

Issue 50, 10 May, 2017

A White Country? The Intricacies of Race in Argentina

Mariusz Kałczewiak

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Gießen)

Contact: mariusz.kalczewiak@gmail.com

Abstract:

Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina is a thought-provoking volume discussing the evolution of the conceptualization of race in Argentine history and culture. The book questions the presumed homogenous whiteness of Argentina and presents how race became invisible in Argentine discourses and how diverse actors attempt to find new ways to debate the racial intricacies of the country. The volume suggests that in Argentina the category of whiteness was both in a certain sense inclusionary, but also a discriminatory, exclusionary, hierarchical structure.

How to cite:

Kałczewiak, Mariusz: "A White Country? The Intricacies of Race in Argentina [Review on: Alberto, Paulina; Eduardo Elena (eds.): *Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.]". In: *KULT_online* 50 (2017).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2017.133>



Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International

A White Country? The Intricacies of Race in Argentina

Mariusz Kałczewiak

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Gießen)

Alberto, Paulina; Eduardo, Elena (eds.): *Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 373 pages, 96 GBP. ISBN: 978-1-107-10763-2

Abstract:

Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina is a thought-provoking volume discussing the evolution of the conceptualization of race in Argentine history and culture. The book questions the presumed homogenous whiteness of Argentina and presents how race became invisible in Argentine discourses and how diverse actors attempt to find new ways to debate the racial intricacies of the country. The volume suggests that in Argentina the category of whiteness was both in a certain sense inclusionary, but also a discriminatory, exclusionary, hierarchical structure.

Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina, edited by Paulina Alberto and Eduardo Elena, is a very needed and enriching volume on race and ethnicity in Argentina. The contributors question the presumed “whiteness” of Argentine society and bring in cultural, literary, and historical examples that inform about the complexities of omitting or weakening the category of race in Argentine popular, political, and cultural discourse. Due to the in Latin America unparalleled numbers of European immigration Argentine society imagined itself as almost purely white. The indigenous peoples and the blacks were, in the mid-19th century, subdued under the power of the white men or murdered (as in the case of the Campaign of the Desert). The non-white heritage was pushed to the margins of the national discourse. Whereas in the United States the notion of race is commonly used to describe the social inequalities, in Argentina (similarly to Holocaust-experienced Europe) the term is still barely used and carries a clearly negative connotation.

The volume is divided into two parts: the first dealing with the past imageries of race and the second with the contemporary developments. The contributors discuss the ways in which, in Argentina, race

became invisible over the course of history. Whereas in other countries in Latin America the mixing of the races resulted in a widely-acknowledged process of *mestizaje* and in mixed identities of *mestizo* or *mulato*, in Argentina we observed a reverse tendency. People of mixed heritage were increasingly included into the white category, unless they possessed all phenotypic features associated with a specific race. Consequently, Argentina and Argentines continued to imagine themselves as a homogeneously white country. At the same time, as the contributors to the volume suggest, race did play a role within a local social matrix. Although not labeled directly as such, race did play a prominent role in shaping the local identities. The whitening national discourse suggested other categories for denoting individuals and groups that were not exactly white. Race was constructed as something that belonged to the past and did not have a place in the Argentine melting pot. For instance, the category of *criollo* that originally referred to the descendants of white European colonizers eventually transformed to denote those of mixed white and indigenous/black heritage. In the same vein, instead of Africans and Indians, Argentine discourse preferred to see Afro-descendants or Indian-descendants.

Especially interesting is the article by Oscar Chamosa, who examined the development of internal tourism in the Argentina of the 1930-1940s and uncovered it as an arena where Argentine conceptualizations of race came to a very clear expression. Chamosa argues that travelling to the sites important for the national memory, or to the geographic landmarks inhabited by the indigenous tribes, played a function in how Argentines leaders desired to construct the nation. In the early twentieth century these travels served as a tool for familiarizing predominantly European-born Buenos Aires dwellers with the “authentically Argentine” culture of the Interior (sparsely populated areas far from the sea and industrial centers). The automobile tourism allowed thousands of *porteños* to come to the remote villages of the indigenous, where they took photographs and observed the tribesmen. As Chamosa claims, these visits served the “darkening” of the poor classes and strengthened the myth of seemingly homogeneously white Argentina. In addition, the travel journals pictured the people inhabiting the advertised remote regions as *tipos* (types). They were labeled as a distinct race, demarcating the difference between pale-skinned Buenos Aires residents and the dark-skinned villagers. The travel industry constructed the *mestizo* and indigenous as attractive and unique, as long as they continued to be attached to the land and tradition.

Rebekah E. Pite examined the racial contexts of Argentine cooking in the 20th century. Following the story of star cook Doña Petrona she traced the way Europeanness or indigeneity (*criollidad*) were performed and redefined in the Argentine foodways. Whereas at the beginning of the twentieth century urban Argentines, both in the capital and in the provincial cities, aspired to eat dishes imagined to be European (especially French), the 1960s saw increasing interest in and appreciation of the cuisine of the *criollo* Interior. Doña Petrona’s early cookbooks of the 1930s emphasized the “cosmopolitan” (me-

aning European) recipes, with only few *criollo* accents. In the 1960s Argentina saw a dramatic increase of books titled *cocina criolla* or *cocina gaucha*. The earlier preference given to the European food was embedded in the process of whitening the Argentine foodways. Foods traditionally associated with the cuisine of the indigenous or the blacks were downgraded as not fitting, “*no pasables*” on the tables of the modern Argentine middle class. With time, though, traditional *criollo* foods such as corn or grilled meats came to denote the “authentic Argentine cuisine”.

Other contributions in the book include studies on the representations of the indigenous in Argentine fiction, the presence of the Asian-Argentines or the issue of contested or unsure whiteness of Jewish immigrants. The book follows the social developments in Argentina and presents a transition from an all-white Argentine paradigm, via the recognition of racial diversity by Peronism, up to the current official and unofficial imaginaries of Argentina as a multiracial country. Taken as a whole, this diverse volume serves as a perfect reader for anyone interested in Latin American Studies, ethnicity, and race/racism.

Mariusz Kałczewiak
International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Gießen)

Contact: mariusz.kalczewiak@gmail.com

How to cite:

Kałczewiak, Mariusz: "A White Country? The Intricacies of Race in Argentina [Review on: Alberto, Paulina; Eduardo Elena (eds.): Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.]" In: KULT_online 50 (2017).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2017.133>