

RE-TYPING TRADITION: NEW BLACK PRESS AND THE AFRO-ARGENTINE STRUGGLE FOR CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP

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Abstract

The shelves of Buenos Aires' *kiosko* newsstands feature a new periodical next to *La nación: El Afroargentino*. Contrary to the hegemonic myth of a race-less (white) nation, the negated Afro-Argentine community in conjunction with new Afro-descended immigrants reemerged in the late 1990s. Increased efforts to gain recognition through the 2010 census, the foundation of DIAFAR (Diáspora Africana de la Argentina), and the inauguration of Día Nacional de los Afroargentinos y la Cultura Afro in 2014 demonstrate how Afro-Argentines are vying for the cultural inclusion they have been denied.

Drawing on *El Afroargentino*, published by DIAFAR starting in 2014, this paper explores how Afro-Argentines are re-imagining black history and identity to reflect the community of Afro-descendants in contemporary Argentina. As the national discourse shifts toward racial consciousness and human rights, the multi-national and multi-cultural African diaspora movement has mobilized within dominant political rhetoric.

I argue that amidst the struggle to represent Afro identity in Buenos Aires, the newspaper redefines "Argentine-ness" by simultaneously differentiating an Afro cultural identity while affirming African traditions as essential to the Argentine narrative. I examine how *El Afroargentino* occupies public spaces, necessary, as cultural policy theorist George Yudicé contends, in order to affirm the Afro presence and belonging within dominant society. An analysis of "lost" Afro-Argentine cultural practices suggests that the contemporary newspaper *El Afroargentino*, self-defined as the modern rendition of the Nineteenth century black press, re-invents this Afro tradition in the present. On DIAFAR's Facebook, the positive reception, distribution of and dialogue around the paper reveals a rebuilding of the Afro-Argentine community. Employing Yudicé's theorizing of cultural expedience and citizenship, I contend that *El Afroargentino* plays an active role within the context of Buenos Aires' shifting racial landscape to legitimize claims to an Afro-Argentine culture, and thus asserts the community's agency in gaining recognition as citizens.

Introduction

Acá Estamos. On the third page of the first issue of *El Afroargentino*, the only black self-published newspaper produced in Argentina in the twenty first century, begins its editorial section: Here We Are.¹ The paper itself, printed on thin pamphlet paper with thick, dark ink, relays the message. It screams: “We, the Afro-Argentines, are here. We exist and we have a voice.” The newspaper recently went to press in 2014, published by DIAFAR (Diáspora Africana de la Argentina), a civil society that is shaping the landscape of the contemporary Afro movement in Buenos Aires and beyond. In a country whose Afro history is still often negated, and current Afro presence outright denied, those who have been invisibilized are reclaiming their agency. Due to a process of racial mixing, myth-making, and the oppression of military dictatorship that “erased” Afro-Argentines from national belonging, the population’s right to their own identity as both Afro and Argentine has been compromised. The modern Argentina democracy looks, quite literally, different from the newly independent Argentina of the 1800s, ergo the construction of the modern Argentine identity is being re-negotiated a new society that must come to terms with diversity. Given the increased multi-racial consciousness in Buenos Aires due to neoliberal, multicultural discourse and recent immigration trends in the past thirty years, the Afro-Argentine organization DIAFAR has been able to create spaces, symbols and practices through which Argentine “Afro-ness” may be performed. The Afro newspaper *El Afroargentino* embodies these practices, as part of a larger “visibilization” process of drawing awareness and legitimacy towards the nation’s Afro influences and participation. It represents, but also actively re-imagines, local Afro culture as part of a larger diaspora

¹ Frederico Pita, “Editorial: Acá Estamos,” *El Afroargentino* 1, no.1 (November 2014) 3.

community, while simultaneously (re)constructing a national Afro-Argentine identity in order to gain cultural citizenship.

Current president Frederico Pita founded DIAFAR in 2010 to organize Afro-Argentines, and although it addresses the challenges that specifically Argentines of African descent must face today, they welcome all peoples to join and celebrate Afro cultures. Within transitioning Argentine race relations, and in response to systematic “invisibilization” and “erasure” of Afro-Argentine history, DIAFAR has taken on the project of fighting for inclusion and the right to their identity, or rather “cultural citizenship.” What does full citizenship mean for Afro-Argentines in 2015? Today in Buenos Aires, if a person is born in Argentina, but has African heritage, as according to UNESCO census work approximately 4% of the population does, he/she may be mistaken as Brazilian or told his/her Argentine ID is false because “Afro-Argentines do not exist.”² Such individuals may have learned in elementary school that all Afro-descended peoples died in the war against Paraguay and from Yellow Fever in the 1900s, and that now the black people in Argentina are Uruguayans, Cubans or Senegalese and therefore Afro-Argentines do not have their own cultural autonomy. In the eyes of DIAFAR and the Afro-Argentine community, these assumptions and explicit negation of Afro-Argentine participation in the national narrative are detrimental violations of their rights as Argentines and deny them belonging to their own country.

² Maria Lamadrid, a native descendant of two slaves, was accused of presenting a false Argentine ID in 2002. The airport official was reported to have denied Maria her national identity: “This can’t be your passport. There are no blacks in Argentina.” Laura Balfour, “Afroargentines,” *The Argentina Independent*, March 23, 2007. <http://www.argentinaindependent.com/life-style/society-life-style/afroargentines/> accessed 12/7/15.

Citizenship as defined by the social movement means being recognized as Argentines in order to access state benefits and programs, gain cultural respect, and reverse “othering” towards Afro-descendants.³ Afro-Argentines are no less, Argentine than any other citizen, and thus must strategically navigate the tension between asserting a cultural identity attached to a specific interest group and claiming rights to a political national identity. The implications of this study help us understand the complex process of how the “lost” Afro-Argentine community re-invents their traditions in modern contexts to establish a basis upon which cultural identity may be claimed.

In this paper I argue that DIAFAR’s *El Afroargentino* embodies the Afro-Argentine struggle for social inclusion, simultaneously demanding national belonging and cultural autonomy. This main claim is grounded in George Yúdice’s scholarship on the uses and the plurality of culture. His theory that subaltern communities may use their cultural differences as ultimate tools for citizenship informs my own conclusions about the Afro-Argentines.⁴ First, I outline the challenges that the Afro-Argentine community faces in contemporary Argentine society: reversing invisibilization and myths of criollo whitening, proving modern Afro-Argentine existence and competing with other foreign, more visible Afro-descended populations. I examine how transitions toward the neoliberal economic model exposed the diversity within Buenos Aires’ supposed homogenously mixed European population with increased hostility towards ethnically marked immigrant workers, but discriminated groups were able to mobilize for their human rights against racism, including Afro-descended groups. I then analyze the black newspaper *El*

³ I infer these citizenship demands based on DIAFAR’s objectives outlined on their website; “Quienes Somos,” *DIAFAR*, 2011, <http://diafar.blogspot.com/p/quienes-somos.html> accessed Nov. 6, 2015.

⁴ George Yúdice, *The Expendiency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

Afroargentino to understand how specifically Afro-Argentines are organizing, spearheaded by DIAFAR, in order to be acknowledged as full Argentine citizens. Using well-known theories of imagining communities and re-inventing culture, I lay out how *El Afroargentino* gains visibility for the community through its physical, digital and symbolic occupation of space, its content unites the community around explicit shared experience and goals, and the publication of the newspaper itself is a modern resurrection of the Nineteenth Century booming black press tradition.⁵ Finally, I assert that the important role of *El Afroargentino* in legitimizing the contemporary Afro-Argentine community's culture sets the foundation upon which claims for cultural citizenship can be made. Using Yúdice's *The Expediency of Culture*, I conclude that DIAFAR's new black newspaper is a medium through which Afro-Argentines assert both belonging to Afro and Argentine identities, which negotiates national Argentine-ness to include a plurality of cultural identification.

Defying the Invisibilization of Argentine Afro-ness

One of DIAFAR's principal missions, and the objective of publishing *El Afroargentino*, is to legitimize lasting Afro-Argentine presence and civil participation in response to the historic suppression of the Afro-descended population, and continued negation of a Twenty-First Century Afro-Argentine community. Despite the fact that Argentina participated in the colonial legacy of slavery, most of the dominant society does not recognize the country's African roots. Buenos Aires, post independence, had a large and dynamic African descended population, reaching up to a quarter of the city's

⁵ See Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and Eric Hobsbawm's *The Invention of Tradition*.

population 1830s according to municipal censuses.⁶ The Afro-Argentine community participated actively in civic practices and cultural spheres.⁷ Many men served in the military, thereby improving their social status. Community leaders formed social clubs and African Nations, which established networks of mutual aid, held dance socials and published newspapers to keep members up to date. El tango, la milonga, la murga, el candombe were born in the neighborhoods of ex-slaves, free people of color and their descendants. The early to mid Nineteenth Century was a time of Afro mobilization in Buenos Aires, but increasingly radicalized ideas about race and racial hierarchies forced the marginalized Afro and other non-white communities to discard or hide their customs.

By the late Twentieth Century, the African-descended population was essentially erased from Argentina's racial map and national narrative through the process of "invisibilization", which is a major challenge for Afro-Argentines in 2015 to prove their national belonging.⁸ Invisibilization consists of the removal of ethnic differences from dominant political language and public discourse by the society's elite policy makers.⁹ The national educational institutions, mainstream media and other State measures encouraged the repression of ethnic markers, such as Afro cultural practices, which enforced such "de-ethnization."¹⁰ The myth of the criollo "racial melting pot" has erased African influences

⁶ George Reid Andrews, *Los afroargentinos de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1998): 81.

⁷ For further context on Afro-Argentine community mobilization and culture from 1800-1900 see George Reid Andrew's *Los afroargentinos de Buenos Aires* (1989): 79-231.

⁸ The Spanish word *invisibilización* is used by Argentine scholars understand how an entire community could have "disappeared" from the public eye. In this paper, I conserve an Anglicized version of the local neologism because it implies a conscious process instigated by dominant political actors to make Afro-Argentines invisible. Throughout this paper, I attempt to adhere to native academic language in order to represent the Afro-Argentine reality on, and in, their own terms.

⁹ Alejandro Grimson, "Ethnic (In)Visibilization in Neoliberal Argentina," (*NACLA Report on the Americas* 38 no. 4, 2005): 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

from the national identity because Argentine-ness becomes defined by a European dominant homogenous race.

During the second half of the 1800s, faced with Sarmiento's racist "whitening" policies and then Roca's oppressive, Eurocentric regime beginning in 1880, the Afro-Argentine community struggled to maintain their place in the public sphere. Although Afro-Argentines contributed to literature, music, cinema, religion and dance in the Nineteenth and Twentieth century, the racist European descended elites re-wrote African influences from history books through "criollo" rhetoric, inventing the legacy of the white Latin American state. Before the turn of the twentieth century, Buenos Aires elite constructed a local identity based on European mixing -criollismo- that led to the notion of "racial neutrality" or homogeneity. They welcomed (white) immigrants to the Argentine shores because in the discourse of the time European-ness was equated with conceptions of civilization and progress. Waves of Spanish, Italians, and other Europeans spilled into the port of Rio de La Plata, and over time, and whiteness was naturalized as Argentine. The rise of Peronism in the 1940s and 1950s then emphasized class as the defining agent of social structures, further removing or negating racial differences.¹¹ Moving into the second half of the century, military dictator regimes took control of the state. The terror and oppression that paralyzed the nation deterred any social mobilization and any celebration of difference was marked as subversive. Afro-Argentines in this context were under no

¹¹ Juan Domingo Peron is one of the most influential figures in Argentine history, especially in shaping the political, social and economic landscapes of the Twentieth Century. A populist leader, Peron appealed to the working class masses during Argentina's industrialization in the 1940s. During his time as head of state, members of society identified as Peronism or Anti-Peronism, dividing the country by political ideology than by explicit racial lines. This did not mean racism did not exist, merely that the myth of European homogeneity prevailed and was not contested given that more weight was put upon class and political party alliances than race at the time. (Grimson 2005)

political or social conditions to build their community and promote cultural awareness in the public sphere.

In the context of the Twenty-First Century, the notion of “invisibilization” has shifted because major state institutions in education and politics have accepted that Afro-Argentines did certainly exist in the colonial period and decades post independence, however many still ignore contemporary Afro-Argentine presence. Current discourse surrounding African heritage historicizes the native Afro-descendent legacy, placing it far in the past to pre-modern days without acknowledging its withstanding contribution into the present. The literature that surrounds (in)visibilisation often employs language such as recovery, recuperation, revival, and other terms that essentialize a “lost culture” as a historic artifact, mummified and preserved in its primitive past form. Latin Americanist and Diaspora researcher Fernanda Peñaloza critiques the emphasis of the invisibility paradigm that dominates scholarly work on Afro culture in Argentina precisely because it historicizes Afro-Argentine existence and influence. Her argument that invisibility invokes “cultural recovery” reveals how the research of Afro-Argentine culture limits the validity of modern construction of blackness, or Afro-ness, by placing it in the past.¹² This paper strives to move beyond historical recognition, and instead reflect on the mechanisms that Afro-Argentines are implementing to visibilize the modern manifestations of their culture. The process of visibilization is necessary to overcome invisibilization and historicization as it proves the present existence of an Afro-Argentine community.¹³

¹² Fernanda Peñaloza, “Mapping Constructions of Blackness in Argentina,” *Indiana* 24 (2007): 229.

¹³ The tension between history and modernity plays out in the discourse surrounding “tradition” that will be discussed further. Although Afro-Argentines face the challenge of proving their 21st century existence, they must concurrently maintain engagement with past traditions in order to legitimize Afro-Argentine culture as a continuous identity that has “survived” or transcended the invisibilization imposed by dominant conceptions of white criollo Argentine-ness.

New Afro Visibility: Neoliberalism, Immigration and Multi-Racial Consciousness

Post-dictator Argentina transformed in many ways as the society rebuilt itself, and the shift toward Neoliberalism exposed a multi-racial, multi-ethnic reality that increased awareness of Argentina's heterogeneity, provoking increased racism, but also ethnic mobilization including among Afro civil societies. It was under President Menem's "restored democracy," during his term between 1989-1999, that new global economic policies marketed upon multiculturalism were initiated and Neoliberal Argentina was born. The privatization of work and simultaneous entrance into liberal global markets impacted the socio-economic realities of Argentine and immigrant workers in Buenos Aires, which fueled tensions between native-born people and foreigners. With more competition, immigrants were targeted as scapegoats for economic hardships.¹⁴ In response to the increased xenophobia and hostility, immigrants, especially of Bolivian background, mobilized around their own ethnic identity, demanding acceptance for cultural difference.¹⁵ These efforts increased visibility and celebration of diversity in Buenos Aires. Despite Argentina being imagined as a racially neutral space (or a white space), in the 21st century race and racial diversity emerged as concepts in social, political and cultural discourses. Multiculturalism created a new framework that historically marginalized and "othered" groups who had been denied full citizenship because of cultural differences, could appropriate to claim belonging and rights. Under the modern democracy and neoliberal reform, Buenos Aires has become a visibly multiracial space with increased physical presence and perceived awareness of cultural and racial differences among its inhabitants.

¹⁴ Grimson, 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

Despite new ethnic and racial visibility in the 1990s, Afro-Argentines still remained excluded from dominant political language and public view due to the ingrained belief that “Afro-ness” was not native to Argentina. While visiting the US in 1996, President Menem claimed in Argentina there are no “black” people- “ese problema lo tiene Brasil”, rejecting the concept of an Afro-Argentine population, denouncing Afro-descendants as a problem, and “othering” blacks as foreigners.¹⁶ This example highlights the challenges that the Afro-Argentines still face, even with growing acceptance of diversity: natives of African descent are not considered Argentine.

Not only must DIAFAR contend invisibilization, the organization must fight the stigmas that emerged as a consequence of modern Afro visibilization. In 2012 on the online blog for Clarín, one of Argentina’s principal news sources, Argentine Marcelo Pissaro published his observations of changing racial dynamics on the streets of Buenos Aires:

“Cuando yo era chico, a comienzos de la decada de 1980, difícilmente podías cruzarte con un negro si vivías en Buenos Aires o en sus suburbios. No había negros, y si los había, no te los cruzabas diariamente, ni semanalmente, ni mensualmente... La gente negra estaba en las películas y en las series de televisión, en los viajes al exterior, en las figuritas de la época de la colonia que venías en Antejito o Billiken para el 25 de Mayo; en la vida cotidiana, en Buenos Aires, no había negros [...] Desde hace unos años (¿diez? ¿quince? ¿más? ¿menos?), en estas mismas calles de Buenos Aires y de sus suburbios, se pueden ver negros en puestitos informales vendiendo cadenas, relojes, anillos, bisutería de todo tipo.”¹⁷

This excerpt indicates a consciousness that *negro* African immigrants have increased in number and have infiltrated once-white spaces in the capital city. Clearly, Pissaro perceives people of Afro or African descent as inherently foreign, as belonging on the TV, in other

¹⁶ Rosario Gabino, “¿Hay negros en Argentina?,” *BBC Mundo*, March 16, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/spanish/specials/2007/esclavitud/newsid_6455000/6455537.stm.

¹⁷ Marcelo Pissaro, “Los negros que venden relojes y cadenas de oro en Buenos Aires,” *Clarín Weblogs*, February 3, 2012, http://weblogs.clarin.com/revistaenienersallstar/2012/02/03/los_negros_que_venden_relojes_y_cadenas_de_oro_en_buenos_aires/ accessed 9/16/15.

countries or in the colonial past, but not in Argentina. He demonstrates that the majority of Argentines do not recognize the nation's African heritage. Moreover, the representation of Afro-descended people made in relation to the racist cartoon Antejito and to persecuted illegal immigrants perpetuates the negative stereotypes associated with Afro-ness in Buenos Aires. Misrepresentation, exoticization and racism are challenges that new visibilization presents to the Afro-Argentine community in contemporary Argentine society.

The changing immigration trends in the past thirty years as a consequence of the draw of neoliberal Argentina, have complicated the obstacle of visibilization for the Afro-Argentines because they must compete for visibility with other Afro communities that appear more phenotypically African, whose cultures are widely recognized as Afro, and whose immigrant communities are cohesively established as African or Afro-descended. Afro identity and culture is contested among various factions of the Afro community in Buenos Aires. This conversation revolves around varying representations and claims to African heritage, which are embodied by the performance of Afro traditions. Afro-Uruguayans, Afro Cubans, Afro Brazilians have made strides in visibilizing, popularizing and even commercializing "Afro" culture through stereotypical or easily recognizable practices in music, dance and religion. Afro-Argentine traditional culture is dismissed as lost, and foreign Afro cultures take the front stage in representing Afro-descended identities.¹⁸ The argument of this paper examines DIAFAR and *El Afroargentino* as active members in reclaiming both their legitimate African heritage and Argentine belonging to strengthen the Afro-Argentines' voice among other Afro communities.

¹⁸ Alejandro Frigerio, "Blacks in Argentina: Contested Representations of Culture and Ethnicity," Paper presented at the 2000 Meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, Miami, FL, March 2000.

Political Mobilization with Argentina's Shifting Racial Attitudes

Recent changes in legislation indicates the increased immigrant presence that has lead to racial consciousness among porteños and an expressed racism that permeates new interactions and perceptions of non-whites. On July 28, 1995 the Argentine legislative bodies passed Ley No. 24.515 that instituted the creation of INADI, the Instituto Nacional Contra la Discriminación, la Xenofobia y el Racismo.¹⁹ The objective of this institution, established during the booming years of Neoliberalism under President Menem, is to provide legal services to people who experience specific cases of discrimination, xenophobia and racism, to revise discriminatory structures within the government and to promote equality and social justice with the national community. Furthermore, in 2014 the University of Buenos Aires and the INADI found 41% of Buenos Aires residence had been discriminated against, 18% of the cases for the color of their skin and 17% for physical attributes²⁰. The Southern Cone country that used to claim that “race” is not an issue given the narrative of a mixed criollo, European whitened population that erased physical differences, is now faced with a very different reality. The fact that the survey provided an option indicating racism, or discrimination based on skin color, is a major indicator that racial diversity and persecution are realities in Buenos Aires.

Additionally, the fight against racism as a recognized social issue in a now acknowledged multi-racial Argentina became legitimized as a fight for human rights. The political project since the dictatorship has been dominated by a fierce defense of human

¹⁹ “Instituto Nacional Contra La Discriminación, La Xenofobia y El Racismo,” *Información Legislativa y Documental*, last modified in 2005, <http://infoleg.mecon.gov.ar/infolegInternet/anexos/25000-29999/25031/texact.htm>.

²⁰ Edith Cantinazo, “El 41% de los porteños se sintió discriminado en alguna oportunidad,” *La Nación*, September 30, 2015, <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1832243-en-zona-sur-se-registran-los-mayores-casos-de-discriminacion-de-la-ciudad>.

rights in response to the atrocities and human rights violations committed during the 70s and 80s. The emergence of a human rights movement has transformed Argentine political culture, and NGOs, advocacy organizations, and social movements are new, active players in defending social accountability.²¹ The proliferation of human rights rhetoric in legal discourse during the past thirty years has created the political language for the Afro social movement to enter into dominant spaces and fight for their own political agenda. To reflect the interconnectivity of racial and human rights discourse, in 2005 INADI was legally transferred from the Ministerio del Interior to work under the Ministerio de Justicia y Derechos Humanos.²² Anti-racism advocacy is the human rights platform upon which Afro and African descended peoples organize.²³

The imagined nation, given that nationalism is an imagined concept, is flexible and constantly re-shaping itself. Afro populations in Buenos Aires have imagined their own communities to assert their marginalized presence in the city, while simultaneously appropriating dominant political framework. The Afro movement imagines itself as a united force against racism and advocate of Afro identity pride, despite differences or fragmentations, which strengthens its political influence. The sub-communities do, however, represent different interests. African immigrants, for example, pull for political citizenship rights to housing and to voting. Afro-Argentines, on the other hand, organize for

²¹ Enrique Peruzzotti, "Accountability Struggles in Democratic Argentina: Civic Engagement from the Human Rights Movement to the Néstor Kirchner Administration," *Laboratorium* 2, no. 3 (2010): 66-70.

²² "Instituto Nacional"

²³ DIAFAR on its website cites "Divulgar y velar por el cumplimiento de la Declaración y Programa de Acción de Durban contra el Racismo, la Discriminación, la Xenofobia y todas las formas conexas de Intolerancia" as the organization's final objective. They directly align their own action within international and national human rights and anti-discrimination programs. La Declaración y Programa de Acción de Durban is a declaration against all forms of discrimination, racism and xenophobia written during the World Conference 2001. See "Quiénes somos.," "Conferencia de Examen de Durban," *United Nations*, 2011, <http://www.un.org/es/durbanreview2009/ddpa.shtml>.

the right to claim dual belonging to both the national Argentine and the transnational Afro identities as they are interconnected.

With the transition towards multi-racial consciousness, the mobilization of Afro groups gained traction in the 1990s. After the creation of INADI many organizations emerged: the Nigerian Organization, the African Diaspora Working Group, the Afro-Indigenous coalition, Africa Vive, Agrupación Xangô, Asociación Misibamba, Casa de la Cultura Indo-Afro-Americana, among others. These “imagined communities” of Afro descendants (African immigrants, Argentine slave descendants, African descendants of other Latin American nationalities) join to gain visibility and fight for social justice under the notion of human rights and anti-discrimination.²⁴ The formation of these political organizations and mutual aid societies reveals is a sense of commonalities and shared challenges around which a political interest may be formed and strategically formulated within existing dominant language.

One of the biggest achievements for Afro and Afro-Argentine visibilization is the 2010 population census that included a section to identify as Afro-descendant, for which a trial survey was conducted in 2006 funded by the World Bank. The census revealed an Afro-descendant population of only .4%, but the pilot results recorded 2 million Afro-descendants, about 5% of the national population. In Buenos Aires alone, a genetic test done by the University of Buenos Aires found a 4.3% Afro population.²⁵ Giving people the option to identify as Afro-descendants is a statement of social inclusion, a step towards

²⁴ Suárez in the fourth chapter of her Graduate Thesis on Afro-Argentine “Examples of the Organizing Strategies of Three Afro Argentine Civil Society Organizations” examines the strategies employed by Agrupación Xangô, Asociación Misibamba and Casa de la Cultura Indo-Afro-Americana, which further discusses the way these associations utilize human rights discourse. (Suárez 2013): 64-83.

²⁵ Balfour.

greater ethnic citizenship participation, and the opening of new racial dialogues in response to contemporary immigration and transnational black movements.²⁶ Now that Afro-descended peoples have officially stated their presence, it is still necessary for *Afro-Argentines* to re-imagine their contemporary community in order to assert their specific interests and citizenship rights demands.

In the next section, I address how DIAFAR specifically employs the newspaper *El Afroargentino* to build the Afro-Argentine community through both physical and symbolic representation. With visibility and spatial presence established, *El Afroargentino*'s content consolidates the community's identity. Because Afro-Argentine identity has been historically invisibilized and contested in modern racial politics, DIAFAR draws upon the Nineteenth Century practice of Argentine black press to "re-invent" Afro-Argentine in dialogue with contemporary race politics and Argentine society. This re-invention of tradition is necessary for Afro-Argentine claims to contemporary cultural belonging.

As cultural theorist George Yudicé points out, the definition of "cultural rights" is ambiguous due to the flexible nature of culture and its infinite variability.²⁷ Furthermore, differing governmental structures have varying strengths and weaknesses in integrating and following through with protecting such rights.²⁸ Despite the ambiguity and the contested validation of cultural rights, Yudicé maintains that culture "is a resource for politics" (p. 23). In the case of the Afro-Argentines, in order to push a political agenda, first they must re-create their culture that has been erased from national memory and as such has been

²⁶ Argentine Anthropologist Laura Cecilia López discusses the 2010 population census that included Afro-descendants as a social group, and the transnational actors (UNESCO, World bank, regional Afro resurgence movements) that influenced this change as an important tool for constructing social realities (López 2006):103.

²⁷Yudice, 21.

²⁸ Ibid.

negated as an integral part of Argentine identity. The culture making process is, in turn, shaped by the established political rhetoric as DIAFAR must strategize and legitimize their claims for identity within notions of anti-racism under dominant human rights discourse.

While Yudicé's research on marginalized Afro populations in Brazil discusses how culture may be used as capital to gain access to governmental resources and political legitimacy, in DIAFAR's case, Afro populations in Buenos Aires have already established a foothold in political spheres. In order to legitimize those claims for identity, however, the Afro-Argentine community must re-construct the supposedly "lost" Afro-Argentine culture that their imaginary is founded on.

Re-Imagining and Consolidating Afro-Argentine Community

El Afroargentino is dispersed physically throughout the capital to gain visibility and assert the presence of the Afro-Argentine voice among other mainstream media sources. It is sold in kioskos, newspaper stands that are integral to Buenos Aires subway systems and arguably to the tradition of the city itself.²⁹ Kioskos are passed by thousands of people a day, as they are strategically located near public transportation and on well-travelled corners. It is a joke among locals that if you get lost in the city, you should ask the man at the kiosko for directions because he is the expert of that block. The kioskos represent information, and have a dominating presence within the spacial construct of Buenos Aires.

El Afroargentino's appearance in the newsstands represents a symbolic belonging to the

²⁹ According to posts on facebook, *El Afroargentino* initially was sold at twelve different kioskos throughout the city. On November 19, 2014, a digital pamphlet announced that the newspaper could be found mostly along the Subte D metro stops, in the downtown center and in the Barrio Norte. November 29, a new list included nine more "puntos de venta" that extended into neighborhoods on the periphery of the capital and in central neighborhoods such as Monserrat where the Afro descended population is greater. By May 29, 2015, the announcement for the newest issue of *El Afroargentino* declared "¡Ya está disponible en todos los kioscos de C.A.B.A!" ("Photo 1"; "Photo 2"; Photo 3")

capital city. The newspaper may not gain economic profits from paper copies, but by having a space on those shelves, *El Afroargentino* gains access to the same space as the mainstream news sources and magazines. Occupying public space amongst other images and representations of Argentine-ness is a way for Afro-Argentines to assert their own belonging³⁰. The Afro newspaper is sold side-by-side the national paper; it represents an alternative, but comparable, Argentine perspective.

Beyond the symbolic belonging that the newspaper represents, the content of *El Afroargentino* represents the re-imagined, re-invented Afro-Argentine Community. It calls for the Afro-Argentine community to come together, to inform itself and to take a stand for acceptance. *El Afroargentino* embodies for the Afro-Argentine population a subaltern media source, which serves, as Benedict Anderson emphasizes, as a fundamental tool in imagining community. In his renowned theory of the imagined community of the nation-state, Anderson argues “nothing perhaps more precipitated this search [for linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together], nor made it more fruitful, than print-capitalism, which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways”.³¹ Through text, Afro-Argentines have a mode of communication, a platform to establish values, to impart a history and to create a sense of belonging. The symbolic community building is stated clearly in the first issue of *El Afroargentino*: “es a ellos [los afroargentinos y las afroargentinas] a quienes dirigimos en primer lugar nuestros esfuerzos por encontrarnos,

³⁰ George Yúdice states: “Being seen and being heard- and just occupying space- is thus a way of asserting belonging” (Yúdice: Duke, 2003):138.

³¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983): 36.

celebrarnos y empoderizarnos.”³² As the editor states, the Afro paper is first and foremost a resource for Afro-Argentines to relate to one another in order to mobilize the community. *El Afroargentino* is a way for Argentines of African decent to recognize themselves within a greater established community.

Similarly, African diaspora theorist Brent Hayes Edwards uses Anderson’s framework to understand diaspora identity and community making through the black press in Paris and in Harlem in the 1920s. He analyzes how the circulation of newspapers published by black communities in France and in the U.S forged links and fictitious encounters between international black populations. He further argues that such exchanges between periodicals represent an imagined community of the Pan-African Diaspora during the Twentieth Century.³³ Hayes Edwards emphasizes the importance of newspapers as inherently *literary* modes of communication across spatially dispersed readers, creating an imaginary space that crosses national borders. By examining *El Afroargentino* through this logic, it is evident that the DIAFAR’s newspaper “practices” diaspora in the same way as the black periodicals *Opportunity* and *Les Continents* that Hayes focuses on.³⁴ *El Afroargentino* performs on a smaller scale, however, given that its readership is targeted towards specifically *Argentines* of African decent. The literary space that the newspaper creates is a point of contact and introspection where Afro-Argentines enter into dialogue between themselves about their belonging to both the Argentine nation and to a greater African diaspora.

³² Frederico Pita, “Editorial: Acá Estamos,” *El Afroargentino* 1, no.1 (November 2014): 3.

³³ Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, translation and the rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013): 115.

³⁴ Hayes Edwards stresses the performativity of newspaper publishing and circulation by determining it a “practice” of black internationalism. (Hayes Edwards 2013):118.

As a population that was essentially erased from national history, the Afro-Argentines must reconstruct, re-imagine, their history and culture. This process is a reflective one that requires not only the participation of those who create this narrative, but directly involves the reception and acceptance of the community members. DIAFAR engages in dialogue with the imagined Afro-Argentine community through *El Afroargentino*. The desired reader is an Afro-descended Argentine, who by reading the articles will reach a better understanding of him or her self and his or her role in society. The layout of the newspaper is broken down into segments, most with an educational function that aims to illuminate its readers of the negated Afro-Argentine history, discrimination and marginalization of the population, prominent national Afro figures, misrepresentation of Afro-descendants in educational institutions and media, and other issues pertaining to the community.³⁵ Each issue includes an Afrodiccionario, which highlights frequently asked questions and definitions pertaining to: Afro descendants, Afro identity classification, racism, diaspora, and white supremacy.³⁶ In response to the whitening of Argentine identity and naturalized negation of Afro existence, the newspaper serves to educate Afro-Argentines of their social and cultural situation. The goal is to spread awareness of the structural marginalization that has permeated all levels of society in order to ignite social empowerment and activism.

³⁵ The headlines of the first issue of *El Afroargentino*, which inform the topics of importance, are: "Invisibilización y Barbarie. El rol de los medios: Racismo estructural y el mito de la 'desaparación de los negros argentinos'", "El ABC del Editor Racista", "Chascamús: La capilla de los negros", "El padre del cine argentino: José Agustín Ferreyra", "La Industria y El Racismo", "Fidel Nadal: 'No hay ningún país del mundo que no sea racista'". The second issue printed articles titled: "Racismo en la Escuela. El sistema educativo en la mira: Las instituciones educativas como reproductoras del racismo estructural", "Escultura 'La Esclavitud' en un rincón oculto de los Bosques de Palermo", "Gabino Ezeiza: Poesía y militancia", "Fragmento del poema 'El esclavo'", "Carlos 'El Negro' García López: '¡Hay que hacer el club de los negros!'".

³⁶ "Afrodiccionario," *El Afroargentino* 1, no.1 (November 2014):2 and "Afrodiccionario," *El Afroargentino* 1, no.2 (May 2015):2.

This practice of community imagining through a printed newspaper parts from Anderson's theory because it is not founded upon capitalist ideals, but rather the opposite. Using resources to produce a pamphlet in the 21st century during the boom of the digital age does not follow the capitalist logic, seeing as a virtual copy would be cheaper and could reach a greater quantity of readers in unlimited online spaces. Why, then, invest capital and energy in publishing a printed periodical?

The main objective of publishing *El Afroargentino* is not to gain a profit, but rather to circulate it in order to gain recognition for, and solidify, the Afro-Argentine community. It is not employed as "culture-as-a-resource," but rather as symbolic cultural capital.³⁷ The value of the newspaper goes beyond its economic expedience; *El Afroargentino* represents the community's voice and affirms the existence of a shared world view. DIAFAR produces this "voz de la comunidad" as a way to imagine the Afro-Argentine community through a concrete and legitimate medium.³⁸ Because the internet is public domain, anyone can publish anything online. A paper periodical, therefore, is perceived as more legitimate, or at least implies an urgency to spread its content. Additionally, the physical character of the paper and ink is a reminder that Afro-Argentines too are "real", present, human beings with a purpose and a vision. The physical paper serves as a mouthpiece "para hablar en primera persona y para romper con un silencio involuntario de décadas, que de ningún modo ha tenido que ver con callar y otorgar."³⁹ As a printed text, *El Afroargentino* becomes an object-artifact that cannot be erased nor ignored, but rather may be leafed through, distributed and duplicated.

³⁷ Yúdice, 9.

³⁸ *El Afroargentino* 1, no.1 (November 2014):1.

³⁹ Frederico Pita, "Editorial: Acá Estamos," *El Afroargentino* 1, no.1 (November 2014) 3.

Although the periodical is a physical artifact, digital platforms are used to promote and further visibilize *El Afroargentino*. The online pages that allow for public comments and forums extend readership beyond the small local community, and create non-geographical spaces where Afro-Argentine discourse may develop, where connections across provinces may be made and therefore further community building transpires. *El Afroargentino* is a medium through and around which social activists may dialogue with the Afro community.⁴⁰ Its symbolic nature allows it to create an imagined space for community interaction and discussion, essentially community building. The newspaper can be bought online through mercado libre, as is explained on a comment to Facebook user Adriana Tatu Barberis, a habitant of the interior town Saladillo. She writes “hola soy del interior de que forma puedo conseguir el afroargentino?”, demonstrating an interest in Afro-Argentine news in other parts of the Buenos Aires Providence⁴¹. DIAFAR uses social media as an additional resource to expand the community that *El Afroargentino* means to represent and unify beyond the limitations of a paper news source.

The Re-Invention of Local Afro-Tradition; The Re-Making of Afro-Argentine Culture

In the racially charged, neoliberal and multicultural context of contemporary Argentine society, DIAFAR intervenes in the imagination of Argentine culture by promoting nation-building strategies, like in the production of an Afro media source, in order to re-imagine Argentine plural identities. A population excluded from dominant society, the Afro-Argentines must prove they have a culture upon which they may organize and identify with. In affirming “difference” or “otherness” by emphasizing their Afro-ness,

⁴⁰ The idea of community dialoguing comes from Yudice’s research on Funk dance parties in marginalized favelas in Rio. (Yúdice: Duke, 2003):149.

⁴¹ “Photo 1.”

Afro-Argentines actually assert their Argentine-ness. Although seemingly contradictory, by weaving the Afro narrative into the national narrative, to be Afro is not mutually exclusive with being Argentine. A phenotypically Afro individual does not have to defend his or her Argentine identity if Afro-Argentines are recognized as a social, political and cultural community.

DIAFAR through *El Afroargentino*, is actively inventing a national “Afro culture” that neither exoticizes, others nor historicizes Afro-Argentine identity. Afro-Argentine presence in dominant academic and political spheres has been marginalized into a constructed historic past, which challenges conceptions of the modern Afro-Argentine. Moreover, cultural discourse demands “tradition”, or the repetition of historically shared customs, events or practices, as a prerequisite to legitimacy, which pulls Afro-Argentines back into the past. Clearly, current-day Afro-Argentines must respond to both the pressures to prove their contemporary existence and maintain a certain traditional relationship with the past. It is through “invented tradition” that Afro-Argentines may navigate the dichotomies of cultural legitimacy and identity making.⁴² Among other social actions such as DIAFAR radio and the organization of Afro “family” socials, one of their major activities is the publication of *El Afroargentino*.

El Afroargentino reasserts an Argentine voice for the Afro population, it reconstructs a “lost” tradition in modern contexts, and contributes to an Afro-Argentine culture defined by activism, literature, musicians and artists. *El Afroargentino* is a symbol of black participation and mobilization that has a dual function as a representation of the subaltern voice and as a celebration of Afro-Argentine identity. Resurrecting the black

⁴² See Hobsbawm, E. J., Ranger, T. O, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

press tradition of the 19th century, the editors of *El Afroargentino* consider it to be “el primer periódico afro del siglo XXI.”⁴³ Black newspapers *El Proletario*, *La Broma*, *La Igualdad*, *La Juventud*, *La Raza Africana* among others formed an active and robust publishing culture that represented the substantial Afro-descended population in Buenos Aires⁴⁴. Historian George Reid Andrews discusses how Afro mutual social aid organizations in the second half of the nineteenth century formed an indisputable and active community in Buenos Aires despite their low numbers.⁴⁵ Their self-published newspapers represent a conscious Afro identity that the construction of the postcolonial Afro-Argentine. Similarly, *El Afroargentino* celebrates past and present Afro-Argentine musicians, activists and other cultural figures, reports on community events and support networks, and educates the community on the modern challenges to call members to action, thus situating itself within this longstanding tradition of Afro-Argentine press and re-inventing the tradition in the twenty-first century.

The first Editor’s Note declares “Acá estamos: Más de un siglo ha pasado desde la aparición del último periódico afroporteño, y ríos de tinta han corrido anunciando nuestra pronta e inminente desaparición. EL AFROARGENTINO se levanta con orgullo para decir ¡Acá estamos! Siempre estuvimos, nunca desaparecimos y siempre estaremos.”⁴⁶ Pita’s mission is for *El Afroargentino* to represent the afrocentric voice of the community that challenges dominant mass media. Reflecting the same sentiment, Black Performance Theory declares itself “oppositional because it honors the subaltern, rhetorical roots of black symbolism that survive and break through the timeworn death wish cast against black

⁴³ Pita, Frederico, “Editorial: Acá Estamos” *El Afroargentino* 1, no. 1 (2014): 3.

⁴⁴ George Reid Andrews, “Race versus Class Association: The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1850-1900,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 11, no.1 (1979): 19-39.

⁴⁵ Reid Andrews (Editorial de la Flor: 1989); 167-184.

⁴⁶ Pita Frederico, “Editorial: Acá Estamos,” *El Afroargentino* 1, no.1 (November 2014): 3.

expression”.⁴⁷ As such, the publishing of *El Afroargentino* is a performance of Afro-ness, of the oppositional.

Demanding Cultural Citizenship: Re-Imagining Afro-ness and Argentine-ness

More than just a re-invention of tradition in the literal way, *El Afroargentino* fulfills a greater function as a tool for achieving a collective vision, in this case gaining political recognition of cultural citizenship and national belonging.⁴⁸ The freedom to express one’s culture is “a *necessary* condition for citizenship” because it creates a space of belonging and membership, which the Afro-Argentines have been denied, given the negation of their plural-cultural identity (my emphasis).⁴⁹ The Afro-Argentine community, which identifies with a certain culture based in re-invented traditions, is defined and organized through DIAFAR’s efforts. Legitimizing a native Afro-descended tradition re-invented in the present confirms the modern presence of Afro-Argentines and validates their national belonging that must be recognized in all institutions and public discourses. . *El Afroargentino*, therefore, represents the foundation upon which the community may demand full citizenship as Afro and Argentine. DIAFAR’s claim for cultural citizenship is motivated by the need for acceptance of plural-ethnic identities.

Through the education and recognition of social challenges facing Afro-Argentine community change may be made and full citizenship achieved. In the first issue of *El Afroargentino*, a bolded box highlights and explicitly defines “Estrategias discriminatorias del discurso periódístico.” Here, the editors of *El Afroargentino* explicitly address the

⁴⁷ Thomas DeFranz et. al *Black Performance Theory*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014): viii.

⁴⁸ This analysis of traditions as “resources for the attainment of particular, individual or collective goals” is developed in Ton Otto and Poul Pederson, *Tradition and Agency : Tracing Cultural Continuity and Invention* (Oakville: Aarhus University Press, 2005): 35.

⁴⁹ Yúdice, 22.

major challenges, from their perspective, that Afro-Argentines must navigate: dominant society's invisibilization and negation of the population, over-representation of Afro influences stuck in the past, stigmatized and racist representation of Afro cultures, "othering" of Afro-ness and over-representation of racism in other countries to de-emphasize the ingrained racism in Argentine society.⁵⁰ The editors emphasize modern issues that Twenty-First century Afro-descendants face and highlight the violations of their citizen rights to identity, belonging, and equality. *El Afroargentino* affirms an activist role, not only bringing the community together based on common experiences, culture and identity, but calling that community to action. Social activists' citizenship initiatives are based on changing the social structures put in place by dominant society by bringing people together "so that they can negotiate their differences and find common ground, that is, set the parameters for coordinating social change."⁵¹ *El Afroargentino* is the platform upon which the Afro-Argentine community finds those similarities and shared experiences of being the "other," and empowers the member with the tools for social mobilization. The periodical represents the voice of the marginalized Afro-Argentines in their cry for belonging to both Afro and Argentine identities.

In this paper I have attempted to show how the supposedly invisible Afro-Argentine population that is marginalized from dominant society and denied its national identity, negotiates the terms of that national identity to create space for Argentine cultural plurality. I argue that in order for this negotiation to take place, the Afro-Argentine population must prove belonging to a visible, consolidated community with a cohesive culture, legitimized by ties to original Afro-Argentine tradition. However, in the context of multiculturalism,

⁵⁰ "Invisibilización y Barbarie," *El Afroargentino* 1, no.1 (November 2014): 5.

⁵¹ Yudicé, 148.

human rights and anti racism discourses based upon contemporary racial relations, the process of re-visibility has presented further challenges to Afro-Argentine's claim of belonging by exoticizing, othering and discriminating against native Afro-descended peoples. My research suggests that DIAFAR takes on the obstacle of transcending social exclusion and negation of the present day Afro-Argentine community with the distribution of *El Afroargentino*. The newspaper functions to re-invent the traditional Argentine black press: it celebrates Afro-Argentine cultural figures, propagates opportunity for community participation, and ultimately aspires to mobilize within the community, just as the Nineteenth-Century newspapers served in the same way. By building the Afro-Argentine community and re-creating its cultural practices, DIAFAR establishes its legitimate claim for cultural belonging. This research suggests that such re-invented culture, which I analyze through George Yúdice's cultural expediency theory, is a political resource that the Afro-Argentine's are employing in their struggle to attain citizenship.

El Afroargentino helps us understand how this marginalized population invents and re-invents tradition in the process of imagining the Afro-Argentine community and culture. Almost counter-intuitive, the Afro-Argentine population must affirm its Afro-ness; they must emphasize their otherness in order to be accepted into dominant society. *El Afroargentino* affirms that the population still exists and is culturally active. DIAFAR shows in present day Argentina: to be Afro is not mutually exclusive with being Argentine. Essentially, through the process of re-inventing Afro-Argentine-ness to gain national cultural citizenship, DIAFAR ultimately re-defines contemporary "Argentine-ness."

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