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ARTICLE



Ethnic nicknaming: 'negro' as a term of endearment and vicarious blackness in Argentina

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ABSTRACT

In Argentine colloquial language, calling someone 'negro/a' may have two opposite connotations. It can be derogatory and racist, but in other contexts, it can be used as a term of endearment. It is also customary to nickname someone 'el negro/la negra [+ name]', with no offense intended or taken. These usages are unrelated to actual skin colors; both white and dark skinned people may be affectionately called 'negro'. This article analyses the origins and meanings of such a habit, by relating it to other forms of vicarious blackness and to the specificities of the vernacular racial formations. In turn, the malleability and instability of the negro allusion is explained as a sign of the country's disjointed process of ethnogenesis. The last section explores possible implications of the Argentine case for debates on hybridity, nation formation and mixed race studies.

KEYWORDS

Ethnogenesis; mestizaje; ethnic nicknames; whites; Afro-Latin Americans; Argentina

The elites who built Argentina claimed that their nation was embodied in a white-European people. At the end of the 19th century, members of distinct African or indigenous groups were declared extinct or were acknowledged only as the last few historical remnants of their communities, rapidly dissolving in the massive torrent of European immigrants. Unlike other Latin American countries, in which narratives of the nation revolved around ideas of mestizaje or racial democracy, in the 20th century, Argentina's intellectual elites continued to endorse visions of an Argentine race that was uniformly white. This, of course, was a kind of fantasy, as the ethnic backgrounds and phenotypes of large portions of the population do not easily fit into standard definitions of whiteness. For one thing, Afro-Argentines and indigenous groups managed to preserve some ethnic particularities despite the state's homogenizing pressures. In addition, a large portion of the Argentine population with no sense of belonging to any particular minority bore phenotypes that did not fully align with stereotypes of whiteness. All Argentines were formally considered white, but in terms of physical appearance, there was a substantial gray area between those who clearly displayed the right (European) skin tones and facial features, and those who obviously did not.

This lack of correspondence between the official discourses of the nation and its demographic heterogeneity generated diverse paradoxes in Argentine culture. The

pervasive presence of racism in a supposedly raceless country was one of them. Indeed, racist aggressions against the lower classes have been present throughout modern Argentine history. Both President Hipólito Yrigoyen's and Juan Perón's followers were discredited for being *negros*. Although such prejudice has an obviously racist component, it is a racism that, as historian Natalia Milanesio has noted, is subordinate to a discrimination based primarily on class. The use of labels such as '*negro*', '*cabecita negra*', and '*groncho*' during the 20th century was aimed at the lower classes and at plebeian behavior generically, conveying a racial mark that did not translate into a particular physical trait. To this day, a lower class individual can be considered a *negro* even if his or her skin color and facial features are fully in tune with the stereotype of whiteness. Dark skin makes someone a *negro*, but so does poverty for those who are phenotypically white, especially if accompanied with plebeian looks or attitudes (Caggiano 2012; Frigerio 2006; Grimson 2016; Milanesio 2010).

Consequently, *negro* ended up being used as an identity label by people of the lower classes regardless of their actual skin tones. However, this only became evident in the past three decades. As the country's economic and political crisis spiraled after the 1980s, the state's (and therefore the nation's) capacity to incorporate the lower classes weakened. As anthropologist Rita Segato has argued, under these circumstances, the effectiveness of the 'cultural patrolling' that had long enforced the myth of the white-European country diminished, which in turn made room for nonwhite presences to become newly visible (Segato 2007, 30). The derogatory meanings ascribed to nonwhiteness certainly remain strong today. But for the first time, lower class cultural and political forms of expression have directly challenged prevailing national myths by declaring dark skin a source of pride, thus responding to racism and also (albeit vaguely) antagonizing with the upper classes. But this *negro* identity is not imagined as part of a broader Afro-diasporic community (except, of course, by members of the small groups who claim an Afro-descendant identity). Nor does the term refer to a specific Amerindian ethnos, even if it may connote a vague sense of *mestizaje*. Instead, being an Argentine *negro* today appears as a *racial marker* in what is fundamentally a *class identity*, rather than an ethnic or racial identity strictly speaking. People of the lower classes who are perfectly white for local standards may choose to call themselves '*negro*' with a sense of pride (Adamovsky 2012).

The emergence of this non-diasporic *negro* marker in lower-class identities in the past three decades inevitably raises the question of its relationship to the history of race, class and politics in earlier periods. As I have argued elsewhere, positive allusions to the presence of blackness as a fundamental part of the nation can be found much earlier than the 1980s. Through a range of practices (such as carnival and other public celebrations) and through forms of cultural consumption (from *criollista* productions celebrating Argentina's rural and pre-immigration traditions to diverse popular music genres), the lower classes and some of the political forces that channeled their voices made the nonwhite visible in ways that undermined the implicit homogenization produced by the discourse of a white-European nation (Adamovsky 2014, 2015, 2016a).

This article will examine the historical origins of one of those practices, namely the use of *negro* as a term of endearment among people with no African ancestry or dark skin. In Argentine contemporary colloquial language, calling someone

'*negro*' or '*negra*' may have two completely opposite connotations. It can certainly be derogatory and racist. But in other contexts, it can also be used as a term of endearment (often in diminutive and/or possessive forms, as in '*mi negrita*'). It is also customary to nickname someone '*el negro/la negra* [+ name]', with no offense intended or taken. These usages are unrelated to actual skin colors; both white and dark skinned people may be affectionately called '*negro*'. This article will analyze the history and meanings of such a custom, by relating it to other forms of vicarious blackness in Argentina. In turn, the malleability and instability of the *negro* allusion will be explained in light of the specificities of Latin American racial formations.

The country's peculiar 'ethnogenesis', or the process by which a group of people becomes ethnically distinct – in other words, develops a sense of being an 'Us' – will be a crucial concept in this article. Normally used by anthropologists to describe certain dynamics of ethnic groups, historians have also found ethnogenesis a useful concept for the understanding of the emergence and transformation of nations themselves. Just like ethnic groups, nations are also formed and transformed through processes of boundary definition, naming, visual and symbolic creation, and through narrative exercises. Defining its ethnic profile is a crucial point at stake. But in this, as in all other aspects involved, internal tensions of class, race or political views may translate into competing or conflicting definitions of the nation (Smith 2009, 49). A racist insult but also a term of endearment, an ethnonym for Afro-Argentines but also a way to allude to lower class folks of whatever ethnicity: this article will analyze the ambivalence of the term *negro* in the light of Argentina's disjointed process of ethnogenesis. The last section will also explore possible implications of the Argentine case for debates on hybridity, nation formation and mixed race studies.

Ethnic nicknaming in Argentina

Argentina's territory has always been multiethnic. Spanish colonization added to the various indigenous populations living in different parts of the country Spaniards and a large number of Africans. In turn, these three groups intermingled, giving birth to a colonial society that was remarkably heterogeneous in terms of ethnic origins and phenotypes. After the mid-19th century, national policy attracted a massive wave of immigrants, including many Jewish immigrants, particularly from Spain and Italy, but also from France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Eastern Europe, among other European countries. Visible contingents also arrived from the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East. By the early 20th century, one-third of the total population was foreign-born. The coming years added smaller but still visible groups of Japanese, Koreans and Chinese. The influx of immigrants from neighboring countries – many of whom were mestizos – was also considerable.

In such a diverse context, ethnic appellatives and nicknames became very popular in daily interactions. Regarding the former, only a few of the castes labels used to categorize groups during the colonial era were still in use in the late 19th century. The expansion of citizenship rights to all males, intense biological miscegenation, social mobility and whitening cultural pressures led ethno-racial labels to become fewer and simpler. Having no legal significance, such labels were used more loosely. Indigenous

people were normally called '*indios*' if they were members of discrete rural communities. In other contexts, they were labeled '*mestizos*' or simply '*criollos*'. Afro-Argentines were referred to as '*negros*' if they were of a very pronounced Negroid phenotype. But mulattos and lighter-skinned Afro-Argentines were normally called '*pardos*' (dark-skinned). In the late 19th century, the new category of '*trigueño*' (literally wheat-colored, implying a brown-skinned person) was profusely used to name people of any ethnic background, including Afro-Argentines, indigenous and Europeans. The most popular ethnic term at that time – '*criollo*' – was applicable to any person born in the country, of whatever complexion and background. Depending on the context, it could allude to non-whiteness, but it was often used simply as a synonym of 'Argentine' (Andrews 1980, 83–92; Edwards 2014; Farberman 2009; Grosso 1999; Guzmán 2013).

In the late 19th century, *negro/a* and *pardo/a* (and *indio*) could certainly be used as insults, but they were also usual nicknames accepted by those who carried them; to this day, Afro-Argentines may be called or call themselves '*el negro* [+ name]' with no offense intended or taken ('*pardo*' is very rarely used these days).¹ In addition, there were other popular appellatives for people of dark complexion, such as '*moreno*' and '*morcho*', that were also willingly carried as nicknames (the latter still is). Appellatives to denote mestizaje still in use in the late 19th century included '*cholo/a*' and '*chino/a*', terms originally used during the colonial era to denote a mixed ethnicity of indigenous and mestizo/mulatto, respectively. Again in this case, both could be used with derogatory intentions but were also popular nicknames throughout the 20th century (and still are). And the same applies for ethnonyms of indigenous nations – such as '*el Toba*' – used generically to refer to a brownish skin tone (Cutolo and Ibaguren 1974; Grenon 1956).

For the newcomers and their offspring, national ethnonyms were the most common choice, but there were also metonymic variants. Spaniards coming from any region were called '*gallegos*' (Galicians) and Italians '*tanos*' (from Napolitano). European settlers of diverse non-Spanish origins were called '*gringos*'. Jews of any origins were usually called '*rusos*', as most of them arrived from the Russian Empire. Middle Easterners were '*turcos*' (Turks), no matter if they were actually of Arab descent. Likewise, all East Asians tended to be called '*chinos*' (Chinese). All of these appellatives are still very much in use today and are willingly carried as nicknames, with some exceptions.²

Naming and nicknaming is a complex practice that may serve a variety of purposes in social life; as such, it has been analyzed from different conceptual frameworks (see Adams 2009; De Klerk and Bosch 1999). In Argentina's rapidly changing ethnic landscape, calling someone by his or her ethnonym was certainly used to claim precedence, to emphasize differences and/or as a form of aggression. But the reason why ethnic appellatives and nicknaming became so popular is that they also had the opposite function. Much in the same vein as the 'teasing' or 'joking relationships' described by anthropologists, it became a way of dealing with potential conflicts stemming from ethnic differences. As Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown (1940, 197–198) explained in his seminal study of this phenomenon, individuals in contexts of social disjunction may prevent serious hostility 'by the playful antagonism of teasing', establishing a relationship of consented mutual disrespect and license in which none of the parties takes offence at insult. In its regular repetition, such joking reminds that social disjunction is 'one of the essential components of the relation, while the social conjunction is maintained' (ibid.). Moreover, teasing humor and verbal putdowns – including ethnic nicknaming – have

been reported to play an important role in fostering a sense of group solidarity in different parts of the world (Kerrigan 2014; Murphy 2015; Turner 2001).

The late 19th century was indeed a time of social disjunction/conjunction in Argentina. Racism and xenophobia were very much present. In the newly conquered lands in Patagonia and in the Chaco, indigenous nations suffered from several forms of State and non-State violence. Yet, in big cities, racial relations were relatively smooth, at least comparatively speaking. Racist attitudes toward non-whites were of course very common, but there were no formal practices of segregation comparable to the Jim Crow laws in the United States. Daily relations between white and black folks on the street, in leisure time and at work, were more or less cordial. Moreover, the integration of immigrants was surprisingly fast: exogamic unions were common among foreigners, and xenophobic violence and ethnic ghettoization were very rare. Because national identity was shaped by narratives of an 'immigrant nation', the first generation of immigrant children usually developed a strong sense of national belonging that was not challenged by those of more established Argentines (except, to some extent, in the case of Jews and Asians; but even for them, discrimination was of relatively mild actual effects comparatively speaking). In such cultural context, it is no coincidence that ethnic teasing and labeling was used with opposite intentions, as a form of aggression but also as a confirmation of friendliness in diversity. A good example of this is the tremendously popular comical character of the *cocoliche* – the Italian immigrant who aspired to pass as an authentic *gaucho* – well represented in circus shows, theatres, magazines, radios and films from the late 19th century and for over 50 years (Cara-Walker 1987). With regards to nicknaming, a good illustration would be 'Freckles and his gang', a comical teenage radio ensemble that was popular in the early 1930s. Ethnic teasing was a central part of their show, starting by the very names of the characters, that included 'the French', 'the fat German', 'the Italian', 'the Brazilian', 'the Jew' and 'el Negro' (played by an actor in blackface).³

Such playful intention is of course also attested by the fact that nicknames were willingly carried. But the best proof lies elsewhere. The most interesting thing about Argentina's affinity for ethnic appellatives is that they are often used with total disregard of actual ethnic backgrounds. Ethnonyms can be employed to describe physical traits of individuals with no connection to their alluded ethnicities. The nickname 'the Polish', very popular in the 20th century and still today, is applicable to people of Polish descent but also to light-blond Argentines of whatever ethnic background (Spanish included), reflecting the fact that pale skins and light blondeness are perceived as somewhat removed from the implicit local norm of whiteness.⁴ 'Gringo' is used similarly; it is common as a nickname for people of Italian or German backgrounds, but it is also used to denote generic blondeness.⁵ Blondes with no Russian or Jewish background are also called 'el ruso'.⁶ In turn, 'chino' can be carried as a nickname by people who are perfectly white and European-looking but have subtly slanted eyes.⁷ 'Chino/a' can also be used in its older sense, to refer to a mestizo-looking person or simply as a generic term of affection for women.⁸ An ethnonym unrelated to a person's background can also be employed to playfully allude to his or her real ethnicity, such as people with typically Jewish surnames that are called 'el tano',⁹ or to his or her place of birth, such as North westerners that are called 'el coya'.¹⁰ Finally, ethnic nicknaming is often used randomly or for personal reasons unrelated to actual ethnicity or looks. Football star Claudio García is known as 'el turco García' simply because, while playing with his friends

as a kid, he constantly shouted '*Dejala! Dejala!*' ('Leave it to me!'), imagined as an Arab-sounding cry by one of his partners.¹¹ Random examples of *cholo* and *indio* nicknames are also frequent (although in some cases, the former may allude to a brown skin).¹² And there are also people of non-Italian surnames nicknamed '*tanos*' for incidental reasons.¹³

'*Negro/a*' as a term of endearment

Calling each other '*negro/a*' with affection can be interpreted as part of the same cultural trait. As an appellative, it was common for the whole of the 20th century (and still is) among Argentines of whatever ethnic backgrounds and phenotypes. For example, Perón used to call Evita '*negrita*' in private (and she signed letters to him as '*tu negrita*') despite the fact that her complexion was not dark at all.¹⁴ The playful dimension of such appellatives is highlighted in Omar Acha's (2007) analysis of private letters of the 1950s in which a young Navy sailor addresses his fiancée as 'Ugly of my soul' and '*Mi negra carbonera*' ('My charcoal-selling *negra*', a common insult at that time). As was already explained in this article, the inversion of the negative implications associated to such expressions reinforced the sense of intimacy and closeness between the correspondents.

As a nickname, '*negro/a*' followed by a name or surname was also very common during the 20th century. It was (and still is) willingly carried by Afro-Argentines, brown-skinned and whites alike; although less frequently by fair-haired people, it has been publicly used with a sense of pride by people of either group. For example, such use ranges from Afro-Argentine guitar hero Carlos Alberto '*el negro*' García López, who released an album in 2010 called *Esta vez invita el Negro*, to the mestizo-looking folk singer Mercedes '*la negra*' Sosa, who named her earlier 1988 LP *La Negra*. Among people who may be considered white by local standards, movie star Sofía '*la negra*' Bozán performed a song entitled 'I am the *negra* Bozán' in the film *Rodríguez supernumerario* (1948), while Elisabeth '*la negra*' Vernaci called her popular 2012 radio show *Negropolis*.¹⁵

The precise origins of this peculiar cultural trait are difficult to establish. Although the affectionate '*negro/a*' – as both appellative and nickname – may apply today to individuals of all social conditions, it seems to have historically been primarily used among popular sectors of society. In his survey of 17th-to-19th-century documents, Pedro Grenon (1956) noted that nicknaming in general was common among the lower classes but not used by members of the upper class. Granted, there are a few known cases of politicians or higher ranking army officials of the 19th century who were called '*el negro*' by others in reference to their dark complexion. But it is not clear if they were happy with such nickname.¹⁶ And while I have not found any example of white-looking members of the elite who were nicknamed '*el negro*' or called each other '*negro/a*' at that time,¹⁷ by the late 19th century, it was already commonly used by popular sectors of Buenos Aires and considered a typical custom of rural *gauchos*. In a folk songbook published in 1899, for example, the loving wife of a *cocoliche* called him 'my dear *negro*' (De Nava 1899, 10). Likewise, in the script of 1909 theatre play, the son of a French immigrant calls his girlfriend 'my *china*' and 'my *negra*' as part of a *gaucho* impersonation (Fontanella 1909, 17), and in a tango of that time a lower class couple lovingly calls each other '*negro*' and '*china/negra*' (with no indication that they were other than average *criollos*) (Blanco, n.d.). Similar early uses of *negra* as an affectionate appellative

have also been registered in folk songs in regions far away from Buenos Aires (Furt 1923, 188, 219). Such appellative was so common that in 1910, it was the matter of an article in a *criollista* magazine addressed to the lower classes. The piece, entitled 'Mi negra', is aimed at defending that 'genuinely *criollo* expression', which may not be 'academic' or 'elegant' but nevertheless transmits the passion for the 'rustic charms' of the girls of the Pampas.¹⁸

How did 19th-century lower class Argentines with no African background end up calling each other *negro/a* as a sign of affection? It is difficult to arrive to categorical answers with the limited information available, but it seems likely that the custom was directly derived from Afro-Argentines' sociability, who used the appellative among themselves, often with playful and picaresque intentions (Geler 2010, 136). Black people calling each other '*negrito*' or '*mi negrita*' appear throughout the historical print matter of Buenos Aires, from political tracts of the 1830s to actual Afro-*porteño* periodicals of the 1870s.¹⁹ Given the proximity between blacks and whites in lower class life, it is not impossible that the latter adopted that custom. As noted by a traveler in the late 18th century, white men were particularly keen on *mulattas* as sexual partners; moreover, workers of all races mingled in rural spaces and whites did not object to working under the supervision of blacks if it was required (De Azara 1850, 269, 282). In the second half of the 19th century, Afro-Argentines enjoyed full civil and political citizenship. In Buenos Aires, they played an active role in political and cultural life: main parties sought out their associations and leaders as supporters in electoral battles and they often participated in carnival parades alongside whites. In leisure spaces, it was black or mulatto people who often ran the 'dance academies' where common people of all ethnic backgrounds met to entertain themselves and drink, while black *payadores* performed regularly in bars, circuses and theatres for audiences of all types. Moreover, interracial marriage (not to mention flirtation) was common among the lower classes. A dictionary of Argentine terms published in 1910 described '*mi negrura*' [my *negro*-ness] as a 'very common expression among us', used to refer to a beloved person 'of dark colour' (Garzón 1910, 327).

In this shared scenario, there were diverse forms of appropriating blackness. The best known were those enabled by carnival celebrations, in which both black and white folks – sometimes together as part of the same ensembles – staged performances in blackface, imitated Afro-Argentines' way of speaking and dancing or simply wore black masks. Tango itself can be considered a form of cultural appropriation, its peculiar moves developed as an imitation of those of the Afro-Argentine *candombes* (Geler 2010). In such cultural context, it would not be surprising that lower class people of diverse ethnic backgrounds adopted *negro/a* for nicknaming, as a way to call each other when they felt close enough, or tenderly to refer to the women they loved.

In addition, the appropriation of blackness in Argentina had a political dimension. In the 1830s and 1840s, the Federal party publically promoted its allegiance with *gauchos* and Afro-Argentines as a claim to represent the authentic *criollo* people (as opposed to their enemies of the Unitarian party, who were construed as representatives of the *gringos* and of the higher classes). Although such lines were more blurred in reality, these images rested on a real class cleavage, and Federals were clearly more popular among the urban and rural poor – non-whites included – than their rivals. In the 1830s, for example, supporters of Juan Manuel de Rosas in Buenos Aires printed newspapers

with titles such as *El Negrito* and *La Negrita* (and also *El Gaucho* and *La Gaucha*), which contained texts supposedly written by Afro-Argentines calling to support their leader (Acree 2013, 61–77).

Thus, '*gaucho*' and '*negro*' were used as emblems of lower class *criollo* authenticity and of the patriotic and democratizing drive of Federalism. For the very same reasons, both tended to be derided when Rosas's enemies finally got the chance to rule the country after he was ousted by military force in 1852. However, after the 1870s, the *gaucho* emblem became extraordinarily popular thanks to *criollista* dime novels, finally embraced by the intellectual and political élites as the main symbol of the Argentine nation by the early 20th century. The Afro-Argentines, on the contrary, suffered a process of invisibilization after the 1890s, as the country was proclaimed to be fully white and European. Yet, they never disappeared from popular culture. As I have shown elsewhere, they remained quite visible in cheap *criollista* literature and also in theatre and circus performances, as actual inhabitants of the world of the lower classes (Adamovsky 2014). This continued with the advent of mass culture. As Matthew Karush (2012) has argued, local filmmakers, broadcasters, music entrepreneurs and authors striving to establish themselves often drew from traditional popular culture to identify with lower classes (particularly *criollo*) emblems and values and successfully compete with transnational culture. As part of that impulse, local impresarios and artists exploited the *gauchesque* and tango domains and also rediscovered the African roots of local culture, for example, in the late 1930s fashion of the *milongas* and *candombes*. Thus, willing to ensure their credibility as authentic *criollos*, several well-known artists of the 1920s and 1930s adopted '*negro/a*' as public nickname. This custom was embraced not only by those who were actual Afro-Argentines – like the pioneer filmmaker José Agustín '*el negro*' Ferreyra – but also by others who were white, like tango composer Celedonio Flores, aka '*el negro Cele*'. The same applies to rising folk singers in the 1930s, who were nicknamed '*la negra*' (like Rosa Soria) or described as brown-skinned in popular magazines (like Martha de los Ríos) to stress their artistic authenticity. In the case of the folk scene, blackness was usually evoked in relation to indigenous and *mestizo* legacies, rather than Afro-Argentine ones (Adamovsky 2016a; see also Geler 2016).

By all these cultural shifts, the appellative '*negro/a*' became to some extent independent not only from a particular race but also from actual phenotypes. The heretic value of blackness vis-à-vis elitist culture and politics was thus liberated from its exclusive reference to Afro-Argentines and made available for all – whether white or dark-skinned – as a generic trait of the authentic Argentine (common) people. It is worth noting, however, that such a shift did not suspend the more obvious resonances of the word *negro* as indicative of color. In fact, it continued to be used with racist intentions. To offer but one example, in the 1910s, the conservative press was generous in the use of ethnic nicknaming – including '*el negrito*', '*el mulato*' or '*el zambo*' – as a weapon to discredit darker skinned members of rival parties (Tato 2008). Thus, while this article is about *negro/a* as a term of endearment, it should be borne in mind that it also remains as a common racist insult.

Vicarious blackness in the Latin American context

When white folks identify with blackness and Afro-Argentine cultural products, even calling each other *negro* as a sign of affection and as a way to claim national

authenticity, it would appear to represent a form of 'vicarious blackness', understood as racial appropriation. Such phenomena is often understood as an exploitative practice, while other forms of vicarious ethnicity are normally presented as a fake or superficial adoption of the 'Other's' attributes, through a commodification of difference that leaves ethnic borders and hierarchies unchanged or even reinforced (see Halter 2000, 82; Tate 2003, 9). However, the example of vicarious blackness that we are analyzing here is difficult to understand from such a perspective. To begin with, it started in Argentina well before the transnational vogue for Afro-American music or of any form of commodification of ethnic difference. Moreover, it is not only displayed in public performances or in the context of consuming cultural goods but also in the intimate sphere of family and friendship.

More importantly, the malleability of racial categories seems to be engrained in the vernacular language itself. This is evident in the term '*morocho*', which originated in South America. In Argentina, *morocho* may describe a white and European-looking person with brunette hair, but it can also be used as a synonym of *moreno* or *negro*. This ambivalence was already present in the 19th century. One of the oldest dictionaries of Argentine terms compiled in the mid-1870s, for example, states that the etymology of *morocho* derives from an 'old diminutive form for Moors [*moro*]' and points out that it can be used to imply that a person is *trigueño* (brown-skinned) or *prieto* (dark-skinned) (Barcia 2006, 239). Another dictionary, published in 1910, also defines *morocho* as '*moreno* or *trigueño*' (Bayo 1910, 148). It is worth noting that moor itself was often used as euphemism for *negro* (meaning a person of African looks) and that *moreno/a*, deriving from it, was one of the most common words to describe Afro-Argentines at that time. In fact, according to another dictionary published in 1910, '*morocho*' was usually employed as a 'term of endearment [*por cariño*]' to refer to a '*morena*, fresh, well-kept, person of the white race' (Garzón 1910, 319). While the combination of *moreno* and white in the same description may seem incomprehensible, it is no mistake, as '*moreno/a*' was also a somewhat ambiguous term. According to another dictionary published in 1916, *moreno/a* could be used to refer both to Afro-Argentines (*negros*) and to 'the least light of the white race' [*el menos claro en la raza blanca*] (Calandrelli 1916). As I have shown elsewhere, in the early 20th century, the *morocho argentina* came to be regarded as the quintessential Argentine woman, an emblem that displayed (and still displays) the same ambivalence: sometimes represented as a white brunette and sometimes as a dark-skinned lady (Adamovsky 2016b).

Such malleable categories are consistent with other Latin American cases. Similar to Argentina, people in Cuba, Venezuela and Puerto Rico use *negro/a* as a term of endearment to refer to both dark-skinned and white people. In Brazil, the Portuguese equivalent of words such as '*negro*' and '*preto*' are generally used only to refer to black people. But the slang '*nego/a*', which evolved from the former, can be employed as a term of endearment for people of any color. In turn, '*moreno*' is also ambivalent in Brazil, as it may refer to any nuance of non-white skins, but white brunettes can also call themselves *morenas*.²⁰ In Andean countries, white-looking people may occasionally use *cholo* as a term of endearment, something rather common among actual mestizos (Fletcher 2003). By contrast, in the United States, the word 'nigger', considered a racial insult, has been reappropriated by Afro-Americans to refer to each other, thus conveying a sense of closeness (and also,

when used in front of racially mixed audiences, as a way to remind them of the reality of racial oppression). White people cannot use it to refer to Afro-Americans without risking accusations of racism. But interestingly enough, in the past two decades, white folks – especially those who feel attracted to black culture – are increasingly referring to other whites as ‘niggers’ as a sign of affection (Fogle 2013; Kennedy 2002). The range of racial categories and forms of appropriating of blackness across such diverse contexts reflect the malleable nature of racial formations in Latin America.

Such a difference reflects different histories of race relations. In the United States and in some European countries, race relations tended to be structured as a polar system that opposed whites and blacks as two neatly demarcated ethnic groups. According to the one-drop rule, actual miscegenation was not supposed to alter that polarity, as even a distant African ancestry makes a person black. By contrast, racial relations in Latin America were organized in diverse ways in different countries (often with variations also within each of them), but generally in nonpolar systems. Color tended to be regarded as a continuum in which being white was not traditionally defined by purity of blood, but in terms of culture and phenotype (which in turn are very flexible and situational) (see Telles and Flores 2013; Segato 2010). Consequently, there has not tended to be a unified condition of non-whiteness, but several ambiguous and sometimes overlapping terms that allude to phenotype and/or to ethnicity, which are often only discernible from local perspectives.

In turn, this difference is also reflected in differing narratives of national identity. In the United States, the population that founded the nation was racially defined as white and Anglo-Saxon. In other words, there was an *ethnos* before the actual nation. Other ethnic groups were later granted membership through a narrative of the gradual integration of ‘minorities’ through a process that would lead to a multiracial nation. In this imagined outcome, races would remain discrete, clearly defined groups, while white Anglo-Saxons would continue to be regarded as the founders of the nation. By contrast, most Latin American countries developed discourses of nationhood that revolved around the idea of mestizaje or racial democracy. The population that founded the nation was imagined as a blend of different ethnic components that had already undergone a process of biological and cultural miscegenation. In these narratives, a national, mestizo *ethnos* crystallized as part of the process of independence and nation building.

To be sure, mestizaje and racial democracy are myths, but as such, they also rest on the reality of Latin America’s extensive biological and cultural mestizaje. Beyond narratives, national formation was actually coeval with processes of ethnogenesis. This explains why, in the Latin American context, the appropriation of black (or indigenous) culture or attributes in individual cases may be explained as practices of racial exploitation. Yet, looking at it from the collective point of view, they were often indispensable ingredients of the process of ethnogenesis that was central to national formation. By engaging in enactments of blackness, consuming and re-adapting African and indigenous cultural products and producing mestizo emblems for their nations, people of all colors and ethnic backgrounds were often experimenting with performative games to build a national *ethnos* out of the heterogeneous pieces left at the end of the colonial period.

The Latin American non-polar racial formations have led to diverse vernacular color regimes, which are combined in specific ways with the official narratives of a given

nation. Each national (or regional) case can be quite different in this regard. The ideology of *mestizaje* in Mexico, widely shared by the population, acknowledges a common indigenous ancestry but minimizes any African heritage; in terms of colour, it allows most people to associating themselves with whiteness (Sue 2013). By contrast, the '*trigueño*' in Puerto Rico or the '*café con leche*' skin color in Venezuela and Colombia embody a national character that emphasizes its distinct African ancestry. Argentina is a peculiar case, as it is one of the few countries in which the official discourses of the nation rejected the whole notion of *mestizaje*, to embrace instead a myth according to which the national *ethnos* is white and of purely European origins. However, confronted with the evidence of the population's ethnic diversity, that myth has always been unstable and vulnerable. As I have argued elsewhere, Argentines have used diverse cultural practices to resist state whitening pressures and propose alternative views of the nation (the profile of its *ethnos* included) (Adamovsky 2012).

The phenomena of vicarious blackness that we have analyzed in this article, where '*negro/a*' is used as a term of endearment in everyday interactions and blackness appropriated in mass culture to represent lower class (and therefore national) authenticity, can be better understood under this light. It subtly undermined the solidity of official discourses of the nation and offered safe ways to challenge the myth of the white-European Argentina without having to launch an open combat against it. As noted at the beginning of this article, it has also laid the foundations for the emergence of a *negro* pride among lower class people of all complexions over the past three decades. Looking at vicarious blackness not from the point of view of individual cases but from the collective perspective of ethnogenesis, it is not rare that people of all complexions participated in all these cultural practices. The definition of a viable national 'Us' is a matter that concerns everybody.

Implications of the argentine case for debates on hybridity and mixed race studies

As a peculiar form of vicarious blackness, the use of '*negro/a*' as nickname and as a term of endearment suggests that Argentina has undergone (and still undergoes) complex dynamics of cross-cultural contact and mixing – ethnic and racial aspects included – comparable to other Latin American countries. In the region's context, however, it represents a peculiar case, as such dynamics have been strongly hindered by official discourses of the nation that claim that Argentina, ethnically speaking, has not walked away from its European cradle. Torn by contradictory forces, this scenario has nurtured peculiar patterns of personal and national identifications. Racism and white pride may coexist with forms of vicarious blackness; the same person may use '*negro/a*' as an insult and as a term of endearment. These 'non-dialectic contradictions' that preclude all possibility of harmonious syntheses seem to confirm the validity of Antonio Cornejo Polar's (1996) critique of the concepts of hybridity and *mestizaje* as they are often used in Latin American studies.

Moving from individual practices to collective identifications, the Argentine case also offers interesting elements for debates on nation formation. The evidence that we have analyzed in this article adds validity to the ethno-symbolists' point about the need to reconsider the role of ethnicity in our understanding of those processes. As

Anthony Smith has argued, nations 'are repeatedly formed and re-formed, at least in part, on the basis of the symbolic processes of ethno-genesis such as naming, boundary definition, myths of origin and symbolic cultivation' (2009, 49). In turn, competing definitions of the nation often feature as part of these processes, stemming from internal tensions of class, ethnicity, gender, political affiliation etc. The ethnic dimension, then, becomes relevant not only for the understanding of discrete 'minorities' within nations but also of the changing profile of nations themselves. Likewise, struggles over the national *ethnos* also affect the boundaries and definition of the diverse communities out of which it is made. The forms of appropriation of blackness that we have analyzed in this article can be interpreted under this light, as episodes of a contested, long-term and unfinished process of ethnogenesis; in other words, as the making of a national *ethnos* out of the heterogeneity of Argentina's demographic components and of the tensions added by their overlapping class and ethnic cleavages, and by the conflicting narratives by which they tried to grasp who they were. In a context in which official discourses of the nation relied on a white-European Argentine *ethnos*, the ambivalence and openness of those forms of appropriation made them a safe arena of contention. Using '*negro/a*' to refer to oneself or as a term of endearment was not merely a private matter, but also a way of imagining a community in which generic affection and national authenticity were expressed through that appellative.

To be sure, all these forms of vicarious blackness – from the older nicknaming to the most recent lower class *negro* identity – are not about imagining an African (or Indigenous) Argentina instead of the European one proposed by the elites. They can be interpreted, rather, as ways of making visible the human diversity and miscegenation of the Argentine people in a playful and metonymical mode. The *negro* allusion functions as an encompassing signifier for the totality of the people, irrespective of their color. One of its parts – the dark-skinned people – takes the place of the whole to make visible the fact that such a whole is not (only) white or colorless, as the dominant discourses would have it. Just like in private nicknaming, the Argentine people can thus be white and *negro* at the same time.

The allusions to blackness in metonymical mode (rather than referring to a discrete group of the population) should also call our attention to the necessity to rethink ethnicity beyond 'groupism', to put it in Roger Brubaker's (2004) term. In other words, ethnicity should be considered a process, the always-provisional outcome of group-making projects rather than (only) as expression of preexisting ethnic entities. In the Latin American context, Livio Sansone (2003) has already called the attention to the emergence of black identities unrelated to an actual ethnic community in Brazil. In his work, however, the agents of such project are still the people of 'black' phenotype. Non-black Brazilians certainly engage in black culture, but it is clear that that culture comes from people of actual African descent. The Argentine case invites us to move one step forward, to consider the possibility of blackness not only beyond 'groupism' but also as unrelated to actual phenotypes or ancestry. In other words, to rethink *negro* as an encompassing signifier for a new *ethnos* composed of people of diverse phenotypes and ancestries (in which actual Afro-Argentines are in fact hardly visible).

From this point of view, this article has argued that the appropriation of blackness, with or without African denotations, cannot simply be interpreted as a form of

exploitation, nor as a banal and superficial form of consumption. This is not to say that such forms of exploitation and consumption do not exist. But playing with the Other's racial marks, appropriating and redefining their cultural forms, can also be considered key tools of ethnogenesis. This is particularly so when we look at ethnogenesis as it happens among the lower classes in ethnically diverse communities. The fact that those tools can be used for both purposes – not only to recreate new forms of racial distinction and hierarchy but also to negotiate more democratic forms of community – should not come as a surprise. As it is well known, cultural forms and artifacts vary in their functions as they travel between classes, genders and ethnic groups, and between historical situations. And it would be unthinkable that racially hierarchical societies started to produce democratic cultural products overnight and through a neat transition. Ambivalence is often the only available channel for cultural change.

This interpretation of racial appropriation as part of imaginative games and performances of communities-in-the-making is consistent with research in other contexts. The revisionist scholars in the United States have made precisely that point in the interpretation of early blackface minstrelsy among lower class audiences (Lott 1992). The very notion of some 'black authenticity' that may be therefore 'usurped' has been challenged by some scholars, who proposed to consider blackness a *performance* in which both African-Americans and non-blacks may engage in diverse ways and for different purposes (Cutler 2003; Johnson 2003). The lesser known tradition of whiteface minstrels among Afro-American performers has also been interpreted as an interracial community-making practice (McAllister 2011). Likewise, the appropriation of white cultural products in African contemporary popular culture has been explained under this light (Krings 2015). In the Argentine context, a similar interpretation has been proposed in relation to local artists of European descent who engage with indigenous cultures in order to produce their own versions of 'Argentine art' (Schneider 2006).

In addition, the appropriation of the term 'black' to describe oneself was also reported among whites and non-whites of lineages other than African in other contexts. In New Zealand, as Michele D. Dominy (1990) has shown, Maori feminist activists adopted the self-ascribed label 'black', or occasionally 'brown', to assert a polarizing non-white identity in response to a white and male-dominated social order. The label implies a shift away from a specific ethnic category (Maori) to a broader racial one, which is potentially more inclusive. However, while it does not apply to white-acting Maori, it *does* include Maori women who look white and white women who behave as 'blacks' (i.e. their allies in the white lesbian movement). As Dominy concludes, 'black' is used by these women as an oppositional marker rather than as a biological category, similar to some of the Argentine examples that we have analyzed here.

Finally, the Argentine case may offer valuable insights to the field of mixed race studies. Most scholars in that field have been primarily interested in understanding individual behavior and identities in polar racial systems of the kind that prevail in the North Atlantic world. In most studies, 'race mixing' comes to be defined as a matter of individuals belonging to discrete, well-delineated groups who cross the white/non-white line. The Latin American racial context – and the Argentine case in particular – may offer valuable elements to rethink this approach, by moving from the inquiry of individual identities to collective practices, from the study of minorities to processes of ethnogenesis at the national level, and from exclusive and biologically defined conceptualizations

of whiteness and blackness to more loose, inclusive and performative ones. After all, if the 'Latin Americanization of racial stratification in the US' thesis is right, and if biracial individuals there now tend to identify as 'whites' or simply raceless (see Adekunle and Williams 2010; Bonilla-Silva 2002), this shift may prove indispensable even for countries of the North Atlantic.

Notes

1. For examples of nicknames using '*el pardo*', see Salas (1892), 101 and 109; for *el negro*, see examples below.
2. Argentines of non-Chinese Asian ancestry are less happy to be called '*chino*'.
3. 'El Pecoso y su pandilla: todos cumplieron veinte años,' *Sintonía*, no. 97, 2 March 1935, n/p.
4. Famous non-Polish 'Polish' are tango hero Roberto Goyeneche, cumbia star Ezequiel Fwirkaluk (*née* López), broadcaster Eduardo Caimi, football players Claudio Arzeno, Fabián Della Marchesina and Adrián Bastía.
5. '*Gringos*' that have Spanish surnames (but are blonde) include boxers Mauricio Cabrera and Luis Sebastián Medina.
6. '*Rusos*' include Football players Bernardo Vilariño, Diego Matías Rodríguez and Evaristo Sande López, and journalists Eduardo Ramenzoni and Norberto Vereá.
7. Non-Chinese '*chinos*' include actresses Concepción Zorrilla and María Eugenia Suárez, actors Darío Volpato and Ricardo M. Darín, football players Pedro Coudannes and Carlos Daniel Tapia, boxing star Marcos René Maidana, golfer Vicente Fernández, punk musician Adrián Vera, and politicians Carlos Zannini and Fernando Navarro.
8. Argentina's president Victorino de la Plaza (1914–1916), himself a mestizo of light-brownish skin, was called '*chino*' (although it is not clear if he approved it). In his private letters to Evita, Perón sometimes called her '*chinita querida*'.
9. I could not find any famous case, but I can offer as an example the father of historian Nicolás Kwiatkowski, who was known as '*el tano*' in his neighborhood (while his best friend, Hugo Pichersky, was called '*el gallego*', not to be confused with the former). Although I never carried it as a nickname, I have been humorously introduced as '*el tano Adamovsky*' several times.
10. From the Kolla, the indigenous nation that lives there, such '*coyas*' include football stars Daniel Humberto Gutiérrez and Daniel Ortega.
11. Recalled in a 3 March 2010 article of *El Gráfico*, available at www.elgrafico.com.ar/2010/03/03/C-2459-Ilegue-a-tomar-10-gramos-de-cocaina-por-dia.php (accessed 4 November 2015). Other '*turcos*' with no Middle Eastern backgrounds include football players Sergio Vázquez and Hugo Maradona; basketball player Rodrigo Ezquerri; and transvestite artist La Turca Glamour (*née* Pedro Nicoletti).
12. Such '*cholos*' include tango performer Rodolfo Montironi; football players Carmelo and Diego Simeone, Miguel Converti and others; and journalists Ramón Andino, Marcelo Sottile and Oscar Gomez Castañón. Evita was also called '*la chola*' as a child. '*Indios*' who do not look indigenous include football players Enrique Guaita, Jorge Solari and Oscar Arévalo; folk composer Antonio Comas; and rock star Carlos Alberto Solari.
13. '*Tanos*' include football players Vicente Pernía, Leandro Gracián and Fernando Ortiz.
14. See <http://infoblancosobrenegro.com/noticias/278-evita-fue-la-razon-de-mi-vida-confiesa-su-companera-de-lucha-blanca-ibarluca> and <http://museoargentineljuguete.com/evita-peron-museum/nggallery/eva-peron-museum/eva-peron-museum-notas-manuscritas> (accessed 1 November 2015).
15. Other famous 20th-century Argentines who willingly carrying '*el negro*' as nickname include Afro-Argentine filmmaker José Agustín Ferreyra (born 1889), brown-skinned (but not African-looking for local standards) tango singer Raúl Lavié (b. 1937) and journalist Oscar González Oro (b. 1951). Those who would be considered white by local standards include

tango composer Celedonio Flores (b. 1896), comedian Alberto Olmedo (b. 1933) and writer Roberto Fontanarrosa (b. 1944).

16. For example, General Lorenzo Barcala and Senator Jerónimo L. del Barco; see Cutolo and Iburguren (1974), pp. 201, 281.
17. Leandro Losada, the main specialist in Argentina's turn-of-the-century high society, is not aware of any examples either (personal communication, October 2015).
18. 'Mi negra', *El Fogón Argentino* (Lomas de Zamora), no. 1, 18 December 1910, n/p.
19. See Soler Cañas (1958); *La Broma*, 31 October 1878, pp. 3, 7 February 1880, p. 2.
20. See 'Local Customs and Culture in Venezuela', available at <https://www.gapyear.com/countries/venezuela/local-customs> (accessed 1 July 2015); Vaughan (2005); Rodríguez & Sánchez Korrol (1996, 27); Nascimento dos Santos & Alomba Ribeiro (2010); Sansone (2003, 49).

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