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BLACK LEGEND

Celebrities live their lives in constant dialogue with stories about them. But when these stories are shaped by durable racist myths, they wield undue power to ruin lives and obliterate communities. *Black Legend* is the haunting story of an Afro-Argentine, Raúl Grigera ("el negro Raúl"), who in the early 1900s audaciously fashioned himself into an alluring Black icon of Buenos Aires' bohemian nightlife, only to have defamatory storytellers unmake him. In this gripping history, Paulina Alberto exposes the destructive power of racial storytelling and narrates a new history of Black Argentina and Argentine Blackness across two centuries. With the extraordinary Raúl Grigera at its center, *Black Legend* opens new windows into lived experiences of Blackness in a "White" nation and illuminates how Raúl's experience of celebrity was not far removed from more ordinary experiences of racial stories in the flesh.

Paulina L. Alberto, an Argentine-born historian of Afro-Latin America, is Professor of History, Spanish, and Portuguese at the University of Michigan. She is the author of *Terms of Inclusion: Black Intellectuals in Twentieth-Century Brazil* and co-editor of *Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina*. She won the Roberto Reis Prize for Best Book in Brazilian Studies, the Warren Dean Prize for Best Book in Brazilian History, and the James Alexander Robertson Prize for best article in the *Hispanic American Historical Review*.

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The Many Lives of

BLACK LEGEND

Raúl Grigera and the Power of Racial Storytelling in Argentina

PAULINA L. ALBERTO

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A Note on Terminology

During the period in which the events of this book take place, most Argentines referred to Africans and their descendants in Argentina and elsewhere using the Spanish word *negro*, referring to the color black. The term is parallel to its English translation in that it evokes both a color and a group of people viewed as being of African ancestry. Yet unlike in the United States, where people of African descent have embraced the term and imbued it with pride and a sense of shared culture, in Argentina people of African descent largely shun the term *negro* for the pejorative meanings it has long carried, which date back to a period when it was nearly synonymous with enslavement. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, as the book that follows demonstrates, Argentines of African descent pointedly avoided *negro*, calling themselves instead people "of the class of color (*de la clase de color*)," or "of the class (*de clase*)." In the twentieth century, even as many remained conscious of their African ancestry and kept alive aspects of their African cultural heritage, most identified simply as Argentines, with no reference to color, race, or descent.

These forms of self-identification reflected the exigencies, for Argentines of African descent, of asserting full belonging in a citizenry imagined as homogeneous and, increasingly, as White. Yet toward the end of the twentieth century, as this book's final pages show, some Argentines of African descent, in concert with social activists elsewhere in the region, began to demand public recognition of their nation's African heritage. In this context, they identified social and statistical invisibility – the engrained idea that Afro-Argentines had "disappeared" or simply did not exist in a homogeneously White Argentina – as the

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foremost barrier to full belonging. As activists from Argentina joined colleagues from other parts of Latin America in Santiago de Chile to prepare for the United Nations' 2001 World Conference Against Racism, they were aware that many African-descended people in the Americas, like their colleagues in the United States or Brazil, chose "Black" or *negro* as terms of self-identification. Yet they joined other Latin Americans of African descent in adopting the term "Afrodescendant" (*afrodescendiente*) as one through which they would be named, counted, and once again seen.

Historians struggle with terminology as we work within the compromised, deficient, indeed toxic vocabularies bequeathed by legacies of racial slavery. In my writing on race in Latin America, I frequently have to convey the terms through which people were racialized in past eras – terms like *negro/a*, *moreno/a*, *pardo/a*, or *mulato/a*. In such cases, I use the term in italics or quotes to signal that it is not my own. When I write in my own voice about people of African descent, I endeavor to follow the consensus among present-day Afrodescendant activists and thinkers – the people and groups who have to live with these terms every day. So in my English-language writing on Argentina, I have tried as much as possible to use "Afro-Argentine," "Afrodescendant," or "Afroporteño/a" ("Porteño/a" being the term for residents of the port city of Buenos Aires, the national capital), or "people of African descent." I avoid the Spanish term *negro* except to refer either to a historical source or concept, or to Argentines' idiosyncratic, alternative use of the term to mean a person whose appearance, behavior, and perceived lack of culture mark them as belonging to the lower classes – a form of social marginality currently imagined as unrelated to African origin.

Following this logic, I should also refrain from using the English term "Black" to refer to Afro-Argentines, except when translating a primary source or a historical concept. Yet I have chosen instead to use the term in English, for English-language audiences, to signal that there are commonalities in the ways people were racialized as "Black" across the Americas, despite significant variations in racial constructions. Anti-Black racism emanated from common fonts, even if it was inflected differently between and within nations.

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A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

The racial justice protests of the summer of 2020 in the United States catalyzed a shift in the national usage of racial terminology, leading many major publishers and mass-circulation media outlets to heed the call of African American thinkers and activists to capitalize Black in recognition that it refers to a people and a culture, rather than the color of an object. I had many long conversations with colleagues and editors over the implications of adopting "Black" in a book that sought to approach racial formations in Argentina on their own terms. Would the term reflexively place readers in mind of a history of racialization in the United States, flattening or even preempting any inquiry into what it meant to be a person of recognized African descent in other parts of the Americas? After all, the Argentine term *negro* only sometimes refers to a person of visible or acknowledged African descent (the meaning captured by the English term "Black") and is more often used as a class- or culture-based slur. Would "Black," with its specific historical density and resonance in the United States, settle the question of what *negro* means and has meant in Argentina before I could pose it?

In capitalizing "Black" in this book, I do not mean to suggest that being Black in Argentina was the same as being Black in the United States or other parts of the Americas – I hope the pages that follow make the term's uniquely Argentine (and especially Porteño) meanings abundantly clear. But this is a book written in the United States for English-language readers, and I expect many of them will find the experiences of Argentines racialized as *negros* and *negras*, and the anti-Black ideologies behind them, disturbingly familiar. I capitalize "Black" in order to accord Afroporteños and Afroporteñas the same dignity African American readers have rightfully come to expect. For the same reason, I have chosen to capitalize "Blackness" when it refers directly to African descent or cultural heritage. But I leave it uncapitalized when referring to the broader panoply of associations and meanings attaching to *negro* in Argentina – all of which derived from and are entangled with Blackness in the Afrodescendant sense but have also evolved in different directions.

I trust that seeing "el negro Raúl" rendered as "Black" will not lead readers to imagine that Raúl Grigera's experiences of racialization were, or should have been, identical to those imagined for his African American contemporaries. The specific politics of racial respect and

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recognition of the contemporary United States do not have to preclude understandings of race as something differently constructed across place and time. They can be adapted and translated in turn, perhaps even decentered from the US context. Indeed, there are some indications that Afro-Argentine activists, in dialogue with colleagues in the United States and elsewhere in the Americas, are beginning to subvert and reclaim *negro/a*.[1] I hope the term "Black," in this English-language work on Argentina, can build on those hemispheric conversations to evoke shared experiences in the struggle for visibility, recognition, respect, and self-determination. In this sense, despite the still largely negative connotations of its literal translation, "Black" can do some of the same semantic and political work as *afrodescendiente*, the preferred term of many Afro-Latin Americans.

To name other racialized groups, such as "Native" or "Indigenous," I follow the same rationale as for "Black." The decision to capitalize "White" responds to a different but complementary anti-racist logic; the intention there "isn't to elevate; it's to situate," reminding readers that racial identities are historically constructed rather than natural.[2]

This choice of terminology indelibly positions my book in this time and place, and that is as it should be. I expect that many more such provisional notes on language will become necessary in years to come, reminding us that historians are not omniscient narrators, and that there is no such thing as a timeless, neutral, or uncompromised language of race.

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