

REVIEW ESSAY

AFRO-ARGENTINE HISTORIOGRAPHY

Claire Healy

- Andrews, George Reid. *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1800–1900*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980. (Out of print). 286 pp. ISBN 0 299 08290 3.
- . *Los Afroargentinos de Buenos Aires*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1989. \$18.20. 280 pp. ISBN 9 505 15332 5.
- Lewis, Marvin A. *Afro-Argentine Discourse: Another Dimension of the Black Diaspora*. Colombia: University of Missouri Press, 1996. (Out of print). 168 pp. ISBN: 0 826 21042 2.
- Liboreiro, M. Cristina de. *No Hay Negros Argentinos?* Buenos Aires: Editorial Dunken, 1999. £5.90. 86 pp. ISBN 9 875 18160 9.
- Schávelzon, Daniel. *Buenos Aires Negra: Arqueología Histórica de una Ciudad Silenciada*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2003. \$10.75. 216 pp. ISBN 9 500 42459 2.
- Solomianski, Alejandro. *Identidades Secretas: La Negritud Argentina*. Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo, 2003. \$16.00. 288 pp. ISBN 9 508 45127 0.

Archaeology, sociology and literary studies are the disciplines one must have recourse to in piecing together the history of Afro-Argentines.¹ Since the seminal publication of George Reid Andrews' *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires* in 1980, and of its Spanish edition in 1989, there has been no historical monograph of note published on Afro-Argentine history.² Argentina is still recalcitrant in its refusal to acknowledge the crucial part that Africans and Afro-Argentines played in its colonial and post-colonial history. In the 1970s, there was an upsurge in the number of articles and debates centred on the question of the disappearance of the Afro-Argentines, as well as a debate on how Argentine immigration policy affected the Afro-Argentine population. In the following decade, the historic agency of the Afro-Argentines was researched, as opposed to their previous portrayal as victims of history. However, subsequent studies of Afro-Argentine history continued to obsess about their disappearance from the popular consciousness and viewed the subject only within the paradigm of "white" Argentine history. Five publications between 1989 and 2003 have contributed to rectifying this situation.

George Reid Andrews' work was seminal primarily in that it acknowledged the existence of the Afro-Argentines, an existence that had previously been downplayed,

¹ Previous to the publication of the Spanish translation of Andrews' *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires* in 1989, monographs on Afro-Argentines include: Lanuza (ed.), *Morenada: Una Historia de la Raza Africana en el Río de la Plata*; Ortiz Oderigo, *Aspectos de la Cultura Africana en el Río de la Plata*; Natale, *Buenos Aires, Negros y Tango*; and Gallardo, *Etnias Africanas en el Río de la Plata*. Gallardo's book is little more than a list of all of the African ethnic groups present in the region.

² George Reid Andrews recently made a further contribution to the field, albeit from a broader geographic perspective, with the publication of *Afro-Latin America, 1800–2000*.

glossed over, or even denied by successive generations of Argentine historians. Andrews' historical study examined Afro-Argentine participation in armies and the cultural life of the community, as well as providing an in-depth analysis of the slave trade in the River Plate, on the basis of primary research in Argentine archives. Andrews, like Alejandro Solomianski, presents a more positive portrayal of Juan Manuel de Rosas, who ruled Argentina from 1835 to 1852, than is common in Argentine historiography. This account is based purely on his treatment of Afro-Argentines, which compares favourably with the situation subsequent to his fall from power after the Battle of Caseros in 1852.

Marvin A. Lewis analyses the literary works of Argentina's African community on the basis of postcolonial discourse and minority literature methodologies. He discards African-based theories in his study, considering them irrelevant to the particular "black experience" of Afro-Argentines.³ Lewis considers Afro-Argentine literature to be political simply because it represents a minority. For Lewis, the literature is indicative of a form of active solidarity, in accordance with the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.⁴ The value of Lewis's work lies in his reproduction and interpretation of works by Afro-Argentine authors, allowing us to hear the story from the perspective of members of the community themselves. Lewis concludes that the Afro-Argentine community ultimately failed to construct an identity and a literary tradition of their own, because they suffered from "a lack of a common identity as a people and the inability to forge common goals [...] as evidenced by the strife within organizations, the rivalry among competing newspapers, and the frustration of individual leaders."⁵

M. Cristina de Liboreiro's *No Hay Negros Argentinos?* is a largely polemic sociological work. She describes the settlement of Africans in the city of Buenos Aires with the tacit authorisation of the Spanish colonial government and clergy.⁶ While de Liboreiro clearly acknowledges the existence of Afro-Argentines, there is an insidious condescension in her writing style; she repeatedly applies the adjective "pobres" to Afro-Argentines.⁷

Daniel Schávelzon approaches the question from an archaeological perspective, examining the material culture of people whom he refers to, more accurately than the other authors reviewed here, as "afroporteños". The conflation of Buenos Aires and Argentina is endemic in the much Argentine literature and historiography, but is avoided in Schávelzon's more concrete and less theoretical study. He also mentions the language of the afroporteños, *bozal*,⁸ pointing to the recognisable heritage of Afro-Argentines in the language of Buenos Aires.⁹ In the introductory chapters to his archaeological study, Schávelzon emphasises the fact that Afro-Argentines were always perceived as losing the demographic battle; this was exacerbated by the fact that they were associated with the Rosas era,¹⁰ as had been examined by Andrews and Lewis. Another important contribution

³ Lewis, *Afro-Argentine Discourse*, 7.

⁴ See: Deleuze & Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, passim.

⁵ Lewis, *Afro-Argentine Discourse*, 127.

⁶ Liboreiro, *No Hay Negros Argentinos?*, 17.

⁷ Liboreiro, *No Hay Negros Argentinos?*, 30.

⁸ Schávelzon, *Buenos Aires Negra*, 18.

⁹ This is evident in *lunfardo* words such as *mina* (woman), *tango*, *tamangos* (shoes), *mucama* (maid), and *quilombo* (originally an Afro-Brazilian word for a runaway slave community; current meaning: disaster/mess/confusion). See: Schávelzon, *Buenos Aires Negra*, 19.

¹⁰ Schávelzon, *Buenos Aires Negra*, 35–7.

of his book was to uncover interesting new archaeological evidence, which points to the existence of a runaway slave and indigenous community in Arroyo de las Leyes.¹¹

The colonising force of writing forms the methodological basis for Alejandro Solomianski's book *Identidades Secretas: la negritud argentina*. He explicitly locates his book as being partially a continuation of Marvin A. Lewis's work, though he criticises Lewis for overlooking and downplaying the development of the Afro-Argentine community during the Rosas era. Solomianski is also conscious of the significance of the fact that the first scholar to study and publish works of Afro-Argentine literature was not an Argentine but a US-American scholar.¹² One area where he does build on Lewis's work is in providing a broader historical overview to aid in understanding Afro-Argentine literature. Solomianski analyses Afro-Argentine literature in the context of its intricate relationship with Argentine identity and the broader issue of the *descubrimiento/encubrimiento* of America.¹³ Thus in some senses he appropriates the theme of Afro-Argentine literature to postulate critical theories on modernity and euro-centrism, yet Solomianski provides a stimulating prism through which to view the literature and Afro-Argentine history. He sees the concealment of the corpus of Afro-Argentine literature from the Argentine public as a function of the repression of *afroargentinidad* by hegemonic forces in Argentina and the aim of his book is to re-establish "those deleted voices which resound through their absence."¹⁴ This point is well made in that it highlights the fact that the absence of Afro-Argentines from national identity as well as their "disappearance" are telling in themselves in relation to Argentine history. In this context, like Lewis, Solomianski seeks not to contribute to the work of Africanists, but to examine the African element in the national Argentine imagination.¹⁵

The phenomenon of the low numbers of Afro-Argentines in the twentieth-century population of the Republic of Argentina is sometimes referred to as the "riddle" of the disappearance of the Afro-Argentines, or even the "black genocide".¹⁶ Historiography on Afro-Argentines has concentrated almost entirely on their disappearance rather than on their existence in nineteenth-century Argentina. A vast problem when assessing the historiography of Afro-Argentines is the almost ubiquitous perception that they were the victims of history and that their "disappearance" was somehow inevitable. As such, analyses of their history frequently relate exclusively to their contribution to and acceptance within white culture, or to reasons for their alleged disappearance.

The demographic decline of the Afro-Argentines has variously been attributed to miscegenation, disease and warfare. George Reid Andrews sets out four principal reasons for the decline in the first chapter of his book: death and injury in wars, intermarriage, low

¹¹ Schávelzon, *Buenos Aires Negra*, 60.

¹² Solomianski, *Identidades Secretas*, 60–1.

¹³ This debate, occasioned by the quincentenary of Christopher Columbus's arrival on Hispaniola in 1992, centred on whether 1492 should be remembered as a "discovery" (*descubrimiento*) or a "concealment" (*encubrimiento*).

¹⁴ Solomianski, *Identidades Secretas*, 14; "aquellas voces borradas que retumban por su ausencia."

¹⁵ Solomianski, *Identidades Secretas*, 21.

¹⁶ See: Corbière & Ruchnsky, "Negritud y Racismo: El genocidio de la población negra de Argentina," *passim*. Alejandro Solomianski refers to their absence from Argentine history as a "discursive genocide". Solomianski, *Identidades Secretas*, 119.

birth rates and high mortality, and the decline in the slave trade.¹⁷ He later appends reclassification of black people as white or *mestizo* to the list.¹⁸ Indeed, reclassification has its origins in the early eighteenth century, when the Spanish monarchy instituted a system whereby a subject could purchase certificates of legal “whiteness” called *gracias al sacar*. Andrews argues that death had less to do with the perceived disappearance of Afro-Argentines than such reclassification, frequently as “*trigueños*,”¹⁹ and cultural prejudices. These contributed to downplaying the contribution of black people to *porteño* culture and overlooking the patriotism and high level of integration of some black *porteños*. Andrew’s argument does pose the question that if Buenos Aires was such a racist society, how was it so easy for blacks to “pass” as mulattoes or even whites. We are left confused as to whether we are dealing with a rigidly stratified society or a situation of social fluidity, where people could redefine themselves ethnically in order to further their own economic interest.

The apparent disappearance of the Afro-Argentines, however, is also related to a high level of assimilation and acculturation in the nineteenth century community, a positive aspect of Afro-Argentine history which is commonly overlooked. Lewis considers acculturation in purely negative terms: “Aware of their precarious situation in a society that placed primarily negative emphasis upon blackness, they sought alternatives to perpetual otherness. Acculturation and miscegenation were the options most often pursued.”²⁰

According to María Cristina de Liboreiro, mortality rates were higher among free blacks than among slaves, showing that the acquisition of free status was not always a boon to someone who had previously been enslaved.²¹ She emphasises that the districts worst hit by epidemics such as the yellow fever were the predominantly Afro-Argentine and poor *barrios* of San Telmo, Barracas and Monserrat.²² Solomianski also makes this point, referring to the yellow fever epidemic of 1871 and the poor standards of living of the Afro-Argentines.²³ He vaunts the theory that the Argentine “hegemonic project” occupied the space of subaltern groups such as the Afro-Argentines.²⁴ This is interesting in that it implies that all subaltern groups in Buenos Aires suffered a similar fate; paradoxically, the fate of the subaltern Afro-Argentines was more visible than that of poor immigrants, *gauchos* or indigenous people.

Death in the army is frequently referred to as the primary reason for the demographic decline of Afro-Argentines. George Reid Andrews usefully reveals the fact that desertions massively outweighed deaths in Argentine armies; it was more convenient for historians and society in general to claim that these soldiers had died rather than deserted, and stayed alive.²⁵ Daniel Schávelzon adds that many Afro-Argentines’ response

¹⁷ Andrews, *Los Afroargentinos de Buenos Aires*, 10.

¹⁸ Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*, 110.

¹⁹ In current usage, “*trigueño*” means a brunette, or someone with tawny-coloured skin. Its etymology relates to the word “*trigo*”, meaning wheat. In Buenos Aires in the nineteenth century, it was a term with a particularly murky definition and could be applied to almost anyone who was not white.

²⁰ Lewis, *Afro-Argentine Discourse*, 133.

²¹ Liboreiro, *No Hay Negros Argentinos?*, 65.

²² Liboreiro, *No Hay Negros Argentinos?*, 66.

²³ Solomianski, *Identidades Secretas*, 23.

²⁴ Solomianski, *Identidades Secretas*, 25.

²⁵ Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*, 124.

to their inferior situation was the most self-destructive response of all, suicide.²⁶ What is not emphasised enough in any of the five books is the effect of cessation of immigration from Africa on the survival of the Afro-Argentines as a recognisable social group in the face of mass immigration from Europe.

One glaring void in the various theories that seek to explain the “disappearance” of Afro-Argentines is their obvious failure to account for a substantial proportion of the entire population of Afro-Argentines. That is, Afro-Argentine women, who did not fight in these wars, and many of whom in the mid-nineteenth century could be found engaged in the patently non-hazardous pursuit of doing the laundry for the city of Buenos Aires.²⁷ This points to the prevalence of inter-marriage and immigration in accounting for the small number of dark-skinned inhabitants of the port city and its surroundings in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Liboreiro does hint at this point when she states that because immigration did not continue from Africa, Afro-Argentines were forced to intermarry, even if they did not choose to do so.²⁸ This intermarriage is directly related to the absence of black men with whom black women could have procreated, as so many of them were engaged, or killed, in battle. Furthermore, for an Afro-Argentine woman, having children with a non-Afro father would improve her children’s prospects in *bonaerense* society, provided the children distanced themselves from their Afro-Argentine roots. Marvin A. Lewis claims that interethnic unions were not frowned upon by the black population, because of the low status of blackness in society.²⁹ He later contradicts himself, claiming that they fought this trend, in an illustrative glorification of the community’s press: “They waged a constant battle against biological extermination through miscegenation.”³⁰

Argentina’s black people were the subject of a concerted policy by the government, with the compliance of many intellectuals, to apply pseudo-scientific racism to population planning. Lewis indicates that there was a political connection between the late nineteenth-century rise in the white population of Buenos Aires, due to the arrival of immigrants from Europe, and the concurrent decline in the population of African origin. In 1869, the proportion of the national population who were of African origin was registered as 26.1%; in 1895, it was 1.8%.³¹ Marvin A. Lewis mentions this interface in passing, though he sees it as integral in their demise as a recognisable social group: “The argument of national identity first and the individual afterward was effective in destroying Afro-Argentine continuity while Germans, Italians and British progressed with their identities intact.”³²

Solomianski provides a more comprehensive analysis of the effect of European immigration on the Afro-Argentine community, seeing it as the most decisive factor in the

²⁶ Schávelzon, *Buenos Aires Negra*, 25.

²⁷ The cover illustration of Stewart (ed.), *From Caledonia to the Pampas* is an 1834 painting by Ricardo Adams, a Scottish immigrant. It clearly portrays the exclusively black washerwomen at the banks of the river; the point of arrival of transatlantic ships—a sight which would, therefore, be formative in any European’s first impressions of the city.

²⁸ Liboreiro, *No Hay Negros Argentinos?*, 64.

²⁹ Lewis, *Afro-Argentine Discourse*, 13.

³⁰ Lewis, *Afro-Argentine Discourse*, 22.

³¹ Lewis, *Afro-Argentine Discourse*, 19.

³² Lewis, *Afro-Argentine Discourse*, 50.

“the dilution of the social reference group” of Afro-Argentines.³³ He considered the increase in associative activity and the proliferation of newspapers in the community as a reaction to the threat posed by successive waves of European immigration.³⁴ Immigrants did edge slaves, and then free Afro-Argentines, out of their traditional employment as artisans or in agriculture.³⁵ At the turn of the century, according to Schávelzon, 37% of free and enslaved agricultural labourers were of African origin.³⁶ Another area where immigrants ultimately replaced Afro-Argentines was in music and dance.³⁷

Military service figured in the life of almost every Afro-Argentine man.³⁸ General José de San Martín’s Army of the Andes had two exclusively black battalions, the Hunter Battalions 7 and 8, who fought in the battles of Chacabuco, Cancha Rayada and Maypú.³⁹ Solomianski mentions the 700 African slaves who fought during the British invasion of Buenos Aires in 1806 and 1807, along with other Afro-Argentines who were already enlisted in regiments at the time of the invasion.⁴⁰ Andrews claims that of the 5,000 people who defended Buenos Aires in 1807, 876 were in the Corps of Indios, Pardos and Morenos.⁴¹ Liboreiro highlights a less positive contribution of the Afro-Argentines to Argentine history in the participation of some Afro-Argentines in General Julio A. Roca’s expedition of extermination against indigenous people in Patagonia in 1879,⁴² the infamous “Campaña al Desierto.”

Liboreiro emphasises the presence of Afro-Argentines in the battles of Caseros, Cepeda and Pavón in the 1850s and early 1860s, a time of civil war in Argentina, when Buenos Aires had seceded from the Confederation of the thirteen remaining Argentine provinces. She does not however analyse their involvement in these battles, thus failing to enlighten the reader on the nature of their activity. One of the few celebrated Afro-Argentines is “El Negro Falucho”, a soldier of the River Plate Regiment of the Army of the Andes in 1824. Solomianski points out that this entire story, of a submissive but patriotic black soldier, may have simply been an invention of Bartolomé Mitre’s in 1857.⁴³

Despite claims otherwise, George Reid Andrews research significantly uncovered no evidence that regiments of Afro-Argentine soldiers were sent on more dangerous missions than other regiments, therefore he finds no evidence of an intentional genocide.⁴⁴

María Cristina de Liboreiro makes mention of the journalistic activity of the Afro-Argentine community in the city of Buenos Aires, in newspapers such as *La Broma*, *La Juventud* and *El Eco Artístico*.⁴⁵ Marvin A. Lewis refers to “the importance of the black press and Afro-Argentine mutual aid societies in the transition from slavery to freedom, and in

³³ Solomianski, *Identidades Secretas*, 23.

³⁴ Solomianski, *Identidades Secretas*, 192.

³⁵ Andrews, *Los Afroargentinos de Buenos Aires*, 40 & 46.

³⁶ Schávelzon, *Buenos Aires Negra*, 31.

³⁷ Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*, 170.

³⁸ Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*, 115.

³⁹ Liboreiro, *No Hay Negros Argentinos?*, 24.

⁴⁰ Solomianski, *Identidades Secretas*, 76 & 79.

⁴¹ Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*, 115.

⁴² Liboreiro, *No Hay Negros Argentinos?*, 24.

⁴³ Solomianski, *Identidades Secretas*, 91.

⁴⁴ Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*, 121.

⁴⁵ Liboreiro, *No Hay Negros Argentinos?*, 42.

the advancement of their community during the nineteenth century."⁴⁶ However, he qualifies this statement later in the book, by pointing out that Afro-Argentines had particularly low rates of literacy.⁴⁷ George Reid Andrews does not provide a detailed analysis of Afro-Argentine newspapers, but he does use them to good effect as sources. He makes the interesting point that there were class differences within the Afro-Argentine press, represented by the bourgeois outlook of *La Broma*, and *La Juventud's* claim to represent the working classes.⁴⁸

The necessity of studying the Afro-Argentine press of the nineteenth century is highlighted by Lewis, as the journalists themselves fought against the tendency to write Afro-Argentines out of the national history.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, he does not take on this mission himself and concentrates on the more romantic productions of the Afro-Argentine community's literary representatives. Solomianski considers Afro-Argentine journalism enlightening particularly because it reached its heyday during the period when the community was said to be dying out.⁵⁰ He discovered one newspaper, *Los Negros*, which had never before been researched.

George Reid Andrews analyses the development of religious confraternities, "nations", mutual aid societies and dances among the Afro-Argentines.⁵¹ His work therefore goes some way toward providing an account of Afro-Argentine history itself rather than simply cataloguing reasons for their disappearance. Schávelzon also mentions the nations and their elected monarchs, who took part in politics in the 1820s.⁵² He briefly alludes to Afro-Argentine public dances. Mutual aid associations were very common among European immigrants to Buenos Aires in the second half of the nineteenth century, but George Reid Andrews points out that the associations of the Afro-Argentines predated those of the immigrants.⁵³ Andrews relates how the tango itself, that paragon of Argentine culture, originated in Afro-Argentine *candombe* dances, and the word "tango" comes from an African word for drum.⁵⁴

Alejandro Solomianski never mentions a single African country or region in his book. As he sets out in the first chapter, he does not consider African heritage relevant to the study of Afro-Argentine literature.⁵⁵ This is an ambitious supposition, countered by Andrews' account of the origins of eighteenth-century slaves who had been transported to the River Plate from East Africa, West Africa, Congo, Angola, Mozambique and Brazil.⁵⁶ Daniel Schávelzon alludes to the ethnic diversity of slaves in Buenos Aires; many came

⁴⁶ Lewis, *Afro-Argentine Discourse*, 4–5.

⁴⁷ Lewis, *Afro-Argentine Discourse*, 17–18. Lewis adds that as late as 1882, no black student had graduated from the University of Buenos Aires.

⁴⁸ Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*, 191.

⁴⁹ Lewis, *Afro-Argentine Discourse*, 22.

⁵⁰ Solomianski, *Identidades Secretas*, 186.

⁵¹ Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*, 139–70.

⁵² Schávelzon, *Buenos Aires Negra*, 76.

⁵³ Andrews, *Los Afroargentinos de Buenos Aires*, 12.

⁵⁴ Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*, 165–6.

⁵⁵ Solomianski, *Identidades Secretas*, 21.

⁵⁶ Andrews, *Los Afroargentinos de Buenos Aires*, 35, & Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*, 233.

from Guinea and the Congo, and some came from as far as Malaysia and the Philippines.⁵⁷ George Reid Andrews provides a concise and comprehensive treatment of the history of the slave trade in Buenos Aires,⁵⁸ an issue merely touched upon by the other authors, despite its centrality to the history of Buenos Aires's African population.

Daniel Schávelzon explicitly places his study of the *afroporteños* within Afro-American history, stressing the development of historiography from mere white admission of culpability to the study of African history and African diasporic culture. The influence of the African diaspora is particularly evident in the material culture of the Americas.⁵⁹ Despite his explicit intention not to, Marvin A. Lewis's book places the Afro-Argentines within the broader context of the African diaspora on the basis of Afro-Argentine writers' own articulation of their identity. He quotes Casildo G. Thompson's "Song of Africa" which evokes an idealised image of the African continent as redemptive and as an escape.⁶⁰ George Reid Andrews also aims to contextualise Afro-Argentines as Afro-Americans,⁶¹ in contrast to Solomianski's treatment of the community as Argentines; he omits any "African" or "Afro" element from the title of his book, *Identidades Secretas: La negritud argentina*.

Lewis mentions the Afro-Argentine author Jorge Miguel Ford, who published a book in 1899 entitled *Beneméritos de mi Estirpe* (Outstanding Members of my Race).⁶² Lewis considers Ford's book to be a contribution to the articulation of the collective black experience in Argentina. In reality, it is an Afro-Argentine alternative to Bartolomé Mitre's elitist *Galería de Celebridades Argentinas* (Gallery of Argentine Celebrities) published in 1857, considered by some to have been a defining moment in Argentine nationalism.⁶³ This implicit parallel is regrettably not remarked upon by Lewis. Both pantheons of heroes include only an elite few in their biographies of Afro-Argentine and Argentine worthies, and as such, they cannot be seen to represent an entire community. A similar inaccuracy occurs when authors such as Andrews and Solomianski consider Afro-Argentine journalism to represent the entire community, when in fact only the literate elite contributed to the newspapers. A poet central to Lewis's and Solomianski's studies, Horacio Mendizábal similarly represents an elite, in dedicating his book *Horas de Meditación* (1869) to Domingo F. Sarmiento, president of Argentina (1868–1874).⁶⁴

Solomianski notes that it is important not to impose identities posthumously on authors; black Argentines did not necessarily identify *themselves* as Afro-Argentines: "there are crosses and mixes and [. . .] it cannot be proposed that there is an absolute coincidence between *negritud* and Africanism and between whiteness and Europeanism."⁶⁵ He stresses the universalism of the study of Afro-Argentine literature, because the analysis of African

⁵⁷ Schávelzon, *Buenos Aires Negra*, 24, 71.

⁵⁸ Andrews, *Los Afroargentinos de Buenos Aires*, 31–49.

⁵⁹ Schávelzon, *Buenos Aires Negra*, 64–6.

⁶⁰ Lewis, *Afro-Argentine Discourse*, 52.

⁶¹ Andrews, *Los Afroargentinos de Buenos Aires*, 14.

⁶² Ford, *Beneméritos de mi Estirpe*, *passim*.

⁶³ Mitre et al, *Galería de Celebridades Argentinas*, *passim*. See also: Shumway, *The Invention of Argentina*, 188–213.

⁶⁴ Solomianski, *Identidades Secretas*, 202. Domingo F. Sarmiento famously said, on entering parliament, "I arrive happy to this Chamber of Deputies of Buenos Aires, where there are no gauchos, nor blacks, nor poor people. We are the decent people, that is, the patriots."

⁶⁵ Solomianski, *Identidades Secretas*, 19–20.

contributions to the history of the Americas has been a persistent lacuna in the historiography.

Both George Reid Andrews and Marvin A. Lewis comment on the prominence of Afro-Argentines in the African musical form of the *payada*, a poetic duel.⁶⁶ Lewis analyses the work of *payadores* such as Gabino Ezeiza and Luis García Morel, while Andrews looks at the progression of the art form from drum battles, or *tapadas*, to the vocal *payadas*.⁶⁷ Alejandro Solomianski interprets the *payada* between Martín Fierro, his quintessential *gaucho* character and “El Moreno”, an Afro-Argentine man, as an expression of equality and antiracist discourse between the two participants.⁶⁸ This is curious in the light of El Moreno’s lines: “Things that the whites don’t know/This poor black man does./[. . .]And they should be heard/Even if it’s a black man who sings./[. . .]Beneath the blackest forehead/There is thought and there is life.”⁶⁹ Thus, El Moreno must emphasise that he is wise, *despite* the fact that he is black. What in fact unites Afro-American literature is the experience of America, rather than any unified, imported African culture, as well as the necessity of articulating their experience in the languages of the European colonisers of America. It is on this basis that Solomianski suggests that, similarly to the United States, Argentine identity developed in counterpoint to the existence of Argentine black people.⁷⁰

The five books reviewed provide an insight into the variety and disparity within Afro-Argentine identity, enhanced by the different disciplines from which the topic is approached. Their consummate achievement has been to draw Afro-Argentine history and literature out of oblivion. It is lamentable, however, that to date no Argentine historian has thought to concern his or herself with this aspect of the national and regional history. What remains to be undertaken is to move away from idiosyncratic treatments of people of African origin in Buenos Aires and to subsume Afro-Argentine history into the history of Buenos Aires, Argentina and the Atlantic World.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Claire Healy received her B.A. (International) in History and German from the National University of Ireland, Galway in 2001, with one year at the Otto-Friedrich Universität Bamberg, Germany as part of her studies. She is due to receive a PhD in History from NUI, Galway in Summer 2006. Claire then spent one year as a visiting research fellow at the Department of Latin American History at the University of Hamburg, Germany, and in 2004, she was awarded the Eoin O’Mahony Bursary by the Royal Irish Academy, and the Irish Argentine Historical Society Research Grant. Claire has undertaken research work in Buenos Aires, San Antonio de Areco, Hamburg, London, Liverpool, Dublin, Galway, Westmeath and Wexford, and has recently completed a doctoral dissertation on migration from Ireland to Buenos Aires province, as a Government of Ireland Doctoral Fellow in

⁶⁶ Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*, 167–70; Lewis, *Afro-Argentine Discourse*, 70.

⁶⁷ An interesting testament to the enduring relevance of this literary and oral form in African diasporic culture is the rapping duel scene in the semi-autobiographical movie based on the life of the white US American rapper Eminem, *Eight Mile* (2002, Director Curtis Hanson, Universal Pictures).

⁶⁸ Solomianski, *Identidades Secretas*, 169.

⁶⁹ Solomianski, *Identidades Secretas*, 167.

⁷⁰ Solomianski, *Identidades Secretas*, 18.

History at the Centre for the Study of Human Settlement and Historical Change at NUI, Galway. Claire's work focuses on eighteenth and nineteenth-century Irish migration to Buenos Aires province and interaction between Irish immigrants, indigenous people and Afro-Argentines. Working with sources in English, Gaelic, German and Spanish, Claire has presented work-in-progress papers in Ireland, Germany and Latvia.

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