INTRODUCTION

Racial Stories

In an old wooden card catalog that no longer stands in Argentina's National Archive, under the entry titled "*negros*," there was, for many years, an index card for someone called "*El negro* Raúl," or Black Raúl. I happened upon that card, and the collection of photographs to which it pointed, in 2010 while searching for sources for a twentieth-century history of Argentina's African-descended population.

I had not expected to find much. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, people of African descent made up a substantial portion of the population of the territory that would become Argentina: more than 30 percent of the inhabitants of Buenos Aires, the city of my birth, and over 50 percent of some provinces to its northwest. But over the course of the twentieth century, most Argentines came to believe that our nation no longer had a Black population. At the dawn of the twentieth century (so the story goes), the last descendants of Argentina's enslaved Africans had succumbed to the combined effects of warfare, disease, and intermixture with White immigrants, "disappearing" from what became a thoroughly White citizenry.[1] Afro-Argentines became casualties of a black legend, much like Native peoples in the Black Legend of Spanish colonization of the Americas: a narrative that, in its attempt to highlight European agency or cruelty, also exaggerated the annihilation and produced the invisibility of an entire ethnic group.[2]

Argentines of African descent did not, in fact, disappear in the twentieth century. But by and large, they ceased to be recognized or to self-identify as such. Since the 1980s, activists and scholars have worked

assiduously to debunk the myth of disappearance, arguing for recognition of Afrodescendants' historical importance and continuous presence on Argentine soil. But the black legend of Afro-Argentine annihilation adapts and persists. For most Argentines, including many archivists and librarians, the Afro-Argentine presence remains confined to the nation's deep past, when it is recognized at all. So I was not surprised, that day at the archive, to see that the few cards behind the subject divider "*negros*" referred mostly to people racialized as Black who lived and died prior to the twentieth century.

Yet "el negro Raúl," the Black man whose image developed before me across eleven striking photographs, was clearly a twentieth-century figure. In one arresting studio photograph taken in his youth, he poses in black coattails and silk waistcoat, a walking cane in one hand and a luminous white magnolia on his lapel. In other images, an older incarnation of the same man, cocooned in ragged overcoats, walks the city streets shadowed by the police or shelters uneasily in doorways. In another series, an even older "negro Raúl," his legs bowed by age but his face beaming for the camera, strolls near the entryway to some sort of institutional building, assisted by men in white coats. I could see from the pencil markings and the snippets of newspaper articles pasted on the backs of the photographs that his full name was Raúl Grigera and that he had been famous – so famous that photographers and journalists sought him out over many decades to tell his story. But who was "el negro Raúl"? And what had made him famous?

I pulled the thin threads of information dangling from these photos, and hundreds of stories came tumbling forth. Thanks to traditional historical sleuthing and the marvel of text-searchable books and periodicals, I was able to collect more than 280 published textual and visual sources on "el negro Raúl," as well as several more unpublished photographs. This corpus spans more than a century: from Raúl's first print appearance in 1912, interleaved among coverage of the sinking *Titanic*, to 2011, when the local press mentioned him in relation to the United Nations' declaration of the "International Year for People of African Descent," and beyond. It comprises genres from across elite and popular culture – newspaper and magazine articles, plays, poems, songs, comic art, photographs, portraiture, films, novels, essays, histories, memoirs,

city and neighborhood chronicles, and blog posts. Its creators were mostly Porteños (residents of Buenos Aires) from a variety of social backgrounds, political persuasions, and degrees of renown in the city's intellectual and creative circles. Almost all these chroniclers of "el negro Raúl" were men, and except for one African American traveler, all were people considered White by Argentine racial norms.

Yet it quickly became apparent that this profusion of sources offered no straightforward answer to the questions of who "el negro Raúl" was and what made him famous. What I had before me were suspiciously repetitive stories about a semi-fictional character that referred more to each other than to the life of a historical individual. Authors rarely offered citations for their accounts, breezily invoking hearsay, oral tradition, or common knowledge instead; when they did, the account cited was equally unfounded or in turn referred to yet another baseless story. Plagiarism abounded. Articles in the popular press "refried" earlier accounts (to cite local journalists' lingo), but never so thoroughly that words, phrases, and tropes could not easily be picked out whole. Photographs, drawings, and cartoons told similarly standardized stories visually. This uniformity was especially palpable in retrospective accounts from his final decades (1930s–50s) or after his death (1955), the vast majority of my sources.[3] Evidently, the people who wielded the power to narrate Raúl's life had reduced it to what novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls a "single story" – an impoverished, incomplete, dangerous account that "show[s] people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again," until that becomes "the definitive story of that person."[4]

More troubling still, the single story of Raúl's life reiterated Argentina's dominant narratives of race. Especially in retrospective or posthumous accounts, the patterned tale of his (nebulous) origins, (bizarre) rise to fame, and (inevitable, spectacular) decline and death plotted exactly onto the black legend of Afro-Argentine disappearance in circulation at least since the mid-1800s: that Argentine *negros* were rarities, fundamentally out of place, and well on the path to extinction. There was nothing subtle about it: the stories about "el negro Raúl" were parables – projections of one story onto another – about the inexorable demise of the Afro-Argentine population.[5]

If we were to believe these formulaic tales, Raúl's story would look something like this:

His origins were unknowable. He came out of nowhere, his presence in twentieth-century Argentina was inexplicable. Perhaps he was an orphan, or the only son of an agonizing and ancient father, or of a father who died young and left him to face life alone. Or perhaps he spontaneously materialized, falling from the sky or emerging from a hole in the ground. "It never was possible to find out where he had come from," one midcentury writer sighed, summarizing the impossible task of exposition.[6] Behind "el negro Raúl" there was no lineage, no continuously existing Black community. The trope of his unfathomable origins expelled Afro-Argentines from national history and from historical recoverability.

Raúl's swift ascent to spectacular fame – the rising action and climax of these tales – generated far more speculation than his nebulous origins. All accounts agree: "el negro Raúl" was famous in the 1910s and 1920s as the Black buffoon of the *niños bien*, the notoriously spoiled, carousing young men of the White Porteño elite. In exchange for their cast-off finery, lavish food and drink, and inclusion in their nocturnal debauchery, Raúl made himself the niños' plaything: the willing object of sadistic practical jokes that risked dignity, life, and limb. His whole persona was a sham: the luxurious outfits on which he prided himself, in which he ostentatiously posed for the camera or paraded himself about town, were secondhand, ill-fitting, out of season. "El negro Raúl" may have fancied himself a refined dandy, but he was no more than a self-deluded clown who mistook attention for affection. And why did he subject himself to such treatment at the hands of aristocratic idlers? Authors picked from a smorgasbord of anti-Black racial stereotypes common throughout the Americas. He was inherently servile or driven to ape his "betters"; he was mentally insufficient or deranged or insane, or struggled with a deep inferiority complex; he was a lazy vagrant who hated work and debased himself to secure the easy life; he was deviant and tricked others to get by. By all accounts, "el negro Raúl" was a throwback in the modern White nation, evolutionarily out of place, unable to play fairly by the rules of democracy and capitalism.

Then came the stories' extended dénouement: Raúl's much-anticipated decline and death. Years of easy living had taken their toll, and as Raúl's aristocratic protectors suffered through the stock market crash of 1929, they abandoned him. He became a pitiful sight, reduced to begging and wearing rags, revisiting his earlier haunts in the vain hope of handouts and sympathy. Speculations about madness became certainties once news began to circulate that Raúl was dying in a rural mental health institution. And dying, in these stories, was a protracted, iterative affair. As early as the 1930s, contemporaries declared "el negro Raúl" to be in the twilight of his life, and in the 1940s and 1950s, mistaken assertions of his death were so frequent that they became part of the story surrounding him. He was, writers joked, a dead man who kept returning to life, forcing newspapers to retract their repeated obituaries until his real death in 1955. Prominent Argentines had vigorously repeated premature assertions of Afro-Argentine decline and death since the nineteenth century; storytellers in the mid-twentieth century simply conscripted Raúl into that broader narrative. His premature death was permanently useful to tell and retell as part of a tragicomedy about the foolishness of persisting in being a Black person in a country that had outgrown them (or in its great wisdom, had arranged never to have any).

When I first discovered these tales about "el negro Raúl," I thought they might make for an illuminating window onto the relatively unexplored topic of racial ideologies in twentieth-century Argentina. The character they constructed, his far-reaching "narrative resonance" with Porteño audiences, offered an unusually potent lens through which to examine ideas about Whiteness and Blackness over time and across social class, political ideologies, and literary genres.[7] But I quickly lost all heart for a project centered on these stories, with their gruesome deformation and muzzling of the protagonist, their perpetual restaging of his humiliation and death. As literary critic and historian Saidiya Hartman writes about the countless girls and women behind the abused figure of Venus in the archive of Atlantic slavery, "[t]he stories that exist are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and

identified them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes."[8] To be sure, exhuming and dissecting these sadistic tales helps expose what Hartman calls the "scandal of the archive," or in my case, the violence of Argentine racial ideologies codified in stories.[9] The twentieth-century tales about "el negro Raúl" lay bare, with painful clarity, the raw racism and White supremacy so often ignored or dismissed by Argentines. But by taking only those stories as my subject, I, as yet another White Argentine narrator of Raúl's life, would simply have amplified their power, conceding to the character storytellers had constructed and to their conceit (in the end, a provocation) that it was "impossible" to know anything outside its bounds.

I chose not to use "el negro Raúl" as a lens through which to peer at something else. I decided instead to try to reconstruct Raúl Grigera's life as lived in dialogue both with stories about his character and larger narratives of Blackness and Whiteness in Argentina. When friends and colleagues warned me that trying to find a "historic" Raúl Grigera embedded in family and community was a quixotic undertaking, they did so not unkindly or unreasonably. From the mid-1800s onward, the Argentine state largely suppressed racial labeling in the name of liberal racelessness, and many Afro-Argentines themselves ceased identifying with racial labels (especially the hated *negro*). This made Afrodescendants invisible in national censuses and many other official sources. In turn, the supposed nonexistence or irrelevance of Afrodescendants to Argentine culture rendered their African descent invisible in archival and bibliographic collections, catalogs, or finding aids. But working backward from an individual of known African ancestry who lived well into the twentieth century opened up new possibilities for identifying other Afrodescendants in the past, whether or not they were marked as such in historical records. On another floor of the same archive that housed the photographs of "el negro Raúl," scores of documents about Raúl Grigera's family's history – notarial, judicial, and property records on his ancestors, enslaved and free, reaching back to the early 1800s – awaited anyone with the interest and patience to find them. These sources in turn led me to other historical archives, as well as to the rather less accessible repositories of functioning mental, correctional, juridical, and police institutions, which held

unimaginably rich information about Raúl and many of his Afro-Argentine relatives, friends, and neighbors.

As the corpus of derisive stories about "el negro Raúl" receded in size and significance before this mounting archive of the lives of five generations of Afro-Argentine men and women, the scope of my project shifted again. The life stories of Raúl's ancestors did not just disprove the narrative of Afro-Argentine disappearance but raised new questions. How did Afro-Argentines experience their own supposed erasure? And while powerful White Argentines were busy narrating Afro-Argentines' disappearance, what other stories were Afro-Argentine men and women telling and living? Similarly, the information I uncovered about Raúl's life did not just disprove the sordid stories later told about him; it too raised new questions. What was the relationship between his life and the stories told about it? What was it like, for Raúl, to be not only a Black man in twentieth-century Argentina, but a Black celebrity? I saw that the stories about "el negro Raúl," and the broader narratives of race they echoed and mobilized, were just one piece of a larger history of the relationship between ideologies of race and lived experiences of Blackness in modern Argentina. This multigenerational history of Argentine Blackness and of Black Argentina, with Raúl Grigera at its center, was the one worth telling.

Readers might notice that I use *story* to refer to the tales about "el negro Raúl" and *narrative* to refer to broader ideologies of race. Although both terms, broadly speaking, denote a relation of events, I find it useful to distinguish between *story* as an "event unit" (a relation of who, what, when, where, and why), and *narrative* as "a system of stories" related to one another through coherent themes. When narratives sediment and endure over time, they become "master narratives."[10] Narratives may be the more resilient, but stories do the everyday work to prop them up. In Argentina's case, stories about "el negro Raúl" fleshed out otherwise abstract, dry, or featureless racial narratives about disappearing Blackness and triumphant Whiteness with a lifelike character, familiar settings, gripping plots, colorful vocabularies, and compelling morals. Porteños young and old who might never hear the dreary declamations

of national and foreign racialist thinkers could exchange anecdotes, chuckle at cartoons, watch a play, or hear a song about the misadventures of "el negro Raúl" and absorb many of the same lessons.

The hundreds of stories about "el negro Raúl" are what I call "racial stories": accounts that mobilize the uniquely persuasive powers of storytelling to breathe life into racial ideologies, disseminating, naturalizing, and reinforcing them at the capillary levels of public discourse.[11] Recent scholarship across literary studies, psychology, neurocognition, philosophy, sociology, legal studies, and critical race theory shows that stories (and narratives) are uniquely effective at promoting empathy and changing attitudes toward stigmatized groups by immersing readers in simulated experiences, exposing them to anti-stereotypical situations and characters, and encouraging perspective-taking. Yet these same powers to transport and absorb, to render a worldview inevitable or natural, make stories that reinforce racist and other exclusionary sentiments extremely difficult to dispel.[12] As critical race theorist Imani Perry argues, unlike flat stereotypes or schemas, "racial narratives not only give you a particular image; they tell you something consequential that will follow in the lives of people or characters in ways that are presumably reflective of their membership in a particular racial group." Racial narratives presume outcomes, and through repetition and persuasion they often bring about the very prophecies they foretell. Because they so effectively "teach us to engage in practices of racial inequality" and to make "decisions about how to treat individual members" of racialized groups, racial narratives drive discrimination, dehumanization, and even violence against people marked as racially Other.[13]

The case of "el negro Raúl" offers an astonishing and harrowing illustration of the power of stories to make and disseminate ideas about race, to create unequal and unjust collective outcomes, and to circumscribe or ruin individual lives. We have seen how hundreds of Porteños who reflected back on Raúl's life from the middle decades of the twentieth century recounted his story, and to what ends. This book harnesses the power of storytelling to tell a critical counter-narrative. It is a story of a man, Raúl Grigera, who fashioned himself into an alluring character, "el negro Raúl," only to have authorship usurped by storytellers who, in deforming the character, unmade the man.

In the 1910s and 1920s, Raúl Grigera was an audacious Black dandy, an eccentric bohemian icon, a man who called himself "el murciélago" (the bat) – a mysterious creature of the night. Using the freedoms granted to men, he moved seamlessly among the city's after-hours hotspots, seedy and glamorous alike: the illegal gambling dens of his working-class neighborhood, knife fights outside disreputable bars and cabarets, the foyers and plush seats of downtown theaters, and the city's crowded dance floors, where he led revelers in tango and other African-inflected rhythms. Using his charms, physical grace, and sartorial flair, Raúl made himself the subject of scores of newspaper and magazine stories, poems, plays, and tangos. He posed for photographs, became the protagonist of the first Argentine comic strip, and made cameo appearances in early silent films. As the stories multiplied, "el negro Raúl" became a rare Afro-Argentine celebrity: a Black legend.

This fame was never free of the racism that abounded in Argentine society. But as sociopolitical upheavals expanded the meanings and threats of Blackness (slowly after 1916, precipitously after 1930), Raúl fell prey to racial narratives that cast him as an aberration in the White nation: an uppity Black man who dared too much and flew too high, and was doomed to fall into misery, despair, and oblivion. Storytellers began to recast his fame as infamy, to predict his fall, and to declare him dead before his time. And life followed art: the defamatory racial stories about the character "el negro Raúl" narrowed the kinds of personas Raúl Grigera could assume or project in the city's nightlife, stripping him of authorship and channeling his life trajectory toward the very few unsavory dénouements imagined for him. As his character's star fell in the public imagination, in the 1930s Raúl himself began a long decline into destitution and panhandling, periodic homelessness, repeated police detention, illness, and hospitalization. In 1942, he was confined to the mental institution in which he died in 1955. After his death, the tales about him continued unabated for decades. His fall made for an even better story than his rise to fame.

Stories were central to Raúl's fate as an extraordinary Afro-Argentine demoted from Black legend in his own right to lead protagonist in the black legend of Afro-Argentine demise. Stories are central, too, to my own counter-narrative – not just as objects of critical analysis, but as a

method for disentangling the man from the caricature. Only another story (or better, many), attentive to the destructive power of racial storytelling but committed to its equally potent capacity to "shift the narrative," can displace the defamatory ones that still exist.[14]

The book that follows therefore tells a story – or rather, three entangled and overlapping ones. The first is a microhistory or deeply contextualized biography of Raúl Grigera and his family over several generations, spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The second is a social, political, and cultural history of the racial stories about his character, "el negro Raúl," from the early twentieth century to the present. The third is an intellectual history, cutting across all three centuries, of the broader racial narratives that shaped the lives of Raúl, his family, and his community – the same racial narratives that fed, and fed upon, the racial stories about Raúl. The setting is always the port city of Buenos Aires, which enters our story as the seat of the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata and becomes, after the late nineteenth century, the capital of a unified Argentine Republic. The story this book tells is thus, strictly speaking, a Porteño one, distinct from many other possible stories about Afrodescendants across the national territory.[15] But because of the city's overwhelming weight in Argentina's political, cultural, and intellectual life – its ongoing draw for internal migrants, many of them Afrodescendant, and its writers' and thinkers' efforts to make Buenos Aires stand for the nation as a whole – this Porteño story is deeply enmeshed with a national history.[16] This Porteño story is also, like the port city itself, marked by long-standing exchanges of people, ideas, and culture across the greater Río de la Plata region, especially Uruguay and Brazil.[17]

To tell this layered social, cultural, and intellectual history, *Black Legend* experiments with narrative style. Inspired by the techniques of microhistory, experimental narrative history, and judiciously speculative histories about people marginalized or silenced by Western or postcolonial archives (often pioneered by women of color historians), I use my historically informed imagination to "get the documents to speak" as volubly as possible about the lives of the people who made them and