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Mapping Constructions of Blackness in Argentina¹

Resumen: En términos generales, los estudios sobre representaciones de la negritud en el contexto argentino argumentan que la consolidación de un modelo de identidad nacional basado en jerarquías raciales dio lugar a un proceso de *blanqueamiento* de la población lo cual, a su vez, convirtió a los afro-descendientes en seres invisibles en la historia oficial del país. Este ensayo problematiza este énfasis en la invisibilidad y plantea la necesidad de ir más allá de este paradigma y adoptar en cambio un punto de vista crítico sobre las representaciones de la negritud enfocándose en operaciones discursivas de apropiación cultural. Entonces, la primera parte de este ensayo observa desarrollos recientes en el campo de estudio con relación a la cuestión de la representación y nociones de recuperación cultural. La segunda parte del ensayo explora críticamente el tratamiento de la negritud en *Nuestra América* (1903) de Carlos Octavio Bunge el cual expone cómo una ambivalente y sin embargo poderosa noción de negritud se construye al mismo tiempo como marginal y central de un no menos ambiguo sentido de “argentinidad”.

Summary: Studies on representations of blackness in the Argentine context generally argue that the consolidation of a model of national identity based on racial hierarchies resulted in a process of *whitening* of the population which, in turn, rendered the afro-descendants invisible in the country’s official history. This paper problematises the emphasis on invisibility and argues the need to move beyond this paradigm to a critical engagement with representations of blackness focusing on discursive operations of cultural appropriation. Thus, the first part of the paper looks at recent developments in the field in connection with the question of representation and notions of cultural recuperation. The second half of the paper critically explores the treatment of blackness in Carlos Octavio Bunge’s *Nuestra América* (1903), which exposes how an ambivalent and yet powerful notion of blackness was constructed as both marginal and central to a not less ambiguous sense of “argentinidad”.

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1. Introduction: Studies on the “Afro-argentinos”

Given the expansion of interest in Afro-Latin studies, it should not come as a surprise that, particularly in the last few years, there has been an “inundation of writing on Blacks in Argentina” (Fox 2006: 98). Yet, attempts to analyse cultural aspects of the ‘Afro-Argentines’ are not as recent as it might be supposed.² In fact, the first work to explicitly declare interest in exploring the cultural legacy of afro-descendants³ in Argentina was the highly problematic Vicente Rossi’s *Cosas de Negros* (1926);⁴ and it was followed by the works of José Luis Lanuza (1947), Ricardo Rodríguez Molas (1961), and Néstor Ortiz Oderigo (1974), amongst others.⁵

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- 1 I would like to thank Patience Schell, Núria Triana-Toribio, Peter Wade, and the anonymous reviewer from *Indiana* for helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper.
 - 2 Alejandro Solomianski argues that this perception is because there is “escasa difusión de los aportes realizados, sobre todo en medios académicos” which in turn is another example of “la represión automatizada de la ‘negritud’” (Solomianski 2003: 22).
 - 3 I have opted for using the term afro-descendants in preference to Afro-Argentines. I think the term Afro-Argentine inaccurately presupposes that cultural difference can be contained within the homogenising boundaries of the concept of *national identity*. Adding the prefix ‘Afro’ to ‘Argentines’ does not really unsettle the founding principles of *argentinidad*; it simply suggests because ‘Argentines’ requires a constellation of prefixes to account for what it excludes by definition, the national project is unfinished and fragile. On the other hand, by speaking of afro-descendants in the Argentine context, albeit the essentialist connotations the prefix Afro might entail, it nevertheless highlights the historic processes of inclusion, exclusion, negation, omission, negotiation and agency that made the narrative of national identity discursively operational and therefore subject to scrutiny and resistance.
 - 4 One could also include in this list *Beneméritos de mi estirpe* by Miguel Ford and published in La Plata, Argentina, in 1898 (Ford 2002). This peculiar book, as its title suggest, was written by an afro-descendant and contains biographical sketches of distinguished members of the black peoples community of Argentina in an attempt to highlight their contributions to the history of the country. Unsurprisingly, Ford’s text has become one of the main sources of historical accounts on the black population of Argentina. However, although I acknowledge its significance I am not including it in my brief account of works produced on the afro-descendants as it is mainly a hagiographical project rather than an analysis of the Argentine black population’s history or culture. Additionally, reflections on the influence of the afro-descendants in the shaping of the Argentine history and culture can be formulated across a wide range of texts that of course pre-dates Rossi’s and Ford’s. I will be reflecting on these later in this paper.
 - 5 These four examples are very different works. Vicente Rossi’s pioneering book is mainly an account of the musical contributions of ‘Afro-population’ in the Rioplatine region, thus making references to both Montevideo and Buenos Aires. Rossi’s work has been rightly questioned for his racist comments. Although; the title itself gives away the author’s ideology, I believe the way in which he approaches “Afro-identity” is far more complex than it might at first appear. Like Rossi, Lanuza also attempts to reconstruct a cultural history where black peoples’ influence is traced, but he does so from a less problematic perspective than his predecessor. Rodríguez Molas’s work is more rigorous and historically accurate than Rossi’s and Lanuza’s; and it analyses both the colonial and the post-

Rather than reviewing in detail recent developments in the field, I will first identify key scholarly contributions developed in the last two decades, then I will problematise the emphasis on invisibility, a perspective which has been privileged over others on the scholarly work devoted to analysing constructions of blackness in the Argentine context and which also shows its ramifications in a wide range of textual representations of the afro-descendants. I will then argue for a need to move beyond the paradigm of invisibility to a critical engagement with representations of blackness focusing on discursive operations of cultural appropriation.⁶ Finally, towards the conclusion, I will substantiate this theoretical reorientation from invisibility to cultural appropriation through an analysis of Carlos Octavio Bunge's *Nuestra América* (1903).

The proportion of works published from the 1980s onwards, and the variety of disciplines from which these projects have emerged, largely exceeds in number as well as in quality any of the previous endeavours to understand the role played by afro-descendants in the shaping of Argentine culture. Although there were of course scholars working on the field before the 1980s, a thorough historical analysis of the black population of Argentina that ventured beyond the slavery period⁷ did not come until

independence period. Finally, Ortiz Orderigo's is an anthropological project with a strong focus on the religious practices of black communities.

- 6 Peter Wade argues a similar line in various of his works, but in relation to the Colombian context; see Wade, Peter (2000). *Music, Race and Nation: Música Tropical in Colombia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; and Wade, Peter (2005). Even though demographic data clearly indicates that the Argentine and Colombian cases are rather different, the basic theory around the issue of invisibility applies to both countries. Indeed, claims of black population's invisibility can be found in Argentina and Colombia where this discourse has shaped notions of blackness in a similar way. It is precisely in this sense that Argentina is no different to Colombia because, in spite of the emphasis on 'invisibility', one can find significant references to afro-descendants across a wide range of sources and through the 19th and 20th-centuries. Additionally, like in the Colombian case, many afro-descendants in Argentina have embraced the notion of invisibility as part of their struggle for recognition. Such discursive operations need to be placed in the context of political activism in afro-descendant groups of the second half of the 19th century and late 20th century as well as the phenomenon of recent academic production around the subject of blackness which is usually presented as contributing to the "cultural recovery" of Argentina's "African roots". For more on this issue in relation to Colombia see Arocha, Jaime (1999).
- 7 The people that were taken to the port of Buenos Aires as slaves in the seventeenth, the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries were predominantly from Angola and Congo, and pertained to the linguistic and ethnic group known as Bantu. However, many historians agree that several groups of African peoples were introduced to Argentina via Brazil, making it difficult for researchers to be precise about their origin. Because Argentina lacked the plantation system so commonly developed in other parts of Latin America, most slaves were used for domestic and rural work. Slavery was officially abolished in 1813, but, according to Andrews it was only by 1840, the year the Anglo-Argentine anti-slavery treaty was signed that the slave trade was effectively removed (Andrews 1980: 57). For detailed information about the slave trade in Argentina see the still authoritative work of Elena F. S. de Studer (1958).

the publication of George Reid Andrews's *Afro-Argentines in Buenos Aires, 1800-1900* (1980).

Andrews's work, unanimously regarded as groundbreaking and seminal, undoubtedly set the standard for many of the studies that follow. From then on, scholars of diverse disciplines – history, anthropology, literary studies, cultural studies – with clearly different objectives, and methodologies, began to produce scholarly work that explored the issue of 'blackness' in the Argentine context beyond the most traditional confines of slavery or musical expression. This applies, for example, to the works of Marvin A. Lewis on 'Afro-Argentine' literature (1996); Dina C. Picotti's analysis of the influence of 'Africanisms' in Argentine identity (1998); Donald Castro's study of the cultural contributions of black peoples in Argentine culture (2001); Alejandro Frigerio's research on contemporary black culture in the Southern Cone; and Alejandro Solomianski's book on Argentine hegemonic ideologies and the construction of black identity (2003).⁸ In spite of such remarkable developments, intersections between gender and racial categorisations in studies on the 'Afro-Argentines' remain marginal. In this sense, the work of Marta Goldberg (2000) represents an exception as it specifically explores, from a historical perspective, the situation and representation of afro-descendant women during the 1750-1880 period in Buenos Aires.

The development of a consistent body of analysis on this topic is significant; not only because Argentina is still perceived by the majority of its inhabitants as a country without a black population but also because studies on blackness in Latin America tend to leave Argentina out of their scope of interest. This exclusion is at times implicit but also explicitly justified on the basis that "Argentina [...] had identifiable Afro-Latin populations at one time, but there is little evidence of their contemporary survival" (Minority Rights Group 1995: ix). Given that such statement comes from a publication that highlights the need to produce a "realistic assessment of Afro-Latin Americans' socio-economic, cultural and political experience" (Minority Rights Group 1995: viii) the choice of the term "survival" is not only highly questionable but almost shocking. However, I am interested in drawing attention to the fact that, although such ideas are not always so bluntly expressed, the almost automatic association of the term blackness to slavery in the Argentine context is so powerful that "if an investigator looks for material on Blacks in Argentina [...] she or he is ushered to the section on slavery" (Fox 2006: 19).

Indeed, the population identified as of having African ancestry is usually affixed to the slavery period. As a result, the current black inhabitants of Argentina – if considered at all – are generally viewed as either 'remnants' of the colonial period or as

8 Inevitably, perhaps, most of these scholarly projects, including of course Andrews's, have their focus on Buenos Aires and its surroundings, quite frequently, making references to the Rio de la Plata region as a whole.

foreigners, regardless of whether they are Argentines by birth or recently arrived immigrants. Whatever the case, these perceptions make evident that the hegemonic Argentine national identity is so to speak incompatible with that of “blackness”. When it comes to attaching a figure to problematic classifications and labels, the situation is further complicated: the Argentine census does not contain a category that would allow a statistical calculation of how many people in Argentina identify themselves as being ‘black’ and/or as having African ancestry.⁹

Much of the expansion in the studies of blackness in Argentina is unquestionably related to a wide range of phenomena which of course spread beyond the confines of scholarly work. In relation to this, one issue to consider is that the process of self-representation as experienced by some politically committed voices of the black communities of Argentina entails the relocation of black identity beyond the national boundaries within the seemingly more porous and heterogeneous demarcations of the African Diaspora. Alejandro Frigerio directly addresses this question by claiming

Dado que “África” se ha constituido, crecientemente, en un símbolo de *empowerment* de numerosos grupos (aún blancos), es cada vez más común que el discurso de los estudiosos se entrecruce –de manera deseada o no– con otros discursos de otros actores sociales sobre el mismo tema (Frigerio 2000: 35).

This *entrecruce* between discourses is also evident in the different classifications created with the purpose of defining the black population in Latin America. In this sense, Peter Wade’s reflections on the shifts produced in the terminology across the continent and beyond are quite revealing:

The key to Latin American racial terminologies lies in grasping that people may make clear identifications of self and other in particular contexts [...] without there being a collective consensus, independent of context, on who is ‘black’, ‘brown’ and ‘white’ (Wade 2006: 108-109).

Classifications are performative as well as discursive tools which can be used strategically by both hegemonic and alternative regimes of representation and are not necessarily coded in clearly defined labels that derive from the black/white racial paradigm. When looking at key moments of the development of the academic terminology applied to afro-descendants in the Argentine context and how these have been confronted with the different reformulations of the concept of identity as practiced by the people themselves, one cannot fail to see that such processes make noticeable not only the many meanings and functions attached to the question of what does it mean to speak of a ‘black subject’, but also the way in which scholarly production becomes

9 Since 2001 de population census of Argentina incorporates in its survey forms a significant number of indigenous groups such as wichíes, mapuches and tehuelches.

at times entangled in the complex web of representational practices which it attempts to unravel.

Thus, given the politicisation of certain groups of afro-descendants, as well as both the increasing awareness of how markers of cultural difference operate within and beyond the sphere of academic production, it is not surprising that specialised scholars on the black populations of Argentina feel the need to specify in which context the “Afro-Argentine” term is used. Particularly in the case of anthropological works, researchers frequently highlight the differences between Argentines who are descendants of the African slaves, usually referred to as *negros criollos* from two distinctive groups of the black population. The first group is composed of the *caboverdianos* whose family history takes them back to migrant workers from Cape Verde who arrived to Argentina in the first decades of the twentieth-century and who, when first established in the country were not necessarily perceived as being ‘*negros*’ but rather as *mestizo* Portuguese citizens (Otero 2006: 9). Another fraction of the population clusters immigrants identified as being of African descent who, particularly in the 1990s came from other Latin American countries and the Caribbean, most notably, Brazil, Uruguay, and Cuba; but also from African countries such as Cameroon, Senegal and Sudan. However, such distinctions are increasingly being waived by applying the umbrella term “Afro-Argentines” to those who are perceived or perceive themselves as having African ancestry and are residing in Argentina.

These categorisations of identity are of course constantly being readapted and re-defined by the individuals of the different groups that constitute the black population of Argentina, which, as it has been suggested above, is composed of peoples of diverse cultural backgrounds, personal histories and therefore possessors of distinctive collective memories. For instance, Natalia Otero observes that not necessarily all *caboverdianos* are keen to identify themselves with Africa (2006: 13). Indeed, while older members of the community rarely discuss the connections between Cape Verde and the slave trade system, the younger generations project a sense of pride on feeling part of the African diaspora (Otero 2006: 13).

2. Imagining blackness

In spite of the fact that black communities in Argentina clearly experience identity in a multiplicity of ways, images associated with blackness as formulated by the ‘forebears’ of the Argentine Republic in the nineteenth-century have not lost their symbolic value. Indeed, portrayals of afro-descendants as dutiful servants of the creole ruling class still circulate today. The characteristic representation of afro-descendants as street vendors performed by primary schoolchildren commemorating the Independence Day in Argentina is a clear example of the discursive frames through which the representation of blackness operates in the Argentine context. The caption of a photograph reproduced in the year 2000, in a popular historical magazine, showing a man

opening the door of the Government House, echoes the views expressed in 1881 by José Antonio Wilde in his memoirs. In the nineteenth-century, Wilde ‘mourned’ the apparent decline of the black population and described them as mostly being employed by the national and provincial governments. The caption, almost replicating word by word Wilde’s comments, reads: “Pocos descendientes de negros quedan en la actualidad en nuestro país. Algunos trabajan de maestranza en el Congreso de la Nación. Otros, como este simpático moreno, abre y cierra las puertas de la casa de Gobierno” (Todo es Historia 393: 69).¹⁰ Note also here the use of the term “moreno” which in the Argentine context is thought to be less pejorative than the most widely used “negro”, which in turn has a myriad of negative connotations. In addition, it would be difficult to miss here the more or less predictable patronising way of describing afro-descendants as being “colourful” hence the use of the adjective “simpático”. Running parallel to such representations, contemporary experiences of Argentines of African descent reveal numerous situations of subtle or blunt discriminatory treatment.¹¹

Another dimension of these discursive operations is the difficulties any researcher will find if interested in analysing the literary and journalistic production of the afro-descendants. A fluid cultural network was particularly active during the second half of the nineteenth century and it generated a significant range of publications (magazines, periodicals, newspapers, books, and pamphlets) that channelled the aesthetic, political and/or social concerns of the black population. One should be of course cautious in treating all artistic and literary expressions of this kind as strategies to denounce the situation of marginality many members of the black population had to endure. In fact the participation of the black communities in the cultural life of Argentina attempted at times to facilitate social mobility and respectability for which marks of ‘blackness’ necessarily had to be removed. This is exemplified by the fact that black artists and musicians were sponsored by the government to be trained in European institutions (Andrews 1980: 195) and publications such as ‘La Broma’ which represented a “black middle class intensely desirous of escaping the stigma of its racial status and being

10 Wilde writes “El número ha ido disminuyendo gradualmente, y hoy los negros son relativamente escasos. Se ve acá y allá algún veterano como representante de la raza que se va: un monumento que el tiempo ha carcomido. Uno que otro de menos edad, ocupa el pescante de algún lujoso carruaje, y un cierto número de negros, la mayor parte jóvenes, están empleados en calidad de sirvientes en las casas de Gobierno Nacional y Provincial (Wilde 1960: 124).

11 Episodes of this kind have been increasingly registered by the national press, the most notorious one being the interview made to the president of Africa Vive, Magdalena Lamadrid in the *Clarín* newspaper in relation to the abusive treatment she suffered at Buenos Aires international airport when the police accused her of holding a false Argentine passport (*Clarín* 2006). The topic of discrimination is also at the centre of a documentary entitled ‘Afroargentines’ directed by Jorge Fortes and Diego Ceballos and produced and released in Argentina in 2002.

accepted as equals by the white middle class” (Andrews 1980: 194). Much of this material is to be found scattered in different archives and libraries and remained mostly ignored by researchers until some scholars already mentioned earlier in this paper made them central to the study of blackness in Argentina. Along with their contributions to Argentine literature¹² and journalism, the black population of the nineteenth-century developed dynamic community support networks (social clubs and mutual aid societies) which were the centre of recreational activities and festive celebrations. One should also include in this brief genealogy of social and cultural activities of afro-descendants in Argentina the Shimmy Club located in the centre of Buenos Aires where *candombe* was danced and carnivals were celebrated until the dictatorship of 1976 put an end to the discontinuous yet persistent history of afro-descendants’ social clubs.¹³

As George Andrews has pointed out, nineteenth-century manifestations of the cultural and social vibrancy of Argentina’s black population were paradoxically at their peak in a time when “discussions of the imminent extinction of the city’s black community appeared regularly in the writings of the period” (Andrews 1980: 93). Indeed, these images of inevitable ‘vanishing’, which do not coincide with the historical data available,¹⁴ are recurrent in publications by prominent figures of the elite creoles, such as Domingo F. Sarmiento, surely the elite’s most visible voice. However, his apoca-

12 The oral tradition of the *payada* was the main genre in which the afro-descendants became publicly recognised, being the figure of Gabino Ezeiza (1858-1916) the most critically acclaimed. There are also poets such as Horacio Mendizábal (1847-1871) and Casildo Thompson (1856-1928) whose work, although it failed to be included as part of the national literary canon, was recognised as of aesthetic value by contemporaries.

13 Based on a male informant who frequented the Shimmy Club in the 1970s, Alejandro Frigerio concludes: “Este testimonio permite constatar al menos tres hechos: existía por lo menos hasta 1973 una comunidad negra que se reconocía como tal [...] que se diferenciaba claramente de otros grupos étnicos (los blancos argentinos y negros uruguayos) y una de las principales formas en que lo hacían era a través una forma particular de tocar los tambores y bailar (el *candombe*)” (Frigerio 2000: 49).

14 Although in 1778 black peoples represented a 30% of the Buenos Aires population, by 1887 their number only reached less than 2%. Many historians now coincide with George Andrews that the abrupt demographic change did not occur until after the 1850s, suggesting that between the first census in 1778 and the second half of the nineteenth century the population remained considerably stable. According to Andrews, this demographic evidence explains why, even though the trope of extinction was widely circulating in the literature of the period both celebrating and mourning the so-called disappearance of black peoples from Argentine society, the black community of Buenos Aires continued to grow and flourish. In 1895 no racial categorizations were used in demographic records which leads Andrews to claim that the black population of Argentina was rendered *invisible* in statistics because they were incorporated as whites (Andrews 1980: 112). Andrews powerfully concludes that “the most important determinant behind the absolute decline of the population in the 1838-87 period was not low birth rates or high death rates (though these unquestionably contributed to the decline), but rather the statistical transference of a large segment of the Afro-Argentine population from the black racial category to the white (1980: 89).

lyptic tone of the extinction trope can still be found well in the twentieth century as this passage from an article by Rodríguez Molas shows:

Alrededor de 1900 las calles ensancharon sus veredas mientras Montserrat –antiguo lugar de residencia de los morenos– se acercaba al centro, compartiendo las luces y las cercanías del progreso. El Norte, barrio nuevo y pujante, ganó la delantera con sus lujosos palacios y amplias avenidas. El Sur, en cambio aún agonizaba en sus recuerdos; casas pobladas de inmigrantes, depósitos y talleres. Pero allí las calles no escuchaban en la noche el ya perdido rumor de sus voces y de sus parches ... Eran fantasmas de un tiempo ya ido, dolores y lágrimas de cadenas escondidas (Rodríguez Molas 1956: 125-126).

This mourning tone is indeed reminiscent of claims over ‘disappearance’ and it signals the weakening of the afro-descendants platforms of communal expression which became a reality by the twentieth century. Despite – or perhaps due to – the persistence of the vanishing trope, in the 1990s a sense of pride about being black was redefined around a political agenda by organisations such as “Organización África Vive”.¹⁵ These organisations not only aim at creating a space of collective participation by promoting notions of identity strongly linked to African history, but also represent the political, social and cultural demands of some sectors of the black population of Argentina.¹⁶ Indeed, regardless of the difficulties afro-descendants are still facing in a society that continues to insist on identifying itself as predominantly white, the communities which define themselves as of African ancestry are leading a dynamic process of reformulating their identity through political activism but also by encouraging the promotion of cultural practices that are part of personal and collective memories.

One of the main challenges these groups face is the fact that whereas understandably they do not want to be perceived by the Argentine society as foreigners, at the same time, they want to highlight their historical connections with Africa. Situating themselves as part of the African Diaspora undoubtedly allows them to make evident that their ‘establishment’ in the country is not a product of immigration, but of slavery. Although it could be argued that because these black communities trace their family histories back to the colonial period they are reinforcing dominant definitions of blackness in Argentina; however, there is a significant difference between these two discourses on blackness. The difference lies on the fact that whereas for the black communities connecting their family background with slavery enables them to draw attention to the links between their history of displacement and their current situation in Argentine society, for the hegemonic discourse the main function of affixing black people to the colonial period is to acknowledge their subjectivity only in anachronistic terms. Indeed, the construction of afro-descendants as phantasmagorical remnants of

15 María Lamadrid, a descendant of the so called *negros criollos*, is the president of Africa Vive.

16 Another interesting dimension of this phenomenon of self-representation is the expansion of ‘Afro-Brazilian’ religions in Argentina. See Frigerio (2002).

the colonial period fits quite appropriately with what Johannes Fabian called “denial of coevalness” (1983: 31). Hegemonic forms of classification and representation of blackness discursively ‘re-enact’ a post-independent setting where the creole elites seem to have full control of a hierarchical society. However, these representations even under such power articulations also permeate the signifying forces of the afro-descendants’ cultural practices that make perceptible the impossibility of representing national identity without resorting to its own sets of inclusions and exclusions.

3. The invisibility paradigm

Taking into consideration such a state of affairs, it should not come as a surprise that there is a tendency in the majority of the scholarly work on the ‘Afro-Argentines’ produced from the 1980s onwards to emphasise the ‘invisibility’ of blackness in the official history of Argentina. Indeed, most of these studies include a reflection on these processes of cultural amnesia and insist on exposing the omissions and distortions of historical evidence. For example, George Reid Andrews defined his project as one which initially began as “a study of a purely demographic phenomenon, the decline of the Afro-Argentine population”, but soon developed into “an attempt to explain what motivated the Argentines to deny black people their rightful place in the record of the country’s past” (Andrews 1980: 6). Arguing from a similar perspective, Marvin A. Lewis claims: “Argentina is one nation that is generally overlooked in discussions of Afro-Hispanic literature” because “its present-day population [...] does not contain many people of African descent” and also due “to the tendency to downplay a significant portion of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Argentine history, in which blacks were major factors” (Lewis 1996: 4). In a similar vein, Donald Castro, states: “the cultural contribution of Afro-Argentines, like their physical presence in Argentina, has ‘disappeared’. Regardless of the reality, if that reality is ignored long enough, it ceases to exist because it is unseen” (Castro 2001: 143). More recently Alejandro Solomianski confessed that at some point, when reflecting on the centrality of black peoples in the development of Argentine culture, he speculated that perhaps “el nivel de invisibilidad de lo afroargentino iba en relación directa con su enorme relevancia: a mayor importancia mayor silenciamiento y distorsión (menor visibilidad) acerca de su existencia (Solomianski 2003: 17).

Denouncing invisibility becomes also the *raison de être* of recent publications, which present themselves as projects of ‘cultural recovery’. Illustrative of this trend is the archaeological work of Daniel Schávelzon’s which is aimed at a non-specialised audience and is suggestively entitled *Buenos Aires negra. Arqueología histórica de una ciudad silenciada*. According to Schávelzon, his archaeological findings reveal the afro-descendants’ strategies of cultural resistance to the colonial and postcolonial rule:

Hallar evidencias de vudú y magia adivinatoria en ese Buenos Aires antiguo supuestamente homogéneo en su religión, saber que hubo barrios y áreas en las que el blanco no podía entrar –la costa del río, el barrio del Tambor– es penetrar en una dimensión desconocida en la historia de la ciudad (Schávelzon 2003: 25).

The culture of the afro-descendants here is presented as if developed either in isolation or as a response to dominant cultural practices. The main question here seems to be how Africans retained their identity by preserving their cultural traditions and expressed their religious beliefs and practices in colonial Buenos Aires. The focus is on the cultural material Africans brought to Argentina in order to recreate their “Africanness”. Without questioning the value and the quality of this research, one cannot help to see that there are here some assumptions around cultural distinctiveness and questions of origin, which in turn retain essentialist notions of identity. Additionally, the metaphor of treading *unknown* cultural spaces that in the past belonged to the afro-descendants is indicative of the way in which the culture of this particular group is frequently anchored in a bygone era and it only becomes meaningful as long as it can be incorporated to the official history. In projects such as these, the history of the afro-descendants is highly exoticised, and presented as full of secrets waiting to be revealed. The book’s blur reinforces these ideas by claiming that it “invita a asomarse a un pasado cuyas raíces culturales son de una riqueza y una permanencia inesperadas” (Schávelzon 2003, back cover).

Another example of these projects of ‘cultural recuperation’ is provided by Juan Lucio Torres who, with the war heroism rhetoric, proposes a detailed account of soldiers of African descent in different battles of the nineteenth-century. The most interesting aspect of this book is that its publisher is the *Instituto de Historia Militar Argentina* and his author is a military figure himself. According to Torres, the afro-descendants “dieron testimonio de su valor y sacrificio por la Patria y se fueron calladamente de la historia” (Torres 2003: 5). Blackness is ‘rescued’ here from a seemingly state of oblivion and it becomes fully functional within a nationalistic saga of male heroism. In spite of Torres’ claims, these tales of loyalty and courage are not entirely new. In fact, in the instances when afro-descendants have entered the official history of the nation, they have done so mainly as soldier-heroes (see for example, Marrone 1996). As Donald Castro has pointed out, during the early years of the republic, the afro-descendant “was necessary, as was the Euro-Indian, in the military forces of the vying caudillos: as the defender of the nation from outside forces. Once that stage was over, the black as warrior was superfluous” (Castro 2001: 145). The acknowledgement of the role of the afro-descendants in the army can be seen in Sarmiento’s *Facundo* where he praises Lorenzo Barcala, the son of slaves who reached the rank of colonel. Sarmiento writes:

Barcala, el liberto consagrado durante tantos años a mostrar a los artesanos el bueno camino, y a hacerles amar una revolución que no distinguía ni color ni clase para condecorar el

mérito; Barcala fue el encargado de popularizar el cambio de ideas y miras obrado en la ciudad, y lo consiguió, más allá de lo que se creía debe esperarse. Los cívicos de Córdoba pertenecen desde entonces a la ciudad, al orden civil, a la civilización (Sarmiento [1845] 1990: 222).

The reason why these images of heroic black soldiers dying for the patria have been privileged over others is twofold. On the one hand, these representations are consistent with the theory that most afro-descendants died in the wars of independence and other armed conflicts. But, most importantly, as Sarmiento's passage clearly shows, these depictions of male heroism are functional to the claims that because the afro-descendants were treated fairly according to principles of freedom and equality, they were prepared to die for a country respectful of such values.¹⁷ In this particular case, the afro-descendants are not excluded from the new Republic; on the contrary, they are turned into key protagonists in the consolidation of country's national project by being presented as advocates of the ideals of progress and civilisation. Such values were constituent to the nation-state building project envisaged by the creole elites and aimed at removing the new Republic as far as possible from the Spanish ruling system legacy, of which slavery was, of course, one of its most noticeable elements.

But going back to the issue of the projects of 'cultural recovery', it is important to highlight here that what unites projects as different as Schávelzon's and Torres's, is the emphasis on invisibility; both authors present their projects as contributions to restoring the importance of Argentina's "black roots". The emphasis on invisibility has greatly contributed to disentangle the dynamics of exclusion of which black people were – and in some cases undoubtedly are – subjected to. However, as Patricia Fox claims, "visibility is not the problem – blackness is the elephant in the room – and unearthing something in plain sight artfully dodges more pressing concerns" (Fox 2006: 179). In fact, one could ask whether by assuming – both in our research of the past and our engagement with the present – that approaches on blackness are projects of digging out what once was at the surface, we might be subscribing to the idea of cultural recuperation which is highly problematic. Projects of cultural recuperation presuppose that cultural practices can be excluded and then rescued as if culture itself would not entail processes of transformation.

17 Many nineteenth-century essays, such as Sarmiento's *Conflicto y armonías de razas en América* Sarmiento ([1883] 1946) highlighted the 'friendly' treatment of the "criollo" masters; "El negro, aunque esclavo, era el amigo del joven criollo su amo" ([1883] 1946: 76). This tale of friendship that turns the black slaves into devoted servants, clearly attempted to erase the atrociousness of slavery. Sarmiento's contemporaries as well as influential Argentine thinkers of the first decades of the twentieth century created this image of humanitarian treatment to the black slaves so to enable the shaping of an image of Argentina consistent with their aspirations.

While I recognise the validity of denouncing the process of ‘invisibility’ and it is true to claim the history of afro-descendants has remained for many decades both under- and misreported, one problematic aspect of legitimising scholarly work around the concept of invisibility is that it seriously compromises our understanding of the paradoxical construction of blackness in Argentina by not directly addressing the question of cultural appropriation. The formulation of blackness as invisible implies that in Argentina, throughout its history, perceived markers of black identity were systematically effaced. Whereas the afro-descendants may not have as much control over whom they were visible to and when and in which context their presence was acknowledged, the number of popular culture representations and the equally significant number of essays in which they are either demonised or romanticised, unsettles the concept of invisibility. Indeed, prominent figures of the Argentine letters, politics, philosophy and sociology – willingly or unwillingly – expressed a desire to identify and categorise blackness, a fact which makes evident that, particularly in the nineteenth-century and in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the presence of the afro-argentines was simultaneously negated and recognised.

4. Appropriating blackness

Manoeuvres of appropriation have evolved so much that, across Western societies, blackness “has definitely become a ‘hip’ signifier of identity and difference (Johnson 2003: 217). However, as Peter Wade has recently pointed out “if black style is defined as a globally ‘cool’ commodity, then this can lead to concrete benefits for some Afro-Latins who are able to get a slice of the pie, but the question is who is in control of the process of definition and commodification” (Wade 2006: 118). Indeed, such process of commodification pertains to a history of cultural appropriation which has a long standing tradition not only of course in the Argentine context, but in Latin America as a whole where “middle and upper classes include in their cultural repertoires elements that they identify as originating from the lower and/or darker-skinned classes”, and they do so by “mystifying their origins, and repositioning them in value hierarchies” (Wade 2003: 266).

These processes of mystification are more noticeable in the musical arena where the influence of afro-descendants is acknowledged because cultural practices such as tango are incorporated as a popular expression of the ideal of nationhood. According to Marta E. Savigliano, in the specific case of Argentina,

the recovery of black roots [...] has acknowledged the importance of black participation in the creation of rioplatense popular culture [...] On the other hand, no matter how important black participation is considered to be, positioning it at the “beginnings” of tango reproduces the racist association between blacks and “primitiveness” (Savigliano 2003: 33).

Indeed, the acknowledgment of the afro-descendants as the point of origin in the development of Argentine culture, echoes the discourse of primitivism, which, consistent with the evolutionary racist ideology, assigns hierarchical value to the different stages of human development. This paradox can also be seen at play in the ambiguous engagement of the creole elites with a 'national culture' noticeably influenced by elements identified as foreign – of both European and non-European extract –. This double operation of negation and appropriation is evident in Ricardo Rojas's *Historia de la literatura argentina* (1917-1921) in which in a prose full of inconsistencies, the author when referring to the afro-descendants he writes

Su memoria, como su sangre, se halla hoy desvanecida. Apenas si sobreviven –vagas larvas del folklore regional–, alguna superstición como la de *Mandinga*, alguna costumbre como el *candombe*, alguna palabra como *batuque*, alguna danza como el *tango*; algún tipo literario sin mayores caracteres individuales, tipo meramente decorativo y específico, como son los *morenos* de José Hernández y de Eduardo Gutiérrez (Rojas [1917-21] 1960, I: 90).

Rojas declares the so-called vanishing of the black population and attempts at the same time to diminish their influence on Argentine culture. The use of the metaphor of the larva is by no means insignificant. The larva is the first stage in the development of an insect; once the metamorphosis process is completed, the larva becomes something entirely different to what it was, leaving little trace of its former appearance. However, Rojas fails to achieve his intention of downplaying the role of the afro-descendants in the cultural history he seems so eager to reconstruct. He fails because, although he relegates the contributions of the Afro-Argentines to an apparently insignificant number of cultural expressions, his choice contradicts his own arguments. Indeed, in just one paragraph he condenses many elements which even in the twentieth first century are still identifiable as the cultural repertoire of the *argentinidad* such as the linguistic expressions *mandinga* and *batuque* still widely used in Argentina; the *candombe*, a musical genre of African influences commonly incorporated to the genealogy of *tango*, which in turn is one of the most visible symbols of Argentine national pride; and finally the writers Hernández y Gutiérrez who Rojas himself helped to consolidate as the originators of the *género gauchesco*, which constitutes the epitome of the national literary canon.

Thus, by incorporating all these elements and associating them with the Afro-Argentines, Rojas constructs blackness as simultaneously peripheral and central to the great narrative of Argentine identity. This is possible because Afro-Argentine identity, via the metaphor of the larva, emerges as already dead, as expunged from its subjectivity. This discursive objectification of the black populations enables the appropriation of blackness as an element of cultural legacy. Particularly during the consolidation of the national project, the afro-descendants became the exemplary instance of what it meant to have achieved progress towards a supposedly more sophisticated country; because, as establishing it as the master of its past and destiny, Argentina could rein-

vent itself by writing its own cultural history. This reinvention process implied explicit and implicit decisions on which cultural elements should be borrowed, defended, attacked, and discarded.

5. Blackness and “argentinidad”

With the intention to explore the theoretical possibilities of understanding the construction of blackness from the perspective of cultural appropriation, I will analyse the specific case of Carlos Octavio Bunge’s ideas on blackness as expressed in his book entitled *Nuestra América*, originally published in Barcelona in 1903. Although the work of Bunge has been relatively well studied, specialists on the afro-descendants frequently ignore him. Thus, my point in analysing the writing of Bunge is on the one hand to fill in this research vacuum and, on the other hand, to present an examination of the construction of blackness that problematises even further the notion of invisibility.

Unsurprisingly, Bunge’s text reveals what anyone concerned with constructions of blackness would rightly claim: the creole elites perceived peoples of African descent as a threat to their desire to create a homogenised identity narrative based on notions of white superiority. However, what I think it is far more interesting about Bunge’s theorisation of blackness is that it enables reflection on the ambivalent engagement of the white elites with the afro-descendants. Through a reading of *Nuestra América* is possible to observe that whereas the construction of “argentinidad” indeed implied a process which aimed at excluding ‘unwanted others’, such as Argentines of African descent, from the metanarrative of national identity, these discursive operations also entailed the classification of cultural traits explicitly associated to individuals perceived as of African origin, and yet regarded as significantly influential – in negative as well as in positive terms – in the shaping of national characteristics. Indeed, in a highly ambiguous and paradoxical way Bunge seems to associate blackness with a sense of creole authenticity. When referring to what he sees as contradictions of the culture of the Americas which, according to him is a product of “elementos hispano-indígena-africanos”, he mentions the fact that these tensions are never more evident than when “se aplican rótulos europeos á productos genuinamente criollos” (Bunge 1903: 33). As an example of these conflicts he suggests, with an ironic tone, that in the Americas, elements of “estética típicamente africana” are defined by people as of being of “buen gusto y belleza” (Bunge 1903: 33).

Bunge’s treatment of blackness entails contradictory and selective strategies of appropriation because his reflections involve ownership claims over cultural forms and characteristics thought to be generated by the afro-descendants. Indeed, the afro-descendants enter Bunge’s text so that he is able to explain what he sees as key components of the “identidad argentina”. However, what is more revealing about Bunge’s reflections on national culture is that its characteristics are perceived here in terms of

imitative practices which can be passed on from generation to generation. By using this framework of imitative practices, Bunge challenges the accepted view that Argentine elite creoles perceived black peoples as irreconcilable with elite ideas of nationhood.

Although Bunge's thinking is informed by racialised categorisations of identity, his understanding of identity is not only racial, but also culturally constructed. Indeed, even though he saw identifiable elements as biologically encoded, he also believed that progress towards a more 'civilised' society depended on progressive assimilation – mainly through miscegenation – as well as on the collective effort towards an ideal. Bunge's theory simultaneously embraces and rejects biology because if culture was simply biological, then there would be no possibility of challenging what in theory is already encoded in the 'racial' features he seems so eager to identify.

"Bunge, like Sarmiento believed in the superiority of blacks over Indians in the struggle of life" (Helg 1990: 41). Such "superiority" was possible because Bunge's theory was grounded in the belief that there were "various degrees of difference in *mestizaje* between 'distant' and 'proximate' races" (Martínez-Echazábal 1998: 26). This scheme of "distant and proximate races" is what Bunge uses to justify his theory that the afro-descendants are more likely to fit in with the Argentine society because the Spanish have a common past with the African continent: "setecientos años de dominación morisca han mezclado en las venas de nuestro progenitores, los españoles, copia no pequeña de sangre africana" (Bunge 1903: 32). Because Bunge links the Spanish to Africa, the end result is that the afro-descendants are indeed the originators of Argentine culture. Once again, as in the case with the acknowledgment of the afro-descendants in cultural forms such as tango, we have here a narrative of evolutionary development that places black peoples as the most primitive.

Bunge's treatment of blackness in Argentina is mostly developed in the third chapter of his book which opens with a large quote from poet and writer José Rivera Indarte.¹⁸ According to Bunge this passage is from a newspaper article and he uses it to highlight the significant presence of afro-descendants in the 1830s in the Río de la Plata. Bunge concludes this lengthy quote by stating that the influence of 'black ancestors' can be seen "no sólo en el pueblo, sino también en las mejores familias, por más que se niegue y se desmienta, por pueril vanidad" (Bunge 1903: 32). Bunge is aware of the negative connotations associated with blackness and the effect these have in people's attitudes as, even though it is practically impossible to deny it, most Argentines, regardless of their social class, would not be inclined to admit they are afro-descendants.

18 José Rivera Indarte (1814-1845) was an Argentine writer and poet who regularly published in *El Nacional*, a Montevidean newspaper.

Although Bunge believes very few Argentines, even the most patrician amongst them can actually deny they have African ancestry, he, like Rojas a few years later and so many other writers before, highlights the afro-descendant's decline in number:

Hoy en el censo señala en Buenos-Ayres una ínfima proporción de negros. ¿Por qué este descenso? Varias son las causas: el clima los ha diezmado, pues sus pulmones resisten mal el pampero; porque se han mestizado, la raza blanca, como más vigorosa, predomina en las mezclas, que se suponen blancas; y finalmente, por la copiosa afluencia de inmigración europea (Bunge 1903: 32-33).

Similar to many other texts of the period, Bunge not only draws attention to the influx of immigrants as a cause of the decrease of the black population, but he also implicates the afro-descendants themselves as the cause of this supposedly irreversible fate as they are physically more vulnerable to the weather of the pampas than the white population. Although Bunge claims it is due to miscegenation that the population of Argentina is not longer as numerous as it used to be, there are certain elements in the Rioplatine culture which renders visible the 'African' influence: "Aunque la masa de la población parezca absolutamente blanca, hay un factor oculto, de pura cepa africana, que, para un observador hábil, se revela en todo momento: en la política, la literatura, los salones, el comercio" (Bunge 1903: 33). The 'hidden' elements that signal the influence of Africa in the Argentine culture fabric are grouped in a ludicrous concept invented by Bunge himself which is "la hiperestesia de la aspirabilidad". According to Bunge, because, 'black people' are new to civilisation they 'embrace' its benefits

con todos los bríos anteriores de la infancia ... Apasionánse con lo que recién van conociendo; sobreexcítanse, fanatizánse por la "última palabra". Su *aspirabilidad*, dominada durante tantas edades, se despierta, como la Bella Durmiente, al beso del príncipe Progreso, con un hambre de siglos. A este fenómeno típico de los mulatos (africanos que han reforzado su sangre con elementos europeos) llamaré yo *hiperestesia de la aspirabilidad* (Bunge 1903: 27-28).

Bunge goes on to exemplify his concept by reflecting on the trajectory of Bernardino Rivadavia, the first constitutional president of Argentina known by his contemporaries as a "mulato". Bunge praises Rivadavia, albeit with ambiguity, as the most notable example and perhaps, in that sense, from his own perspective, the most accomplished "mulato" of Argentine history. According to Bunge, the passion for *all things new*, so characteristic in Rivadavia and his fellow afro-descendants, it is not only perceptible in *their* enthusiasm for politic or philosophical European writings but also in *their* aesthetic choices because "los mulatos intelectuales" are devotees of "esa 'última palabra' de los blancos (sea Hugo, sea Verlaine, Puvis de Chavanne, Rodin, Grieg); con más ardor, ardor tórrido, que sus mismos inventores" (Bunge 1903: 28). By highlighting this supposedly visible characteristic of the afro-descendants' behaviour, blackness here is not constructed as traditional, but on the contrary as modern, perhaps one could even say *hyper-modern* to follow Bunge's own terminology. Needless to say, the pref-

erence afro-descendants seem to express for the European tradition over any other, serves the purpose to confirm assumptions on white superiority. Indeed, according to Aline Helg, Bunge “pretended to build a theory of concordance between physical (or racial) and psychological characteristics, much in the vein of the French theorist Gustave Lebon. Once again, Anglo-Saxons appeared at the top of the racial scale, with great sentiment and altruism as their major traits, as well as industry, joy and democracy” (Helg 1990: 40).

It is important to note that for Bunge this phenomenon of *hiperestesia de la aspirabilidad*, which he defines as being psychological in nature, only applies to “mulatos ó amulatados; pues los negros puros poseen un potencial psicológico generalmente demasiado débil para expandir, en otra cosa que en candombes, la procesión que les anda adentro” (Bunge 1903: 28). Clearly for Bunge whereas the “negros” are the possessors of musical traditions later absorbed by the creoles, they are at the same time incapable of achieving sophisticated rational thinking. In contrast, the “mulatos” because theoretically have been “improved” by their contact with white people as a result of miscegenation, they are well predisposed to embrace civilisation. This idea is reinforced by Bunge when, in a highly exoticised and eroticised passage he writes,

si hay criollos alegres, son los negros y mulatos, cuando, aclimatados ya, abren su ancha boca sensual á las molicias de la civilización, mostrando, en sus dos gruesas hileras de dientes de marfil, que tiene el estómago sano de las estirpes nuevas (Bunge 1903: 39).

Thus, Bunge’s argument is not only that the afro-descendants have significantly reduced in number, but also that those who are still representing this sector of the Argentine population, no longer have a distinctive culture of their own; they have lost their ‘purity’, they have been *mesticized*.

Bunge recounts this process of cultural appropriation by taking back the readers to the period of Rosas during which, according to him, the “candombes” and “tangos” flourished. From these genres

ha sacado la plebe gauchesca lo que llama “bailar con corte”, con “puro corte á la quebrada”[...] Pero esta alegría lujuriosamente africana, en el carácter criollo, que es de triple origen hispano-indígena-africano, parece pasajera, excepcional; desvirtúase, por ser de un factor generalmente en minoría en el proceso de homogenización de la raza (Bunge 1903: 49-50).

Whereas on the one hand Bunge clearly reduces blackness to what he sees as hereditary traits of a biological and psychological nature – for example in his view afro-descendants lack from a “sentido moral cristiano” (Bunge 1903: 28) –, in his argumentation national identity becomes a value to be transmitted. In this sense, culture itself becomes an imitative process that can be improved if the social environment provides the right setting. What I think is very revealing about this discursive operation is the fact that Bunge is unwillingly aware of the fragility of the Argentine project because

he admits that Argentina's population was clearly dominated at some point by communities of African ancestry. Thus, in order to justify the viability of the civilisation project, he needs to portray black people in a way that makes evident their 'good disposition' in spite of their less favourable 'racial characteristics'. In other words, from Bunge's perspective, in order for the afro-descendants to be considered as acceptable members of the Argentine society they had to stop *being blacks*. By declaring the loss of signs of "Africanness" in the behaviour of afro-descendants, blackness as part of Argentine culture was able to emerge.

6. Conclusions

Notwithstanding the significant ideological and methodological differences between the scholarly work currently being produced and the tradition that precedes it, what I have tried to demonstrate here is that there is a tendency in the majority of them to emphasise the 'invisibility' of the afro-descendants in the official history of Argentina. This emphasis over 'invisibility' comes into contact with the appropriative force of hegemonic representations of afro-descendants, without fully exploring it, or even worse, reproducing some of its tropes. The emphasis on invisibility at times defines blackness in exclusionary terms in the shape of projects of 'cultural recovery'. Claiming that by exploring the 'Afro' component of Argentine culture one is restoring their place in history, is to become complicit with a reductive version of culture, which instead of questioning narratives on otherness, it might well be reproducing such discursive operations. Part of the problem lies on the fact that scholarly work on blackness in the Argentine context has yet to develop further reflections on how its own discursive production interweaves with the constructions of blackness it attempts to disentangle.

I have tried to distance myself from the invisibility paradigm by attempting to understand the construction of blackness as both central and marginal in the ongoing process of construction of Argentine identity. As my reading of Bunge's text demonstrates, racist constructions of identity implied not necessarily exclusion or negation of the afro-descendants existence, but rather a complex set of manoeuvres of appropriation that enabled the incorporation of the afro-descendants' culture as part of the national tradition. In Bunge's case it becomes clear that instead of invisibility, what seems to be in operation is an obsession with the differentiation of cultural traits perceived as being of African origin as these became essential in the process of creating, selecting and appropriating cultural elements for reinventing a sense of national identity. In fact, one could claim that the cultural legitimisation of Argentina's national project put into practice complex manoeuvres of appropriation of notions of blackness.

Thus, the question is clearly not any longer whether the afro-descendants were or are invisible in dominant perceptions of Argentine identity, but rather when and why denouncing invisibility became the privileged perspective from which to explore the construction of blackness in the Argentine context and what other perspectives might

be better suited to acknowledge profound shifts in identity formation and cultural practices.

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