

2003

## Though Many Have White Skin, their Veins Flow of Black Blood: Afro-Argentine Culture and History during the Twentieth Century in Buenos Aires, Argentina

Erika D. Edwards  
*Grand Valley State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mcnair>

---

### Recommended Citation

Edwards, Erika D. (2003) "Though Many Have White Skin, their Veins Flow of Black Blood: Afro-Argentine Culture and History during the Twentieth Century in Buenos Aires, Argentina," *McNair Scholars Journal*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 8.  
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mcnair/vol7/iss1/8>

## Though Many Have White Skin, their Veins Flow of Black Blood: Afro-Argentine Culture and History during the Twentieth Century in Buenos Aires, Argentina



**Erika Denise Edwards**  
*McNair Scholar*

### **Abstract**

*Although the Afro-Argentine population continued to decline during the twentieth century, the people played an integral role in shaping Argentina's culture through their contributions in the field of dance, literature, and religion. Unfortunately, their vibrant culture and history are often ignored and overlooked because of Argentina's subtle efforts to whiten its population. The purpose of this project is three-fold. First, it aims to recognize the survival of the Afro-Argentine community during the twentieth century. Second, it recaptures the means used to preserve African traditions. Finally, it reveals efforts of Afro-Argentine groups such as La Fundación Africa Vive that have dedicated themselves to reconstructing the Afro-Argentine role in Argentina's culture and history.*

### **Introduction**

One of the first things I noticed while studying in Buenos Aires, Argentina, was that there were few, if any, blacks among the city's inhabitants. I lived there for six months and people always assumed that I was Brazilian because of their popular belief that Afro-Argentines no longer exist. However, this is a lie: Afro-Argentines do indeed exist. Africans began arriving in Argentina as slaves in 1534, two years after the foundation of Buenos Aires, and since then they have shaped and transformed Argentina.<sup>i</sup> This paper seeks to draw attention to the contributions of Afro-Argentines to the country's culture and history. To this end, I will recognize their existence despite the country's denial of its black population. Then, I will address the ways in which Afro-Argentines recapture their African past through dance, music, religion, and literature. Finally, I will discuss what Afro-Argentines are doing to reconstruct their history and, in the process, correct lies, misconceptions, and myths about them. In denying Afro-Argentine culture and history, many Argentines may not learn about their families' and country's past. Though many have white skin, their veins flow of black blood.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Recognizing the Existence of Afro-Argentines**

Statisticians often claim, "the numbers never lie." Yet in the case of census information for Argentina over the course of the twentieth century, the existence of the country's black population is often denied or its size is underestimated. The noted Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges remembered that in 1910 or 1912 there was a tenement of blacks on the corner of Uriburu and Vicente López streets and another on Sarmiento Street in Buenos Aires, Argentina.<sup>iii</sup> In 1946, Nicolás Besio Moreno calculated that there were "one and a half million people with



**David Stark, Ph.D.**  
*Faculty Mentor*

black blood [in Argentina]" and further stated that they could be classified as blacks based upon the United States guidelines, which suggest that people who have a lighter complexion and often might pass for whites would still be classified as blacks.<sup>iv</sup> The following year, in 1947, a national census identified the presence of 15,000 blacks, (5,000 blacks and 10,000 mulattos).<sup>v</sup> By 1963, Afro-Argentines were estimated to number 17,000. Their population declined over the next four years to 3,000 in 1967 but increased to 4,500 in 1968 for reasons which remain unclear.<sup>vi</sup> However, some people have estimated that there were as many as 10,000 blacks "not counting those mixed with dark skinned people in the provinces."<sup>vii</sup> The journalist Narciso Binayan Carmona stated in 1973 that "if all Argentines with black blood were accounted there would be 2-3 million."<sup>viii</sup> Based upon this information, one can see there are discrepancies involving the size of Argentina's black population; their true number probably lies somewhere between what the census counted and people's perceptions.

Present-day statistics tend to agree with what people saw during the twentieth century. This could be due to *El Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos* (INDEC) which forgot to include a box for citizens to identify their descent (*descendencia*) during the last national census in 2001. INDEC later denied that it had forgotten to include the box.<sup>ix</sup> It is interesting to note that when the last national census was undertaken, INDEC included a category for the first time to check if one was of indigenous descent, a change from the last national census conducted in 1991.<sup>x</sup> Their failure to inquire about people of African descent further perpetuates the myth that Afro-Argentines no longer exist. In stark contrast, *La Fundación Africa Vive*, an Afro-Argentine group dedicated to promoting black culture

and history, believes that there are currently two million Afro-Argentines (descended from slaves) in the country.<sup>xi</sup> Thus, regardless of how a person may appear (dark- or light-skinned) and whether or not they are aware, many Argentines have black blood.

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, miscegenation served to lighten the complexion of the country's black population. Argentina's black male population was already in decline as a result of wars for independence and territorial expansion as well as diseases. Then, from 1880 to 1930, a mass of European immigrants arrived in the country. Most European immigrants were male, thus their arrival led to a surplus of white males and a shortage of white females. Given the pre-existing scarcity of black males, prospective black brides often married white grooms, many of whom were European immigrants. Interracial marriages became common. The children of such unions often had lighter skin giving them access to better education and employment opportunities thereby facilitating their ability to pass themselves off as white.

However, not all blacks who wished to marry selected white spouses. There were black couples, such as the Monteros. The couple had three daughters but due to miscegenation in their family's past, each of the girls was a different shade of brown: the eldest looked black, the middle child resembled a mulatto, and the youngest appeared to be entirely white. "So great were the physical differences... people refused to believe they were family."<sup>xii</sup> However, the Monteros considered themselves black and "had a shelf of books on race and a stack of Aretha Franklin, Roberta Flack, and Ike and Tina records to prove it."<sup>xiii</sup> At the time they were interviewed in 1973, the girls were dating white boys.<sup>xiv</sup> Were they to

have married and had children, they too would have contributed to the whitening of the country's black population. As the black population becomes lighter through miscegenation, it will become harder to identify its existence.

The existence of Argentina's black population has been denied publicly throughout the twentieth century. A popular saying in the early 1900s claimed, "in order to see a *black* person one must go to Brazil."<sup>xv</sup> In his book *Sociología Argentina* published in 1913, author José Ingenieros proclaimed, "*Los negros se han extinguido; los mulattos de zona templada son cada vez más blancos. En Buenos Aires un Negro argentino constituye un objeto de curiosidad, or "blacks have disappeared, mulattos, of even toned color [light brown], are becoming whiter. In Buenos Aires a black Argentine constitutes an object of curiosity."<sup>xvi</sup> Then in 1976, an article in the newspaper *La Opinión*, proclaimed "*Los negros han desaparecido del ambito de Buenos Aires*" or "blacks had disappeared from the vicinity of Buenos Aires."<sup>xvii</sup> Ironically, the article's author Blas Matamoro admitted that "*Buenos Aires fue una ciudad de predominio Negro. Hay quien arriesga un probable 60 por ciento de población de color*" or "Buenos Aires was a predominately black city, there are those who claim that probably 60 percent of its population was people of color." In the very next, issue Matamoro had to make a public retraction in an article titled "*Fe de erratas,*" or "Mistake of Faith." Unfortunately, according to Emilio Ruchansky, author of the article "*Negros en Buenos Aires? Fe de erratas,*" many people did not notice it.<sup>xviii</sup> Finally in 1996 the country's ex-president Carlos Menem stated, "*En Argentina no existen los negros; ese problema lo tiene Brasil,* or "In Argentina blacks do not exist, that is a Brazilian problem."<sup>xix</sup> These three public denials reveal Argentina's reluctance to acknowledge*

that a black population exists or to come to terms with its black heritage. This is especially true in Buenos Aires, where the city's inhabitants pride themselves on living in the "Paris of South America," or as Juan Bautista Alberdi, author of *Bases y puntos de partida para la organización de la República Argentina*, wrote, "nosotros, los que nos llamamos americanos, no somos otra cosa que europeos nacidos en América. Cráneo, sangre, color, todo es de fuera," or "...those of us that call ourselves Americans, are nothing more than Europeans born in America. Our heads, blood, and color, are all from outside the country."<sup>xx</sup> Thus, silence about their black culture would be necessary.

One means of perpetuating the silence about Argentina's black culture and history as well as the contributions Afro-Argentines have made in music, dance, religion, and literature was through the country's education system. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, father of the public education system, believed that in order to become a civilized nation, Argentina must not only erase those people whom he considered barbaric (those who were not white) from its instruction in the education system but also genetically, by promoting European immigration.<sup>xxi</sup> While living in Argentina, I realized his plan had worked because he and his followers also erased Afro-Argentines from popular consciousness. When given a chance, I would ask some of my friends what had happened to the country's black population? While they proudly told me that slavery ended in 1813 (though that was incorrect), they believed Afro-Argentines had vanished. According to Jean-Arsene YAO, their views can be best described in this way: "si hubieran sufrido el efecto de la varita mágica," or "as if blacks had disappeared by a magic trick."<sup>xxii</sup>

Another overlooked aspect of Argentina's black culture and history is the Cape Verdean immigration. These

Africans immigrated to Argentina during the late 1930s and early 1940s in search of better economic opportunities. Although Argentina prohibited African immigration, Cape Verdeans were allowed to enter the country because they were from a Portuguese colony. The majority of Cape Verdean arrivals were males and they worked as fishermen, loaders, seamen, cooks, and waiters. The few women that came were employed mainly as domestic servants. Most of these immigrants settled in areas surrounding Buenos Aires like Dock Sur. Somewhere between 8,000 and 10,000 Cape Verdeans live in Argentina today.<sup>xxiii</sup> A large Cape Verdean population still lives in Dock Sur and I had the opportunity to interview Adriano Rocha, a Cape Verdean immigrant. Based upon what he told me, miscegenation quickly lightened their population too. He immigrated from the Cape Verde Islands in 1947 in search of a job and married a white woman. Their children also married whites, and the majority of his grandchildren are white. Though he did not seem to mind, it struck me that this group could also "disappear." However, even if these groups disappear, their contributions have become a part of Argentina's cultural identity.

**Recapturing the Afro-Argentine Past**  
Afro-Argentines have creatively fused their African past with Indigenous and European cultures. They created the tango, *payador*, and the carnival as well as synchronized religious beliefs, which still are celebrated today. They have expressively described their plight in literature. The origins of the tango (a popular Argentine dance) have been attributed to the *gaucho*, or cowboy, of the interior. But the word *tango*, according to Nestor Ortiz Oterigo, author of *Aspectos de la Cultura Negra*, suggests that it is a mispronunciation of the word *shango* that has twenty-three

meanings; the most popular are a place of dance, a meeting place to dance, or inciters of dance.<sup>xxiv</sup> The tango has been referenced in documents since the early nineteenth century and it evolved from the traditional dance known as the *candombe*.<sup>xxv</sup> The *candombe* originated with slaves of different African nations who gathered to perform their traditional dances. It eventually evolved into the tango that is danced today.<sup>xxvi</sup> In its inception, the tango was associated with the lower classes and was known to "demarcate the drama of the poor, on the outskirts of the city, black, *mestizo* [a mix of indigenous and white], *zambo* [a mix of black and indigenous], free, or immigrant."<sup>xxvii</sup> It was not until Carlos Gardel popularized the dance in Europe during the 1930s, that the Argentine white middle class accepted it as a national pastime.

Another art form popularized by the black population was the *payador*. *Payador* is the Spanish word for a singer who improvises while he plays the guitar. This art form originated in the interior of the country and quickly spread to the city.<sup>xxviii</sup> The improvisational nature of the *payador* invites comparisons to today's free style competitions between rappers. The one with the best spontaneous responses wins the competition. The most famous *payador* was Gabino Ezieza (1858-1916) who started his career at age fifteen and his reputation quickly spread. His most famous *payador* competition was against Pablo J. Vásquez, which he won and for which he was awarded an honorary diploma.<sup>xxix</sup> Ezieza is well-remembered and his is one of three black statues in Buenos Aires today.<sup>xxx</sup> Other notable *payadores* were José Betinoti (1878-1915); Federico Curlando (1878-1917); and Juan Damilano (1876-1955), a good friend of Gabino Ezieza who quit performing after the death of his friend.<sup>xxxi</sup> Today in Argentina, the memory of *payadores* is celebrated on

July 23rd and is called “*Día del Payador*.”<sup>xxxii</sup>

The carnival, which implemented Afro-Argentine dances in 1771, was a constant reminder of where Afro-Argentines came from.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Percussion, especially the tambourine, arrived with the slaves and heavily influenced the music of the carnival. During this celebration, members of diverse African nations, groups of Africans who share the same ethnicity, would wear distinctive clothing to identify themselves and unite to dance in the streets.<sup>xxxiv</sup> These African *krewe*s (groups of people participating in a carnival parade) dominated the carnival parties each year until 1870 at which time white *krewe*s began to take over. Still, in 1900, ten to fifteen Afro-Argentine groups with names such as *Estrella de Sur*, *Flor de Cuba*, *Tenorios del Plata*, *Habitantes de la Luna* or names reflecting their African heritage like *Los Negros Benguelas*, or *Los Negros Monyolo* participated in the festivities every year. But as the black population continued to decline, so too did the carnival. By 1930, the parades and the street festivals had stopped, while carnival itself officially ended in the 1970s.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Throughout Argentina’s colonial past, slaves synchronized their African religious beliefs with Catholicism. Syncretism took many forms including the veneration of saints. This served as a social marker so that African languages and religions could be preserved. One such example of an Afro-Argentine saint was Saint Benito of Palermo also known as “*el Moro*,” or “brown skinned.” He was born in Sanfratello, Sicily in 1526 and died in Palermo, Italy in 1589. His parents were slaves from Ethiopia.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Knowing that San Benito had received his freedom and that he was black, probably helped slaves to identify with him and, by extension, Catholicism.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Additionally, in 1838, Juan Manuel de Rosas, who was the first governor of

Buenos Aires, named Palermo, a barrio in Buenos Aires, after San Benito because “*en la dirección a Belgrano, [había] una capilla bajo la advocación de San Benito de Palermo, ... se le ocurrió bautizar su propiedad con el nombre Palermo de San Benito*,” or “in the direction of Belgrano, (another barrio in Buenos Aires) there was a chapel dedicated to San Benito of Palermo and it occurred to him to name his property Palermo of San Benito.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> In Buenos Aires, San Benito is still venerated today. A popular saying about him is “*Oro toco, Negro veo, San Benito querido que se cumplan mis deseos*, or “I touch gold, I see black, beloved San Benito grant me my desires.”<sup>xxxix</sup> It is interesting that a black saint whose popularity in Argentina originated with slaves has achieved widespread popularity.

The Virgin Mary was likewise made more accessible to the black population through her veneration as the *Virgen de Rosario*, or the Virgin of the Rosary, the *Virgen Morena*, or Black Virgin, and *Nuestra Señora de los Negros*, or Our Lady of the Blacks. The Portuguese in Brazil, where the Afro-Brazilians of Congolese origin synchronized the Virgin Mary with their god Yemanjá and *Nuestra Señora de la Concepción*, or Our Lady of the Conception, brought the idea of a black Virgin Mary to Argentina.<sup>xl</sup> Transforming the white Virgin into a black Virgin probably helped the blacks identify with her and possibly associated her with already preexisting female deities in their African religions.

Another example of slaves synchronizing their African religious beliefs with Catholicism is that of Saint Balthazar, patron Saint of Argentina’s slave population, who was fused with Balthazar, one of the magi whose feast day is “Three Kings’ Day” on January 6. Slaves adopted this feast day and transformed it into an African one affording each nation an opportunity to

dance and pay homage to their African past. In 1785, slaves formed a *cofradía*, or religious brotherhood, known as *San Baltazar y las Animas*, or “San Balthazar and the Souls,” and subsequently petitioned government authorities for permission to dance “*a la usanza del Africa*” or “old-styled African dances.”<sup>xli</sup> The synchronization of religious beliefs provided both material and social support to the growing black native-born population.

*Cofradías* served as a means through which slaves could come together, although they were always under the control of ecclesiastical powers. This was because “...*mantuiveron una celosa desconfianza... a la posible compra de armas para un levantamiento*,” or “they [ecclesiastical powers] maintained a jealous mistrust because they might buy arms to start an uprising.”<sup>xlii</sup> Although the Church allowed slaves to participate in these *cofradías*, they feared their socially destabilizing potential. *Cofradías* afforded slaves with opportunities for social interaction to commiserate over their common experiences in bondage. Many of these *cofradías* continued to exist into the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>xliii</sup>

By the 1960s, Afro-Argentine religious practices were becoming heavily influenced by Afro-Brazilian practices. This is probably attributable to the decline of Afro-Argentines and the increase of Cape Verdeans who sought out the African influence. The first Afro-Brazilian temple in Argentina opened its doors to the public in 1966 and was led by *la mae*, the priestess Nelidad de Oxum an Argentine, who had learned of this religious practice while living in Southern Brazil.<sup>xliv</sup> There are two popular variants of Afro-Brazilian religious beliefs: the more orthodox known as *el batuque*, or nation, and the more synchronized, known as *umbanda*.<sup>xlv</sup> By the 1970s, the number of Afro-Brazilian temples had grown

considerably; a half dozen had been established with the majority being *umbanda*. Today, nearly four hundred temples function legally in Argentina, the majority in Buenos Aires.<sup>xlvi</sup>

Afro-Argentine culture and history permeates the country's literature. Black poets wrote about social injustice and black pride. For example, Casildo Gervasio Thompson wrote the poem "Canto al Africa," Hymn to Africa, "evoking the cruelties of the slave trade and described members of the black race as noble and distinguished presenting whites as savages and as destroyers of black families."<sup>xlvi</sup> He was considered to be a true testimony to the black experience because he verbalized black pride, a rare theme in Argentina.<sup>xlvi</sup> The poem begins with a mythical description of Africa, and it ends with the destruction of Africa by European intervention. He proclaimed, "Sabéis como se llama esa tierra divina y bendecida... se llama AFRICA, oid, Africa bella... es la cuna del Negro: esa es la patria del eterno proscrito que lloro, "You know what this divine and blessed land is called... it is called Africa, you hear, beautiful Africa... it is the birthplace of blacks: that is for the love of (Africa) internal exile that I cry."<sup>xlvi</sup> Also, Horacio Mendizábal wrote a poem titled "Libertad," drawing attention to the freedom that was denied to the slaves. He writes, "...Esa por quien pelearon nuestros padres, esa celeste Diosa de bondad, esa que amaron tanto nuestras madres es la sublime, bella Libertad, or "that for whom our fathers fought, that heavenly goddess of kindness, which our mothers loved so much is the noble, beautiful, Freedom."<sup>l</sup> These poets have what we consider today to be "Afro-centrism," which is pride to be black.<sup>li</sup> Though their contributions have been ignored or attributed to others, Afro-Argentines have enriched the country's literary culture.

Black newspapers also played an important role among the Afro-Argentine population. They reported

on social problems that affected their community such as class struggles between middle and lower class blacks and debated if assimilation into white society would be the best option for the declining black population. The first black newspapers, *La Juventud* and *La Broma*, originated during the latter half of the nineteenth century. At the turn of the century, it was a popular belief that Afro-Argentines no longer existed; however, this was not true as the black newspapers were quick to affirm. In 1900, "La Verdad" edited by Bendeto Ferriera and "La Protectora," published by the benefit society bearing this same name, stipulated that Afro-Argentines indeed existed.<sup>lii</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century, Afro-Argentines have sought to preserve their African heritage, though it is difficult due to the country's insistence on denying their existence. Nevertheless, blacks maintained their social connections through organizations, such as the Shimmy Club, located in Buenos Aires' *Almagro* barrio, which opened in 1924 and closed in 1973. According to historian Narciso Binayan Carmona, every first Saturday of the month and during carnival blacks and whites would gather and celebrate, dancing the *candombe*, rumba, a mixture of both, and other popular dances.<sup>liii</sup> Musical enthusiasts would debate the future of African music, while rival dance groups such as the Drummers and the Dancers would face off in competition.<sup>liv</sup> Here the Cape Verdeans and native-born blacks would congregate to pay homage to their African past. These two groups would also come together to sing African songs and dance the *candombe* at another social club, the *Almagre*.

Black organizations not only served to preserve African culture but also played an integral role as support systems. For example, *La Protectora* (1877-1936), functioned as a labor union. For fifty-nine years, it fought for higher wages. It

also provided free medical care for its members and constructed a mausoleum in a cemetery in Recoleta, a barrio in Buenos Aires, where they gave free burials to the deceased.<sup>lv</sup> Other black groups that existed during the latter half of the twentieth century were *Agrupación Patriótica*, *25 de Mayo*, *el Círculo Social Juvenio*, *la Asociación de Fomento General* and *San Martín*.<sup>lvi</sup> These associations provided material and moral support to the black population.

Nevertheless, the pressure to whiten the country's population oftentimes overwhelmed the black community. Cultural aspects that used to be predominately black were taken over by whites. Transculturalation took place in areas such as socialization and music. For example, the Shimmy Club, which started out as an organization promoting black solidarity, also attracted whites, and by the time it closed had a majority of white members. The club appealed to whites, who would come to dance and listen to black music. It officially closed its doors in 1973 after a seven-year push to end it by the Governor of La Pampa Juan Carlos Onganía.<sup>lvii</sup> His persistence in closing the club may have been because he did not like the idea that whites were attracted to black culture. Another example of transculturalation was the demise of the black labor union, *La Protectora's*, which was possibly due to "white infiltration in which the black members would have lost control."<sup>lviii</sup> No longer addressing the concerns of black issues such as discrimination and racism, *La Protectora's* focus was probably transformed to better fit the interests of the white majority in the club.

Music also changed. There had always been a fascination with how easy slaves learned to play European instruments like the violin, guitar, and piano.<sup>lix</sup> By the late nineteenth century as the black population declined and European music became more popular, black

musicians began studying abroad. Musicians like Manuel Posadas, who won a scholarship to study violin in Brussels, and Zenón Rolón, who studied the organ in Italy and later became an elementary school music teacher, rejected African influence in music, believing that it no longer fit their social class.<sup>lx</sup> For some blacks this was a form of assimilation into the predominant white class. Such actions made it harder for those Afro-Argentines who wanted to preserve their African past to do so.

### Reconstructing Afro-Argentine Culture and History

Today Afro-Argentines have started to recognize their African culture and history and are committed to reconstructing it. Groups such as *La Fundación Africa Vive*, located in Buenos Aires, host free informative sessions such as “The Afro-Argentine Journey” through the *Archivo General de la Nación*. These sessions are intended to introduce and teach the history of Afro-Argentines to the general public. *Africa Vive* was established in 1996 after the founder, María Lamadrid, was detained in the airport for six hours. Attempting to check in, the airline attendant did not believe that her passport was valid because there was no such thing as a black Argentine.<sup>lxi</sup> *Africa Vive* also strives to show that the official government census information is misleading. To this end, *Africa Vive* is conducting its own statistical research to develop a more accurate idea of the number of people descended from slaves. Their estimates suggest that there may be as many as two million. Another organization the Center of Afro-Indo Studies, which is located in the northern province of Santa Fe, also works to promote Afro-Argentine history. Recently the Center of Afro-Indo Studies has organized many conferences and international meetings with African descendents from around the world to change this attitude.<sup>lxii</sup> In

addition, social groups like *La Juventicia*, *Los Aparecidos*, and *El Martín Fierro* exist.<sup>lxiii</sup> These groups like the ones before them provide moral and social support, especially since it is a common belief that Afro-Argentines no longer exist.

Educating people about Afro-Argentine culture and history poses a challenge because whites deny its existence and Afro-Argentines themselves have difficulty accepting it. Based upon interviews in the book, *¿No Hay Negros Argentinos?*, Lucía of Santa Fe, the daughter of a mestiza and a mulatto, writes about what it is like to be a black person from the interior of the country. Growing up, her father taught her that being black was a disadvantage and at home he gave her better clothes, toys, and education than her “white” sisters to compensate for her dark skin.<sup>lxiv</sup> She admitted “*en mi juventud no tenía conciencia de ser negra, vivía sin darme cuenta que la relación con la gente tenía que ver con mi color,*” or “during my childhood I was not aware that I was black, I lived without knowing that my relations with people had to do with my color.”<sup>lxv</sup> Not feeling she was a part of the black community, Lucía probably felt disconnected and a lack of concern with the Afro-Argentine plight. She later agreed there was no black community in Santa Fe. She stated, “*Solo en el barrio Santa Rosa de Lima están algo concentrados... poco participan de actividades en común, porque pocos de ellos se reconocen como negros. A nosotros desde la Colonia nos han dividido,*” or “only in Santa Rosa de Lima are they concentrated, few participate in common activities because few recognize themselves as being black. We have been divided since Colonial times.”<sup>lxvi</sup> This highlights a common problem facing blacks: they are reluctant to see themselves as members of the Afro-Argentine community.

Enrique, whose black parents separated when he was young, grew up in a school for orphans. He mentioned that discrimination is not overt, “*En nuestro país es muy, pero difícil, que alguien te agrede directamente, cara a cara con tu color... mucho pasa a tus espaldas,*” or in our country the discrimination is rare face to face... usually it is behind our backs.”<sup>lxvii</sup> Later he admitted, “*Cargamos con el síndrome de la esclavitud. A nosotros nos tiene evaluados como tipos alegres, deportistas, músicos,... y nosotros, los propios negros, creemos que somos,*” or “we are trapped by the slavery syndrome. We see ourselves based upon stereotypes that portray us as happy, athletes, musicians,... and those of us that are black believe that is who we are.”<sup>lxviii</sup> In addition, he freely admitted “*hay entre mis hermanos, negros que se avergüenzan de ser negros... ante situaciones de cargadas prefieren pasar desapercibidos*” or “among my brethren there are blacks who are embarrassed to admit they are black and when put in awkward situations they prefer to be unnoticed.”<sup>lxix</sup> As a person who appeared to be black and unlike Lucía, who could pass into another racial category, Enrique would have had to accept that he was black, which might have prompted him to learn about his history.

Tomás, a mulatto, from La Plata grew up in a rich family, which probably decreased the amount of discrimination he received. Though his white mother did teach him about black history that is where it stayed, in the past and irrelevant to Tomás. In addition, due to his family’s socioeconomic status “*mi papa hizo esfuerzos para que yo no la hiciera (la conscripción en el ejército)*” or “My father made sure that I would not have to serve in the army.”<sup>lxx</sup> In this case, Tomás benefited by coming from a rich family versus Enrique who did not. In Argentina, if a black person has money the assimilation process becomes

easier. Maria Lamadrid, founder of *La Fundación Africa Vive* also proclaims, "... *si han podido estudiar y si han podido blanquearse son blancos*," or "if blacks have had the opportunity to study, and if they have been able to whiten themselves, they are white."<sup>lxxi</sup> She is probably implying that Afro-Argentines who have access to higher education are economically better off and they choose to assimilate into white society. Though it is more likely that Afro-Argentines who attend universities probably have no choice but to assimilate because of the lack of black students in higher education.

As the number of Afro-Argentines continues to decrease, the story of their contributions to Argentine culture and history must be recognized, recaptured, and reconstructed. If not, future generations will never know that they existed. The statistical saying, "the numbers never lie," does not accurately reflect what has happened in the case of Afro-Argentines, many of whom because of miscegenation no longer appear to be black. Their ability to fuse European, Indigenous, and African cultures in the *tango*, *payador*, carnival, religion, and literature are examples of how they have shaped and defined Argentina. Today,

Afro-Argentine groups such as *Africa Vive* are committed to promoting their history, though their biggest challenge is for whites to recognize it and blacks to accept it. Therefore, they must continue the process of correcting the lies, misconceptions, and myths about Afro-Argentine culture and history. If, by chance, one day they no longer exist in Argentina, their legacy will tell another tale.

#### **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank Ulises Alaniz, Elda Obella, Tamara Obella, Celia, Amabel, Dr. David Stark, and Dr. Reid Andrews for their contributions to this paper.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Andrews, George Reid, *Los AfroArgentinos de Buenos Aires 1800-1900*, (Buenos Aires, 1989), 31.
- <sup>ii</sup> “En Argentina No Hay Negros,” see [www.nucleoradio.com/genesis/promocion/notas](http://www.nucleoradio.com/genesis/promocion/notas), 1.
- <sup>iii</sup> Op cit.
- <sup>iv</sup> Binayan Carmona, Narciso “Pasado y permanencia de la negritud,” *Todo es historia*, vol 162, 1980, 70.
- <sup>v</sup> Rosenblat, 1941 cited in Binayan Carmona, 70.
- <sup>vi</sup> La Nación, 1963, and Panorama, 1967 cited in Binayan Carmona, 70.
- <sup>vii</sup> Bell Thompson, Era, “Argentina Land of Vanishing Blacks,” *Ebony*, (October 1973), 75.
- <sup>viii</sup> Op cit.
- <sup>ix</sup> Ruchansky, Emilio, see [www.uruguay.com/laonda/LaOnda/](http://www.uruguay.com/laonda/LaOnda/), 2.
- <sup>x</sup> *Censo Nacional de Población Hogares y Viviendas 2001*, (Buenos Aires, 2002), 24.
- <sup>xi</sup> “En Argentina No Hay Negros,” 2 .
- <sup>xii</sup> Bell Thompson, 79.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ibid, 81.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Ibid, 74.
- <sup>xv</sup> Ruchansky, 2.
- <sup>xvi</sup> YAO, Jean-Arsene, “Negros en Argentina. Olvidados pero presentes” see [www.combonianos.com/mn/julio/](http://www.combonianos.com/mn/julio/), 1.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Ruchansky, 2.
- <sup>xviii</sup> This possibly demonstrates Argentina’s concern with governmental policies during this period and efforts to combat “subversives” during the “Dirty War” (1976-84).
- <sup>xix</sup> Ruchansky, 2.
- <sup>xx</sup> Alberdi, Juan Bautista, *Bases y puntos de partida para la organización de la Republica Argentina*, (Buenos Aires, 1952), 38, cited in Andrews, 123-4.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Ingenieros, José, *Sociología Argentina*, (Biblioteca científico-filosófica, Madrid, 1913), 41-2, cited in YAO, Jean Arsene, *Negros en Argentina: Integración e Identidad*, see [www.univbrest.fr/annis/Afroargentins](http://www.univbrest.fr/annis/Afroargentins), 3.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Ibid, 6.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> de Liboreiro, M. Cristina, *¿No Hay Negros Argentinos?*, (Buenos Aires, 1999), 56.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Coria, Juan Carlos, *Pasado y Presente de los negros en Buenos Aires*, 111.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Andrews, 195.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid, 109.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> de Liboreiro, 36.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Coria, 96.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Soler Lanás, Luis, “Gabino Ezeiza Verdad y Leyenda,” *Todo es Historia*, vol. 2, 1967, 75.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Coria, 106.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Ibid, 98 and 100.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Ministerio de Economía, obras y publicos. See <http://infoleg.mecon.gov.ar/scripts1/busquedas/cnsnorma.asp?tipo=Ley&nro=24120>
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Cagliani, Martín To, “History of Buenosairean Carnival,” *I circulate of History*, N 47, (February 2000), 1.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Goldberg, Marta, “Los Negros de Buenos Aires,” cited in Martínez Montiel, Luz María (Mexico, 1995), 581.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Andrews, 191.

- xxxvi Ortiz Oderigo, Nestor, *Aspectos de la cultura africana en el Río de la Plata*, (Buenos Aires, 1974), 33.
- xxxvii Ortiz Oderigo, 33.
- xxxviii "El Rosendal de Palermo," Legislatura de la ciudad de Buenos Aires Dirección General de Información y Archivo Legislativo see [www.cedom.gov.ar/es/lugaresdelaciudad/paseos/capitulo1](http://www.cedom.gov.ar/es/lugaresdelaciudad/paseos/capitulo1).
- xxxix Ortiz Oderigo, 34.
- xl Ibid, 41.
- xli *Archivo General de la Nación* cited in Ortiz Oderigo, 39.
- xlii Coria, 81.
- xliii Goldberg, Marta "Los negros de Buenos Aires," cited in Martínez Montiel, Luz María, "Presencia Africana en Sudamerica," (Mexico, 1995), 580.
- xliv Frigerio, Alejandro, "Las Religiones Africanas en la Argentina: cosmovisión y practicas," and Alo Ruben Ameigeiras, Nestor Tomás Auza, María Julia Carozzi, Alejandro Frigerio, Fortunato Millimacci, and Abelardo Jorge Soneira, *Sociología de la Religión*, (Buenos Aires, 1996), 258.
- xlv Ibid, 257.
- xlvi Ibid, 259.
- xlvii YAO, "Integración e Identidad," 11.
- xlviii Ibid, 10.
- xlix Ibid, 11.
- l Op Cit.
- li YAO, "Integración e Identidad," 12.
- lii Ruchansky, 2.
- liii Ruchansky, 2.
- liv Ibid, 3.
- lv Coria, 89-90.
- lvi Ruchansky, 1.
- lvii Ibid, 1.
- lviii Coria, 90.
- lix Op Cit.
- lx Coria, 5.
- lxi El Clair.com "Una mujer denunció que la discriminaron por ser negra," 1.
- lxii Ibid, 53.
- lxiii YAO, "Integración e Identidad," 17.
- lxiv de Liboreiro, 53.
- lxv Ibid, 54.
- lxvi
- lxvii Ibid, 55.
- lxviii Op Cit.
- lxix Op Cit.
- lxx de Liboreiro, 56.
- lxxi Ruchansky, 5.

## Bibliography

- Ameigeiras, Alo Rubén, Auza, Nestor Tomás, Carozzi, María Julia, Frigerio, Alejandro, Millimacci, Fortunato, and Soneira, Abelardo Jorge, *Sociología de la Religión*, (Buenos Aires, 1996).
- Andrews, George Reid, *Los AfroArgentinos de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires, 1989).
- Bell Thompson, Era, "Argentina, Land of Vanishing Blacks," *Ebony* (October, 1973), 75-107.
- Binayan Carmona, Narciso "Pasado y permanencia de la negritud," *Todo es historia*, vol 162, (Buenos Aires, 1980), 66-72.
- Cagliani, Martín To, "History of Buenaosairean Carnival," *Ucirculate of History*, vol 47, (February 2000).
- Censo Nacional de Población Hogares y Viviendas 2001*, (Buenos Aires, 2002).
- Chomosa, Oscar, "To honor the Ashes of their Forefathers: The Rise and Crisis of the African Nations in the Post-Independence State of Buenos Aires, 1820-1860," *The Americas*, 59:3, (2003): 347-78.
- Coria, Juan Carlos, *Pasado y presente de los negros en Buenos Aires*, (Buenos Aires, 1997).
- de Liboreiro, M. Cristina, *¿No Hay Negros Argentinos?*, (Buenos Aires, 1999).
- "El Rosendal de Palermo," Legislatura de la ciudad de Buenos Aires Dirección General de Información y Archivo Legislativo, see [www.cedom.gov.ar/es/lugaresdelaciudad/paseos/capitulo1](http://www.cedom.gov.ar/es/lugaresdelaciudad/paseos/capitulo1).
- "En Argentina No Hay Negros", see [www.nucleoradio.com/genesis/promacion/notas](http://www.nucleoradio.com/genesis/promacion/notas).
- \_\_\_ [infoleg.mecon.gov.ar/scripts1/busquedas/cnsnorma.asp?tipo=Ley&nro=24120](http://infoleg.mecon.gov.ar/scripts1/busquedas/cnsnorma.asp?tipo=Ley&nro=24120)
- Interview with Adriano Rocha, (May, 2002)
- Mari, María Cristina, "Matrimonios de castas en el Pago de Morón 1770," *Revista de Historia Bonaerense del Instituto Histórico del Partido de Morón*, (1998),56-8.
- Martínez Montiel, Luz María, *Presencia Africana en Sudamérica*, (Mexico, 1995).
- Ortiz Oderigo, Nestor, *Aspectos de la cultura africana en el Río de la Plata*, (Buenos Aires, 1974).
- Picotti, Dina, *El Negro en La Argentina*, (Buenos Aires, 2001).
- Puccia, Enrique, *Breve Historia del Carnaval*, (Buenos Aires, 1974).
- Rodríguez Molas, Ricardo, "Presencia de África Negra en la Argentina," *Desmemoria*, vol 6, issue 21/22, ( Jan/June, 1999), 33-70.
- Rossi, Vicente, *Cosas de Negros*, (Buenos Aires, 2001).
- Ruchansky, Emilio, "Negros en Buenos Aires? Fe de erratas", see [www.uruguay.com/laonda/LaOnda/121/](http://www.uruguay.com/laonda/LaOnda/121/)
- Shumway, Jefferey, "The Purity of My Blood cannot Put Food on My Table: Changing Attitudes toward Interracial Marriage in 19th Century Buenos Aires," *The Americas*, 58:2 (2001): 201-20.
- Simpson, Maximo, "Porteños de Color," *Panorama* (1967), 78-85.
- Soler Lanás, Luis, "Gabino Ezeiza Verdad y Leyenda," *Todo es Historia*, vol. 2, 1967.
- Villanueva, Estanislao, "El candombe nació en África y se hizo rioplantense," *Todo es Historia*, vol 162, (Buenos Aires, 1980), 45-58.
- [www.aica.org/aica/santoral/Santos/san\\_benito\\_de\\_palermo](http://www.aica.org/aica/santoral/Santos/san_benito_de_palermo).
- YAO, Jean Arsene, "Negros en Argentina: Integración e Identidad", see [www.univbrest.fr/amnis/Afroargentins](http://www.univbrest.fr/amnis/Afroargentins).
- YAO, Jean-Arsene, "Negros en Argentina. Olvidados pero presentes", see [www.combonianos.com/mn/julio/](http://www.combonianos.com/mn/julio/).