# African descent and whiteness in Buenos Aires

## *Impossible* mestizajes *in the white capital city*

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*M. Mujica Lainez*: Were all of our black people killed off during the war with Paraguay? When did they disappear?

*J.L. Borges*: I can say something based on personal experience. In 1910 or 1912 it was common to see black people [...] They were not killed off in our frontier wars nor in the Paraguayan war; but what happened to them later, I can't say [...]

*M. Mujica Lainez*: It's possible that their color faded [*puede ser que se hayan desteñido*], and that many of the whites that we know are blacks.

Manuel Mujica Lainez, *Los porteños* (1980), 27.

In 1881, José Antonio Wilde – a renowned intellectual and doctor from the capital city of Buenos Aires – published his memoirs, *Buenos Aires desde setenta años atrás*, which would become a leading primary source for the study of the early post-independence period in the Argentine capital. Wilde portrayed the "mulatto" J. Antonio Viera, a celebrated nineteenth-century actor and singer, as follows: "His courteous demeanor and his manners left nothing to be desired, and as the saying goes, *only his color was lacking* [*el color no más le faltaba*], or more accurately, he had *an excess of it*."[1] In 2010, more than a hundred and thirty years after Wilde's book was first published, Paula, a *porteña* (or resident of Buenos Aires city) who self-identifies as an Afro-descendant, said of herself in an interview: "Only my color is lacking [*a mí me falta el color nada más*]."

The extraordinary formal similarity between these two testimonies points to the historical persistence of a troubling relationship among perceived skin color, a supposedly expected "way of being," and the (im)possibility of recognition and self-recognition within established social categories. For what does it mean for someone to *lack* or to have *an excess of color*? In regard to what standard is someone's skin color judged to be *too much* or *too little*? This

verdict implies, among many other things, that there is something in that person – whether a "mulatto" or an "Afro-descendant" – that exceeds or does not fit into established social categories. In this chapter, I will explore this conceptual dislocation between appearances and ways of being, which, I argue, must be understood in relation to the absence of intermediate or mixed (*mestizo*) categories in Buenos Aires. My purpose is to illuminate the different ways in which social categories related to blackness, whiteness, and *mestizaje* – that is, racialized and racializing categories – are and have been produced and reproduced in Argentina's capital city since the late nineteenth century, with a particular focus on their present-day configurations.

It is important to note that Buenos Aires has long been represented as a white-European, modern, and "civilized" city, in opposition not only to the rest of the country, but also – since the capital city is often made to stand for the nation as a whole – to much of the rest of Latin America.[2] According to this broadly accepted representation, the city's population descends almost entirely from the European immigrants who arrived by the millions in response to the state's invitation to "populate" the country in the second half of the nineteenth century. This image of Buenos Aires and by extension of Argentina as white-European is partly supported by the widely held belief in the total extermination of the indigenous population in late-nineteenth-century wars, and by the conviction that the descendants of enslaved Africans gradually decreased in number over the course of that century until they disappeared.[3] In terms of Afro-Argentines, the focus of this chapter, several accepted hypotheses supposedly explain their "disappearance." The most frequently cited explanation is that people of African descent died *en masse* over the course of the nineteenth century due in part to the many epidemics that assailed Buenos Aires in that period (particularly the yellow fever epidemic of 1871), and in part to the overreliance on black soldiers as cannon fodder in wars, especially the Independence battles (1810–16) and the War of the Triple Alliance (1864–70, the "Paraguayan war" mentioned in the epigraph). In the same vein, the disappearance of Afro-Argentines is often attributed to disproportionately high mortality rates owing to the poor living conditions of freed people, especially following the Law of the Free Womb of 1813 or the abolition of slavery (1853 in the provinces, 1861 in Buenos Aires). Another common explanation is mestizaje – the idea that people of African descent (imagined as ever smaller in number) "mixed in" with lighter-skinned people (ever greater in number, especially during the period of mass immigration). Here, however, it is crucial to note that the idea of disappearance by mestizaje implies that the process of mixture is not imagined as having resulted in *mestizos* ["mixed" people]. Quite to the contrary: thinking about mestizaje as disappearance means imagining the dilution or absorption of one group into another, an issue I will return to shortly. All of these explanations for Afro-Argentines' "disappearance" – as well as the idea of disappearance itself – are continuously reproduced in institutions such as the school system and in a range of representational practices, such as

political speeches, public policies, the media, the arts, and so forth. Consequently, even though these hypotheses have been proven wrong by several generations of researchers, they remain durable pillars of national ideologies and pervasive themes within a national "common sense."[4]

In essence, over the course of the twentieth century, *porteños* have come to accept that there are no more black Argentines, giving rise to a situation that researchers and activists call "invisibilization." The invisibilization of Afro-Argentines does not refer to an actual disappearance of people, but rather, to wide-ranging transformations in social categories and in (self) perceptions that were the desired outcome of late-nineteenth-century processes of nation-building and state consolidation.[5] As part of their attempts to achieve an "improved" and more homogeneous national population, local elites implemented policies that ranged from courting European immigrants as a way of "improving" the local population and bringing the country nearer to European ideals of progress and modernity (Law 817 of Immigration and Colonization, 1876), to passing disciplinary labor legislation (such as vagrancy laws), enacting free, obligatory and secular schooling for every child (Law 1420 of Common Education, 1884), and enforcing obligatory military service (Law 4301 of Mandatory Enlistment, 1901). As a result of these processes, around 1910, the idea that the Argentine population was a melting pot [*crisol de razas*] gained strength. That representation implied the fusion of diversity into a homogeneous "Argentine race" defined as white-European.[6] In the first decades of the twentieth century, through a range of institutions of social control and with the rise of eugenics, psychiatry, and criminology, the state set out to protect and defend the white and homogeneous national race that, it was broadly believed, had finally been achieved.[7]

The belief, in this view, that every Argentine was white brought with it the conviction that race did not play any part in Argentine social relations and that the nation was an "exception" in Latin America.[8] But in fact, the "Argentine race" contained internal hierarchies. In this supposedly racially homogeneous country, difference and diversity were channeled through the class system, the dominant paradigm that allowed citizens to be inscribed in the nation and to be recognized and included in political struggles for or against the state.[9] The class structure reproduced inequalities persisting since colonial times, when society was more visibly divided into groups that measured purity of blood, origins, colors, status, and so on.[10] For this reason, socioeconomic differences within the national population have continued broadly – but not exclusively – to correspond to recognizable phenotypical differences. Yet since the early twentieth century, with the ascendancy of the idea of a uniformly white population and the emergence of class as the only admissible paradigm of difference, race and color (other than the naturalized "white") became issues almost impossible to discuss explicitly, or even to be contemplated. As a result of these processes, during the twentieth century the invisibilization of Afro-Argentines was nearly complete.

Nevertheless, beginning in the 1990s, a deep economic crisis resulting from decades of neoliberal politics uncovered an Argentina that was much closer to Latin America than many Argentines and outsiders had previously thought. The advent of ideologies that praised diversity (such as multiculturalism), together with the efforts of several multinational organizations and financing institutions (such as the World Bank, NGOs, or private foundations) to make loans to Argentina conditional on acquiescence with these ideologies, gradually fractured the state's longstanding commitment to homogeneity and whiteness. It may be true that, as anthropologist Rita Segato points out, this process brought a "canned," flattened sort of diversity to Argentina by imposing ideas and values that originated in historical processes largely foreign to that country.[11] But this process also opened new spaces for making the Afro-Argentine population visible, promoting the activities of a growing number of their organizations and the investigations of scholars who contest the idea of Afro-Argentines' disappearance. As these activists and scholars have shown, far from being gone, Afro-Argentines have continuously negotiated their inclusion in the nation, generally from positions of great inequality and sometimes marginality.[12]

This process is locally known as "revisibilization." Revisibilization implies not only demanding public recognition of the existence of Afro-Argentines and of their historical importance, but also facing up to repressed memories, painful pasts, and discriminatory attitudes. Revisibilization also requires finding new forms of self-identification in the face of social categories still deeply rooted in a national imagination that continues to deny the very possibility of the existence of black Argentines. Indeed, it was in this spirit that a delegation of African-descended activists representing Argentina attended the preparatory encounter for the United Nations' World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Forms of Intolerance in Santiago de Chile in 2000.[13] They decided to adopt the denomination of "Afro-descendants [*afrodescendientes*]" to include, first and foremost, the descendants of enslaved Africans in Argentina or Latin America more broadly, but the label was also in some cases extended to the descendants of African immigrants living and/or born in Argentina.[14] Nevertheless, in Buenos Aires there are various and sometimes competing categories of self-identification at play, as local organizations and groups champion different terms like "black [*negro*]," "Afro-Argentine of the colonial root [*afroargentino del tronco colonial*]," "African Diaspora," among others, each with its own inclusions, exclusions, and political implications.[15]

Working from the premise that every classificatory category is a historically situated and contingent social creation, this chapter analyzes how categories related to mestizaje, whiteness, and blackness work in present-day Buenos Aires.[16] To do so, it draws on the cases of three Afro-descendant porteñas: Nora, Emilia, and the previously cited Paula, all of whom I interviewed between 2008 and 2011. Focusing on these few cases allows me to perform a

close reading and a historically and culturally grounded analysis of the ways in which ideas about mestizaje, "blackness [*negritud*]," and "whiteness [*blanquitud*]" take on meaning at the intersection of individual, family, and broader local or national histories. I have selected these cases to reflect some of the diversity of the Afro-porteño community. Nora, for instance, is around 80 years old and had been living in Spain for more than 20 years at the time of our interview. Emilia and Paula are approximately 40 years old and currently live in the Greater Buenos Aires area.[17] These women represent different generations of families that held great prestige and importance within the Afro-porteño community at the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. Their families achieved recognition and even fame beyond the Afro-porteño community as well. These women also represent different socio-economic backgrounds. Nora can be described as upper-middle class (having trained as a nurse in her youth), while Emilia (a school teacher and a dancer of folkloric and African music) and Paula (a government employee and visual artist) can be described as lower-middle class, both at a certain disadvantage compared to Nora.

It is important to point out, moreover, that by the standards of Buenos Aires, these three women are socially (that is, seen by society as) white.[18] As such, their cases represent a unique part of the broader "Afro field" in that city.[19] Compared to Afro-descendants who are seen as black and who experience racist attitudes every day, these women have a very different situation. Yet, as we will see, they nonetheless suffer a structural racism whose existence Argentines deny. Their words and experiences as white Afro-descendants thus shed light, from a new angle, on the workings of social categories in Buenos Aires and on the processes by which difference is marked or unmarked in everyday life. The very existence of people who self-recognize as Afro-descendants while being socially identified as white may seem strange or even contradictory in the majority of countries in Latin America, where ideologies of mestizaje played a fundamental role in the formation of local matrixes of diversity or where whiteness was not envisioned as the only possible outcome of mixture. Unpacking this strangeness through these case studies will, I hope, contribute to the discussion of racial categories in other American countries. Similarly, the dynamics described in this chapter sometimes run parallel to, and sometimes diverge from, patterns in other Argentine regions where terms like "*criollo*," "white," "black," "mestizo," and "indigenous" have often taken on different meanings.[20] This chapter also contributes, then, to furthering our understanding of the ways in which constructions of racial and ethnic difference in Argentina (as elsewhere) have been markedly region-specific.

First, in order to lay out the complexity of thinking about racial categories in present-day Buenos Aires, I will briefly introduce two different types of "negritud" or blackness that exist today, naming them "racial negritud" and "popular negritud." Second, taking into account the two main types of social paradigms that govern perceptions of race and skin color in Buenos Aires

(a visual paradigm and a genetic paradigm), I will analyze how racialized and racializing categories are configured in such a way as to make the existence of mestizos impossible. Finally, I will explore the relationship between perceived colors and behaviors or "ways of being," showing how people's ways of being are continuously monitored in a society that praises whiteness and that does not allow the existence of gray zones, giving rise to lives shaped by (self) disciplining and to trajectories of concealment and oblivion. Together, these sections illuminate the ways in which the whiteness that characterizes the capital city has been, and is still, manufactured, sustained, and reproduced.

## WHO IS BLACK AND WHO IS WHITE IN BUENOS AIRES? RACIAL NEGRITUD AND POPULAR NEGRITUD

In Argentina, as in most Latin American countries, "race" is very difficult to analyze as an isolated category. In fact, race is embedded within and subsumed as a dimension of other social categories, especially class and nation. This way of understanding the social world is based on longstanding processes in which the formation of an "Argentine race" became entangled with other state projects: first, in the early nineteenth century, attempts to contain and incorporate diversity through the extension of political citizenship, and later, beginning at mid-century, the quest for a homogeneous and modern-European nation.[21] If both aspects of these projects – the taming of diversity and nation-building – were initially grounded in Enlightenment and liberal ideals of equality, cosmopolitanism, and progress, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries they fell under the influence of rising currents of scientific racism (though earlier ideals remained influential).

As a result of these processes, and bearing the evidence of their often contradictory political impulses, racial categories in Argentina and specifically Buenos Aires settled into a unique binomial formation that persists to this day. Argentines would come to be considered "white" by definition – for the invisible raciality of the nation is white (European)[22] – while people seen as pertaining to the "black race" would immediately be understood not only as foreigners but also as numerically insignificant.[23] As anthropologist Alejandro Frigerio has demonstrated, from the early twentieth century until the present, blackness in Buenos Aires has been reduced to a very limited and specific set of physical characteristics. This classificatory system, which rests upon the very high levels of mestizaje that took place in the city, reduces to a minimum the number of people recognizable as belonging to the "black race."[24] The cornerstone of this system of racial classification is the so-called *negro mota* ("mota" refers to tightly curled or "kinky" hair), considered the "true" black person, racially speaking. To be a proper "negro mota," a person must possess a combination of several key physical characteristics, such as very dark skin and tightly curled hair (also called *pelo viruta*), a wide nose, or thick lips. Dark skin is not enough, in this classificatory scheme, to mark someone as racially black; one or more of

the other traits mentioned earlier must also be present. In this sense, what is understood locally as racial blackness is defined visually rather than by a system of descent, blood, or genetics, making it different from other classificatory systems, such as the one conventionally understood to operate in the United States.[25] Everyone who is left out of this narrow "black" category – the vast majority of the population – is seen as *not-black*, or "normal."[26] And since in Argentina what is "normal" is, by definition, white, it follows that whiteness is configured locally as a capacious category that incorporates everything that is left outside of racial blackness. This social economy of color and race – present in several parts of the country but particularly pronounced in the capital – is known as porteño dualism.[27] This dual system inscribes and reproduces locally and historically specific ways of seeing and perceiving whiteness and blackness. Meanwhile, thousands of Afro-Argentines who are seen as "racially black" according to local standards (that is, "negros mota" or "actual" black people) are treated as foreigners on a daily basis, a practice that reveals and reinforces the supposed incompatibility of blackness and Argentineness. This limited representation of what is racially black carries with it all the stereotypically racist meanings associated with blackness for centuries in the broader Atlantic world, such as innocence, stupidity, joy, strength, hypersexuality, savagery, kindness, and so forth.[28] Such racism, however, is considered "non-existent" in Argentina and is commonly denied on the grounds that there are no racially black people in the country to be racist against(!).[29] I call this particular racial construction "racial negritud."[30] The porteño version of racial negritud combines all the potentiality of the visually based classificatory system that characterizes Buenos Aires, with many elements of the genetic or biological classificatory system derived from the "scientific" ideas about race that reached their peak in Argentina in the first half of the twentieth century and have yet to be fully dislodged.

In contrast to the extreme precision of definitions of racial negritud, there exists in Argentina another kind of negritud or blackness that is much more difficult to define. These "negros" do not represent a racial alterity to the nation, for they are part of the nonblack, "normal" or white national "whole," and they are conceived – in general – as Argentines.[31] This kind of negritud does not rely, in principle, on visual markers of race, but is determined primarily by a "way of being" associated with the lower classes, the popular world, and the grotesque: a way of seeing the world (backward or outdated), (uncivilized) actions, (lack of) education, (poor, filthy) place of living, etc. Basically, the attributes of this sort of blackness reflect the pejorative way in which many members of the (generally urban) middle and upper classes conceive of the popular world and popular sectors. In a very complex field of social categorization, where phenotypes are taken into account in very confusing and entangled ways, these "negros" do not, in theory, pertain to a different race, and the use of that word as an insult is not considered (at least by those who make the insult) to be racist. However, as several scholars have noted, the people

dismissively called "negros" (also "*cabecitas negras*" or "*negros cabeza* [little black heads]," "*villeros* [shantytown dwellers]," "*grasas* [tacky people]," or "*negro de alma* [black on the inside, even if visually white]") are usually of darker skin tones than the people thus naming them.[32] In this light, the use of the epithet "negro," "disguised as a social and cultural stigma, masks a clear racial discrimination toward mestizo and low-income social groups."[33] To differentiate this construction of blackness from racial negritud, I will call it "popular negritud". The emergence of this kind of classificatory system based on social class and ways of being, together with the idea that "real" black people largely "disappeared," has made possible the expulsion of the racial dimension from the realm of the explicit.

Just as both racial negritud and popular negritud derive their classifying power from mutually reinforcing cultural and biological axes, so must whiteness be thought of as possessing intertwined biological and cultural dimensions.[34] Whiteness thus consists of ideas about skin color or lines of descent *and* ideas about an expected way of being, related to European modernity and a capitalist system. Basically, whiteness is the baseline from which both forms of negritud are and have been distilled and populated. This process leaves large portions of the population – whether because of their skin color and features or because of their ways of being – on the margins or entirely outside of the (white) "normal," and thus in a space of constant vulnerability.[35]

In sum, in the porteño racial and social ideological complex, whiteness encompasses a visual shade that ranges from people "without color" (middle and upper classes) to the nonracial "black people" (the popular world). This construction of whiteness, however, is itself tacitly racialized, as the middle and upper classes see themselves as whiter and with more European (and therefore more acceptable) tastes and behaviors than the popular sectors.[36] Presenting itself as nonracial (and nonracist), this racial-social ideological complex restricts normality to whiteness while providing very strict lines of perceptibility for racial negritud. Simultaneously, it creates a structure of colors and behaviors linked to values of what is acceptable and what is not, which has very tangible consequences for the lives of people who are left outside of whiteness, or who – like Nora, Paula, and Emilia – are trapped in the classificatory system's ambiguous or intermediate zones. These women's stories can help us gain deeper insight into this ideological complex and its power to expand or limit personal possibilities and life trajectories.

## HAVING TOO LITTLE OR TOO MUCH COLOR: THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF MESTIZAJE

It is important to emphasize that Nora, Paula, and Emilia recognize themselves as white people, and that they know that society classifies them as such. Paula, for instance, describes herself as "*blanca teta* [white as a breast, or literally, "tit-white"]." Similarly, Emilia says: "I am *blanca teta* and have light eyes."

The expression "blanca teta" refers to the extreme of whiteness and it means something like "the whitest that a skin can be," since it represents a zone of the (white) body at its most "natural" and supposedly never touched by sunlight. This expression works similarly to "negro mota," which (as explained earlier) defines the opposite extreme of the color spectrum and means something like "truly black." Finally, Nora says about herself: "I have green eyes and [when I was born] my hair was so blond that they cut it several times to force it to grow, they thought I had no hair . . . and it was because my hair was so blond that it was almost invisible." Unlike Emilia and Paula, Nora's skin color would be defined locally as "*trigueño* [wheat-colored, brownish]." In all three cases, one of the parents of these women was of predominantly European descent.

Besides their self-recognition as white, Paula, Emilia, and Nora recognize themselves as descendants of enslaved Africans, but in slightly different ways. For example, Paula and Emilia grew up knowing that they had African ancestors, but Nora found this out as an adult by reading a history book. That book was George Reid Andrews' foundational *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*, which appeared in Spanish in 1989. Andrews' book marked a turning point in studies about Afro-Argentines, as it was the first to question their "disappearance" and simultaneously offered one of the most comprehensive historical accounts of slavery and people of African descent in Buenos Aires. Considering how deeply entrenched the idea of a white Argentina is among Argentines, it should come as no surprise that a book like this was written by a foreign scholar. Nor is it surprising that the book was only published in Argentina almost a full decade after its first edition in English (in 1980). *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires* became an obligatory reference in Afro-Argentine studies, an achievement recognized even beyond the scholarly world (to the point that Andrews appears in a recent critically acclaimed novel, *Fiebre negra*, as the subject of the main character's romantic dreams and the source of her fascination with the Afro-Argentine past).[37] For Nora, then, discovering information about her family in a book that enjoyed such legitimacy and prestige marked an immediate change in the way she and her family saw themselves. For until that moment, Nora had lived her life assuming she was white-European:

NORA: I realized that my family *had been black*, but only once I was a grown-up. I was an adult. Because I had never known [. . .]. When I bought [. . .] Andrews' book, when I read it and saw that my grandfather was there, then I said: "But of course!" And then I began to *put two and two together*.
LG: You were reading and you said "This is my grandfather"?
NORA: Yes, of course [. . .] and there was also Tata Sosa, whose portrait we have in every one of our houses, he is family.[38]

Note that Nora stresses that her family "had been black," which means that they were not black anymore and, consequently, that she was not either. This way of constructing race is in keeping with the ideology of whitening

historically at work in Buenos Aires. This ideology implies that in the event of mixing, the race that persists is the white one – because it is conceived as the strongest and most adaptable – and it is the one that is most visually "legible" according to the local system of visual racial classification. This particular ideology of whitening was crucial in the nation-building process. It made possible the promotion of European immigration in order to "improve" the population through mestizaje, both biological and cultural. But it simultaneously created a classificatory system that did not allow for the existence of intermediate or mixed zones. In this situation, the intermingling of people considered white with those considered black would not result in mestizos or mulattos, as in other parts of Latin America; rather, as long as these newer generations did not present the full set of characteristics that would relegate them to racial negritud, they would be considered white. This explains why (to return to an earlier point), according to widely held ideas, Afro-Argentines are seen to have disappeared in part due to mestizaje (understood as dilution/absorption): the implication is that they had "faded" or turned white. This whitening process – based on the positive appraisal of whiteness over blackness – can be traced back to the nineteenth century or even colonial times, and even today it is discursively recreated and reinforced when, in conversations, people reveal only their European ancestors. "European" is the ancestry most commonly put forth in public settings and indeed in private ones, as occurred in Nora's case: she only spoke (and knew) about her French-Basque descent until she read Andrews' book, which allowed her to "put two and two together."

Unlike Nora, Paula and Emilia spoke of racial negritud as something that had always been present in their lives. But they framed it using terms pointedly different from those made available by the broadly accepted porteño visual system of identification. Emilia, for instance, said: "you have it in your genes [...] I am a black woman inside a white skin, but blackness doesn't show through skin. I mean, we are all equal, skin color doesn't matter. What's valuable is what is inside." Similarly, Paula explained that "it shows up everywhere ... you can't see it but it is there [...] it's genetic I guess..." In other words, unlike Nora, Emilia and Paula adhere to a racial conception of negritud linked to genetics and biology, more typical of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, when "scientific" theories of race – even after being widely discredited in the wake of World War II – continue to insinuate themselves into our daily lives through a range of seemingly innocuous studies in medicine, psychology, or population genetics. This "biological" way of thinking about race and descent can be compared to the "one-drop rule" historically used in the United States to determine who is black and who is not, and it runs counter to the porteño system of classifying racial types primarily through visual means. In noting this distinction, it is important to remember that between Nora (more than 80 years old) and Emilia and Paula (both around 40), there is a gap of approximately two generations. Moreover, both Paula and Emilia are engaged in revisibilization struggles, while Nora – whether

because of her age, her politics, or her location outside of the country – is not. These circumstances are relevant because they speak to the paradigm shift that took place in Argentina in the 1990s as described in the introduction to this chapter – a shift that influenced and perhaps even made possible new ways of thinking about race, even as it brought with it a new set of limitations.

One of these limitations becomes evident when Paula, who does not have any of the locally accepted visible signs of racial *negritud*, exposes the conceptual dislocation that prevents her from self-identifying the way she would like to: "[…] it's only my color that's lacking, that's how I feel, I only lack color." Indeed, in the absence of external evidence of her racial *negritud* – according to local visual parameters – she feels discriminated against when people dismiss her self-identification as an Afro-descendant:

PAULA: […] I see a lot of "Afro" in myself. [But people] tease me, they annoy me. They offend me, I feel offended many times, and I feel more discriminated than people might think. That is, I am discriminated for the opposite [of what is usual], because they mock me, all the time. It's mockery all the time. It's "don't believe her," "Oh, as if she's really an Afro-descendant, ha ha ha." […] [E]verything we feel that comes out in art […] everything, dance, music […], all of that comes with the genetic package, I think this is true […].

Likewise, Emilia said:

EMILIA: Well, I might be dancing *malambo*[39] [and people would say] "the blond woman was seized by a convulsion" and then, well, that would drive me crazy. […] But heritage [used here in a biological sense] is stronger and I would answer: "no, the blond woman wasn't seized by any sort of convulsion; the *negra* [black woman] was seized by the *Afro*."[40]

Contrary to strategies of "passing" familiar from the United States context, in which the ability to be socially recognized as white could provide a partial escape from severe anti-black discrimination, for Paula and Emilia discrimination stems from the impossibility of having their African ancestry socially recognized. This impossibility is grounded in the contradiction between their phenotype, which makes them "white" according to the visual structure used locally, and what they claim as their "black genetics," invisible to the eye but "verifiable" through their aptitude for dance and music. For these women, racial *negritud* emerges and becomes visible in direct relation to the stereotypical idea that black people carry music and dance in their blood or genes, an idea shared by the majority of porteños.[41] Behind this thought process lies an attempt to subvert dominant whitening ideologies by appealing to an invisible but powerful, genetically inherited knowledge. Yet Argentina's whiteness is a one-way journey – it is the nation's teleology, as anthropologist Claudia Briones has argued – and the visual system society uses to sustain it does not allow these two women to "go backward," to "stop" being white, or to (re)become nonwhite.[42]

In this regard, both the term "Afro" used by Paula and Emilia to identify themselves and the term "Afro-descendant" itself seem to introduce the possibility of mixed or mestizo categories, as they appear to be unattached to specific colors (and thus inclusive of many) and to reference instead geographical origins and cultural traditions. In fact, Afro-Argentine activists chose this terminology specifically for its ability to deemphasize color in order to leave behind any racial implications. Nevertheless, for these women, "Afro" is the materialization of a genetic profile (if not a color), of a biological "heritage" that carries specific and distinctive abilities (such as dance), of a racial *negritud* that should rightfully place them in one of the extremes of the racial continuum. Consequently, Paula and Emilia do not locate themselves as mestizas; instead, they use the term "Afro" as a referent for racial *negritud*. This same use of "Afro" is widely shared, and indeed made possible, by a society that does not permit the visibly white Paula and Emilia to self-recognize as Afro: "Oh, as if she's really an Afro-descendant, ha ha ha." "Afro," in this sense, does not allow someone to be two things at once: European-Argentine and African-Argentine, for example, or white and black, or even something entirely new or hybrid resulting from that mixture. By imposing a genetic racial matrix upon the dominant visual one, Paula and Emilia fall right back into the logic of porteño categorial dualism. Even though Paula and Emilia feel limited, on a daily basis, by their visually determined whiteness, they cannot claim a mixed category. Because their own subjectivity has developed from within dualistic categories, their attempts to fight one binomial classificatory system lead them to appeal to the other, without ever resolving their sense of dislocation.

The racial paradigm that Emilia and Paula use also becomes evident when these women speak about their ancestors. Emilia, for example, considers her grandfather "negro" while her family does not: "I knew my grandfather was black [...]. But afterwards [my mother and aunt] said: well, he wasn't that black, he was chocolate-colored or *morenito* [the diminutive form of *moreno*, a term denoting dark skin – here, the diminutive is intended to soften the term or diminish its presence]." According to Emilia's mother and aunt, who used a visual racial system, being "of chocolate color" or "moreno" seemed to move Emilia's grandfather away from racial *negritud*. Similarly, when Nora thought about her ancestors she said:

NORA: My grandfather was *moreno*. [...] *He was not black, he was moreno* ... I don't recall that; for me he wasn't even *moreno*. I remember him as a *normal man*, gorgeous, handsome, very nice, but he wasn't one of these persons with *a wide nose* or *lips* ... no, not at all. [...] The one who had more of those traits was my aunt. They called her "*negrita* [the diminutive form of negra or black woman, indicating an affective dimension or an intention to soften the term]," aunt Carmen, the youngest of all the siblings [...]. She wasn't *that morena*.[43]

Nora strings together her grandfather's "normality" – his unspoken whiteness untouched by any of the visible traits of racial *negritud*, such as a wide nose or

thick lips – with a language that avoids mixed categories (mulatto or mestizo). Nevertheless, in her word choice Nora refers to a gradation of skin color, with the word "moreno" standing out, as it did in Emilia's mother's and aunt's reported speech.

The term "moreno" and others like it provide an important clue for understanding local racial ideologies. In Buenos Aires, depending on the context, "moreno" may be used to refer to a person with a dark skin tone but who is perceived as within the bounds of racial whiteness, as well as to describe (in softened terms) a person understood as racially black. This same ambiguity is also present in the term "*pardo* [brownish-colored]," and in the term "trigueño," which Andrews has signaled as key to the transfer of people from the category "black" to that of "white" in nineteenth-century official statistics.[44] Significantly, in colonial times "moreno" was not an ambiguous word; it meant "black," and "pardo" meant "mulatto." Yet as "mulatto" (like other explicitly intermediate terms) disappeared from the local vocabulary, "moreno" and "pardo" became ambiguous and interchangeable terms. In that sense, these terms can be understood as points of articulation among racial categories and enablers of movement into the category of whiteness.[45] "Trigueño" also works in this way, as it was used to describe European immigrants with darker skin colors as well as anyone whose skin color could not be placed at either extreme of the color line. These three terms ("moreno," "pardo," and "trigueño") designate people with skins that are darker than those described as "blanca teta," but the terms do not necessarily designate racial negritud or popular negritud. These terms, with their ambiguity and their ability to bridge and allow passage across racial categories, illustrate one of the ways in which the category of racial negritud is continually narrowed in favor of whiteness, a process continuously reproduced across society more broadly. Similarly, in Buenos Aires, to call someone a "negro" may connote strong feelings of affection, familiarity, and friendliness, and when used in this sense the term is not related to skin color. This is yet another way in which the racial meanings of the word "negro" are veiled or altogether voided, allowing it to move closer to whiteness. The reader will recall, for instance, Emilia's phrase "the *negra* was seized by the Afro." Since Emilia is "blanca teta," she was channeling her racial negritud through the concept of "Afro," while leaving "negra" in suspense, in an ambiguous place, signaling the term's inability or insufficiency to connote racial blackness. Or, for example, in Nora's account, her grandfather's designation as "moreno" or her aunt's as "negrita" were never clearly linked to a race that was different from the tacit "normal" (whiteness) – at least while Nora was a child and the issue of racial negritud was completely off the table (in subsequent paragraphs I will return to this question of the silencing of black ancestry in Afro-Argentine families).

The way "moreno" works as an articulating category becomes very clear when Nora describes another of her aunts, Amalia:

NORA: I always say that my aunt might have been a *cuarterona* [quadroon] or something like that, because she was very special [...]. That aunt was beautiful. I always think that she had the beauty of the quadroon, but without being black, only *morena*.[46]

Quadroon is a mixed category used in the colonial period, and in Spanish America it implied a quarter of Indian "blood" and the rest Spanish, though in some places it could also connote African ancestry in similar proportions.[47] This category of mestizaje was thus related to a biological system that tracked "blood" or descent, detached in principle from possible visual outcomes.[48] Nora, also using a biological system, assumes that a quadroon would be nearer to a racial negro than to a mestizo or a white person. That is why she hurries to remove her aunt from that definition: her aunt was a quadroon but "without being black, only *morena*." Nora is pulling her aunt back into a visual system where she would be white, though with a darker skin tone than "blanca teta"; or at least her aunt would not belong to racial negritud, understood in its biological sense. "Morena" appears again as a referent of the visual system, displacing the language of (black) "bloodlines," which mean nothing locally and which, in any case, have been understood to "disappear" through dilution in whiteness. In contrast to terms such as "Afro-descendant" or "Afro," which make it possible to remove people from the visual paradigm and situate them in the biological one (as we saw in Paula and Emilia's cases), the terms "moreno," "pardo," "trigueño," and often "negro" itself remove people from the biological paradigm and situate them in the visual one. We must understand them, then, as articulators among classificatory systems.

For her part, Paula describes her family as follows:

LG: Your [great-grandfather] married [a Spanish woman]...
PAULA: Yes, she was white with light eyes.
LG: And their children?
PAULA: They all turned out black [...] All of them.
LG: And your mom?
PAULA: She is *a mulata* [...] My mom is *mulatita* ["a little bit" mulatto], and so is my aunt. Maybe my aunt has whiter features, but not my mom. My mom has the nose, the eyebrows...

It is relevant here that Paula uses the intermediate category – mulato/a – to name her mother, instead of relying on the local binomial classificatory system. However, Paula does not use the mulatto category with her grandfather, though this term would apply to him according to classifying systems that recognize mestizaje. Instead, she speaks of him as "negro." Apparently, Paula is once again combining the visual racial system with one based on descent. That is why, when returning to local visual categories to describe her mother, Paula has to search for other signs of racial negritud ("the nose, the eyebrows") while her aunt was already seen as "white." And just as with Nora and her quadroon aunt, the fact that Paula's mother could be identified as "mulata" placed her in the realm of racial negritud. Yet unlike Nora, Paula did not try to

take her relative out of racial negritud. On the contrary, what Paula was seeking to emphasize was the very racial negritud that would allow her, as her mother's daughter, to be designated as an Afro-descendant as well. As a result, the terms "mulata" and "cuarterona" – which are not currently in use in the city except, as in these cases, among people looking for different ways of classifying themselves – end up adapting to the local binomial system. In that context, they work as categories denoting racial negritud, according to the system of "blood"/biology/descent, and not as the intermediate categories they were in their original contexts.

In short, "moreno," "pardo," "trigueño," and even "negro" are all categories that, in the broader local usage, signify intermediate skin tones but without a necessary association with racial negritud. They work to help bring people of darker skin tones closer to whiteness which, readers will recall, is locally determined through a visual system that comprises a broad range of phenotypes, even though it is grounded in supposedly European descent. The term "Afro" works in a parallel manner, though in the opposite direction: it helps to take people out of the visual system with its emphasis on whiteness, and to place them instead into a genetic matrix, bringing them closer to racial negritud while skipping over intermediate options. In both cases, we are dealing with articulators among classificatory systems, whose function is to mediate between visual and biological systems that are always binomial. Disguised as intermediate or mestizaje terms, these categories work by re-locating what is in the gray zones to one or another extreme ("black" or "white"), and by moving people to one or the other system of categorization (visual or genetic), depending on the context, without allowing them to occupy intermediate spaces. Both the visual and the genetic systems of classification are grounded in the positive valorization of whiteness (seen as a welcome and irreversible historical outcome), thus restricting any possibility for making visible the nonwhite/non-European. This situation illustrates how powerfully social classifications are imposed and maintained in Buenos Aires through the teleological and legitimating force of racial and cultural whiteness, as we saw (in different ways) through Nora, Paula, and Emilia's cases. At the same time, these dynamics lead us to wonder about the experiences and struggles of people on the margins of whiteness: those who, whether because of their phenotypical traits or their "ways of being," or according to what they are able to present or hide in crucial social situations, are vulnerable to being classified as nonwhite and therefore at risk of being seen as deviants from the "normal." Once again, Nora, Paula, and Emilia's family stories can help us untangle some of the past and present consequences of these experiences.

## WAYS OF BEING: ON MOVING AWAY FROM (OR BEING KEPT IN) "NEGRITUD"

Racial markers are not innocuous: negritud carries with it connotations of derision and exclusion that can be traced all the way back to the origins of

the slave system. And even in a supposedly "deracialized" Argentina, the power of these connotations is palpable, as can be seen in Emilia's case:

EMILIA: [My mother and aunt face] the issue of not wanting to recognize part of their roots. Because they have *pelo mota* and they straighten it with a flat-iron. It is a small detail but, well, there are other ways in which they don't accept themselves. For example, I might tell my mother or my aunt "shut up, *negrita*," and they'll answer, "I'm not black." They themselves will say this to me! And then I'll get mad and I'll reply: "And where do you think that *pelo mota* comes from?" And they'll have to shut up. [...][My sister] has really kinky hair, super kinky, but you can't tell because she straightens it. But she has *viruta* [very coarse] hair, not just the common tight curls, she has *viruta* hair, and she hates it ....

Although this reaction to tightly curled hair (known in other countries as "bad hair") is not exclusive to Argentina – it exists in the majority of Latin American countries and feminist scholar Hill Collins cites it as part of the "matrix of racial domination" in the United States – in an Argentine context that upholds whiteness as an almost totalizing normality, carrying such visible signs of racial *negritud* brings with it the risk of falling into abnormality or deviance.[49] In this light, the importance that Emilia's family members place on ironing and hiding their hair's original form becomes understandable. In the same way, Paula relates how her mother found, upon her body, some of the visual signs of racial *negritud*, and, as a perpetual inhabitant of the margins of inclusion, felt threatened and potentially defined by them at all times: "[My mom] had a lot of complexes [...] about her nose. Because she said it was broad. So my mom slept with a clothespin on her nose, during like two years of her adolescence she slept with this clothespin." As with Emilia's mother and aunt, for Paula's mother it was essential to try to modify bodily traits (in her case, a broad nose) that signaled racial *negritud*. In the porteño ideological-social-racial system, racial *negritud* is construed as a radical and negative alterity, always visible and, in principle, impossible to hide.[50] Racial *negritud* is also inextricably related to ugliness and strangeness. In this regard, Nora relates:

NORA: We arrived at a house. [...] What I didn't know beforehand was that the owner was a woman who was black as coal. [...] And my sister and I thought she was wearing a *virulana* [steel wool] wig. She was an old lady... and we said: "Grandfather, your friend is really ugly!" "Don't say that, girls," he responded. "She is a very elegant lady, very charming."

The ideals of beauty that have become dominant in Argentina since the end of the nineteenth century celebrate white skin, blond, straight hair, and light eyes.[51] It cannot surprise us, then, that the question of the beauty or ugliness of Nora's relatives had come up frequently in her family. For example, she added about Colonel Sosa:

NORA: Yes, our family had his portrait. [...] He was very respected by the family. Not by the kids, because we saw him as ugly, because he had ... a hairy beard with those

things on the front that generals typically wear [sideburns], with his uniform and all. So we'd say, "Tata Sosa is so ugly," and aunt Carmen always replied, "You are wrong, he was a beautiful man." But in the picture we saw a dark thing, with this white hair . . . .

Beauty and ugliness were thus closely related to whiteness or negritud, with real consequences in people's lives. For instance, Emilia's sister, who has a darker skin tone than Emilia, always felt she was at a disadvantage due to this difference. Emilia recalled that her sister used to say to her: "You are the pretty one, not me; you are the white one, not me." And Emilia adds: "I know my [European] grandmother said [at my birth]: 'finally, a blond and light-eyed baby was born,' and she was in front of my sister, and my sister was thirteen. . . ." According to Nora's family account, the doctor who helped deliver Nora said something similar: "Well, the sun of the family is born." In these accounts, those who expressed joy at Emilia and Nora's appearance dramatized the widely held view that mixing with Europeans was successfully resulting in the sought-after process of whitening, gradually eliminating racial negritud from bodies (classified according to the local visual system) that then became beautiful. It is also worth noting that both Emilia and Nora's families transmitted these accounts to them, perhaps as a way of highlighting events and values that were meant to bring happiness.

In light of this, Paula explained that she thought her Spanish great-grandmother "[. . .] was exquisite, she was striking, very striking." But it is interesting to point out that this striking woman described her own husband, Paula's famous Afro-Argentine great-grandfather, as follows: "That *negrito* [the affectionate diminutive for negro], that *negrito* was charismatic, very seductive." Paula elaborates: "They say he was terribly seductive, he was not handsome, he was not handsome but he was seductive . . . charismatic and charming, a gentleman." In sum, for Paula's great-grandmother and for Paula herself, this great-grandfather was not handsome, but he had other positive qualities and manners that made it possible to "ignore" his racial negritud. Just like the "mulatto" J. Antonio Viera, described by Wilde in his famous work, Paula's great-grandfather's only defect was that he had *an excess of color*.

The charisma and gallantry that Paula attributes to her great-grandfather finds a parallel in Nora's description of her grandfather: "My grandfather [. . .] was very dapper, very well-mannered. He was such a polite man, so elegant, always so well put together [. . .]. Besides, he was a teacher in the armed forces, where he made his career. He had gorgeous handwriting. He was a cultured man, he was delicious." And about her "quadroon" aunt, Nora said: "my aunt Amalia was beautiful. How can I explain it? She was kind of strong. Not weak. She was strong but elegant, a beautiful woman." Through Nora's and Paula's testimonies, as in Wilde's before them, we can see that refined behaviors, education, and gallantry, in the case of men, or elegance in the case of women,

were conceived of as possible ways of unmarking oneself racially, of down-playing or sidestepping the pejorative meanings attached to skin color or to perceived ugliness and strangeness. That is why for Paula's mother, hiding one's potential racial *negritud* involved not only the modification (inasmuch as possible) of physical traits, but also, at the urging of her family members, a constant self-patrolling according to the standards of "polite" behavior, a "containment" of the physical boundaries of herself:

PAULA: [My aunts] used to say to my mom: "don't wipe your nose, don't cough, don't speak in front of people, because if a *dark one* does that it looks bad." So my mother was all *contained* [*contenida*] all the time, all *contained*. Then when she went to [the privacy of] the bathroom she sneezed, she did everything there. [...] All these things built upon themselves: you were dark, or black, you came from African roots, you couldn't [...], you had to be careful about everything because anything could stigmatize you so much more, do you understand?[52]

It is highly disciplined people such as these – people who, at different moments, turned themselves into models of polite conduct according to prevailing norms of social and bodily propriety – who would be seen as having "too much" color: their visible traits (dark color, potentially "black" facial features) did not coincide with their ("civilized") "ways of being." This dislocation placed them in a zone where classification standards became blurred and porous.

The fundamental importance of measured, educated, disciplined, and "contained" behaviors in these passages speaks to one of the key ways in which whiteness was and is constructed in Buenos Aires. The "ways of being" explored here must be understood as learnable behaviors that enable people to "progress" or "improve," and not as biologically determined, inherited, or unchangeable characteristics. This definition rests upon long-term historical processes related to nineteenth-century European modernity, Enlightenment values, the expansion of citizenship, and capitalism, when ideas about "culture" and "race" were not completely dissociated from one another. In nineteenth-century Buenos Aires, the nonwhite social sector previously known (in colonial times) as *castas* – essentially blacks and mulattoes, because the indigenous population was scarce in the city – together with everyone who did not belong to the aristocracy, was lumped together under the category of "popular world" or "popular sectors."[53] Porteño elites saw this urban popular world as an amalgamation of grotesque, uneducated people, with uncouth manners and an unrestrained sexuality, closer to barbarism than to civilization, though politically mobilizable and, above all, potentially improvable. What is striking here is that as the nineteenth century progressed and as the Afro-descendant population supposedly "disappeared," black people actually held such importance in the city's cultural and political affairs that they became the prototypical figures of the urban popular world. As a direct reflection of this position, during the final decades of the nineteenth century – precisely when

modern social classes were emerging and the city was changing rapidly due to immigration and economic expansion – that popular world came to be conceived of and explicitly described as "black" or "of color." In sum, "blackness" melded with and came to characterize the popular world as a whole, a popular world elites believed to be uncouth but civilizable through education and discipline.[54] In this way, blackness disappeared neither from the city's imagination nor from its lexicon; it became, rather, the concept and the term used widely to designate every form of unsuitable behavior coming from poor, "primitive," or "uncivilized" social sectors – no matter their skin color or race – thus providing the historical basis for today's popular negritud. Notably, while unacceptable behaviors by members of the popular classes were derided as "black," similar behaviors by elites would be understood, conversely, as "pranks" or "mimicry," performances that were at their most explicit during carnival. But it was exactly the possibility of "improvement," "civilization," or "regeneration" – the latter term a favorite of Afro-porteño intellectuals in the 1880s[55] – encoded in ideas about the popular world that offered the inhabitants of the margins a legitimate path to becoming part of a nation that wished to be modern and white-European, a process that simultaneously ensured their inclusion as citizens.[56] And many Afro-porteños embraced this ideology and its promise of inclusion.

According to late-nineteenth-century Afro-porteño intellectuals, achieving regeneration required education, proper manners (that is, "modern" ones patterned on European standards of behavior), shedding old ("African") traditions or reserving them only for the private sphere, working to provide stability for one's family and, of course, serving one's country.[57] Through this sort of personal effort, a person's black past (never considered a positive legacy), their non-European traditions, and the supposedly close relation between negritud and vice could be "ignored." "Civilizing" oneself in this way also brought with it the promise of social mobility, related as much to economic improvement as to social prestige. The realm of popular negritud, with its intrinsic capacity for education and improvability, allowed many Afro-descendants with "dubious" appearances, and even many socially black people, to move closer to whiteness. And in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one of the paths that led Afro-descendants to gain social prestige and a more comfortable standard of living – even in the face of the obstacles that discrimination placed in their way – was undoubtedly the army. Nora's grandfather, as mentioned previously, had been a military man:

NORA: He had his military wage. His was a model family [...]. They helped people. He had his salary. All the children had careers. As was customary at the time, his daughters attended the Red Cross nursing courses when they were 17 years old, something only done by well-to-do families. [...] And in my grandparents' house there was a stairway, and upstairs there were three rooms for the help. They had only two women as help, the cook and the cleaning lady, who was a Spaniard by the way, charming. They both were named María.

This last paragraph is remarkable for the way in which Nora inverts the typical image of black people as domestic servants, reserving that place instead for the white-European immigrants who served traditional local families.[58] This image highlights Nora's family's status and upward mobility.

Aside from a military career, other kinds of government jobs allowed many Afro-Argentines to improve their economic situations, find economic stability, and even achieve social mobility. Emilia's Afro-porteño grandfather was "the first typist for the National Congress." With this grandfather, her mother and aunt "lived [...] in the city center, downtown, they even lived in [the middle-class neighborhood of] Flores. [...] My grandfather would take them on Thursdays and Fridays to the theaters, they would pick him up when he left work at the Congress." One can safely assume that this grandfather's manners and ways of being were "impeccable," surely much like those of Nora's grandfather, according to the conventions of etiquette required in spaces of great visibility, prestige, and discipline such as the Congress or the army. Historical accounts describe Paula's great-grandfather in similar terms, high-lighting his elegance and gallantry as major factors in his success as a musician. One of those accounts from the nineteenth century stated: "His attire, in accordance with the importance that his art has earned in our social life, has much more of the gentleman than of the popular singer about it."[59] Accounts of Afro-porteños as refined, with excellent manners, etiquette, and education endured throughout the twentieth century, even as stereotypical, discrimin-atory, and demeaning ideas about racial negritud rose.[60] These circumstances made it possible – at least in the first years of the twentieth century – for color to be ignored or downplayed in favor of ways of being, bringing those who dwelled on the margins of whiteness closer to its center through performances of whiteness.[61] Performances of whiteness – that is, acting in ways that approx-imate the behaviors and visual standards of European-modern culture – also facilitated the move away from another way of being: popular negritud, in the development of which Afro-porteños had been so crucial. Nora, Paula, and Emilia's relatives represented different generations of Afro-descendants who, through their ways of being, sought to demonstrate – indeed, were compelled to demonstrate – that their only sin was an excess of color. In so doing, they found spaces of acceptability and some opportunities for class mobility. But in order for their color to stop being quite so visible – in order, in other words, to stop suffering from an "excess" of color – what they needed beyond manners, economic stability, and education was to hide or dilute the signs of racial negritud for themselves and their descendants. To this end, mestizaje became a fundamental resource.

Overall, moving away from racial negritud required bodily modifications, mestizaje, or concealment, and moving away from popular negritud required the imposition of a strict code of conduct or a continuous performance of whiteness. Both negritudes are dangerous, and keeping one's distance from them is an important concern in people's daily lives, even among socially white

Argentines. What makes this goal particularly difficult for Afro-descendants, however, is that these negritudes do not work apart; in fact, they feed each other. When hints of popular negritud can be detected in racial negritud (a radical alterity), or vice-versa, people go out of their way to hide them or to keep them out of sight. That is what happened to a majority of Afro-porteño families. Nora's ignorance about her family being "black" was based on specific actions taken by her family. The lengths to which they went to keep her ignorant of this fact sheds light on the suffering of those who – despite all efforts at education, "containment," or courteousness – still find themselves in danger of exclusion by the binomial system of visual classification at work in Buenos Aires:

LG: And your father did not know about [his African roots]?
NORA: He must have known, but he never breathed a word. In my house NO ONE EVER SPOKE OF THIS.
LG: You asked questions and they didn't answer?
NORA: No, no, no. I couldn't ask about what I didn't know. No, this didn't exist for us.

These kinds of actions aimed at eroding or erasing negritud – described by Alejandro Frigerio as "social micro-processes of concealment" – turned ever more urgent as Nora's family moved up the social ladder.[62] But silence and ignorance were not the only ways to conceal negritud:

NORA: One day, while looking at photographs with that aunt, the youngest of the family, I must have been about fourteen years old, I said: "Wow, aunt, look, who is this *negrita*?" because I saw in the picture a young black girl sitting in a hammock beneath the vine arbor in my grandparents' yard. She answered: "That's aunt Amalia." "That's not possible," I said, "because here she is black." "Ah, no, it's just that she came out badly here," and rip-rip-rip *she tore up the photograph and she threw it away... [...]. Yes, and this was never spoken of again.* This episode was stored away in my brain and later, one day, I recalled it, but at that moment it disappeared from my life, [...] and as a result there was no way we could discuss it.[63]

Taken together, her family's actions allowed Nora to live her life in a state that we might call "perfect whiteness": a combination of a good social position, a performance of whiteness, and light skin color. Meanwhile, the material vestiges of negritud, any traces that could have cast doubt upon this whiteness, were systematically destroyed.

In the same vein, Paula remembered: "Here is another terrible thing: it is said that there were a lot of [my great-grandfather's] writings that his own sons threw away [...]." And Paula's mother, in turn, took actions to edit or redact the family tree of her own daughter, in an attempt to steer her life trajectory from the moment of birth: even though she is the child of a single mother, Paula was given her stepfather's surname. According to Paula's account, her mother denied Paula her maternal surname because of the recognition it might have had in the public sphere due to her great-grandfather's fame:

PAULA: My mom took away my identity. She wouldn't give me her surname [...].
I couldn't have my father's surname, the biological one, and I ended up having my
stepfather's .... It's OK, he was great, to me he was my father, but he is not my
bloodline, it's wrong, this is not my identity. [...] And I don't understand why she
thought it was so bad to be a Larrea. That is what I don't understand [...]. Since
I assumed the Larrea surname my life got better [...].[64]

To remove the surname was to remove a traceable mark of African ancestry.
Denying the family surname also had the effect of silencing the fact that Paula's
mother was unmarried, another shameful stigma reinforced by stereotypes of
black women's hypersexuality. Paula's mother's actions not only strengthened
the chain of concealment, discrimination, and rejection of blackness in the city,
but it also reproduced this ideology in Paula, shaping her from birth.

In Emilia's case, her family's pointed avoidance of any discussion of black-
ness was strengthened by her grandfather's early death, which forced the family
to change their lives completely. "I see it as totally related to discrimination and
to a sort of abandonment from not being able to stay with [that part of the]
family, not being able to be with their roots." Episodes of discrimination
toward Emilia's mother and aunt also played a part in their silence:

EMILIA: I always knew, but they never talked to me about this issue because my mom
has ..., she is one of the many ... let's say discriminated people, for most of her life,
let's say her childhood, at the school, [they would call her] *negrita de mi\*\*\*\** [sh\*tty
little black girl]. [...] She was always discriminated, and her sister, both of them [...].
Both used to tell me that at school they were called *negrita de mi\*\*\*\**, I don't want to
finish the word because I don't like it [...]. Well, they were really discriminated ....
But the point is that she suffered a childhood of discrimination, afterwards she
suffered the fact that my father's family didn't accept her, that made her life
impossible, because how was it possible that a white, blond, and blue-eyed man was
going to marry a *negrita*!

Emilia, Nora, and Paula's accounts speak volumes about local racial ideologies.
They reveal that visual markers never cease to impact people's lives or to govern
their placement within the complex coordinates of social status and belonging.
In order to make all the discrimination and the stereotyping go away, the
answer for many Afro-porteños has been to hide any signs of negritud, con-
stantly and indefinitely, making every trace disappear. Even now, whitening as
a national telos becomes hegemony, and it acts – and forces people to act – to
reproduce it, profoundly shaping the socio-racial ideologies and practices
of the inhabitants of Argentina's capital city. And in this sense, it is remarkable
how these families' archival vacuum, the silences surrounding their blackness,
parallel the absence of classificatory options for people like Nora, Paula, and
Emilia, for whom a non-white identification is impossible. Unable to enjoy the
stability of occupying an established intermediate category, in Buenos Aires
people who suffer dislocation among color and ways of being have to per-
manently take action to be classified or declassified, a constant pressure that

disempowers them, and instead empowers those who classify from their secure and stable places: in general, places of whiteness.

The success of these and other families' arduous journeys toward whitening has depended on the contingent and often random ways in which key elements in the construction of whiteness worked (or not) in their favor in different times and places: the social perception of colors and phenotypes, economic status, education, and so forth. In Nora's case, her family's trajectory permitted her to melt imperceptibly into the national "us." In Paula's and Emilia's cases, their life trajectories had the opposite result: they ended up, as adults, claiming the African roots that their families had tried so vigorously to deny. If, over the course of the twentieth century, local classifications allowed the inhabitants of the gray zones to be considered either black or white according to ways of being that were moldable and could veil racial negritud, today Paula and Emilia demand to be recognized according to a way of being determined by biology. They do this in the attempt to overcome their categorial dislocation, but without accomplishing it.

## FINAL WORDS

The visual classificatory system on which porteño whiteness is based is certainly undergoing a process of transformation. Not only has there been a slow but steady paradigm shift away from praising homogeneity to praising diversity, but the revisibilization process led by Afro-descendant organizations and activists is yielding some of its leaders' desired results. Nevertheless, in Buenos Aires, thousands of persons must contend daily with stigmatizing experiences that vary according to the ways (largely beyond their control) in which their skin colors and ways of being are perceived in a range of contexts. The stories of Nora, Paula, and Emilia allow us to glimpse how whitening and racialized categories operate and have operated locally, suppressing any possibility of mestizaje by driving to the extremes every intermediate case, ultimately reinforcing the dualistic system in which the poles of whiteness and negritud (both racial and popular) are the only viable categories for self-identification. Finding it impossible to be "detected" as black women from within the porteño visual classification system – because they fall outside the local parameters for perceiving signs of racial negritud – and finding it even less possible to identify as mestizas or mulatas – because the system is dualistic – Paula and Emilia are continuously driven toward one or the other of the extremes of the racial continuum. Even when they seek to claim racial negritud according to the blood or biological system of classification, they fail to be accepted as Afro-descendants by the rest of society. For them, there are no suitable categories available for self-identification. But neither can they imagine themselves in an intermediate situation: not only is their own subjectivity dualistic, but every intermediate category with which they might experiment ends up driving them back to one or the other extreme. Through a series of articulators among systems of categorization, the

inhabitants of the gray zones are continually transported from a visual system of classification toward a biological one, and vice-versa, eliminating any chance of remaining in the middle zone or of generating something new. "Pardo," "moreno," "trigueño," "negro," and "afrodescendiente" are some of the most prominent terms that work interchangeably to signal either negritud or whiteness, according to the system within which a person is being categorized and from which the term is enunciated.

The elimination of the possibility of mestizaje in Buenos Aires has real consequences. It not only configures racial negritud as a radical and negative alterity, a discrimination borne daily by black Afro-Argentines (who until not so long ago were compelled to hide and suppress any trace of their blackness). But it also denies people who wish to claim non-European roots and/or traditions the ability to situate themselves outside of whiteness. Moreover, every Afro-descendant is forced to continuously demonstrate ways of being that distance him or her from the other kind of negritud, the popular one. Even though Paula, Nora, and Emilia do not suffer the harsh racism and derision that socially black people must cope with on a daily basis, their families' trajectories starkly reveal how a less obvious, but nonetheless tenacious, structural racism works in Buenos Aires: racial and popular negritud function together to mold bodies and behaviors, containing and discouraging different forms of blackness, and thereby undercutting any potential threat to whiteness. Indeed, the very dynamics and history of the production of the (partial) distinction between racial and popular negritud is itself a fundamental cog in this machinery, reinforcing whiteness once again as the only possible means of belonging in the city and nation. Through a range of coercive and disciplinary mechanisms at work since the late nineteenth century, the life trajectories of those who dwell on the margins of whiteness are confined to a very narrow set of choices in a city that ceaselessly polices and demarcates negritud in any of its forms. Fortunately, some choices do exist, and they are becoming ever more visible.

## Notes

1. Wilde, *Buenos Aires*, 61 (italics in the original).
2. See Gordillo, Chamosa, this volume. See also Briones, *Cartografías*; Escolar, *Los dones*; Guzmán, *Los claroscuros*.
3. On indigenous "extermination," see Rodríguez, this volume.
4. For refutations of these hypotheses, see especially Andrews, *Los afroargentinos*.

5. The disappearing of people is, sadly, one of the things for which Argentina is known, as nearly 30,000 people were abducted by the state during the last military government (1976–83). On the transformations in social categories that produced Afro-Argentines' "disappearance," see Andrews, *Los afroargentinos*; Frigerio, "Negros"; Geler, *Andares*; and Geler, "¡Pobres negros!"
6. Adamovsky, *Clase media*, 63.
7. See Salvatore, "Criminología"; Vallejo and Miranda, "Los saberes"; Stepan, *Hour*; Rodríguez, this volume.
8. See Briones, "Mestizaje"; Frigerio, "Negros"; Elena, Adamovsky, this volume.
9. Geler and Rodríguez, "Argentina." See also Margulis and Belvedere, "La racialización."
10. Margulis and Belvedere, in "La racialización," call this structure "racialized class relations."
11. Segato, "Alteridades," 15.
12. On Afro-descendant activism since the 1980s, see Frigerio and Lamborghini, "Los afroargentinos"; Frigerio and Lamborghini, "(De)Mostrando"; Lamborghini and Frigerio, "Quebrando."
13. The conference was held in Durban, South Africa in 2001.
14. The term allows the inclusion of different national origins (Afro-Uruguayans, Afro-Ecuadorians, etc.) in a movement of collective recognition. See Frigerio and Lamborghini, "Los afroargentinos," 30. See also Maffia, "La migración," on Cape Verdean migration to Argentina.
15. See Frigerio and Lamborghini, "Los afroargentinos"; Molina, "Por qué Afroargentin@s"; Cirio, "Afroargentino."
16. On the situatedness of classificatory categories, see Wade, "Race"; de la Cadena, "Introduction."
17. In order to preserve the interviewed women's privacy, all cited names are fictitious and the ages given are approximate. The interview with Nora took place in Madrid (2008). The interviews with Paula (2010) and Emilia (2011) took place in Buenos Aires.
18. In describing a person as white or black, I follow anthropologist Luis Ferreira's idea that people are "socially" black or "socially" white. That is to say that perceptions and recognition of race and color are never simply "natural" but always respond to socially constructed, historically situated, and contingent classifications. Ferreira, "Música."
19. The term designates the discontinuous territoriality and heterogeneous temporality that includes state institutions and other public offices, groups, families and individuals of African origin, networks of Afro-descendants, students, researchers, etc. Fernández Bravo, "Qué hacemos," 243.
20. See Rodríguez, Chamosa, this volume; Guzmán, "Performatividad."
21. Quijada, "Imaginando."
22. Étienne Balibar speaks of the invisible ethnicity of the nation, which in the Argentine case would be "European." Here, I want to highlight the other facet of this nation's invisible ethnicity, which is "white" raciality. Balibar, "La forma nación."
23. The same happens with people seen as "Asian." See Ko, this volume; Balibar, "La forma nación."
24. Frigerio, "Negros."
25. Historically in the United States, even when a person did not display any visual traits assigned to the black race, he or she could be classified in the judicial system

as black due to family background. Such rules, however, could in some situations be challenged by performances of whiteness and "common sense" understandings of a person's race. See Gross, *Blood*. The "one drop rule" became less stable once the Supreme Court overturned laws banning miscegenation in 1967.

26. Frigerio, "Negros."
27. Frigerio, "Negros"; Andrews, *Los afroargentinos*.
28. Hall, "Spectacle."
29. In the last decade or so, the growing presence and visibility of migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa to Buenos Aires has unveiled the persistence of this kind of racism. See Morales, "Representaciones." On state racism, see Espiro and Zubrzycki, "Tensiones."
30. *Negritud* could be translated as "blackness," but I keep the Spanish word to emphasize that racialized and racializing signs are socially and historically specific, and do not result from natural or self-evident differences that can be easily transferred from region to region. On a similar use of "negridad," see Restrepo, *Intervenciones*, 195.
31. Nevertheless, this kind of *negritud* is often xenophobically used to describe immigrants, especially Latin American ones; it is often applied to indigenous peoples or their descendants as well, with the effect of expelling them from the national imaginary. See Briones, "Mestizaje," and Gordillo, Rodríguez, this volume.
32. Note the interesting phonetic recurrence in the words *grotesco* [grotesque], *grosero* [rude, uneducated], *grone* [slang for black], *groncho* [black and tacky], and *grasa* [tacky], often used to diminish lower-class people and anyone lacking in education or manners. Note too the resemblance between "groncho" and "*morocho* [a term for people with dark hair or skin]."
33. Lamborghini and Frigerio, "Quebrando," 140 (Cf. Frigerio, "Negros.") See also Frigerio, "Luis D'Elia"; Ratier, *El cabecita negra*; Margulis and Belvedere, "La racialización"; Gordillo, this volume. Scholars of other Argentine provinces are currently investigating how categorial ambiguity works in a similar fashion to designate racial/social alterities. Lina Picconi (personal communication); Fernández Bravo, "El regreso."
34. This duality is central to the emergence of whiteness as an ideological structure and to its power. Echeverría, *Modernidad*.
35. On whiteness as a civilizing system, see Echeverría, *Modernidad*.
36. On the middle classes' whiteness, see Adamovsky, *Clase media*; Garguin, "Los Argentinos."
37. See Alberto, this volume.
38. Emphasis mine. Nora is referring to Colonel Domingo Sosa, a renowned Afro-Argentine military officer of the nineteenth century, who was also appointed congressman. His portrait usually appears in books about Afro-Argentines due to his outstanding trajectory.
39. *Malambo* is an Argentine folkloric dance that involves drums and heel-and-toe tapping. Today it is believed to have African and Spanish roots.
40. Emphasis mine.
41. In fact, music and dance have become one of the main focuses of the Afro revisibilization movement in Buenos Aires, given these activities' apparent ability to capture the public's attention and to position Afro people and cultures in a favorable light. See Frigerio and Lamborghini, "(De)mostrando." Dance and music have been configured as repositories of memory for Afro-descendant families in

Argentina: because until not so long ago every non-European cultural expression was repressed or negatively valued, dance and music went deep into the private sphere of Afro-descendant communities. See Frigerio, *Cultura negra*; Geler, *Andares*. However, Afro-descendants are far from unanimous in their views of the virtues of this strategy for revindicating African culture and Afro-descendant identities.

42. Briones, "Mestizaje."
43. Emphasis mine.
44. Andrews, *Los afroargentinos*.
45. See Geler, "Un personaje"; Frigerio, "Negros."
46. Emphasis mine.
47. The dictionary of the *Real Academia Española* defines "cuarterón/a" as coming from "quarter" (having a quarter of Indian ancestry and three quarters of Spanish): "Adj. Born in America from Spanish and *mestiza/o*." I believe the use Nora makes of "cuarterona" has more to do with her living in Spain than with a specific knowledge of the term's historical meaning.
48. In colonial Spanish America, categories that referred to people's "quality" combined a range of systems for marking difference – visual, moral, sociability-based, and of so-called purity of blood – all of which worked in complex and intertwined ways and were marked by what anthropologist Anne-Marie Losonczy has dubbed "phenotypic uncertainty." Losonczy, "El criollo," 266; Guzmán, "Performatividad"; Rappaport, "¿Quién es?"
49. On the United States, see Hill Collins, *Black Feminist*.
50. Contrary, in principle, to the (assimilatable or modifiable) alterity that indigenous people supposedly represent. Briones, "Mestizaje."
51. Devoto and Madero, "Introduction."
52. Emphasis mine.
53. See Di Meglio, ¡*Viva el bajo…!*
54. See Geler, "Afrodescendencia"; Geler, "Un personaje"; Geler, "¿Quién no ha sido?"
55. Geler, *Andares*.
56. This process, as it concerns Afro-porteños at the end of the nineteenth century, can be called "ethnicization," following anthropologist Claudia Briones' conception of an alterity-marking process that, being based on "cultural" differences, allows passage from one category to another. Briones, "Mestizaje." On the process of ethnicization among Afro-porteños, see Geler, "¡Pobres negros!"
57. Note the correlation between, on one hand, these lines of action as defended by Afro-porteño intellectuals committed to improving their community, and, on the other, the national laws passed in order to "improve" the population, as cited in the introduction to this chapter. This overlap reveals the reach and hegemony of state-sponsored ideas about progress among the Afro-porteño leadership. See Geler, *Andares*.
58. On images of blacks as servants, see Geler, *Andares*.
59. Di Santo, *El canto*, 9.
60. Bernardo González Arrili described the black population of 1900s Buenos Aires as follows: "Any one of them […] could give us a lesson in manners or urbanity […]. The *morenos* were usually courteous." González Arrili, *Buenos Aires*, 119. In the same vein, Alfredo Taullard recalled "In the 1890s some blacks were still visible in

the army, and the most 'refined' worked as orderlies in state offices. They were, it should also be said, more solicitous and accomplished than many of today's 'whites.'" Taullard, *Nuestro antiguo*, 357. See also Alberto's insightful analysis of the many representations of the famous porteño character "el Negro Raúl," and the way this kind of description could be used by Afro-descendants themselves to mock elite groups. Alberto, "Títere roto."

61. Geler, *Andares*; Geler, "¿Quién no ha sido?"
62. Frigerio, "Negros."
63. Emphasis mine.
64. Paula now uses her mother's surname, which links her to her famous Afro-Argentine great-grandfather.