

## El Negro Raúl: Lives and Afterlives of an Afro-Argentine Celebrity, 1886 to the Present

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*Abstract* This article analyzes the rich corpus of stories about the dandy-turned-beggar Raúl Grigera, a popular Afro-Argentine street figure from early 1900s Buenos Aires. Stories about El Negro Raúl, told in hundreds of printed texts and images across multiple genres from the early 1900s to the present, reflected and reproduced ideas about degraded and disappearing blackness, and triumphant whiteness, in Argentina. Reading these racial stories alongside information about Raúl's life gleaned from archival sources, the article not only seeks to highlight the power of collective storytelling to construct ideas of whiteness and blackness in modern Argentina and to shape individual fates; it also offers a critical counternarrative of black presence and self-fashioned celebrity in a period for which the historical scholarship on Afro-Argentines has been scarce.

Between 1910 and 1916, as *porteños*, residents of Buenos Aires, celebrated Argentina's centennial of independence from Spain, a black man in top hat and coattails rose to spectacular fame. For the two decades that followed, Raúl Grigera, known as El Negro Raúl, was an eccentric fixture of the city's posh downtown: a young, handsome, dark-skinned dandy who joined the sons of aristocrats in bohemian extravaganzas by night and charmed coins from passersby by day. The city's rich cultural scene took notice of this flamboyant black man in a city painstakingly fashioned to show off the nation's European culture and citizenry. From the early 1910s he appeared as a recurring character in tango lyrics, magazines, newspapers large and small, city and neighborhood

For their generous and insightful contributions to this essay, my warmest thanks to George Reid Andrews, Sueann Caulfield, Eduardo Elena, Mary-Catherine Harrison, Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, Lea Geler, Paul Johnson, Danielle LaVaque-Manty, Tiya Miles (and the fantastic students in our cotaught graduate course, History and Narrative), and the three anonymous *HAHR* reviewers. I am grateful to the many colleagues who gave valuable feedback when I presented this work at the Eisenberg Institute for Historical Studies at the University of Michigan and at the centers for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at the University of Chicago and New York University. Grants from the University of Michigan's Office of Research, its College of Literature, Sciences, and Arts, and its ADVANCE Faculty Summer Writing program made it possible for me to research and write this piece.

*Hispanic American Historical Review* 96:4

DOI 10.1215/00182168-3677639 © 2016 by Duke University Press

chronicles, poems, plays, memoirs, novels, and the works of amateur historians. Raúl also became the subject of one of Argentina's earliest syndicated comic strips, and his character appeared in one of the country's first silent films.<sup>1</sup> As the stories multiplied, El Negro Raúl became a living urban legend.

By the 1930s, Raúl Grigera was no longer a dashing figure. Abandoned by his former benefactors, a homeless Raúl survived by wandering the city, pan-handling and spinning tales of his adventures in exchange for a glass of wine. Yet stories about him continued to multiply in subsequent decades, their narrative arc now drawn steeply toward Raúl's demise. The decline and fall of El Negro Raúl, it turned out, made an even better story than his bizarre rise to fame. Noticing Raúl's absence from his usual haunts, newspapers and rumor mills repeatedly declared him dead, only to retract the claim when Raúl reappeared. In 1941, after years of run-ins with the police and seemingly in an alcohol-induced state of delirium, Raúl was briefly hospitalized in a city psychiatric ward. By 1942, authorities had sent him to the rural mental institution where he would die in July 1955. During the 1970s and 1980s, memories of Raúl faded, and storytelling about him slowed almost to a halt. Yet tales are emerging once again, as part of a turn toward multiculturalism and new attention to the nation's nonwhite past.

Twentieth-century Argentina might seem like the least likely place in Latin America for a black man to acquire and maintain such a prominent position in the collective imaginary. If anything, the process by which he was gradually forgotten by the twentieth century's end seems more in keeping with the well-known story of Argentina's successful whitening. Beginning in the nineteenth century, Argentine thinkers and politicians worked to establish their nation as a white European exception in a region marked by large indigenous or African-descended populations and extensive racial mixing. Liberal nineteenth-century elites encouraged immigration from Europe to improve (as they saw it) the local Indo-Afro-Hispanic or criollo population while waging wars of conquest and extermination against indigenous peoples whose lands would, they hoped, be occupied by the new arrivals.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 2.9 million immigrants settled permanently between 1880 and 1916, while millions more came and went among Argentina, their homelands, and other destinations. By the end of this period nearly one-third of Argentina's population were foreign-born; another 25 percent were first- and second-generation descendants of immigrants, most

1. Arturo Lanteri, *Las aventuras del Negro Raúl, El Hogar* (Buenos Aires), 1916; *Una noche de gala en el Colón, o, La Carmen criolla*, directed by Federico Valle (1918).

2. See, for instance, Quijada, Bernand, and Schneider, *Homogeneidad*; Shumway, *Invention*.

of whom settled in cities, especially the capital, Buenos Aires.<sup>3</sup> By the time of the centennial celebrations, just as Raúl was becoming a black urban celebrity, many Argentine elites hailed the replacement of a preimmigration criollo population with a new “Argentine white race.”<sup>4</sup>

Whitening the nation, however, was not just a matter of attracting immigrants considered more or less white by the standards of the time, nor was it achieved only by elites’ attempts to eliminate indigenous and African-descended populations through war or intermixture. It was, rather, the result of a particular racial imaginary and set of narratives that underwrote the country’s undeniable demographic transformations and shaped how they would be understood. Whiteness prevailed in Argentina in part through storytelling—in censuses, literature, history, statuary, art, genealogies, and so forth—that emphasized Argentina’s whiteness and European culture and placed indigenous people and Afro-descendants in the nation’s past. As George Reid Andrews demonstrated over 30 years ago, and as a spate of newer scholarship has confirmed and elaborated, the so-called disappearance of Argentina’s distinct black population by the late nineteenth century was largely ideological, the result of a concerted effort not to recognize or count nonwhite people and to deny them a place in the modern nation. Argentines simultaneously adopted a system of racial classification and perception that broadened the category of whiteness to include an array of racial origins, phenotypic variations, and shades of color that elsewhere in Latin America might have been considered mestizo or *mulato*, dramatically narrowing the category of blackness. Only people with rare combinations of features imagined as proof of pure African origin—people like Raúl Grigera—counted as truly black, as *negros negros* (the second word was added for emphasis). The virulence of racist stereotypes, moreover, discouraged identifying as *negro* if one could avoid it. By the early twentieth century, as the idea of a visibly and proudly black Argentine became increasingly implausible in the national imaginary, racial diversity and blacks themselves came to be understood as fundamentally foreign.<sup>5</sup>

But not Raúl Grigera. El Negro Raúl was one of very few public figures in twentieth-century Argentina recognized by contemporaries as both black

3. Another million immigrants arrived in the 1920s. Brown, *Brief History*, 148–55. See also Moya, “Continent”; Devoto, *Historia*.

4. José Ingenieros, “La formación de una raza argentina,” *Revista de Filosofía* (Buenos Aires), Nov. 1915, pp. 479–80. See also Helg, “Race”; Zimmermann, “Racial Ideas.”

5. Andrews, *Afro-Argentines*; Frigerio, “‘Negros,’” 77–98; Geler, *Andares*; Geler, “African Descent”; Otero, “Estadística”; Quijada, “Imaginando.”

and Argentine—a “figure whose blackness, thick lips, flat nose, and tightly curled hair revealed a direct descendant of the African race.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Raúl was perhaps the most visible character around which public discussions of blackness coalesced in twentieth-century Buenos Aires. El Negro Raúl, both through his life and his semifictional afterlives, charts a revealing path into the meanings, horizons, and experiences of blackness in the twentieth century, a period for which—because they were not recognized as such by others or often by themselves—the history of *negros* or Afro-Argentines remains largely unwritten.<sup>7</sup>

This article analyzes hundreds of stories about Raúl Grigera told over the course of a century alongside information about his life obtained through more traditional archival sources to shed light on the social and cultural processes by which Argentina’s blackness was alternately highlighted and entombed since the early 1900s. It begins by considering Raúl’s afterlives: stories about his life and death written in hindsight from the 1930s onward. Once Raúl lost his unique place in the city’s legendary bohemian nightlife, scores of authors scripted him as the lead character in a story about the ways in which blackness, and Afro-Argentines themselves, disappeared with the start of the twentieth century. The article then works backward to explore Raúl’s parallel lives: stories produced about him in the 1910s and 1920s, at the height of his visibility and fame. The variety in these contemporaneous accounts, compared with the consistency in his afterlives, suggests different story lines—indeed, different ideas of what made for a good story—and illuminates the fluctuating nature of blackness and whiteness in those years.<sup>8</sup>

The case of El Negro Raúl invites us to reflect on how ideas about race are made, defined, and experienced through storytelling. In the past few decades, scholarship on race in the Americas has been usefully influenced by questions and methods of literary analysis. Literary scholars and historians have paid close attention to the role of narratives, both fictional and nonfictional, and a range of literary or rhetorical devices in shaping and disseminating ideas of race

6. Labanca, *Recuerdos*, 61.

7. Frigerio and Lamborghini, “Los afroargentinos,” 3.

8. In this article I read the stories about Raúl as a corpus to highlight formal resonances and patterns across time and place. In my broader book project, I also situate these accounts in their place and time to trace how stories about whiteness and blackness intersected with other transformations: the changing social geography of Buenos Aires, the history of the city’s literary movements, the cultural history of the tango and of porteño bohemia, the institutional history of minors and of mental illness, and the different racial attitudes expressed by, for example, socialists, anarchists, or Peronists.

and nation.<sup>9</sup> These insights acquire new salience when read against an emerging and rapidly growing body of interdisciplinary research (in social and cognitive psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, and literary studies) focusing on narrative persuasion: the disproportional power of narrative, compared to non-narrative, expository, argumentative forms, to shape our beliefs and attitudes. According to these studies, our brains process narrative through a quicker, primarily affective system of cognition that is distinct from the slower cognitive elaboration (based on logic and reasoning) required for information presented in nonnarrative form. This difference in processing makes narratives—both fictional and nonfictional—uniquely convincing and extremely difficult to dispel even with compelling expository, nonnarrative, countervailing data.<sup>10</sup> In the struggle to understand and combat racism (and discrimination against members of stigmatized groups more broadly), news of narrative's disproportional impact is both good and bad. Its affective qualities and reliance on characters make narrative particularly good at encouraging perspective taking (getting readers to put themselves in the place of and to feel with a particular character) and producing lasting associations between individual cases (characters) and the broader social categories to which they belong.<sup>11</sup> Narratives transport readers, mimicking experiences and encouraging suspension of disbelief while discouraging counterargument. This allows readers or listeners “to disappear into the story, to experience the emotions”—and, we might add, to absorb the ideologies—“intended by the writer.”<sup>12</sup> The power of stories to shape and naturalize beliefs, though ethically neutral, can thus be mobilized to vastly different ends. Stories can help produce empathy toward out-groups, but they can just as effectively be marshaled toward exclusionary, racist, dehumanizing purposes.<sup>13</sup>

9. Sommer, *Foundational Fictions*; Shumway, *Invention*; Nouzeilles, *Ficciones somáticas*; Rosenthal, *Race Mixture*; Earle, *Return*; Nunes, *Cannibal Democracy*. For a compelling analysis of narrative's power to shape ideas of race and place, and an introduction to broader debates about the role of narrative in historical writing, see Cronon, “Place.”

10. For an overview of this literature, see Green and Brock, “Role”; Mar, “Neuropsychology,” 1414–16.

11. On this literature and its overlap with empathy studies, see Harrison, “Paradox.” On narrative and out-group empathy, see also Batson et al., “Empathy,” 105; Stephan and Finlay, “Role”; Hakemulder, “How to Make”; Harrison, “‘Great Sum.’” For a parallel argument by a historian (on the power of the emergent novel to stoke readers' visceral emotions and produce empathy for working classes in eighteenth-century Europe), see Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 35–69.

12. Quoted in Green and Brock, “Role,” 703.

13. See, for instance, Smith, *Less than Human*.

In this sense, the many stories told about Raúl during and after his life are more than an eye-catching wrinkle in the fabric of Buenos Aires's urban culture. They are what I call racial stories: tales that mobilize the persuasive and empathic power of narrative to bring racial ideologies to life, helping to disseminate, naturalize, and reinforce them at the capillary levels of public discourse. Unlike more familiar foundational works of national history and literature propagated by a central state and educational system, the accounts that comprise Raúl's parallel lives and afterlives are decentralized collective reconstructions: a body of spontaneously transmitted yet discursively coherent stories. Countless narrators conferred new potency to existing racial stereotypes and messages by weaving them into dynamic—and therefore persuasive—tales of a character presented as real and representative of his race. In so doing, storytellers lectured their publics about who they were and who they should not be, often with the implicit warning that the line between the two—between the listener's own presumed or desired whiteness and different forms of blackness—was neither firm nor indelible.

Because these tales have been so successful at reproducing themselves, they make it difficult to find a real Raúl Grigera behind the scripted character. This task is complicated further by the power that racial stories seem to have had on Raúl's life as he lived it—the extent to which he chose, or was forced, to step into the few stock roles available to him. In a final section, the article therefore turns to Raúl's possible lives. By triangulating the storytelling about him with a range of archival sources, I attempt to reconstruct a plausible life trajectory for Raúl and to imagine how he might have moved through a world shaped in tangible ways by racial stories about whiteness, blackness, and his own character.

#### **Afterlives (1930s to the Present)**

Sources about Raúl produced after the 1930s—the bulk of my corpus—show most clearly how multiple, diffuse texts converged to construct a coherent racial story around his life. In this period of homelessness and institutionalization, he was less visible to writers, who treated him as a relic of an earlier era or assumed that he was already dead. Divorced from actual contact with their subject, stories about him were recycled, distilled, and ultimately frozen into a script. These sources—most of them essays or stories in literary and cultural magazines, remembrances in neighborhood or city histories, or articles in magazines or newspapers—often presented themselves as memories or investigations into the past. But they referred more to each other than to the historical record. Extensive plagiarism and circular references worked, as in a game of telephone, to enshrine error or pure invention as truth, producing free-floating afterlives

in which fidelity to a remarkably consistent racial story was more important than an approximation of the main character. Raúl's story became a parable about the demise of the once substantial Afro-Argentine population, a process alternately celebrated and lamented but always deemed unavoidable.

This metastory has the dramatic structure of all good tales: exposition, rising action and a climax, and falling action and a denouement. As related in his afterlives, these elements map onto three inflection points in the plot of Raúl's life: his (nebulous) origins, his (curious) rise to fame, and his (inevitable) decline and death. Notably, rather than provide background for the main character, most versions begin by asserting that clear exposition is impossible—that, as an anonymous contributor to a midcentury literary and cultural magazine put it, “it never was possible to find out where he had come from.”<sup>14</sup> The trope of Raúl's hazy origins was as present in lyrical texts as in those with pretensions to reference-book status, such as this brief biography: “They say that he was born in 1886 in one of the best parts of the [city's] Southern neighborhoods. But it never was possible to ascertain, with any kind of rigor, if he even possessed an age.”<sup>15</sup> Several accounts make languid attempts to establish Raúl's age or neighborhood of origin; a few gesture toward some family history (he was, they suggest, the son of a church organist or a carriage driver).<sup>16</sup> What matters in these accounts is precisely the impossibility of genealogical accuracy; emblematically, authors cannot agree on the spelling of his last name. In Raúl's case, the unknowability that often surrounds popular urban characters performs specifically racial work by excluding Afro-Argentines from the past and present. The supposed enigma of Raúl's “nebulous lineage” suggests that there was no fathomable reason for the existence of such a dark-skinned man in a modern, white city.<sup>17</sup> Raúl is consistently made into a singularity, an oddity

14. “Hacia una mitología porteña: Tipos olvidados,” *Continente* (Buenos Aires), 15 July 1947, p. 16. There is no byline for this piece, but the passages about Raúl were republished decades later by the famous playwright César Tiempo in “Porteñísimas. Raúl: Un muñeco color betún,” *Clarín* (Buenos Aires), 19 Oct. 1976. In this later piece, Tiempo also relates a moving meeting with Raúl following the opening night of the former's 1933 play *El teatro soy yo*, which featured an Afro-Argentine protagonist scorned (much like Raúl) for his blackness and imitiveness.

15. “El Negro Raúl, un risible.”

16. For instance, Pintos, *Así*, 54, attempts to establish Raúl's approximate age and claims his father was an organist; Moreno, *De la bohemia*, 89, suggests Raúl's father was a carriage driver; Korembli, in “Tríptico,” is unusual in listing Raúl's correct address and year of birth but guesses at Raúl's father's employment (carriage driver).

17. Héctor Ángel Benedetti, “El mendigo Raúl Grigeras,” *El Sextante de Hevelius* (blog), 1 Sept. 2011, <http://elsextantedehevelius.blogspot.com/2011/09/el-mendigo-raul-grigeras.html>.

who one day mysteriously “appeared” on the city streets “like a jet-black doll misplaced by a carnival troupe.”<sup>18</sup> Behind him there is no lineage, no history, no larger community—only anonymity and a supernatural (even vampiresque) agelessness.<sup>19</sup>

The second point of inflection—Raúl’s sudden and puzzling rise to fame—generated far more speculation than his origins. This provided the rising action and climax of these tales, their juiciest parts. In explaining Raúl’s rise, no account fails to mention his role as the favorite companion of the *niños bien*, carousing young men of the porteño elite who treated him as a plaything and who, in exchange for their cast-off finery and inclusion in their parties, subjected Raúl to vicious practical jokes. The term that commentators uniformly used to describe Raúl’s relationship to the *niños bien* was “bufón.” As Adolfo Bioy Casares, the famous Argentine writer, recalled in a published diary entry from March 1975,

El Negro Raúl was a well-known beggar in Buenos Aires; though perhaps best known in [the wealthy neighborhood of] Barrio Norte, since I believe he played the role of a buffoon of sorts to the young men of the upper class. He won them over with bursts of hearty laughter that brought a flash of white to his coarse face; with some more or less comical dance steps; and above all, with his blackness.<sup>20</sup>

This characterization drew from an ample tradition in the Americas and beyond—including the early modern Spanish practice of keeping blacks as court jesters, the *negritos* of nineteenth-century Cuban *teatro bufo*, the blackface minstrels of the United States, and Buenos Aires’s own early twentieth-century popular theater scene, replete with ethnic and racial stereotyping.<sup>21</sup> Calling Raúl a “bufón” was also a clear reference to the rule of nineteenth-century strongman and governor of Buenos Aires province Juan Manuel de Rosas—reviled by

18. “El Negro Raúl, un risible.” See also Luis Alposta, “Mosaicos porteños,” *El Barrio* (Buenos Aires), June 2014, p. 12; “Hacia una mitología”; Nicolás Olivari, “Caras olvidadas: El Negro Raúl,” *Atlántida* (Buenos Aires), July 1953, p. 30.

19. For the vampiresque, see Ignacio Merel, “El Nosferatu porteño,” *Desde Boedo* (blog), 12 June 2006, [http://periodicodesdeboedo.blogspot.com/2006\\_06\\_01\\_archive.html](http://periodicodesdeboedo.blogspot.com/2006_06_01_archive.html); Matías Juncal, “Un raro bicho nocturno,” *Fray Mocho* (Buenos Aires), 3 May 1912, p. 60. In the 1910s, Raúl was known as “el murciélago” (the bat), probably for being a fixture of the city’s nightlife and someone who never slept. *Ibid.*; see also “Biografías mistongas,” *Crítica* (Buenos Aires), 9 June 1916, p. 4.

20. Bioy Casares, *Descanso*, 3.

21. On early modern Spain, see Moreno Villa, *Locos*. On Cuba, the United States, and Argentina, see Lane, *Blackface*; Lott, *Love*; Castro, “Image”; Geler, “Un personaje.”



modernizing, pro-European liberal elites for, among other things, his alliances with blacks and other plebeian sectors. Rosas famously kept several *moreno* (black) and *pardo* (mulatto) buffoons as part of his cortege.<sup>22</sup> Rosas's liberal enemies, as well as subsequent critics, portrayed these buffoons as icons of Rosas's political barbarism and passive victims of his unbridled sadism and tyranny, imbuing their blackness with a range of derogatory stereotypes.<sup>23</sup> In this tradition, an article in a popular illustrated magazine from the 1930s explains that Raúl, "like his fellow blacks [*sus hermanos de raza*] Eusebio de la Santa Federación and 'father' Biguá [two of Rosas's buffoons], never amounted to much more than the target of the savage pranks of the porteño youth, in whom we might also discern the persistence, if somewhat diminished in grandeur, of the cruel and bullying spirit of Juan Manuel de Rosas."<sup>24</sup> With or without such explicit (and politically charged) references to Rosas's supposed tyranny, portraying Raúl as a buffoon allowed authors from diverse class backgrounds and political positions to criticize the aristocratic *niños bien*.<sup>25</sup> The *niños bien* rarely came off well in these accounts; authors usually invoked them as a collective ("la patota," a bullying gang) that stood in for the sadism, decadence, parasitism, and extravagant privilege of an entire social and political class. Yet the main thrust of these accounts was ultimately to belittle Raúl himself.

Explanations of Raúl's rise to fame also relied on a tradition common to many parts of Latin America that ridiculed blacks and mulattoes for pretensions to elegance or learning and sought to expose them as pathetic mimics. Raúl was, in the words of one midcentury scholar of "lowlifes" in Argentine theater, the incarnation of one of the broader "types" examined in his treatise: an "aristocratic tramp [*vago aristocrático*], an imitator of the polished manners and the professorial gestures of those who had been his patrons."<sup>26</sup> Consider, in this light, the following oft-quoted passage from Germán Carrasco y García's 1948

22. A classic account is Lanuza, *Morenada*, 127–38.

23. For an excellent analysis of these representations, see Ghidoli, "Invisibilización," 99–132.

24. Manuel Castro, "Niño, niño . . . una moneda," *¡Aquí Está!* (Buenos Aires), 7 Nov. 1938, p. 2.

25. See, for example, María Alicia Domínguez, "Verídica historia del 'Negro Raúl,'" *Mundo Peronista* (Buenos Aires), 1 Sept. 1955, pp. 24–25, 48; Juan Contreras [pseud.], "Carta abierta al director de *Mundo Peronista*," *Mundo Peronista* (Buenos Aires), 1 Nov. 1951, p. 30; Martínez Estrada, *La cabeza*, 153–54; Benarós, "Otra vez"; Algorta, "La negra historia." (Sincere thanks to Ezequiel Adamovsky for sharing the articles from the Peronist press.) Deployments of Raúl's story to criticize particular classes or political groups, as we will see, began much earlier in the century.

26. Casadevall, *El tema*, 173.

novel, *Anclas de amor*: “The unmistakable figure of El Negro Raúl, with his dark little top hat yanked down over his ears, his overlarge and always gleaming shoes, his impeccably white spats, his thick walking cane in fin de siècle style, a red carnation on his chest, his blood-red smile, marching in huge strides and doling out greetings left and right just like an Indian Maharaja entering the capital city of his realm.”<sup>27</sup> Or the following reminiscence by one of Raúl’s contemporaries, a policeman stationed in the downtown areas frequented by Raúl and the niños: “Had it not been for his color, he could have been mistaken for a gentleman. A slow, deliberate gait, a black top hat, dress trousers, a double-breasted jacket or sometimes a morning coat [*chaqué*], a thick walking cane, white or yellow gloves and cravat. All of this balanced on large feet inside even larger shoes, which offered a solid base.”<sup>28</sup>

Raúl was no typical beggar; he cultivated the air of a man of standing who belonged to and possibly ruled over his corners of the city. Yet Raúl’s blackness, like his ill-fitting clothing, affected walk and gestures, and grandiose or exotic performances of authority, gave the act away: this was no gentleman but a grotesque clown. It was the abject failure of his performance—the incongruity of his attempts to claim public dignity as a black man—that made him funny. Such depictions echoed the figure of the *negro catedrático* in Cuban theater and literature, blackface characters who by professing to be doctors and spouting dubious learning in broken Latin or faux French lampooned men of color who aspired to social mobility and citizenship.<sup>29</sup> Similarly nasty stereotypes about blacks who wore elegant clothing or otherwise seemed to affect airs of superiority circulated in turn-of-the-century Buenos Aires.<sup>30</sup> Like Cuba’s negros

27. Carrasco y García, *Anclas*, 215. See the strikingly similar description of one of Rosas’s buffoons in Ramos Mejía, *Rosas*, 150–51.

28. Labanca, *Recuerdos*, 61. As Lila Caimari demonstrates, many current or former members of the city’s police forces were avid storytellers throughout the twentieth century, using memoirs, police magazines, novels, and a range of other genres to showcase their knowledge of the city’s *bajo fondo* (underworld) as evidence of their own rightful authority on the streets—in the process glorifying the city’s popular culture (especially the worlds of tango and its famous argot, *lunfardo*). See Caimari, “Police.” Several sources beyond Labanca’s memoir (including multiple entries on Raúl in the finding aids of the police’s historical library itself, the Centro de Estudios Históricos Policiales “Comisario Inspector Francisco L. Romay,” and my interviews with its director, Comisario Inspector Eugenio Zappietro [especially on June 9, 2014]) indicate that Raúl was a salient figure in this police lore about the city’s *bajo fondo*.

29. Lane, *Blackface*, 13–15, 71–86. Cuban writers sometimes construed these characters sympathetically for nationalistic purposes, which was also true of Raúl, as we will see.

30. Wilde, *Buenos Aires*, 115, describes *negros* who donned their employers’ cast-off clothing as “dressed-up monkeys” (his inventory of their clothing and accessories prefigures

catedráticos, it was not just Raúl's color and mannerisms that undercut his performance but also his speech. Of the relatively few accounts that attribute speech to Raúl, almost all have him speak in the *habla parda* associated primarily with colonial-era and nineteenth-century Afro-Argentines, supposedly characterized (like *bozal*-style Spanish in other parts of Latin America) by the substitution of *l* for *r* as well as a range of other nonstandard expressions, pronunciations, and constructions.<sup>31</sup>

At the heart of their stories about Raúl's relationship with the niños bien, writers of his afterlives recounted a repertoire of pranks at his expense that is staggering in its extensiveness and cruelty. It is difficult to know how many of these pranks actually took place and how many are the product of writers' imaginations. But the consistency with which narrators reproduce key tropes and episodes confirms, at the very least, the existence of a barely repressed, almost exuberant shared imaginary of racial violence and dehumanization. Some reported pranks played on widespread associations between black people and animals, such as when the niños dressed Raúl like an organ-grinder's monkey and paraded him around the city with a sign that read "for hire" hanging from his neck.<sup>32</sup> Other pranks involved the threat or reality of violence, as when a niño forced Raúl to dance a cakewalk at gunpoint in the bucolic public gardens of the Bosques de Palermo, or when in a downtown restaurant Raúl was made to dance naked on a table while revelers hurled food and glassware at him.<sup>33</sup> In other accounts, Raúl was drugged and left for dead in a morgue, locked up (drunk and naked) in the trunk of a car as a gift to a pair of newlyweds, and, most infamously, sealed inside a crate (some say a coffin) and dispatched to surprise a niño vacationing in Mar del Plata (or Rosario or Montevideo).<sup>34</sup>

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descriptions of Raúl with striking accuracy); Frigerio, "Sin otro delito," 169–70, cites several cartoons from the early twentieth-century porteño magazine *Caras y Caretas* that reproduce the stereotype of black pretentiousness. For more on this trope and its appearance even in late nineteenth-century Afro-porteño newspapers, see Geler, "Negritud," 214–15. On similar representations of Rosas's buffoons, see Ghidoli, "Invisibilización," 99–132. For contemporaneous examples from Brazil, see Hertzman, *Making Samba*, 83–84.

31. For instance, Raúl purportedly calls himself "Laúl" and says "Pol favol" or "Muchas glacias" in Castro, "Niño"; he speaks in the third person and otherwise fails to conjugate properly ("Neglo Laúl quiere mil pesos") in Blanco Amor, *¿Y ahora qué?*, 99. A journalist comments on, and quotes extensively from, Raúl's "lengua particularísima" in Carlos Marin, "'El negro Raúl' bufón de ébano vive recluído en 'Open Door,'" *Hechos en el Mundo* (Buenos Aires), 7 June 1954. On *habla parda* in the late nineteenth century (and its role in the rise of lunfardo), see Geler, *Andares*, 39, 131, 133–60.

32. Pintos, *Así*, 56–57.

33. Labanca, *Recuerdos*, 60–63.

34. "Hacia una mitología"; Alifano, *Tirando*, 74–76; Blanco Amor, *¿Y ahora qué?*, 99; Molinari, *Buenos Aires*, 411.

As we can sense from the recurring theme of Raúl's nakedness, many of these jokes derived their dark humor from placing Raúl in sexually humiliating situations and from the heterosocial voyeurism and indirect affirmations of their own white masculinity that perpetrators (or writers who later consolidated these stories) must have derived from exerting this emasculating power over their black victim. Incidents highlighting the deployment of Raúl's sexuality included reports that the niños forced him to make advances on women in public spaces, staged an open-air wedding between Raúl and a prostitute, and the following scene, recounted in a novel as late as the 1970s: "He came perilously close to bleeding to death in a bathtub after masturbating for two days straight, excited by a dose of cantharidin [a poisonous blistering agent sometimes used as a topical aphrodisiac] strong enough to destroy a mule."<sup>35</sup> Not unlike the actions of the niños bien themselves, these lurid secondhand accounts built on the stereotype of lascivious black male sexuality and then worked to put it in its (debased) place.

Unsurprisingly, the explanations that authors provided for Raúl's participation in these abusive encounters were overwhelmingly unflattering. Many asserted that he was a lazy vagrant—another widespread racial stereotype in postemancipation Latin America—and that he stumbled upon the niños bien as the path toward an easy life.<sup>36</sup> One frequently cited retrospective about Raúl published in 1967 in a leading popular history magazine best captures this: "The 'niños' needed him for their entertainment. He knows this—he pays with his dignity and in exchange he collects clothing and money."<sup>37</sup> Raúl also purportedly received as compensation for his self-debasement endless champagne, sumptuous late-night meals, invitations to theater and cabaret functions, visits to brothels, and even a trip to Paris.<sup>38</sup> The authors of these stories used Raúl's negative example to illustrate the importance of a work ethic to citizenship in a civilized, modern, white nation. One journalist who encountered Raúl in his days as a beggar blamed his woes on his fetishistic, tribal (African) attitude toward money, while another who found an aging Raúl working as a gardener in the psychiatric institution where he would die claimed that Raúl had at long last been redeemed—restored to manhood—by his daily labors.<sup>39</sup>

35. Martini Real, *Macoco*, 12. See Korembli, "Tríptico"; Castro, "Niño."

36. See, for example, the claim that "work . . . was always his mortal enemy" in Marin, "El negro Raúl." On such images of Afro-Latin American workers, see Andrews, *Afro-Latin America*, 143-44.

37. Korembli, "Tríptico," 73.

38. See, for instance, Benedetti, "El mendigo."

39. Castro, "Niño"; "El Negro Raúl: Su reinado. Aunque en un mundo en sombras, todavía libra la lucha vital," *Noticias Gráficas* (Buenos Aires), 6 Aug. 1953.

Another common explanation for Raúl's behavior was that he was mentally deficient and either mistook the niños' attention for affection or accepted the abuse as his (racial) fate. These accounts speak of his "docile," "servile," or "loyal" submission to his role or compare him to a "broken marionette," an "android," or a "malfunctioning wind-up toy."<sup>40</sup> In many accounts, little separated the idea that Raúl was congenitally devoid of willpower from the idea that he was a natural slave.<sup>41</sup> This explanation came in part from the comparison with Rosas's black buffoons, frequently portrayed not only as slaves to Rosas's will but as insane, both in their own time and by the modernizing psychologists, criminologists, and social theorists whose works became the foundation for social policy in the period of Raúl's life and afterlives.<sup>42</sup> More immediately, discussions of Raúl's "taras," or hereditary mental defects, reflect the extent to which, since at least the early twentieth century, discourses of mental and racial degeneration had become intertwined in Argentine social thought.<sup>43</sup> Authors repeatedly linked his laughter (often rendered as a "mueca," or grimace) to blackness, "puerile" simplicity, and mental incompetence or "imbecility," creating a trope that one commentator summed up as Raúl's "incurable racial infantilism."<sup>44</sup> For this reason, almost all accounts from midcentury onward emphasize that Raúl ended his days at the Colonia Nacional de Alienados "Dr. Domingo Cabred," the psychiatric hospital also known as Open Door, as if this proved his fate inevitable. Often accompanied by the language of race and deformity—"grotesque," "simian," "chimpanzee," "Bantu face," "Quasimodo," "racial atavism"—the overall picture portrays a

40. Puccia, *Intimidades*, 148 ("docilmente"); "El ocaso del Negro Raúl," *Caras y Caretas* (Buenos Aires), 17 Oct. 1936 ("dócil"); Benarós, *El desván*, 117 (speaks generally of his lack of will to rebel); Casadevall, *El tema*, 173 ("servilismo," "juguete"); "El Negro Raúl: Su reinado" ("quietud," "fidelidad"); Benarós and Piana, "Ahí viene" ("juguete cruento," "títete roto"); Castro, "Niño" ("androide"); "Sombras de Buenos Aires," *Ahora* (Buenos Aires), 26 Mar. 1936 ("juguete descompuesto"). Repeated comparisons of Raúl to a mechanical toy imply a lack of agency linked to slavery; for a similar analysis of the figure of the automaton in discussions of slavery and African religion in turn-of-the-century Brazil, see Johnson, "L'automatisme."

41. See, for instance, Labanca, *Recuerdos*, 61.

42. See especially Ramos Mejía, *Las neurosis*, 123–24; Ingenieros, *La locura*, 126–52. See also Barsky, "Balada."

43. For "taras," see Puccia, *El Buenos Aires*, 246; Puccia, *Intimidades*, 147–48; Alposta, *Definitiva*, 174. On mental and racial degeneration, see Stepan, "Hour"; Vallejo and Miranda, "Los saberes"; Rodríguez, *Civilizing Argentina*.

44. Castro, "Niño." For uses of "mueca," "puerile," and "imbecile," see also Olivari, "Caras olvidadas"; "El Negro Raúl: Su reinado," 8; Pintos, *Así*, 55, 57; Koremblit, "Tríptico," 72. Benarós, *El desván*, 117, speaks of his "risa tonta."

man (and by extension a racial group) congenitally unfit for the modern city and nation.<sup>45</sup>

A small number of authors offered another explanation, presenting Raúl's buffoonery as calculated performance rather than mental insufficiency.<sup>46</sup> One unusually sympathetic observer, an African American literary scholar visiting Buenos Aires in the early 1940s, quietly applauded Raúl's performances: "It was not an unfamiliar story, nor a pleasing one, yet I thought that I could sense beneath the buffoonery of the Negro Raúl a cunning calculated to turn to his profit the vacuity of the tinsel palace that is the Jockey Club of Buenos Aires."<sup>47</sup> Yet most writers interpreted Raúl's cunning performance as fraud or worse. In so doing, they drew from the deep well of racial stereotypes in the Americas, reprising the idea of the cunning or tricky black man. But they also drew on local social theories, especially those of the psychologist and criminologist José Ingenieros, who in the early twentieth century used the concept of simulation to explain what he perceived as widespread social dysfunction in rapidly growing cities like Buenos Aires.<sup>48</sup> A strategy of survival in the "struggle for life," simulation, in Ingenieros's view, was a healthy part of all human behavior but became a problem when society's weakest members (the poor, nonwhites, criminals, and the insane), devoid of other resources in the struggle, reached for fraud to survive.<sup>49</sup> Ingenieros expressed particular anxiety about the ways that urban anonymity and social mobility might allow people to pass as something that they were not, threatening social and political order.<sup>50</sup> Decades after Ingenieros first published his work, these anxieties continued to shape interpretations of Raúl's fraudulent performance, sometimes explicitly. One writer in the mid-1950s (perhaps concerned with the porosity of social boundaries in his own time) declared Raúl to be an "interesting case of simulation, worthy of the attention of an alienist. . . . Doctor Ingenieros claims in one of his books that faced with the struggle for life, the weak refine their fraudulent strategies—the only ones at their disposal—so as not to perish. And in his struggle for life,

45. Algorta, "La negra historia"; Benedetti, "El mendigo"; Korembli, "Tríptico"; Moreno, *De la bohemia*, 90.

46. Korembli, "Tríptico"; Pintos, *Así*, 53–58; Bioy Casares, *Descanso*, 3. From a slightly earlier period, see A. Hernández Cid, "El negro Raúl," *Caras y Caretas* (Buenos Aires), 12 Apr. 1924.

47. Spratlin, "Latin America," 202.

48. On immigration and the pressing turn-of-the-century "cuestión social," see Zimmermann, *Los liberales reformistas*. A good introduction to Ingenieros and his oeuvre is Terán, *José Ingenieros*.

49. See primarily Ingenieros, *La simulación*.

50. Ferrás, "Extranjero," 145–47.

[Raúl] became astute, cynical, and a simulator."<sup>51</sup> Astuteness here was a mark of moral and social weakness, not a redemptive form of black resistance. Whether due to laziness, madness, or deviousness, then, Raúl was portrayed as a throwback, evolutionarily out of place, and unable to play fairly by the rules of modern democratic society and the capitalist market. Yet in contrast to the broader, worrisome phenomenon of fraudulent social climbing, Raúl provided comic and psychological relief. Whether his insufficiency for modern life made him a madman or a con man, as a black impostor he was at least easy to spot.

This idea of Raúl as a man misplaced in time and unprepared for modernity is reinforced in the climax and denouement of these narratives: accounts of his decline and death. Many writing after Raúl's glory days told the story of his descent into poverty and madness as a cautionary tale with a foreseeable end. Years of easy living had taken their toll, and as Raúl's protectors grew up or suffered through the stock market crash of 1929, they abandoned him. Raúl became a pitiful sight, reduced to begging and wearing rags, unsuccessfully revisiting his earlier haunts seeking handouts and sympathy.<sup>52</sup> Notably, though these stories associate Raúl's fall with the passing of the partly aristocratic, partly bohemian Buenos Aires of the century's turn, they do little to situate it within the broader transformations that gripped Argentina in the 1930s: economic depression, ongoing labor unrest, and repressive military governments. Instead, the stories explain his decline through moralizing messages about the perils of laziness or simulation, the redemptive power of honest work, the evils of ill-gotten fame and wealth, or the inexorability of madness. Any or all of these morals could have applied to characters from the popular or lower-class sectors of porteño society, regardless of race. And the implicit condemnation of the morally decadent world of "dangerous abundance" that created someone like Raúl could also be read as yet another class critique of the aristocratic niños and their "caprices."<sup>53</sup> Yet the eagerness with which these accounts rhetorically precipitate Raúl's end, even while he was still alive, carried a specifically racial message. As early as 1936, a commemorative history of Buenos Aires proclaimed that "today, with his body wasted by everything it was made to endure, he is in the twilight of his life, grown old before his time."<sup>54</sup> An article in a

51. Pintos, *Así*, 55–56.

52. See, for instance, Molinari, *Buenos Aires*, 411; "El Negro Raúl, un risible"; "Sombras"; Carlos Trillo and Juan Dalfume, "Crónicas más o menos veraces: El Negro Raúl," *Superhumor* (Buenos Aires), Aug. 1982; "Esto pasó . . .," *Clarín* (Buenos Aires), 9 Aug. 1996; Tiempo, "Porteñísimas."

53. Carlos Arana, "¿Te acordás, hermano, del Negro Raúl?," *¡Aquí Está!* (Buenos Aires), 6 Oct. 1947, pp. 18–20.

54. Cánepa, *El Buenos Aires*, 166.

popular magazine that captured Raúl during his years as a homeless beggar in the 1930s called him a “shadow,” an “almost nonexistent, nearly ghostly” presence drifting through city streets.<sup>55</sup> Photographs narrated these same stories in visual terms, often portraying Raúl in shadows (figure 1). An account published before his actual death in 1955 already declared him dead (adding the imaginative flourish of suicide, as if to underscore how untenable must have been his existence).<sup>56</sup> Indeed, repeated and mistaken assertions of Raúl’s death became part of the story surrounding him. He was, according to one midcentury account, “the man from Buenos Aires with the most obituaries published while still alive, because every time he disappeared he was considered dead and people would write about him and his splendid era.”<sup>57</sup> I have not yet found these obituaries, but the (unfounded) message of Raúl’s death does appear to have circulated widely at midcentury. By the 1940s and 1950s journalists could use mistaken reports of his death as their hook: “Raúl Grigeras [*sic*] . . . has not died,” declared one lead, while another article’s subhead read “El Negro Raúl: A ‘dead man’ who reappears.”<sup>58</sup>

The reiterated but erroneous stories about Raúl’s death should come as no surprise given what we know about the discursive disappearance of Afro-Argentines over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through repeated, vigorous, and above all premature assertions of their community’s decline and death. This is a trope that anthropologist Alejandro Frigerio has aptly called “a chronicle of a death foretold.”<sup>59</sup> Indeed, the phrase “¡Pobres negros!” (Poor blacks!), used by nineteenth-century thinkers and politicians to signal and piously lament the black race’s supposedly imminent passing, finds a clear echo in the “¡Pobre Negro Raúl!” used in many midcentury sources.<sup>60</sup> The overall story emerging from these afterlives—with their emphasis on Raúl’s nebulous origins, fatal maladjustment, and untimely death—thus plots exactly onto the story told about Afro-Argentines in general since the nineteenth

55. “Sombras,” 27.

56. Pintos, *Así*, 58.

57. “El Negro Raúl, un risible.”

58. “El Negro Raúl: Su reinado”; Arana, “¿Te acordás?” See also Marin, “El negro Raúl.” Benedetti, “El mendigo,” finds it necessary to clarify exactly when Raúl “falleció de verdad y para siempre” (the date that the article offers, August 9, 1955, is another frequently repeated error).

59. Frigerio, “El Candombe.” Andrews, *Afro-Argentines*, first identified this narrative. See also Solomianski, *Identidades secretas*, on “discursive genocide”; Cirio, “La desaparición.”

60. Arana, “¿Te acordás?”; Castro, “Niño.” On nineteenth-century uses, see Geler, “¡Pobres negros!”





Figure 1. "El Negro Raúl" (n.d., ca. 1940). Courtesy of Archivo General de la Nación, Dpto. Doc. Fotográficos, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Note Raúl's face in shadows and the policeman in the background.

century: that (despite abundant evidence to the contrary) they were a race in agony, on the path to extinction. This narrative, which continued well into the twentieth century, denied the continuous existence of Afro-Argentine people and cultures and helped declare the disappearance of Afro-Argentines a *fait accompli*.

Stories about El Negro Raúl circulating throughout the twentieth century played an important role in this rhetorical entombment of Argentine blackness. Recall the exaggerated emphasis on death throughout his story—including the repeated accounts of his demise, his supposed adventures in a coffin or at the morgue, his spectral wanderings through the city in the 1930s, and midcentury references to him as "a 'dead man' who reappears." Writing in the mid-1950s, around the time of Raúl's actual death, essayist Ezequiel Martínez Estrada left no doubt as to Raúl's symbolism as the last representative of a vanishing race: "El Negro Raúl, that buffoonish and tragic incarnation of the mulatto of

yesteryear, that lingering offshoot of colonial-era slavery. . . . One day he passed out of fashion, descended into mendicancy, and the tattered rags replaced his dinner jacket . . . until he was finally crushed by the ancestral burden of his caste. He was the last slave and the last manumitted black man.”<sup>61</sup> Those who authored Raúl’s afterlives thus arranged the playing field of modern Argentine history so that he would be, at all times, caught chronologically offside.

We might expect the stories about Raúl to have changed in light of shifting public formulations of Argentina’s national identity following the 2001 economic crisis.<sup>62</sup> Elsewhere I demonstrate how Argentina’s official embrace of multiculturalism in the bicentennial era, and the efforts of many activists, artists, and intellectuals to emphasize racial and cultural diversity over earlier celebrations of whiteness, have helped whet readers’ appetites for stories and histories centered on sympathetic nonwhite protagonists and issues of racial discrimination. Yet in taking up an antiracist position, most of these new cultural productions unwittingly contribute to the erasure of Afro-Argentines from the nation’s past and present by uncritically celebrating interracial romances and race mixture as mechanisms for racial inclusion or reproducing long-standing narratives of Afro-Argentines’ unremitting victimization and annihilation.<sup>63</sup> Most of Raúl’s present-day afterlives fall squarely within the latter camp.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, many authors who write about Raúl today recycle mid-century publications about Raúl’s sufferings and untimely demise, at times nearly word for word.<sup>65</sup> In other cases, as in many bicentennial-era racial fictions, his sufferings as a black man are subsumed within, or made to stand for, other social issues that authors consider more pressing, like the need for female empowerment. This is the situation in a recent play that imagines Raúl’s encounters with a turn-of-the-century prostitute and uses the theme of slavery (imagined literally and therefore anachronistically for Raúl) as a metaphor for prostitution and patriarchy.<sup>66</sup> Echoes of Raúl also surround Omar Obaca, the fictional Afro-Argentine presidential candidate created by a web TV channel and publicized through dozens of online videos and street placards in 2015. Obaca’s popularity among a mass audience resonates with recent trends to make

61. Martínez Estrada, *La cabeza*, 153–54.

62. See Adamovsky, “El color”; Briones, “La nación.”

63. Alberto, “*Indias Blancas*.”

64. See, for example, Algorta, “La negra historia”; Contreras, *Buenos Aires*, 107–10; and the unattributed image of Raúl on the cover of Rosenzvit, *Fiebre*, a tale of fateful black disappearance (analyzed further in Alberto, “*Indias Blancas*”).

65. For instance, Alposta, “Mosaicos porteños.”

66. Mabel Loisi, *Negro sobre blanca* (2011). MS of play courtesy of Loisi and Argentores.

racial minorities visible in Argentina (and is made possible by the historic presence of Barack Obama in the White House). Though Obaca's humor hinges partly on the implied impossibility of a black Argentine becoming president, Marcos Martínez, the Afro-Argentine actor who plays Obaca, describes the knowing, tough-talking, and charming candidate as a welcome departure from the limited roles ("delinquents, thieves or drug dealers") previously available to him as a black actor.<sup>67</sup> Yet critics have rightly noted that the character continues the tradition of using black buffoons as entertainment for Argentina's white middle and upper classes.<sup>68</sup> In fact, Martínez also played the role of Raúl in the abovementioned play. Raúl's present-day afterlives, to the extent that they reaffirm long-standing ideas about black victimization and disappearance, thus illustrate the incompleteness of Argentina's transition from a paradigm of homogeneous whiteness to one of multiculturalism. But they also support critics of multiculturalism in their contention that the logic of diversity itself depends upon, and reproduces, earlier racial narratives by establishing a politics of recognition that requires racial or ethnic subjects to perform their identities in legible (that is, stereotypical) ways in order to become visible to society and the state.<sup>69</sup>

### Parallel Lives (1910s–1920s)

In Raúl's parallel lives—accounts written in the 1910s and 1920s, at the height of his relationship with the niños bien—he appears as a much more unfinished and multifaceted character. Of course, many of the tropes from his afterlives are already present here, including frequent use of his example to vilify and ridicule black people. Yet as scholars of race in Argentina have begun to demonstrate, Afro-Argentines were ambiguous figures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were excluded from elite definitions of national culture, but especially in Buenos Aires, where Afro-descendants were a significant proportion of the plebeian world and important participants in the city's social, cultural, and political life, they became symbols of Argentina's expanding popular sectors and emerging working classes. As such, they could represent everything wrong with these groups but could also embody a popular

67. Frederick Bernas and Diane Ghogomu, "A Fictional Candidate Draws Attention, and Criticism, in Argentina," *New York Times* (New York), 22 Oct. 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/23/world/americas/a-fictional-candidate-draws-attention-and-criticism-in-argentina.html>.

68. See Federico Pita, "El negro bufón," *Página/12* (Buenos Aires), 24 June 2015.

69. See especially Ko, "From Whiteness."

culture (in theater, music, literature, and iconography) hailed as authentic and quintessentially national.<sup>70</sup>

In this context, Raúl's stark blackness helped situate him as a referent for a new definition of *negro* that did not primarily reference African origin. As noted earlier, in the early twentieth century Argentines began referring to people like Raúl who fit the narrow set of visual characteristics still associated with Afro-diasporic blackness as *negros negros* (another common term was *negros mota*, referring to tightly coiled hair). The need to distinguish this kind of blackness stemmed from the emergence, in the early decades of the twentieth century, of a new category of blackness in Buenos Aires: what historian and anthropologist Lea Geler has usefully called *negritud popular*. Being a *negro* in the popular sense did not require African descent or dark skin, although many thus labeled indeed had phenotypes signaling indigenous or African ancestry (or both). Nor did *negro*, when used in this context, function as an explicitly racial descriptor or a mark of racial descent. Rather, this kind of blackness was about what Geler calls "ways of being," a complex amalgam of performances of class, culture, behavior, appearance, geographic origin, gender, and nationality, among others. In early twentieth-century Buenos Aires, even as *negros negros* were said to disappear, traits long associated with Afro-diasporic blackness—poverty, physicality, lasciviousness, vulgarity, criminality, filth, grotesqueness, barbarism, and political primitivism—were gradually transferred to the popular classes as a whole, as was the concept of blackness. This resignification of *negro* mobilized earlier derogatory meanings of blackness to stigmatize a broad segment of the urban population (including many Afro-Argentines who no longer counted as *negros negros*); though formally part of the modern white nation, their ways of being marked them as not yet qualified for full citizenship.<sup>71</sup> In these years Raúl, with his extremely visible and hyperbolic blackness, acted as a hinge between these different meanings of *negro*.

70. Geler, *Andares*; Castro, *Afro-Argentine*; Chasteen, *National Rhythms*; Geler, "Un personaje"; Karush, "Blackness"; Adamovsky, "La cuarta función"; Solomianski, *Identidades secretas*.

71. For this argument, see especially Geler, "African Descent"; Geler, "Afrodescendencia"; Geler, *Andares*. These meanings of *negro*—still in use today—are commonly assumed to have emerged during the nationalist-populist regime of Juan Domingo Perón in the mid-twentieth century, but their roots go back much further. On the evolution of the non-African meanings of *negro* during the twentieth century, see Frigerio, "Luis D'Elia"; Adamovsky, "El color"; Elena, "Argentina"; Gordillo, "Savage"; Milanesio, "Peronists."

Perhaps nowhere was this new definition of blackness, or its deployment in the context of Raúl's parallel lives, clearer than in political opposition to the first presidency of Hipólito Yrigoyen (1916–1922), the first leader elected through universal male suffrage and secret ballot. The expansion of the popular sectors' participation in formal politics in these years led many of Yrigoyen's conservative opponents to tar him and his followers as *negros* (and as *indios*, highlighting the terms' often-convergent meanings).<sup>72</sup> Raúl's unmistakable blackness, notoriety, and suspiciously fast upward mobility became resources for denunciations of the expanded electorate and related sociopolitical tensions. In 1916, for example, Raúl's character appeared on the porteño stage in Julio Escobar's play *La paisana* as a protégé of Yrigoyen, who has secured him a job as a congressional orderly (a sinecure in which Afro-Argentines were traditionally well represented) and further promised him a position as a *diputado*. Faced with his interlocutor's disbelief that "El negro Raúl" would become a congressman, Raúl responds, "Why not?! Haven't you seen the kind of diputados we have now?"<sup>73</sup> The scenario of a *negro negro* as congressman (presented as patently ridiculous) invites the audience to scoff at the presence in politics of groups that Argentina's middle and upper sectors perceived as equally *negro* in their barbarism and vulgarity. Yet here and elsewhere, using Raúl to highlight political indignation or absurdity simultaneously served as a reminder of the popular sectors' real and increasingly formalized political power.<sup>74</sup>

In his capacity as mediator between fluctuating definitions of blackness, Raúl also served as an object lesson for the emerging Argentine middle class. Middle-classness—which in these decades would become a defining feature of Argentine national identity—was inextricable from ideas about culture, education, urbanity, and whiteness. Specifically, as scholars have demonstrated, it was constructed partly in opposition to the purported barbarism and blackness of popular sectors, with their uncouth and politically unsuitable behaviors.<sup>75</sup> It is in this light that we can read the comic strip *Las aventuras del Negro Raúl* by cartoonist Arturo Lanteri, which ran in the magazine *El Hogar* for most of

72. See, for instance, Garguin, "‘Los Argentinos’"; Adamovsky, *Historia*, 96–97; Svampa, *El dilema*, 151–57.

73. Escobar, *La paisana*. Characters based on Raúl would appear in subsequent plays, such as César Tiempo's *El teatro soy yo* (1933) and Enzo Aloisi's *Negro bufón* (1958).

74. For example, "El loco dios en danza," *Crítica* (Buenos Aires), 11 Nov. 1916; "Sinapismos," *Crítica* (Buenos Aires), 2 May 1916; "Obstruccionismo en San Juan," *Crítica* (Buenos Aires), 4 Nov. 1914; Arturo Lanteri, "Las aventuras del Negro Raúl: En la ciénaga política," *El Hogar* (Buenos Aires), 15 Sept. 1916.

75. See especially Adamovsky, *Historia*; Garguin, "‘Los Argentinos.’"

1916. Lanteri, it would seem, deployed Raúl to educate *El Hogar's* broad readership (primarily women) about the racial and behavioral expectations encoded in middle-class status and to police its lower boundaries.<sup>76</sup> On the one hand, Raúl appears as a hapless victim of discrimination in the city, designed to garner some sympathy from readers. (Indeed, the character seems to have captured the imagination of children, a few of whom sent drawings of Raúl as their submissions to a leading magazine's drawing contest.)<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, the strip engages in unabashed racial stereotyping—informed by international trends but worked out for a local context—rendering Raúl in caricatured blackface style with outsize white lips, kinky hair, and lanky and uncontrollable limbs. It portrays him, as one scholar argues, through the derogatory figure of the “mono con frac” (monkey in a tuxedo) and as a pathetic “simulador” whose attempts to properly perform refinement, employment, political engagement, and leisure always fail spectacularly.<sup>78</sup> The tension between Raúl as sympathetic and repulsive seems to suggest Lanteri's desire to create a limited form of identification that ultimately encouraged distance, teaching readers aspiring to or perfecting their middle-class status to see themselves in Raúl just long enough to learn how not to behave.

At the same time that Lanteri's cartoons highlighted the boundaries separating the middle classes from the barbaric lower or popular classes, they also subtly cautioned against the arriviste desire to move too far into, or to slavishly emulate, the parasitic upper echelons of society. In this sense, it was Raúl's position in the world of popular blackness together with his attempts to cultivate an aristocratic style that made him useful. Like later authors who deployed Raúl's mistreatment by the niños to criticize the excesses of Buenos Aires's waning oligarchy, Lanteri's cartoons—published just as middle- and lower-class sectors successfully challenged the oligarchy's grip on power—satirized the morally decadent *crème de la crème* of porteño society, with their ostentatious displays of wealth in public spaces like Calle Florida or in Pantagruelian “five o'clock teas” at elegant cafés.<sup>79</sup> From this emerging middle-class

76. Gutiérrez, *La historieta*. See Frigerio, “Sin otro delito,” on the similar function of the contemporary magazine *Caras y Caretas*.

77. See submissions by D. Juárez and Epifanio Salinas in “Concurso de dibujos infantiles,” *Caras y Caretas* (Buenos Aires), 11 Nov. 1916 and 19 Apr. 1919.

78. Gutiérrez, *La historieta*, 75–76.

79. See, for instance, Arturo Lanteri, “Las aventuras del Negro Raúl: Five o'clock tea,” *El Hogar* (Buenos Aires), 28 Apr. 1916; Arturo Lanteri, “Las aventuras del Negro Raúl: En la Calle Florida,” *El Hogar* (Buenos Aires), 5 May 1916; Arturo Lanteri, “Las aventuras del Negro Raúl: El VI Salón Nacional,” *El Hogar* (Buenos Aires), 20 Oct. 1916.

perspective, such excess was reprehensible and the aspiration to it by people of more modest backgrounds in bad taste. Lanteri's cartoons, like many of Raúl's post-1930s afterlives, might thus be read as middle-class morality tales that defined middle-classness against the behaviors of upper and lower sectors and as firmly white.

Even amid these transformations, however, Afro-diasporic blackness continued to be invested with authenticity, cachet, and sexual appeal, especially in the worlds of popular music and theater.<sup>80</sup> In this sense, the absorption of Afro-diasporic blackness into a broader *negritud* popular in this period produced an ambivalent, rather than simply celebratory, narrative about the disappearance of Afro-Argentines. Such ambivalence marks these early accounts of Raúl as well. A 1916 vignette in the gossipy police section of the Buenos Aires tabloid *Crítica*, for instance, hints at Raúl's attractiveness to women. It describes a (fictional?) late-night scene at an elegant bar, in which the drunken *niños bien* carouse with a group of young French *gigolettes*, or escorts.<sup>81</sup> The scene opens with one of the men coercing the *gigolette* Lulú to dance; he becomes increasingly violent as she resists his advances. Just when the *niño* vows to kill Lulú for refusing him, Raúl walks in, and the young *francesas* enthusiastically shift their attentions to him. Lulú whispers into Raúl's ear what we infer to be a suggestive proposition, and then the other women take turns making similar requests. The intimacy is broken when another *niño* abruptly invites Raúl to join them for a drive around town. When Raúl unsuspectingly agrees, the young man ties him to the grill of the car. Raúl protests to no avail, and the group drives off in hysterics.<sup>82</sup> The story deploys stereotypes of black male lasciviousness and prostitutes' deviant sexuality and puts Raúl firmly back in his place, but it simultaneously acknowledges Raúl as a competitor in the struggle for these women's attentions.

In the abovementioned play *La paisana*, moreover, in addition to serving as a tool for conservative political critique Raúl takes a turn as the urbane and savvy companion to the male lead. Neither intellectually disabled nor a devious con man, he is an authentic popular voice, commenting acerbically on both the *niños bien* and the money-seeking women accompanying them. His character thus voices the central concerns of the nascent tango, whose lyrics deeply mined the theme of lower-class male friendships built around lamentations about unfaithful women who left them for flashier types. In these accounts, the

80. Karush, "Blackness"; Karush, "Black"; Geler, "Un personaje."

81. On pseudo-French prostitutes in this period, see Guy, *Sex*, 46.

82. "Garufiendo," *Crítica* (Buenos Aires), 18 Jan. 1916, 24 Dec. 1916.

suffering induced in less powerful men by their wealthier counterparts and the women who consorted with them was a sign of authentic manhood—a trope reproduced, though tenuously, in the anecdote that ends with Raúl bound to a car.<sup>83</sup>

Raúl, then, is at once a symbol of the kinds of blackness that political conservatives and middle-class commentators demonized in the 1910s and 1920s and quintessentially Argentine by the standards of the period's popular culture. The stories that multiplied around him at the height of his visibility reveal the filaments of both horror and fascination with blackness that were subtly woven throughout Argentine politics and culture in these years. Decades later, essayist Ezequiel Martínez Estrada contemptuously looked back on Raúl's appeal in precisely these terms: "El Negro Raúl," he claimed, was "a slave to the fad that took root among young lads who lacked any decorum, long before Josephine Baker became all the rage; [he was the] idol of the adorers of tango, *candombe*, and *catunga*."<sup>84</sup> Though Martínez Estrada found this turn-of-the-century embrace of black culture revolting, associating it with a line of barbaric populism fomented by leaders from Rosas to Perón, the "fad" that he identified suggests that Raúl, like other black figures, could be recruited as a symbol of a criollo and essentially Argentine national culture—a riposte to both the Europeanizing pretensions of elites and the cosmopolitan cultures brought by immigrants.<sup>85</sup>

Raúl's afterlives, constructed in retrospect at a time when he was presumed to have vanished, tended to reinforce a by-then commonsense view that Argentina was pristinely white. In those post-1930 accounts, many of which frame Raúl as a legend of a bygone Buenos Aires, he appears as the last example of a vanishing race, impossibly present in and ultimately insufficient for the modern metropolis. But the parallel lives that authors, cartoonists, and lyricists constructed about him in the 1910s and 1920s reveal that this common sense was still a work in progress, highlighting the unevenness of the process of whitening as it took place. These stories reflect the continued, ambivalent role

83. Savigliano, "Whiny Ruffians."

84. Martínez Estrada, *La cabeza*, 154. *Candombe* is the Afro-Argentine music and dance form that flourished in the nineteenth century and experienced a revival, thanks to cultural nationalism, in the early twentieth century; *catunga* is an offensive term used in parts of Spanish America and Brazil to refer to the supposedly distinct body odor of people of African origin.

85. See also Martínez Estrada, *¿Qué es esto?*, 178. On *criollismo* and cultural nationalism, see especially Prieto, *El discurso criollista*; Delaney, "Imagining"; Bockelman, "Between the Gaucho."



of Afro-diasporic blackness in constructing new ideas of national identity, both for those who denigrated blackness and those who idealized it as a marker of creole authenticity. And as part of the processes by which blackness came to be seen as a set of modifiable behavioral or cultural traits rather than primarily biological or phenotypical ones, these stories add to an emerging picture of how Argentina's whiteness was painstakingly constructed through the uneven incorporation and mixture of people of different cultural and ethnic origins rather than simply through their exclusion or elimination.<sup>86</sup>

### Possible Lives (1886–1955)

The notion that Raúl came from nowhere or that his origins were unknowable became an important theme in the stories surrounding him, especially after the 1930s. But it is, of course, ridiculous. There is an ample documentary record of his life. Uncovering this evidence shows that some of his biographers occasionally got parts of the story right but also highlights something that generally escaped them: his embeddedness in family, community, and (for better or worse) state institutions. The consistent presentation of an inexplicable or foreshortened genealogy shows storytellers' commitment to the conceit that Raúl was, racially speaking, *sui generis* and to making invisible the broader world from which he came. The few accounts that attempted to create a backdrop for his life imputed conditions that authors considered typical of blacks, such as poverty, orphanhood, or the squalor of a *conventillo* (tenement).<sup>87</sup> In fact, Raúl Pascual Grigera was born on October 23, 1886, the legitimate son of don Estanislao Antonio Grigera and doña Alejandra Ainas.<sup>88</sup> Raúl's parents lived on 1283 Calle México in the neighborhood of Monserrat, so he did come from the southern barrios, as many writers knew or imagined. His father, Estanislao, was the organist of the nearby church of La Inmaculada Concepción, where Raúl and at least nine of his siblings were baptized.<sup>89</sup> He was clearly

86. On this topic, see Alberto and Elena, "Introduction."

87. Contreras, *Buenos Aires*, 107; Korembli, "Tríptico."

88. Pascual Raul Gripera [sic], 19 Jan. 1887, "Argentina, Capital Federal, registros parroquiales, 1737-1977," FamilySearch, accessed 14 Apr. 2016, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XXN68-WYJ>; Raúl Pascual Grigera, certificate of birth, 26 Oct. 1886, Archivo General del Registro Civil de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires (hereafter cited as AGRCCBA), fols. 297-98.

89. Details of Estanislao's employment are from *La Broma* (Buenos Aires), 10 Dec. 1881, p. 3; *La Broma* (Buenos Aires), 29 Nov. 1882, p. 3. *La Broma* was an Afro-porteño newspaper. I have found baptismal records for nine siblings; other evidence points to the birth of at least two more siblings (one of whom died before baptism). At least three of Raúl's siblings reached advanced adulthood.

not—as some stories assert—an only child.<sup>90</sup> Some accounts also claimed that Raúl went astray when his father died prematurely, yet his father lived to be 78.<sup>91</sup> Raúl, moreover, came from a fairly distinguished family in the Afro-porteño community. Estanislao was not just a church organist but a well-regarded classical musician, composer, and piano teacher.<sup>92</sup> Adding to the family's relative economic stability, Estanislao and Alejandra had inherited their modest single-family home from Estanislao's family (a multigenerational history that is fascinating in its own right).<sup>93</sup>

Estanislao Grigera, Raúl's father, was active in the political and associational life of the Afro-porteño community. In 1880, he acted as a "delegate of the people of color" alongside more famous Afro-porteños like writer Casildo G. Thompson, musician Zenón Rolón, and poet and journalist Froilán Bello to protest, through petitions and letters to the municipality and the press, an incident of racial discrimination that barred "gente de color" from a recreational establishment.<sup>94</sup> These political bonds extended to his personal life. Arístides Oliveira and Casildo G. Thompson, for instance, fellow delegates of the people of color in the protests, were baptismal godfathers to Raúl and his sister Feliza, respectively.<sup>95</sup> Many Afro-porteño thinkers in Estanislao's generation fought, through newspapers and community organizations, to become racially and culturally unmarked and to demonstrate their capacity to be lettered, responsible citizens. As Lea Geler argues, by emphasizing what they understood to be the norms of civilized behavior and culture over biology or

90. See, for instance, Barsky, "Balada"; Algorta, "La negra historia."

91. These accounts include Juan José Vieytes, "Comunicación académica n° 1550: El Negro Raúl," *Academia Porteña del Lunfardo*, 22 Oct. 2001, <http://www.geocities.ws/lunfa2000/1550.html>; Pintos, *Así*, 55. Estanislao Antonio Grigera, certificate of death, 15 Feb. 1935, AGRCCBA, fol. 228.

92. Héctor Pedro Blomberg, "Los negros de Buenos Aires," *¡Aquí Está!* (Buenos Aires), 21 Apr. 1949, pp. 18–19, 23; Arana, "¿Te acordás?"

93. The house at 1283 Calle México was donated in 1834 to Raúl's paternal grandmother (then only three years old) by the woman who held the girl's grandmother and mother in bondage (as a slave and a *liberta*, respectively) as inducement to keep the legally free young girl in her service until adulthood. This arrangement informally mirrored the terms of *liberta* status that applied to children freed by the 1813 Law of the Free Womb. Alberto, "*Liberta*."

94. Soler Cañas, "Pardos," 280.

95. Feliza Alejandrina Grigera, 11 Dec. 1887, "Argentina, Capital Federal, registros parroquiales, 1737–1977," FamilySearch, accessed 30 Mar. 2016, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XXN68-DZF>; Pascual Raul Gripera [*sic*], 19 Jan. 1887, "Argentina, Capital Federal, registros parroquiales, 1737–1977," FamilySearch, accessed 14 Apr. 2016, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XXN68-WYJ>.

appearance and by seeking to discipline other community and family members to do the same, Afro-porteño intellectuals actively shaped their group's seeming disappearance.<sup>96</sup> This form of leadership sometimes put them at odds with their broader community. An article in the Afro-porteño newspaper *La Juventud* of January 1879, for instance, recounts an attack on Estanislao Grigera by another man of color for appearing in public wearing a top hat.<sup>97</sup> In an Afro-porteño community gripped by struggles over collective identity and destiny, it seems that Estanislao was singled out for betraying—in his sartorial choices and their attendant bourgeois values—a competing vision of the community that identified more closely with the working classes and other nonhegemonic ideals.

Estanislao's own embrace of sartorial, professional, and political respectability as means toward full, racially unmarked citizenship provides a clue to the strict standards and expectations that he likely set for his children. What might it have meant to Estanislao to have a son who so flagrantly failed to meet these standards and who, moreover, came to be known publicly as “el negro”—a term, with its connotations of savagery, vulgarity, and stupidity, from which so many Afro-porteño intellectuals fervently sought to distance themselves and their community?<sup>98</sup> According to Raúl in an interview that he gave to the press later in life, Estanislao was a strict father who “did a lot of hitting.” Raúl added that his father “had me locked up in Marcos Paz until I was eighteen”—a reference to the Colonia Nacional de Menores Varones de Marcos Paz, a famous reformatory. Asked why he was sent there, Raúl is quoted as saying, “I really liked the party life.” His interviewer added that “he says it mischievously, and he confesses that he did not like to work.”<sup>99</sup>

According to the reformatory's records, Raúl Grigera was interned there from October 1906 to November 1908 (from ages 19 to 21), when he reached the maximum legal age for confinement and was released to his father.<sup>100</sup> State institutions created their own set of stories around Raúl's life, some of which resonate with his account. His file at Marcos Paz notes that he was sent there

96. Geler, *Andares*. See also Andrews, *Afro-Argentines*; Lewis, *Afro-Argentine Discourse*.

97. Geler, *Andares*, 234.

98. See, for instance, Zenón Rolón's message to his fellow Afro-porteños cautioning them to avoid acting in ways that would incur white porteños' use of the infamous (but very common) phrase “ha hecho cosa de negro.” Quoted in *ibid.*, 107.

99. Arana, “¿Te acordás?”

100. Colonia Nacional de Menores Varones de Marcos Paz, Buenos Aires, Registro de Menores (1904), leg. 66 (Raúl Grigera). Deepest thanks to María Laura Catalano for helping me get access to the institution's records.

“for spending too much time on the streets, being disobedient, and keeping bad company.” Although it was the Ministerio de Justicia that confined him (indefinitely) to the reformatory, this particular language suggests that it was most likely his father Estanislao who requested the ministry’s intervention and institutional resources to help set his son straight. Such “paternal correction” of unruly children was a legal and fairly common practice, especially among lower-income families.<sup>101</sup> The reformatory at Marcos Paz, inaugurated in 1905 in a rural area far removed from the city, quickly became a holding pen for a vast array of minors, a legal category increasingly associated, in the thought and practice of authorities, with youth who did not fit the idealized definition of childhood and young adulthood (belonging to a traditional nuclear family, dutifully attending school, or working).<sup>102</sup> Raúl’s intake form at Marcos Paz reflects these value judgments (and, it seems, related assumptions about his *negro* skin and features, catalogued in detail) in proclaiming him to have a “low” degree of formal instruction and a “degenerate” appearance.<sup>103</sup>

It might be tempting, following the mental deficiency interpretation, to draw a direct line from the reformatory to the mental asylum where Raúl eventually died. But it is clear that his confinement in Marcos Paz was due to disciplinary reasons, and I have found no evidence of mental illness or intellectual disability early in his life. The census form for 1895, when Raúl was eight years old, notes that he attended school but did not yet know how to read and write. This might indicate slow development, but the corresponding box for “mental problems” was left blank.<sup>104</sup> Even his clinical file from Open Door, the rural mental hospital where he was institutionalized from 1942 until his death in 1955, provides no clear evidence about his mental state.<sup>105</sup> The psychological language that doctors employ is vague, and Raúl’s summary diagnosis of

101. The right to “corrección paterna” was guaranteed by Article 278 of the civil code; its one-month limit was frequently exceeded at parents’ request. Freidenraij, “Por los vericuetos.”

102. Zapiola, “‘¿Es realmente una colonia?’”; Zapiola, “Un lugar,” 151–256; Aversa, “Vagos.”

103. Colonia Nacional de Menores Varones de Marcos Paz, Buenos Aires, Registro de Menores (1904), leg. 66 (Raúl Grigera).

104. Raúl Grigera, 1895, “Argentina, National Census, 1895,” FamilySearch, accessed 14 Apr. 2016, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MW7J-7JS7>.

105. Raúl Grigeras o Lijeras [*sic*], clinical file (*boletín civil*) number 19367, 1942–1955, patient file repository of the Colonia Nacional de Alienados “Doctor Domingo Cabred,” n.p. (hereafter cited as Grigeras, *boletín civil*.) I am grateful to Dedier Norberto Marquiegui for clues on how to access this file and to Carlos Peñalba for helping me unearth it from the basement of this institution.

“imbecility” is permeated by prejudices about his race, class, and level of education (“general appearance: *stupid*”; “face: *typical of blacks*”; “skin: *black, foul-smelling*”; and “spoken language: *puerile*”).<sup>106</sup> Though this is too complex a document to analyze fully here, Raúl’s decades-long record of medical treatment at this facility reflects attention to primarily physical rather than mental ailments. Two brief mentions in his file of senile dementia and alcoholism suggest that what passed for “imbecility,” especially toward the end of Raúl’s life, could in fact have been senility, depression (from the toll taken by decades of homelessness and mistreatment), and the long-term effects of alcohol abuse.

The stories depicting Raúl as a chronically unemployed vagrant are, similarly, partially true at best. The above-cited interview from 1947 paraphrases Raúl as saying that “he knows the trade of mechanic, which he learned when he was a boy” at a shop not far from his home.<sup>107</sup> Raúl’s file in Marcos Paz lists him as having the skills of a blacksmith, which he could well have used or learned as an apprentice in a mechanical shop. In this interview (and in his clinical file for Open Door), he also reports having been an employee at the city’s water utility and in the lower ranks of the city police. The interviewer dismissed these claims as dreams or the addle-brained recollections of a practical joke at the hands of the *niños bien*. But it’s not at all unlikely that someone from a respectable Afroporteño family like the Grigeras could have worked at government jobs like these—precisely in which many members of the Afroporteño community found employment, often through patronage relationships.<sup>108</sup> Raúl’s *pronuario*, or centralized police record, lists his self-reported employment for each of 19 incidents between 1907 and 1942. It, too, records Raúl claiming to be a blacksmith in 1907; future entries alternate among a range of fixed or temporary jobs (“mucamo” [houseboy], “jornalero” [day laborer], and “changador” [porter / worker of odd jobs] or “mozo de cordel” [porter]) and “no

106. *Ibid.* This reading dovetails with the scholarship on mental health institutions in twentieth-century Argentina, which has demonstrated the role of poverty, alcoholism, homelessness, foreignness, homosexuality, race, and other markers of social nonnormativity in defining mental illness and in determining who was confined. See Vezzetti, *La locura*; Salessi, *Médicos*; Ablard, “Law”; Ablard, *Madness*; Rodríguez, *Civilizing Argentina*. On Open Door specifically, see Di Liscia, Bassa, and Billourou, “Institutional Confinement”; Marquiegui, “Las mil caras.”

107. Arana, “¿Te acordás?”

108. Andrews, *Afro-Argentines*; Geler, *Andares*. A search in the police personnel archives conducted on my behalf, however, has not yet yielded confirmation. It is possible that Raúl was not a formal *agente*, as he claimed, but a casual informant for the police, trading information in exchange for a modicum of protection. (I am indebted to Lila Caimari for this insight.)

occupation.”<sup>109</sup> It is conceivable that Raúl began his working life as an apprentice (assisting the neighborhood mechanic) after his days at school, like many non-elite children, and that his father (his hands full after his wife’s death in 1905) sent him to the reformatory when this didn’t yield the expected disciplining results.<sup>110</sup> Or perhaps after Raúl returned from Marcos Paz, Estanislao helped him get various jobs, attempting to set him on the straight and narrow path.

Strikingly, what we can discern of his early life shows not birth in predictable poverty followed by a sudden rise in status as a result of friendship with the niños bien but rather a kind of racialized downward mobility. From his respectable family, Raúl descended into the city’s nightlife and underworld (with a stint in the reformatory somewhere in between) and from there to multiple police detentions, two 22-day jail terms for vagrancy, and three psychiatric institutions.<sup>111</sup> This trajectory has to do with individual choices, no doubt, but also with the narrowing spaces and roles available for a visibly and publicly black man in Argentina at the time that he came of age. By the 1910s, when Raúl made his mark on the porteño scene, the activism of Estanislao Grigera and other Afro-porteño leaders of his generation, in concert with dominant ideologies, had largely succeeded in producing the disappearance of Afro-Argentines as a distinct community of racial descent by emphasizing proper behavior as an avenue toward partial inclusion in the white nation. None of Raúl’s brothers and sisters, for example, appear to have been publicly marked by a buffoonish blackness like Raúl. Their life trajectories emerge much more faintly from the historical record, some of them muted by anonymity and unremarkability, others by quiet respectability: Luis Estanislao, for instance, the oldest and the one whose trail is most discernible, was a musician, an accomplished pianist like his father. By the mid-1910s, he was married and living in the reputable neighborhood of Flores, offering piano lessons. He was remembered, decades later, by a journalist who noted that “Grijeras Ainas” was a man of fine features, elegantly musical fingers, and impeccable and “almost

109. Policía de la Capital, Buenos Aires, prontuario 1.631.733 (Raúl Pascual Grigera). Deepest thanks to Comisario Inspector Eugenio Zappietro, director of the Museo y Archivo Histórico de la Policía Federal, for making this document available after a lengthy search in the police files, which are not accessible to the public.

110. Zapiola, “Los niños.”

111. Raúl was also hauled into *comisarias* across the city for contraventions ranging from gambling, carrying a weapon, defacing public transportation, public drunkenness, indecency or disorderly behavior, and begging. Policía de la Capital, Buenos Aires, prontuario 1.631.733 (Raúl Pascual Grigera). Before Raúl arrived at Open Door, he spent brief stints in the psychiatric wing of the city’s Hospital Alvear and in the Hospicio de las Mercedes, the urban mental institution for which Open Door served as overflow. Grigeras, boletín civil.

aristocratic” manners in whom the only trace of “African ancestry” was the duskiness of his skin. Though this writer marveled at the mysterious disappearance of Buenos Aires’s “morenos” during the twentieth century, in describing Luis Estanislao the author identified precisely the performative mechanisms for moving away from blackness.<sup>112</sup> These were narrow straits to navigate, however. While Luis Estanislao Grigera apparently succeeded in downplaying his African ancestry through a quietly respectable life as a professional classical musician, men of color perceived as uppity, bombastic, or crossing other tacit behavioral boundaries could exacerbate their blackness and trigger vicious attacks on their reputations.<sup>113</sup>

It is possible that Raúl’s appearance would have barred him from following his father’s and brother’s paths into racially unmarked respectability or whiteness, even had he desired it.<sup>114</sup> Yet judging from his trajectory from adolescence onward, it seems likely that Raúl rejected his father’s (and perhaps siblings’) class and behavioral expectations altogether and aspired to a more unconventional lifestyle. If so, what options were open to him, given the racial stories that circulated so powerfully around him? Raúl chose, for reasons that are still unclear to me and perhaps undiscoverable, not to blend quietly into the acceptable spaces for Afro-Argentines either as anonymously respectable or as modestly appreciated in certain niches of popular culture. Whatever the reason, he chose instead to dress up and to stand out, to trade on his singularity, especially his blackness, and to fashion his own path and public persona. The story about Raúl has become that he was a pathetic clown—a “laughable secondhand dandy.”<sup>115</sup> Yet was this the image that he intended to transmit? Aware that I am venturing ever further into my own racial storytelling, I will point out that the stories about Raúl as victimized buffoon suffer from an excess of cruelty that calls attention to itself. To imagine him voluntarily remaining in this world when his family surely pleaded with him to return to theirs, there must have been an economy of cruelty: times when the niños viciously abused Raúl and put

112. Máximo Aguirre, “El destino color de piel,” *La Prensa* (Buenos Aires), 9 Jan. 1972. See also Estanislao L. Grigera [sic], 1895, “Argentina, censo nacional, 1895,” FamilySearch, accessed 8 Apr. 2016, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MW77-JSS> (his profession was listed as “músico”).

113. See Lea Geler’s account of the transformation in this period of the reputation of the renowned Afro-porteño musician Zenón Rolón in Geler, “Afrodescendencia.” For a discussion of similar dynamics in Brazil, see Hertzman, *Making Samba*, 66–93.

114. Estanislao Grigera’s death certificate listed him (incorrectly) as “Italian.” Estanislao Antonio Grigera, certificate of death, 15 Feb. 1935, AGRCCBA, fol. 228.

115. “El Negro Raúl, un risible.”

him in his place, and times when Raúl felt that he was tolerated, needed, or even appreciated.<sup>116</sup> Without this balance, the relationship—and the stories themselves—make no sense, except as racist fables.

When I spoke with Hugo Lamadrid about the stories about El Negro Raúl that circulated in his prominent Afro-porteño family, he explained that “[telling] them where and where not to go” was “his employment, his job.”<sup>117</sup> This confirmed my emerging alternative narrative—that Raúl acted partly as an entertainer, partly as a guide for these privileged young white men through the underworld of porteño nightlife and popular culture, a world in which black Argentines still occupied important, if diminished, roles. A few of Raúl’s afterlives provide hints about this possible form of employment, noting that Raúl could produce a pack of cigarettes for his protectors as easily as he could arrange an encounter with a prostitute.<sup>118</sup> More importantly, he may also have provided cultural capital, and a sense of belonging and authenticity, to the white niños in neighborhoods or establishments that they could not typically or safely frequent. This bargain would still have been unequal, iniquitous, and determined by racial stories about what black men were like. This version of the story also, I admit, has faint resemblances to the tropes of “black best friend” or “magical Negro” that scholars have identified in US popular culture and strong resemblances to scholarly narratives about Afro-descendants as important cultural mediators or cultural insiders across the Americas.<sup>119</sup> But this interpretation is more plausible than dominant ones and does not require ideas of racial degeneration, imbecility, or atavism to explain Raúl’s behavior. If we are to believe the words attributed to him in his clinical file from Open Door, an aging Raúl himself told doctors that “when he was young, he got together with the ‘niños bien’ of the city, whom he served as a laughingstock and who induced him to engage in grotesque acts and sexual perversions.” Despite the

116. Notably, during probate proceedings in 1921 over the estate of Raúl’s mother (Alejandra Ainas, who had died years earlier), Raúl’s father and siblings ensured that Raúl could inherit (they could not locate his birth certificate, so his family and the court arranged sworn declarations to prove filiation). Under the circumstances, it would have been easy to disown him. At that time Raúl also listed his parental home as his address, suggesting ongoing contact with his family even at the height of his fame as a *personaje callejero*. Alejandra Ainas de Grigera, probate proceedings (*sucesión*), Archivo General del Poder Judicial de la Nación, Buenos Aires, Departamento Civil/Sucesorio (Buenos Aires), file no. 9208.

117. Hugo Lamadrid, in discussion with the author, Buenos Aires, Sept. 2013.

118. “Hacia una mitología.”

119. On these figures in US popular culture, see Gabbard, *Black Magic*; on Afro-descendants as cultural mediators elsewhere, see Vianna, *Mystery*; Hertzman, *Making Samba*; Silva, *Dom Obá II*.



convergence of this account with the avalanche of stories told about him, the doctors used it against him as evidence of Raúl's "congenitally debilitated judgment and reasoning capacities," "puerility," and "marked suggestibility and credulity."<sup>120</sup> Could it be that there was a tone of ownership, pride, and even vanity in Raúl's account of his former fame—of his willing service to the niños—that made the story unthinkable to his interlocutors as more than the ravings of a madman?

I want to end by revisiting the source that first introduced me to Raúl, one of very few documents that Raúl himself directly helped create. It is a photograph of him probably from the early 1910s, precisely the time when Raúl dressed up as a dandy (figure 2). If we believe subsequent accounts, Raúl was sporting out-of-season secondhand clothes given to him by his benefactors. The photo, taken in a studio against an elegant trompe l'oeil backdrop, might itself be the product of one of the many pranks to which the niños subjected him. (Or did Raúl arrange and pay for it himself, an echo of his father's own elegant *carte de visite* of earlier years?)<sup>121</sup> Whatever the circumstances of its production, this picture suggests that laughableness is in the eye of the beholder. Raúl's image is not intrinsically grotesque or ridiculous; he cuts a handsome figure, proud and even defiant. Was dressing up in this attire, in his eyes, a claim to dignity? Was it mere simulation of his betters? Was it a tacit acknowledgment of the influence of his father, who had been physically attacked for dressing ostentatiously, as Raúl did here? Or was it, more pointedly, a declaration of independence from his father's bourgeois work ethic, flaunting his freedom by achieving the same results through alternate means? I'm not sure that we can ever know. But I think this picture and Raúl's evident care in curating his own image force us to question assertions of his absurdity and think about the effort that contemporary and subsequent observers put into making him absurd—into ensuring that his performance failed—through a long-lived cycle of repetitive racial stories. Some of the ambiguity surrounding the character of Raúl while he was still visible may be due not just to the fluidity of the period's racial ideologies but also to the fact that, in contemporary representations, Raúl was able to participate—if only to a limited extent—in constructing and shaping his public persona. This multivocality decreases markedly over time as El Negro Raúl's story is distorted at the service of other narratives, stripping him of any self-representation and authorship that he may once have exercised.

120. Grigeras, boletín civil.

121. See Blomberg, "Los negros."

Figure 2. "El Negro Raúl"  
(n.d., ca. 1910). Courtesy of  
Archivo General de la Nación,  
Dpto. Doc. Fotográficos,  
Buenos Aires, Argentina.



This is one possible life. Raúl, rejecting his father's standards of behavior and drawn to bohemian leisure activities, capitalizes on an idea of black authenticity to create a role for himself in the social world of the *niños bien*. His relationship with them reflects his relative lack of power but is not wholly abject. But by becoming visible in ways that contradict the rules for black disappearance, he makes himself a target of the city's racial storytellers, who relentlessly construct semifictional lives for and about him. Raúl was not free to fix the meanings of his performance or the tenor of his celebrity. The racial, class, and cultural meanings of *negro* overdetermined how he would be seen, in his time and beyond. At Raúl's expense, these racial stories performed valuable work for dominant ideologies of racial and cultural whiteness throughout the twentieth century. They helped crystallize certain negative traits and behaviors associated with blackness, affixing them to a hypervisible, phenotypically black man portrayed as an anomaly in the white nation. In so doing, and to the extent

that they derided Raúl's way of life and celebrated his sad fate, these stories reaffirmed the idea of the disappearance of Afro-Argentines and preserved the nation's whiteness. But the stories bore repeating because, like the revenant Raúl, the specter of blackness lingered and shifted shape. In a century marked by the appearance of a new set of *negros*, the stories also served as cautionary tales regarding the scorn and exclusion awaiting those—regardless of race—who followed in Raúl's vulgar path. How many other racial stories like these, posing as nonfiction, have done similar work across the Americas? As they come to light, perhaps more inclusive racial stories, drawing on the affirmative power of narrative to produce empathy and induce change, will take their place.

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