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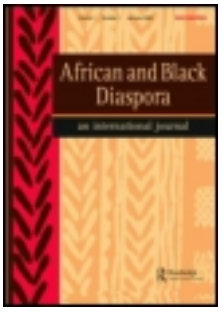

African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rabd20

Afro-Porteños at the end of the nineteenth century: discussing the nation

Lea Geler[a]

[a] Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Published online: 23 Apr 2014.

To cite this article: Lea Geler (2014): Afro-Porteños at the end of the nineteenth century: discussing the nation, African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal, DOI: 10.1080/17528631.2014.908543

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2014.908543

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African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal, 2014
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2014.908543

Routledge
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Afro-Porteños at the end of the nineteenth century: discussing the nation

Lea Geler*

Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Argentina is a country that, even today, identifies itself as a modern, white, and European nation. This representation began to be projected in the last decades of the nineteenth century, framed in the state-consolidation and nation-building processes, which will be the historical context for this paper. It was also the time when a certain notion became broadly accepted: that Afro-Argentines, the descendants of formerly enslaved African people, had 'disappeared'. By contrast, in that same period, *Afro-Porteños* (*Porteños* are citizens of Buenos Aires, capital of Argentina) had not disappeared but constituted an important community, which produced numerous newspapers. Through the analysis of *Afro-Porteño* newspapers, their self-representations and discourses, some of the ways they negotiated with the ideology of modernity and Europeanism (that implied whiteness) will be discussed. The agency of *Afro-Porteños* will be examined as we analyze how *Afro-Porteño* intellectuals promoted state values to their group and at the same time defended their community against discrimination.

Keywords: *Afro-Porteños*; Buenos Aires; nineteenth century; subaltern intellectuals; nation-state; agency

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Introduction

During the second half of the nineteenth century, in Buenos Aires, capital of Argentina, the press acquired great importance. Newspapers became so numerous that it was remarked upon at an international level (Quesada 1883; Sábato 1998). This phenomenon can be explained partly because the press was linked to progress and civilization, pillars which were believed to support any modern society. Moreover, the press was considered an engine of social change. As Sábato (1998) pointed out following Habermas' model, the *Porteño* press was a primary element in the bourgeois public sphere which allowed communication within society and mediated between civil society and the state. This public sphere supported public opinion which exerted great pressure that could promote, challenge, or even stop state policies. In this context, being a journalist meant prestige and social popularity. In fact, journalism had such an importance in those times that being a journalist was mandatory when embarking upon a political career (Halperin Donghi 1985). Framed by this phenomenon, in Buenos Aires, there was a very important circuit of popular press and literature, active since the first decades of the nineteenth century (González Bernaldo De Quirós 2001; Prieto 2006). It is in this context that we will examine the huge number of newspapers edited by *Afro-Porteños*, descendants of the enslaved African people who lived in Buenos Aires, mostly born in Argentine territory. Over 300 issues of seven *Afro-Porteño* newspapers, published between 1873 and 1882,

*Email: leageler@gmail.com

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are kept in the Argentine National Library. They include *La Broma*, *La Juventud*, *La Perla*, *El Unionista*, *El Aspirante*, *La Luz*, and *La Igualdad*.[1] These newspapers are interesting nowadays, not only because of their number and richness but also because of their mere existence.

Even today, Argentina considers itself a white, European nation, with a homogeneous population that has descended entirely from European immigrants who arrived by the millions in the last decades of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to the generally accepted story, the descendants of indigenous peoples have been exterminated, while Afro-Argentines have decreased in number gradually, until they totally disappeared. This constitutes the famous Afro-Argentine 'disappearance' myth, which is often explained by several hypotheses that have become deeply ingrained in Argentine popular thinking. The most important of these explanations – disputed by historians like Andrews (1980) – is deaths at large scale as a result of different epidemics, the use of *Batallones de Pardos y Morenos* [Mulatto and Black Battalions] as cannon fodder during the nineteenth century wars and *mestizaje* [mixing].

However in reality, the erosion of the nonwhite racial alterity within the Argentine national state was a complex process that took place at the time of the state-consolidation and nation-building process, the 1880s. During this time there was an imposition of an ideology that defended the superiority of whiteness/European people/European culture, and considered it modern and civilized. Accordingly, along with the creation of a public education system and obligatory military service that allowed for the disciplining of the population and the spreading of the whitening ideology, laws were passed to promote an increase in European immigration. The elimination of all census categories related to color, and the erasure of the Afro from the official history were also among extremely effective state 'improvement' policies. These policies led to a negation of the presence of Afro-Argentines, calling them 'disappeared', and consolidated the process locally known as 'invisibilization'. Invisibilization refers to a social process. Contrary to the accepted explanations of the physical disappearance of Afro-Argentines, this concept asserts that the disappearance was in fact a historical change in social categories and (self) perceptions (see, for example, Restrepo [2010]; Geler [2010, 2007a]; Frigerio [2006] on this subject).[2] As such, we must take into account that these policies and changes were negotiated, accepted, and/or contested by the Afro-Argentines themselves. The *Afro-Porteños* expressed their visions, expectations, claims, and passions in their publications, which this paper examines.

Through the analysis of *Afro-Porteño* newspapers, and framed within a history-anthropology-based approach (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992), this paper focuses on *Afro-Porteños'* self-representations and discourses in their journalism. First, I will analyze some of the identification axes that were at stake in the *Afro-Porteño* community during these changing times. Second, I will study the role of journalists as intellectuals, in relation to their community, and the consolidation of the homogeneous and civilized nation state. That role as intellectuals will be emphasized when analyzing, as a third point, the action of journalists when arguing against discrimination and their discussions related to founding a segregated primary school. These issues will shed light on the importance and historical agency of *Afro-Porteños* at the time of state and national consolidation, where they played a significant role during the creation of a whitened Argentina.

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Newspapers as identity space

The *Afro-Porteño* newspapers circulated in a restricted circuit and in general did not manage to interest journalists or readers who participated in the bourgeois public sphere. This marginality was mentioned in the pages of *La Broma*, an *Afro-Porteño* newspaper: '¿Quiénes, más que nosotros, leen … las columnas de nuestros humildes periódicos, que jamás salen tampoco de nuestra fracción social?' [Who, apart from us, reads … the columns of our humble newspapers, which never leave our social group?] (*La Broma*, July 30, 1881).

The social exclusion of *Afro-Porteño* publications should not surprise us. Even though the bourgeois public sphere presents itself as supporting an egalitarian space for communication, subalternized groups are often excluded from it. As a result, they usually create new forms of communication. Fraser (1992) defines public spheres of subordinated social groups, such as women, African descendants, or proletarian groups, as 'subaltern counter publics' (123). In these arenas where alternative discussion is supported, the formation and circulation of counter-cultural discourse is enabled, thus allowing for an expression of oppositional identities, interests, and needs. That is the reason why these alternative arenas can also be a privileged place of identity formation (Fraser 1992).

Indeed, newspapers opened spaces for discussion and the exchange of ideas between *Afro-Porteños*. Their publications were open to contributions by male and female readers, provided that their objective was to promote the common good and group progress. They also published editorial opinions, social chronicles, literary creations, advertisements, and paid announcements. Through the analysis of the discussion channels opened by the *Afro-Porteño* press, we discover several permanently disputed forms of identification, supported, or/and reflected by the newspapers. But first of all, it is important to note that male and female readers of the newspapers considered themselves a *community*: *Afro-Porteño* newspapers often published expressions such as '¿Quién no ama a la sociedad, o mejor dicho a la comunidad de que forma parte -quién?' [Who does not love the society, or better said, the community we form a part of – who?] (*La Broma*, August 10, 1879). These phrases show that strong emotional aspects, related to community, were at stake: as in every communalization process (Brow 1990), bonds of loyalties and affections were in a complex interplay of which newspapers give us a glimpse. For example, *La Perla*, regarding a fight between two *Afro-Porteño* carnival associations, stated: 'Estas son cosas que no debían de suceder tanto más cuanto todos los que componen ambas sociedades pertenecen a una misma comunidad y puede decirse también a una misma familia' [These are things that should not happen, especially since all those who form part of both associations belong to the same community, and, it can also be said, to the same family] (March 9, 1879). The idea of community as a set of emotional relationships deepened as the connection between it and family emerged, especially in relation with the notion that 'no one chooses their family', and the fact that *Afro-Porteños* were still, as a group, marked by the rest of the society as different.

As such, second, the greater part of community identification was related to notions of skin *color*, which carried specific and historical meanings and memories. Unlike other forms of self-identification, racial markings appeared in the newspapers, often as something problematic: in italics, for example, or accompanied by expressions such as 'as we are referred' or 'as we are called'. *La Broma* explains the situation well: 'Hoy todo hombre de *color*, como nos llaman, ejerce un arte o desempeña un empleo con perfección y honradez intachable' [Today every *colored* man, as we are called, practices an art or

works perfectly and with impeccable honesty] (September 25, 1879, emphasis in the original). These words underscored that color was a marking imposed from outside the community and it was not entirely embraced by *Afro-Porteños*: 'Creemos que la unión existe desde que existimos nosotros constituidos en sociedad. No se ha dado en distinguirnos con el nombre de sociedad de *color*?' [We believe that our union exists since we have existed, constituting society. Haven't we been distinguished by the name of *colored* society?] (*La Broma*, August 22, 1878, emphasis in the original).

Although *Afro-Porteños* did not agree with being labeled as colored people, racial marking was constantly used by them. They made the words their own, and reused them as a form of community identification. As *La Juventud* said: 'Amamos a los hombres de color, pertenecemos a esa clase' [We love colored men, we belong to that class] (August 10, 1878). This is important because if categories linked to skin color are, in general, stigmatizing, they are also capable of being appropriated, reformulated, and used both for self-identification and for fighting against different forms of domination (Thornton, Taylor, and Brown 2000).

Third, a particularly strong form of community identification was related to *nationalism*. It is worth noting that in the context of modern, European-style national state consolidation, the official history that was being written, based entirely on territorial conquests and political affairs, drastically omitted the proven relevance of Afro-Argentines, making them 'invisible'. Accordingly, the erasure of Afro-Argentines from the history was one of the strongest claims that can be read in the newspapers. Those claims let us see the deep patriotic feelings that existed in the *Afro-Porteño* community. Newspapers defended the place of Afro-Argentines as prime participants in the territorial construction of the nation, asserting a prominence that was becoming increasingly vague:

> ¡Parece mentira que una sociedad tan ilustrada … como lo es la nuestra, no supiera rendir culto a las tradiciones gloriosas que en la guerra de nuestra independencia, grabaron con su sangre … los batallones de negros y mulatos! ¡Sí! ¡Porque esa libertad de que gozan … se la deben a … los sacrificios heroicos y abnegados de esa raza indomable que llevó su aliento de gigante hasta las nevadas crestas de los Andes! [It cannot be true that such an educated society … like ours does not worship the glorious traditions that in the war of our independence, Black and Mulatto Battalions … etched with their blood! Yes! Because the freedom they enjoy … is due to the heroic and selfless sacrifices of that indomitable race that took its breath as far as the snowed peaks of the Andes!] (*La Broma*, November 20, 1879)

Paradoxically, if those accounts that included the shedding of the blood of Afro-Argentines represented a possibility for *Afro-Porteños* of making themselves visible, these heroic actions symbolically tied them to Argentine society as a whole, erasing their own singularity. The idea that blood was shed over the national territory, equally, by Afro-Argentine and those of other descents was at the basis of what Quijada (2000) calls 'land alchemy'. Land alchemy was a symbolic process that allowed everyone involved in national battles to rid themselves of particular ancestries and to establish renewed ties, as descendants from the same blood-sharing family. The land alchemy idea was supported by the broadly accepted botanical metaphor stating that the Argentine people descended from a family tree fed by the shed blood over the national territory of all the soldiers that fought for the republic, resulting in a new Argentine blood.[3] This was also vindicated by *Afro Porteños*: 'nosotros, que somos hijos humildes del pueblo, que llevamos la sangre de los argentinos, nos asociamos en el justo dolor que siente la República' [we, who are

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humble children of the people, who carry the Argentine blood, we become part in the deep pain that the country feels] (*La Broma*, January 3, 1878).

Finally, if color turned *Afro-Porteños* into a specific community and their Argentine blood tied them to the rest of the national society, being *poor* and *needing to work* differentiated them from the local aristocracy, but tied them with other individuals in the same situation. That is why it is noteworthy that whatever their individual jobs were, the *Afro-Porteño* population was generally very poor. At that time,[4] poverty became an important axis of community identification. Not surprisingly, the most desperate references that *Afro-Porteños* themselves made were about their poverty and about being a group in need to work: 'Los que nos conocen a nosotros, saben perfectamente bien que somos … más pobres que la encarnación de la pobreza …, que no tenemos ni tras de qué caernos muertos' [Those who know us, know perfectly well that we are … poorer than the incarnation of poverty … that we do not have a penny to our names] (*La Juventud*, August 20, 1878). In fact, according to what can be read in the *Afro-Porteños* newspapers, poverty was a defining motif of the community: 'Venimos a la prensa … como únicos celadores de la clase pobre, … amigos del bien de nuestros hermanos' [We come to the press … as unique guards of the poor class … as we are friends of the welfare of our brothers] (*La Broma*, September 20, 1877).

The socioeconomic deprivation of the *Afro-Porteño* population was often alleviated, thanks to the newspapers, as they promoted fund raising and charity, and were committed to strengthening the bonds of solidarity within the community. This was a very important function of social protection that the publications took on at a time when the state did not safeguard the social welfare of the population.

Poverty highlighted the fact that the community belonged to the working world and therefore to a social segment that began to call and recognize itself as the 'working class' (see Geler [2010, 260–272] on this subject): '*La Broma* es la visita hebdomadaria del hogar del obrero y del jornalero, donde lleva las noticias y el estado de cosas' [*La Broma* is the hebdomadal visit to the worker and day laborer's home, where it carries the news and the state of things] (*La Broma*, December 23, 1881). Leading this community, whose identifications, as it occurs in every social group, were overlapped and in dispute, and in a strong interplay with the consolidating nation state, we find a self-proclaimed vanguard that intended to guide it to success, understood according to the parameters of the time regarding progress, civilization, and modernity.

Afro-Porteño intellectuals: promoting change

Through their publications, *Afro-Porteño* journalists believed they had the opportunity to change the present and future fate of their community. Because of their commitment toward the destiny of their group and the importance that the press had in the civil society of the nineteenth century, it is useful to identify such writers and reporters as subaltern intellectuals. As Feierman (1990) points out following Gramsci's arguments, in contexts of subalternization, like those of the *Afro-Porteños*, having specific knowledge, such as learning about the modes, codes, or standards of the hegemonic groups, places some people in a higher, privileged status in relation to their peer group. Such people usually become mediators between their group and the hegemonic groups, and are often recognized as advocates of social change. These historical agents, through their actions, could not only modify but also perpetuate cultural categories, obtaining prestige and influence at the same time, as it happened with journalists in the nineteenth century

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Argentina. Mallon (1995) states that there is an inherent contradiction in the work of subaltern intellectuals regarding the hegemonic projects because they act both as mediators and as enforcers: when defending the interests of their community in the greater society, subaltern intellectuals are obliged to make use of hegemonic ideology and discourse, as we will see in the next paragraphs. As a result, subaltern intellectuals may transform into agents of hegemonic power. Therefore, most subaltern intellectuals deal with the contradiction of living in solidarity with their group and in its surveillance (Mallon 1995). Because the impulses of hegemonic domination can only be effective if they partially incorporate or negotiate with the counterhegemonic impulses (Williams 1977), the role of subaltern intellectuals becomes critical to understanding the way hegemony extends its power of consent.

In this sense, *Afro-Porteño* journalists firmly believed that their newspapers were tools for creating change: 'El periódico es un gran medio para introducir remodificaciones profundas' [The newspaper is a great media for introducing deep modifications] (*La Juventud*, September 30, 1878). Among other goals, the journalists fought to protect their publications, because, through the modifications that their press would support, the *Afro-Porteño* community would be placed in the unstoppable path of progress. In fact, the very reason for the existence of the *Afro-Porteño* newspapers was to encourage change and 'regeneration' in the community, which, they believed, were still far from progress: 'Es la hora de la regeneración, el tiempo de organizarse, para que en el futuro nos encontremos fuertes y unidos para contrarrestar las prevenciones de los que creen que no somos capaces de levantarnos' [It is a time for regenerating, a time for being organized, so that in the future we can be strong and work together to counteract the prejudice from those who believe that we are unable to rise] (*La Broma*, January 10, 1878).

Barbarianism, as opposed to civilization,[5] represented the horizon from which *Afro-Porteños* had to escape, and from where they had allegedly come. Barbarianism could be traced to the *Afro-Porteños* in two main ways: because of being descendants of enslaved people, which was still considered shameful (and for that matter, skin color was a shameful marking), and as consequence of being poor. Regarding poverty, the general deprivation of the community was blamed by *Afro-Porteño* intellectuals on *Afro-Porteños* themselves because of their 'vices and laziness'. *La Juventud* expressed this viewpoint:

> Retrocedamos sobre nosotros mismos; no culpemos estúpidamente a causas que no son las verdaderas; el mal está en nosotros mismos, en nuestra indiferencia política, en nuestras costumbres públicas, en esa repugnancia que tenemos instintivamente y también por nuestras viejas habitudes de esclavitud, a satisfacer las verdaderas condiciones de la libertad. [Let us look back at ourselves; do not stupidly blame causes that are not true; the evil is in ourselves, in our political indifference, in our public habits, in this repugnance that we have instinctively and also due to our old habits [inherited] from slavery, to satisfy the true conditions of freedom.] (June 20, 1878)

These words should be analyzed in the light of the notion of the universal existence of a free and autonomous individual that accompanied the development of liberalism. Liberalism required the attribution of success or failure to the individual (Quijada 2000). Once civil rights were extended, becoming a value inherent in all human beings, social inequalities that nevertheless persisted were blamed on the individuals as being the result of personal irresponsibility. Later, with the development of positivism and scientific racial theories, their insufficiencies were understood as having a 'scientific' genetic basis (Stolcke 1992). In both cases, their economic-political origin was ignored. These

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paradoxical ideas were particularly problematic for Afro-Argentines. *Afro-Porteño* intellectuals were highly involved and committed to the well-being of their nation, and in that regard they were deeply convinced that the path of civilization was the right one. As part of the hegemonic process in which they were inserted, they made the universal ideals of progress, reason, and equality their own, understanding that their own behavior had created their poverty and social exclusion: 'Que nuestro atraso estacionario es efecto de nuestra propia negligencia' [Our stationary backwardness is the result of our own negligence] (*La Juventud*, February 10, 1878). Phrases like that were very common in the newspapers, which also served to explain the lack of Afro-Argentines in positions of representation: 'nos encontramos eliminados de la cosa pública … Pero es nuestra la culpa, … vergüenza nos inspira' [we find ourselves eliminated from public offices … But it is our fault … we should feel embarrassed] (*La Perla*, April 23, 1879).

However, *Afro-Porteño* journalists tried to instill hopes of change through their publications, strongly believing in progress as a leveling utopia:

> Ya empezamos a desprendernos por completo de nuestros viejos hábitos y de nuestras costumbres tradicionales que aún conservábamos -hasta ha poco- como un triste rezago de nuestra negra ignorancia, como una fatal memoria del doloroso pasado. En el presente todo regenera, todo cambia y se transforma, sólo impera y se acentúa el espíritu moderno que rige como una eterna antorcha en los pueblos más felices de la tierra. [We have already begun to become completely detached from our old habits and our traditional customs that we used to maintain – until not so long ago – like a sad remnant of our dark ignorance, as a fatal memory of the painful past. In the present, everything is regenerated, everything changes and is transformed; only the modern spirit prevails and is emphasized, ruling like an eternal torch the happiest peoples of the Earth.] (*La Broma*, July 7, 1881)

Afro-Porteño intellectuals regularly published long editorials on the front page of the newspapers in a didactic and disciplinary tone, with the explicit intention of showing their readers the activities they considered more suitable for achieving civilization within the liberal ideology of the time. Civilization and progress, values they believed that all men could achieve, were especially linked to education and labor. Not coincidentally, starting in the 1860s, the Argentine state began the projects of schooling the population to create a homogenous, modern nation, and of disciplining the labor force that would be turned into more suitable workers for an industrialized country. These projects required European immigration, which, by definition, included civilized people: the newcomers were thought to improve the local population by introducing either cultural and/or racial change, through *mestizaje* [mixing] or replacement, leading to Europeanism and *blanqueamiento* [whitening].

On one hand, the primary school was crucial for the construction of the Argentine national state, since it allowed for the massive integration of immigrant children into society and the homogenization of the population through the creation of a common identity: it imposed a common language, a common history, and a common self-representation. As a strategic institution for the nation-building process, the public education system was supported by laws that did not allow restrictions based on race or any other social categories, which in turn allowed it to reach its maximum population target. The importance of education was sustained also by the fact that it was considered as an 'indispensable requirement for the citizen's existence, axiomatic mainstay of the democratic and liberal political system' (Otero 1999, 56). Therefore, through education,

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a people prepared for supporting the modern republican system would rise, which was an ideal that the *Afro-Porteño* intellectuals shared.

Education was advertised in the *Afro-Porteño* newspapers as one of the primary pillars on which community improvement and regeneration had to be based. Education and work replaced vices, thereby correcting any deviations that were in the way of progress. *La Broma* wrote: 'Eduquemos a nuestros hijos si queremos que lleguen a ocupar el puesto que les corresponde como ciudadanos en los destinos de la patria' [Let us educate our children if we want them to be able to occupy their corresponding place as citizens of the homeland] (January 27, 1881). Likewise, *La Perla* expressed: 'La educación es una de las primeras necesidades, la educación corrige las primeras manifestaciones del niño porque les marca el sendero moral hasta estrechar los vínculos más sagrados del hombre en la vida social' [Education is one of the first necessities; education corrects the first impulses of childhood since it shows children the moral path until they find the most sacred ties of man in social life] (*La Perla*, September 22, 1878). As we can see, for *Afro-Porteños* education was linked not only with progress but also with patriotic feelings.

At the same time, capitalist forms of salaried work became important during the second half of the nineteenth century. In the city and countryside of Buenos Aires, together with a growing industrial system, salaried work was significantly expanded, allowing for the formation of a labor market. In order to direct available manpower toward salaried work, the state began to impose discipline on the population, which became evident in the case of laws against vagrancy (Sábato and Romero 1992). Capitalist expansion supported by the state changed labor relations, and, together with the arrival of numerous European immigrants, deeply affected the *Afro-Porteño* community. *Afro-Porteños* embraced the new national labor ideology as part of their (alleged) need for progress, patriotic feeling, and commitment to the nation's future:

> Debemos por esto considerar el trabajo no solamente como una necesidad, sino como una virtud … Nadie debe permanecer ocioso … El que no trabaja es pobre, y el pobre tiene que estar sometido de espíritu y de cuerpo a la voluntad de otro. [Therefore, we should consider work not only as a necessity, but also as a virtue … No one must be idle … The person who does not work is poor, and the poor person has to be spiritually and physically subjected to the other's will]. (*La Broma*, November 15, 1877)

Work made men virtuous and moved them away from the image of vice, laziness, and poverty that both local elites and *Afro-Porteño* intellectuals used to describe the popular world in which Afro-Argentines moved. It was not strange, then, to read phrases such as: 'El trabajo dignifica al hombre … ¿No veis a los *viciosos*, vestidos con trajes harapientos? … El hombre haragán, el que no trabaja, es porque no quiere hacerlo' [Work dignifies the man … Don't you see the people living *in vice*, dressed in rags? … The lazy man is without work because he does not want to do so] (*La Broma*, January 18, 1878, emphasis in the original).

Accordingly, under the liberal ideology of the nineteenth century, both education and work were linked not only to progress but also to patriotism, forming a complex ideology with several points of emotional attachment:

> en el seno de nuestra comunidad existe una falange de jóvenes que alimentan en su pecho el fuego sagrado del amor al trabajo, al progreso, a la ilustración, a las instituciones … y en cuyos corazones repercuten uno por uno los ecos bravíos del más acendrado patriotismo. [at the heart of our community there is a group of youngsters that deep down harbor the

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> sacred fire of love for work, for progress, for education, for the institutions … and in whose hearts, one by one, the brave echoes of the purest patriotism reverberate.] (*La Juventud*, December 10, 1878)

As a result, when *Afro-Porteño* intellectuals, who had deep patriotic feelings, embraced the ideology of progress and spread it via journalism, they were in fact acting as conduits for the spread of state ideologies throughout their community. Moreover, their publications were continuously devoted to exposing behaviors that did not coincide with the new ideology, highlighting those individuals who were considered deviant, or applauding those who followed the expected guidelines (see Geler [2008] on this subject). *Afro-Porteño* publications were thus used as a sort of magnifying glass through which the community could watch, identify and judge whomever did not dress, walk, speak or work according to the guidelines for "modern" behavior (see Geler [2010] on this subject); as such, they became very effective tools for social control. Ultimately, these actions facilitated the state's task of creating the sort of citizen it desired. At the same time, *Afro-Porteño* intellectuals gained great power and social influence. But thanks to their commitment to these same ideals, they were also completely focused on defending their community from discrimination or exclusion. Their social influence was used, then, to stop discrimination and to negotiate the integration of Afro-Argentines into a nation that was supposedly egalitarian and that increasingly saw itself as modern and European. Examples include their work to integrate admission into ballrooms in 1880 and the founding of a primary school for 'colored children'.

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Negotiating at a disadvantage: discrimination and integration

The degree of social pressure that *Afro-Porteño* newspapers could create was especially obvious during the Carnival of 1880, when some ballroom owners denied entrance to 'blacks and mulattos' (see Geler [2006] about this case study). The newspaper *La Broma* began a community movement that operated on several fronts. First, the community movement made a presentation to the Town Hall, seeking to fine the ballroom owners and to achieve equality due to all citizens under the law. Second, it contacted elite intellectuals, such as the well-known journalist and politician Hector F. Varela, to articulate *Afro-Porteño* demands. These intellectuals, belonging to dominant groups, answered favorably and published several announcements and notes in their newspapers – that circulated through the bourgeois public sphere – that resulted in social consensus and public knowledge about the situation. In addition, *Afro-Porteño* intellectuals called for a demonstration throughout the city center, although it was later canceled, demanding an end to discrimination. They, then, called for a second demonstration that was performed in Varela's hometown. These events were also commented on in the bourgeois newspapers. As a whole, they managed to create so much pressure that the police chief quickly called on the ballroom owners to end racial prohibition. The role of the *Afro-Porteño* intellectuals, and of the newspapers, in these circumstances was, undoubtedly, fundamental.

In these and other initiatives, the efficient, mediating role of subaltern intellectuals can be observed in their success in applying social pressure. They displayed great knowledge of the legal strategies necessary in achieving their goals. In addition, they showed a wide reading of the newspapers circulating in the city, a deep understanding of the rules that had to be followed regarding civil order and the 'secular liturgy' (Sábato 1998, 199) of

public demonstration, sharp information about whom and how to talk to in the bourgeois public sphere in order to complete their goals, and, especially, a pervasive awareness of the rights granted by the constitution. Far from the image of Afro-Argentines as victims, accepted for more than a century, we discover through the work of these intellectuals that they were not only historical agents but also highly efficient in their work. During these events, *Afro-Porteño* intellectuals maintained discussions – exposed in the newspapers – that show their vast knowledge and deep, critical reflexive capacity. That same ability, probably related to the long Afro-Argentine history of political practice (see Geler [2012, 2007b] on this subject), was shown during discussions about the possibility of founding a segregated primary school.

As discussed before, it is important to remember that in Argentina, since the second half of the nineteenth century, the state guaranteed free education and defended the rights of all children regarding complaints of discrimination (Geler 2010, 284–289). However, the daily differential treatment and rejection that Afro-Argentine children suffered in the classrooms persisted, resulting in a proposal for the foundation of a segregated primary school by some *Afro-Porteño* intellectuals:

> No basta que las leyes hayan dispuesto que el pobre y el rico reciban alimentos intelectuales … El verdadero problema debe, pues, ser resuelto por nosotros: … No habrán sufrido en sus primeros años (y quizá no tengan después ocasión de sentirlas) las amarguras del desprecio. Encomendemos la educación del niño a sus hermanos en sentimientos. [It is not enough that the laws have decreed that the poor and the rich should receive intellectual nutrition … The real problem, then, must be solved by ourselves: … They will not have suffered in their first years (and maybe later they will not have the opportunity to suffer) the bitterness of disdain. Let us entrust our brothers … with the education of our children.] (*La Juventud*, April 10, 1878)

Even though the school was never created, it is worth noting that certain aspects of the thinking of these intellectuals that became public through the discussion in the newspapers. First, their deep degree of reflection about how they should be included in the nation that was being built and, also, the strong impact that the power of the state had in their lives.

In the first case, some journalists insisted that the Afro-Argentine relevance in military and electoral struggles had been crucial for obtaining their, and every Argentine's, rights as citizens. The guarantees that they had gained and had received, then, had to be taken advantage of rather than be abandoned, by attending classes at the public school:

> Tenemos escuelas, tenemos universidades. Tenemos derecho a ellas porque somos hijos de la patria argentina …; y porque hace cerca de un siglo que en los campos de batalla … donde el honor nacional ha reclamado la sangre de sus hijos, el hombre de color, a costa de la suya, ha conquistado para el paño azul y blanco un laurel … Tenemos derecho incuestionable porque no sólo en los campos de batalla, sino en las luchas pacíficas de la democracia se han utilizado nuestras fuerzas … Por otra parte, este derecho no nos ha sido negado desde hace algunos años … Es lógico entonces asegurar que escuelas y universidades son nuestro patrimonio porque lo son de todos, y que debemos aprovechar para la juventud el tesoro inapreciable que ellas ofrecen. [We have schools, we have universities. We have the right to attend them because we are children of the land of Argentina …; and because nearly a century ago in the battle fields … where the national honor has claimed their children's blood, the colored man, at his own cost, has conquered a glory for the white and blue cloth … We have unquestionable rights because our forces have been used not only in the battle

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> fields, but also in the peaceful struggles for democracy … On the other hand, this right has not been denied to us for a few years … It is logical, then, to make sure that schools and universities are our heritage because they belong to everybody, and that we have to take advantage of the priceless treasure they offer.] (*La Perla*, October 6, 1878)

In the Argentine state, homogeneity and integration meant progress and civilization (Quijada 2006). Therefore, it is not surprising that the segregated school represented an idea opposite to these ideals for some intellectuals and journalists:

> Sería aislarnos de mutuo propio, sembrando el germen de discordia entre dos razas que se estrechan día a día con vínculos indisolubles, niveladas moralmente por este precepto hermoso que establece nuestra sabia Constitución: LA IGUALDAD. [It would mean isolating ourselves by our own will, sowing seeds of discord between two races that are strengthening with indissoluble bonds, morally leveled by this wonderful precept that our wise Constitution establishes: EQUALITY.] (*La Broma*, April 27, 1882, capital letters in the original)

But, according to another sector of the *Afro-Porteño* intelligentsia, there could not be any progress if the promised constitutional equality did not become a reality:

> Si en los colegios del Estado se enseña con la misma regularidad al blanco que al negro, ¿por qué resulta siempre que de éstos salen uno por mil, medianamente instruidos, mientras que de los otros salen más de cincuenta, en proporción? … Lo hemos dicho, crear colegios con el fin que hemos indicado no es separarnos absolutamente de nada; es pura y especialmente buscar los medios del adelanto social de nuestras masas. [If in the state schools white and black children are taught with the same regularity, why is it always the case that out of one thousand black children only one is fairly educated, while in the same proportion fifty white children are? … We have said that, creating colleges with the purpose we have indicated does not mean separating ourselves from anything; it is just to look for the means for our masses' social progress.] (*El Aspirante*, June 18, 1882)

Embedded in this argument, which unfortunately was not furthered by the author, we see the continuous and daily rejection that *Afro-Porteño* children suffered when attending classes at public schools. These actions could not be reported to the state as there were no 'concrete' facts of discrimination to be addressed, which then would promote drop outs. This was also revealing of a more complex reality that indicated a socially based difference in access to education which was because often *Afro-Porteño* children had to work in order to help their families, usually as domestic servants (see Geler [2010] on this subject), forcing them to leave their studies.

There was another reason why most *Afro-Porteño* intellectuals did not defend the idea of a segregated school: it could bring about serious consequences for the community. This was referred to in a newspaper response to a reader's letter:

> [El lector] piensa que sería renunciar al derecho de ciudadano … ¿Qué es lo que entiende el señor [lector] por renunciar a los derechos de ciudadano? ¿Crear un colegio donde podamos educar a nuestros hijos, a nuestro deseado gusto, es renunciar a estos derechos? … El señor [lector preguntaría] 'Si el gobierno no tomaría a mal nuestro proceder, y trataría de no admitir a ninguno de los niños de *color* en los colegios del Estado' [[The reader] thinks that it would be like renouncing a citizen's right … What does the reader understand about renouncing citizen rights? Is creating a school where we can educate our children, in our way, renouncing these rights? … The [reader would ask] 'If the government wouldn't take our

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> actions wrongly and in response stop admitting any of the *colored* children in the State schools'.] (*El Aspirante*, May 28, 1882, italics in the original)

The cited article discussed the pressure exerted by the state to homogenize the population, which even caused fear in those exploring different options, a fear based on threats of total exclusion. The options seemed either to be taking what was being given by the state, and had been achieved by Afro-Argentines themselves, and integrating in the best possible way into a nation seeking progress, or to be left out.[6] Integration gave options for future historical recognition that was unthinkable otherwise and the possibility of actualizing the dream of wealth and social prestige that was supposedly available for all citizens.

Those who dialogued through newspapers understood that education was indispensable for improving and gaining social progress. For some, it was preferable to become a part of the national whole, and yet protect their identity as Afro-Argentines in the same way as they defended it in relation to the official erasure of Afro-Argentine participation in the national history. For others, this was unthinkable. The very fact that state institutions allowed for community participation without distinction was the intended progress: it meant exercising their constitutional rights, in which equality implied no distinctions based on color. It also meant to not confront a state whose power was growing, partly thanks to the work of *Afro-Porteño* intellectuals themselves and their deep commitment to the ideals and projects the state supported. In sum, framed in a process of hegemony, these discussions let us understand that, far from being victims without the power to speak, *Afro-Porteños* were historical agents who thought about, and negotiated with the state and its institutions their circumstances, in the best ways they could.

Final words

When the Argentine state began to forge a particular identity on its citizens, and the nation was being built on the ideals of progress and civilization, not only the Afro-Argentine community of Buenos Aires had not disappeared but also it supported a great number of periodic publications. These publications allow us to glimpse some of the ways in which *Afro-Porteños* saw themselves. Although placed in a very difficult position, and in times of change, far from being the victims of a situation in which they had nothing to say, *Afro-Porteño* intellectuals were committed to the present and future of their community. They were also devoted to their country, with which they had deep emotional bonds. Even in a context of severe inequality and ideological imposition, *Afro-Porteño* intellectuals discussed, thought about, and took actions regarding the best ways of integrating themselves into a nation state that threatened them with exclusion, embracing the ideology of progress and of civilization. But this ideology was also based upon Europeanism and capitalism, homogeneity and whiteness. Committed to the nation's project, *Afro-Porteño* intellectuals introduced this ideology into their community to promote respectability. Because this process allowed the state to spread its power, *Afro-Porteños* should be understood as founding constituents of the modern Argentina, where they saw a future of equality. This reveals how complex the process of invisibilization of Afro- Argentines was. But this also lets us see that we can only fully understand the Argentine state consolidation and nation building processes if we take into account the actions and thoughts of Afro-Argentines themselves.

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Notes

1. For further information about *Afro-Porteño* newspapers, see Geler (2010, 2008).
2. Although here I will focus on the descendants from enslaved Africans, the same process of invisibilization was suffered by the immigrants coming from African countries during the first decades of the twentieth century. The most remarkable example is the Cape Verdeans, whose presence is not recognized in the collective images of the nation (Maffia 2010).
3. This kind of botanical metaphor was a fundamental part in the nation-building processes that were taking place at that time (Alonso 1994) and supported the consolidation of the imagined national community (Anderson 1991).
4. A society was being formed in an economic context that would allow a very high social mobility in the future decades.
5. Rotker (1999) points out that the binary opposition established by Sarmiento between civilization and barbarianism, with all its derivations, structured the second part of the Argentine nineteenth century and gave rise to a form of understanding the society from the dualism of antagonist fields.
6. In this sense, according to the *Afro-Porteños*' vision, the indigenous peoples seemed to represent that total exclusion, based on their 'savagery', which had to be avoided (Geler 2010).

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