Chapter 8

Tropical Buenos Aires: Representations of Race in Argentine Literature during the 2001 Crisis and Its Aftermath

Ignacio Aguiló

Two old upper-class women discuss the news. One of the women has a newspaper, and visibly concerned, turns to her friend: “Have you seen this, Etelvina? Here they say that Argentina is the world’s black sheep and that its future is tinged with uncertainty.”¹ Etelvina’s reply expresses even more distress: “Do you see? Now that we are poor they call us ‘black’!” This comic strip, published by Sendra in the Argentine daily Clarín in May 2002, appropriately captured the way in which the anxieties of sectors of the Argentine middle and middle-upper classes vis-à-vis the 2001 crisis were crystallized through racial language. This often-neglected aspect of the crisis can be interpreted as a reaction from parts of Argentine society to the process of progressive socioeconomic decomposition that started in the late 1990s and culminated during 2001–2. Racial language, which cannot be only limited to phenotype but also encompasses aspects of class and social status, is particularly linked to the effect that the crisis had on certain representations of the nation that, throughout most of the twentieth century, had articulated and upheld a racial imaginary that contrasted the alleged whiteness of Argentina—and particularly Buenos Aires—with diverse and complementary constructions of internal and external racial otherness (Briones 2004; Garguin 2007; Adamovsky 2009). Focusing on the work of Washington Cucurto (born Santiago Vega, Quilmes, 1973), this chapter analyzes how literary production of the period engaged critically with historical representations of race and the way in which these were affected by the crisis. The work of Cucurto is regarded as the most innovative from all the authors to emerge during the crisis in terms of portraying the
new racialized marginality associated with immigration from neighboring countries. His stories have been praised and commended for their depictions of the experiences of the migrant and the precariat, and locales associated to these social sectors, such as neighborhoods of Buenos Aires populated by immigrants like Constitución or Once, and *conventillos* (tenement housing for immigrants). *Cumbia* music, a tropical genre imported from Colombia that became extremely successful in 1990s Argentina, especially among the urban working class, is a central element in his work. This chapter explores the ways in which Cucurto maximizes the racial antagonisms constructed around the binary whiteness/nonwhiteness in order to produce a critique of historical images of racial uniformity and nationhood and expose the exhaustion of these narratives in the face of the economic meltdown. Although its main focus is the crisis and its aftermath, this chapter also looks at the late 1990s, as the financial decline and social anxiety and insecurity that came to a head in 2001–2 were already becoming noticeable in this period.

In order to understand the relevance of Cucurto’s critique of Argentina’s narratives of whiteness, it is important to provide a brief contextualization that explains the central role of the latter in the production of dominant discourses of nationness throughout the twentieth century. Large-scale immigration from Europe and the extinction of the indigenous and Afro-Argentine populations during the nation-building period in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have been usually hailed as the causes of the country’s alleged whiteness and racial homogeneity (Halperín Donghi 1987; Archetti 1999; Quijada 2000). European immigration was partly successful in fulfilling the elites’ aim of whitening Argentina, yet its impact outside the central and littoral regions was less substantial and many regions, particularly the north, continued to have a large indigenous and mestizo population (Chamosa 2008; Briones 2010; Segato 2010). Images of whiteness were thus instrumental in the establishment and reproduction of a regime of racial domination that subordinated lower-class people with indigenous, mestizo and, to a lesser extent, African ancestry, while at the same time denied any racism since Argentina was officially racially homogeneous (Segato 1998; Briones 2005). Therefore, the subalternization of those deemed to be nonwhite was parallel to their exclusion from representation and discourse. This implied that, contrary to other Latin American countries in which the mestizo was identified as the incarnation of the nation, like Mexico or Peru, the white middle class of European background would eventually become the metonymic representation of Argentina, especially