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Erika Edward’s *Hiding in Plain Sight* is a central contribution to the history of black identities and the formation of racial hierarchies in the Rio de la Plata from the late colonial era to the early republican times. Drawing on conceptual tools from gender studies and the social history of law, the book originally engages a vast and ongoing historiographical effort to uncover the everyday forms of resistance of Afro-descended populations in Latin America. The book, in addition, has the merit of integrating Argentina's case into a larger Atlantic framework.

Over the last two decades, researchers had shed new light on the histories of enslavement and emancipation in the region.[1] Following this trend, *Hiding in Plain Sight* challenges long-standing claims about Argentina's racial exceptionalism. Classical interpretations have presented this South American country as the only white country in the region. A widespread view posited that, while visible during colonial times, black populations had vanished during the nineteenth century. According to these interpretations, Argentina's process of nation building stood out as a successful case of racial integration amid a myriad of countries dominated by the “indigenous” and “slavery” questions. The factors that would explain this Argentine specificity were the massive arrival of European immigrants and the efficacy of state-sponsored miscegenation policies launched at the turn of the twentieth century.

Edwards approaches the issue of “black invisibility” in modern Argentina from a different standpoint. Rather than reinforcing top-down narratives of assimilation or disappearance, *Hiding in Plain Sight* foregrounds the role of common black women’s choices in the making of a white nation. By privileging “the intimate relationships formed between African descendants, on the one hand, and slaveholders and their families, ecclesiastical authorities, and or political elites on the other,” the book unveils women’s strategies to abandon blackness and attain a new social status (p. 3). Edwards suggests that personal decisions and bottom-up negotiations were critical to the complex construction of racial categories in a time of great political transformation.

This book is innovative in four distinctive dimensions. First, by privileging quotidian practices and negotiations, it retrieves the agency of subaltern actors in the shaping of the postcolonial social order. Through a detailed study of interracial marriages, legal battles for manumission, and public performances of class and gender roles, the book unveils the fluid nature of racial classifications and the capillarity of power struggles.
Second, by placing black women at the core of its analysis, *Hiding in Plain Sight* transcends masculine notions of citizenship traditionally centered on war and electoral politics. It moves away from the battlefield, highlighting the private space of the home as a crucial theater for the forging of racial, cultural, social, and political identities. Third, while most studies on Argentine history typically center on the capital city of Buenos Aires, Edwards's research looks at the province of Córdoba. This area was an important trade stop along the route connecting Potosí’s silver with the Atlantic ports in the Rio de la Plata. Finally, alongside this shift in geographical focus, by concentrating on the transit from colony to nation, Edwards recasts a traditional periodization of race making in Argentina. Many of the works delving into this theme have predominately focused on the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

*Hiding in Plain Sight* consists of an introduction, six chapters, and a brief conclusion. Edwards’s writing style is clear and appealing. Through a skillful reading of judicial sources, the author reconstructs the lives and daily struggles of ordinary women in detail. Each chapter examines the experiences of black women from a different perspective. Chapter 1 analyzes how African-descended and Indigenous women disrupted and subverted colonial notions of privilege based upon the concept of “purity of blood.” Chapter 2 looks at the changes in the meanings of freedom brought by the wars of independence. In this new context, “whiteness became attainable and black women redefined themselves to fit that model” (p. 47). Chapter 3 revolves around the performative nature of gender and racial roles. It explores how black women attempted to become señoras through cohabitation, the forging of sexual relationships with Spanish men, or the emulation of white women’s public behaviors. Chapter 4 looks at marriage as a way of achieving whiteness through legal means. It discusses the possibilities and limits of this practice and the association of black women with “mala sangre.” Chapter 5 brings to the fore maternity and the conflict between freedom and property rights. Edwards explores how accusations of mistreatment and dishonorable actions by owners were instrumental to claiming the freedom of children born to enslaved women. Finally, chapter 6 analyzes education and the beginnings of institutionalized whitening. In the republican era, social peace depended on mothers, and African-descended woman were educated to teach their children about their role in the new country.

Edwards recently published a piece in the *Washington Post* introducing readers to her main arguments about the historical erasure of black identities in Argentina. The article, titled “Why Doesn’t Argentina Have More Black Players in the World Cup?” exposed the alleged whiteness of the men’s national soccer team.[2] This was not the first time the American press touched upon this issue. Another article, published in the *Huffington Post* during the 2014 World Cup, had examined the same topic.[3] This time, however, amid a widespread outburst of nationalistic pride sparked by Argentina’s victory in the prestigious tournament, a great controversy about miscegenation, European immigration, and the role of racism in the country’s history took place.[4]

Academics, journalists, and a broader public in social media engaged in a heated discussion for several weeks.[5] Edwards received harsh, and at times very offensive, criticism for her views. Some accused her of misinterpreting Argentina’s ethnic and racial realities using concepts rooted in the Northern Hemisphere’s academia. On a different end, others praised Edward’s contributions to furthering a debate that many scholars have been repeatedly calling to include in the public agenda for some time.

Probably the weakest point of Edward’s piece was resorting almost exclusively to nineteenth-century examples while omitting from her narrative the relevance of Peronism in the making of twentieth-century subaltern identities. The work
of many scholars supports the idea that Peronism, one of the largest working-class movements in the Americas during the Cold War, drastically re-shaped Argentina’s understandings of national identity, particularly among the humblest strata of society. As Natalia Milanesio pointed out, Peronist plebeian sectors forged a powerful identity structured around class, subordinating racial dimensions. [6] This did not mean the altogether exclusion of racial categories. As a matter of fact, Peron’s followers were labeled “cabecitas negras” (little blackheads) and they embraced that label as a countercultural tool in their struggle against the “oligarchy.” Nevertheless, it does indicate a particular process of identity formation that dealt with social heterogeneity in ways that US based models may not fully grasp.

In conclusion, Edwards’s interventions have helped shine a light on the nation’s past and reinvigorated a public discussion about the legacies of slavery in South America. The debate is still open.

Notes


[4]. The World Cup provided a great opportunity to reflect on racial identities in the global world. Laurent Dubois focused on France, Argentina’s rival in the final. In his view, the positive reactions of the French public around France’s black players evidenced new ways of reckoning with the country’s racial makeup. See Laurent Dubois, “Another France is Possible. Look at its World Cup Team,” New York Times, December 10, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/10/opinion/france-world-cup-racism-immigration.html.


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