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Race and the shantytown in a race-less country: *negros villeros*, whiteness and urban space in Argentina

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we look at the racialization of the people living in precarious and informal urbanizations known as villas in Argentina. In a country traditionally defined by narratives of whiteness and Europeanness, villeros have functioned as a central figure of racial otherness. Though some studies acknowledge the racism suffered by villeros, how this racialization has unfolded and transformed over time remains a question rarely examined. Here, we look at their racialization focusing on two critical moments. First, the period including the 1950s and 1960s when villeros emerged as racialized figures in need of modernization. Second, the period of neoliberal reforms in the 1990s when villeros shifted from being subjects requiring civilizing to becoming a security threat to be dealt with by police force. By contrasting these two regimes of (hyper)visibility and racialization of villeros, we demonstrate that the villas are not a specific type of urban development but a diversity of urbanizations brought together by a set of approaches to the spatialized production and management of racial and classist exclusion. Finally, we argue that it is mainly in cultural production that the dynamics of racialization materialize and become susceptible to contestation.

In November 2016, a story broke out in the Argentine press about an 18-year-old youth named Tomás Beccar Varela. He was hailed as an example of altruism. A few months earlier, a burglar broke into Tomás' family house in San Isidro (a wealthy Buenos Aires neighborhood) and threatened the Beccar Varelas at knifepoint. The thief, 19-year-old Javier Cardozo, escaped in the family automobile, making a run to La Cava, a precarious urbanization where he lived. He was intercepted by the police and captured after a shootout. In prison, Javier received an unexpected visit from Tomás, who invited him to join a rugby team for inmates that promoted social reintegration through sport. The photograph of the two youths with arms around each other that circulated widely in the media (see Figure 1) accentuated the inspirational nature of this story of reconciliation. Interestingly, the photo's caption in the media did not specify who was who in the picture. Clarifying their identities seemed unnecessary: any viewer remotely familiar with

Figure 1. Photograph of Javier Cardozo (left) and Tomás Beccar Varela (right) by Bernardo Beccar Varela. Reproduced with permission.

Argentine social dynamics could tell that the white youth was Tomás and the dark-skinned one was Javier.

This self-evident quality of race-based social disparity, which easily distinguishes a middle- or upper-class person from someone from a villa (as precarious urbanizations are known in Argentina), seems to be at odds with the scarce references to race in Argentine public discourses. While media outlets stated Javier's poor background as the reason that led him to criminality, there was no single allusion to race or racism in any of the news articles.

One could venture that, in this case, race did not matter. Nonetheless, there was an unexamined assumption that the viewer would determine who was who by contrasting skin color, facial features, and clothing style – among other traits that are, locally, racial signifiers. Race did matter. It did so substantially for those writing the articles and for the reading public. The omission of the mention of race in the caption, therefore, should not be read as a sign of race's supposed unimportance or as a politically correct or 'post-racial' perspective. The reason is that the existence of racism against inhabitants of precarious urbanizations like Javier (known as villeros) has systematically been denied, even when it is continuously reproduced, as this example shows. Generally speaking, their marginalization is presented in official and everyday discourses, sometimes by villeros

themselves, as defined by the intersection of class (being poor) and space (living in the villas). While we agree about the centrality of these two elements in the shaping of villeros' positions within dominant Argentine imaginaries and social dynamics, we argue that villeros' situations can only be fully understood by taking race into consideration. Indeed, a majority of villeros have phenotypically non-white features and mixed-race ancestry.[1] This contrasts with middle- and upper-class urban spaces, which are inhabited mainly by self-identified white people of European descent.[2] In the villas, as we will explain, even light-skinned people are automatically racialized as non-white.

As Scorer (2017) indicates, it is a complex task to explain what an Argentine 'villa' is, given that the term is used for different urbanizations, including shantytowns, slums, and stigmatized working-class neighborhoods. We understand villas as a diversity of urban spaces subjected to the production and management of social and racial marginality (Vivaldi 2019; Martin, Pendall, and Fulton 2002). Thus, we consider the villa not only as a space of poverty or racial exclusion, but as a specific modality of spatialized reproduction of Argentine racial relations. In suggesting this, we want to contribute to visibilizing and problematizing the intersections of race with class and space that, we claim, define the particular place villeros occupy in the Argentine racial formation.

In the US context, authors like Goldberg (1993), Loïc Wacquant (2008), and Saidiya Hartman (2019) have demonstrated that urban segregation is a mechanism for the production of racial divisions and differences. In Argentina, spatial-racial divisions have not resulted from explicitly racist policies. Thus, while the creation of racialized spaces in Argentina echoes mechanisms in other urban locations, we follow Kessler (2012) in arguing that the specifics of the Argentine racial formation make the process of racialized exclusion in villas quite particular. If Afro-Argentines are said to have disappeared in the nineteenth century, and Indigenous people are portrayed as being very minimal, the villero constitutes a figure of racial otherness that operates in a logic of proximity/distance with regards to the white urban middle and upper classes.[3] As we will show, villeros constitute a main threat to the stability of the prototypical white national identity. They are subjected to particular dominant sectors-led mechanisms of racialization. To advance this argument, we analyze public, official, and media discourses and cultural products (literary works, music, and visual culture) as they reproduce lasting tropes in the racialization of villeros.

Our close reading of this corpus is organized around what Wade and Moreno-Figueroa (2022) call 'alternative grammars of racism' and 'racially aware class consciousness.' With these expressions, they refer to dynamics that do not explicitly center on racism or anti-racism but instead address wider structural inequalities in which the role of racial difference is circuitously recognized. Our class-based analytics of race will follow a diachronic approach. Many studies that touch on the racism suffered by villeros tend to present their racialization as non-whites as a fixed fact, thus unwittingly reproducing what Omi and Winant (1994) describe as a racial 'common sense' that sidelines how this racialization came to be and continuities to change over time. One of this article's main contributions is to address racialization as a historically dynamic process: we examine two critical moments in the racial (re)construction of villas and their inhabitants. Firstly, the 1950s and 1960s, when villas and villeros emerged as racialized spaces and figures in need of modernization. Secondly, the 1990s and early twenty-first century, a period of consolidation of neoliberal reforms during which the racial representations of villeros shifted from being regarded as subjects requiring civilizing to constituting a security threat. By

contrasting the racial imaginaries of villas articulated during these two time-periods, and the role of cultural expressions in their configurations, we venture to think about the work of racialization beyond ethnic identities.

This article arises from our participation in the Cultures of Anti-Racism in Latin America (CARLA) project, funded by the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The project, based at the University of Manchester, ran from January 2020 to January 2023. The ideas expressed here are indebted to exchanges with collaborating project team members and artists.[4] We are white middle-class Argentine researchers whose academic work has concentrated on building critiques of Argentine urban racism. When we mention villeros as 'them,' we do not intend to contribute to a process of othering. Here, we want to avoid ambiguities that would comfortably distance ourselves from white supremacy while we both work to be allies of villeros and anti-racist movements.

The Argentine racial formation

We turn, first, to set out the context for understanding villeros and the Argentine racial formation. Unpacking the racialization of villeros demands the use of a relational approach that also considers the racialization of Argentine whiteness as the dominant modality of imagined national identity. We also carefully examine the process of assimilation of people passing for whites, and its corresponding simultaneous erasure of Indigenous and Afro-descendant individuals and communities. Historically, the denial of the existence of racism in Argentina, or even the discussion or consideration of 'race' as a social criterion of any significance to make sense of social situations, has sustained the idea that white European immigration defines the prototypical Argentine character that emerged at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century (Joseph 2000; Quijada 2000; Garguin 2007; Alberto and Elena 2016; Ko 2014). That national narrative came along with the reproduction of the myth of the supposed 'extinction' of Afro-descendants, Indigenous, and mixed people through interracial mixing and the effects of wars and pandemics. Frontier expeditions by the national army to territories under Indigenous control brought these areas and their inhabitants under the orbit of state and capital. One of the major outcomes of these various processes of national affirmation was certainly that by the first decades of the twentieth century, Argentine non-whiteness was regarded as demographically irrelevant (Alberto and Elena 2016).

This whitening process was not unique to Argentina as many Latin American nations turned to European immigration to input whiteness into their multiracial populations to accelerate, so they hoped, the advent of progress and development (Telles and Flores 2014). When considering that regional trend, we can appreciate the many ideologies of national identity that reify mestizaje and white-mestizoness that flourished in many national contexts. That is when the case of Argentine stands out following the elites of the time's success in imposing a narration of the nation in terms of whiteness and European origins as opposed to inter-racial mixing (Anderson 2015; Andrews 2016). Research has shown that despite their demographic decline, Indigenous people, Blacks, and mestizos did not wither away. Instead, they were forced to progressively embrace a model of citizenship that presupposed the white and European character of the nation (Andrews 1989; Frigerio 2008; Geler 2010, 2011a, 2011b; Lamborghini, Geler, and Guzmán 2017; Edwards 2020; Quijada 2000; Gordillo and Hirsch 2003). Argentine whiteness, thus, comes with racial dynamics also found in

other Latin American societies and ideologies of national identity (Quijada 2000; Alberto and Elena 2016; Bonilla-Silva 2022). Yet, the particularity of race relations in Argentina also comes from the fact that Argentina's elites avoided recognizing a formal mestizo categorization: they expected mixed-race people to become socially white, ignore their non-white ancestry, and embrace modern European behavior. This 'impossible mestizaje' (Geler 2016a) meant that those with non-white backgrounds had to assimilate into whiteness and could only aspire to a precarious inclusion (Briones 2003).[5]

As in other parts of Latin America, the emergence of nationalism did not erase racial hierarchies but reinforced them, generating a racial 'common sense' that informs social readings of race through a series of markers (Hall 2017; Omi and Winant 1994). These social reading processes are found behind the distinction between the villero and upper-class youths in our opening vignette. In our perspective, Argentine racism cannot be described as only a case of colorism. Class, space, choice of clothing, and even political affinities can signify race in everyday social interactions. To be white is entwined with ideas about middle-classness, cultural capital, and urban life.

An important category for our investigation is the term *negro*, since many villeros are identified as such. In Argentina, the term is commonly used not to refer to Afrodescendants but instead to call the urban poor. It is derived from the expression *cabecita negra*, a stigmatizing category produced by the Buenos Aires middle and upper classes in the mid-twentieth century to describe an urban poor of Indigenous, *campesino*, and mixed-race background who professed a Peronist political allegiance (Ratier 1971, 1972; Frigerio 2006; Geler 2016b; Grimson 2017). Those described as cabecitas negras arrived in the cities during the 1930s and 1940s and often settled in villas. Ratier (1971, 1972) was the first researcher to identify a connection between the figure of negro villero and the cabecita negra. This specific definition of negro, like whiteness, is entwined with notions of class, education, and place. The fact that negro, as it is most commonly used and understood in Argentina, is supposedly disassociated from a specific racial identity makes denouncing structural racism a more complex task. We suggest that Argentine racism is enacted through alternative grammars – that is through the language and practices of class, space, politics or migrancy.

Though villas are present in all Argentine cities, this article focuses on the Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires (AMBA), a denomination that describes the urban agglomeration constituted by Argentina's capital city, Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires (CABA), and the forty adjacent districts under the Province of Buenos Aires' independent authority. No other zone of Argentina comes close to AMBA in terms of national ascendency: it is the location of the most influential political, economic and cultural institutions (including the national government). It produces 48 per cent of the total GDP, and concentrates 30 per cent of the country's population, making it the most urbanized and densely populated area of the country (Fundación 2017; INDEC 2023). This makes of AMBA a preeminent site for the study of the intersection of race with space, class, and politics in the making of the villeros as a particular figure in the country's racial imaginary and formation.

Despite sharing the same megalopolis, relationships between CABA and its conurbation have been marked by tensions that can be traced back to 1930s' and 1940s' rural-urban migration. Both places are seen as antinomic, with the latter often

presented as marginalized and parasitic on the more affluent capital. Race shapes the strains between the two places. On 17 January 2021, for example, editorialist Sirvén (2021) published a column in the conservative newspaper *La Nación* in which he criticised the electoral relevance of what he called the 'Africanized conurbation.' That Sirvén defended himself from accusations of racism by arguing that his use of 'Africanized' was a reference to economic underdevelopment indicates how racism in Argentina is presented as a manifestation of class (see Aguiló 2018). For this imaginary, the *Conurbano* is the location of impoverished dark-skinned people incapable of civil political participation (Gordillo 2016). Despite stereotypes, both Buenos Aires and the *Conurbano* are characterized by pockets of affluence and poverty. While villas in Argentina are simultaneously segregated against and at the same time integrated within the national ensemble through economic relations, the racial tension produced by their spatial proximity and the social border that surrounds them should not be overlooked. That segregation-inclusion tension is, we argue, at the center of what Argentine's villas are.

The emergence of the villero as a racial other

Though the state created the first precarious settlement in Argentina in 1932 as an emergency measure to accommodate Polish immigrants, villas expanded spontaneously due to rural-urban migration in the 1930s and 1940s. The populist government of Juan Perón (1946–55), which functioned as a political articulator for these provincial migrants (many of whom were mixed-race), put housing for the poor at the center of its welfare program. It did not, however, set up a specific policy for villas, and informal settlements continued to grow (Auyero 2001; Ballent 2009).

In 1955, a military coup, self-named Revolución Libertadora (Liberating Revolution), expelled Perón and concentrated on disarticulating the empowered political agency of the masses. During Perón's government, anti-Peronist discourse sought to discredit the movement due to its non-white composition and occasionally described its sympathizers using racial categories such as mestizo, negro and *indio* (Grimson 2017). More frequently, in line with Argentina's 'race-less' racism, it resorted to circuitously racializing Perón's followers – primarily via the term 'cabecita negra' (Milanesio 2010). While race was not mentioned explicitly, the Revolución Libertadora was also about restoring whiteness as the only modality of national belonging (Grimson 2017). Not surprisingly, the new government engaged in deliberate efforts to eradicate villas quickly and definitively, though these efforts would prove unsuccessful. The focus on villas was part of an anti-Peronist political project of restoration of elite power, given that villeros were regarded as Peronist voters. The regime avoided referencing party politics to justify evictions and framed them as a moral and civilizing mission. The report produced by the newly founded Comisión Nacional de Vivienda (National Housing Commission) in 1956, apropos the launch of the first national plan to evict and relocate villeros, described these residents in the following way:

> Coming from poor areas, without resources and without working habits, [villeros] have been attracted to the big city in search of economic betterment and the leisures afforded by urban life. But the social environment of the *Villas Miseria*, ... contributes to worsening their natural

tendencies and transforming these villas into permanent foci of epidemics and moral degradation: in their majority, their inhabitants require an urgent action of social re-adaptation. (as quoted in Massidda 2021, 226)

The report recommended the 'social re-education' and relocation of villeros and argued that the ideal solution would be the restitution to the provinces (Yujnovsky 1984). It demonstrated concerns about the need to 'recuperate' Buenos Aires (seen as a bastion of the 'whitest' Argentina) from those who did not 'deserve' the city because of their social and ethnic backgrounds. The report's views about villas were widespread among anti-Peronist policymakers and intellectuals. They were heavily influenced by modernization theory (Gorelik 2009). Gino Germani, the founder of Argentine empirical sociology, argued that the country's high levels of urbanization, middle-classness, and education could be explained by the enormous scale of European immigration (Adamovsky 2009). He argued that provincial non-white migrants tended to perpetuate traditional behaviors in the villas and countered modernizing influences indirectly framed in racial terms (Guber 1999; Adamovsky 2012).

The failure of eradication programs and the continuous growth of villas in the 1960s led to the popularization of the expression 'negro villero,' which replaced cabecita negra as the preferred racist expression in the lexicon of the Buenos Aires middle and upper classes. As Ratier (1972) indicates, cabecita negra was a category with strong Peronist associations at a time when elites were seeking to remove all references to Peronism in Argentine society (Ratier 1971, 1972). For anti-Peronists, 'negro villero' offered the advantage of lacking distinctive political overtones while continuing the racialization of the urban poor as non-white, and like 'cabecita negra,' it had a diffuse ethnic connotation that alluded to rural mixed-race people (Cravino 2002).

As mentioned, the term 'negro' is seldom taken as an indication of African ancestry in Argentina (Frigerio 2008; Geler 2013; Taylor 2020). Afrodescendancy is restricted to those 'looking Black'—that is, those with curly hair and pronounced dark skin and/or who act socially Black (Frigerio 2008; Geler 2016a). A similar point could be made about Indigenous recognition, which is circumscribed to those living in the country-side in accordance with their traditions (Briones 2003; Rodríguez 2016). Thus, both Afrodescendant and Indigenous are restrictive categories. People with Afrodescendant or Indigenous backgrounds who do not correspond to expectations have been forced to accommodate to a racial framework that celebrates the Europeanness of the population but categorises them as negros in everyday language. Negro, therefore, is a broad category because it potentially identifies a majority of the popular sectors; those with darker skin and provincial or Bolivian, Paraguayan or Peruvian background.[6] It signifies that which is inassimilable to whiteness; it is a subordinate position sustained on racial difference that, nonetheless, has no state recognition, despite continuous demographic growth (Briones 2003; Segato 2007). At the same time, because the combined denial of mestizaje and the affirmation of racial uniformity include those considered negros, albeit unstably, into national whiteness, negro exposes the precariousness of the Argentine white self, which is 'tainted' and incomplete, and in constant need of policing (Gordillo 2016). While negro can be used as a term of endearment, when combined with villero it assumes a spatial dimension absent in cabecita negra and automatically acquires a negative valorization. 'Negro

villero,' thus, works to produce a figure of racial otherness articulated as a territorialized subjectivity. Adamovsky (2009, 2017) argues that the emergence of the (white) middle class functioned to separate non-white internal migrants and poor European immigrants and, therefore, manage the radical insurgent force of these groups. This separation was generated in urban space: for European descendants, whiteness provided the possibility of social mobility and of moving out of the villas (Vivaldi 2019).

The *crisol de razas* (melting pot) is one of Argentina's most potent symbols of nationhood, predicated by elites as the amalgamation of European ethnicities. In her work, Briones (2003) focuses on those this metaphor excludes: Afrodescendant, Indigenous, and mixed-race people, who she calls 'the other melting pot.' This unofficial melting pot has been materially produced in the cities through the location of non-white bodies in villas, where various ethnic, geographic, and national backgrounds were homogenized as one single urban racial alterity (Vivaldi 2019). This homogenization had unexpected consequences, too, as it opened spaces for the coming together of diverse people who organized politically. The first collective organization of Buenos Aires's villas was formed in 1958. Calling itself the Federación de Villas y Barrios de Emergencia (Federation of Villas and Emergency Neighbourhoods, FVBE), it grouped different informal urbanizations in the city and outskirts of Buenos Aires (Cravino 2006), marking the entrance into national politics of villeros as a specific social actor (Camelli 2011).

To the construction of villeros as alterity and their rise as political subjects, it is possible to add cultural production as a third related factor defining villeros within the national, racial formation at the time (Codebò 2020). Various artistic fields showed a growing interest in the villas and villeros. In visual art, the character of Juanito Laguna, a fictional villero child created by Antonio Berni, became the protagonist of a series of internationally acclaimed mixed-media collages. In film, young auteurs striving to renovate and modernise national cinema created cinematic representations of the villa that depicted it as the site of an inversion of the civilizing process. Examples of this artistic production abound: Lucas Demare's *Detrás de un largo muro* (Behind a Long Wall, 1958), David José Kohon's *Buenos Aires* (1958), Leopoldo Torre Nilson's *El secuestrador* (The Kidnapper, 1958), Leonardo Favio's *Crónica de un niño solo* (Chronicle of a Lonely Child 1965), or Fernando Birri's *Tire dié* (Toss Me a Dime 1960). That many films about the villas were produced in such a short time indicates the need to capture this social location.[7]

The novel *Villa Miseria también es América* (Villa Miseria is [Latin] America too 1957) by Bernardo Verbitsky, or Haroldo Conti's short story 'Como un león' (Like a Lion 1967/2008) introduced villas as a literary topic. Verbitsky's novel became so iconic that it popularised the denomination 'villas miserias.' The novel is indicative of villas' transition, during the 1940s, from poor but still white/European spaces to non-white loci populated by rural and regional migrants. 'There was a time when all bricklayers were Italian. Not now; now they're all cabecitas,' states a villero in the novel, in reference to the archetypical profession of male villeros (Verbitsky 1957, 46).[8]

In *Villa Miseria también es América*, the threat of eviction constantly looms over the characters, structuring a conflict between city and countryside wherein the villa acts as an extension of the rural – and its association with backwardness – in the white-European Buenos Aires. As one character puts it: 'All these rumors worry me: that they will send us to

the countryside. I do not believe it, but the city hates us cabecitas negras, and maybe they will kick us out' (241).[9,10]

The novel, which draws on the conventions of social realism, portrays villeros as victims of an economically unjust system but who still want to progress through hard work – hence, the reference to bricklaying. Verbitsky engages critically with these tropes of Buenos Aires as a civilized space encroached by the barbarism from the rural interior, and he challenges their re-articulation in 1950s' sociological explanations of Argentina's incomplete modernization. The novel argues about the futility of Porteño fantasies of 'recuperating' Buenos Aires' whiteness precisely because this whiteness (as a social position of privilege) depends on labor exploitation. In another passage, a villero goes to Buenos Aires downtown to pick up relatives coming to settle in the city. He strolls through the center, admiring the city's skyscrapers before heading to the railway station to find his family. When the train arrives, he reflects on the masses of migrants setting foot in the capital:

> They want to send them back to the countryside, but they always keep coming . . . . They were walking towards him, flowing like a river. But does the river never dry out? Does its source never run out? It runs endlessly and its channel becomes deeper and there is too the direction of its current. This is how this torrent of cabecitas negras appears (276–77).

The text highlights not only the dark-skinned laborers who construct the opulent white city, with its tall buildings, but also the latter's dependence on the former, which implies that the villa is not an abnormality but a necessity for capitalism and modernisation.

While mid-twentieth-century literary, artistic, and cinematographic depictions of the villas were quite diverse, they shared two related characteristics: firstly, these were not self-depictions by villeros – although some artists like Birri, collaborated actively with them (Podalsky 2004). Secondly, they aimed to raise middle-class audiences' awareness of urban misery. They focused on economic contradictions without explicitly concentrating on racism. In contrast, as we examine next, it was precisely in the arts that some of the most explicit challenges to racism against villeros were voiced at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Towards a reconfiguration of the villero under neoliberalism

State policies and attitudes towards villas initiated with the 1955 coup continued in the following decades (Snitcofsky 2015). However, the eradication campaigns carried out by the 1976–1983 dictatorship, which called itself the National Reorganization Process, surpassed, in terms of scope and violence, any previous efforts. In that period, 94 per cent of the people living in villas in Buenos Aires (some 224,000 people) were expelled to the Conurbano or the interior, often through violent means. Some immigrants were deported (Camelli 2011). The expulsion of villeros was part of the regime's project to re-establish the social and racial order destabilized by the political irruption of the dark-skinned Peronist masses into national life. It also favored speculative capital as much of the land taken from villeros was sold to private ventures (Snitcofsky 2018). Villas's evictions ultimately intended a return of Buenos Aires to its 'rightful' dwellers: the white middle and upper classes. It was a reinstalment of the white city (Oszlak 1991).

The number of people living in villas in the city of Buenos Aires started to grow again with the return to democracy in 1983 (Bellardi and De Paula 1986). The democratic government of Raúl Alfonsín's decision to interrupt eradication efforts was instrumental in that regard. However, the failure of Alfonsín's economic program led to a significant hyperinflation crisis in the late 1980s, which the financial establishment used to gather social support for deeper neoliberal reforms. A transformed Peronist Party under the leadership of Carlos Menem emerged as the executor of this heightened neoliberalism, and during his successive presidencies, between 1989 and 1999, standards of living suffered severe degradation. Between 1991 and 2001, the number of people living in villas in the capital city more than doubled, from 52,608 to 107,805, and in the Conurbano, it grew from 410,479 to 594,781 (Cravino, Del Río, and Ignacio Duarte 2010). Meanwhile, gated communities (at times bordering villas) experienced a dramatic expansion, consolidating the fragmentation of urban space (Svampa 2001).

The villeros' socioeconomic conditions were transformed by a new public imaginary and a reorientation of policy. The prior perception of villeros as racial Others suitable for social integration through modernization by the state institutions was replaced with governmental and media discourses that criminalized the villeros, posing them as a menace to public order (Kessler 2012). This redefinition of the figure of the villero was directly linked to the general anxiety about violent crimes at the time (Adamovsky 2012).

This widespread preoccupation with criminality cannot simply be explained with reference to statistical data, despite an escalation of criminal activity in the 1990s. The securitization of Argentine society in the 1990s replicated an international phenomenon that Wacquant (2009) identifies as a feature of neoliberal governance: the use of the police and carceral institutions to manage and contain the social insecurity and the precariousness produced by neoliberalism. In this process, for Wacquant, the young dark-skinned working-class man (the African American in the United States or the Arab in France) plays a crucial expiatory role: he is a repository of racial and class anxieties that, articulated around a moral panic, justifies the use of the punitive state apparatus. In Argentina, the young male villero fulfilled this function. The dominant discourse of the time claimed that 'they deserve to die,' justifying and even celebrating extrajudicial police violence against the male villero youth (Fernández Roich 2017). CORREPI (Coordinadora contra la represión policial e institucional), an NGO that monitors police violence, registered 4,883 deaths of civilians in the hands of police between 1996 and 2002, 67.38 per cent of whom were aged between 15 and 25 (CORREPI 2006). There is a clear correlation between the rise of police brutality, the degradation of many national socio-economic indicators, and the new forms of racialization of the negro villero as dangerous.

The term *pibe chorro* (thieving kid) became a social category popularised by the media to refer to juvenile delinquents from the villas that soon became part of the vernacular language. These youths were portrayed as frenzied, irascible and inclined to exercise gratuitous violence against their victims. Pibes chorros became associated with the use of street drugs, justifying police budgetary increase and enhanced brutality, presented by reactionary sectors as the only options to deal with them. Fernández Roich (2017) argues:

> The media construction of the young petty criminals [...] is critical for understanding the police discourse and its justification of the excessive use of force or killings 'in the act of duty.' If those kids do not have a human entity and commit a crime, they deserve to die (26).

Although mediated by a discourse centered on criminal behavior, race plays a crucial role in this dehumanization (Aguiló 2018; Identidad Marrón 2021). Among others, Foucault (2003), Mbembe (2003, 2017), Vergara-Figueroa (2017), and Simpson (2014) argue that racism allows overcoming the incongruity between the biopolitical requisite to optimize life and the central sovereign right to kill, through the identification of an internal enemy against which society must be protected. Racism, thus, turns war inwards: the enemy becomes an internal Other that can be actively eliminated so that the 'normal us' can live.

This conceptualization of race as a form of power over life is helpful to think how the repressive state apparatus was mobilized against the pibes chorros in the 1990s. Argentine elites who had been excluding villeros from the dominant white European modality of nationality stressed their dehumanization through race divisions, making the deployment of state violence acceptable. As a result, many cases of police brutality have been accompanied by racist slurs, particularly 'negro de mierda' and 'negro villero' (Rodríguez 2019; Da Silva 2020). Racial profiling is also common, and 'detenido por portación de rostro' (roughly 'being detained for having the wrong face') has become a common phrase in everyday language to describe arrests and cases of stop and search of villero youth because of their dark-skinned features (Bonvillani 2013). Yet, racism continues to be sidelined in discussions about policing, as these cases of police mishandling are framed mainly as human rights violations and violence against the poor, even by some organizations that denounce them (Segura 2010).

Along with the pibe chorro, the *piquetero* became another villero figure central to discourses of insecurity. Most piquetero organizations emerged in the mid-to-late-1990s and got their name from their iconic form of protest: using picket lines to block roads and highways in demand for food and social plans from the government. The piquetero movement soon became a central actor in the reproduction of social life in villas, as organizations invested funding and other concessions from the state to create autonomous collective productive initiatives, like cooperatives, small factories, and soup kitchens. Despite some initial solidarities, the protests reactivated in many Porteños the long-standing trope of the city being invaded by dark-skinned outsiders from the Conurbano (Ingridsdotter 2009; Villalón 2007). This affective base of racism was also galvanized by politicians, journalists, and intellectuals when blockades of significant streets in the capital city added to the tensions between CABA and Conurbano. Affective fear and repulsion towards negros was skilfully capitalized on by Macri, who was elected Chief of Government of CABA in 2007 and Argentine's President in 2015, when he presented his government as a force determined to counter piquetero 'barbarism' (Cichello 2017).

This notion of invasion was also intensified by the spread of *cartoneo*, as the informal collection of cardboard from the streets to be sold by the kilo is known. 'Cartoneo' (or *cartonear*) became a widespread survival strategy for the urban poor during the turn-of-the-century economic crisis-one of the worst in Argentine history. The sight of thousands of cartoneros congregating in wealthy neighborhoods every evening to search for recyclables inside the garbage sacks was initially perceived by parts of the middle and upper class as a recurrent occupation of the white city (Sternberg 2013). As Scorer (2017) puts it: 'The fear of the villas "encroaching" on the city is a reminder of how informal housing and, indeed, cartoneros are constantly located as entities that are not of the city, rather than being recognized as integral to the urban system' (152). The idea of Buenos Aires being invaded resonated with the historical tensions between the capital and its conurbation,

even though some cartoneros live in villas within the city's perimeter. According to Gorelik (2009), this reactivated Porteños' fears about the 'Latin Americanization' of the city, an image associated with poverty, underdevelopment, and non-whiteness. Moreover, the idea of a dark-skinned invasion by cartoneros and piqueteros echoed several nineteenth-century images that the liberal tradition linked with 'barbarism,' such as the occupation of Buenos Aires by Federalist forces during the civil wars in the aftermath of independence, the *malón* or Indigenous military raid on frontier towns, and the reactualization of these images during the height of the conflict between Peronists and anti-Peronists (Svampa 2006; Gordillo 2020).

From the 1990s onwards, pibes chorros, piqueteros and cartoneros became vital signifiers of a new type of villero subjectivity. Rather than being anomic individuals in need of civilization, as they were in the past, villeros were identified by part of the government, the media, and the middle and upper class as, first and foremost, a danger to lives and property. However, despite these resignifications of villeros in cultural representations, what remained constant was a particular form of racialization sustained on the articulation of territory, phenotype, and economic precariousness. A football chant sung by supporters from many Argentine teams to slight fans of Boca Juniors (a team traditionally identified with the working class) illustrates this: *Hay que matar a los bosteros, son todos negros, son todos putos, son todos villeros* (We have got to kill all Boca fans, they're all negros, they're all fags, they're all villeros) (Bundio 2020, 141). The chant links race, location, and class with sexuality as intersected forms of oppression, which resonates with retrograde images of the villas as places of alleged abject sexualities – according to heteronormative frameworks – while it stresses that villeros are negros.

The 1990s also marked a moment of heightened foreignization of villeros. As seen, villas have traditionally contained people who were seen as not corresponding to the white/European national self, given that cabecitas negras were conceived as foreigners, regardless of their actual nationality. During the 1990s, however, the identification of villeros with immigrants from neighboring countries became much more systematic and widespread. A football chant sung by Dock Sud supporters to rivals San Telmo illustrates this:

> *En el barrio de la isla viven todos bolivianos, que cagan en la vereda y se limpian con la mano. Hay que matarlos a todos, mamá, que no quede ni un villero* (In the neighborhood of the island only Bolivians live, they shit on the sidewalks and wipe their arses with their hands. We have got to kill all of them, mama, until there is not a single villero left). (Bundio 2020, 149)

The linkage between villeros and regional immigrants provides an additional illustration of how structural racism in Argentina functions through strategic invisibilization or instead through hypervisibilization. Even though there has not been a steep rise in the number of regional migrants coming to Argentina, Peruvian, Bolivian, and Paraguayan migrants have become very visible in the past decades (Canelo 2013). This new visibility can be explained both by some middle-class (and working-class) people's negative disposition toward immigration in times of economic crises, and the conservative media and the state's exploitation of this sentiment to blame foreigners for the rise of social precarity under neoliberalism.

A paradigmatic example of this hypervisibility was provided by the occupation of the Indoamericano public park in December 2010 by homeless people, mainly immigrants from Bolivia and Paraguay (Gordillo 2016). Inhabitants of public housing complexes in

Lugano and Soldati organized armed groups to attack the trespassers, arguing that they did not want a new villa in the vicinity. These arguments were accompanied by slurs illustrating how being a negro villero and being a foreigner from Bolivia or Paraguay was presented as cognate conditions. The center-left newspaper *Página 12*, for example, reported one resident throwing stones at the squatters while shouting: 'Boliviano de mierda; hay que matarlos a todos, hace cuánto que vivís gratis, negro villero' (Fucking Bolivian; you all should be killed, living for free when you can, negro villero) (quoted in Ruchansky 2010).

Macri's presidential electoral success in 2015 was achieved on a platform of policing, not only social protests but also regional immigration, indicating the articulation of state racism with a racism 'from below.' This latter form of racism is mainly exercised by the white middle and upper classes. Yet, it can also be practiced by those who, like the working-class inhabitants of Lugano and Soldati, want to distance themselves from the stigma of being associated with or seen as negros villeros precisely because their status within the Argentine racial formation is precarious yet something they desire to maintain. That only nationals from poorer countries with prominent Indigenous features and mixed people were consistently slurred and called negros villeros suggests that these discursive strategies activated prejudices that were not just xenophobic but also racist.

From disavowal to creative appropriation

These interrelated figures (the pibe chorro, the piquetero, the cartonero and the immigrant) consolidated as signifiers of villero identification during the 1990s and 2000s, while the villa continued to be defined by disavowed racialization and racism. The centrality of villero subjectivity as a repository of the racialized anxieties of sectors of the upper and middle classes triggered a renewed fascination with life in the villas, as expressed in cultural production.

Film production became increasingly conscious of, and began focusing on the racialization of villeros. For example, the documentaries *Estrellas* (Stars), by León and Martínez (2007), and *Guido models* by Sans (2015), focus on two villero entrepreneurs: respectively, Julio Arrieta and Guido Fuentes. Arreta founded a casting agency, and Fuentes a modelling agency, both employing solely villeros. The films expose the unspoken racialization experienced by the inhabitants of the villas by looking at the racial politics of the body in Argentina's entertainment and beauty industries. Negros are not excluded altogether, but instead circumscribed to particular places. In *Estrellas*, Arrieta criticizes mainstream television and cinema's preference for what he calls 'blond' actors – that is, white and middle-class – to play villero and marginal characters. Interestingly, he sustains this critique on the articulation of class (being poor) with race: 'What we fight for is that blonds stop being hired to play negro characters; we want to play negro characters. We are negros, and we are not ashamed of it . . . We have been poor all our lives, it is a role we know' (León and Martínez 2007).

Aguilar (2015) argues that many films about villas produced during this period, in their aim to counter the criminalization of villeros, return to tropes from the 1960s militant cinema. *Elefante Blanco* (White Elephant Trapero 2012), by Pablo Trapero, exemplifies this. The film – a relatively big production by an acclaimed Argentine director known for its gritty realism – is representative of a type of committed cinema that is widely successful in

the transnational film festival circuits precisely for its critique of what is perceived by international audiences as Latin American issues. *Elefante Blanco* was shot on-site in the villa Ciudad Oculta and highlighted the structural mechanisms that reproduce a subalternized class. However, despite this critical perspective, the film recreates the racial stereotypes we are discussing. The main characters, played by Argentine actors Ricardo Darín and Martina Gusman and Belgian actor Jérémie Renier, are *curas* villeros (Liberation Theology priests) and a female social worker – all white and middle-class. The villero characters are played by people from the villa with darker skin and Indigenous phenotypes (see Figure 2). Moreover, while the inclusion of non-white actors would address the casting issues highlighted by Arrea in *Estrellas*, these characters are indistinguishable from one another and often lack a name. Most villero characters are not only physically racialized. The archetypes they represent condense non-virtuous stereotypes about villeros as indolent, malicious, violent and intoxicated. They are also portrayed as passive and in need of the white characters' help.

White characters are individualized and presented as ethical subjects with complex emotions. In contrast, villeros appear as backstage characters needed to help portray white folks' changes and redemption, a common trope in the making of whiteness. The film accentuates this construction by showing authentic images of the villa that confirm the stereotypes commonly held in hegemonic media: dirty roads that get flooded with rain, 'endless' corridors, unhealthy stray dogs interacting with children, and violent gangs. Long shots tend to show white characters surrounded by villeros, with the former fully visible in the center of the frame. For example, during a sequence in which the police violently evict a group of villeros who have occupied an empty plot of land, the white characters remain entirely in focus and visible and are shown helping the villeros escape the repression. The villeros, on the other hand, are portrayed as an undifferentiated mass of people running (see Figure 3).

The film, in sum, conveys a constellation of elements that contribute to the racialization of villeros: darker skins and Indigenous features, an embodiment of gestures, techniques, and habits of the urban subaltern class, and the use of jargon associated with informal urbanizations. The film simplifies villero identity in its claims that people in the slums are

Figure 2. Film still from Elefante blanco, a white social worker, photographs a villero man she is assisting. The image resonates with anthropometric photos of Indigenous people during the age of scientific racism.

Figure 3. Film still from Elefante blanco.

vicious, corrupt, and lazy; they make poor life choices and need tutelage. That film that was set up to denounce structural inequalities still reproduces forms of racialization of habits and cultural patterns, and assigns to all villeros alike a questionable morality in need of reform. *Elefante blanco* reproduces many facets of 1950s' modernization theory and 1960s' Argentine cinema. It does so while adding elements that resonate with neoliberal reimaginings of villas as criminal and vicious hubs, while transforming them into a spectacle.

Literature also spectacularized poverty and villero life. With a few exemptions, like the non-fiction *Cuando me muera quiero que me toquen cumbia. Vidas de pibes chorros* (When I Die, I Want You to Play Cumbia for Me. Lives of Pibes Chorros, Alarcón 2003), by Cristian Alarcón, this focus on villa in Argentine literature was mainly expressed in a type of narrative that combined the conventions of literary realism with contemporary mediatic portrayals of the villas and surrealist and absurd elements. This approach was partly influenced by César Aira's novel *La Villa* (Shantytown Aira 2001), one of the texts that inaugurated this literary rediscovery of villero life. Ricardo Strafacce's *La boliviana* (The Bolivian Woman Strafacce 2008), Leonardo Oyola's *Santería* (Oyola 2008) and Gabriela Cabezón Cámara's *La virgen cabeza* (The Shantytown Virgin Cabezón Cámara 2009) are examples of this literary trend. Like in the 1950s and 1960s, most novels assume a middle-class perspective and aim at this type of audience but, importantly, do not seek social change. Instead, they reflect what Lucas Panaia denominates, 'éxtasis marginalista'—that is, the opportunity to gaze at alterity and take pleasure in its alleged bizarre nature from the safety of the text or the screen (Panaia 2020). While Aira's *La Villa*, unlike Vertbisky, is not interested in demanding social reform, it directly addresses villero racialization, foreignization, and criminalization, indicating the transition to a new imaginary of villas during the 1990s (Aguiló 2018).

It was also in the realm of culture that, during this period, the first discourses by villeros openly addressing racism started to be articulated. 'Cumbia villera,' a variety of cumbia music partly developed by musicians from the villas, became highly successful in the first half of the 2000s (Cragnolini 2006; Alabarces and Silba 2014; Semán and Silva 2010, 2012). The lyrics of cumbia villera songs tend to be framed as first-person vignettes of daily life in the villas from the perspective of young male villeros – often presented as engaged in

crime, obsessed with alcohol and drugs, and projecting a disdain for work ethics and women. Cumbia villera activated an inversion of these characteristics' social value to construct the pibe chorro not as a stigmatized figure but as an ideal of masculinity (Martín 2008). Crucially, it put racialization at the center of this ideal by exposing and denouncing the disavowed racism suffered by villeros, while making race a key feature of villero subjectivity. Illustrative of this is Yerba Brava's song 'Discriminado' (Discriminated Against2000), which tells the story of a young villero killed by the police during a robbery. The lyrics present the protagonist's criminal career and wretched fate due to structural racism, stating that he was condemned to die this way for being born a 'negro villero' (Yerba Brava 2000). At the same time, cumbia villera claims this stigmatised category as a form of identity. For example, cumbia villera superstar Pablo Lescano starts all his shows with the chant: ¡Las palmas de todos los negros arriba! (all negros raise your hands!), thus not only acknowledging the often disavowed racialization they experience but turning it into a mark of pride and identification (Alabarces and Silba 2014). The fact that light-skinned Lescano is a negro villero icon shows that racialization of villeros, as mentioned, cannot be reduced solely to phenotype and encompasses space, class, and social behavior.

This appropriation of the stigma in cumbia villera draws on this history of racialization as non-white that we have analyzed in this article, and on the influx of relatively more recent foreign trends like hip-hop culture. This influence is mostly visible in the adaptation of the poetics and aesthetics of rap; it is expressed in the primary themes of the lyrics, the artists' choice of clothing, their flaunting of an alleged criminal past or connections with delinquents, and the importance of street cred and affiliation with a specific non-white urban space.[11] Through this selective appropriation of elements from hip hop, cumbia villera suggests an imaginary connection between the pibes chorros from the villa and young male African Americans from the U.S. ghetto, both racial Others who suffer racism and marginalization. At the same time, they possess characteristics allegedly appreciated and desired by whites (sexual prowess, courage in extreme situations, and a natural penchant for rhythm and musicality). It also indicates a direct engagement with the spatialized dimension of racial relations in Argentina and the racialized condition of villa, which is presented as akin to the U.S. American 'hood.' Thus, despite the problematic aspects of cumbia villera (misogyny, glorification of crime, substance abuse and idleness, and its disinterest for politics), it represents a significant development in the place of villeros in national society and culture. This is not only because it constitutes one of the first forms of expression with widespread impact produced by villeros, but also because it articulates a form of identification for the youth that is based on the intersection of class, space and, critically, race.

Though cumbia villera experienced a decline towards the mid to late 2000s, recent years, have seen a proliferation of villeros cultural productions, some of which were transmitted to other sectors of society. This material underscores the need to start looking at cultural productions by villeros along with that about villeros. For our research, it also marks the possibility of exposing and denouncing racism and articulating anti-racist strategies based partly on the arts, something that we aim to cover in future publications. This signals a potential new regime of visibility for villeros that can challenge the one established in the 1990s, and which coincides with a growing public debate about racism in Argentina at the moment this article is being written (See, for example, Oliva 2020; Czerwacki 2021; Micheletto 2021; Colombo 2021).

Conclusion

In this article, we have proposed to think of the villa as multiple loci brought together by a series of mechanisms through which racial and social marginality is managed spatially. It is this multiplicity that motivated us to turn our attention to how the villa and the villeros have been and are (re)created discursively as specific and highly recognizable figures, evoking a combination of change and continuity. Our analyses of discursive productions by public officials, the media, literature, visual arts, and music have revealed how race intersects with space and class in articulating shifting villero imaginaries. The focus on what we identify as the two key periods in the configuration of villero racialization – the mid-twentieth-century process of modernization and the consolidation of neoliberal reforms at the turn of the twenty-first century – allowed us to uncover the processual aspect through which the inhabitants of informal urbanizations have been constructed in terms of racial alterity.

We hope to have made clear how the racialization of villeros has evolved and unfolded through time, and how it has been shaped by social, economic, political, and cultural dynamics.

Finally, our attention to cultural productions highlighted the centrality of the arts in structuring ideas about race, the villas and villeros. Though the racialization of the urban poor as non-white remains under-discussed, we have shown how villeros have systematically acted as the repressed racial Other, continually seen as a threat to the white national self despite allowing the economic reproduction of Argentine society and the lifestyles of its middle and upper classes thanks to their cheap labor.

We hope the future will give us the opportunity to further explore villeros' cultural productions.

Notes

1. There are no official statistics that measure the race or ethnicity of the people living in precarious urbanizations. Studies conducted by Universidad de Buenos Aires in 2005, and Universidad Católica Argentina in 2007 and 2017, have shown a correlation between skin colour and socioeconomic condition, with those with darker skin having lower salaries, job security and formal education levels compared to those with lighter skin (see De Grande and Salvia 2021; Dalle 2014). Therefore, it is possible to think about villas as rating a larger number of darker skin people.
2. In this article, we are less engaged with the racialization of white middle- and upper-class neighbourhoods, partly because whiteness has been naturalized and made invisible in Argentina. Our use of the term 'racialization' feeds from our work with Argentine anti-racist artists/activists, like the Identidad Marrón collective, who utilize the term to refer exclusively to the process through which people are defined as non-white (Identidad Marrón 2021).
3. In the 2010s, Mapuche and Qom organizations started to be demonised by politicians and the media, particularly during the Macri administration. They were often portrayed as a menace to national security and were even imagines as being linked to international extremist groups like ISIS. However, given that these Indigenous organizations are based in what is perceived by many urban Argentines as remote and peripheral areas (in Patagonia and in the north), the risk they allegedly pose according to stigmatising narratives was generally not seen as imminent.
4. CARLA is directed by Peter Wade, with co-investigators Lucia Sá, Ignacio Aguiló, Mara Viveros Vigoya, Ezequiel Adamovsky, and Felipe Milanez; Research Associates, Ana Vivaldi, Carlos Correa Angulo and Jamille Pinheiro Dias; and Research Assistants, Arissana Pataxó, Yacunã Tuxá, Pablo Cossio Vargas, Lorena Cañuqueo and Rossana Alarcón. In Argentina, we built collaborations

with the collective Identidad Marrón, the Afro-Latin American theatre company Teatro en Sepia, the Mapuche theatre project El Katango, and the Qom hip-hop duo Eskina Qom.

5. Some recent studies have shown that some Argentines might choose to self-identify as mestizos, but only when pushed into self-definition based on race and ethnicity (De Grande and Salvia 2021; Alberto and Elena 2016). However, this category has been systematically absent from official statistics and discourse and is rarely used in everyday interaction. Significantly it never featured prominently in narratives of nationhood.

6. Fernández Bravo (2016) highlights that Ratier recognizes that some villeros might have some Afrodescendant ancestry, even though his definition of negro villero focuses on Spanish-Indigenous mixing. This shows that, on the one hand, Indigenous, Afrodescendant, and villero do not exclude each other and, on the other, the histories of Indigenous incorporating Afrodescendant people need further exploration.

7. Poor households in Argentina are identified following the Necesidades Básicas Insatisfechas (Unsatisfied Basic Needs) methodology, which includes basic or minimal access to services, education, and dwelling place.

8. See Geler, Yannone, and Egido (2020) for an analysis of the process of suburbanization of the Afrodescendant community.

9. In the aftermath of the introduction of a Universal Child Allowance by the Kirchnerite government in 2009, stigmatizing images of the poor as 'scroungers' who have children to receive government benefits became common, adding to the paranoid fears about an ever-growing villero population.

10. This and subsequent translations into English are ours.

11. For a study of these elements in hip hop, see Clay (2012) and Harkness (2014).

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