

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-10763-2 - Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina  
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## Introduction

### *The shades of the nation*

Paulina L. Alberto and Eduardo Elena

Argentina suffers from what marketing experts would call an “image problem.” The country rarely fares well in the global media spotlight, where it is frequently trotted out as an example of spectacular political or economic failure. But seldom are the results of this scrutiny so unflattering as when issues of race and national identity come to the fore.<sup>1</sup> As we write this Introduction, the 2014 World Cup provides the latest occasion for commentary. In a piece titled “Why So Many World Cup Fans Dislike Argentina,” *The New York Times* informed readers that “across Latin America, Argentina has the most people rooting against it” – not just because of the country’s past successes on the field against its regional rivals but, more pointedly, because of “how some Argentines projected their perceptions of economic and cultural superiority in the region.” For the article’s authors, the ugliest aspect of this ethnocentrism lies in “the ways in which some Argentines have traditionally viewed their nation, which received millions of European immigrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: as a dominion of racial pre-eminence in the region.”<sup>2</sup> A piece in the *Huffington Post* took a similar angle, asking “Why Are There No Black Men on Argentina’s Roster?” Unlike other Latin American “rainbow nations [...] conceived by the blend of American-Indians, Spaniards, and enslaved Africans,” Argentina’s seemingly all-white roster confirmed, for the author of this piece, the country’s exceptionally violent history of “purg[ing] their African roots from their socio-historical landscape and conscience,” and even of “ethnic cleansing” and “genocide,” in its eagerness to become “South America’s whitest country.”<sup>3</sup>

These journalistic assessments are all too familiar. The image of Argentina as a racial outlier in Latin America has become deeply engrained in popular and even academic discourses over the last century, and it shows few signs of fading. Whether celebrating the country’s white and European character or condemning the discrimination and violence that sustained this image, commentators in

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Argentina and abroad have largely agreed in placing Argentina well outside of the narratives of racially mixed nationhood that characterize much of modern Latin America. The image of Argentina as a racial outlier makes for a good story, whether in the world of sports, in journalism, or in the classroom: it rings true and, as the World Cup coverage demonstrates, it often carries an important moral critique of racism and ethnocentrism. But that image is too often rooted in half-truths, stereotypes, and assumptions rather than in historically and culturally grounded analyses of Argentine society.

This edited volume offers an alternative interpretation. It marks a collective attempt to rethink the meanings and workings of race in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Argentina by interrogating prevailing stories and asking new questions. To this end, we have recruited contributors from multiple disciplines – history, anthropology, and literary and cultural studies – based in academic institutions in both North America and Argentina. The volume’s chapters span a wide variety of subjects, but they share an impulse to illuminate the significance of race in Argentina’s past and present in ways that open avenues for international comparison and dialogue foreclosed by assertions of Argentina’s “exceptional” status as a white and European nation. By placing Argentina more firmly within the vibrant scholarly conversations on race and nation in the Americas and beyond, the chapters in this volume generate insights that, we hope, will be valuable for other national contexts. This volume is thus meant as a contribution to rethinking race *in* modern Argentina, but also *from* Argentina outward to the broader world.

#### THE PROBLEM OF ARGENTINE RACIAL EXCEPTIONALISM

The idea of Argentine racial exceptionalism stems from early conceptions of national progress rooted in racism and violent exclusion, and it persists as part of more recent attempts to address those legacies and to combat racial discrimination in the contemporary world. It is not by chance that critics often choose Argentina as a cautionary case – indeed, the nation’s politicians and thinkers went to great lengths, starting in the nineteenth century, to make racial whiteness and cultural Europeaness central to definitions of Argentine identity and to produce social transformation through overseas immigration and frontier conquest. Argentina’s apparent success in this regard – which once earned the country comparisons to Europe or to European “settler societies” like the United States, Canada, and Australia – was in fact a source of pride for many Argentines at a time when dominant social theories questioned Latin Americans’ capacity for civilization.<sup>4</sup> Yet as the twentieth century progressed, regional and global changes in ideas of race and national belonging increasingly cast Argentina’s proud embrace of whiteness and Europeaness in a negative light. In the first half of the century, many leaders and intellectuals across Latin America began to modify or reject the European standards of civilization and racial whiteness once aspired to by their predecessors, finding new pride instead

in what we might call a *mestizo* nationalism: a defense of their nations' racial and cultural hybridity (resulting from centuries of racial mixing or *mestizaje*) and a celebration of supposedly "Latin" traditions of racial coexistence or fusion in contrast to North Atlantic racism and segregation. Although Argentine intellectual, political, and artistic movements participated in this wave of cultural nationalism, Argentina's leaders never embraced *mestizaje* or racial multiplicity as official national ideologies in the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Nor, later in the century, did Argentine leaders follow in the paths of the European nations or multiracial settler societies Argentina had once aspired to emulate. While processes like decolonization, immigration, and civil rights or anti-Apartheid movements forced many of these countries to grapple with histories of racial exclusion, discrimination, and violence, similar discussions have been markedly slower to emerge in Argentine public life. Within Argentina, in fact, many continue to uphold the ideas of homogeneous national whiteness and of the absence of distinct racial groups as proof of the absence of racism. The idea that race is irrelevant or even foreign to Argentina has made it difficult for members of groups who feel targeted by racism or who claim ethnic or racial difference to have their concerns heard, respected, and addressed.

As the World Cup coverage makes clear, then, the "exceptional" whiteness and Europeanness that was once a source of pride (and still is) for many Argentines appears outdated and even shameful at a time when multiculturalism, diversity, and anti-racism have become, at least nominally, dominant values deeply linked to ideas of justice and human rights.<sup>6</sup> Yet in taking up an anti-racist position, commentators within and outside of Argentina too frequently take for granted the success of the whitening project in that country, leaving intact the image of Argentine racial exceptionalism. Critics of social inequality likewise often accept the idea of Argentine exceptionalism, leading them to overlook the issue of race or, at best, to repeat the simplified version of a much more complicated story: that Argentines either exterminated all nonwhite people or erased them from national history and consciousness, or both. Taken to its extreme (as in the *Huffington Post* piece), the attempt to make Argentina into an object lesson of "ethnic cleansing" and "genocide" unintentionally confirms the supposed "disappearance" of indigenous or Afro-descendant people from the nation – the very discourses to which contemporary activists vocally object in their struggles against invisibility. As a result, Argentina is often marginal to or omitted from comparative studies of race in Latin America. In a field overwhelmingly focused on African, indigenous, or *mestizo* majorities or minorities, this omission indirectly endorses the image of Argentina as white and of "white" as a neutral, un-marked, or transparently intelligible category rather than as the opaque product of local racial ideologies and negotiations.

This volume aspires to move beyond the limiting framework of exceptionalism toward a more robust understanding of race in Argentina's past and present. In approaching this task, the contributors to this volume are conscious

of the need to act as translators of sorts between Argentine and foreign conceptions of race (and thus between the distinct scholarly vocabularies and conceptual toolkits that have developed around each). We are aware that by attempting to mediate, we risk dissatisfying both of the constituencies we seek to engage. Yet recent work on Argentina by scholars based both inside and outside the country has broken new ground by beginning to place these different systems of meaning-making around race in conversation with one another. The chapters that follow seek to deepen and amplify those emerging conversations, mapping the points of convergence and divergence among local and foreign traditions of analyzing race, and using each to point out the other's blind spots, hidden assumptions, or contradictions.

Given the longstanding prevalence in Argentina of ideas about the nation as homogeneously white and about the irrelevance of race as a social (and even analytical) category, we believe that providing satisfactory alternatives to the narrative of exceptionalism requires engaging with terms and concepts that have not traditionally been central to Argentine discussions of national identity or to Argentine scholarship. Though terms like “mestizaje,” “minorities,” “whiteness,” and even “race” may seem imported or illegitimate, they have proven adaptable and very useful in helping to explain the workings of social inequality in other parts of the Americas. Their use helps render visible the ways that ideas about race and processes of racialization, even if not always explicitly recognized as such by locals, inflected or shaped other (perhaps more readily recognized) forms of difference and inequality in Argentina.

Yet this operation is useful only if we are simultaneously attuned to local social attitudes, behaviors, and vocabularies of difference. The World Cup coverage cited earlier illustrates the pitfalls of transporting fixed or preconceived ideas about race to a foreign context, and of treating race as somehow more “real” than other forms of difference. Specifically, it demonstrates the limited usefulness of categories like “blackness” and “whiteness” when deployed from a strictly external perspective and helps explain why many Argentine scholars have found them lacking. Yet this journalistic coverage (in spite of itself) also hints at the unexpected meanings that these false cognates might yield up when examined within the context of Argentina. From this perspective, we might ask of the aforementioned *New York Times* article: What do Argentines mean when they say their nation is “white”? How do the meanings of the term vary in different times and places within Argentina, and how do they diverge from understandings of what it means to be white in other parts of the region and the world? How exceptional or extreme are Argentine racial ideologies in the Latin American context, and how do the ways we conceptualize the comparative elements influence our conclusions? Similarly, when the *Huffington Post* piece asks why there are no black men on Argentina's roster, we might reply: How do we know there aren't? By whose definition of “black”? What does it mean that Argentines refer to at least one player on the team colloquially as *el negro*, even though his “blackness” is not obvious to

the North American journalist?<sup>7</sup> By posing these kinds of questions, the contributors to this volume seek to *explain* the obliqueness of race in Argentine society rather than celebrate it as an accomplishment or dismiss it as a comparative “lack” or “failure.”

#### RACE IN ARGENTINA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

How does one write the history of race in a country that largely denies its relevance? Until recently, because most Argentine scholars were skeptical of the concept, no one had attempted to write an integrated history of race that explained patterns of racial formation and followed multiple racial groups over the long term, analyzing their relationships to racial ideologies and to processes of nation- and state-formation. Though much work remains to be done, the outlines of this history are slowly emerging.<sup>8</sup> The brief overview that follows is meant as a guide for readers, providing useful background for the individual chapters. It also reveals how and why the twentieth century appears to be missing in the literature on race and nation in Argentina, and why interest in race seems to be reemerging in the twenty-first.

During the late colonial period, the territory that would become Argentina was a socially heterogeneous landscape. Like many other peripheral parts of Spanish America, the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata lacked the large, settled indigenous populations characteristic of Mexico or Peru, the centers of Spain’s New World Empire. Its relatively sparse population included people labeled as Spaniards, Indians, blacks (*negros* or *morenos*, comprising free and enslaved Africans), as well as a range of people in-between. *Mestizo* referred primarily to individuals of mixed indigenous and European ancestry. *Pardo* and *mulato* described people of mixed African and European ancestry, and *zambo* referred to people of mixed indigenous and African heritage.<sup>9</sup> Over time, *criollo*, a term originally applied to American-born Spaniards (and in some areas, to American-born African slaves), was increasingly used to designate anyone born on American soil.

Although it may seem surprising to readers familiar with Argentina’s reputation for racial exclusion, in the wake of independence and for much of the nineteenth century, relatively inclusive definitions of national belonging prevailed as elites attempted to create an Argentine “people” out of this heterogeneous, stratified, and formerly colonized population.<sup>10</sup> Dominant conceptions of citizenship as political or voluntarist were, in theory if not always in practice, race-blind or raceless, and the nation’s guiding metaphors of inclusion endowed the national soil with the power to generate a shared sense of familial belonging among people of different ancestries.<sup>11</sup> In the first half of the nineteenth century, the exact shape that the Argentine nation would take remained an open question as various factions struggled for power in protracted civil wars. Rival conceptions of republicanism embraced, to greater or lesser degrees, liberal and individualist principles as well as more conservative corporatist

ideals. Proponents of these different political tendencies also reached out, to varying degrees and in different ways, to people of indigenous, African, or mixed ancestry in their attempts to recruit or mobilize “the people”; the 1853 Constitution that abolished slavery and granted the right to vote to all adult men embodies the overall expansion of political participation and citizenship in this period.<sup>12</sup> This project is evident in the case of Afro-Argentines, who made up about 30 percent of the population of Buenos Aires in the early nineteenth century (the figures were even higher in parts of the Northwest). Afro-Argentines fought in the country’s many wars and were active participants in the nation’s politics, including as an important contingent of voters. Together with the politicians who sought their support, Afro-Argentines stressed the power of the land or of soldiering to make them nationals and promoted the idea that nonwhites could be improved through education, military service, labor, and general assimilation to Catholic, European ideals. This was far from an easy or automatic process. Afro-Argentines had to struggle, often against difficult odds, for their rights of citizenship to be respected. They also had to renounce ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or religious differences in the process of becoming unmarked Argentines.<sup>13</sup>

The relationship of Argentine nation-building to indigenous peoples differed in important respects. Regardless of which political faction held power, Argentina’s nineteenth-century leaders sought to wrest control over portions of the national territory and areas outside its formal borders from a number of Amerindian polities (although even at their most violent, the nation’s shifting frontiers were also places of extensive cultural and economic exchange).<sup>14</sup> Argentine statesmen and intellectuals considered members of unassimilated indigenous groups as “savage” threats to civilization and indeed as foils to the “proper” Argentine citizen, a view that underlay and supported their policy of war and expansion.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the state’s strongly territorial conceptions of citizenship meant that indigenous people who lived inside the national territory and adopted a “civilized” way of life were envisioned as Argentines – if not fully equal to Argentines of European descent, at least no longer “Indian.”<sup>16</sup> Yet in this period the boundaries for integration into the nation (conceived by elites as a process of “civilization”) appear to have been somewhat more porous for Afro-Argentines than for indigenous people, who continued to bear stronger stigmas of racial and cultural otherness.<sup>17</sup>

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, ideologies of race and national belonging hardened and narrowed further, reflecting in part the rise of currents of so-called scientific racism in Europe and the United States. In this context, Argentine liberals recast ideals of nationality and of fitness for citizenship more forcefully in terms of racial whiteness and European culture, while enacting disciplinary legislation (regarding labor, vagrancy, education, immigration, military service, and so on) designed to create and enforce homogeneity among the citizenry.<sup>18</sup> It was in this period, as the Argentine state pushed to consolidate a booming agro-export economy, that the national governments launched

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military campaigns to definitively occupy the remaining expanses of Amerindian lands to the south and northeast. These campaigns killed thousands of indigenous people and violently assimilated survivors through practices like the separation of families, forced relocation, and coerced or low-wage labor.<sup>19</sup> In the wake of the subjugation of independent indigenous groups and the consolidation of the national territory, Argentine observers complacently declared the almost complete disappearance of “Indians” in the nation. “Blacks” too, official histories and statistics of the period asserted, had disappeared or were well on their way toward group extinction, due to their supposedly disproportional rates of death in nineteenth-century wars or epidemics and their high degree of intermixture with the broader population.<sup>20</sup> These disappearances, of course, were a matter of perception. Indigenous people and descendants of Africans continued physically to exist in the nation, but no longer as members of communities recognized as racially or ethnically distinct. Instead, people of indigenous or African ancestry increasingly became part of a many-hued “popular world” composed of the nation’s poorer sectors – a group considered white in racial terms but subject to longstanding social prejudices that linked darker skin tones to low socioeconomic status and lack of cultural refinement. Though elites often questioned the popular sectors’ fitness for full political participation, many also saw them as capable of improvement through education and disciplinary policies.<sup>21</sup> The victory of a white racial order in Argentina (which earned the country its reputation as exceptional) therefore depended not principally on “extermination,” but on the renegotiation of the boundaries of ethno-racial difference in socioeconomic and cultural terms. This process was a result of elites’ attempts to produce a homogeneous citizenry, but it also reflected many nonelites’ attempts to seize the spaces that assimilationist ideologies provided for their fuller inclusion as citizens.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time that Argentine statesmen waged their campaign of conquest and assimilation in the Interior, they sought to take advantage of the growing stream of migrants leaving Europe and the Mediterranean basin. Other Latin American countries created similar projects to sponsor European immigration in an effort to whiten their populations, but due to a variety of economic factors and other reasons, Argentina stands out in its dramatic success. Census figures suggest that approximately 2.9 million immigrants settled permanently between 1880 and 1916, while millions more came and went among Argentina, their homelands, and other destinations. By the end of this period nearly one-third of Argentina’s population was foreign-born (the reader may contrast these levels, among the highest in the world, with the United States today, in which immigrants represent roughly 12.9 percent of the total population).<sup>23</sup> Immigrants to Argentina often came in search of rural work, but many remained in the capital Buenos Aires – which rapidly became the largest metropolis in Latin America – and in other cities, where they too became part of the emergent “popular world.” The demographic transformations that immigration wrought allowed Argentine public figures – together

with many private citizens – to congratulate themselves on the achievement of a homogeneously white citizenry and to construct personal and national genealogies that stressed European descent. Yet just as the ideas of indigenous extermination and Afro-Argentine disappearance need rethinking, so too does the idea of immigrant whitening. For one thing, although Italian and Spanish immigrants represented the largest groups of resident foreigners, the immigrant population comprised a kaleidoscope of nationalities, ethnicities, religions, languages, and cultural traditions.<sup>24</sup> Second, as anthropologist Claudia Briones has pointed out, imagining Argentine whiteness as the result of a purely European melting pot [*crisol de razas*] obscures the presence of a “hidden” melting pot that included Argentina’s significant pre-immigration popular sectors.<sup>25</sup> In short, turn-of-the-century immigration had a profound influence in shaping Argentine society and ideas about national and racial identity as European and white, but these ideas need to be examined, not taken literally.

Indeed, Argentine authorities in this period were hardly satisfied with the whiteness or homogeneity of the national population that they had fashioned through ostensible extermination, disappearance, and immigration. Heavily influenced by the new science of eugenics, in the early twentieth century some leaders worried obsessively about the disorder caused by the intermingling of diverse native- and foreign-born populations and created new policies designed to protect the national “race” from degeneration. The state and allied intellectuals used policies and institutions of social control to police diversity of all kinds – not just along lines of race and ethnicity but also of religion, culture, language, political affiliation, sexuality, psychology, age, and legal condition – and to induct newcomers and locals as nationals by disciplining them in acceptable behavioral norms modeled on Western European standards. In this context, in which behaviors considered “deviant” could be understood as dangers to the health of the nation and its people, “race” came to mean many things: it could denote perceived differences and hierarchies among human groups (like “whites” or “blacks”); it could refer to national populations imagined as distinct (the “Argentine race”), or it could refer more broadly to humankind (the human “race”) in discourses about public health and social improvement.<sup>26</sup> As several chapters in this volume demonstrate, race was, in a sense, atomized and absorbed into other forms of marking difference in the early twentieth century, thereby becoming difficult to see or to name. Similarly, as whiteness became ever more firmly established as a natural part of the nation’s identity and of what it meant to be Argentine, it too became invisible as a racial construction.<sup>27</sup> Yet even when the main projects to reform the Argentine population no longer identified clearly defined communities of racial others as primary targets, and indeed exported (construing as foreign) the problem of race from the national debate, the differentiating, essentializing, and disciplining logic of racial thought permeated interactions between the state and its citizens and, through micro-mechanisms of self- and mutual “cultural patrolling,” among citizens themselves.<sup>28</sup>



The best example of this process is the transformation of the word *negro*, in the early twentieth century, from an explicitly racial referent to a term used primarily to mark social class within the broad field of Argentine whiteness. As Argentina became more urban and industrial and the poor more proletarian, class became central to the vocabulary of mass politics and mass culture alike, thanks in part to the activism of the country's small but vocal labor and leftist movements. The growth of a proletarian sector and the importance of left-wing politics predicated on a belief in the essential historical reality of class and the secondary, ideological, status of other kinds of exclusion, meant that race further receded in visibility as a way of marking or explaining social difference. Yet even as class subsumed racial or ethnic identifications in these decades, race strongly inflected the meanings of class.<sup>29</sup> In the parlance of members of the middle and upper classes, to return to our example, "negro" was unmoored from biological references to African descent and extended more broadly onto working-class sectors and certain provincial populations. In this usage, "negro" – issued as an insult – projected the pejorative connotations once attached exclusively to people of African descent to popular sectors as a whole. This broad application of "negro," though intended as a class-based slur, drew on the term's delegitimizing power (originally based on race and culture) to mark these populations off as less deserving of full citizenship due to their perceived poverty, uncouth behavior, lack of education, or place of residence.<sup>30</sup>

While this rhetorical move did not make members of the lower classes "black" in a way that would be legible to most outside observers (the journalists who produced the coverage of the 2014 World Cup a case in point), it did draw upon the longstanding association in Argentina between dark skin and low socioeconomic status, thus providing a necessary corrective to the idea that race simply ceased to be an important part of Argentine social hierarchies in this period. The transformation of "negro" into a primarily class-based slur diluted the word's racial meanings so thoroughly that they remain difficult to pinpoint today – whether for exposing the racism that the term often carries, or for affirmatively claiming a black racial identity, as chapters in this volume demonstrate. But far from having no racial salience, the term's redefinition at precisely the moment when "white" became the default national race points to the stratifications within Argentine whiteness, a status conditioned by a range of factors: geographic origin, appearance, education, and class affiliation and its attendant cultural forms and behaviors, among others.<sup>31</sup> Nor is "negro" an isolated case. As several chapters in this collection reveal, the use of euphemistic terms like *criollo*, *paisano*, or *descendiente* to refer to individuals of mixed racial ancestry or to culturally assimilated indigenous people (especially in rural areas) similarly served to facilitate the conceptual transformation of the population to white, while acting as continual reminders of widespread processes of *mestizaje* and of the persistence of ethnic or racial differences. These various terms, with their oblique racial connotations, bolstered the image of the white nation while creating subtle differentiations within it.<sup>32</sup>

This volume begins, then, with the turn of the twentieth century: the moment when race began to recede from view in official discourses, eclipsed or subsumed by other categories of difference (class, nation, region) that became more visible, even as race continued to shape them. The twentieth century is the period most marked by the turn away from race as a category of historical analysis, and most in need of careful reinterpretation. This volume also tries to make sense of the first decade of the twenty-first century, a period in which questions of racial and ethnic identity, discrimination, and diversity have reemerged as issues of public debate in Argentina (as in many other parts of Latin America). While these conversations have been simmering at least since the country's return to democracy in 1983, the traumatic 2001–2002 economic crisis brought them to the surface with new urgency by dealing a blow to longstanding formulations of Argentine exceptionalism that had linked national progress to whiteness and middle-class status. Building on this conjuncture, on the rise of a multicultural agenda within international organizations and funding institutions, and on the political openings provided by a left-leaning nationalist government from 2003 to 2015, state and non-state actors have increasingly put forth an image of a nation premised on antiracism and on the affirmative inclusion of various ethnic or racial groups. This new image of the nation was clearly on display in the state-organized 2010 Bicentennial celebrations and in the 2010 Bicentennial census, which, for the first time in over a century, included categories for both Afro-descendants and indigenous people.<sup>33</sup> Yet Argentina's multicultural turn, as this volume demonstrates, is far from complete or assured, and in any case, multiculturalism brings with it new problems. Recent xenophobic attacks on mestizo or indigenous migrants from neighboring countries, or denunciations of reemergent "Afro-descendant" or indigenous identities as inauthentic or imported, demonstrate that exclusionary paradigms of nationhood have hardly vanished. And even the newly inclusive census of 2010 has faced criticism for undercounting the presence of Afro-Argentines and indigenous people and omitting other groups entirely. Still, these controversies have fueled lasting discussion among politicians, media commentators, NGOs, intellectuals, artists, and other actors about the contours of national identity, fracturing longstanding ideas of Argentine whiteness or, at the very least, revealing its internal shades and nuances. It is thus an ideal time to revisit the issue of race in modern Argentina, analyzing contemporary transformations as part of our revision.

#### ARGENTINA IN LATIN AMERICAN CONTEXT

Because the narrative of Argentina's exceptional whiteness depends essentially on a comparison between that country and its regional neighbors, rethinking "exceptionalism" requires that we reassess the terms of that comparison. On the one hand, Argentine thinkers' emphasis on whiteness and cultural Europeaness is noticeably distinct from the efforts of other Latin American national elites – in