descent. He argued that it should

be more and that passing gives blacks an economic advantage globally, thus improving their quality of life.

Even William with his keen eye sometimes has difficulty spotting an “undercover” brother. When he was visiting an Afro-Argentine organization in a province in the interior of the country, his host and group leader Alicia, an Afro-Argentine from the colonial line, greeted a stranger standing near them. Afterwards, she informed William that she recognized the man as a *mestizo* with African ancestry, which surprised her guest. Finding Afro-Argentines in Argentina does not seem to be the problem, but rather finding these individuals that identify as such is the real challenge. Alicia knows this conundrum all too well.

Afro-Argentines have not been included in the Argentine national census since the 1880s (Andrews 1980), facilitating the dominant discourse on their disappearance. In 2005, Alicia was a volunteer in the test census project funded by the World Bank. She went door to door in historically black neighborhoods in the provinces of Buenos Aires and Santa Fe with census questionnaires in an effort to have Afro-Argentines self-identify for the project. Unfortunately, the employees from the national census office were too frightened to go outside of the capital city into what they considered “dangerous” neighborhoods (heavily populated by poor non-whites) to collect data, so Alicia and a few of her Afro-descendant contacts accompanied them. The official numbers produced by the test census project estimate that less than four percent of the population is Argentine of African descent (Stubbs and Reyes 2006). Alicia described the project as plagued with problems in its execution and in the reporting of data to census officials, thus making the results unreliable.

Afro-descendants always have been present in Argentine history and have often been noticeable, though they have largely gone unacknowledged. Their presence has been recognized in especially racialized ways that have singled them out for discriminatory practices. Additionally, changing systems of racial classification and national ideology have meant fewer blacks in Argentina to corroborate with the national whitening agenda (Andrews 1980). This, combined with the self-hate that results from constant racist treatment, has facilitated the need for people to hide their African ancestry.

Negro Family Secrets and Confessions

Periodically throughout my research stay, a strange occurrence would repeat itself. Persons who, in some respects, appeared to be non-black Argentines suddenly would have the urge to confess to me that they have black relatives. When this would happen, it was always a bit odd and uncomfortable for me as the researcher, but it seemed surprisingly cathartic for the person confessing. The situation usually began with a casual conversation not directly related to my research project. When the individual discovered that I research blacks in the nation, he typically then proceeded to lean forward and almost whisper that he has black relatives. I then have to resist the urge to whisper back, "That's interesting, but why are we whispering?" Within many Argentine families, any talk of relatives that do not fit the paradigm of European origins are almost always mentioned in an off the record sort of way or at the very least in private conversation. There is also another way to surmise that Afro-descendants exist in a family line. When family members claim the ethnic origins of some relatives as "unknown" and quickly change the topic, they are probably referring to Afro-descendants. Indigenous relatives are sometimes dealt with in the same manner but

recently are becoming more acknowledged due to efforts made by various Indian groups to increase their visibility.

Behind all of the rumors and whispers, there is a sincere curiosity and desire to know more about one's own history, but often great resistance from family gatekeepers usually prevents this from happening. A sense of shame around blackness is the quiet inheritance that is passed down through the generations. This was the case for some of the students at Guillermo's *capoeira* school, where I gave a brief talk on Afro-Argentine history. After my presentation, a few of the students spoke with me about their encounters with blackness. One white male student in his late twenties recalled having an Afro-Argentine childhood friend who was ostracized by all of his classmates. Another very light skinned male student of African descent in his early twenties told me that his grandmother was a black Brazilian. He owns a small bookstore in a middle class section of town and had been doing his own research on Afro-Argentines. A father, in his late thirties, of an eight year old male student told me he is Uruguayan from a *mulata* mother and darker-skinned Afro-descendant father, but he is phenotypically white. For all three of these men, the search to learn more about Argentine blackness was not accepted within their families or in a public forum.

Not all undercover brothers and sisters consciously have chosen to hide. Sometimes that decision is made for them by parents and other loved ones who feel that they are protecting them from the negative associations with blackness. This was the case for Pedro (Fig. 6-1), a male in his mid-thirties, who through his own vigorous research discovered his biological family line is colonial Afro-Argentine. I first met Pedro at a conference hosted by Alicia and her organization in the province of Santa

Fe. When I initially saw him seated at our dining table, I did not immediately know he was of African descent. He is very light-skinned with loosely curled black hair and hazel eyes. He stood up and his body structure combined with his facial features caused William to comment that he is Mandinka, referring to an ethnic group of Africans that were especially prized by enslavers for their strong physical build. His physical features, his gait, and other personality traits marked him as an Afro-descendant. Of course, there is no sure way of knowing if all people who have features similar to Pedro's are really of African descent. It is folk ideas about human variation among different populations that lead some individuals with a physical appearance like Pedro's to be classified as having "black" features. In other contexts, Pedro might not have been classified as an Afro-descendant.

I interviewed Pedro near the end of my research stay. Pedro, now in his early thirties, went down an amazing trail of self-discovery to learn about his Afro-Argentine origins. As a child, he always felt out of place, even within his own family. His blonde haired, blue eyed mother would spend hours trying to straighten his naturally curly hair so that his appearance would be more like that of his peers. Pedro had few friends growing up, and in grade school, he spent recess indoors instead of playing with the other children who often made fun of his physical features. One day in third grade, he stayed inside during recess and started drumming on his desk with a classmate, much to his teacher's chagrin. She yelled at him, "*Calláte, parecés un negro candombero*¹!" (Shut up, you look like a trouble making *negro*). The irony of her statement was not revealed until later in Pedro's life when he seriously began to study the drums and discover his roots.

As Pedro matured and entered high school, his self-esteem plummeted even more. His classmates made fun of his physical traits by calling him names like monkey. He had stopped straightening his hair, which had grown into a large loosely curled afro. He felt no one considered him attractive, and he became a very solitary person, spending many hours at home reading. Pedro noted that his personal history mirrored what happened to Afro-Argentines as a group. The ridicule from dominant society caused them to retreat to the private domain of their homes and stop sharing their culture with outsiders.

It was not until Pedro discovered his love of music that he finally began to travel down the path to self-acceptance. At age eighteen, he started playing the drums on his own after listening to different music styles including salsa. His ease in learning the instrument led him to seek out opportunities to play music with others. He began by playing in an Afro-Uruguayan *candombe* musical group formed of older black men. They made it clear that they only allow black men to be a part of the band, so Pedro was surprised that they incorporated him. He did, however, notice that one of the men was similar to him in appearance.

Three years later, Pedro participated in a three-year-long Afro-Rioplatense musical project coordinated by a female Euro-Argentine student. The project focused on *candombe* and required them to contact and interview many local Afro-descendants. Pedro was surprised at how easily the black participants opened up to him, though he was not the one leading the project. In most cases, the interviewees would only address Pedro during the interviews. In one particular instance, they interviewed Josephina, a well-known Afro-Argentine jazz singer in her seventies. There were four

Euro-Argentine men helping conduct the interview and Pedro sat in. Josefina placed herself directly in front of Pedro and solely addressed him, though he was not asking the questions. At one point, she abruptly stopped the conversation and exclaimed, “*Pero este chico es de la raza*” (but this young man is one of us/of the race). Pedro interrupted his story to comment that blacks always recognize each other. He continued the story to describe how the room went silent for a brief moment, and then everyone resumed their conversations. Pedro had never thought of himself as black, but having a phenotypically black person identify him as such left him thinking more about his origins.

After the memorable encounter with Josefina, Pedro was prompted to approach his mother and ask her specific questions about his history. She refused to reveal the truth to him, but he discovered from his father he was adopted as a baby from a province of Misiones, northeast of the province of Buenos Aires. His father reluctantly revealed this small bit of information only after they had a huge argument over the subject. His mother eventually told him that his birthmother worked as a maid for someone and named the specific person and the location. With this small bit of information, Pedro began an intense research project to locate the members of his biological family. He found the small village in the interior where his birthmother is from and went there with his then girlfriend to further research his family line in the public documents. Pedro was quickly put in contact with the man who was the mayor around the time he was adopted. The ex-mayor shared what he knew about Pedro’s family and then had his daughters escort Pedro to the residence of his family members who are

from an area in the middle of a mountain range that is known for being very dangerous and having a culture of fighting.

When Pedro finally reunited with his Afro-Argentine family, they informed him that his father was killed on duty while working as a police officer many years ago. They did not know much about the man or his family, but they claim Pedro looks a lot like him. Pedro's maternal great grandfather was black and his grandmother was Austrian. Half of his cousins are light in skin color but have black features while the other half are dark in skin color with black features. Pedro's birthmother is white in skin color. He did not have the opportunity to meet her, nor did he look for her during that stay because she lives in a different town. In time, he will locate her and reconnect. His relatives informed him that they had been wondering about him and were going to look for him.

After visiting the village of his birth family, the struggles Pedro had with his identity suddenly seemed to make sense. Many other things also fell into place for him as well. He no longer saw his physical features as abnormal or ugly. He listened to heroic stories of herculean strength of an uncle who after having his jeep roll on top of him lifted the vehicle up and drove himself to the hospital only to die of his injuries. Pedro, in fact, is very similar in appearance to one of his uncles and a cousin. When Pedro's uncle first opened the door to greet him, there was a very awkward moment in which Pedro thought he was looking at an older version of himself. Pedro finally found the sense of belonging he had been missing all of his life and now visits his birth family almost every summer.

Through his love of music, Pedro has learned more about his Afro-Argentine heritage and is able to connect with other Afro-descendants. A few years ago, he met

Lourdes, an Afro-Argentine from the colonial line in her sixties. Lourdes has very dark skin, in contrast to Pedro. He feels that his generation tends to be very light in skin color and more mixed with non-blacks. Together, they formed an Afro-Argentine cultural organization and a music group as a way to sustain *candombe* music and teach others about Afro-Argentine culture. Pedro works as an organizational psychologist in the province of Buenos Aires but has proudly become a *negro candombero*, just like his third grade teacher had said.

Searching for Self

The search for identity in individuals of African descent who identify as multi-ethnic and multi-racial is understandably complex. In Argentina, another layer of complexity is added as the very existence of Afro-Argentines is denied and their cultural contributions are subordinated. Understandably, the desire to know one's own origins and feel a sense of belonging as a member of a larger group is a driving force in this search. This is usually the result of much individual research in public archives as well as family archives and interviews with multiple family members in an attempt to get a more complete history.

Daniela is one individual who has embarked on this journey. She is thirty-five years old, very light skinned, petite, thin framed, and has her red hair in medium tousled curls. Daniela does not phenotypically look like an Afro-descendant but makes a point to assert her black identity by informing people of her ethnic heritage and participating in black cultural events like those hosted by the black Diaspora of Argentina. She gets upset that people do not want to recognize her as being an Afro-descendant since she is very proud of her heritage.

Daniela's grandfather was a famous Argentine street performer or *payador*, and she uses his last name to connect her to that history, though her mother is his granddaughter. He married a woman who was very white in complexion, and Daniela says that is why she came out so light skinned. She was teased a lot as a child because of her curly hair, but she did not let it bother her too much since she always had music as an outlet for her frustrations. Daniela feels the most respected as a person of African descent in the music world. As the mother of ten and thirteen year old daughters, she has unfortunately had to watch her youngest child, who is phenotypically Afro-descendant, suffer from racist teasing in school.

I would characterize Daniela as an anxious person. She seems constantly to be in a big hurry and running in survival mode, which is understandable since she works several jobs to support her two children and her mother. She distributes flyers for the National Institute Against Discrimination (NIAD) events, has composed and performed children's musical shows for the past six years, and writes her own independent underground music magazine that covers genres like rock, blues, and tango. Our interview was rushed since NIAD called her shortly before we met to send her out to advertise on short notice. Because Daniela lives in a home in the province of Buenos Aires, about two and a half hours from the central bus depot of the capital city where she works, her weekly schedule is especially hectic. In spite of her busy schedule, she welcomes every opportunity to share her Afro-Argentine heritage with others.

Not all Afro-Argentines are as forthright in their personal history. During the second half of my research stay, I lived with Francisca (Fig. 6-2), an Afro-Argentine from the colonial line in her sixties. It was her daughter Gisela (Fig. 6-2) who first confirmed

my suspicion that Francisca is of African descent and helped me arrange an interview with her. I interviewed Francisca in her daughter's apartment in a working class neighborhood near her residence. She shares the apartment with her boyfriend Fabian, who is a first-generation Afro-Argentine from an Afro-Uruguayan father and is phenotypically black. Fabian stayed in the bedroom while we chatted at the front of the apartment. Gisela was especially interested in being present for the interview as it gave her the opportunity to learn more about her mother's family history, which had been somewhat shrouded in mystery. I later was informed that Gisela's maternal grandmother passed on very little information about their family line to Francisca.

While Francisca is arguably of noticeable African descent, her daughter Gisela has a more ethnically ambiguous phenotype. Gisela easily passes as non-black with her very light freckled skin, long wavy black hair, and full lips. She does look far enough from white that she was once casted as a *negra* in a commercial. She could be characterized as a person of mixed ancestry (*criolla*) with a lineage that includes Afro-Argentine, Sicilian, and indigenous. Gisela has several types of employment, including working as a theatrical dance instructor at an elementary school, a massage therapist, a salesperson of natural health and beauty products, and on the weekends, a singer in an Afro-Cuban band. Additionally, she has her own performance group that does shows for children.

Gisela enjoyed flipping through old family photos and learning more about her mother's history as I interviewed Francisca. Francisca is originally from the province of Santa Fe where she grew up under the protection of her blonde-haired blue-eyed cousins who, in spite of having a *mulata* mother, were phenotypically white. She was

shielded from racist comments and had little recollection of experiencing racism there. It was not until Francisca moved to Buenos Aires at the age of sixteen and attended high school with a lot of Jewish girls that she observed racial discrimination. The Jewish students were the ones that befriended her and invited her over to their houses. The other girls never talked to her, and later, she discovered it was because of her association with Jews.

Gisela describes her maternal grandmother as indigenous and noted that Francisca's father was only in her life until she was twelve. Francisca's father was the son of a *mulata* and was known for his philandering, gambling, and drinking, causing his wife to leave him and move to another city. Francisca noted that her mother was very racist, especially towards Jews, to the point that she would announce the person's ethnic background when they would call for her daughter. Francisca paid little attention to the ethnicity of her friends and even dated a Jewish boy, much to her mother's chagrin.

Francisca met her husband Teodoro at a joint bachelor/bachelorette party. Gisela told me that the family always has been considerably well off because her father worked as a merchant marine for many years. Francisca worked in a plant that produced roads for twenty years and also earned a good salary. They were economically stable enough to take Gisela to Miami for her fifteenth birthday instead of having a traditional *quinciñera*² party.

Teodoro is the child of Italian immigrants, and interestingly in the household, it is this European heritage that is discussed most. I had seen campaign posters for Italian politicians lining the streets, and one day, Teodoro showed me a recently arrived

postcard from the Italian government reminding Gisela to vote in the upcoming elections³. I remember the conversation we had when their son Daniel had come over with his two year old daughter for lunch. We were discussing Argentine cuisine and why the diet is so different from the rest of Latin America where beans and rice are ubiquitous. Daniel made the statement, "We're European" to explain the culinary differences. I thought this was interesting considering he was sitting in front of his mother who has known African and indigenous ancestry. Daniel chose not to acknowledge that side of his heritage demonstrating that he is very culturally Argentine. His daughter is phenotypically white with loosely curled blonde hair. In another conversation, Francisca noted that children would make fun of Daniel for being so dark when he was younger. Daniel's way of identifying is quite different from that of his sister Gisela.

I had the opportunity to speak one on one with Gisela when I met her at a local restaurant for dinner after she had experienced an especially hard day. She wanted to make sure I was comfortable after moving into her parents' home since she knew they unintentionally reproduced some racist ideologies and language. I had noted some minor comments that had underlying racial implications, but it was not enough to make me feel uncomfortable, so I did not mention it. Gisela feels that her mother represses all the blackness in her without even recognizing it. She gave the example of setting the Christmas Eve dinner table in a manner in which Francisca obsessively was teaching her two year old granddaughter the European standards for table settings. Francisca also loves classical music and tennis, which also have strong European

associations, but I recalled that she grew up surrounded by whitened Jews her whole life.

Gisela also was very interested in how I felt living in a nation that she views as extremely racist. She seemed very frustrated with the everyday battles of racism. At the school where she teaches, she noticed some of the children using racial slurs against their classmates. She brought this to the attention of the principal, and the woman did not see this as a problem. This made Gisela feel even more ostracized, and she noticed that she “always felt different.” When spending time with her childhood friends after she started dating Fabian, they would talk incessantly about her “black boyfriend.” Gisela describes her childhood as growing up surrounded by whites, so these are observations she is only recently beginning to make.

Music has offered Gisela a much needed escape from her feelings of difference and isolation. When she started getting serious about music and spending time with a lot of black musicians, her parents did not understand why. She agreed with me that Argentine society is not one in which you can truly be yourself. There is an extreme amount of pressure for conformity rather than praise for individualism. Gisela has long felt this way. It is only the last few years since she has been dating Fabian that she has felt more freedom to express herself through her appearance and activities.

Gisela is not a card carrying member of any black organization. She does not dress in a way that would associate her with black cultures or have any outstanding personality traits that would have similar associations. Many people have even questioned if she is Argentine because of her extroverted personality and upbeat attitude. Gisela sings in an Afro-Cuban ensemble and enjoys many black cultural

expressions, whether through music, dance, visual arts, or food, but so do many non-black Argentines as these types of activities have become extremely popular in the last decade. She has very recently started asserting her blackness, surprisingly to the resentment of her boyfriend Fabian. I interpreted his reaction as his viewing her as usurping an identity and subsequent problems of which she is not entitled since he is the legitimate phenotypical *negro* of the pair. I also read into his negative stance that as a member of Isaac's association, the black Diaspora of Argentina, he adopted some of his leader's sexist ideologies. I noticed that Isaac and many of the African men follow the pattern of keeping their non-black female partner out of their black activities. The only problem is that Fabian apparently forgot that his girlfriend is Afro-Argentine from the colonial line and thus legitimated in her desire to explore her lineage and assert a black identity.

Daniela and Gisela are of known African ancestry and close in age but could easily pass as non-black (and usually do). Yet, these two women have differing identity claims. Daniela strongly asserts her Afro-Argentine identity while Gisela is more hesitant to claim blackness. From my conversations with Gisela, it is evident that she would like to claim her Afro-Argentineness, but it is unclear what specifically is preventing her from doing so. Her mother Francisca indubitably influenced her attitude towards her Afro-Argentine heritage. Also notable is that Daniela is a mother of two and in a very different stage in her life whereas I met Gisela in a moment when she was entangled in the process of self-discovery. Both women are a testament to the very different ways in which Afro-descendants experience their identity in Argentina.

Passing: the Greatest Performance in Argentine History?

In Argentina, there historically has never been an advantage to being black, so understandably those that can pass as non-black do. Even when a person is of known African descent, members of the dominant Argentine society downplay this ancestry. I witnessed this scenario on many occasions, but one particular experience best characterizes the types of encounters that occur between known blacks and those of African descent that seem to be intentionally passing.

One Sunday afternoon, I went to a popular tourist craft fair near one of the city's most wealthy and well known neighborhoods. I often would visit to watch the students from an Afro-Brazilian research consultant Guillermo's *capoeira* school perform there. Tina, a friend of mine, was visiting from the U.S., so she was eager to shop and see what the crowded area had to offer. Carolina, a *criolla* Argentine friend, was also with us. When the *capoeiristas* finished, we started to exit the plaza where they were performing, and a group of teenagers passed. Among them was a young female with bleached blonde hair but very *mulata* features. My eyes immediately were drawn to the girl since I recognized her as a light skinned Afro-descendant who was possibly Afro-Argentine. Simultaneously, she kept staring at me even as all of her friends already had walked by and turned their backs to us. Tina noticed this odd exchange of glances and asked why the girl was staring at me. I explained that it is because she knows that I know she is black. I pointed the girl out to Carolina who agreed that the girl looked *mulata*. I jokingly said. "*Sí, te veo, negra*" (Yes, I see you *negra*) before cutting off my glance. This was just one of numerous occasions in which this type of awkward exchange occurred.

After months of seeing “undercover” brothers and sisters, I had to question the meaning of *mestizaje* in the Argentine context. *Mestizaje* recently has come under more visible scrutiny by Afro-descendants in the region (Safa 2005). Argentina appears to be the country where the ideology has been the most successful as non-whites are excluded from the national mythology, census, and discourse. I knew many Afro-Argentines who easily could pass as non-black, though there are surely just as many that could arguably be labeled as being of obvious African descent. At a meeting for the African Diaspora Working Group, one very light skinned Afro-Argentine male stated that blackness for him was a choice. Circulating within the black ethnic blocs and outside of them are many popular accounts of famous Argentine leaders with secret African ancestry. Though there is no way to know for sure if passing is a widespread phenomenon in Argentina, both passing and the assertion of blackness among Afro-Argentines challenge the foundational myth of *mestizaje*.

The encounters of the individuals discussed in this chapter are perhaps more representative of how Afro-Argentineness is experienced in the capital city. They do not reside or participate in a community that includes Afro-Argentines outside of their immediate family. Some have managed to recover elements of their Afro-Argentine cultural heritage, but many others are more ambivalent towards it and do not publicly claim a black identity, because it has not benefited them socially, economically, or otherwise.

Many Afro-descendants in Argentina work in the entertainment industry as producers of black culture, but perhaps their greatest performance has occurred off stage. Passing for non-black has arguably been the greatest performance in Argentine

history. I think the issue is much more complicated than simply gaining an economic advantage through approximating whiteness. There are numerous other factors entangled in the concept of blackness causing those who can choose to avoid it to do so. It is very possible that millions of Argentines have done this historically, creating the appearance of an Afro-Argentine population that has “disappeared.” Simultaneously, others are deeply entrenched in the process of self-discovery and affirmation of their African cultural heritage. The boundaries of blackness are continually being reworked in Argentina, slowly chipping away at the façade of monolithic Europeanness that has obscured the multiethnic contributions to the nation.

¹ *Candombe* is an African based dance and music style popular in Argentina and Uruguay. Afro-descendants in both countries have historically kept this musical tradition alive (See Frigerio 2001) The term *candombero*, and especially *negro candombero*, is an insult in Argentine slang meaning that a person is a troublemaker. Black people and black cultures often have negative associations in the nation, yet these types of phrases have become normalized.

² A *quincién* is the birthday celebration of a fifteen year old girl. It is a sort of coming of age party akin to the “Sweet Sixteen” party in the U.S., but can easily cost as much as a wedding.

³ The Italian government provides citizenship and its accompanying rights like voting for immigrants, their children, and their grandchildren.



Figure 6-1. Pedro



Figure 6-2. Gisela (second from left) and Francisca (third from right)

CHAPTER 7 CAN YOU RELATE? FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND ROMANCE IN THE DIASPORA

During my fieldwork, I had the pleasure of sharing many special family moments and celebrations with my research participants. Observing the everyday family lives of Africans and Afro-descendants in Argentina was an essential part of my research experience. As a constant presence in their lives, I unwittingly became a participant when there were moments of conflict and tension. In these situations, I did my best to remain neutral and non-intrusive, as I could only imagine how awkward I would feel if an outsider came to observe my daily life and saw me in my worst moments. The tensions that occurred in the private realms of the home often were reflected in conflict with larger society. Issues of race and identity were repeatedly the focal point of many dramatic family episodes, but they also served to draw family members closer together.

Race, Class, and Gender in Family Dynamics

Many Africans and Afro-descendants in Argentina form families with partners who are not black. Raymond T. Smith (1987) notes that all social classes historically have been intertwined through formal and informal unions. Based on his research in West Indian societies, he argues that what was viewed as deviation from normal Christian marriage patterns was, in fact, an alternate system he calls dual marriage. He defines dual marriage as “an integral part of one marriage system that included alternate forms appropriate to different class and racial groups, or to certain inter-class and inter-racial relations” (Smith 1987:164). Parallel to formal marriage was a system of concubinage in which black and colored women were the concubines of white men. These men would marry women of the same status but choose concubines of an inferior social class. Such interracial unions were not legitimized by law but formed an

important part of the kinship structure and helped explain present-day mating patterns (Smith 1987). In modern-day Argentine society, there is a similar pattern of black women in non-marriage relationships with white men of a higher social class. Though these women are not necessarily the concubines of white men, formal marriage is not common between these two groups. The fact that these unions are not "legitimated" through marriage even when the pair has children together could be due to several factors ranging from the cost of a wedding to a family's lack of acceptance of the union. Following Smith, one could link current mating patterns of black women from the lower class sector partnering with middle class white males to the hierarchical character of a kinship structure that was established during the colonial era.

Building on the scholarship of Smith, Lisa Douglass examines sentiment as an ideology that is both a form of power and meaning in the families of the Jamaican elite. She suggests that the way these upper class families "organize and practice family is related to patterns of social hierarchy" (Douglass 1992:1). Both familial and non-familial relationships are governed in relation to gender, color, and class. Douglass holds that "the family acts as a means by which the elite distinguish between themselves and others, and in this way the sentiment of family acts as a legitimizing force for social hierarchy" (Douglass 1992:3). Among my research consultants, ideas about race are solidified in the household. As Douglass suggests, social hierarchy is learned through sentiment, how people feel about others. This, in turn, enforces power within existing hierarchies.

In her research in Cuba, Nadine Fernandez also notes the role of history in influencing modern-day mating patterns. Fernandez recognizes that "the meanings of

interracial couples, like the meanings of race, have not remained the same over the centuries or over the course of the Cuban revolution. The meaning of interracial couples has a history" (2010:3). During the colonial era, the Cuban state encouraged certain types of interracial unions as a part of the modernizing whitening project (Fernandez 2010). While her discussion is of Cuba and its specific socialist history, this notion could be extended to other nations like Argentina. Interracial unions also were encouraged in Argentina as part of a whitening agenda to redefine and solidify the nation. The meanings of race and how interracial unions are interpreted, however, have changed over time. In modern Argentine society, there is a heightened exoticism of black bodies due to the belief that there are no black Argentines and the high visibility of blacks involved in the commodification of black culture. It is not common to see dark skinned Africans and Afro-descendants in the nation, which also might play a role in how non-black Argentines choose their potential partners. The same sort of exoticism could play a role in how blacks choose their non-black partners as well, though many point out that the dating pool of eligible blacks is much smaller than that of non-blacks. Fernandez reminds us that ultimately "the meaning of interracial couples are never singular but are subject to both the couples' own motives and the public's interpretations of their interracial unions" (Fernandez 2010:7).

The work of Smith, Douglass, and Fernandez illustrates that interracial unions tend to occur in a way that, for the most part, keep hierarchies of color, gender, and class intact. These factors are no doubt in play in the cross-racial unions of my research consultants. Among family and kin, I commonly heard jokes that highlighted racial differences. Such commentary reflects a heightened consciousness of the role

race plays in the daily lives of Africans and Afro-descendants (Vargas 2004), even in the private realm. The kinship and family networks of my research consultants overlap and intersect with those of other local blacks as well as those of larger Argentine society. In this chapter, I relay some accounts that demonstrate these theoretical ideas regarding family dynamics within mixed race families.

On Mothers

Josefina (Fig. 7-1), an Afro-Argentine jazz singer in her seventies, had a mother who was a well respected psychic in the capital city, though her clientele secretively solicited her services because of the stigma of this profession. As a child, she remembers seeing the most powerful men in the nation pass through her home. They would consult with her mother before making important moves in their personal and political lives. I found this story impressive, but it was her grandmother who led an even more incredible life.

Josefina's grandmother was the daughter of an Afro-Argentine woman and an aristocrat who fell in love, had a secret affair, and then fled their town to be together. As an adult, she was the wet nurse for the wealthy Alvear family and breastfed the future president of Argentina, Marcelo T. de Alvear. The Alvear residence literally occupied an entire city block, and the family employed about thirty servants. Decades after she stopped working for that family, Josefina's grandmother found herself living on the street with five children after her husband left her. She wrote President Alvear explaining her situation and asking for help. He told her that he never forgot her, and from that moment on, he sent her \$500 pesos a month, which was quite a large sum of money in those days.

These connections to one of Argentina's wealthiest families helped financially secure Josefina's family for future generations. Josefina grew up in an aristocratic neighborhood in the home her grandfather purchased, which is a rarity for Afro-Argentines. The full nature of the relationship between Josefina's family and the Alvear family was never made explicit. I am not even certain that Josefina knows the full story. There easily could have been children from the unions between members of the two families, potentially strengthening the bonds in their relationships. This is not to undermine the generosity of the Alvear family but rather to highlight the intricacies of race, class, and gender that exist within these types of patron client relationships.

Josefina remains connected to the Alvear family through her profession. As an artist recognized by the government, she lives in the world's only free pension house for retired artists. The building is named after President Alvear's wife, who was also a singer. The Alvear family was inspired to erect the building after the President's wife saw one of her former voice instructors living on the street. They created the pension home as a place artists could live completely free of charge including meals and basic medical checkups. Josefina gave me a tour of the home where she and about thirty other residents live, which is located in the upper three levels of a theater in an expensive section of downtown Buenos Aires.

Another Afro-Argentine with deep family ties is Angelica, who like Josefina, is also from the colonial line of Afro-Argentines. I tried to get Angelica a job cleaning in the home of Kelly, a black employee at the U.S. embassy. Unfortunately, that did not work out well, so Kelly sent me to retrieve her house key from Angelica. Angelica lives only two subway stops from Kelly in a small apartment in a middle class neighborhood

on the outskirts of the city. I had been planning to interview her for a while, so the opportunity allowed me to do so informally.

Angelica is a first cousin to Berta, who is the leader of the organization Madre Africa. She often accompanies Berta to African Diaspora Working Group meetings and assists her with Madre Africa events. Angelica noted that since Berta does not have a spouse or children to support, she has more time to participate in those types of activities. When they were younger, the two danced professionally together in cabaret shows. They performed together for several years and had a very popular act, but Berta lost interest in dancing. Consequently, Angelica went on to dance alone or as a part of other ensembles. She appeared on well-known television programs with some of Argentina's most famous entertainers. Unable to truly progress in her career as a professional dancer due to the lack of a good agent, Angelica left dancing years ago. She still occasionally performs and has passed her love of dance on to her children.

Angelica was married to an Argentine of European descent for more than 20 years but has been divorced from him for several years. She is now single and has four children with her ex-husband: two sons ages 25 and 22, and two daughters ages 26 and 17. Her oldest son has lived in Spain with his wife for more than three years. They are planning on moving back to Argentina and getting a larger apartment to share with Angelica. The other two older children live in nearby neighborhoods. Her youngest daughter lives at home and is still very dependent on her.

As we sat at her dining room table, Angelica proudly flipped through photos of her family and told me some of her personal history, noting it was evidence not only of Afro-Argentine existence, but of their rich cultural heritage. She had been organizing

numerous photo albums and loose photos for a book she and Berta are writing about their family line. As I was enjoying listening to her stories, her daughter-in-law called from Spain. They stayed on the phone for quite a while, much to the disdain of her youngest daughter who wanted to call her friends. Angelica explained that her daughter-in-law calls her often for advice or just to say hello since they are good friends. She is also very close to her youngest daughter, and they spend a great deal of their free time together.

It is obvious that the role of mother is one that Angelica cherishes. Her children remain her utmost priority and continue to be a major part of her daily life, though they are grown. She seemed dismayed by the fact that none of them expressed interest in having children of their own. While we were chatting, Angelica's son called to say that he would stop by for a moment. He drove over shortly after, so she went to the kitchen to quickly prepare us some lentil soup since it was nearing dinner time. We sat and ate dinner together while laughing at the ridiculousness of Argentine TV programming. My brief visit at Angelica's place turned into a much longer pleasant afternoon stay. Her family is always at the forefront of her mind. She ended our time together with a warm invitation to visit her extended family where she grew up in the province of Buenos Aires.

Angelica's struggles as a black mother in Argentina were significantly different from that of Eugenia, also an Afro-Argentine from the colonial line. Mothers are viewed by many as the protectors of their children and the universe, and no one embodies this better than Eugenia, an interviewee in her sixties and mother of my research consultant Lupe. Eugenia is a true *Porteña*, as she demonstrated while I sat in her small

apartment while I interviewed her. During our conversation, she stopped abruptly to argue with her husband over who was the greatest tango artist. Eugenia is now reunited with her husband, but she spent most of her child-raising years as a single mother struggling to raise her daughter amidst the racism of Argentine society.

Eugenia's grandfather and an uncle worked as chauffeurs for the police department. Unfortunately, her grandfather died when she was born, so she never knew him personally. Her maternal grandfather was Afro-Argentine, and her maternal grandmother was Afro-Uruguayan. She knows almost nothing about her father because her parents separated when she was very young. Eugenia describes him as having left her a quantity of siblings with other mothers, but she only grew up with one brother. Her family lived in the province of Buenos Aires for some years before moving to the capital city where she was born and has lived her entire life. She lived in what was then the poor outskirts of the city but through the decades, has transformed into one of the most expensive and exclusive residential neighborhoods.

Eugenia has held several jobs throughout her life, many of them simultaneously. She worked in a textile factory for many years while serving as a model for the fine arts schools in the city of Buenos Aires. She even modeled for some of Argentina's most famous painters, among them Leopoldo Presas and Juan Carlos Castagnino. Eugenia's love of dance led her to learn and perform classical and modern dance as well as act. She was a member of the all-black dance company "Ballet Chango," which had an Afro-Argentine director and consisted of eighteen dancers, most of whom were Afro-Argentines and a few Afro-Brazilians. The company did well for a while and regularly traveled to perform in Brazil and Uruguay. They even appeared in the

newspaper, though they were identified as Africans instead of Afro-Argentines and Afro-Brazilians. After Eugenia married, she gave up dance and noted that she also stopped hanging out with other blacks with whom she used to socialize at the famous Shimmy Club parties. She did, however, pass down her passion for the art form to her daughter Lupe.

Lupe's father was not a part of her life during her childhood and only recently has reestablished ties with her and Eugenia. As a single mother, Eugenia was in a constant fight to provide for her daughter. She saw Lupe's natural talent for dance early on and enrolled her in the country's most prestigious dance school in the Teatro Colón, but not without facing many obstacles. Eugenia explained that the heads of the school discriminated against Lupe for having a black mother. She pointed out that her daughter is not "that black," so they would not have treated her in such a manner had they not seen her mother. Lupe was only allowed to enter the school as a probationary student, though she was an excellent dancer and did everything with such elegance and ease that her instructors constantly chided her for showing off. Lupe was such a good dancer that she tried out for the play "Hansel and Gretel" and won a major role as one of the angels, though the people in charge of the auditions were unaware that she was only a probationary student and was, therefore, not supposed to be offered such roles. This was one of many racialized challenges that Eugenia faced with her daughter. She explained to Lupe that she just had to study more than the other students and always behave herself to avoid more discriminatory treatment.

Lupe studied alongside the famous Argentine ballet dancers Julio Boca and Maximiliano Guerra. All the while, Eugenia supported her daughter by working as a

model at three art schools, all located great distances from each other. Eugenia and Lupe spent thirty years living in and out of cheap motels and were thrown out onto the street without advance notice on several occasions. Their economic situation made it even more difficult for Lupe to continue her studies. As a teenager, she left dance to pursue other interests.

Eugenia is now retired and spends most of her days taking care of her fictive kin granddaughter Liliana, a six year old Argentine-born child of an African single mother. Liliana reminds her of her own daughter when she was young. Liliana is very intelligent, outgoing, and inquisitive, so much so that Eugenia and her husband sometimes have to speak “Geringoso,” a coded local slang so that she does not follow every word of their conversation. Like she did with her own child, Eugenia struggles daily to keep Liliana safe, healthy, and happy against the backdrop of a society that has done its best to make sure blacks constantly feel unwanted.

On Fathers

Many people admire their fathers as heroes and Dominique, an expressive, funny, light skinned Afro-Argentine, is no exception. He grew up in awe of his father, black Argentine activist Martin Escobar. Dominique’s parents were a beautiful couple that looked like they were pulled from the pages of a glossy Hollywood magazine. Martin’s skin is a dark chocolaty hue, which Dominique, pale in comparison, envied. Dominique’s mother is a very light skinned Argentine of Spanish and Italian descent. His parents separated when he was a young child.

Martin was abandoned by his mother as a baby and met her for the first time under odd circumstances as an adult. Martin attended a family funeral and inadvertently found out that his birth mother was there. Another family member

confronted Martin's mother and made her confess that he was her son whom she had abandoned. She was rather indifferent and only saw him a couple of times afterwards. Dominique never had the opportunity to know his grandmother.

At a family gathering, Dominique's twin dwarf aunts whom he characterized as "very gossipy" informed him that Martin's father was a man named "George." Dominique mentioned this to an uncle who got upset at the misinformation and confessed that Dominique's real grandfather is the famous Afro-Argentine actor Ray Charol, well-known for his roles in 1960s films. Dominique was familiar with Ray Charol from the movies but never knew that the man was his grandfather. After his uncle confessed, he quickly tried to retract the statement and regretted that he shared this deep dark family secret with his nephew. Dominique told his uncle that as a man in his forties, he is way too old to be affected by such a revelation.

Dominique knows a lot about Afro-Argentine history because his father instilled in him a very strong sense of black consciousness and through his own research. Outward expressions of this include practicing *capoeira*, becoming a reggae musician, and wearing his hair in dreads for almost two decades. He informed me that when he started wearing his hair in dreads, no one in Argentina was doing this. His decision on this hairstyle often brought him a lot of negative attention from the general public, but as the years passed and black cultural expressions became more popular, people started complimenting him on his look. Because Dominique is the lightest of his siblings (two brothers from different mothers who live abroad), his father would assure him that he is the "blackest on the inside." While hanging out with blacks in Ecuador, Dominique was told by a man from Esmeraldas, a city well known for its Afro-descended population,

that “on the inside, he [Dominique] is black.” Of course, this irked Dominique who feels that “negro *no es un color, es una raza*” (black is not a color, it is a race). Africans are also among those who want to negate Dominique’s blackness because he is a black South American. He angrily retorts that “he is black, but they sold his people and that’s why he was born in Argentina.” He told me “*No dejo de ser Africano, aunque soy Argentino* (I haven’t stopped being African though I’m Argentine).”

Martin taught his son to always greet every black person he sees on the street, making sure to look them in the eyes as a sign of respect. He noted with a great sense of frustration that the blacks he met from the Cape Verdean line never greet him back. In fact, they run away or ignore him, and in Dominique’s mind, make it very clear that they want nothing to do with other black people. They seem a far cry from the strong black people his father wanted him to emulate. Oddly, his father Martin was the only black person with whom Dominique had regular contact. At age eight, Martin took his son to the famous Shimmy Club party on Carnival eve and casually introduced him to several relatives in attendance, yet they never became a part of their lives. The family history of Dominique’s father is shrouded in mystery. He says Afro-Argentines take everything to the grave as if their own pasts are some sort of shameful secret.

Not all Afro-Argentine families are guarded about their black lineage. Bruno, an Afro-Argentine in his sixties, is from a family that is very open about discussing and sharing their family roots with others. I met him at a meeting of the African Diaspora Working Group, where I found out that he is a cousin of Berta, the leader of the Afro-Argentine organization Madre Africa. Josefina is his aunt, but he does not see her often since she lives in the city and he lives in the province. Bruno kindly invited me to meet

his extended family and celebrate New Year's Eve with them. I gladly joined them in his cousin Alma's home for their annual New Year's Eve *asado* dinner and New Year's Day lunch.

I spoke to him after a meeting and discovered that he works as a bartender at a pub in the most popular tourist district of the city. He knew that I did not have any family to spend the holidays with, so he invited me to join his in the holiday celebrations. Bruno thought it would be a great opportunity for me to learn more about Afro-Argentines by spending time with them in a family setting. I appreciated this rare chance to really get to know an Afro-Argentine family. Living and working in the city of Buenos Aires made it very difficult for me to interact with many Afro-Argentines from the colonial line as the overwhelming majority of them lives in the outskirts of the city.

The evening of New Year's Eve day, I took a bus from my residence to the subway station so that I could catch the train to meet Bruno. Traveling into the province often requires the use of multiple modes of transportation. This means a significant investment of time and money, but the higher paying jobs are located in the capital city. Bruno, like thousands of other working class individuals and the working poor, makes this sort of long trip several days a week to get to work. Bruno arrived with his daughter, age fourteen, his son, age twelve, and fourteen year old cousin. Bruno's children are light skinned and longed limbed with dark brown wavy hair and facial features similar to their father's. All of the children are of obvious African descent to the degree that they often get called "Brazilian" by other Argentines.

We all left the station around ten at night and walked a couple of blocks to a bus stop where a small group of people already was waiting. After standing there for about

half an hour, all of the people at the stop, us included, went to a different stop around the corner where we thought we had a better chance of catching a bus. The bus never came and slowly the other patrons started getting rides from friends they had called or the few private taxis that were roaming the area. The last few people stranded at the stop went as a group to the main bus terminal to pressure the operator into sending the bus out from there. We stayed behind, and Bruno called Alma's husband Giovanni, a *criollo* Argentine who works as a city bus driver. Giovanni arrived after what seemed like an eternity of waiting and carried us in his empty bus to the depot where we then took his car to his mother-in-law's home where the extended family eagerly awaited our arrival. We arrived just in time for the New Year's toast. The clear night sky, typical of the province, was sprinkled with stars and a fantastic fireworks display right over our heads courtesy of some neighbors a few blocks away. This provided a picturesque background to a warm New Year's Eve dinner of *asado*, sweet bread, and cider with family and friends.

After dinner, a few of the guests went over to the home of one of Alma's neighbors. They had a small party going with a DJ playing dance music. Bruno and Alma enthusiastically joined in the dancing. Eventually, the kids overcame their shyness and danced as well. Bruno's daughter inherited his love of dancing, and she gleefully shuffled and swayed to salsa with her dad while sporting an enormous smile the entire time. After a brief dance break, we walked a few blocks to Alma's house to spend the night.

The next morning was the day before New Year's Eve and a double celebration since it was also Giovanni's fifty-third birthday. More family joined the luncheon feast

celebration, including Alma and Giovanni's two daughters, both in their early twenties and pregnant, their partners, their son, his wife, and several of Giovanni's relatives. All three of Alma and Giovanni's children are not noticeably of African descent. They all joked about the lightness of the skin tone of the children in spite of Alma being a *negra*. Alma is light in complexion with dark brown coarse hair. She is well known and liked by her neighbors who commented on how she is the "famous *negra*" of her neighborhood. She told me that none of her neighbors are *negros*, but they all get along. The whole family was very warm and receptive towards me and my project and made jokes about what strange specimens I would find among them for my anthropological study.

Alma and Bruno have a long interesting history together. Bruno's birth mother died when he was just eight months old. Alma's mother Ofelia, who is also Bruno's aunt, raised him as her own child. Bruno's older brother was given to another family member to be raised. He did not see his brother again for fifty years. Alma and Bruno attended the famous Shimmy Club parties together when they were young. Alma's uncle even played in the band. Alma later told me that those parties were the only contact she ever had with other blacks because of her father's restrictions. They were raised in a working-class neighborhood of the capital city where a large community of Jews also resided. Alma's father would not even allow her to spend time with some of her own black family members because he felt they all had reputations for being "whores." Some of the women in Alma's family have been very candid about their pasts. These include histories that involve working as prostitutes. These along with other issues have caused definite rifts in their very large extended family. Alma said that blacks did not study back then, hence her father wanted to distinguish himself from

those individuals, so he cut off all communication with other blacks. In spite of this upbringing, Bruno has made an effort to know and interact with all of the factions in his family. He seems to move effortlessly between the different blocs and is well liked.

Bruno greatly values the relationships that he has with his family, especially his Afro-Argentine relatives. He seems very aware of the fact that his contact with them was limited while growing up, so he makes conscious efforts to ensure that his children have the opportunity to interact with these individuals. Bruno had a daughter who recently died at age thirty. He also has an older son in his thirties from a previous marriage that I had not yet met. He is separated from the mother of his youngest son and daughter. His younger children and their cousin who spends a great deal of time with them all strongly identify as Afro-Argentines, though none of them have mothers who are Afro-descendants.

Bruno is well respected and very loved in his family. As his guest, I enjoyed some access into their lives and private family celebration. Alma lives quite far from Bruno, which means he only gets to see her a few times a year at most. Bruno is a soft spoken man with a very mellow personality. I had never heard him discuss race in a direct manner, thus I was surprised when I overheard him and Ofelia debating if racism was a part of their life experiences. Ofelia claimed she never had any problems with racism while Bruno calmly started pointing out some subtleties of how it operates in their lives. He seemed all too aware of the role racism had played in his life when he talked to me as he walked me to the bus stop to return home. He told me how much he enjoyed the Shimmy Club parties because with just your last name, you could figure out how you were related to all of the other guests. The Shimmy Club meant strengthening family

bonds and finding out more about your own personal history as an Afro-Argentine. As a father, these were utmost priorities for Bruno.

One family holiday I celebrated for the first time in Argentina was Father's Day. William and his wife Nancy invited me, Elizabeth, who is from a Cuban mother and an Ugandan father, and her ten year old son over for dinner to celebrate. During the meal, the conversation ranged from music to food to, of course, fathers. William is a mentor and father figure to many; accordingly, he told us of how he had been offering advice to some young African men, including a new diplomat whose wife had just given birth. He stressed the importance of being honorable men and good fathers and offered up some sound advice for Elizabeth's son, whom he lauded for being an intelligent and well behaved child.

William is admired by his friends for many qualities; among those is his strong sense of social responsibility, which is reflected in his decision to become a diplomat for his native country of South Africa as well as his smaller everyday actions. I remember we would walk around the corner from his office, and he was always greeted by name by a paraplegic white Argentine man in a wheelchair that would ask for money and sell small trinkets on the plaza. William told me that he always gives the man ten pesos at the end of every month. He has a lot of respect for the handicapped man because he learned William's name, greets him in a friendly and respectful manner, and never asks him for anything since he knows he will get his money at the end of the month. William feels that, as middle class people in a society, we have the responsibility to take care of people who are born with disabilities. His family members do not agree with this perspective and feel that many charlatans on the street abuse the generosity of

strangers like him. William, who comes from very humble beginnings, has received a great deal of assistance through scholarships and other means; hence, he wants to give back to society.

At dinner, we made a toast to everyone's father and soon discovered the irony of the situation. None of the adults had grown up with a father. William and Nancy were raised by single mothers since their fathers died when they were young. William is the eldest of five children and had to help take care of his siblings. His wife played a similar role with her nine brothers and sisters. Elizabeth's parents died together in a car accident in Cuba when she was thirteen, and she had to help raise her siblings as well. I was adopted along with my sister at a young age and raised by a single mother. Neither William, Nancy, Elizabeth nor I grew up with fathers, yet we celebrated Father's Day together. We all ended up leading good, respectable lives, and William has become the ultimate father figure for those he meets. William and Nancy have an adult son and daughter in South Africa but are fulfilling a parental role for the younger generation of blacks in Argentina.

As I waited outside on the corner desperately hoping a taxi would pass, I discovered just how important of a holiday Father's Day is in Argentina. After a half hour of moving from block to block on streets that seemed almost devoid of cars, I was finally successful in flagging down a taxi. Taxi drivers in Argentina are almost exclusively male. My driver informed me that most of the drivers took Father's Day off to spend time with their families. This inconvenience for me only stressed the importance of the holiday in the nation.

Another man who treasures his role as a dad is Lucas (Fig. 7-2), an Afro-Brazilian in his late thirties. He arrived in Argentina in the mid-nineties to work as a professional dancer and now performs and teaches at various locations around the city, including a popular cultural center affiliated with one of the nation's most prestigious universities. He has a six year old daughter with a former partner and later met his current partner with whom he has a two year old son and a newborn daughter. On my previous field visit, his son Ariel was born. Lucas's daughter Milagros was born shortly after my arrival for my dissertation fieldwork. After I moved to my second residence, I was literally just a few blocks away from Lucas, thus I was eager to stop by and meet his new daughter.

When I arrived, Lucas had prepared a nice lunch for me and his family to enjoy. While we ate, he told me that he had a job opportunity in the province and another in Holland, but he will turn them down because they involve him being far away from his family. He takes every opportunity he can to spend time with his children, with whom he enjoys sharing his Afro-Brazilian culture. Lucas assured me that his children were really Brazilian, even if they were born in Argentina. His wife did not say anything out loud, but her face indicated that she did not necessarily hold the same opinion. The "I love Argentina" shirt on his oldest daughter and her distinctly *Porteña* accent seemed to challenge his statement. Lucas encourages his children to participate in black cultural expressions like Afro-Brazilian dance and *capoeira*. He is excitedly preparing a family trip to Brazil so that they can get to know the Brazilian side of their family.

Lucas is very affectionate towards all of his children, but his two-year-old boy Ariel is the apple of his eye and like his dad, has the soul of a dancer. "Watch this," Lucas

said to me, and he started to beatbox with his hands cupped over his mouth and his lips vibrating with every beat. Right on cue, Ariel dropped to the floor and started break dancing in fine two-year old fashion with all the seriousness and drive of a professional. After about a minute, Ariel stopped suddenly and said, "It's your turn daddy." Then, the boy cupped his hands over his mouth imitating his father and enthusiastically beatboxed his heart out with more spit leaving his tiny lips than beats. Meanwhile, Lucas was on the floor slowly break dancing moves that he knew his son could copy. His eyes locked with his son's, and they both smiled and giggled. In this moment, all you could feel was love.

The Dangers of Dating

Among my research consultants I saw several examples of healthy interracial relationships and couples that truly were happy. Unfortunately, it seemed I heard just as many stories of couples that were miserable and highly dysfunctional. Romantic relationships involve a certain amount of risk taking, but being black and trying to date in Argentina adds layers of complication. According to the accounts I was told, the majority of problems in romantic relationships stemmed from blacks dating non-black Argentines or Argentines of European descent. Race and cultural differences seemingly cause not only the demise of a relationship but can lead to the psychological breakdown of a healthy individual with a once strong sense of black consciousness.

Though most black males, foreign and Afro-Argentine, have non-black partners, black men frown upon black women dating non-black men. Monica, a first generation Afro-Argentine in her twenties, told me of how she is constantly made to feel uncomfortable by her non-black Argentine boyfriend's family. Once at a family dinner, her boyfriend's father commented how he likes his sausage "hot, like a *negra* dances."

Though Monica was offended by the statement, she did not say anything in response. He later went on to diminish the value of African cultures in general, knowing that her father is African. She said that it is hard for her boyfriend's parents to accept that he was dating a *negra*. His mother, in particular, stated that Monica does not share the same conservative values. The woman told the story of how she received an ironing board on her wedding and still proudly displays it. Monica, on the other hand, found the story quite bizarre and saw it as proof that they come from completely different worlds. Despite these issues, Monica and her boyfriend plan to wed in the near future.

Rudolfo, an Afro-Argentine male in his thirties, told me about how he used to frequent popular Brazilian themed clubs years ago in hopes of meeting single black women who were always in high attendance. As a man proud of his Afro-Argentine heritage, he was determined to find a black woman to date. All of his attempts were futile as the Afro-Brazilian women were not even interested in talking to him since he felt they assumed, as a black man, he had no money. He is, in fact, a very financially stable businessman. Rudolfo believes that all black women in Argentina marry whites "to save them from their blackness."

African men, in particular, have had a multitude of bad experiences dating non-black women. The classic *Porteña* or Argentine woman of Italian and Spanish descent, is seen as a consistent threat to solidarity in black communities and the advancement of black male success. My interviewees gave examples of the few stellar *Porteñas* they knew of that break the stereotype. These women were presented as the exception. Among the broad category of jealous women, both Argentines and foreigners alike agree that the *Porteña* is by far the worst and helps sustain sexism in Argentine society.

She is famous for her extreme jealousy towards black women and any other relationships that black men have with others, whether family, friends, or work related. The *Porteña* is seen as looking for a man to control, rather than a man to love. She inserts herself into black communities to unravel them and is rarely ever an ally. They have even been described as “hijacking” Africa and preventing its progress.

It is always seen as more of a risk for black men to find partners outside of black communities than it is for black women to do so. African men, in particular, have related some shocking stories regarding their romantic relationships with *Porteñas*. One individual explained that white Argentine women always follow African men around, even where they are not invited, like at men’s meetings to discuss politics. This is a great nuisance since the men have to interpret everything for their partner who does not speak the language. To avoid this situation, some African men simply just stop attending meetings. According to African males, this is part of how a white wife keeps her husband in “slavery.” She cannot organize herself independently like an African wife, so she always must have her African husband help her with even the most mundane tasks. Some African males make the distinction that Francophone Africans tend to be very deferent to whites. One man who lived in Francophone African nations said he observed the attitude of subservience blacks there have towards whites, so they just carry this attitude with them wherever they go. Overall, white Argentine women are seen as “unprogressive and backwards” women whose ultimate goal is to pull the African man away from his community.

Another African male participant pointed out that many African men in Argentina tend to marry white women from the middle class, even though they would not be able

to marry a black woman from that class level in their homeland. Africans must be careful when they put such men in leadership positions because you can never foretell what a white woman will do. When I questioned this man as to why he does not seek out an Afro-Latino partner, he had an interesting explanation. He feels that the mentality of American blacks, from the U.S. and Latin America, does not coincide with that of Africans. American blacks think they are superior to Africans and lack strong family values because they have been living in white society for more than 200 years. They go so far as to negatively influence African women with their women's liberation ideology. Afro-American women even refuse to wear African clothes and do not know how to maintain a household. Even illiterate Afro-American women can find a white middle class Argentine man to marry, even though they are uneducated and lack good family values. African men have higher standards for their partners and expect them to have more noble values.

When I asked Afro-Latina women why they do not choose partners of African descent, they explained that there simply were not enough eligible black men in Argentina. The majority of the Africans barely are surviving selling jewelry on the street, and the Afro-Latinos rarely have stable incomes. These women did not want to sacrifice their quality of life to be with a man they would have to support financially. One Afro-Argentine also gave the explanation that their community is so closely knit that it seems that everyone is a blood relative, so you have to get a partner who is white.

One of the most disheartening accounts I heard about an African male dating a *Porteña* was Richard's story about his friend Luther. I had only met Luther in person once, but my impression of him is that he is a very lonely man. He periodically would

send me abbreviated text messages and email greetings. Part of this had to do with his unfamiliarity with the technology. Richard is basically one of Luther's only friends, as Luther tends to isolate himself. Richard's account of his friend's life only confirmed my suspicions.

Luther has not had contact with his family in Central Africa for almost thirty years. Luther's father was a diplomat who arrived in Argentina with his family in the 1970s. They lived in a luxurious home in an upper-class neighborhood of the capital city. When his father's assignment ended, Luther was not prepared to leave because he wanted to spend more time with his white Argentine girlfriend. Luther decided to stay behind and married the *Porteña* he was dating. They have a son who is now in his late twenties. Unfortunately, Luther's wife and her family are very racist towards him and have raised their son in the same manner.

After Luther's son was born, Richard wanted to meet the baby. It took two years before Luther's wife would allow him to do so. When they were at Luther's mother-in-law's house, she was upset that she had to wake the baby to show him to Richard. When the baby started crying, the mother-in-law said it was because he was not used to seeing black people, implying that Richard's blackness had scared the child. Richard was outraged and left. He is still not comfortable visiting Luther in his home because as soon as his wife sees him, she calls all of her friends over to the house to stare at him like some sort of spectacle. They then bombard him with questions that have racist undertones.

Luther loves his family and misses them dearly, but they stopped writing and calling him years ago. Perhaps after more than two decades they just gave up hope

that they would ever be reunited. He is afraid to even try to reestablish contact with them. His son is very close to his mother and has a lot of resentment towards his father, who is his primary source of income. Richard told me the son owns a \$15,000 motorcycle, a new computer, and lives rent free in his parents' home without making any sort of financial contribution to the household. Luther's wife is a teacher, but unlike the vast majority of teachers, have no second form of employment. This is very rare because even university professors have to have additional employment to stay afloat financially. She basically lives off of him and manages all of his earnings. This allows her to easily manipulate him financially so that he could never leave the country. Luther is in a state of constant depression because of the sad situation that is his life. Richard said that if Luther ever goes to Europe or Africa where he has family, he will never return to Argentina. The only thing keeping him in the country is his fear of confronting the past and all the changes ushered in with the present.

La Familia Es Complicada (Family Is Complicated)

Some family relationships have layers of complexity that only are enhanced by the issues of race, identity, and diaspora. Sometimes the children of what scholars have referred to as "mixed race" families, or families in which the parents are of different racial classifications, have their own web of complications stemming from internal and external pressures that result from these unions. In the U.S., the focus mainly has been on the children that result from the unions of blacks and whites. In Argentina, it is common to see these relationships between Africans or Afro-descendants and Argentines of primarily European descent. While it is tempting to draw parallels between the U.S. examples and Argentine cases, very different histories of nation building, differing systems of racial classification, and differences in current racial

politics serve as evidence of unique phenomena. These issues combined can result in individuals of African descent who enter adulthood with major insecurities about their own identities and place in the nation of Argentina. The children of the Themba family are a compelling example of this reality. Their father Phillip Themba was a South African activist who came to Argentina as an exile in the 1970s. He had four sons from his first wife before leaving the country. The oldest child in Argentina, Nigela, moved to South Africa after visiting her father's family there shortly after his death. She now has a Zulu boyfriend and lives with his family. There are four other children in the family, and they reside in the city of Buenos Aires. I had a chance to interview three of them individually: Ricardo, Salvador, and Esperanza.

Ricardo Themba is in his early thirties and is pursuing a career as a professional musician. In his early twenties, he was part of an all-male band of musicians popular in the region for a few years. He works in a rented studio space and helps other artists produce their projects in addition to performing his own music. When I visited his studio, he was attentively and patiently working with a young Ghanaian street vendor who wanted to begin a career in rap. Music has been a powerful outlet for creative expression and a safe place for Ricardo to express his identity as a first generation Afro-Argentine. When Ricardo is not preoccupied with his budding career, he intermittently has been involved with the African Diaspora Working Group. Some of the African leaders have critiqued him for not doing enough for the black cause and being too concerned for his own wellbeing. Ricardo's father's legacy has left an imprint on him, and issues of racial identity are never far from his mind.

Salvador is in his mid-thirties and works as a business lawyer in downtown Buenos Aires. I first met him at William's house when he came to drop off some items for William to take to his sister in South Africa. Salvador traveled to the country a year ago as the Chief Operational Officer of an Argentine company that exclusively does business with South Africa. William had encouraged him to do business there, so they were looking at some clothing samples to be sold abroad. Salvador invited me to come by his office to interview him. I went to his workplace downtown, which is the newest, most exclusive upper-class neighborhood on the waterfront. We spoke in his private office with a large window in a glossy high-rise building overlooking the Rio de la Plata.

I explained my project to Salvador, and he began talking about his childhood experiences and family relationships. He said his mother Leyla's family did not approve of her marrying a black man, but she did not consider his skin color an issue. She treated her husband like any other person, but she seemed to be in deep denial of the racism that her husband faced as a result of being black and living in Argentina. She also denied that her children faced similar problems as well, perhaps in an effort to protect them. Salvador's father Phillip also avoided discussing race in any form with his family, most likely because of his situation as a South African political exile. As a result, Salvador feels that he and all of the Themba children desperately are trying to find themselves as first-generation Afro-Argentines in a very racist society that refuses to acknowledge their belonging.

Salvador had more problems with racism attending private schools than he did in public ones. While the classroom had its troubles, it was back at home in his neighborhood where he felt the most discrimination. The neighbors constantly would

accuse him and his siblings, the *negro* children, of misbehaving while the other children were not singled out in this way though they behaved in the same manner. In spite of the constant negative experiences, Salvador and his siblings never shared these concerns with their parents because they felt so disturbed and ashamed by the racism directed at them. Instead, they chose to suffer silently. Salvador noted that, in Argentina, he is alone as a black person. He grew up in a society where he was taught to avoid other black people and feel ashamed of being black and his African heritage. He said dominant Argentine society has managed to “freeze the hearts and souls” of blacks so that they cannot share their sorrow, pain, or happiness with each other. This has caused him to feel an ongoing sense of loneliness in his life, in spite of having a loving wife, daughter, and friends. Interestingly, he did not categorize Argentines as racist since he was able to become a lawyer and get a good job.

Esperanza is the youngest of the Themba children and in her late twenties. She once worked in an administrative position in a neighborhood downtown, but she now solely focuses on her studies at one of the nation’s most prestigious universities. Esperanza always has expressed a great curiosity about the African side of her family and her academic interests reflect this. Her thesis project for her bachelor’s in communication involved interviewing three African families, including her own, and following the discourses they created about themselves through family albums. As a part of her research project, she has studied Afro-Argentine history as well. Among her interviewees was Paul, a Nigerian who is the president of the Nigerian Organization of Argentina. In my interview with him, he revealed that he lectured Esperanza on African traditions because her father never did. He informed her that, as the last-born, she

inherits everything and must call her father's first wife "mother" as well, which upset Esperanza. She blames her mother as the reason she does not know her African roots and the fact that she still lives with her only escalates their contentious relationship.

Further complicating Esperanza's relationship with her mother is her father Phillip's decision to move back to South Africa many years ago. It was a devastating blow to all of his children. His motivations for doing so were never explicit, but the Africans that knew him blamed his Argentine wife for driving him away from his children. They also recognize his sense of loneliness and need to be with his fellow South Africans. Upon return to South Africa, he married a South African woman, though he was still legally married to Leila. A few years later, he died in his homeland. Even more disruptive than Phillip's decision to move back to his country was the void his death left. My African research consultants affirmed that the polygamy system is good until the male dies. The children were left with many unanswered questions about their father and themselves after his passing. They felt more alone and confused than ever. The children and their mother went to South Africa to visit Phillip's grave, but Phillip's African wife would not allow Esperanza to visit the site because she still had so much contempt for her father. Leila decided not to go to the gravesite either.

Shortly after the economic crisis of 2001, Esperanza spent almost two years traveling in search of employment opportunities internationally. Because she speaks Spanish, English, and Italian, she was able to live and work in Madrid, Barcelona, Rome, and Naples. At the end of her European tour, she went to South Africa to visit her sister and stayed briefly to work for a few weeks. In South Africa, she, her mother, and her siblings reunited and were welcomed with open arms by her father's African

wife. With her opportunities limited abroad due to the large influx of Argentine immigrants, Esperanza finally returned to Argentina to finish her degree. She told me that she does not desire to live in any other country because she does not want to fight to survive and work all over again in a new setting. She recognizes Argentines as being very racist and feels that she has to fight harder for respect in Argentina than elsewhere.

I had the opportunity to observe Themba family dynamics firsthand when William, Nancy, another South African couple, and I went to the Themba home for a family *asado* one evening. All of the Themba children were there with their partners and helping their mother prepare the food for serving on the back patio. The oldest son Juan lives in his mother's home with his girlfriend and their two-year old son. He was upstairs playing DJ. Ricardo happily manned the grill while tapping his feet to the beats of soul, Motown, and other classic African-American music that was playing on the stereo in the background. Esperanza decorated the cheesecake she had made with her boyfriend. Salvador and his wife made sure the guests all had drinks and were comfortable. William, in typical fashion, gladly entertained everyone with pre-dinner stories about how to survive a lion attack and what to do when confronted by other jungle animals. He obviously was excited to be going home for the Christmas holiday to visit his family and friends. The night was perfect for an *asado*, as there was a bit of a cool breeze to refresh us. We started eating a casual dinner, and by all appearances, it was going to be a nice laidback evening.

There were several simultaneous conversations during dinner, and at one point, Leila Themba asked me what I study. I told her "black identity" to give a short, easy

answer. Leila, who has a degree in theology, said black identity does not exist since identity cannot be of one race or another. I was ready to move the conversation to another topic when Esperanza interjected and began to calmly debate the subject with her mother. This upset Leila, and she defensively told her daughter to stop “talking down to her like she is a common street person since she has a college degree.” Leila then walked away angrily. Ricardo, who witnessed the whole confrontation, verbally attacked his sister for what he felt was a lack of respect towards their mother.

Just when I thought the family drama had ended for the evening, we were all hanging out in the small foyer of the house when the Themba siblings engaged in an argument over the expenses for the dinner. William always generously donates money for the *asados* to Ricardo since he recognizes he is a struggling artist. During the argument, Ricardo made a rude comment towards Esperanza, and she got so upset she went to the bathroom to cry. At one point, Esperanza mentioned that the whole conflict really started earlier in the evening over the discussion of identity. Her boyfriend Raul then started to argue with Ricardo, which only provoked Ricardo to harshly chastise him for getting involved in family affairs. After Raul left to comfort his girlfriend, Ricardo proceeded to mock him in front of everyone as his family and other guests reluctantly laughed. During the height of the drama, Leila pleaded with her children to please not fight in front of the guests, signaling in my direction. Ricardo then half jokingly told her not to worry since I would be recording everything for posterity. The other two brothers and Leila chimed in, noting that Ricardo and Esperanza have been fighting in this manner since they were children, so they would resolve their issues on their own.

William and his wife Nancy, who did not witness either of the arguments, later told me that according to African customs, Esperanza always must agree with her mother out of respect. They were pleased to hear that Ricardo defended this tradition even though he most likely agreed with his sister. William and Nancy were not surprised at all by the latest Themba family battle. Because of their close relationship with the family, they had been present for other heated family discussions. During one of these incidents, Salvador stated that he was Argentine and not African, but his brother identified as South African. William affirmed that the Themba children are in fact African and debated the issue with Leila until she literally broke down crying saying that her children are not part of a diaspora because they have a homeland. What at first seemed to be some explosive disagreements that came out of nowhere were really the resurfacing of some deep seeded issues that are part of an ongoing family battle related to ancestry, race, and identity.

The Thembas prove to be an interesting case in the different ways first generation Afro-Argentine siblings can identify. Salvador seems to very strongly identify as Argentine though I sense he has some ambivalence about his place in Argentine society. Esperanza identifies as Argentine but also feels a strong connection to Africa. Her brother Ricardo feels very much like an African and has used his music to express that aspect of his identity. They all feel that their father has left an indelible imprint on their lives though he never explicitly taught them about his culture.

Can You Relate?

My research consultants have established profound roots in Argentina. They have deep ties to the nation even when it is not their homeland. These bonds are strengthened through their Argentine children. When these children are the product of

an interracial or mixed union, challenges arise in helping them create a strong self-image and pride in their diverse heritage. All of the individuals mentioned in this chapter, with the exception of William and Nancy, have partners that are identified by my interviewees as white Argentines or Argentines of European descent. While some research participants seem to have successfully instilled in their children a sense of pride in identifying as Afro-descendants, other parents and children are more ambivalent towards that subjectivity. As an individual who self-identifies as *metisse* or of mixed descent, Ifekwunigwe notes that diaspora can have “layered, textured, and contradictory meanings” for those who are the product of interracial unions (Ifekwunigwe 1999).

Interracial relationships, whether between partners, family members, or friends, can have their own layers of complications. Though many of these relationships have been successful, cultural differences often can be a source of conflict in themselves. Local racial politics inevitably play a role in how individuals interact with each other and view other racially marked people. As Fernandez states, “[c]ultural interpretations of the structural changes and shortcomings play out in interpersonal relations through commonsense ideologies of race” (1996:103). This is reflected in Argentina where the suppression of race in a highly racialized society combined with a volatile economic climate facilitates external pressures causing tension in the private realm.



Figure 7-1. Josefina (right) with the researcher



Figure 7-2. Lucas and son

CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION/EPILOGUE: THE FUTURE OF BLACKS IN BUENOS AIRES

Understanding black identities in modern day Argentina required me to address a series of research objectives and questions. In this project I identified the blocs of Africans and Afro-descendants that reside in Argentina and the roles they play in the revitalization of black identity. I also delineated Argentine racial categories and analyzed the significance of race in Argentina where it has been denied since the end of the colonial era. During that time there was a contrived ideological and physical erasure of Afro-descendants as a component of a larger project to create an Argentine people. As a part of this, I recognize that color, class, and ancestry play a vital role in defining racial categories. Finally I related the everyday experiences of Africans and Afro-descendants living in Buenos Aires.

I seek to understand the politics of racial identity in Argentina primarily through the exploration of inter-ethnic relations among Africans and Afro-descendants. I observed what appears to be a hierarchy among the different black ethnic blocs, which was created by these individuals. Africans usually appeared at the very top do to their high visibility, entrepreneurship, and higher paying jobs. In contrast Afro-Argentines were placed at the bottom because of their low visibility, limited amount of formal education, and overrepresentation among the nation's poorest residents. In reality, these blocs have quite a bit in common in spite of their perceived sizeable, or as Bhaba would describe them, incommensurable differences (1994). These conflicting ideologies about racial identity can serve to perpetuate the myth of Argentina as a country devoid of racism and to promote the national whitening project begun in the early 1900s.

Interpreting Blackness in Buenos Aires

To fully comprehend how black identity is being constructed in present day Argentina, we must understand the positionality of Argentina's Afro-descendants. Not all Argentines of African descent identify in this manner. According to the results of the 2005 test census sponsored by the World Bank, less than four percent consider themselves Afro-descendants (Stubbs and Reyes 2006). My research consultants include members of a small contingent that only has recently begun to identify strongly as Afro-descendants. The overwhelming majority of the members of these ethnic blocs have chosen to identify in other ways. This invariably poses a great challenge for the Africans and Afro-descendants in Argentina who are trying to construct a unified political movement around black identity. To better understand the varied ways in which these converging and diverging diasporic identities are relating to blackness, I have framed my analysis in the concepts of neoliberal multiculturalism (Hale 2006), incommensurable exchange (Bhaba 1994), and the hyperconsciousness of race (Vargas 2004). By framing my study with concepts from the works of Hale, Bhaba, and Vargas, we can better understand how inter-ethnic relations between groups that share some common history leads to varied ways of identifying.

Neoliberal multiculturalism combined with racial ambivalence form the crux of Hale's interpretation of inter-ethnic relations among the groups that make up Guatemala's population, which despite sharing some common ancestry, have developed very different ways of identifying. Because of political pressures from minority groups, the state creates the façade of incorporating racial others. All the while, neoliberal multiculturalism allows for the maintenance of structural inequalities by creating a safe buffer around the status quo. When working in tandem with racial

ambivalence, it creates even greater fissures among groups. Hale understands racial ambivalence "not as individual predicament, but as collective political sensibility and structured social condition" (2006:19). This requires a sort of strategic positioning in relation to the racial politics dictated by dominant society. In the case of Argentina, the repercussions of such a positioning remain to be seen. As the Argentine state seemingly incorporates blacks through acts like inclusion in censuses and subsidized housing, these same policies simultaneously help maintain the marginalization of these ethnic blocs.

Among the groups of Africans and Afro-descendants in Argentina, there exists what Bhaba calls an incommensurable exchange (Bhaba 1994) in ideas about belonging in the nation, racial categories, and the meanings that constitute blackness. Many Afro-Argentines from the colonial line consider themselves as fully belonging to Argentine society, in spite of racialized experiences of discrimination and the acknowledgement that they have been silenced in the hegemonic accounts of Argentine history. Within this group are individuals who because of class, phenotype, socialization, or even place of residence do not identify as Afro-descendants. Their criteria for racial categories like "black" are very different from those of other blocs like Africans or other Afro-Latin Americans. This difference is the product of varied political histories, patterns of immigration, and relationships that each contingent has with its home country. Conceptually, blackness can possess a multitude of meanings. While mobilization around black identity has been established across Latin America and the Caribbean and Africa, similar activities are in their very nascent stages in Argentina.

These factors combine to create a complex situation of ideological exchange among Africans and Afro-descendants in Argentina.

The hyperconsciousness of race with the accompanying negation of its importance help shape race relations in Latin America's so called racial democracies. While Vargas's research is on Brazil, the most well known racial democracy, the concept has provocative implications for Argentine race relations. As Vargas highlights, the surface level negation of the relevance of race in social relations is, in fact, a reflection of race's pervasiveness in all realms of life (Vargas 2004). Argentine racial mythology takes the concept of racial democracy one step further, holding that Argentines are solely descended from Europeans, thus racism cannot exist in such a homogeneous group. When racial others like Africans and Afro-descendants provide evidence that contradicts this myth, their claims are framed as isolated incidents. In reality, Argentine history is deeply entangled in racial politics ranging from the whitening initiatives created during the consolidation of the nation in the early 1900s to the harboring of Nazi sympathizers after the Second World War. There is a hyperconsciousness of race among all Argentines, which leads to the hyper-visibility of Africans and Afro-descendants in the country. But the silencing power of the national myth has helped maintain the invisibility of blacks in the nation.

Update on Recent Developments

During my last visit to the city of Buenos Aires in early October of 2009, I had the opportunity to present my dissertation fieldwork research at a regional anthropology conference with Ivan, an Argentine anthropologist who is an activist and ally to local blacks, conduct some follow up interviews with research consultants, and to finally visit Barrio Perón, a neighborhood in the province of Buenos Aires well known for having a

high concentration of colonial Afro-Argentines. An Afro-Argentine consultant, Angelica, grew up there, and the majority of her family still resides in that area. She invited me to travel with her there to attend a birthday celebration for her mother and her mother's twin sister.

I was staying at the apartment of a close friend, Carolina, whose home is only a few blocks from Angelica's place. I walked over to meet Angelica and her youngest daughter Sara at her home, and we all walked together to a nearby bus stop to catch the bus downtown near the bus depot. From downtown, we were picked up by a minivan with Claudia, the Afro-Argentine scholar of Cape Verdean descent, accompanied by an international group of young college students interested in Afro-Argentine culture. We had about fifteen people in our group. and among the students was a white female Argentine photographer and Susana, a white Argentine who is also a member of the African Diaspora Working Group.

It took a little over an hour to reach Barrio Perón, and we drove straight to the schoolhouse, which was the site where the event was being held. Using public transportation, it takes two buses and more than two hours to arrive in Barrio Perón from the city center. Angelica's cousin, Berta, decided to host the event there because that was the only space that had a large enough room to accommodate all of the guests, and it has a large grill in the back, which is essential for preparing the traditional Argentine *asado*. The location also made the party accessible to the whole neighborhood, and about twenty neighbors came by near the end of the celebration. The school was a very simple concrete structure fairly rundown and needing major maintenance. Many of the residents in that section of the neighborhood were working

class and working poor, so the majority of the buildings in the area were in the same condition.

As guests, we were strongly discouraged from leaving the schoolhouse. I remember at one point I wanted to walk to a nearby convenience store to make a photocopy, and the residents convinced me to wait until I returned to the capital city. My darker skin color made me stand out as a foreigner, and they were concerned that I would be robbed even in daylight. The neighborhood appeared relatively peaceful, but I heeded the advice given. I was intrigued by what I initially observed about the neighborhood, so I asked Sara more about it. She confirmed some of my suspicions. Barrio Perón has various zones, and shantytown zones are mixed in with middle class areas without the usual geographical or infrastructure separations like ravines or railroad tracks. The poorest of its residents literally live down the block from their much wealthier neighbors. I observed several middle class homes with fenced in yards, satellite dishes in their yards, and later model foreign vehicles parked in their driveways.

I was pleasantly surprised that among the guests at the party were Bruno and his young son and daughter as well as his thirty-year-old son with his wife and their three-year-old boy. He is Berta's cousin but lives quite far from her, so it was nice to see him there and have the opportunity to catch up. After we had eaten, Berta made a small speech thanking everyone for coming and apologizing for forgetting some items like silverware and plates. She blamed her lack of organization on her reaching her sixties. She then passed out folders to all of the students in attendance. The folder contained some of her life history in it, a few copies of newspaper articles written about her and her organization Madre Africa, and some other documents she had produced about her

organization. The number of folders exceeded the number of students, so I asked Berta if I could have a copy, but she refused to give me one for unknown reasons. Perhaps Berta did not feel that I needed a folder because I could afford to make my own copies. On the ride home, I looked at Susana's folder and noticed all of the information it contained was accessible online. During Berta's speech, she also mentioned that she did not know how much longer she would be involved with Madre Africa. Bruno's daughter also referred to herself as the future president of the organization a few times, but I took this more as a joke since she is only sixteen. Both of these assertions would become more significant in the months to come.

Shortly after the cake was served, Claudia got up to make a short speech, which included a comment about how we are all "*Afro*" in spite of skin color and suffering in the same way. I found this odd since she grew up middle class and has enjoyed a very comfortable life that includes university studies and traveling internationally to represent blacks in Argentina. The guests there were from the shantytown sections of the neighborhood and most likely could not relate to Claudia's life experiences, in spite of being of mixed descent that could include African ancestry. While we enjoyed the festivities, all the students from the bus were busy filming and photographing the event in an unintentionally invasive manner. At one point, Susana started taking a photo of Bruno, and he calmly told her that he did not want her to photograph him. I took several photos with him and his family, but we already had established a relationship whereas he and Susana had only seen each other casually in meetings. Near the end of the party, the family's musical group, in which Angelica and Berta perform, played Argentine *candombe* and salsa as we all danced and socialized for a few more hours. We said

our goodbyes and left to go back to the capital at sunset. Angelica stayed behind to spend more time with her mother since it was Mother's Day. Sara returned to the capital city with us so that she could meet up with her boyfriend. The trip to Barrio Perón would foreshadow other major changes within Argentina's black communities.

When we arrived back in the city of Buenos Aires, I accompanied Susana to her neighborhood where my former hosts Francisca and Teodoro also live. She explained to me the dynamics of the relationship between the main Argentine anthropologists that research Afro-Argentines. Susana is in the second year of a doctoral program in anthropology and researching *candombe* and Afro-descendants in the Rio de la Plata region. She noted a lot of competition and tension between her adviser, a well known anthropologist who researches African based religious practices in Argentina, and an anthropologist who works closely with Pedro's *candombe* group. Each is very possessive of the people they work with and the information they obtain, so they do not readily share their research with others. I thought this was really unfortunate and suggested that we collaboratively find a way to serve as bridges between the fractioned family members and the researchers that work with them.

In September of 2009, I received an email from Isaac's organization announcing their involvement in an important historic accomplishment for Argentina's black communities. According to the press release attached to the email, the association successfully petitioned the Argentine Census Bureau to include a question about Afro-descendants in the 2010 census (Seghezso 2009). The statement specifically mentions that the bureau agreed to include a question that allows for them to account for the population of Afro-descendants in the country. A sample form including the question

was the final part of the press release. Question number six reads, “Do you or someone in your household have an ancestor that is of African origin or an Afro-descendant (mother, father, grandparents, or great grandparents)?” If this question is included, it could be a step towards recognizing blacks, but the data gathered from it also could be used as evidence to substantiate the claim that these populations are insignificant in the nation. Ultimately, this could set back the efforts that different individuals and organizations have made toward the recognition of blacks in Argentina.

There are additional problems with the latest attempt at inclusion in the national census. No Afro-Argentines from the colonial line are members of Isaac’s association, nor were they a part of this effort. Isaac and many members of his group hold very negative stereotypes of this bloc of Afro-Argentines. These include viewing them as not being interested in identifying as black and creating internal problems that are counter productive to the formation of a cohesive black Movement in Argentina. In spite of any differences that might exist between the different ethnic blocs, colonial Afro-Argentines should be an essential part of the census process. Their participation is pivotal to its success, especially considering how difficult colonial Afro-Argentine families are to locate and access. Gaining entry to these communities was a major problem during the pilot census sponsored by the World Bank. That project, which included the involvement of colonial Afro-Argentines, is noticeably absent from the press release, even though it is very relevant to the latest developments. A successful census of Argentina’s black populations must take into account all efforts to document these blocs.

Changing of the Guard

In January of 2009, Bruno texted me saying that his cousin Berta had stepped down as leader, and he was the new president of her organization Madre Africa. I had spent New Year's with him and his family during my fieldwork, so it was not unusual that they send their holiday greetings. I was quite surprised by this news since I did not anticipate major changes happening that quickly. Berta's uncooperativeness, bitter disposition, and unwillingness to accept help hindered her ability to be a good leader. Creating more challenges is the fact that, like many Afro-Argentines from the colonial line, she is barely literate. This makes it even more difficult for her to communicate with others, whether through the logistics of organizing an event or disseminating information to other black organizations.

Bruno's personality contrasts greatly with that of Berta. He appears to be the much needed change that the other black associations have been awaiting. He seems to maneuver easily between at least three factions of his large family. He is very personable, diplomatic, mild mannered, and charismatic. Additionally, he is willing and ready to work with others. Bruno lives in the province but works in Capital Federal. He is willing to travel, which is essential since Afro-Argentines are scattered throughout the province of Buenos Aires. Berta's health problems sometimes interfered with her ability to travel and other daily activities. Bruno has a history of actively participating in the African Diaspora Working Group's activities as well as those of Madre Africa. He can serve as a true bridge between the Afro-Argentine bloc and the Pan African organization. Finally, he makes an effort to educate his children about their Afro-Argentine roots and give them many opportunities to interact with their black family members. This has been quite effective as his daughter sincerely is interested in taking

a leadership role in the organization. With a successor in training, he already has invested in the future and longevity of the organization.

Only days after I received the news from Bruno, Ivan notified me that Claudia was no longer in a leadership role in the African Diaspora Working Group. William, days before he left Argentina permanently, held a private meeting with key members of the organization, including Berta and Claudia. He harshly critiqued Claudia, one of his good friends, for being idle and stifling the activist momentum for so many years and urged the younger members to replace her immediately in the executive board. There was a subsequent meeting with more members, and they debated the direction the organization should move, and the majority voted for a change in leadership. Claudia did not leave the organization completely, but she was removed from a position of power and now plays a more nominal role. Ignacio was chosen to replace Claudia and provided his own unfavorable critique of her leadership history before assuming his new position.

Ivan was only present at the second meeting since William strategically did not invite him to attend the first one. Perhaps he felt the presence of anyone who was not African or an Afro-descendant would inhibit the black board members from truly speaking their minds. Ivan feels William's decision to make this dramatic intervention before leaving was the action of a true activist. Most diplomats would have just left without thinking about the future. Ivan said Bruno was present at the second meeting when the group reorganized its structure. He noted Bruno had an active and constructive voice. Perhaps his participation in these debates led to him assuming leadership of Madre Africa.

I perceive the general sentiment is that Claudia and Berta still should be involved in the organizations and their activities. They have been instrumental in gaining visibility for blacks in Argentina nationally and abroad. Claudia is especially important because of her long history of involvement. She has been participating since Escobar was active and is very much needed. The members of the black ethnic blocs can respect Claudia as the leader of the Cape Verdeans, but they were not happy with her being the mouthpiece for Afro-Argentines or any other bloc. Part of this stems from the fact that she is not descended from the colonial line. She also has been critiqued for having a conflictive personality, not being willing to accept help from others and being permanently set in her ineffective ways. Claudia has devoted much of her life to studying the local and global history of blacks and representing Africans and Afro-descendants in Argentina though many feel that these activities do not constitute activism. Her peers noted that when she appears in dominant society, she is accommodating and docile compared to the militant posture she assumes when around other blacks. This is extremely problematic as she is by far one of the most visible blacks with a high level of formal education and an international network that includes influential people. Her unwillingness or inability to use these resources to improve the lives of all blacks in Argentina was a major point of contention among local black communities.

Now, there are two Afro-Argentine males from the colonial line leading two very visible organizations. The fact that both of these new leaders are male probably will assist them in connecting with the Africans who are politically active since they have been reluctant to collaborate with larger projects because of the lack of male

involvement and leadership on the part of Afro-Argentines. Afro-Argentines are known for being very insular, so the fear is that they might use these positions of power to isolate those who are not Afro-Argentine or even Afro-Argentine from the colonial line, thus further fractioning activist efforts. In spite of these doubts, there is a great sense of optimism that was ushered in with the reorganization of the leadership. With these new developments, the future is sure to be full of changes. What types of changes still remain to be seen.

Implications for Future Research

This research project is only the beginning of a much larger intellectual endeavor in which I attempt to situate Africans and Afro-descendants in the racial landscape of Argentina. With this in mind, there are several directions I could pursue in future research. First, I would like to explore more on the subject of identity formation in the context of socialization. I particularly am interested in the younger generations of Afro-Argentines who are a part of mixed race families. The intimate relationships among family members often can contradict public discourses of color-blindness and racial acceptance (Burdick 1998; Fernandez 1996; Twine 1998). Many of the tensions that exist inside of these families are reflective of larger conflicts that Africans and Afro-descendants have with dominant Argentine society.

I also am interested in writing a more depth ethnography of Afro-Argentines from the colonial line to better understand their everyday lives. To do this effectively, I need to live in the neighborhoods where they reside, which are located just outside of the city limits of Buenos Aires. These areas are more difficult to access, but I now have research contacts who live in these areas or have family members that live there. Life in the province of Buenos Aires is very different from life in the city. The people who are

natives of the provinces are quick to make this distinction, even noting a different pace of life and value system than *Porteños*. As a part of this work, I would like to spend some time residing in Barrio Perón. This would help me gather a more complete history of the neighborhood from those who experienced its establishment and development firsthand.

The relationship between race and class in Argentina merits further inquiry. Race has been operating subversively in Argentina through government sanctioned policies and practices. While Argentine society at large is reluctant to openly discuss racial discrimination as an issue, these debates historically have surfaced through the Peronista political party. *Peronismo* is at the crux of understanding race relations and racial ideologies in Argentina, yet very little has been written on this political orientation in terms of race. Guano is among the few scholars who briefly touches on the subject of race and *Peronismo*, but this is not the focus of her research (Guano 2003). She only recognizes the racial categories of European, white, mestizo, and *negro* without really problematizing how different individuals are incorporated into these categories. Specifically, no distinctions are made between class and race based definitions of *negro*. Finally, European and white are used as if they were synonyms in Argentina.

The stories my consultants have told me cause me to suspect that race also played some role in how people were pursued during Argentina's *Proceso Militar* or military dictatorship. I would like to research more on how Afro-Argentines were affected during this time. Research is still very limited on the dictatorship in the nation. It was an incredibly oppressive moment in very recent history. Many scholars will not even discuss, let alone research, the issue for fear of persecution.

The final realm for future investigation is in social and political organization among Africans and Afro-descendants. Many Afro-Argentines, both from the colonial line and first generation, have projects underway to record their family histories. Efforts on the part of the different organized black ethnic blocs combined with dominant Argentine society's growing interest with black cultures indubitably has served as an impetus for these individuals to create organized records for themselves and to share with outsiders. Additionally, there are two Argentine scholars working with different, feuding camps of a well-known Afro-Argentine family. I am working with a separate individual who moves between the camps. Ideally, we would be able to combine our research efforts to create a more complete picture of this family and a better understanding of their communities. In spite of their infighting, some of them already have expressed to me that they are interested in knowing their complete history, though unwilling to communicate with each other directly to obtain it.

There are ongoing changes occurring among the politically active black organizations in Buenos Aires. They are engaging more with public figures on issues of racial discrimination in Argentina. There is a definite need to chronicle these developments as they happen. I maintain regular contact with my research consultants so that I can keep abreast of their activities. The reorganization of these groups undoubtedly will have its repercussions. Blacks consistently have their eye on regional racial politics as well as current U.S. race relations.

While there might not be one cohesive black community in Argentina, the effort to create one, or at the very least a strong network of individuals and resources, is already underway. I think communities I worked with could benefit greatly from reading a

summary of my project. They could use it to gather a more complete picture of Argentina's racial climate and where they are situated within it as well as a better understanding of inter-ethnic relations in the country. Additionally, state agencies, both foreign and Argentine, also could gain a lot of insight into the dynamics between the different blocs of Africans and Afro-descendants to better understand how to serve them.



Figure 8-1. Madre Africa party in Barrio Perón

APPENDIX A
TIMELINE OF SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL EVENTS IN ARGENTINA
FOR AFRICANS AND AFRO-DESCENDANTS

Table A-1. Timeline.

Year	Formal	Informal
c.1530	First Africans arrive via slave trade in Argentina	
1630		black slave, Manuel carries Virgen de Lujan (patron saint of Argentina) statue to Iglesia de Lujan
1664	First time blacks (slaves) counted in census	
1824		Afro-Argentine soldier Falucho dies in battle
1852	Ley Avellanada (immigration)	Law marks beginning of whitening agenda in Argentina
1852- c.1900		black Argentine Press
1853	Abolition of Slavery in Argentina	
1862		Founding of Capilla de los Negros in Chascamus
1865- 1870	War with Paraguay	Afro-Argentines put on front lines, most black soldiers die
1871		Yellow Fever Epidemic—Afro-Argentines forced to remain in quarantined areas, large percentage of population dies
1882- 1978		Shimmy Club (Afro-Argentine social organization that united yearly on night of Carnival with a large Candombe party)
1887		Beginning of Afro-descendants being excluded from Argentine census
1976- 1983	Military rule, heavy censorship	
1995	Creation of Insituto Nacional contra Discriminacion, , Xenofobia y Racismo (by Minister of the Interior)	
1996		Afro-Brazilian Elías Farías beaten to death by group of white Argentines after Nigeria defeats Argentina in soccer
		Jose Delfín Acosta Martinez beaten to death by white Argentine police (Afro-Uruguyan, black activist)

Table A-1. Continued.

1997	Brother of Acosta Martinez formally files case with UN Commission on Human Rights	
2000		Mirasse, South African diplomat from the World Bank, wrongfully detained (and deported) in Ezeiza Intl. Airport
2001	Argentina agrees to accept refugees from outside of the continent	
	Argentine Economic crisis	Large percentage of the Afro-Brazilian cultural worker population migrates out of the country
2002		Film: Afroargentinos
		"Pocha" Lanadrid wrongfully detained in Ezeiza Intl. Airport
2003	Argentina inaugurates a national refugee vocational training program (gives loans to start small business)	
2004	Argentina signs decree allowing immigrants from outside of Mercosur to legalize status in nation	
	United Nations formally asks Argentina to count its Afro-descendant population noting their absence on recently released 2001 census	
	Cromagnon (performance hall) fire	Threatens livelihoods of black performers as their places of employment come under very close regulation and scrutiny
2005	Preliminary Census of Afro-descendants funded by WB	Film: (begin shooting) <i>El Negro Che</i>
		Conjunto Afro celebration in basement of Defensa 1464 (historical site where slaves kept during colonial era)
	black organized conference on blacks in Latin America held for first time in Argentina	

APPENDIX B
SAMPLE PAGE FROM 2010 ARGNETINE CENSUS –ETHNICITY QUESTIONS

APPENDIX C
MAPS OF FIELD SITE



Figure C-1. Argentina (Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/10/Provincia_de_Buenos_Aires_%28Argentina%29.svg)

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Judith M. Anderson is a West African adopted from Liberia along with her older sister and raised in Dallas, Texas by a white single mother. Her life experiences have greatly contributed to more nuanced understandings of race and identity. Growing up in Texas in the nineties, she witnessed major shifts in politics to recognize Hispanics as a permanent and influential population. Her fluency in Spanish and academic achievements helped her win a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship for a year of study at a private university in Buenos Aires in 2000. It was during that first trip to Argentina, she began to question how Afro-descendants in the nation had become marginalized to the point of solidifying the myth of their disappearance. This led her to focus her graduate research on the issues of race and identity in the African Diaspora in Latin America.

Ms. Anderson revisited Buenos Aires in 2005 for preliminary dissertation research on black identities in present day Argentina and in 2007 to carry out the full dissertation research project. During that time, she worked closely with black community leaders, scholars, representatives of local and international state institutions, and other black residents in Buenos Aires. She continues to be engaged with these communities and looks forward to helping them realize a variety of projects. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Florida in the summer of 2010.