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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jorge Fortes, Diego H. Ceballos, dirs.. *Afroargentinos.* New York: Third World Newsreel, 2003. 75 mins. $250.00 (DVD)

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Ten minutes into Diego H. Ceballos and Jorge Fortes's wide-ranging documentary *Afroargentinos*, white text on a black screen presents the words of Argentine President Carlos Menem. During a visit to the United States, when asked if there were persons of African descent in his country, Menem responded: "There are no blacks in Argentina; Brazil has that problem." In *Afroargentinos*, Ceballos and Fortes seek to rebut Menem's racism and ignorance, using a wealth of interviews, archival photographs, and video footage to show the history and ongoing African presence in Argentina. In just under ninety minutes, the film explores an impressive range of issues central to its thesis: the African origins and history of Argentine tango and *candombe* music; twentieth-century West African and Cape Verdean immigration to Buenos Aires; the history of black slavery in Argentina; black involvement in the Argentine military from the nineteenth century through the present; Afro-Argentine social movements in opposition to repressive governments in Nicaragua and South Africa following Argentina's 1983 democracy restoration; ongoing racism engendered through offensive media representations of blacks in Argentine popular culture; and continued social marginalization and political invisibility suffered by contemporary Argentina's diverse black population, especially women. In sum, this is a film that easily convinces the viewer of the centrality of Argentina's African presence to its national identity.

Yet in spite, or perhaps because, of the film's wide treatment of subject matter, it provides less to absorb than to question. Interviewees' perspectives are often overplayed or silenced against a narrative that lacks any signposting. Questionable choices in the film's editing are exacerbated by an often surprising lack of contextual information, as well as a confusing use of supporting visual materials that in themselves raise ethical questions on the representation and visibility of blackness, a fact particularly surprising in a film explicitly about that topic.

Afroargentinos begins with an immediate retort to Menem, as Miriam Gomes, daughter of Cape Verdean immigrants to Buenos Aires and a museum docent, stares into the camera to repeat the phrase she so often hears from European-identified Argentines: "There are no blacks in Argentina." Gomes notes that Afro-Argentines are either dismissed as foreigners (typically as Brazilians), or consciously removed from Argentine history. From Gomes's statement, the film moves quickly through a major talking points discussion of black Argentine history: military involvement; plantation and urban slavery; the 1813 "Freedom of the Wombs" law; and finally an uncredited stat-

ue (Francisco Cafferata's *La Esclavitud* in Buenos Aires). The film asks: "What country did these men belong to?"

Answering this question, *Afroargentinos* moves on to examine the national marginalization and suppression of its African history as well as its current transnational origins, by presenting interviews with black immigrants and Afro-descendants to illustrate both the unity and diversity of the Afro-Argentine population. Miguel Rios, a social psychologist, begins by noting that discussing the unity of blacks in Argentina is a difficult proposition. As such, the filmmakers construct an iterative definition of Afro-Argentine unity, especially for recent immigrants, through revealing interviews with Obadiah Oghoerore Alegbe, a native of Delta State, Nigeria, who came to Buenos Aires in 1977; a series of contemporary narrations by Tigusto Dias and Adirano Rocha, early members of the Buenos Aires Cape Verde Society in the 1940s; and further personal recollections by, among others, the internationally acclaimed Afro-Argentine reggae artist Fidel Nadal. Across all of these interviews, despite the scattered backgrounds of those interviewed, and the political pressures of Argentine society to ignore black history, speakers tell similar stories of personal and social marginalization that speak to the deeply embedded social realities of racism in a society that routinely claims to have no race.

Yet for each revealing interview in *Afroargentinos*, there is an alternative voice that is marginalized or silenced altogether. Horacio Pita, black member of the national congress; Daniel Gomez, taxi driver; Cesar Rodrigues, volunteer firefighter; and Doctor Nora Gomez, obstetrician, all appear in the film as silent, labeled faces staring from the screen, shots that occasionally last as long as two full minutes. The absence of their voices is surprising, especially noting the extensive screen time given to other speakers. Still, these four Afro-Argentines appear as confident and socially visible reminders of the Afro-Argentine presence in Argentine daily life. Even so, such silent shots point to a disconcerting trend in *Afroargentinos*, one alluded to, seemingly unintentionally, by Gomes as she relays the history of the Argentine nation-state's propagation of the idea that blacks did not exist in the country, coupled with social whitening (***blanqueamiento***) ideals that privileged European standards of social development and physical beauty. The whitening was a lie. As Gomes states, "You will see black features in many Argentines" who claim European ancestry, while at the same time, Facundo Posadas, a famous tango instructor, notes that there are no purely black people in Argentina.

Afroargentinos' answer to Gomes's and Posada's queries is to try to prove the existence of black African features in Argentina. To do this, the filmmakers use a voyeuristic--a term I do not use lightly--series of long takes of black street vendors and day laborers in Buenos Aires, often shot from angles that make it obvious the camera-person was consciously trying to not be seen. The objects of such shots are never given names, life histories, or interview time. Thus we have no idea of their citizenship, social status, or self-identification. In a film where blackness had already been discussed from a variety of social and cultural development angles, such shots are jarringly dependent on facile visual identification of blackness, propagating the stereotype of the paradoxically invisible, fully black African who was previously stated not to exist in Argentina.

In the film's narrative, it would be fitting if the subjects of these shots were contemporary immigrants to Argentina from western or central Africa. WhileAlegbe's presence in the film is a welcome one, overall the interview subjects of *Afroargentinos* describe current waves of African immigration from a surprisingly distant, and unsympathetic, perspective. An uncredited speaker says that "they" are coming by choice, running from starvation, mostly from Senegal, Mali, and Congo, and that "they live in hotels, four or five

people." Yet not a single recent African immigrant to Argentina is interviewed, so that again, the voices of the few interviewed stand in for many who remain silent in this film, their opinions unsolicited. This trend continues in discussing the current hardships endured by black women in Argentina, particularly in fighting against the stereotype of sexual availability. A short series of interviews attest to this truth, particularly that of Nadal, who discusses white men's harassing reactions to the presence of a black woman on the street. Nadal's interview is followed by yet another series of voyeuristic shots of black women sitting on the sidewalk or walking down the street, as if provoked by his words. Although insisting on the importance of the black presence in Argentina, these shots make it unclear what perspective *Afroargentinos* is asking us to take. Whose perspectives does it privilege? What stereotypes are being presented, since these sections work to reinforce social visibility and agency based on skin tone? In *Afroargentinos*, the darkest-skinned subjects in the film are those who are given no voice and no history, and whose images were taken seemingly without their consent.

As potentially problematic as I found the racial politics of visibility in *Afroargentinos*, I found the film's best sections to be focused on the history of black and African influence on national Argentine music. Posadas traces the history of black music at the Shimmy Club at Casa Suiza in Buenos Aires, where upstairs everyone could tango, jazz, rumba, and conga the night away, although the basement was fiercely protected by black Argentines for ***candombe***. Posadas also engagingly traces the African history of tango: the word's descent from the central African "tambo," and the music's descent from ***milonga***, itself a fusion of ***candombe*** and Cuban ***habanero*** music. One wishes Posadas, Ceballos, or Fortes had further examined the current racial politics of participation in Argentine ***candombe*** today, as historian George Reid Andrews did for Uruguay in his excellent ***Blackness in the White Nation*** (2010), since, after Posadas's discussion, *Afroargentinos* cuts to a contemporary ***candombe*** circle consisting mostly of white musicians in a public square. How does ***candombe***, a publicly visible marker of African cultural influence in Argentina, figure into the personal consciousness of upper-class white Argentines, and what are the politics of exclusion and inclusion operating as this musical form expands its audience outside of the basement of the Casa Suiza that Posadas so lovingly describes?

At the film's end, a quick switch to a short clip of ***capoeiristas*** (practitioners of the Afro-Brazilian martial art ***capoeira***) in Buenos Aires begins a call from those interviewed for continued unity and struggle against racism in Argentina.Alegbe, Nadal, Gomes, and Rios all note the need for Afro-Argentines of all backgrounds to promote mutual assistance, political activism, education, and cross-cultural integration. Otherwise, as Nadal notes, "Our struggle in this captivity will continue." Perhaps *Afroargentinos* is an excellent start. It is a wide-ranging examination of the history and ongoing legacy of Argentina's diverse and multifaceted black population that remains, ten years after its production, still the foundational film on its topic. In this sense, it is a revealing introduction to the black history of the self-professed whitest nation of the Americas. However, it remains a deeply problematic film that, while arguing for the visibility of Afro-Argentines, continues to utilize the same ideologies of the public visibility of blackness, that is, racialized and sexualized voyeurism, and ***blanqueamiento*** that it seeks to undo.

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