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An African Tree Produces White Flowers: The Disappearance of the Black Community in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1850-1890

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ABSTRACT
Walking down the streets of Argentina, one might suspect that there are no blacks among the city's inhabitants. Though a black community hardly exists in present-day Argentina, history tells another tale. Beginning in 1535 and continuing over the next four centuries slaves were brought to Buenos Aires. By the time of Argentina's independence in 1810 blacks accounted for a sizable minority of Buenos Aires' population and contributed their dance known as the candombe, religion, and literature to the country's vibrant culture. However, in the years 1850 through 1890, the black population declined dramatically and the black community all but disappeared. Wars and disease decimated the black population, while European immigration, Social Darwinism, and miscegenation led to the whitening of the black population such that the black community in Buenos Aires virtually disappeared.

Walking down the streets of Buenos Aires today, one might assume that there are few, if any blacks among the city's 11 million inhabitants. If one sees a black person, they are simply regarded as Brazilian or another *extranjero*, or foreigner. Talking to the people on the streets confirms that blacks did exist in Buenos Aires, though they often claim that blacks never were of significant number. Yet this is a lie; there was a sizable and prominent black community that existed in Argentina, and in particular Buenos Aires. This brings to mind the question of what happened to the black population?

The disappearance of the black community in Argentina is a question that has intrigued many scholars. The first blacks arrived in Argentina as slaves from Africa in 1535 three years after the foundation of Buenos Aires. Initially, though few in number, the slave population increased over the next three centuries as a result of trafficking in human cargo. By the time slavery was abolished in 1853, a black community flourished in Argentina, contributing their dance known as the *candombe*, music, and literature to the country's vibrant culture. Following abolition, the black population continued to play an important role in Argentina's society, especially that of Buenos Aires. This paper will examine the disappearance of the black community in Argentina and, more specifically, in Buenos Aires. First, I will discuss the black community in Argentina in the years following the end of the slave trade in 1813. Next, I will assess the demographic consequences of war and disease, which killed many blacks, and miscegenation, which lightened the complexion of the black population. Finally, I will evaluate how racist attitudes associated with Social Darwinism during the 1880s continued to push for a whiter Argentina. By 1900, the general belief was that the black community had disappeared.

The Black Community in Buenos Aires: 1800-1850

Census information complied in the years 1778 through 1836 reveal that blacks accounted for a sizable minority of the city's population. Of the 24,363 individuals enumerated by the 1778 census, 7,235 or thirty-seven percent were blacks. However, the proportion they comprised of the city's population fluctuated over time. Although the number of blacks in the city had increased by 1827, the proportion of the city's population that was black had declined. Of the city's 42,540 inhabitants, 8,321, or twenty percent, were blacks. The city's black population continued to increase in number, as did the proportion it comprised of the overall population. According to the 1836 census, of the city's 63,035 inhabitants, 14,906, or twenty-six percent, were blacks. A black community in Buenos Aires clearly existed during the early years of the nineteenth century.[1]

The censuses taken in the years 1810 and 1827 denote the classification of people. There were whites, indigenous peoples, *mestizos,* or a mixture of white and indigenous peoples, *pardos* or mulattos, *morenos* or blacks, and *desconocidos* or individuals who left the category of race blank, but denoted their legal status. By 1827 there were no blacks in this category.[2] The lack of blacks in the *desconocido* category may have been because blacks selected another category such as *pardo*, whose numbers increased from 1810 to 1827.

The 1810 census also lists the age distribution of the city's population. A comparison of blacks and whites in the age range of 0-9 reveals that blacks and whites comprised a similar proportion of the population, fifteen and twenty percent, respectively. In the age range of 10-29 whites amounted to thirty-eight percent and blacks amounted to fifty-six percent of the total population. This difference can be attributed to the number of slaves and free blacks. A majority of the slave population was between the ages of 10-29, while thirty-eight percent of free blacks fell within this age range.[3]

A comparison of the proportion of women between the ages of 15-44 in the years 1810 and 1827 reveals that the proportion of black and white women of child bearing ages was similar at fifty-nine and fifty-three percent, respectively. However, despite these similarities there was a noticeable difference in the number of infants born to black and white women. According to the 1810 census, for every 1,000 women there were 400 infants born to whites and 256 infants born to blacks. By 1827, the difference was even more pronounced, with 366 infants born to whites and 183 born to blacks.[4] Herein, lies one of the factors contributing to the disappearance of the black community in Buenos Aires- a high mortality rate.

Blacks' infants indeed suffered from a high infant mortality rate. In 1828 the mortality rate for white infants under the age of 1 for every 1,000 births by sex was 246 males and 251 females. In contrast, the mortality rate among black infants was 442 males and 376 females.[5] Black males suffered from a disproportionately higher infant mortality rate than their female counterparts or the city's white population. The mortality rate within the black community can be explored further among the adult population of free blacks and slaves. Mortality rates were much higher for free blacks than they were for slaves. Free black males fifteen years or older had a mortality rate of thirty percent, while black male slaves had a mortality rate of twenty-four percent. In contrast, free black females had a mortality rate of twenty-one percent while black female slaves had a mortality rate of fourteen percent.

The difference in mortality rates within the black community itself may be attributed to living conditions. In general, diseases killed many in the black and white population. However, the conditions in which blacks lived oftentimes increased the likelihood of their dying from diseases such as cholera and salmonella.[6] Yellow fever was especially rampant during the 1870s, killing many people that could not escape areas that were infected and the majority of its victims were blacks.[7] Among the black population the standard of living was better as a slave than as a free person. Travelers accounts have suggested, "that many slaves continued voluntarily, not wishing in many cases to change their position or to leave their caring owners…"[8] Apparently, this meant that the slaves knew that their chances of survival were greater if they remained in bondage than if they were freed.

Another factor that affected the reproductive capabilities of the black population was a sex ratio imbalance.

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[1] Andrews, George Reid, *Los Afroargentinos de Buenos Aires*, (Buenos Aires: 1989), 81.
[2] Ibid, 83.
[3] Ibid, 85.
[4] Goldberg, Marta "*La población negra y mulata de la ciudad de Buenos Aires 1810-1840,"Desarrollo Económico* 16 (april-june, 1976) cited in Andrews, 88.
[5] Goldberg, Marta, "*La población negra y mulata de la ciudad de Buenos Aires 1810-1840," Desarrollo Económico* 16 (april-june 1976): 88.
[6] Ibid, 89.
[7] de Liboreiro, Cristina, *No Hay Negros Argentinos?*, (Buenos Aires, 1997), 8.
[8] Op Cit.

According to the 1810 census, there were an unequal number of black women and men between the ages of 10-29. For every 100 females there were 107 males, whereas for every 100 white females there were 103 white males. By 1827 the sex ratio imbalance was even more pronounced, as the number of black males had dropped significantly to 69 for every 100 black females, yet the ratio of males to females among the white population remained high at 90 white males for every 100 white females.[9]

One reason for the decrease in the number of black males has to do with the wars of independence and fighting within the country. Afroargentinos actively participated in Argentina's wars for territorial expansion and suffered from high casualty rates. One of the worse losses suffered by the country during the war for independence occurred in 1815 at the battle of Sipe-Sipe, where 1,000 Afroargentinos were killed, captured, or wounded, while 20 Spaniards were killed and 300 were wounded.[10] The black mortality rate may have been high compared to that of the whites because the army placed blacks in the front lines. Another example of the loss of life that occurred during the wars of independence were the military campaigns of General José San Martín. At least half of his army consisted of ex-slaves. When the army marched west to the Andes Mountains in Chile, and from there north to Peru and Ecuador in the hopes of liberating the countries from Spanish rule, only half of the 2,000 black soldiers in General San Martín's army made it to Chile.[11]

As mentioned previously, there was an increase in Buenos Aires' black population during the 1830s as revealed by the 1827 and 1836 censuses.[12] The reasons for this increase can be found in the forced migration of *traidos*, or Africans, that were brought to Buenos Aires during the governorship of Juan Manual Rosas to fight in the war against Brazil during the years 1831 to 1833. Many blacks also migrated from the interior of Argentina and Uruguay to Buenos Aires in hopes of finding jobs. One historian of the nineteenth century estimated that in 1840 somewhere between 12,000 and 15,000 Africans were brought to Buenos Aires. Though his estimates were twice the number that actually lived in the city, the population of blacks was considered to be more "Africanized."[13] The migration of blacks from the interior also had an impact upon the composition of Buenos Aires' black population. The influx of immigrants from the interior of Argentina and Uruguay increased the number of foreign-born blacks. The 1827 census indicates that ten percent of blacks had been born in the interior of the country or in Uruguay.[14] The increase of the black population during the 1830s could not be overlooked and was well documented in the censuses.

Nineteenth-century travelers' accounts suggest that the black population in Buenos Aires was greater than that reported by the 1810 and 1827 censuses. Alexander Gillespie, a British official captured during the English invasion of 1807, "estimated the population of Buenos Aires to be 41,000," and "one fifth of the population was white and the rest of the population were different degrees of black."[15] Another Englishman, Samuel Haigh, lived in Buenos Aires for 10 years during the 1820's and suggested "the city had about 100,000 citizens, pure whites in the city were few in number, the majority being of mixed white, native, and black, making it difficult to denote their origin."[16] These examples raise doubts as to the overall accuracy of the 1810 and 1827 censuses.

We must also consider whether blacks may have been undercounted. Inaccuracies occur because not every person was counted. For example, the areas in which blacks lived, like the barrio Monserrat, were stereotypically described as "dark and dirty plagued with thieves, prostitutes, and evil people."[17] Census takers may have avoided such areas and thus it may be impossible to obtain an accurate account of afroargentinos in certain parts of the city.

To say that a person was white did not always mean that they were of European origin. Racial passing was common. For example, a successful mulatto might after some time be able to pass from one racial classification to another and possibly be considered white. This may have been the case with the first president of Argentina, Bernardino Rivadiva (1780-1845) who was rumored to be black.[18] His blackness would have made him unfit to be the country's leader. Thus, we see an example of the willingness to portray a white Argentina.

A new term of racial classification known as *trigueño*, meaning neither black nor white, came into use shortly

[9] Andrews, 89.
[10] Best, Felix, *Historia de las guerras argentinas*, 2 vols. (Buenos Aires, 1968) cited in Andrews, 139.
[11] Espejo, *El paso* pg. 400-1, 411. Álvarez Pereya, *Regimiento 8* pg 21, Tristany, Ramón. *Regimiento 8 de Infantería de Línea*, (Buenos Aires, 1897), 12-3, cited in Andrews, 141.
[12] Andrews, 90.
[13] Op Cit.
[14] Op Cit.
[15] Gillespie, Alexander, *Buenos Aires y el interior*, (Buenos Aires, 1921), 65, cited in Andrews, 93.
[16] Haigh, Samuel, *Bosquejos de Buenos Aires, Chile y Peru*, (Buenos Aires, 1920), 26, cited in Andrews, 93.
[17] Romay, Francisco L, *El Barrio de Monserrat*, (Buenos Aires, 1971), 61-3, cited in Andrews, 95.
[18] Andrews, 97.

after Argentina's declaration of independence in 1810. The term literally meant wheat-colored, from the Spanish word *trigo* for wheat. It was used to identify light-skinned blacks and dark-skinned whites. In doing so, it helped to categorize social mobility. Light-skinned blacks had a better chance of being accepted into the white middle class than their dark-skinned counterparts. However, the dark-skinned whites' chances of social mobility would be minimal compared to their white middle class counterparts. According to one historian, "*trigueño* was applied to whites that had black or chestnut colored hair, bronze or chestnut colored skin, or those physically resembling blacks. It was also used as a substitute for the word *Negro* for blacks in high respectable positions."[19] The term *trigueño* was also typically applied to Sicilian immigrants, though it was not a term that they voluntarily accepted, as was the case with the black population.[20] The term *trigueño* helped to identify those individuals that were hard to racially categorize, taking into account their social mobility.

Afroagentinos used the term *trigueño* in order to leave behind or reject their African ancestry. Those individuals that occupied high positions in society aspired to be known as *trigueños* in order to be respected by their white counterparts. An example is Estanislao Maldones, a black colonel who served under Rosas; after fourteen years of military service he was considered a *trigueño,* as well as his son.[21] Racial passing often required several generations, for example captain Federico Maurino was identified as a *pardo* when he was born in 1828, the eldest son of Feliciano Maurino, a *pardo*. Yet when Federico's son, also named Federico, entered the army in 1882 he was noted to be a *trigueño*.[22] It was possible for a black person to whiten their complexion within two generations.

Authorities would also have wanted to promote the existence of a whiter Argentina. For example, one historian affirmed that few blacks lived in the parishes of Monserrat, Concepcion, La Piedad and Balvanera, while in the parish of San Telmo "the black population constituted a minority."[23] However, a closer look at the 1836 census reveals that blacks constituted twenty percent of San Telmo's population, a larger proportion than in Balvanera and approximately equal to that of La Piedad. A whiter Argentina was not only desired, but actively promoted.

As the frequency of miscegenation increased, it also became harder to determine who was black. A new category of blacks came into existence known as "white blacks," designating black people that had more white than black in their blood. Thus, a "white slave" was not uncommon in Argentina. Newspaper articles from the nineteenth century referred to some *mulattos* as "*mulatto* whites." One anecdote even referred to the "white mulatto as being a rare beauty."[24] This remark provides us with an idea of society's notion of beauty in that "what's white is right."

The 1810 and 1827 censuses clearly established the existence of a black population. Other sources such as travelers' accounts of visitors to Buenos Aires confirm its presence. However, the implementation of a new racial classification category hints at what would happen to the black population in the upcoming years 1850-1900.

The Disappearance of the Black Community

The twenty-two years of Juan Manual Rosas' governorship of Buenos Aires (1830-1852) can best be described as years of turmoil and chaos. At the time there were two main political parties, the Federalists who believed governmental power should be shared between the interior and the capital, and the Unitarians who believed power should remain in the capital. Rosas was considered to be a Federalist. The Unitarians, based in Buenos Aires, believed Rosas and the other Federalists hindered the country's development because of their barbaric ways and lack of education. Their attitudes toward the city's black population differed. Rosas looked to the black community for political support when needed, while the Unitarians believed the only way for Argentina to develop into a modern country would mean the elimination of all people that were not white.

Rosas used the bodies of blacks like tools to achieve success. Whether it was as fighting machines, or through the ballot box, Rosas could persuade blacks to side with him by giving blacks just enough rights to retain their loyalty and not side with the Unitarians. For example, in 1836 he abolished the law that demanded the automatic requirement of free black men fifteen years and older to serve in the army. On occasion he also made donations to African mutual aid societies. Additionally, in 1839 he abolished the slave trade once and for all, after having

[19] Padilla, Elena, *Up from Puerto Rico*, 73-4 and 75, (New York, 1958), cited in Andrews, 99.
[20] Op Cit.
[21] Andrews, 101.
[22] Op Cit.
[23] Sanguinetti, Manuel Juan, *San Telmo: Su pasado histórico*, (Buenos Aires, 1965), 116 and 317, cited in Andrews, 127.
[24] Beck-Bernard, *Cinco años en la Confederación Argentina, 1857-1862*, (Buenos Aires, 1935) 180-1, cited in Andrews, 102.

reinstated it in 1831 during the war against Brazil. Finally, Rosas repealed the laws that prohibited the nations of *candombe* from meeting and in 1838 invited them to dance and celebrate Independence Day, which infuriated the Unitarians and helped them to unite against Rosas.[25] Although Rosas was considered to be sympathetic to the plight of blacks, his main interest was to stay in power, as demonstrated by his confiscation of the central seat of the Nation of Cambuda in 1838, and using its monies to pay off Buenos Aires' debts. Again, this reveals how blacks were at the mercy of Rosas.

Following Rosas' fall from power in 1853, the Unitarians took control of the government, and looked to transform Argentina. This group of politicians and intellectuals, known as the generation of 1880, looked to the countries of France, England, and the United States as models for Argentina's development. In order to be a modern country, they argued that Argentina must disregard the barbaric and old ways of the Federalists and eliminate the non-white elements of its population.

Among the intellectuals of the generation 1880, three stand out for their opinions about the black population. All three adhered to the teachings of Social Darwinism; thus, they argued that a whiter Argentina would be the best way to achieve a more civilized country. Domingo F. Sarmiento, who wrote *Civilización y barbarie: la vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga* in 1845, retells the life of Juan Facundo Quiroga, a general during the years of Argentina's expansion. Sarmiento criticized Rosas government as barbaric. According to Sarmiento, one potential solution to this "problem," was to encourage European immigration to whiten the population. He did not believe in the mixing of whites and blacks. Instead he looked to the United States as a role model, and strongly supported the idea of "segregating the Native Americans, and marginalizing the blacks, and prohibiting the two groups from participating genetically, socially, and politically…"[26] In doing so, white men would be able to retain political and social power. Juan Bautista Alberdi, who wrote *Bases y puntos de partida para la organización de la Republica Argentina* in 1852, described how to form a more perfect nation. Alberdi looked to England and believed "the civilized action of Europe was in South America and Argentines were Europeans born in South America and called Americans. Their heads, blood, and color, were from outside the country."[27] Unlike Sarmiento, Alberdi believed that racial mixing was important because the genes of whites would dominate and were superior to the inferior genes of non-whites, which would help to breed out the "bad" genes. José Ingenieros, who wrote both *Sociologia Argentina* in 1913 and *La Locura en la Argentina* in 1937, was a strong believer in Social Darwinism and was more extreme in his views than either Alberdi or Sarmiento. He believed that the fight for the second independence of Argentina, freeing the mind of the old ways, would be one of race before class, and institutional formation.[28] Like Sarmiento, he believed that blacks and whites could not mix and that the two should develop separately.

By the end of the nineteenth century the dreams of Sarmiento, Alberdi, and Ingenieros had been achieved. Between the years 1880 and 1900 almost a million European immigrants arrived in Argentina. By 1900, the country's dependence on blacks for its labor force, army, and voting ballots had been replaced by European immigrants.[29] Blacks were left to compete with newly arrived immigrants for jobs they had previously held. Jobs such as washing clothes, *callejeras*, or street vendors, and domestic service were taken away from blacks. Immigrants went so far as to replace blacks in the army. For example, the 8th Infantry Battalion made up of blacks during the 1820s was later disbanded. In 1871, it was reconstituted and renamed the Italian Legion. As tools of war, immigrants had replaced blacks. Competition between blacks and immigrants also occurred for living space. As the black population declined, immigrants displaced them, prompting many of the remaining blacks to move outside the city into suburbs such as Flores.[30]

However, some blacks opted for assimilation into white Argentina. Despite animosity and conflict between blacks and European immigrants, marriages between black women and white men were common. A sex-ratio imbalance among the black population forced black females who wished to marry to seek out husbands among white male immigrants. This prompts one to ask why would white men choose to marry black women? One reason was the lack of white women. The majority of immigrants that came to Argentina were men. In most cases they were not looking to settle permanently, but to work and return home with the money they had saved. However, as

[25] Ibid, 118.
[26] Sarmiento, Domingo F., *Conflictas y armonías de las razas en Americas 2 vols*, (Buenos Aires, 1953), cited in Andrews, 123.
[27] Alberdi, Juan Bautista, *Bases y puntos de partida para la organización de la Republica Argentina*, (Buenos Aires, 1952), 38, cited in Andrews, 123-4.
[28] Ibid, 124.
[29] Ibid, 211.
[30] Ibid, 217.

more male immigrants came and settled in Buenos Aires, it became harder for them to marry a white woman. Consequently, many immigrants married black women. Although the magazine *Caras y Caretas* once stated that it bothered a black family to see their children marry a white person, there was never an indication of blacks having a problem with the intermarriage of blacks and whites.[31] This indicates that avenues for social advancement could be pursued through intermarriage, and having children of a lighter complexion.

The black community also had internal problems, which prevented it from coming together. Oftentimes, those were attributed to "the tendency to waste time, spending money and energy on entertainment, a common dislike between blacks and whites, unequal educational opportunities and class issues within the black community."[32] In 1858, the black press in Buenos Aires wrote against the tendency of the black community to spend money and energy on diversions and instead concentrate on constructive projects such as education or the mutual aid societies.[33] Classism also hindered the efforts of the black community and was well pronounced within the black press. For example, *La Broma* represented the views of the upper class, while *La Juventud*. those of the lower class. Classism also destroyed any efforts to create a united community and pitted the classes against each other, creating separate social clubs such as *La Esperanza Argentina*, which was financed by prominent black families. The working class black, however, could not afford the annual membership dues. Later they responded to their exclusion with the formation of a social club known as *Los Hijos del Orden*.[34]

One thing upper and lower class blacks did agree on was assimilation into the white society. They were in favor of adopting white, middle-class culture. In doing so, they rejected their African heritage. The African mutual aid societies disappeared during the decades of 1860 and 1870, when young Afroargentinos refused to join and support them. The black community also abandoned the *candombe* in favor of imported dances such as the chotises and mazurka from Europe. *La Broma* newspaper reported that upper-middle-class blacks looked to limit many cultural activities of the black community considering them a detriment to their advancement. The black bourgeois class looked to escape the stigma of their African past and sought to be accepted as equals by the white middle class. This concept would have been impossible before the year 1850, without the economic expansion, the growth of a middle class, and a white society that seemed to like the idea of blacks being equal to them.[35]

An African Tree Produces White Flowers

Factors such as the end of the slave trade in 1813, the demographic consequences of wars, disease, and miscegenation, as well as Social Darwinist attitudes, all contributed to the disappearance of the black community in Buenos Aires. While disease killed many blacks, the wars fought for independence, produced disproportionately high casualties among black men contributing to a sex-ratio imbalance among the black population. This coincided with an increase in immigration by white Europeans, which Social Darwinists, actively promoted to whiten Argentina. With the arrival of so many white male immigrants, they often sought out black females as spouses. Any children they had would help lighten the complexion of the city's population.

By the end of the nineteenth century many people believed that the black population had "disappeared." But in reality, the black population had only become lighter. Published in the black newspaper, *Cara y Caretas,* author Juan Jose Soiza Reilly exclaimed, "the African tree is producing white flowers."[36] The black community was slowly fading in such a way that the children of blacks appeared to be white. It also suggests the answer to the mystery of what happened to the black population in Buenos Aries and Argentina; they were slowly assimilated into the white community.

[31] Soiza Reilly, Juan José, *"Gente de color," Caras y Caretas*, November 25, 1905, cited in Andrews, 220.
[32] Ibid, 221.
[33] *"El lujo es incompetente y ruinoso a la clase de color," El Proletario* May 9, 1858, pg. 1, cited in Andrews, 221.
[34] Ibid, 224 and 226.
[35] Ibid, 226.
[36] Sozia Reilly, Juan José, *"Gente de color" Caras y Caretas*, November 25, 1905, pg. 2.

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