

Black Skin, White Music: *Afroporteño* Musicians and Composers in Europe in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century¹

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As nineteenth-century Argentine local elites struggled to transform the country into a “white republic”, Afro-descendant populations in Buenos Aires embraced peculiar strategies of social mobility. This entailed grappling with the hegemonic values of society, while dismissing, at least publicly, their ancestral cultural practices. In this context, there emerged a particular distinction between two types of Afro-descendants: *negro che* and *negro usted*. This division can be understood as a straightforward but radical reshuffling of values, and as an instance of adaptation to modern society. However, from the perspective of postcolonial theory, this process also appears as a possible strategy of camouflage and self-representation based on external references. The symbolic appropriation of discourses and practices of progress and power may have indeed allowed the introduction of an element of “instability in imitation”.

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This paper analyses this strategy in the lives of two *afroporteños*² artists, Zenón Rolón (1856-1902) and Manuel Posadas (1860-1916), who travelled to Europe (Florence and Brussels, correspondingly) to improve their musical knowledge. Given the absence of scholarly studies on the lives of these artists, and the difficulties of conducting research in multiple archives, sources are basically limited to existing contemporary *afroporteño* periodicals. For *afroporteños*, their printed press constituted an invaluable vehicle for the dissemination of news and ideas at a time when the promise of modernity was to place Argentina at the vanguard of all nations. Both Rolón and Posadas appeared often in these publications to account for their experiences in Europe, while their peers critically assessed their work, in both favorable and unfavorable ways.

This article is divided in four parts. First, I will describe the socio-political context of mid-nineteenth-century Buenos Aires. Next, I will situate *afroporteños* in such a context, drawing on their hierarchical social stratification. Third, I will place the artists' own narratives in counterpoint to those published by their critics in the same *afroporteño* periodicals. Lastly, I will make use of postcolonial theory to analyze *afroporteño* social stratification as a mimetic strategy that de-stabilized dominant discourses by introducing a simulacrum of identity aspiring to fulfill an authorized version of Otherness. The underlying hypothesis is that Rolón and Posadas's self-praised success granted both the status of "artist" in Eurocentric terms, while their black lineage placed a wedge of instability within the dominant local narrative. If, on the one hand, this narrative advocated the univocal consolidation of whiteness as the essence and marker of

² [NB] *Afroporteño* refers to the population of African descent that until today inhabits different neighborhoods in the city of Buenos Aires and its surroundings.

Argentine identity, on the other hand it also bolstered and prided on the great success of the two artists.

Buenos Aires in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century

In order to understand the social and political context inhabited by Rolón and Posadas, we deem convenient to offer an overview of the country's situation, especially regarding Buenos Aires during the second half of the nineteenth century. This is due to various factors, as the mid-century marked a before and after in the development and consolidation of the nation state. The Battle of Caseros (February 3 1852) ended the rule of Juan Manuel de Rosas, and placed its victor, Justo José de Urquiza, in charge of leading the Argentine Confederation until 1860. Since the eighteenth century, British economic influence increased as a result of illegal smuggling in Colonia del Sacramento and, after the May Revolution of 1810, through lawful commerce of goods manufactured by the expanding Industrial Revolution. The arrival of the railroad favored the export of raw materials (beef, leather, wool and grains) through the port of Buenos Aires. This process translated into a weakening of Argentina's smaller regional economies (Garavaglia 2007).

Inspired by European models of economic development, especially the French experience, Argentine politicians and intellectuals put forward different projects of state and nation-building. Two of the most important interventions in this regard were those devised by Juan Bautista Alberdi and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. Despite their ideological differences, both shared one central belief: the endorsement of European

immigration to (re)create the nation as a mirror image of Europe (in the case of Alberdi), and, for Sarmiento, the United States. This newly established group of state intellectuals came to be known as the *Generación del 80*. With liberalism as their doctrine, they aimed at promoting investments and workforce training to sponsor massive immigration from Northern Europe. But the majority of newcomers arrived from poor rural areas in the south of the Old World, most of them lacking education in their respective occupations. This first wave of immigrants did not find the promised or imagined niches, and strove for insertion in both labor and society, a major challenge given the stark cultural differences. Many settled in wretched tenement houses or *conventillos* in the slums, alongside other marginal segments of *porteño* society. These settlements were the focal point of a yellow fever epidemic that besieged the city from 1871 to 1873, causing thousands of deaths particularly amongst the blacks. Around the same years, a wave of Italian immigration (1857) transformed the country into an agricultural powerhouse, and one of the leading exporters of wheat worldwide.

In this period, the administration of Nicolás de Avellaneda drafted plans to occupy further territories in the provinces of Buenos Aires and Patagonia, the latter still inhabited by indigenous groups removed from state control. Avellaneda's Minister of War, General Julio Argentino Roca led the expedition, known as the *Conquista del desierto* (Conquest of the Desert). The six-year campaign began in 1878, and its military success of 1879 propelled Roca to be elected president in 1880. Roca took office in Buenos Aires that same year, when Congress reestablished Buenos Aires's status as capital city, immediately after the defeat of an uprising led by Carlos Tejedor, governor of the province of Buenos Aires. Roca ruled until 1886 with uneven results. On

the one hand, the country experienced an unprecedented economic prosperity, fueled by exports of beef and grains to Great Britain, and massive expansion of the railroad. Education also contributed to this growth: Congress passed Law 1420, which established that education ought to be free, compulsory, gender-mixed and secular. On the other hand, financial speculation and corruption reigned, underpinned by electoral fraud. During Roca's presidency, the regions of La Pampa, Río Negro, Neuquén, Chaco, and Formosa acquired the status of territories. Sovereignty over Patagonia was reaffirmed in the 1881 Border Treaty with Chile, giving birth to the territories of Chubut, Santa Cruz and Tierra de Fuego. In 1882 Dardo Rocha established La Plata as capital of the province of Buenos Aires. Yet, undoubtedly, the aforementioned *Generación del 80* left the deepest imprint on this process, one still palpable in present-day Argentina. Members of this *Generación*, like Eduardo Wilde, Carlos Pellegrini, Aristóbulo del Valle, Miguel Cané, Roque Sáenz Peña, Lucio V. Mansilla and Paul Groussac were, for the most part, progressives. They were also influenced by different forms of liberalism and positivism, understood in terms of Auguste Comte's dictum of "Order and progress" (Bertoni 2007; Romero 2001).

Afroporteños and their social stratification

Although slavery in Buenos Aires lacked the economic and demographic magnitude shown in other regions of the continent, blacks constituted an important part of colonial society. This is apparent in the existence of an incessant slave trade that started with the granting of the first royal permit in 1534, two years before the founding

of the city (Andrews 1989, 31). Several authors have tried to establish the number and places of origin of these first slaves (Scheuss de Studer 1958; Clementi 1974; González Arzac 1974; Goldberg 1995; Borucki 2010). Despite unclear information about the number imported slaves, obscured by clandestine trafficking, as well as the imprecise naming of ethnic groups and their geographical origins, these studies made important contributions to the knowledge of the genesis and significance of slavery in the region. While the Constituent Assembly of 1813 established the juridical principle of “free womb” for blacks born after the implementation of the law, it was not until the National Constitution of 1853 that slavery was formally abolished. By 1861, abolition took full effect in Buenos Aires, after the province subscribed to the constitutional reform passed in Santa Fe by the Provincial Convention one year before.

Not every census deemed ethnic affiliation to be relevant, but those that indeed gathered this type of data show that the highest percentage figure for *afroporteños* was 30.1% in 1806. By 1887 it dropped to 1.8% of the total population (8,005 individuals), and by 1895, when the country already had a population of 4,044,911 there were only 454 individuals of “African race” (Andrews 1989, 81). Yet these figures should not be taken as a fixed reality. As revealed by present-day anthropology, censuses are not a neutral tool for statistical knowledge, but a positivist strategy waged by nation-states to build/secure themselves in accordance to a fitting imaginary (Anderson 2007; López 2006).

Though slavery persisted until 1861, after the Assembly of 1813 *afroporteños* gradually managed to take advantage of any social interstice that could translate into better living conditions. This became particularly evident during both of Juan Manuel de

Rosas's terms (1829-1832 and 1835-1852), as *afroporteños* played a relevant role in the politic program. Although little is known about nineteenth-century *afroporteño* social life, by 1820 there was a significant number of blacks living freely amongst the white aristocracy, mainly in the music scene, a phenomenon that can be traced back to 1777 (Gesualdo 1961m 89-92). In this context, Federico Espinosa (1820-1872) and Remigio Navarro (ca.1800-ca.1850) became well-established pianists and composers, coveted by aristocratic families to liven up their social gatherings (Calzadilla 2006, first edition 1891; Ford 1899; Plesch 2006). Ballroom dance maestro Joseph William Davis (whose year of birth remains unknown, he arrived from Rhode Island in 1826 and passed away around 1850) taught the most fashionable European rhythms (and some of his own inspiration) with great success until 1848. He also published English-language advertisements in *The British Packet*, calling for the local black Anglophone population to embrace mutualism. By 1834 Davis relied on "four beautiful young ladies of his own color" as instructors of French quadrille (Franze 1988). In 1854 a group of *afroporteños* founded the Fraternal Society, a mutualist organization that later gave birth to El Colegio del Carmen, a primary school for its affiliates' children. The school was financially self-sufficient until 1859, when it began receiving public funding, although by 1863 there seems to be no trace of its operations (Olivetti 2009). Lastly, in 1858 *afroporteños* launched their first two periodicals, *La Raza Africana, o sea El Demócrata Negro* and *El Proletario*, the latter founded by Lucas Fernández (Díaz 1998). It is likely that the social stratification within the *afroporteño* community, still present today, originated in this period. This structure entailed a differentiation according to individual

and/or familial social, economic and cultural variables, with frequent overlaps and contradictions between them.

In order to understand this class (estamental) division we deem pertinent to delve into the courtesy prescriptions typical of the time. In line with the Spanish tradition, rules of *porteño* courtesy reserved the personal pronoun *usted* and the title of *don/doña* to individuals of higher social ranking, whom by default addressed those of lower social condition with another personal pronoun, *tú*. The use of *tú* was also common amongst individuals of the same age group and/or cultural level. As in other parts of Latin American, in Argentina *voseo* (the use of *vos*) gradually replaced *tuteo* (the use of *tú*), erasing previous norms of courtesy and shortening social distances in favor of familiarity. Echoing the trust generated by *voseo*, the nations of the Southern Cone began using the interjection *che* as a more intimate and spontaneous handler between peers, although in a context of subordination it could very well serve as a derogatory form and/or to reinforce social asymmetries. In this fashion, *usted* and *che* appeared as polar opposites in standard *porteño* manners. Indeed, *afroporteños* appropriated them as the articulating elements of their own social stratification, and as a way for a specific group to create a social, economic and cultural distance, upward ("*negro usted*") and downward ("*negro che*"). While there is scarce information about when this differentiation appeared, the poem *Don* by *afroporteño* author Horacio Mendizábal can be taken as a point of reference. Mendizábal indeed illustrates with playful irony the aversion felt by the subaltern classes towards the norm of addressing others as *don/doña*, and attempts to substitute it with the more democratic *señor/señora*. Mendizábal published the piece in *Primeros versos* (1865), most surely the first Afro-

Argentine book (Cirio 2007, 140-143). We have knowledge of a pertinent anecdote of that time, cited by Santiago Calzadilla: “*Maestro* Roque had made a fortune (which he later lost) [...] Not only was he the only carriage-maker around, he was also a piano teacher [...] But the idea of buying a nobleman’s title got into his head and ordered the title of *Don* to be searched for in Spain. He paid a high price, and the title came. Ill-willed rumors, always young and never aging, took delight in him, and instead of calling him Don Roque as he would have wished, they called him Roquedon [...] this evil greatly affected him, and he died shortly after due to his fellow citizens’ ingratitude” (Calzadilla 2006, 18)³. From more scholarly sources, such categories are known through oral memory, registered and published by a journalist in 1967: “Kary Vane, an elegant and cultured woman, of seductive conversation, revealed that ‘there are three types of negroes’: *el usté*, *el vos*, and *el che* or *chau*. The first type is determined to progress, to fulfill himself with a vocation; the second is content with any job or occupation. The third type ‘are those who do nothing, and refuse to comb their prickly hair” (Simpson 1967, 80)⁴. Although Frigerio (1993, 52) has validated and reproduced this commentary, during my field work I came across no trace nor reminiscence of this intermediate category (“negro vos”) nor the synonym for the lower form (“negro chau”). This is why, given the absence, for the moment, of sources earlier than Simpson’s work

³ “El maestro Roque había hecho fortuna (que fue lo que lo perdió) [...]. No sólo era el único carrocerero que había, sino que también era maestro de piano. [...] Pero se le metió en la cabeza comprar un título de nobleza y mandó a España a buscar el de Don. Bien caro lo pagó, y vino el título. La maledicencia, que siempre es joven y no envejece, se cebó en él y, en vez de llamarle D. Roque como lo pretendía, lo llamaron Roque-don... maldad que mucho le afectó, y murió al poco tiempo por esta ingratitud de sus conciudadanos” (Calzadilla 2006, 18).

⁴ “Kary Vane, una mujer elegante, culta, de seductora conversación, manifestó que ‘hay tres clases de negros’: el *usté*, el *vos* y el *che* o *chau*. El primero sería el que se empeña en progresar, en realizarse en una vocación; el segundo, el que se conforma con un empleo u oficio cualquiera; y los últimos, ‘los que no hacen nada, y ni se peinan aunque tengan la cabeza llena de abrojos” (Simpson 1967, 80).

that provide an account of these alternate categories, I adhere to the bipolar division. As a way of bringing closure to this complex matter, let me refer to the unexpectedly biological, rather than cultural, nuance provided by a sixty year-old *afroporteño* woman during an interview performed in the course of writing this essay. Recalling her mother's teachings, the interviewee stated that a *negro usted* is one whose phenotype corresponds in greater degree to his/her African ancestors. On the other hand, *negro che* is one who, by miscegenation of the kindred with whites, shows the latter's phenotype as predominant.

Rolón and Posadas in the *afroporteño* press

There are very few studies about the lives of Rolón and Posadas, all of which lack extensive information about their familial contexts. We do know that they were born freemen, a status passed on from their parents. There is also evidence showing that Posadas's father, Manuel Gervasio, was an academic musician and a violinist at the Colón and Ópera theaters. Jorge Miguel Ford, a fellow Afro-Argentine, published Rolón's first biographical note in *Beneméritos de mi estirpe* (1899, 99-100). Marcos de Estrada also deals with him in *Argentinos de origen africano* (1979, 146-153). Rolón appears also in three brief dictionary entries: Rodolfo Arizaga's *Enciclopedia de la música argentina* (1971, 262-263); Vicente Gesualdo's contribution to Eric Blom's *Diccionario de la música* (1958, 981); and Mario García Acevedo's note in *Diccionario de la música española e hispanoamericana* (2002, 352). Others deal with Rolón through anecdotes and remembrances (Blanco de Aguirre 1888, 32-36, 218-219; García

Velloso s/d, 108-120; amongst others), or in broader-level analyses (Andrews 1989; Cirio 2009; Geler 2010, 2013). Relevant works on Posadas are far more scarce, and limited to only three very succinct biographical dictionary entries (Arizaga 1971, 250; García Acevedo in Blom 1958, 975; Lacquiniati 1912, 102), along with mentions in more general studies on Afro-Argentine culture (Andrews 1989; Cirio 2009)⁵. Given how little is known on both figures, we deem pertinent to partially review their biographies.

Zenón Rolón was born in Buenos Aires on June 25, 1856. He began his musical education through the teachings of Alfredo Quiroga, an *afroporteño* organist at the Church of La Merced. In 1873, at age sixteen, Rolón received a government scholarship to improve his training in Florence, where he lived until 1879. There he published the pamphlet *Dos palabras à mis hermanos de casta* (1877), along with at least five music scores. He returned to Buenos Aires to continue his studies with Basilio Basili and had an outstanding trajectory. He married his first professor's sister, María Quiroga, with whom he had two children, Dafne Zenón and Cloe María. In April 1881 the Rolón and Oca Press opened in partnership with the *afroporteño* probably Exequiel Oca, at Piedras St. 171-173, in the *porteño* neighborhood of Montserrat, specializing in music scores by contemporary Argentines, including his own. In 1887 the National Education Council appointed him as music professor, taking on Justin Clérice, Antonio Restano, Enrique García Velloso and Afro-descendant Prudencio R. Denis as his pupils. Although there is no recorded catalogue of his works, I have verified the existence of

⁵ Symptomatic of both the scarcity of knowledge about and academic disinterest in Afro-Argentine culture at the local level (Cirio 2008), it is worth mentioning that neither Acevedo (2002) nor Gesualdo (1958) make any mention of Rolón's African background. The same is the case for Posadas in Arizaga (1971) and Gesualdo (1958).

sixty-five compositions, of which there are only thirty-one left, some of them incomplete⁶. Rolón died in Morón (Buenos Aires) on May 13th, 1902. While the fate of many of his works remains unclear, a fair number of them are kept at the Museo Histórico de Morón, thanks to a family donation.

Manuel Lorenzo Posadas was born in Buenos Aires in 1860. In his youth he showed a vocation for music, and studied with Pedro Ripari at the Provincial School of Music in 1875. In May of 1879 he traveled to Belgium to round off his studies at the Conservatoire Royal in Brussels, where he was a pupil of the belgian violinist and composer Eugène Ysaÿe. He played violin at the Téâtre Royal des Galleries in that same city, and returned to Buenos in 1882 with a concert at the Coliseum theatre on September 9th. He returned to Brussels for a short period and later established residency in his hometown, working as a music professor. He became first violin at Colón theatre and a professor at the National Institute for the Sightless. Amongst his students we find Juan José Castro, a high-achieving composer and director. Posadas also directed a number of *porteño* orchestras that animated the carnival festivities. He died in Buenos Aires in 1916.

Both Rolón and Posadas were trained in European musical arts, demonstrating exceptional talent since their childhood. Both came from affluent families, which allowed

⁶ The majority of his manuscripts belong to the Museo Histórico Morón (Morón, Buenos Aires), donated by his children and by the Instituto Nacional de Estudios Teatrales (Buenos Aires). Among his works we find the series of motets *Música sacra por la Semana Santa* (1893) and *Sinfonia originale* (1879); the operette *Le château du Pictordu* (1885, lyrics by George Sand), *El castillo hechizado* (1887, lyrics by Alfio Gianelli) and *Strattagemma di Nannetta* (1887, lyrics unknown); the opera *Fides* (s/d); the waltz *El Plata* (1875); his symphonic march *Falucho* (s/d); the zarzuela *Chin - Yonk* (1895, lyrics by Hugo Morven and Enrique García Velloso); the comic zarzuela *Le prove o El ensayo de una ópera criolla* (1899, lyrics by José Lenchantin); his *Himno a Sarmiento* (1899); the cantatas *Stella d'Italia* (1891) and *Adiós a la Virgen* (1900); the barcarole *Sull'Arno* (1875); the polkas *La florentina* (1875) and *La porteña* (1876); the march *Argentina* (1882); the national lyrical drama *Solané* (1899, lyrics by Francisco Fernández); *Aria sagrada* (1878, lyrics unknown); *Misa del Carmen* (1901), and what was perhaps the very last of his works, *Kyrie* (1902).

them to travel back and forth to the Old World, Rolón being the first Afro-Argentine to do so in 1873⁷. In the imaginary of the new local elites, these European trips stood as necessary for social ascension and reaffirmation with hegemonic purposes (Romero, 2001). Their aim was to acquire knowledge of the long-standing European culture and values, to do business in the context of personal or official political arrangements, and to be aligned with the latest trends in every possible aspect. In light of this shared perception, Buenos Aires's physiognomy underwent significant changes. Paris, deemed as the vanguard of good taste, became the obsessive model for *porteño* pretensions of luxury. There was imitation of everything, except of originality. In this Europeanizing effort, the project of the *Generación del 80* fostered no more than an acceleration and reshaping of the process of national sociocultural "whitening" that had been operating for decades within the ruling class, and, later on, in urban and rural sectors eager for a new position outside the orbit of a decadent populace. Following Romero (2001, 173), the question of determining which group would undertake the mission of providing the character and qualities of the new nation came to the fore. The terms of this debate were set by an ideological formation oscillating between the urban and the rural, the enlightened and the romantic, the progressive and the conservative.

As an inextricable part of society and with their own distinctive qualities, blacks were participants, or at least spectators, of these changes. If, as we have examined, freemen were able to embark on projects aimed at social ascension based on European

⁷ This assertion must be taken with a certain caution, since there is in fact little evidence for this matter. For instance, Gesualdo (1961), based only on second hand information and without further investigation or commentary, claims that the death of *afroposteño* singer Juan Antonio Vera (born in 1773) took place in Buenos Aires in 1841 (p. 297), and also in Milano in 1858 (p. 298). De Estrada (1979: 61) favors the latter, but neither explains how Vera got to Milano in the first place.

values, the expectation built amongst the non-emancipated must have been significant. These expectations shaped a new mentality that began to operate once *afroporteños* were freed, with deep implications for their offspring's education and their views as prospective citizens. In a book about the *afroporteño* press between 1872 and 1882 (Cirio 2009) I have analyzed how this field of tension defined broadly as "tradition *versus* modernity". I pose the idea that blacks stood at an identity crossroads. On the one hand, they shared the same civic liberties of whites, for instance, universal male suffrage, and sought to heal the wounds left by the left by the Juan Manuel de Rosas' period through oblivion. However, they also embraced education, enlightenment, labor, and racial and gender equality. But their struggle had a different starting point than that of whites, given that hegemonic discourses had utilized the concept of race as a validation of superiority based on the advancements of scientific racism and social Darwinism (Wieviorka 2009). These notions reinforced ideas about the natural inequality of blacks in aspects as diverse as hygiene, manners, discipline in the workplace and aptitude for music. Yet, this racism was far from being an original invention of the Argentine ruling class. Indeed, at that time, all Latin American states brandished these ideas as the undisputable justification for concentrating economic and political power. For blacks, the implications were either an increasing isolation due to their inevitable difference, or a drive towards integration at any cost (Andrews 2007). This is apparent in the publications here studied, where the socialist ideas that these groups embraced with zeal at least since 1858 urged blacks to neglect even more their ancestral traditions and to subsume their particularity under de-ethnicized transnational labels, such as "workers," "underprivileged classes" and "artisans". In this context, we

can understand their social structuring as another product of the antithesis between tradition and modernity, the latter being the repository of all highly-coveted values. An instance of this tension appeared in the periodical *La Broma* and its embracement of education as “our mission” (*La Broma*, year II, series VI, no. 6, January 27, 1881). Also telling is the periodical’s statement that “since its founding, the main goal of this publication has been to persuade our brothers to work for the moral and material improvement of our community” (*La Broma*, year II, series VI, no. 72, June 3, 1882).

Another paradigmatic case is that of the pamphlet *Dos palabras à mis hermanos de casta*, published by Rolón in June 1877 in Florence. A full year passed between its first edition and the first signs of local acknowledgement in the press. With the passion created by great expectations, criticisms were swift and severe. In the pamphlet, Rolón urged his peers to redeem themselves through associationalism, common in European workers of that time. He insisted on portraying education as the only way of emancipating from the burdens of servitude, internalized through the imposition of slavery and the habits of complacent reverence towards their former masters. In conceiving the opposite of advancement not as “stagnation”, but as “backwardness”, he noted that in the realm of the social his fellows had not only disregarded education, but chosen to live an idle, immoral and depraved life. This gave an excuse for derogatory phrases like “only a negro would do such a thing!”, used by whites every time blacks acted out of their alleged fondness for knives, wine and prostitution. The benefits of the progress brought about by occupational training, the formation of guilds, education in general could translate into a moral gain in favor of equality and against discrimination. Moreover, if added to the successful fostering of their own diasporic consciousness,

they could become the cornerstone for the liberation of other brothers still oppressed by slavery, like those in Brazil. In the face of this harsh but still accurate and well-intentioned critique, why did the community react completely against Rolón? Perhaps the nickname bestowed upon him by his detractors (*Florentino*) reveals something about this issue. Apart from its obvious geographic referent, this word was meant as a synonym for traitor, as clearly stated in an anonymous article: “*Florentino* means ‘renegade of his homeland and enemy of national glories’” (*La Broma*, year I, no. 20, February 8, 1878). In ideological terms, calling a *porteño* by referring to a foreign city not only expels the person from an original circle of belonging, but also denotes an accusation of arrogance, here on the basis of Rolón’s Europeanizing notion of progress detached from local realities. If Rolón’s diagnosis of *afroporteño* society was indeed right, perhaps his peers’ reaction was but a defense mechanism of “downward leveling”; that is, an attempt to ignore the truths uttered by an individual that by age sixteen had become an acclaimed artist in one of Europe’s most prestigious cities. The quarrels increased to the point of Rolón being denied access to the periodical *La Perla*, which, in the debates surrounding *Dos hermanos...* he had described as “a rag” (*La Perla*, year I, no. 26, September 15, 1878). Yet, Rolón witnessed a full turn in his compatriots’ opinion when he returned to the country in 1879, with all honors. This shift is noticeable in several *afroporteño* press notes through which, with unexpected sincerity, Rolón’s peers performed a collective *mea culpa* and acknowledged, after several hours of conversation with the artist, that Rolón was also more moderate and mature (*La Broma*, year I, series V, no. 8, September 3, 1879).

Compared to what is known about Rolón, information about Posadas in the *afroporteño* press is far more limited (sixty-one entries against fifteen, respectively). This, adding to the shortage on specific literature about Posadas, precludes any comprehensive account. We know through *La Perla* (year 2, no. 44, March 28, 1879) that he was perceived as a “great hope for country and society” by his close friends, who organized a farewell party for him at the Delicias Porteñas Hall. Also, through *La Broma* (August 24, 1879) we learn that the carnival society *El Progreso Porteño* received a letter sent by Posadas from Brussels, perhaps the first one he sent from abroad, where he claims to be doing well and sends his regards. However, we only know of two more letters of his own writing, one dated May 11, 1879 (the day of his departure) and published on the 24 of that same month in *La Perla* (year 2, no 48); and a second letter, reproduced by *La Broma* in two parts (year I, series V, no. 30, February 14, 1880; no. 31, no. 31, February 28, 1880)⁸. The latter is dated December 18th, 1879, and is written in a colloquial and pleasant style, proper of correspondence between non-intimate acquaintances. The fact that it was presented as *Correspondencia: Especial para La Broma* suggests that he sent it for publication. The text can be divided in three parts: the first describes his vicissitudes and impressions as a traveler, as well as the geographical and social conditions of Brussels (he also mentions having been to Paris). In the second part, Posadas provides details about the Conservatoire Royal. He finishes by apologizing for writing too much, returns to a few considerations about the city and proceeds to express his good wishes and farewell. Taking into consideration the letter’s

⁸ This letter is reproduced in Cirio (2009, 187-190). An announcement about the upcoming publication of another letter by Posadas from Brussels appears in *La Broma* (year I, series V, no. 32, March 14, 1880), but there is no record of its printing. Given the partiality of access to other issues of this periodical, I am hoping that the letter is indeed in one of the missing numbers.

date, it is probable that Posadas had knowledge of Rolón's pamphlet. That may explain his very detailed chronicle of the first port he visited, Rio de Janeiro, which contrasted with his overtly brief commentary about Southampton and Antwerp: "there is nothing notable in them, in my opinion". What made him write about Rio de Janeiro at length? It was, perhaps, his contact with the slave population. In the context of an extremely dirty city, with its air rarefied by the heat, he regrets

"The immense quantity of men born by nature free, reduced to slavery by pecuniary ambition. It is, to the eyes of the young son of a nation in which no such atrocity is possible, simply unbearable, worse than having to hold one's breath amidst such a foul and insalubrious atmosphere. However, there is also a little something of republicanism in that country, which our intelligent young ones should study, in relation to the treatment of people of color. On my behalf, I leave that honorable task to others more intelligent than I am".

In contrast to Rolón's pamphlet, these topics are not at the core of Posadas's letter and there is no record of a reaction by his peers in Buenos Aires. Yet, as far as we know, it is noticeable that despite being the second (and last) *afroporteño* that traveled to Europe in the nineteenth century (he even returned to Brussels), all commentaries about Posadas (except perhaps those in the letter mentioned above) although praiseful, are rather brief and appear always in the section destined to the most general affairs.

Social Stratification as Mimetic Device

Both Rolón and Posadas came from families of *negro usted* and their lives were indeed consistent with the rather Eurocentric values and actions proper of that particular class. Such values had the unreserved endorsement of the white Argentine ruling class, due to their centrality in defining the features and ultimate goals of national identity. Although these artists' lives can be seen as products of mere assimilation, they can be also be analyzed from the standpoint of postcolonial theory as a means to grasp the "noises" and disruptions not only within the body of our knowledge about them, but in the ways their Afro-Argentine peers perceived and refuted their deeds. As a basis for my analysis, I refer to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1974, first edition 1952). Given his radical formulation of a dual conduct in the existential domain of blacks in a white American⁹ sphere, Fanon facilitates an understanding of mimetic action that, despite its appearance of compliance, deeply subverts postcolonial social norms. Although Fanon was widely criticized and today his work reads rather differently, his writings allowed a revised analysis of the social dynamics between blacks and whites in the American continent. Indeed, his formulations shed light on the agency of blacks to resist and subvert imposed and supposedly insurmountable realities, utilizing every available interstice to attain a better life, instead of appearing as passive victims of material and symbolic deprivation. Amongst the authors who have followed Fanon's intuitions, I will draw on the work of Homi Bhabha (1994), Serge Gruzinski (1999), Enrique Dussel (2001), Aníbal Quijano (2001), and Rita Segato (2007). Altogether, they propose a dramatic shift in the understanding of the interethnic dynamics of postcolonial Latin America, through the metaphor of the mask as a Trojan device for subversion.

⁹ [NB] In the context of this article, "American" is used in the broader continental sense.

Also, they demand the deconstruction of the myth of European modernity as the result of a dialectical relation of domination with a non-European alterity. More generally, they call for an analysis of Latin American thought on its own terms and in its relation to the European invention of concepts such as “race” or “black” as ways to implement and legitimize domination on the basis of the natural inferiority of the Other.

The thesis we wish to bring forth is that Rolón and Posadas simulated their lives in accordance to the authorized version of Otherness, fabricated and sanctioned by the Argentine establishment as the path towards belonging and inclusion in Argentine identity. For the local ruling and intellectual classes, being Argentine implied being European in skin color and intellect. Their scale of values regarding art, education, morality, etiquette and broader notions like wealth, civilization and progress stood at an apex that no other race in any other part of the world could rise above. Despite the particularities of its historically asymmetrical position, the *afroporteño* population was far from being alien to this ideological register. However, no matter how precise this imitation intended to be, an unmistakably “local color” or “mestizo accent” emerged as a marker for American distinctiveness. This is visible in the academic music of nineteenth-century *negros usted*; for instance, in Federico Espinosa’s compositions and performance on the piano (Calzadilla 2006, 80), as well as in the works of Roque Rivero (Gesualdo 1961, 427). What exactly did this “local color” or “mestizo accent” entail? Is it possible to detect elements of African heritage in these authors? Was it merged into the identity markers of the larger afroporteño society? May we speak of the emergence of disruptive black elements in the seemingly white monopoly of defining national identity? From an acoustic point of view, it has been impossible to get a general grasp of the

musical landscape, due to the lack of pertinent musicological studies and to the fact that most of these repertoires failed to reach our time, or are nowhere to be found (Plesch 2006).

For Bhabha, mimicry is, at once, resemblance and menace. As members of this layer of *negros usted*, Rolón and Posadas sought to attach themselves to the reigning white-european system of social improvement. While for *porteño* society the upper black stratum had already been assimilated insofar as they had been conquered and their ancestral cultural values replaced by European ones, its ambivalence also represented a form of menace. That is, a menace in the sense that *similarity does not equal sameness*. Indeed, the attempt of cultural remodeling had fallen short in doing away with its “points of suture”. The resulting disruption became the ironic content of the mimetic enterprise: while Rolón and Posadas lived and worked artistically in both European and European-*porteño* world of academic music, the mimetic power of their white masks turned them into an irreducible *partial presence*. In the ambivalent world of the “not quite white” (Bhabha 2002, 118), Rolón and Posadas appeared as authorized versions of Otherness. The menace, however, lied in their almost militant *negritude*. Rolón’s pamphlet and Posadas’s passionate commentary on slavery in Brazil bear witness to the fact that, far from mere assimilation, both artists took advantage of their privileged positions as authorized voices to guide the *afroporteño* community towards a better life.

From Gruzinski’s perspective, this would correspond to the terms of *mestizo* thinking. For him, post-conquest Latin American societies gave birth to *sui generis* ideas that ultimately served as the basis for the emancipation processes of the early 1800s.

These ideas took several forms, perhaps as many as the number and diversity of intellectual currents and social/ethnic groups, nonetheless deriving in a coherent system of ideas and practices. Often we fail to avoid the mistake of analyzing these societies from a univocal (for instance, European) perspective, and not as the original outcome of a multicultural process. Are these ideas present in the works of Zenón Rolón? Although, as I have pointed out, we lack comprehensive studies on his oeuvre, review and criticism by his peers suggests an equation with European academic music. What else could musical forms such as aria, cantata, polka, opera and zarzuela represent, if not European values? As with a mask, this is perhaps just appearance. I will render two instances in which the European essence of the equation of form and content becomes de-centered. The zarzuela buffa *Una broma improvisada o Los Autómatas de Tartafell* (1900, lyrics by Rafael Barreda) begins with a prelude and a lowered backdrop. In its orchestral setup we find a typical *afroporteño* instrument, the *mazacaya* (a type of metallic maraca), as well as a bass drum that is to be played “solely with the hand, as in *candombe*”¹⁰. Indeed the piece opens with the sounds of a carnivalesque society, seeking to emulate local traditional black music. In the zarzuela *Una farra de Nochebuena or Las desdichas de Rascaeta* (1897, lyrics by Carlos Castillo) we find an instrumental act called *Tango*. Taking into consideration its date of composition as well as the then embryonic stage of tango (and its still-debated African origins), we might speak of this zarzuela as a *sui generis* expression of tango from the purview of academic music, one where the “local color” comes to surface in with the undeniable mark of citizenship.

¹⁰ [NB] *Candombe* refers to a musical genre rooted in Bantu Africa, with presence in Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil, and popular amongst Afro-descendants of Buenos Aires and its surroundings.

Concluding Remarks

Enrique Dussel (2001, 58) points out that “modernity as such was ‘born’ when Europe was in a position such as to stand against its Other; when [...] constructed itself as a unified ego in order to explore, conquer and colonize an alterity whose response was an image of Europe itself”. If this was in fact, the overall assumption, we can therefore suggest that the emerging Argentine nation underwent a similar process of constructing and imagining itself vis-à-vis its Other, the non-whites of the country: Indians and blacks. Their exploitation, conquest and colonization brought about a demarcation of alterity that defined Europe’s search for identity. The gaze returned by the Other was seen in rather detrimental terms: barbarism, backwardness, inferiority and primitivism. In the case of blacks, I deem their cultural colonization as the cause for the emergence of the higher echelon of *negros usted*. However, their entry into modernity did not render them as innocuous, but rather deceptively displaced their potential as a menace. While they embodied the authorized version of Otherness, it is also true that they managed to utilize their ascent as a means of showing their brothers of caste (*hermanos de casta*) how to progress. Whereas in the eyes of their fellow *porteños* Rolón and Posadas were fine exemplars of racial regeneration (in terms of the then prevailing social Darwinism) through contact with modernity, *afroporteños* perceived them as archetypes of black militancy. As Quijano (2001, 125) has suggested, “the dominated learned, first, to give substance and meaning to the new and alien images and symbols, and then to transform and subvert them as means to include their

own class in every image, ritual or practice of external origin. Lastly, it became impossible to put these patterns into practice without subverting, reappropriating or reorganizing them". In Latin America, the coloniality of power created the categories of race and color as instruments to classify, dominate and legitimize the appropriation of the cultural Other (Segato 2007, 100). But with their long struggle for a new awareness of the African presence in the New World, slaves and their descendants were not unnoticed guests. Both Rolón and Posadas, inasmuch as they were intellectuals who lived in Europe to cultivate their art, stand out as part of a long succession of other *hermanos de casta* who, with Argentina as a shared reference, achieved their own victories¹¹.

Rolón and Posadas were two artists who managed not only to traverse racial and cultural boundaries imposed by the coloniality of power in Argentina. They also traveled, as freemen and with Europe as their destination, across the emblematic Atlantic Ocean, through which their African ancestors had been taken to the New World. Their music, although European in essence, succeeded on both sides of the Atlantic, carrying the encrypted mark of African and mestizo heritage. Both artists, while black in essence, had to wear their white masks in order engage in practices of power and progress,

¹¹ In the realm of nineteenth-century music, besides the already-cited Joseph William Davis, we can include: the Peruvian *pardo* Ambrosio Morante, who migrated to Buenos Aires at the beginning of the century, and sang at the Coliseo since its very opening in 1804 (de Estrada 1979, 58); Teodoro Hipólito Guzmán, a free *pardo* born in Buenos Aires ca. 1750, who was a violinist at the city's cathedral in 1790, and later (1800) in Santiago, Chile, where he died in 1820 (Gesualdo 1961, 103). Lastly, we know of the peculiar and extraordinary character of afrocuban Claudio José Domingo Brindis de Salas, "The Black Paganini", "The King of the Octaves". Brindis visited Argentina in 1889 accompanied by a German assistant and a mulatto servant. He triumphed with his Stradivarius at prime venues, including a concert attended by the President of Argentina and governor of the province of Buenos Aires, General Bartolomé Mitre. There he shared the stage with Zenón Rolón at the piano. He returned to the country in 1910 in poor shape due to his alcoholism. He died in Buenos Aires on July 2, 1911, drowned in alcohol and struck by a heart attack at a tavern in the popular neighborhood of *el Bajo*. The police found him in agony and, although he was carrying his identification documents, they left him at a public welfare institution with a sign that read: "negro atorrante" ["crooked negro"] (Candileja 1911).

triggering strong displacements of meaning in their interlocutors. With their white music the menace of belonging to the cultural Other seemed to have been neutralized and dismantled. Or at least *it seemed* so.

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