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**Landlocked and Unwanted: The Afro-Paraguayan Dilemma**

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**Landlocked and Unwanted: The Afro-Paraguayan Dilemma**

*by*

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## ***Dedication***

To Shuhan: thank you for your unconditional love and support throughout this process.

## *Acknowledgements*

Heartbreak seems inadequate, but it is the only word that immediately comes to mind to commence what I feel in my heart is appropriate. In November 2015, I received a phone call that carried unwelcomed news: my Aunt Gloria was diagnosed for the second time with cancer. The first time she was diagnosed, I did not worry. As my great-uncle Fred stated, “Cancer will find out it picked the wrong person to mess with!” I wholeheartedly believed in the sentiment. Glo was an impassioned fighter and eventually became a cancer survivor. Last November, however, the terms of her survivor-hood changed to an uncertain but imminent death sentence. The second diagnosis: an incurable form of cancer that had spread along her spine. The diagnosis seemed vengeful. Glo had travelled down to hell, met the devil, cussed him, perhaps slapped him, and returned victoriously with visible battle scars; but the devil could not allow Glo’s victory to stand.

The second bout with cancer immobilized her, weakened her, requiring more torment to her body to stay off her demise. In January 2017, I received word Glo opted to leave on her own terms without further treatment: the pain had grown too much, I presumed. Thereafter, the sequence of events progressed quickly before any of us could catch our breath. Friday, January 13<sup>th</sup>, my cousin informed me Glo was preparing for her home going. She defiantly held off death one more time to grace those around her with a smile and laughter. Monday, January 16<sup>th</sup>, the day the world celebrated the life of a king,

Martin Luther King Jr, I made preparations to travel to Memphis to send one of my queens home.

Tradition dictates the acknowledgement section should discuss academic contributors—mentors, committee members, advisors, colleagues, etc.—who aided in the completion of the doctoral process. But, evoking Scarface’s lyrics on Jay-Z’s track, *This Can’t Be Life*: “But heaven knows I woulda been wrong; I wouldn’ta been right, it wouldn’ta been love; It wouldn’ta been, it wouldn’ta been us.” A simple dedication is not sufficient. Glo’s life requires an acknowledgement. An acknowledgement that celebrates what she meant and still means to me.

In 1981 (if I recall correctly), a snot-nosed, scrawny black child showed up on Glo’s doorstep. I made the decision to live with my mother rather than my father. I did not immediately show up on Glo’s doorstep. My mother sent me to Chicago, IL first to stay with another aunt until she had things set up for us in Evanston, IL. After a short time, I was in Evanston. My mom and I shared a twin bed in Glo and Frank’s (Glo’s husband) second bedroom in their apartment. It was a full house. Frank, Glo, Talline (who was a baby at that time), mom, and myself occupied the space. But, it was home for the moment.

Glo served as second mother to me. My mother worked retail, involving odd hours—particularly at night. Thus, Glo was there when I got home from school and cooked the delicious meals I gladly consumed. She also played other roles such as saving my ass from countless spankings. In the third grade, Ms. Holdman was my homeroom teacher. My friends and I constantly disobeyed her instructions, which led to repeated

calls to the house complaining about my classroom behavior. Hence, Glo and I engaged in the daily dance: “Boy, I told you ‘bout havin’ that woman callin’ my house!! Don’t do it again!” I would promise to improve my behavior. Glo would smile and promise not to tell mom. Then, the next day we would repeat the same conversation. Each time Glo kept her promise and did not inform mom of my indiscretions whereas I struggled to uphold my end.

As our relationship blossomed, Glo became a confidant, a truth teller (whether you wanted to hear it), a friend, and a protector. She taught me how to cuss. Glo once told me, “Now, there’s a difference between cursing and cussin’. We don’t curse...we cuss. Yo’ grand-momma can string some cusses together. And yo’ momma can do some cussin’ when she gets ready to. Now, boy, when you get ready to, you bet not curse. Don’t let me catch you cursing. You betta cuss right! Don’t let me down!!” Glo’s words always stuck with me as I witnessed future generations learn how to cuss from her.

During summer 2015, I had a fellowship and required accommodations in Memphis, TN. Without hesitation, Glo and Frank graciously opened their house to me once again. I greatly appreciated the hospitality; but, more importantly, I felt at home. A friend from Austin, TX visited. I introduced Glo as the “hell raiser.” I meant no disrespect. Simply, I recognized Glo as the family protector. If anyone posed a threat to the family, she would raise hell to shield us. I understood that and I loved her for doing so.

Thus, when I received the call regarding Glo’s deteriorating health, I had to make the trip to Memphis. Once there, I had to quickly adapt to the reality: cancer robbed Glo

of her ability to physically function. She could not walk, stand, or do any basic function individuals take for granted. I proudly accepted the responsibility to carry Glo from her wheelchair to bed, couch, or any destination she chose. As I carried her, Glo's breathing patterns indicated she was in pain. I did my best to be gentle. But, she weathered the pain. I patiently waited for her to inform me whether she was comfortable and listened intently to make the necessary adjustments to increase her comfort.

Through the pain Glo remained mostly lucid. She laughed, smiled, displayed honesty, cussed, and conveyed stories to those who sat with her. One night, after I moved Glo to the couch so she could watch her Westerns, Glo recounted my indiscretions—particularly, with Ms. Holdman. She stated, “He always had that heffa callin’ my house talkin’ ‘bout you did this...or you did that. I almost started to worry about you. Then, I’ve watched you grow...I’m proud of you!” I sat on the adjacent couch and stared at the television screen, hoping not to succumb to my emotions. Consequently, my last words to her were: “I love you!”

Shortly after Shu and I left Memphis, Glo decided to end her treatments. I understood she was tired. Tired of the pain, the poking, the prodding, the needles, and so forth. No matter how many times I wanted to say so it would have been selfish of me to ask her to continue the struggle. Glo was in pain and I could not bear it.

Since her death, I have been in full dissertation mode—eluding the opportunity to grieve because of a fear that the process would have consumed me to the point I could not bring myself to complete this dissertation. I wrote with a heavy heart and I know she



was there every step of the way. I miss her! Until we meet again, Aunt Gloria. I love you and thank you for being that rock in my life. Peace.

# **Landlocked and Unwanted: The Afro-Paraguayan Dilemma**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

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Afro-Paraguayans continue to struggle for rights associated with cultural citizenship from the state rather than pursue other strategies. This is especially perplexing given their political organizing around cultural citizenship has not been effective in gaining such rights much less improving their material well-being. Afro-Paraguayans recognize their lack of economic well-being as a critical issue the group faces with regard to survival. Yet, the Red Paraguaya Afrodescendientes (RPA), an association of three community organizations, focuses on cultural citizenship rather than directly confront the state to demand assistance with their socioeconomic marginalization. Hence, why do they continue to engage in such actions? Better yet: why has the state been nonresponsive to Afro-Paraguayans' demands for cultural inclusion?

Drawing from theories on cultural citizenship, moral economies, black liberation, and Afro-Pessimism, I posit the following: cultural citizenship rights are legible to the state due to the institutionalization of hegemonic politics that emerge after post-colonial rule. The institutionalization of those politics has led to a set of beliefs in cultural citizenship rights as the most appropriate course to gain visibility and equal rights as citizens, which Afro-Paraguayans have embraced as the principle solution to their socioeconomic and political deficiencies. But, there is a fundamental issue. The state denies Afro-Paraguayans' rights because of anti-black racism. In essence, the struggle is not against a hegemonic mestizo nation for cultural inclusion but against a deeply ingrained anti-black sentiment.

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### ***Introduction: A Return to Afroparaguay***

Night descended upon us. Darkness seemed to plaster all the crevices of the city. Every so often a glimpse of light would peer out to accentuate small pockets of paved, at times cobbled streets banked by concrete and bricks. But, the glimpse of light was not enough. The darkness concealed everything, rendering it impossible to locate where I was. It reminded me of those small country roads with only the moon providing light. Defeated, I decided to embrace the darkness. I had no choice but to accept its presence as I sat idly next to my navigator, José Carlos.

As José Carlos navigated the various passageways with a mixture of tenacity and extreme caution, I marveled how the darkness could not conceal our reality: life had changed us. José Carlos and I first met in 2003. Linda, a mutual friend and Peace Corps volunteer assigned to Kambá Cuá, facilitated our introduction. She invited me to her home located in José Carlos' community, Kambá Cuá. He lived a couple houses up the hard, uneven dirt road from Linda. She wanted me to meet him; and José Carlos was anxious to meet me because of the possibility of working with a black volunteer who would receive an assignment in a town, Emboscada, known for having people of African descent. Even though he had made contact with Nelson from Emboscada, José Carlos envisioned me as an important cog in strengthening his relationship with Afro-

Emboscadeños. I was more than up for the task. More importantly, I understood his vision and wanted to assist in any manner I could.

I made several subsequent visits to Kambá Cuá after our initial meeting. Those visits gave me an opportunity to meet José Carlos' family—his grandfather, uncle, sister, and various other extended family members. Kambá Cuá's community was, and remains, essentially a biological family with some outside additions. A family incident divided the community, creating some visible tension. But, José Carlos seemed to be hopeful that the community would eventually resolve the internal conflict and invest its energy in a greater cause: the inclusion of Afro-Paraguayans in a society that regularly ignored their existence.

Back then he was young. On certain occasions, I witnessed immaturity—the usual growing pains that accompany life. I, however, never questioned José Carlos' resolve. The young man was determined to empower his community and had an inchoate plan to build connections beyond his community with other Afro-Paraguayans. That would be the ultimate move to organize and mobilize Afro-Paraguayans to demand citizen rights from the state. I admired the eventual goal; but I also understood that he was not ready for that task yet because his main focus, at that moment, was on improving the socioeconomic conditions of his immediate community.

Now, it was 2012. We were much different from those earlier years. The evidence of that evolution resided in the backseat—José Carlos' true co-navigator, his son. José Carlos resembled a family man with a wife and three children. His face was a little rounder than I remembered. I knew in his eyes I had physically changed too. The last

time he saw me I had a full head of hair. Undoubtedly, time had taken its toll on the both of us. We were two older black gentlemen facing the darkness together with the future behind us, patiently awaiting our destination.

After staying in a hostel for some time, I acquired a small room to rent in San Lorenzo. The locale of the rental was a bonus on several levels: it was a few blocks from where José Carlos lived, a reasonable walking distance to Kambá Cuá's community, and accessible to bus routes that went to Emboscada and Paraguari. Moreover, I craved the quasi-privacy (which never seemed to be obtainable in Paraguay) a hostel did not afford me. I desired solitary moments to reflect and organize my thoughts as I underwent the field research process. José Carlos kindly offered to assist me with the move from the hostel; hence, the reason why we were on the road that night.

We spoke sporadically. I sensed José Carlos had endured a long day. He seemed tired. Thus, I was more than grateful for his assistance. Silence mostly filled the cabin of José Carlos' car. Every so often I glanced behind me to see whether his carbon copy was still awake. I felt myself drift in and out of deep thoughts, wondering what was waiting around the corner—potentially, altering our direction. I realized that José Carlos was cutting through various neighborhoods as to avoid traffic on major roadways—further contributing to my confusion as to where we were because I had never seen those parts of Asunción before.

Some time passed. José Carlos indicated he needed to make a quick stop in Kambá Cuá to drop off a key with one of his relatives. The stop was on the way. I did not mind because he was doing me a solid. Shortly thereafter, we were in a neighborhood



that was recognizable but drastically altered. He turned down a street that led to Kambá Cuá. The street was now paved with considerable more traffic than I remembered. To the right was Universidad Nacional de Asunción. In 2003, the university was significantly smaller—probably, a couple of buildings. Now, it seemed expansive: adorned with bright lights, paved streets within and around the perimeter, multiple buildings, and a guarded gate to protect its upgraded functionality. This had all the markings of gentrification. I perceived Kambá Cuá's community had suffered more land loss.

José Carlos pulled in front of the designated house, exited the car, returned after a couple of minutes, and we continued on to our destination. Instead of driving immediately to the main road that passed through San Lorenzo, he decided to take a detour through the university's campus. We crossed the current road we were on from left to right. José Carlos pulled in front of the guard's post to request permission to pass through. The guard obliged his request. As we drove on the campus, he looked at me and said, "Lorenzo, this used to be all ours [Kambá Cuá]...all the way down (gesturing with his right index finger) to the creek that's down that way!" I looked in the direction he indicated. Even with the bright campus lights, the creek seemed off in the distance. Thus, I imagined where the creek was located, which led to a sense of disbelief and anger.

I knew the stories: Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia decreed land to Kambá Cuá during the 1820s but never gave the community the title to the land. Although Afro-Paraguayans lived on and cultivated the land since Francia's dictatorship, the absence of the title meant they were technically squatters—relegating them to a perilous position. Subsequent dictators use of political and physical force would illustrate how much peril

Kambá Cuá faced. In 1943, General Higinio Morinigo utilized presidential powers to remove fertile land from Kambá Cuá to give to his allies.<sup>1</sup> Again, in 1967, Alfredo Stroessner forcibly expropriated fifty hectares more, where the Universidad Nacional now resides.<sup>2</sup> The overall expropriation of land drastically reduced Kambá Cuá from one hundred to seven hectares,<sup>3</sup> disrupting severely the self-sufficiency of the community. Consequently, some members, such as José Carlos' mother, were forced to leave Kambá Cuá in search of jobs.<sup>4</sup>

José Carlos turned left at what I believed to be the center of campus. That road led to the main street we needed to take. My thoughts lingered on the dispossession of land from Kambá Cuá, radically altering the self-sufficiency of the community. José Carlos' silence after the revelation spoke volumes. I did not feel the need to interrupt the silence. Besides, it did not feel appropriate. The memories of trauma—armed soldiers invading the community to forcibly take land—remained fresh among community members, particularly for José Carlos. He and his uncle Lázaro embarked on an apparently futile quest, due to the absence of land titles, to regain what was lost. Furthermore, the state seemed steadfast, ignoring any requests to consider the adverse impact the land loss had on Kambá Cuá or to offer solutions to remedy the socioeconomic deficiencies that ensued after the loss.

We reached our destination. I unloaded the suitcases from the vehicle. I thanked José Carlos again for his assistance. Promises were made to see each other again soon. He and his co-pilot drove away. I entered the small quarters designated as home for the duration of the research. Overcome with fatigue, I did the bare minimum to at least get

through the night. My head eventually hit the pillow. Unfortunately, I did not immediately drift away as planned. Thoughts continued to swirl about the research. More importantly, I could not shake the reality José Carlos exposed me to that night.

For approximately twenty-plus years, Kambá Cuá has committed its efforts primarily to cultural reproduction (i.e. exhibitions of dancing and drumming). The intent of cultural reproduction is to position blackness as a subculture that operates within or parallel to the dominant culture without disrupting or frontally repudiating the state's hegemony. Stated another way: Afro-Paraguayans dancing and drumming does not pose a legible threat to Paraguay's status quo. The cultural reproduction strategy, however, has had an adverse effect on Afro-Paraguyan communities: material well-being (i.e. affordable healthcare, higher education and job opportunities, etc.) remains inaccessible. Thus, the fundamental question this dissertation seeks to understand is: if the strategy of cultural reproduction has not yielded favorable results, why not exact the state to address severe deficiencies in material well-being?

I posed this question to José Carlos when I returned to Paraguay. As we sat in his living room, José Carlos responded, "I don't see any other way! Living and being in this country...this country only responds to certain movements. And, it oppressively rejects those movements that openly challenge it. If we could, I'd like to try something else. But, knowing this country...I don't know what that would be except for what we are doing now. I just don't see any other way!"

José Carlos' response reflects the following. The state has a history of coercion and violence to promote certain cultural and political narratives while oppressing (and, in

most cases, annihilating) potential counter-cultures. The lived-experiences of Afro-Paraguayans dictate that movements frontally opposing the state's hegemony may jeopardize black's survival. As a consequence, Afro-Paraguayans' cultural and political *common sense*<sup>5</sup> veers toward a *war of position* as the most suitable strategy. Antonio Gramsci states the *war of position* "demands enormous sacrifice" from masses of people to challenge the "hegemonic 'positions' of the dominant group," but winning the *war of position* means a decisive definitive victory.<sup>6</sup> The strategy, however, is a long, drawn out one that requires considerable time—hence, the enormous sacrifice on the part of the masses—to challenge the hegemon. José Carlos, in particular, seemed aware of the sacrifice in employing cultural reproduction as the strategy.

Unlike indigenous groups, Afro-Paraguayans are not constituted as a culture separate from the state. Additionally, they do not seek a position as a cultural entity that functions completely independent of the state. Rather, Afro-Paraguayans pursue cultural citizenship, which is the right to be different in relation to the dominant culture without jeopardizing one's right to belong to the nation-state and to participate in the democratic process.<sup>7</sup> Renato Rosaldo posits there are two dimensions of cultural citizenship that involves the redistribution of resources and also recognition and responsiveness.<sup>8</sup> The redistribution of resources is meant to solve issues of class while recognition and responsiveness attend to matters of social inequality and justice. Rosaldo seems to argue redistribution of resources and recognition and responsiveness need to happen simultaneously for full citizenship to be achieved.<sup>9</sup> Other anthropologists have built upon Rosaldo's understanding of cultural citizenship. Aihwa Ong offers cultural citizenship is

a dual process of self-making and being made within the power structure that is linked both to the nation-state and the society.<sup>10</sup> Ong's dual process frames cultural citizenship as a dialectic between the subject and the nation-state.

At this juncture, it is important to note where the aforementioned scholars on cultural rights and cultural citizenship are similar. The approaches of the scholars offer a top-down approach to examining cultural citizenship and rights. Top-down in that the state determines who are citizens and who are autonomous. A critique of this type of approach is that because the state determines who are citizens or autonomous, marginalized groups appeal to the state in such a way that is not seen as threatening to gain certain statuses. Furthermore, we can infer, as far as cultural citizenship is concerned, marginalized groups, to appear less threatening, compromise some of their cultural practices and values to assimilate into the nation-state's dominant culture. From Afro-Paraguayans' standpoint, assimilation has meant compromising values with regard to opportunities to improve material well-being.

Another critique is cultural citizenship and cultural rights are situated in a colonial context. We understand how the state constructs citizenship but in particular with cultural citizenship, we remain ambivalent as to how marginalized groups construct and live their notions of citizenship. More specifically, we need to understand the process in which marginalized groups derive their understandings of citizenship and articulate it in the everyday. Here the everyday signifies cultural practices, expressions, performances, narratives, daily interactions, and so forth.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, scholars who focus on gender

and utilize a feminist framework make the intervention and provide a multilayered approach to the everyday.

Cultural citizenship situated in the everyday provides a bottom-up analysis. In this regard, citizenship is a “lived social process” that people, desiring to be citizens, create, animate, and transform.<sup>12</sup> By intersecting race, gender, class, and transnationalism, we begin to understand the multiple layers through which marginalized groups express citizenship.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the feminist framework employs an approach that engenders citizenship. Engendering citizenship enables the search for politics and power and inequality issues that reside outside the domain of citizenship, which extend to spirituality, sexuality, family, emotions, domestic and sexual violence, and so forth.<sup>14</sup> This further complicates visions and expressions of citizenship in the everyday.

Taking a step back: why is culture important? What is the role of culture in the struggle for citizenship? In his restructuring of Marxist theory to frame a cultural revolution, Amilcar Cabral states, “...culture is a method for the collective mobilization, a weapon, that is, in the struggle for independence.”<sup>15</sup> He states further:

It is a fact that for its own security imperialist domination requires cultural oppression and endeavors to liquidate directly or indirectly the cultural fabric of the dominated people. But the people are able to create and develop the liberation movement only because they have kept their culture alive and vigorous despite the relentless and organized repression of their cultural life; with their resistance at the political and military levels destroyed, they continue to resist culturally. This cultural resistance will at a certain point, determined by internal and external factors governing the development of the dominated society and its relations with the colonial power, assume new forms (political, economic, armed struggle) to directly challenge foreign domination.<sup>16</sup>

Previous experience with imperialism in Africa illustrates the colonial power's most effective means (with the exception of genocide, racial segregation, and apartheid) to interrupt the colonized people's cultural resistance was assimilation.<sup>17</sup> Granted, Cabral's use of culture reflects the colonizer/colonized binary under imperialism. His interpretation of the role of culture, however, is applicable here. The colonizer/colonized binary transformed to a master/slave (I will go into greater detail later on) dynamic in which Afro-Paraguayans operate under.

In *Weapons of the Weak*, James Scott examines the ways in which peasants in Malaysia engage in everyday forms of resistance. The powerless resist in ordinary methods: "foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth."<sup>18</sup> According to Scott, everyday forms of resistance are far more effective in class struggles than large-scale peasant uprisings that are usually "crushed unceremoniously."<sup>19</sup> In a similar vein, Afro-Paraguayans use cultural practices to resist.

Paraguayan dominant culture consists of Europeanized elements acculturated to Paraguay's identity: mestizo. The national music (Guaranía) and dance (Paraguayan Polka, which differs from the Europeanized version) intertwine aspects of Spanish and Guaraní cultures. Black communities in Emboscada and Kambá Cuá, conversely, practice, albeit acculturated, African drumming and dancing. It is a subversive move: antagonizing the national culture without threatening its dominance. Employing drumming and dancing as an everyday ritual is, as Cabral and Scott posit, a cultural weapon that disrupts the normative and collectively organizes blacks in the struggle for

recognition from the state as a subculture. Yet it remains unclear how effective the role of culture is with regard to Afro-Paraguayans achieving their desired goals.

The struggle for cultural inclusion stems from the racialization of the state. In *The Racial State*, David Theo Goldberg supposes a dual role for the modern state: it is a racial state as well as a racist state.<sup>20</sup> According to Goldberg, “Race marks and orders the modern nation-state, and so state projects, more or less from its point of conceptual and institutional emergence. The apparatuses and technologies employed by modern states have served variously to fashion, modify, and reify the terms of racial expression, as well as racist exclusions and subjugation.”<sup>21</sup> Paraguay racially expresses itself as a constituted bi-lingual (Spanish and Guaraní languages), hybrid (the progeny of European and indigenous ancestors) nation-state. Hence, racial/ethnic formations occurring outside of that paradigm are excluded from the state.

Furthermore, Goldberg states:

Racist states have undertaken to deflect resistance by indirection. Contemporary state have sought thus to dissipate the normative power of critique in two related ways. On the one, they have rerouted rightful anger at the homogenizing exclusions of racist states into the circuitous ambiguities and ambivalences of “mere” racially characterized if not outrightly colorblind conditions; and on the other hand, they have pursued superficial appropriation through uncritical celebration of the multicultural.<sup>22</sup>

In Paraguay, the indirection has occurred in the form of social studies concluding racism does not exist. Terms such as racism and discrimination are normalized as the actions of foreigners. Moreover, racism and discrimination are not widely discussed concepts, creating a false consciousness that a Paraguayan does not act in discriminatory or racist manner. That false consciousness or colorblindness renders Afro-Paraguayans and



indigenous groups' demands for racial/ethnic inclusion to a state of invisibility. As Goldberg states, "the modern state...founds itself not just on exclusions, those absences that render invisible, but on the internalization of exclusions. Thus inclusions, those privileged by and in the modern state, assume their privileges in virtue of the exclusion the state at once renders possible conceptually and technologically."<sup>23</sup> Therefore, those groups racially configured as the other remain invisible until they insist upon recognition from the state.<sup>24</sup> Indigenous groups insisted upon an instituted existence outside of the Paraguayan state. Thus, indigenous people have been instituted as the other while blacks have been much more ambiguously configured, "as both inside and outside the society of their masters and observers."<sup>25</sup>

Returning to the ambivalence Goldberg mentions, Charles Hale notes in his analysis of Ladinos in Guatemala: "Ladinos manifest racial ambivalence when they repudiate racism, express support for the ideals of cultural equality, and view themselves as practicing these ideals, and yet, maintain a psychic investment in their dominance and privilege in relation to Indians."<sup>26</sup> Hale posits the racial ambivalence as a "collective political sensibility and structured social condition."<sup>27</sup> Similar to the Ladinos, Paraguayans claim to accept and celebrate cultural differences and see themselves as an anti-racist/ discriminatory cultural state; however, they privilege themselves in relation to indigenous groups and refuse to recognize blacks as a subculture. Paraguayans, particularly, view blacks as Brazilians: essentially, foreigners. It is, practically, infeasible for Paraguayans to identify themselves as black.

According to Hale, racial ambivalence runs parallel to the shift of the Guatemalan state to neoliberalism.<sup>28</sup> Neoliberalism transforms economic policy reforms to a process of subject formation. The consequence, Hale states, was “the ideology of neoliberalism affirms cultural rights, and endorses the principle of equality, while remaking societies with ever more embedded and resilient forms of racial hierarchy.”<sup>29</sup> Hence, neoliberal multiculturalism has the following impact: the recognition of cultural difference enables states, civil society, and transnational organizations to influence the terms of political contestation and to determine which cultural demands are authentic and permissible; but only promises cultural recognition, denying equality.<sup>30</sup> As Jared Sexton argues, multiculturalism does not fundamentally challenge white supremacy rather it reinforces anti-blackness.<sup>31</sup>

Admittedly, I am hesitant with the idea of multiculturalism as a state project in Paraguay. As Goldberg notes, the state is inherently contradictory and internally fractured.<sup>32</sup> Here is the contradiction I struggle with in referring to Paraguay as a multicultural state. In reality, Paraguay is, albeit slightly, a diverse state. Even though the census enumerates the Paraguayan population as approximately ninety-five percent mestizo, the country’s diversity includes immigrants (i.e. Asians, Italians, and others from various countries), people of African descent, multiple indigenous groups, and so on. Yet the state does not, at least openly, recognize cultural differences the way in which Hale argues as a component of neoliberal multiculturalism in Guatemala. The state, however, has and continues to promote a homogeneous mestizo nation as the cultural project. As Ronald Stutzman posits, ethnic identities are lost or denied once the goals of

the nation's cultural project are accepted.<sup>33</sup> In the Paraguayan cultural context, black and indigenous identities have been denied.

Undoubtedly, Paraguay has undergone neoliberal reforms of economic policies and a process of democratization. But, multiculturalism as a project in Paraguay seems disjointed due to the disposition of the Colorado Party. (In essence, Afro-Paraguayans are the group pushing for a multicultural state project.) Former impeached President Fernando Lugo stated the need to seek inclusivity, recognizing publically black and indigenous populations. Governmental agencies such as the Ministry of Culture and Education have hosted conferences, discussing multiculturalism. The state, or should I say Paraguayan elite, has not embraced or recognized Afro-Paraguayans as a subculture. Granted, the inverse is the state does not recognize Afro-Paraguayans as an authentic identity with legitimate demands.

Setting my objection aside, the lack of recognition reinforces the reasons why Afro-Paraguayans insisted on conducting a census. Melissa Nobles states, "censuses help form racial discourse, which in turn affects the public policies that either vitiate or protect the rights, privileges, and experiences commonly associated with citizenship."<sup>34</sup> The 2012 census included a question on race, asking specifically whether an individual identified as a person of African descent. The intent was to prove to the state the numbers of Afro-Paraguayans existed and make the case for policies that could assist Afro-Paraguayan communities. The census presented potential *pasitos* [little steps] to pursue material well-being. But, here is the reality: seeking to disrupt the homogeneous mestizo nation by demanding multicultural inclusion evades the root issue. The root issue is Afro-

Paraguayans are struggling against structural anti-black racism that perpetuates the death of black bodies.

To this point, the discussion has ranged from state power and formation—including policies or projects (i.e. neoliberal multiculturalism), the ways in which Afro-Paraguayans engage in subversive behavior in a nonthreatening manner (i.e. performing African traditions), to civic participation (i.e. the census). In focusing more of civic participation, the following question arises: what value does civic participation really hold for people of African descent? Frantz Fanon discusses breaking the cycle: whites exuding superiority complex while blacks relentlessly attempting to prove their intellectual capabilities to whites.<sup>35</sup> To take it step further, civic participation (for blacks, specifically) delves into a series of meticulous, arduous tasks to provide evidence of one's existence. The state necessitates the need for concrete, irrefutable statistics to illustrate a community's deficiencies. In some cases, the state dislodges racial inequality from the equation to maintain the façade of inclusivity. Reiterating Hale's observation, the state has the discretion to designate whether it legitimizes cultural authenticity and demands. Yet blacks remain engaged in a tenuous, predictable system of anti-blackness.

In *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, Derrick Bell acknowledges Fanon's pessimism in *Black Skin, White Masks* and states, "He did not believe that modern structures, deeply poisoned with racism, could be overthrown. And yet he urged resistance."<sup>36</sup> Fanon's pessimism is justifiable: states, in this case—Paraguay, have perpetuated systems of oppression (i.e. anti-blackness) that seem deeply rooted due to coercive methods the state utilizes to sustain and reinforce norms while the masses are

complicit in allowing the state to operate as such. Thus, everyday resistance is the mechanism to stave off annihilation—prolonging suffering and experiencing minuscule advances when it does jeopardize the privileges of the dominant culture.

Bell's later work, *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform*, offers two concepts, "racial-sacrifice covenants" and "interest-convergence covenants," that aid this discussion. Through a litany of examples (*Brown vs. The Board of Education*, *Dred Scott vs. Stanford*, etc.) to demonstrate how "racial-sacrifice covenants" are harmful to blacks. As an example, the *Brown* decision ended the legal segregation of public schools, benefiting blacks in the process. As Bell notes, "the decision enraged large numbers of whites, who mounted a political rebellion that over the years seriously undermined the Court's good intentions."<sup>37</sup> In essence, when civic participation yields racial-reform, the state will sacrifice reforms to sustain the status quo of anti-blackness to avoid rebellion from the dominant group. Conversely, "interest-convergence covenants" involve political advances for blacks gained from policies that also served the interests and convenience of whites without remedying racial injustices against blacks.<sup>38</sup> Even with the "interest-convergence covenants" there is no guarantee that they remain intact with shifts in political climate and special interests.

Bell's examples are imbedded in the racial hierarchy of the United States. But, the concepts are still applicable to blacks in Paraguay. Afro-Paraguayan history includes examples of "racial-sacrifice covenants" with regard to granting African slaves freedom. Placing history aside, I am more concerned with the future of Afro-Paraguayans as they

continue to pursue forms of civic engagement. Are there possibilities for Afro-Paraguayan interests to align with the government to achieve political, economic, and/or social progress? If Paraguayans push back on certain advances, will the state sacrifice the rights of blacks to appease the masses?

The aforementioned questions are steeped in uncertainty, at best. What is certain, however, is blacks occupy an ontological status that makes civic participation or advancement through civic engagement impossible. In his discussion on slavery, Orlando Patterson posits slavery as a process through which black bodies became socially dead. The slave's natal alienation signified the following: "Alienated from all 'rights' or claims of birth, he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order. All slaves experienced, at the very least, a secular excommunication."<sup>39</sup> Frank Wilderson III states:

...as Orlando Patterson points out, slavery is natal alienation by way of social, which is to say that a slave has no symbolic currency or material labor power exchange: a slave does not enter into a transaction of value (however asymmetrical) but subsumed by direct relations of force, which is to say that a slave is an articulation of a despotic irrationality whereas the worker is an articulation of a symbolic rationality.<sup>40</sup>

The absence of symbolic currency or material labor power exchange places black bodies outside of the construct of civil society whereby black subjectivity is antagonistic because it is not relational to society.

Returning to Gramsci's concept "war of position," Wilderson argues black subjectivity is incommensurable with "Gramscian categories: work, progress, production, exploitation, hegemony, and historical self-awareness."<sup>41</sup> As a consequence, the "war of position" is ineffectual for black bodies: "the worker demands that productivity be fair

and democratic...the slave demands that productivity stop, without recourse to its ultimate democratization.”<sup>42</sup> Black bodies repeatedly demand the dismantling of white supremacy and a reconfiguration as *living human beings*. Those demands, however, are inarticulable, incoherent to the state apparatus that preys on black death. Thus, as Wilderson states:

There is something organic to civil society that makes *it* essential to the destruction of the Black body. Blackness is a positionality of “absolute dereliction” (Fanon), abandonment, in the face of civil society, and therefore cannot establish itself, or be established, through hegemonic interventions. Blackness cannot become one of civil society’s many junior partners: Black citizenship, or Black civic obligations, are oxymorons.<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, blackness operates in Master/Slave narrative that “cannot disentangle itself from slaves.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, blackness exists ontologically as death, anti-human—subjects of gratuitous state violence.

In *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Wilderson differentiates and conflates the experiences of blacks and Indians. Unlike blacks, Indians operate in Settler/Master narrative where the “Savage” exists liminally in relation to the Settler, remaining ontologically possible—but half-alive.<sup>45</sup> Wilderson states, “...the ‘Savage’ is positioned, structurally, by subjective capacity and objective incapacity, by sovereignty and genocide, respectively.”<sup>46</sup> He further explicates:

Indians perpetually shuttle between death and civil society: at one moment they are isolated from Human community (civil society or “contemporaries”) in their genocidal effect (much like Slaves); at another moment, the moment of the sovereign effect, Indians are wedged back into the Human fold. For slaves, this shuttling between death and civil society is simply not allowed—which accounts for the anxious need to imagine Black slavery as a historical rather than ontological phenomenon.<sup>47</sup>

In essence, civil society constitutes Indians as half person/nonperson whereas blackness is only a nonperson. Redness has the ability to regain “the coherence that a priori violence of modernity ripped from her or him by way of its capacity to be free from, or at least partially immune to, accumulation and fungibility.”<sup>48</sup> Conversely, accumulation and fungibility constitute blackness.

Although slightly different, genocide conflates the experiences of redness and blackness. The state commits gratuitous violence on redness and blackness yet redness can ascend genocide. Hence, redness is able to achieve certain, permissible levels of civil rights because the state recognizes Indians to a degree. In Paraguay, the constitution protects the rights of indigenous groups. Granted, the state has and continues to exclude indigenous groups from civil society while simultaneously acknowledging their existence in Paraguay as separate from the state.

Thus, could civic participation eventually benefit blacks? The simple answer: no! This sounds pessimistic; however, it recognizes the following. For civic engagement to work for black bodies, the white supremacist apparatus would have to frontally confront, take responsibility, and genuinely commit to ending gratuitous state violence—thus, raising black bodies from the dead. In 1969, before a majority white audience, James Baldwin argues the problem is not racial rather it is a willingness to look at one’s life and take responsibility for it, and change it.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, it involves the recognition of black bodies as humans (no longer the *other*), living in the same Western house.

According to Baldwin, *true* progress depends on the following: “If I’m not the nigger here and you invited him, you the white people invented him, then you’ve got to



find out why. And the future of the country depends on that, whether or not it is able to ask that question.”<sup>50</sup> Whether in the US (which Baldwin’s statement refers to) or Paraguay, the ideals of white supremacy are deeply entrenched structurally. It is parasitic, projecting myths of black bodies as threats to a false consciousness of rationality that undergirds civil society formation. Because society must be protected from threats, whites are inherently *deputized* to dispose of blackness.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, it is implausible to witness the state critically and willfully engage with Baldwin’s challenge, rendering civic participation as a farce. This is the oxymoron Wilderson refers to: black bodies are not able to transcend an endless and incoherent junior partner status.

The title of this dissertation, *Landlocked and Unwanted: The Afro-Paraguayan Dilemma*, is apropos for the following. I intend for *landlocked* to have a *doble sentido* [double meaning] here. Paraguay is one of two landlocked countries (with Bolivia as the other) in South America. As a consequence, Afro-Paraguayans as well as nonblack Paraguayans are physically enclosed by land. But, metaphorically speaking, Afro-Paraguayans are *landlocked* in perpetuity in a state of alienation: social death. And, because Paraguay normalizes anti-blackness, Afro-Paraguayans function as undesirable, *unwanted* subjects.

Despite the existence as *unwanted* subjects, Afro-Paraguayans pursue cultural citizenship as a means to engage civically without hesitation. The strategy, however, has not produced desired results, inciting a moral dilemma for Afro-Paraguayans. It is a realization the state privileges whiteness and perpetuates anti-blackness, rendering Afro-Paraguayans as permanent foreigners unable to disrupt their exclusionary status. Thus,

the moral dilemma: do Afro-Paraguayans continue to civically engage the state even though the state engages in anti-black racism without an indication that the state will eventually take responsibility for designating Afro-Paraguayans as niggers?

The aforementioned dilemma is not unique to Paraguay rather it persists throughout the African diaspora. Similar to other Afro descendants, Afro-Paraguayans suffer with the contradictions and complications of existing as socially dead individuals. This dissertation focuses on the Red Paraguaya Afrodescendientes (RPA), which is comprised of Kambá Cuá, Kambá Kokué, and Emboscada. Each community function as closed-communities, affecting the possibility of collective action. Thus, the contradiction: Afro-Paraguayans speak of solidarity but lack fidelity<sup>52</sup> to each other or other members of the African diaspora to realize that solidarity and connection with the larger struggle of descendants of African slaves across the globe.

### *Afroparaguaya Cue*

This dissertation draws from various sources: experiences, activist work, and interviews in Afro-Paraguyan communities located in Kambá Cuá (place of blacks), Emboscada, and Kambá Kokué (farm of blacks). The communities are part of the RPA. Among the three communities, Kambá Cuá has been the most recognized and politically organized community; hence, it is appropriate to refer to Kambá Cuá as the vanguard group.

In 1824, approximately two hundred black lancers and family members sought political asylum along with Uruguay's revolutionary leader, José Gervasio Artigas. Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, Paraguay's first dictator, granted one hundred hectares of land, located on the outer city limits of Asunción, to the lancers. Residents of Kambá Cuá cultivated the land, fostering a self-sufficient community of subsistent

ASOCIACION GRUPO TRADICIONAL  
**KAMBA CUA**  
PRESENTA  
- 26ª EDICIÓN -

**FIESTA KAMBA**  
— 2017 —  
**LÁZARO VIVE**

LOS OJEDA | RENACER DE VILLARICA | AMERICANTA | M FOLK |  
YORYI TORALES | CARLITOS VERA | MIGUEL NARVAEZ | PARDOS LIBRES |  
FRANCISCO RUSSO | MARCELO ROJAS | GRUPO VERBENA |  
FRANCISCO GIMÉNEZ | TERESITA VELLOZO | VÍCTOR HUGO DOMÍNGUEZ |  
BALLET TETAGUA KYRE'Y | ELENCO FOLKLORICO SAN LORENZO |  
Y MUCHOS OTROS ARTISTAS

**7 ENERO 2017**  
**21:00 HS**

**FRENTE A LA CAPILLA**  
**MARÍA AUXILIADORA**  
CAP. RIVAS ESQ. 6 DE ENERO

**ENTRADAS GENERALES**  
**30.000 GS**

Seguinos en: **BALLET KAMBA CUA DE LÁZARO MEDINA** **Contactos al: (0982) 374 736 / (0982) 487 652**

Auspician:

Figure 1: Advertisement for 2017 festival in Kambá Cuá.

farmers. As mentioned earlier, the community was not given the title to the land, making them squatters. The absence of the title enabled the government on several occasions to



Figure 2: San Baltazar, *el Rey Mago negro*

forcibly dispossess hectares of land from Kambá Cuá. The dispossession severely curtailed the community's self-sufficiency, forcing women to join the domestic labor force and most of the men into unemployment.

As a response to the dispossession, the youth formed the Asociación Afroparaguaya Kambá Cuá (AAKC) to not only promote black culture through dance and drumming but also to organize to petition the government for the return of titles to the land that had been taken. The fight for land, however, has been unsuccessful. Instead, the AAKC has forged relationships with international, nongovernmental agencies to gain

grants to address the socioeconomic needs of the community (i.e. the construction of a school). In 2006, the Inter-American Foundation awarded a grant to Kambá Cuá to conduct a census of the three communities: Kambá Cuá, Kambá Kokué, and Emboscada. The census of the Afro-Paraguayan communities subsequently led to the inclusion of a question with regard to race on the 2012 national census. Additionally, Mundo Afro (an organization located in Montevideo, Uruguay) has outreached to AAKC to teach drum making as a means to strengthen Afro-Paraguayans' cultural identity formation.

Annually, on January 6, Kambá Cuá holds a festival for the community's patron saint, San Baltazar, *el Rey Mago negro* [wise black man].<sup>53</sup> The festival involves a religious ceremony that pays homage to San Baltazar, and a cultural exhibition that demonstrates Afro-Paraguayan dance and drumming. The event garners visibility for Kambá Cuá from major media outlets (i.e. ABC Color, La Nación, Última Hora, etc.), government officials, and other Paraguayans. Thus, the festival is intentional in this regard: the attention provides a vehicle for Afro-Paraguayans to raise awareness among Paraguayans about the presence of a subculture that has African ancestry; and, the community fundraises via ticket sales. The monies gained from the festival are usually used to support community development projects.

Past festivals primarily featured the Ballet Kambá Cuá. Over the years, the event has grown to include performances from the Grupo de Pardos Libres de Emboscada although the inclusion was not originally accepted. Some members of Kambá Cuá rejected the participation of the Grupo de Pardos Libres because it disrupted the unique position Kambá Cuá had operated as the vanguard of Afro-Paraguayan communities.





Figure 3: Ballet Kambá Cuá performing at the festival.

Imploration to entertain fidelity to black solidarity eventually softened the opposition's aversion to inclusivity.<sup>54</sup> As a consequence, the festival now showcases one of Paraguay's oldest communities of African descent: *los pardos libres de Emboscada*.

Officially named *el Pueblo de Pardos Libres de la Emboscada* [Emboscada, Town of Freed Brown People] or referred to as San Agustín de la Emboscada, Emboscada is believed to have a population of African descent approximately more than eighty percent of the populace. In 1740, Governor Rafeal de la Moneda founded the town located in the department of the Cordillera.<sup>55</sup> During Spanish colonization, indigenous tribes such as the Guaicurúes, Payaguaes, and Mbayaes persistently ambushed the Spaniards: thus, it was apropos to name the town Emboscada (translated: "ambushed").

According to documentation, 6,667 *negros* and *mulatos libres* populated the town.<sup>56</sup> Their primary function was to defend Arecutacuá, a prison (surrounded by water), from the invading tribes. Additionally, the *negros* and *mulatos libres* cultivated the land near the prison.

Similar to the formation of other towns populated with black people, that of Emboscada did not deviate from the colonizer's methodology: blacks were expected to pay tribute to maintain their freedom; yet it was impossible to pay the tribute because the state refused to provide adequate resources to blacks to survive. Therefore, blacks were the property of elites. Subsequently, blacks frequently fled to achieve their freedom.<sup>57</sup> Some blacks did remain in Emboscada.



Figure 4: Grupo de Pardos Libres performing.

Currently, Emboscada's population is approximately 12,000 inhabitants. The majority of the population lives in the rural areas. Emboscadeños either travel to Asunción for work, farm, teach in public or private schools within Emboscada, work for the local government, mine rock in the quarries, or create crafts from stone, wood, and karanda'y (leaves from a species of palm trees used to make sombreros, baskets, etc.). Due to its economy depending on rock mining, Paraguayans refer to Emboscada as the Stone City. Additionally, Emboscada has the dubious distinction for criminality because of the low-minimum security jail located in Minas, a neighborhood in Emboscada.

In 2003, *La Misión de Afrodescendientes* (MDA) formed to investigate the history of the African slaves and freed mulattos in Emboscada. The focus, however, altered to examine the socioeconomic conditions of Afro-Paraguayans because of the lack of access to higher education, jobs, and proper healthcare—especially, for those who work as rock miners. The name eventually changed to the Asociación de Afrodescendientes de Emboscada. The remaining member of the MDA, Antonio, assumed the role as leader of the Asociación. The Asociación consists of youth from the neighborhood, Minas. Some of the youth also participate in the Grupo de Pardos Libres, the performing drumming and dance group. The group has performed in various locales throughout Paraguay.

Lastly, Kambá Kokué's community resides in the city of Paraguarí, which is the capital of the department of Paraguarí. Before their expulsion, the Jesuits owned the African slaves in Paraguarí. Hence, people of African descent have been in the city for over two hundred years. Those slaves constructed the government buildings and well that exist to this day. Presently, Kambá Kokué consists of fifty families. Residents maintain



their faith in the Virgen Nuestra Señora del Rosario, believed to have been a black Madonna.

Out of the three communities, Kambá Kokué is not as organized. The community formed the Comisión Cultural Afrodescendiente Kambá Kokué to increase the community's political visibility, recuperate the history and traditions, and implement



Figure 5: Mural of African descendant drumming in Paraguari.

projects to develop the community. The Red obtained a grant to build a cultural center in the community that served as a place for the youth to practice dance and drumming, forming the Ballet Kambá Kokué. The Ballet has participated in the annual festival in

Kambá Cuá's community. Yet internal conflict has stifled the community's progress. A disagreement led to a temporary disbandment of the Ballet. Regardless, the community still remains a distant member of the Red.

### ***Notes on Fieldwork and Methodology***

This dissertation represents an amalgamation of experiences in Paraguay. My first encounter with Paraguay occurred in April 2003. Admittedly, I was initially unfamiliar with Paraguay because of its absence from academic or popular discourse. As an undergraduate, my studies extended mostly to Mexico due to an intellectual fascination with the Clinton Administration's enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (1993) that intertwined (on paper) the United States' northern and southern, bordering neighbors. I specifically wanted to understand the impact of NAFTA, after a few years in existence, on Mexico. The occasional course, reading or media, however, exposed me to the politics and cultures of Cuba, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Guatemala (Rigoberta Menchú's book, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, was a requisite read in most courses on Latin American culture), Chile (comprehending Pinochet's regime was a point of emphasis), and Argentina (Madonna's *Evita*—which was highly scrutinized in academic circles I participated in, Juan Perón's presidency, and the Dirty War—particularly stories of the disappeared, were discussed with fervor).

Dartmouth College was (or at least seemed, for it was my only point of reference during the mid-to-late 90s) a hotbed with regard to intellectual interrogation of Latin

America. The Latin American, Latino and Caribbean Studies (LALACS) was established in 1993 as an interdisciplinary area of study to deepen students' understanding of (to name a few) social and political oppression, cultural formation and practices, sovereignty, international relations, and the expansion of democracy to Latin America. Due to the feminist bent of the program, gender and class dynamics were routinely examined with race, at times, garnering some attention—but, very little. Thus, the aforementioned countries provided ample material to explore and develop intellectual curiosity around those various subject matters. And, Paraguay, I presume, could not capture the curiosity of my instructors; thus, going unnoticed in curriculum development and discourse.

Paraguay has a long history of political unrest—several coup attempts over the years, oppressive dictatorships, corruption, and land loss due to unwise wars with its surrounding neighbors, and an assassination of a potential presidential successor. The country is perceived as an unenlightened stepchild with no redeemable value, making it easy to dismiss. Until the “discovery” of yerba mate, Spanish colonizers struggled with Paraguay's potential (or lack thereof). Unlike other Latin American countries, Paraguay was not a treasure trove, enriched with silver or other designated markers of accumulated wealth. On the contrary, after independence, eventual leaders such as Dr. Francia, *El Supremo*, invested in cultural wealth in the absence of desirable, lucrative raw materials.

Today, Paraguay has not shaken its undesired status. Tourists (backpackers in particular) seem to consider it a temporary dormitory that allows one to regroup, regain his or her bearings before or after travelling to or from the usual “attractive” locales. There is more to the diminutive, landlocked country; but the stigma remains. As a

consequence of its “stepchild” status, Paraguayans have self-internalized an inferiority complex. Repeatedly, community activists discussed building self-esteem among citizens, especially the youth. Granted, this dissertation is not a psychoanalysis of Paraguayans. Rather, I do recognize the inferiority complex has had a detrimental, trickle-down effect on Afro-Paraguayans’ capacity to assert an identity and make demands of the state for civil rights.

As I alluded to earlier, José Carlos was the first person I met who openly self-identified as having African ancestry. But, our relationship did not develop until much later. Distance was the reason for why we could not immediately cultivate a relationship. We, however, would occasionally meet either at the church in Kambá Cuá or at his job to discuss *asuntos* [issues]. Our meetings gave me an opportunity to probe José Carlos’ thoughts on racism and discrimination in Paraguay. The conversations were usually high-level, drawing on his exposure to ideas on social justice mulled over at conferences across the Americas. Although it was rare, José Carlos would reveal a personalized story about his *outsider* status. (As our friendship developed, I would hear more stories).

I gained a deeper understanding of the myriad of issues Afro-Paraguayans encountered when I moved to Emboscada in 2003. I befriended two more *outsiders*: Antonio and Nelson. José Carlos met Nelson on a trip to Peru for a conference. The conference had a deep impact on Nelson as far as raising his consciousness on black identity politics and social justice. That trip transformed José Carlos and Nelson into allies; thus, José Carlos referred Nelson to me once it was clear that Emboscada would be home for two years. Unfortunately, I did not know how to find Nelson—José Carlos only

knew Nelson lived in Emboscada. I first met Antonio in Emboscada's municipality. A fortuitous conversation with Antonio unearthed Nelson's whereabouts. Antonio and Nelson knew each other well and lived in the same *barrio*. Antonio promptly set up a meeting for us all to meet and discuss a potential project that delved into the history of people of African descent in Emboscada.

My relationships with Nelson and Antonio proved fruitful in multiple ways. They willingly shared their experiences and expressed a need to raise awareness about black identities in Paraguay. Nelson readily harkened back to his revealing experience at a conference in Peru and desired to build upon that momentum. Thus, every Sunday we met under a tree in their *barrio* to strategize our movements. Those strategy meetings led to the formation of a group, *La Misión de los Descendientes Afros*. I cannot recall how the name came into existence, but we concurred it reflected the group's mission and vision statements we spent countless Sundays formulating.

The time in Emboscada included a mixture of formal and informal interactions with other Afro-Emboscadeños, historians, and governmental officials. Most of those interactions seemed one-sided: the *outsiders* were explaining themselves into existence to an uninterested audience. Consequently, those meetings (particularly with government officials) were a source of great frustration. In hindsight, those interactions were fruitful in the following manner. The predictable denial of the existence of Afro-Paraguayans solidified our resolve to further investigate the history and network with other Afro-Paraguyan communities (i.e. Kambá Kokué, Kambá Cuá, Areguá, etc.). Additionally, the interactions honed the narrative we communicated to our audiences. The narrative

evolved beyond a historical investigation as a means to provide evidence of blackness in Paraguay; rather it involved into a discourse on the socioeconomic condition (i.e. lack of access to healthcare—particularly, miners working in quarries without proper protective gear, education, jobs, etc.).

The initial tenure in Paraguay was eventful. Two events disrupted Paraguay's normalcy and infiltrated international media outlets. On August 1, 2004, the Ycuá Bolaños supermarket fire was reported as Paraguay's deadliest catastrophe: when the fire began, the owners directed security guards to close doors to prevent theft, trapping people inside—drastically increasing the number of fatalities. On that catastrophic day, Nelson, Antonio, myself, and two other people travelled to Areguá to potentially network with another Afro-Paraguayan community. We were supposed to meet a travelling musician who previously identified himself to me as a *pariente* [relative] of Kunta Kinte (I discuss my encounter with the musician in greater detail in Chapter III). The meeting never materialized because the musician never showed. We were deeply disappointed: the musician had promised to introduce us to families that self-identified as Afro-Paraguayans. As we gathered ourselves to return to Emboscada, we could see smoke from afar,<sup>58</sup> signaling the development of tragic events.

The second event occurred September 21, 2004. Former Paraguayan President Raul Cubas' daughter, Cecilia Cubas, was kidnapped outside her home. Conspiracy theories instantly swirled. Daily conversations included the latest speculations about the responsible parties and the potential status of the victim. The search for Cecilia played out like a *telenovela*; but this was no fantasy. Ransom demands were made. Cubas paid

reportedly \$800,000 for her freedom.<sup>59</sup> The kidnappers ceased communication. Several months passed. In February 2005, her body was found buried underneath a house.

The two tragedies loomed large: casting an overwhelming shadow on the psyche of Paraguayans—rightfully so. Attempts to interrupt the grieving seemed futile and inappropriate. By the time of the second tragedy, I had moved to Asunción. The move coupled with the tragedies stalled the movement of our group. I desired to remain active, but the distance definitely strained our ability to discuss matters on a consistent basis. I did, however, continue to visit the National Archives, collect documents, and digitize them. Before I left Paraguay, I gave Nelson and Antonio hard copies and several burned DVDs to disseminate at their discretion. (One of the goals of the group was to house the documents, in electronic form, in the library located in Emboscada.)

The return to Paraguay in September 2012 involved a different tactic. I intended to focus the research on the Red Paraguaya de Afrodescendientes, which spawned from a political mobilization (with assistance from international actors) to influence Paraguay's government to include a question, asking whether an individual had African ancestry. The 2012 census would (re)introduce<sup>60</sup> the question. As preparation for the census, census takers received training on how to handle the question.

The Red included Kambá Cuá (the vanguard community), Emboscada, and Kambá Kokué. The group functioned well for a few years and made significant progress with the change to the national census as the major achievement. By the time I returned to Paraguay in 2012, the Red had faltered, due to some internal strife, for about a year.

The Red still existed. It, however, was no longer collaborative among three communities; rather, José Carlos and his wife kept the organization going.

José Carlos did ask for my assistance to reunite the communities—hopefully, solidifying the Red to make further political maneuvers. I wanted to assist, but the reality was too daunting: there was a lack of fidelity among the communities to make the Red function, as it should. Thus, I decided to spend the majority of the time with José Carlos, Antonio, and two black male Peace Corps volunteers who lived and worked (particularly, with the Red) with Afro-Paraguayan communities. One of the volunteers, Anthony, lived in Emboscada while the other, Walter, resided in Kambá Kokué in Paraguari. Anthony and Walter made it their mission to find as many black communities in Paraguay as possible. They video documented their interactions with the various communities visited. Admittedly, I admired and envied Anthony and Walter's relationship and commitment to explore remote areas to locate blackness in Paraguay. During 2003 to 2005, I pretty much kept my exploration to the central area of Paraguay (i.e. Areguá, Emboscada, etc.). I often wondered if I had a companion with a similar desire to find Paraguay's hidden black communities, would that have made the experience in Paraguay an enjoyable one.

It would be negligent to not mention the following. I am an “unapologetic” darker skin, black male. Paraguayans never referred to me as *gringo* or *blanco*. My dark-skin permanently marked me as a *rapai* (the term used to call someone Brazilian). The only time people called me *Americano* was when people were aware of the fact. In some incidences, people refused to recognize me as an *Americano* and preferred to either yell



*rapai* or muster the few Portuguese words they knew as I passed by. I guess, for some, it was inconceivable that blacks resided in locales other than Brazil.

My darker skin meant a perpetual, simultaneous existence of rejection and acceptance, but teetering more towards rejection than acceptance (I discuss this more in Chapter IV). José Carlos (who has darker skin also) desired volunteers with my skin tone to work and serve as role models in his community.<sup>61</sup> I assume he hoped that our presence would instill a sense of pride among the younger Afro-Paraguayans who shared a similar characteristic. Granted, that acceptance seemed truncated in the presence of the most desired individual: a *blanco*.

Beyond José Carlos' desire, the rejection was, at times, suffocating. Those of us who had darker skin were dirty, criminals, hyper-sexualized objects, aesthetically unappealing, and unintelligible beings. Thus, to state that my skin color did not have an adverse impact on the research would be disingenuous, at best. Paraguayans romanticize the myth that they embrace everyone and dismiss any notions of racism; yet their actions prove otherwise. In *El paraguayo*, Saro Vera states Paraguayans are racist due to inheriting the Europeans' values of racial superiority.<sup>62</sup> Undoubtedly, anti-black racism existed and was expressed in micro-aggressive and overt forms—similar, to what I have experienced throughout my lifetime living in the United States.

Indeed I further incurred Paraguayans ire when I refused to do the following: I refused to relinquish my blackness. Vera explicates foreigners go to Paraguay and become Paraguayan through a process of assimilating the culture.<sup>63</sup> Although I believe in freely exchanging ideas and cultural practices while respecting other cultures, I do not

believe that it should come at a cost: a loss of my identity. It has been a long, arduous road to achieve a sense of comfortableness, albeit awkward at times, with my identity; thus, I was not willing to become Paraguayan. Furthermore, I am aware that within a multicultural state the identities of black bodies are not fluid; rather they remain fixed with designated markers (i.e. criminals, disposable, etc.) that prohibit that fluidity. Therefore, I gladly remained staunch in my “unapologetically black” state.

To a limited degree I shared some characteristics with the Afro-Paraguayans I worked with. I am originally from a forgotten part of the United States: a small, rural country town in the Mississippi Delta region. Emboscada, Paraguarí, and San Lorenzo (technically, Kambá Cuá straddles the San Lorenzo and Fernando de la Mora boundary) resemble metropolises when compared to my place of origin. The town has a stop sign, railroad track, and a main road that used to racially divide the blacks from the whites. It is an impoverished town where teaching, farming, or guarding prisoners serve as the main means to earn a somewhat decent living.

Both sides of my family farmed. My maternal grandfather was a sharecropper while the paternal grandfather was able to procure a plot of land with the money he received from an abbreviated military service (health problems forced his release). Both sides of my family struggled—facing, at times, near death—to survive a violent Jim Crow south. But, they persevered even in tragedy. Essentially, I am a byproduct of “good peasant stock.”<sup>64</sup> And, thus I could relate to some of the struggles with structural oppression that Afro-Paraguayans’ expressed in our daily interactions. I, however, recognized and understood our distinctions: I had a college degree that opened certain

doors to improve my class status. Regardless of the similarities or distinctions, my relationship with José Carlos, Antonio, Nelson, and others was forged, or at least I thought, on the notion of operating toward one goal: black liberation.

### ***Writing Autobiographically***

As far as the writing style for this dissertation, I admit the hard part was finding the appropriate voice to convey the Afro-Paraguayan story. Initially, the struggle induced sleepless nights, countless hours of blank pages, and periodic mental escapes—only to return to the same conundrum: how should I write this? What further added to the struggle was the sauna-like room I occupied in Decatur, GA during the summer. The heat always made it readily easy to throw in the towel when only a couple of words found its way to the page. In the meantime, I was combing through James Baldwin’s *Nobody Knows My Name* and *The Fire Next Time*, Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*, and Richard Wright’s *The Outsider*. Coates and Baldwin’s self-reflexive prose drew me in, consoled my insecurities about writing, and eventually influenced me to construct this dissertation in an unconventional way.

The dissertation (or should I say: the stories) flowed once I committed to an autobiographical prose. Thus, there was no turning back: the point of no return was instantly obliterated. I feared if I turned off the faucet, the idea of a “done dissertation” would not reach fruition. And, I could not fathom a liminal status as an individual who committed but never finished the PhD. That meant failure. Subconsciously, I grappled

with how my committee members would receive the shift from a traditional ethnography that observed solely from the point of view of the subject to an ethnography that reflected self-reflexivity in its narrative. In my mind, I desperately plotted a multitude of ways to sneak the autobiographical passages in, hoping they would remain undetected. But, the passages exist in plain view. Therefore, the dissertation required a theoretical precedence to quell any fears.

In *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*, Ruth Behar discusses the use of the autobiographical prose. She notes:

In anthropology, which historically exists to “give voice” to others, there is no greater taboo than self-revelation. The impetus of our discipline, with its roots in Western fantasies about barbaric others, has been to focus primarily on “cultural” rather than “individual” realities. The irony is that anthropology has always been rooted in an “I”—understood as having a complex psychology and history—observing a “we” that, until recently, was viewed as plural, ahistorical, and nonindividuated.<sup>65</sup>

According to Behar, “personal narratives have a long tradition in anthropology, stemming from the studies of Native American cultures conducted by the first generation of anthropologists in the United States.”<sup>66</sup> Behar claims the shifts in anthropology were in tandem with the feminist movement’s assertion that the “personal is political.”<sup>67</sup> Feminist writers reflected on the use of biography and autobiography as well as how to protect women’s subjectivity without objectifying them and ultimately betraying them.<sup>68</sup>

Undoubtedly, this style has its criticisms. David Butz and Kathryn Besio note several challenges to autoethnography. First, the self-reflexivity often leads to the “communicative dead-end of solipsism,” which is difficult to avoid.<sup>69</sup> Second, although autoethnographic writing “strives to represent self in a way that communicates

strategically to an audience of others they are also *constitutive* of identity, and therefore autoethnographic self-narration may be risky to *self-identify*.<sup>70</sup> Butz and Besio claim the aforementioned challenge occurs with subaltern autoethnographers' self-representing to their oppressors.<sup>71</sup> And, third, the intended audiences "are often multiple and difficult to engage simultaneously."<sup>72</sup> Attempts to effectively communicate knowledge production to a variety of audiences (i.e. supervisory committees, colleagues, etc.) may influence in ways that we are not always aware of or would like.<sup>73</sup>

As Behar puts it, an autobiographical prose requires the narrator to be vulnerable, and others to respond vulnerably.<sup>74</sup> Granted, Behar acknowledges the critics' concern with "solipsism," but proclaims vulnerability will remain as people continue to write with their hearts on their sleeves.<sup>75</sup> I concur with Behar's assessment. I wrote this dissertation with my heart—at times a heavy one—on my sleeve. The self-reflexivity forced me to really examine how racism in Paraguay affected not only Afro-Paraguayans but also me—further informing an analysis of myself in relation to Afro-Paraguayans.

Although Afro-Paraguayans and I were treated as foreigners, there was a difference. That difference was in the form of language. Afro-Paraguayans could speak Guaraní to quiet any offense on their identity whereas I could not. Additionally, the self-reflexivity exposes the deficiency in relationships I had with Afro-Paraguayans. In the final analysis, we were strangers. It took a while to wrap my thoughts around that concept because of a deeply held belief that blackness trumped any affinity for nationally constructed identities that exclude black bodies. Thus, to uncover that understanding a

detached writing style seemed inappropriate. I had to write vulnerably to unpack the situation in Paraguay.

### ***Dissertation Outline***

This dissertation covers the following. Chapter I delves into Afro-Paraguayan history. It explores the formation of Paraguay as a mestizo state. I am, primarily, concerned with the impact of policies such as *browning* and *whitening* on Afro-Paraguayans. Paraguay's dictators (Francia, López, the younger López, and Stroessner) employed different methodologies in forming the state, but the methods normalized and reinforced structural violence and anti-black racism. I end the chapter with a discussion of the current state of blackness in Paraguay after the years of dictatorships.

Chapter II covers the quotidian explanation for the disappearance of people of African descent in countries such as Paraguay that claim wars decimated the existence of black communities. Although the explanations seem reasonable, it does not provide the whole picture. Afro-Paraguayans have not disappeared. Black communities continue to do visible cultural reproduction to carve out a presence as a subculture within Paraguay. Thus, I argue their invisible status is not the result of inactivity on the part of Afro-Paraguayans rather the state continues to deny their presence because of anti-black sentiments that privilege whiteness.

The title for Chapter III draws from my experience and that of another black gentleman, Anthony, working with Afro-Paraguayan communities. I explore black

identity formation and the lack of fidelity to a collective black struggle for liberation. The severing of black bodies from Africa has had an adverse effect: we have become strangers unable to overcome strictly rigid notions of community. As a consequence, black bodies struggle to morally configure blackness as a means to contest white supremacy.

Chapter IV is a personal one. I have lived in Paraguay and worked with Afro-Paraguayans. Undoubtedly, I encountered unique situations due to my dark skin and unwillingness to assimilate Paraguayan culture to the point I lost my identity. Recounting my experience enables an illustration on how anti-black racism frontally occurs in Paraguay. That experience reifies the challenges of a black body navigating white supremacy. Moreover, the experience in Paraguay forced me to reflect on my ontological status within an anti-black apparatus.

Lastly, the conclusion circles back to the notion of the moral dilemma Afro-Paraguayans face. As I have argued so far, Afro-Paraguayans have participated in civic engagement. That participation, however, has not yielded favorable results: cultural citizenship. Hence, what should Afro-Paraguayans, or blacks throughout the diaspora for that matter, engage in to gain a status that dismantles white supremacy, ending black death? Granted, the aforementioned question is overwhelming and probably beyond my reach in this space. But, I do explore black liberatory theories and what that potentially means for Afro-Paraguyan mobilization going forward.

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- <sup>1</sup> (Benítez and Alfonso 2010)
- <sup>2</sup> (Benítez and Alfonso 2010): p. 54.
- <sup>3</sup> (Benítez and Alfonso 2010): p. 55.
- <sup>4</sup> Members either relocated to other parts of Paraguay or left the country for places such as Argentina. José Carlos' mother relocated to Argentina to find work.
- <sup>5</sup> Gramsci posits, "common sense...is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity." See: (Gramsci 1971): pp. 330-331
- <sup>6</sup> (Gramsci 1971): pp. 238-239
- <sup>7</sup> (Rosaldo 1994)
- <sup>8</sup> (Rosaldo 1997)
- <sup>9</sup> (Rosaldo 1997)
- <sup>10</sup> (Ong 1996)
- <sup>11</sup> (Siu 2012)
- <sup>12</sup> (Siu 2012)
- <sup>13</sup> (Caldwell et al. 2009)
- <sup>14</sup> (Caldwell et al. 2009): p. 7
- <sup>15</sup> (Cabral and Vale 1977): p. 22
- <sup>16</sup> (Cabral and Vale 1977): pp. 22-23
- <sup>17</sup> (Cabral and Vale 1977): p. 23
- <sup>18</sup> (Scott 1987b): p. 29
- <sup>19</sup> (Scott 1987b)
- <sup>20</sup> (Goldberg 2001): p. 2
- <sup>21</sup> (Goldberg 2001): p. 4
- <sup>22</sup> (Goldberg 2001): pp. 5-6
- <sup>23</sup> (Goldberg 2001): p. 9
- <sup>24</sup> (Goldberg 2001): p. 15
- <sup>25</sup> (Wade 2010): p. 3
- <sup>26</sup> (Hale 2006): p. 19
- <sup>27</sup> (Hale 2006)
- <sup>28</sup> (Hale 2006): p20
- <sup>29</sup> (Hale 2006)
- <sup>30</sup> (Hale 2006): pp. 35 and 38
- <sup>31</sup> (Sexton 2008)
- <sup>32</sup> (Goldberg 2001): p. 7
- <sup>33</sup> (Stutzman 1981): p. 46
- <sup>34</sup> (Nobles 2000): p. 1
- <sup>35</sup> (Fanon 2008): p. xiv
- <sup>36</sup> (Bell 1993): p. x
- <sup>37</sup> (Bell 2005): p. 39
- <sup>38</sup> (Bell 2005): p. 56
- <sup>39</sup> (Patterson 1982): p. 5



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<sup>40</sup> (Wilderson III 2003a): pp. 7-8

<sup>41</sup> (Wilderson III 2003b): p. 21. It is, also, important to note Wilderson is critical of Gramsci and Marx because they do not deal with white supremacy in theorizing liberatory movements.

<sup>42</sup> (Wilderson III 2003b): p. 22

<sup>43</sup> (Wilderson III 2003b): p. 18. Civil society accommodates the “satisfiable demands” and “finite antagonism” of its junior partners (i.e. immigrants, white women, and the working class). Civil society forecloses on the “insatiable demands” and “endless antagonism” blackness occupies.

<sup>44</sup> (Wilderson III 2010)

<sup>45</sup> (Wilderson III 2010): p. 145

<sup>46</sup> (Wilderson III 2010): p. 147

<sup>47</sup> (Wilderson III 2010): p. 150

<sup>48</sup> (Wilderson III 2010): pp. 154-155

<sup>49</sup> (Baldwin and Peck 2017): p. 50

<sup>50</sup> (Baldwin and Peck 2017): p. 109

<sup>51</sup> (Wilderson III 2003b)

<sup>52</sup> The idea of the absence of fidelity percolated from Dr. Joy James’ lecture, *Refusing Blackness as Victimization: Trayvon Martin and the Black Cyborgs*, on September 19, 2012 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. See: <https://vimeo.com/51554877>

<sup>53</sup> See: (Cirio 2000). Communities of African descent in Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, and Paraguay recognize San Baltazar as their patron saint.

<sup>54</sup> An interview with Anthony revealed this situation. According to Anthony, some members of Kamba Cuá protested the inclusion of Afro-Emboscadeños. José Carlos requested Anthony to speak to everyone about the importance of solidarity and how solidarity particularly assisted blacks in the United States to achieve civil rights. A casual conversation with Antonio in Emboscada confirmed Anthony’s story. Antonio stated that members of Kamba Cuá had an issue with the presence of the Grupo de Pardos Libres. He repeatedly reiterated that there was no issue with Kamba Cuá. José Carlos reassured Antonio the need to strengthen the relationship among the communities.

<sup>55</sup> Documents from the National Archive demonstrate that the town was founded in the 1720s. The government does not seem to officially decree Emboscada as a town until 1740.

<sup>56</sup> (Blujaki 1980): p. 11

<sup>57</sup> (Martínez 1999): p. 71

<sup>58</sup> Areguá resides approximately 17 miles from Asunción.

<sup>59</sup> See: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4272633.stm>

<sup>60</sup> Paraguayan newspapers reported this was the first time the census included a question about one’s African ancestry; however, that was not absolutely true. President Carlos López commissioned the last census to inquire as to whether an individual was *mulato* or *pardo*.

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<sup>61</sup> When I interviewed Anthony, he discussed his initial interaction with José Carlos. Due to Anthony's light skin, Paraguayans referred to him as *blanco*. Anthony indicated José Carlos seemed disappointed when they met because he did not meet José Carlos' ideal black model.

<sup>62</sup> (Vera 2000): See p. 19.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> I am borrowing this phrase from James Baldwin's essay, *My Dungeon Shook*. See: (Baldwin 1992)

<sup>65</sup> (Behar 1997): p. 56

<sup>66</sup> (Behar 1997): p. 57

<sup>67</sup> (Behar 1997): p. 60

<sup>68</sup> (Behar 1997): p. 60

<sup>69</sup> (Butz and Besio 2009): p. 1660

<sup>70</sup> (Butz and Besio 2009): p. 1661

<sup>71</sup> (Butz and Besio 2009): p. 1661

<sup>72</sup> (Butz and Besio 2009): p. 1661

<sup>73</sup> (Butz and Besio 2009): p. 1661

<sup>74</sup> (Behar 1997): pp. 39-40

<sup>75</sup> (Behar 1997): p. 66

## *Chapter I: Silencing an Afro-Paraguayan Past*<sup>76</sup>

History reflects the production of power.<sup>77</sup> Specifically, with regard to historical narratives, power dynamics are illustrated in the privileging of certain narratives while suppressing, silencing others.<sup>78</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot posits that historical narratives include the “uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production.”<sup>79</sup> Within Paraguay’s historical context, the Spanish and the Guaraní are the *recognized* competing groups that serve as the foundation of the nation-state. According to the state’s narrative, the Spanish colonizers harmoniously mixed with the *docile* Guaraní people, forming a cultural union fondly refer to as Jopará.

Granted, the popularized narrative is problematic on several fronts. First, the narrative is a reflection of the uneven access to the means to produce such a narrative. The Guaraní people are painted as a group that willingly embraced their colonization. Moreover, the Guaraní people desired to assimilate the colonizer’s ideals of a civilized society. As a reward for the Guaraní people’s willingness to be colonized, the Spaniards normalized some elements of Guaraní culture (i.e. food, language, etc.) into the formation of the nation-state. Second, the other indigenous groups that resisted colonization were demonized as savages unwilling to embrace the fruits of a civilized society. As a consequence, the colonizer attempted to annihilate or silence those indigenous groups. Last, although physical contributions (i.e. the well in the Paraguarí) of African

descendants remain, the narrative completely silences their presence and contributions to Paraguayan society.

Hence, unearthing a silenced history is simultaneously liberating and frustrating. Liberating from the standpoint that silenced narratives unlock the contributions of marginalized groups, evoking powerful emotions of pride once publicized. Yet frustrating because the history remains mostly undocumented, depending on communal historians to serve as repositories and disseminate narratives orally to younger generations. That frustration crescendo when younger generations fail to sustain the repository.

Interviews of several Emboscadeños yielded nothing noteworthy about the former African slaves that settled in Emboscada or thereafter. Responses were discouraging and repetitive, “We did not want to listen to our elders recount stories. Unfortunately, those stories died with them. I wish we would’ve listened!” In other instances, people were encouraging us to change the narrative, “Why don’t you focus on the Chaco War<sup>80</sup>? Now, that’s something that needs to be investigated!” (There is some research on the Chaco War, but not readily made available to Paraguayans, occupying lower-social economic statuses.)

For months, Nelson, Antonio, Pablo (on occasion), and myself went to various houses attempting to excavate an elusive history of Afro descendants in the Pueblo de Pardos Libres de La Emboscada.<sup>81</sup> Our group had mandated the importance of collecting that story to increase awareness as a means to instill pride in a cultural identity rendered invisible due to multicultural politics. We started our investigation in Minas, a small section of Emboscada most noted for the prison that resides there. Because Nelson,

Antonio, and Pablo self-identified as having African ancestry, we conducted interviews with respective elderly family members, relatives, and friends on Sunday mornings as to avoid Paraguay's offensive heat. Unfortunately, our group enthusiastically operated under a faulty assumption: the claim had been made that eighty percent of Emboscadeños were of African heritage—hence someone should have stories of the existence of African descendants in the town.<sup>82</sup> With each passing interview, however, I could feel my colleagues' enthusiasm diminish. Perplexity permeated our conversations: *How could no one know anything about the history? And, who potentially knows it?*

Nelson openly expressed his frustration to a co-worker who suggested a historian, Ana María Argüello Martínez, as a potential source. Immediately, Nelson contacted Ana María to arrange a meeting for us in Asunción. Ana María wrote her thesis on the history of slavery in Paraguay and published, *El Rol de los Esclavos: Negros en el Paraguay*, in 1999. Admittedly, Ana María intrigued me. I had been living in Paraguay for about six months. On occasion, I spoke with various Paraguayans about the existence of Afro-Paraguayan communities. Routinely, Paraguayans politely feigned interest in the matter and would change the subject to something more suitable for them. Ana María was different in this regard: as a historian, she understood the history of Afro-Paraguayans had been absent from the discussion and her dissertation presented an opportunity to illuminate a silenced history. Granted, the majority of the consumers that have access to her book were Paraguayans of higher economic status and resided in Asunción.<sup>83</sup>

The meeting with Ana María was refreshing. On the one hand, she understood our frustration, offered an empathetic ear, recommended sources, and encouraged us to

continue our pursuit. On the other hand, Ana María detailed her various challenges to caution our rekindled enthusiasm. It cost money for the National Archive specialist to transcribe documents from the Spanish colonial era. (Antonio and I made a pathetic attempt to read the colonist's writing before, immediately, procuring the services of the Archive's specialist.) In addition to cost, not all of the documents in the National Archive were properly catalogued; thus, documents were essentially lost in the fray,<sup>84</sup> revealing a limitation on how much information could be found. (Although there were limitations, I would spend about a year and an half collecting relevant documents from the National Archive and digitizing them.) A subsequent meeting with Ana María revealed a much deeper issue she uncovered through her investigation: some Paraguayans, who phenotypically seemed to have African ancestry, refused to identify as such and claimed a mestizo identity. Repeatedly, she explained how she had to respect those boundaries and not force the conversation.

While the relationship with Ana María was forming, I made contact with another historian, Margarita Prieto Yegros, through a mutual acquaintance. Margarita had no knowledge of Afro-Paraguayan history per se, but was willing to assist in our efforts. Margarita was the antithesis of the stereotypical Paraguayan: she openly and unapologetically spoke her mind. I often enjoyed my visits with her because of her candor. During one of our encounters, Margarita informed me of Alfredo Boccia Romañach's book launching event. She felt this event would be of some interests because the book was about slavery in Paraguay.

The day of Romañach's book launching event had finally arrived. Undoubtedly, I was anxious to hear his discussion of his book, *Esclavitud en el Paraguay: Vida Cotidiana del Esclavo en las Indias Meridionales*. My mind wondered: what does his book add to the conversation of the existence of African slaves in Paraguay? Josefina Plá's *Hermano Negro: La Esclavitud en el Paraguay* (1972) and Ana María Argüello Martínez's *El Rol de los Esclavos Negros en el Paraguay* (1999) were commendable starts. Spanning the early 1500s to mid-1800s, Plá and Martínez's work, in my estimation, satiated basic inquiries as to how Africans arrived to Paraguay, were treated, and where they settled. Now, in 2004, we have Romañach's book in the mix. I hoped for something more than a simple regurgitation of past works.

I invited Nelson and Antonio to attend with me. When I told them about the launching, Nelson looked me sternly in the face and said, "Lorenzo, we have to attend!" I guess I was not the only one curious about the author's discourse. On the day of the launch, I travelled to Asunción from Emboscada early that morning. The plan was to meet Nelson and Antonio downtown that night. Nelson arrived with his girlfriend whom I met for the first time outside the auditorium. I inquired about Antonio's whereabouts, but Nelson did not know. I had a feeling that Antonio would not come. Nelson, his girlfriend, and I entered the auditorium to grab our seats. I was somewhat surprised that so many people had turned out on a cold night to witness this event. Because we were seated in the back, I was able to span the audience before Romañach's soirée began and located Ana María with a friend. I assumed she was equally or more curious than I about the contents of the book.

The lights dimmed to indicate the commencement of the event. Someone introduced Romañach. I paid practically no attention to the introduction; I just wanted to hear about the book. Greeted with applause, Romañach approached the podium. He was an older, gray-haired gentleman dressed in a suit and tie. His disposition reeked of Paraguayan elitism. He mentioned his reasons for the project and acknowledged previous works (those of Plá and Martinez) that addressed the subject matter. Then, proceeded to read certain passages from the book. As he read the passages, I battled fatigue to listen intently. I struggled to keep up at times. My Spanish was decent but, definitely, needed improvement. Nevertheless, it appeared to me that Romañach offered nothing enlightening.

Toward the end I felt myself succumbing to my fatigue. Romañach abruptly closed his book to descend to his concluding remarks, “After this era, there didn’t exist anymore people of African descent in Paraguay!” Instantly, I sobered up. Nelson and I glanced at each other as to say, “Wait! What did he just say?” The crowd’s applause briefly interrupted our confusion. Somewhat deflated, we slumped in our chairs as the Q&A Session began. Neither Nelson nor I (mostly, due to my language limitations) had the courage to publicly challenge Romañach’s conclusion. Other than us, the crowd seemed to willingly accept, without contestation, the erasure of blackness in Paraguay.

As everyone made their way to the adjoining room for refreshments, Nelson and I spotted an opportunity to approach Romañach to seek clarification: obviously, he made a simple mistake, *right?* We navigated our way to the stage and patiently waited for this elderly lady to move away from Romañach to ask our pressing question. It seemed as if



Nelson and I had surrounded him, pinning him in an imagined corner. We introduced ourselves. Nelson politely asked, “Did you mean to say that there no longer existed any people of African descent in Paraguay?” Romañach responded, “Yes, they no longer do.” At this point, I was furious. I so badly wanted Nelson to ask, “Then, how do you explain me?” Before we could further press Romañach on his proclamation, a friend of his intervened, taking his attention away from us.

Nelson, his girlfriend, and I refocused to make our way to the adjoining room. What I did not realize was the *scene of erasure* had not completed its course that night. A server approached us to offer some food. My attention briefly fell on Ana María across the room. Her friend seemed to be consoling her: she had just witnessed another author hijack her work. Well, at least, I assumed the reasoning for the consoling. The server’s questions, however, snapped me back to him. “Would you like some hors d’oeuvres,” he asked. We accepted. He looked at me, “Are you American?” I replied, “Yes, I am!” I was surprised he guessed correctly. For the majority of my time in Paraguay, most assumed I was Brazilian and immediately accosted me with whatever Portuguese word they could summon. The server turned his attention to Nelson, “Brazilian, right?” I knew this did not sit well with Nelson. Nelson shook his head to indicate he was not. The server attempted again, “Americano?” Through a forced smile, Nelson replied, “No. I am Paraguayan!” The server seemed baffled and stated, “Paraguayan, really?” I chimed in, “No, he’s Paraguayan!” My statement did not end the inquiry; the server still appeared unconvinced. Thus, to affirm his Paraguayan-ness Nelson did the following: spoke Guarani and told the server where he was from.

After successfully administering the Paraguayan identity test, the server seemed content and moved on to other attendees. We had had enough. Nelson, his girlfriend, and I quickly exited the building as to avoid further offense. Outside, I angrily proclaimed to Nelson, “You see why we are doing what we are doing?! We have to press forward with our struggle!” Nelson replied, “Yes, I know, Lorenzo!” Thereafter, we briefly talked about purchasing Romañach’s book to do a closer read and compare to what we had accumulated thus far. We said our goodbyes and parted ways. I felt uneasy, more than usual, that night.

The labors of Plá and Martinez have their limitations. Plá, in particular, acknowledges the need to investigate the contributions of blacks to Paraguay’s culture; and she further posits that that investigation had to occur before the last traces of African ancestry disappeared.<sup>85</sup> Plá recognizes the erasure of blackness had occurred to some degree, but still existed. Although Martinez’s book covers the era of slavery in Paraguay, she was aware of the presence of black communities because she conducted interviews of Afro-Paraguayans as an attempt to unearth gaps in the history.<sup>86</sup> Neither Plá nor Martinez erased blackness. Thus, Romañach’s move was callous: fictitious at best. Romañach, one of Paraguay’s elite, perpetuated a one-sided narrative that silences Afro-Paraguayans as subjects after the abolition of slavery.<sup>87, 88</sup> The following sections, however, present what is known thus far about the presence of blackness in Paraguay.

### ***Blackness and the Beginning of the Mestizo State***

In 1524, Alejo García,<sup>89</sup> a Portuguese explorer and conquistador, traversed Paraguay's rivers and lands to head west. A mulatto named Pacheco, who historians believe to have been the first of African ancestry in Paraguay, accompanied García on his expedition.<sup>90</sup> In 1525, returning through Paraguay, the expedition met a deadly end. Payaguaes Indians killed García and his companions in the Puerto Antequera region; however, an Indian chief, Guancané, killed Pacheco in Paraguay's Chaco region.<sup>91</sup> Pacheco's death, literally, marks the first known drop of black blood on Paraguayan soil.

Less than a decade after Pacheco's death, the Spanish Crown permitted the trafficking of African slaves<sup>92</sup> along the Río de la Plata (the Silver River) in 1534. In contrast to its neighboring regions, Paraguay received a meager influx of slaves due to a lack of resources such as gold and silver that the colonists desired. Yet Africans landed in Paraguay in various ways: either as contraband or legally transacted in the port of Buenos Aires; or fled from slavery in neighboring countries. Those Africans that arrived to Paraguay as slaves were domestic servants, farmers<sup>93</sup>, and/ or *ad hoc* soldiers—protecting colonizer's interests from invading indigenous tribes.

The permission to trade slaves in the Río de la Plata came with conditions: the Spanish Crown implemented its racial project through certain social regulatory decrees. According to the decrees, Spaniards could marry Indians without permission, but not blacks.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, Spaniards illegally racially mixed with blacks. The racial project established a hierarchal structure that placed in descending order: Spaniards, criollos (the offspring of Spaniards born in the New World), mestizos, Indians, and then blacks.

Blacks were only permitted to marry other blacks; but increasing numbers of *zambos*—a mixture of black and indigenous individuals—prompted the Spanish Crown to amend the rule to allow Indian-black marriages.<sup>95</sup> The amended rule enabled blacks to ascend the social ladder to a slight degree.

Presumably, racial mixing of Indian-Spanish would have naturally occurred without the Spanish Crown's intervention. In 1537, the arrival of Spanish colonists led to alliances with Guaraní chiefs to build a fort in Asunción as protection from hostile Indian tribes.<sup>96</sup> Because of their willingness to accept the colonizers presence, the Guaraní were perceived as the most docile. Hence, the alliance benefited the colonists: Spaniards acquired numerous Guaraní women to serve as wives and concubines.<sup>97</sup> According to Elman R. Service, the polygamous nature of the Spaniards established Paraguay's mestizo population.<sup>98</sup>

The development of the *encomienda* system<sup>99</sup> in Paraguay did not disrupt the relationship between the Guaraní and Spaniards. Elman R. Service states, "In later times, the *encomienda* system appeared, and was a more characteristic Spanish institution, but the concubinage-kinship-labor pattern was never entirely replaced, and it imparted its flavor to the whole subsequent history of Spanish-Guaraní relations."<sup>100</sup> Thus, the second half of the sixteenth century illustrates a sizable shift in the racial representation of Paraguay's population: mestizos outnumbered peninsular Spaniards; moreover, as their roles reached prominence, mestizos expanded colonization through the issuance of *encomienda* grants in 1556.<sup>101</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Paraguay was devoid of natural resources and, thus, perceived as a poor country. As a result, the Spanish Crown did not send more peninsular Spaniards to Paraguay. Therefore, the racial mixing of Spaniards and Guaraní in addition to the absence of economic interests led to the burgeoning mestizo population and the reduction of the Spaniard population. Paraguay's impoverished state further spurred a mutual relationship between the Spaniards and Guaraní. Service posits, "The poverty and scarcity of markets, which reduced the colony to a barter economy, helped bring the Spaniards and Indians into a symbiotic relationship in subsistence activities and were, therefore, very important in promoting the mixing of the two cultures."<sup>102</sup> Here, it is important to note the following. The "symbiotic relationship" Service references undergird the national ideology: *jopará*.

Peninsular Spaniards initiated mestizaje in Paraguay originally against the Spanish Crown's decrees, but Dr. Francia's policies infused mestizaje with a nationalistic zeal. Usually, the nationalistic zeal for mestizaje entails the whitening of an individual's identity as a means to progress or to achieve upward social mobility. The salience of whitening entails Latin American governments enacting immigration policies that invite Europeans to assist in reshaping the ethnic identity of their country.<sup>103</sup> Yet Dr. Francia's policy of mestizaje was not congruent with that of other Latin America rulers because of his disdain for Europeans. Thus, mestizaje, solely under Francia's rule, in Paraguay exacts a different type of social policy: browning.

Most Latin American governments after failed attempts to whiten their populations would eventually change course to "brown" their population, encouraging

cultural mixing with blacks and indigenous peoples, in the early 1900s.<sup>104</sup> Francia, on the other hand, enforced “browning” from 1814 until his death in 1840. It is plausible to assume the social policy changed again under Carlos Antonio López from “browning” to “whitening” because he reopened Paraguay’s borders to European influence. Nonetheless, Francia’s desire to “brown” Paraguay’s population still resembled (or the beginning of) an ethnocide of the black identity.<sup>105</sup> The subsequent wars possibly completed the ethnocide.

Historically, authoritative regimes have mostly governed Paraguay. The tenure of dictatorships would finally end with the ousting of Alfredo Stroessner in 1989; thereafter Paraguay’s government officials would initiate attempts to democratize. It was under the regimes of Dr. José Gaspar de Francia (1814–1840), Carlos Antonio López (1844–1862), Francisco Solano López (1862–1870), and Alfredo Stroessner (1954–1989) that Afro-Paraguayans experienced liberty to re-enslavement, the enactment of the Law of Free Womb that gave freedom to children of slaves, massive population losses due to wars, and years of repression and fear. Moreover, these regimes enacted policies or made decisions that resulted in the exclusion and inclusion and invisibility of Afro populations in Paraguay. The exclusion and inclusion, in particular, occurred with the institutionalization of “browning” as a social regulatory policy under Dr. Francia.

### ***Francia and the State of Blackness***

Dr. José Gaspar de Francia's despotism stemmed from his feelings of intellectual superiority over Spanish settlers and exclusion from white elites' inner circle. Those feelings influenced his decisions to isolate Paraguay from the rest of the world, to homogenize Paraguay's population as "brown," and to debilitate the education systems as a measure to prevent the development of future elites that could potentially challenge his authority.

The progeny of a Portuguese-Brazilian immigrant father and a criollo mother, Francia had a mixed heritage.<sup>106</sup> Due to his idolization of Napoleon<sup>107</sup>, Francia claimed to be of French heritage, which a physician, Dr. Ramos Mejía, later disputed and determined that Francia did not have a drop of French blood.<sup>108</sup> His Portuguese-Brazilian ancestry led to rumors that Francia was a mulatto. Those rumors would prove damaging to Francia: a rich Spaniard did not permit Francia to marry his daughter.<sup>109</sup>

J. A. Rogers notes Francia avenged his matrimonial denial once in power: "No sooner had he come to power than he threw the Spaniard into a dungeon...he lived hungry and martyred...for eighteen years."<sup>110</sup> Rogers further posits Francia's vengeance was based on the Spaniard's denial of José's matrimonial ambitions in addition to the fact that the Spaniard called him a "mulatto."<sup>111</sup> Whether Rogers' assertion is true, it provides a potential reasoning for Francia's intentional, nation-building project. The goal of the de-colonial project was the erasure of *pure* European blood through laws that forbade Europeans marrying other Europeans.

In his ascension to power, Dr. Francia made the transition from a doctor of Sacred Theology, an educator who felt contempt for those of lesser intellect, a defender of the poor, to an eventual despotic leader who was “an austere, cold, and arrogant individual.”<sup>112</sup> The despotic Francia instituted a nationalism that was twofold: sealed off the borders to international influence and cultivated a mestizo culture that rejected its European identity. The border closures, Jerry W. Cooney argues, reverted the nation to the localism and isolationism that had characterized Paraguay during the colonial period.<sup>113</sup> John Hoyt Williams further asserts, “Dr. Francia would rather be branded an international criminal than allow a foreign government to grant permission for other foreigners to trespass on Paraguayan soil.”<sup>114</sup>

Francia’s policy to refuse immigration shaped his social regulatory policy of mestizaje. According to Williams, during the sixteenth century, the few Spanish settlers in Paraguay “blended with the comely Guaraní,” thus, almost erasing a pure European phenotype by the 1800s.<sup>115</sup> Naturally, Paraguay developed an ethnic identity antithetical to a white, European identity and embraced Guaraní instead of Spanish as the preferred language.<sup>116</sup> Building upon the natural progression, Dr. Francia’s matrimonial laws further solidified Paraguay’s ethnic distinction. Francia decreed Spaniards could only marry women legally classified as Indians, mulattas, or negras as a means to curtail social and economic influence.<sup>117</sup> In 1816, Dr. Francia decreed priests officiating illegal unions—Europeans marrying other Europeans—were imprisoned along with the principals.<sup>118</sup> Although Francia did not completely adhere to his own law (he never married), he surrounded himself with black women around him and supposedly took one



as his mistress.<sup>119</sup> Yet his sole daughter, Ubalde García de Cañete, was by an Indian woman.<sup>120</sup>

Williams states Paraguayans “rigidly adhered to” the laws for twenty-six years and refers to the laws as a “true [*genetic*] Paraguayan revolution” that broke the separate and distinct European upper class, assuring almost a complete intermixture.<sup>121</sup> At this juncture, I would argue that this “Paraguayan revolution” or mestizaje was the “browning” of Paraguay’s cultural identity. “Browning” is more applicable to Paraguay’s mestizaje on the basis that Francia, unlike other Latin American leaders, did not promote European immigration as a means of “whitening” the population; rather, his policies diluted pure European blood in favor of a mixture that produced a brown society, a society that had more indigenous influence due to the larger numbers of Indians. Furthermore, those Europeans unwilling to mix with Indians, mulattas, and negras, were exiled. Regardless, “browning” as the vehicle to homogenize the Paraguayan populace still had the same results as “whitening”: a visible black populace was substantially decreased.<sup>122</sup>

Additionally, Dr. Francia enacted repressive reforms that closed institutions of higher education, post offices, newspapers, and banned fiestas as means to prevent chaos.<sup>123</sup> Francia regarded education as “a dangerous tool in the hands of the traditional elite.”<sup>124</sup> Dissenters initially accrued heavy fines or had lands confiscated but, subsequently, faced life in prison if Francia’s secret service (known as the *pyragüés*) caught them.<sup>125</sup> It is plausible to assume that some of the members of the secret service were black. According to J. A. Rogers, Francia came into power largely through his use

of Negroes and mulattoes and “his bodyguard consisted of six hundred Negroes so fanatically loyal that it permitted him to carry out his most cruel decrees.”<sup>126</sup>

Prior to Francia assuming control over Paraguay, the country had the prerequisites—geographical isolation, cultural and linguistic unity, and a new elite that associated with the rest of the inhabitants—for nationhood in the early 1800s.<sup>127</sup> Francia’s policies, however, solidified that transition to nationhood. To accomplish his nationalistic vision, Francia employed simplistic methods: “to discredit, dismiss, or exile any person in power who threatened in manner his intellectual dominance of the government, and to place his adherents in other posts of lesser authority.”<sup>128</sup> Beyond his nationalistic fervor, Francia, to his credit, did grant certain liberties to the Afro population; however, he would eventually rescind those liberties. The experiment in Tevegó serves as an example of the granting and rescinding of liberties.

In 1767, the government confiscated lands and kept those lands under state control rather than private ownership after the expulsion of the Jesuit order. That enabled the government—especially, under the dictatorships of Francia, Carlos and Francisco López—to develop an extensive state estancia system that would dominate the nation’s livestock production by 1860.<sup>129</sup> These state ranches were essential to Paraguay. John Hoyt Williams states, “Covering most of the finest pastoral lands in the country, the state ranches assured basic livestock provisions and cereal food stuffs for the military establishment, provided vast amounts of goods for the government-controlled export trade, helped finance the extremely rapid modernization of Paraguay between 1840 and 1860, and served as a source of relief during times of famine and crop failure.”<sup>130</sup>

Williams further states, “The workers on the state estancias were salaried state employees who fell into five basic categories—foreman, or *capataces*, white and mestizo peons and cowboys, young army recruits, free black and slave black labor.”<sup>131</sup> Only the capataz, an appointee of the central government, and all free workers received monthly wages.<sup>132</sup> More importantly, black freemen and slaves worked mostly on these state ranches and Tabapí, particularly, consisted of slaves entirely.<sup>133</sup>

Paraguayan slavery was relatively mild as compared to that of other countries. According to Williams, Paraguayan slavery was less restrictive, regimented, oppressive, and rigorous because Paraguay lacked large-scale plantation agriculture.<sup>134</sup> As a result, enslaved pardos (a generic label that was interchangeable with black and mulatto) occupied roles as cowboys, skilled workers, house servants, or small farmers, and routinely worked beside free Paraguayans in a “loose democracy of the poor.”<sup>135</sup> In 1811, approximately 600 pardos began to resent their roles as sharecroppers on the church lands of Tabapí and petitioned the governing junta for permission to leave and colonize Ytá, a neighboring pueblo, or any other available lands.<sup>136</sup>

Initially, the government considered the hostile Chaco, a desert land, as a means to provide a defense against invading Indian tribes; conversely, the government eventually decided to allow the pardos to settle in Tevegó. Blacks settled in Tevegó as “True Freemen” and enjoyed property rights, security, and liberty; also, they were not subject to tribute if they served in the defense of the country.<sup>137</sup> Even though the Junta prohibited forced labor, the directive was clear: blacks were to farm the land and safeguard the advance of white and mestizo society from Indian invasions and the

potential threat of Portuguese expansion—essentially, blacks were “farmer-warriors.”<sup>138</sup> Previously, this strategy to convert blacks into “farmer-warriors” had been done in other pueblos such as Areguá and Emboscada, where blacks successfully defended from Indian invasions.

Tevegó proved costly to the central government and eventually antagonized Dr. Francia. Williams asserts that Tevegó was a “ghastly settlement”—basically, uninhabitable.<sup>139</sup> The government envisioned a self-sustainable colony; instead, the government had to continuously send supplies to support the settlers, and, in 1815, Tevegó began to resemble a penal colony.<sup>140</sup> Williams summarizes the failure of Tevegó: “Constantly harassed by hostile Indians, wracked by sickness, famine and consequent desertions, Tevegó became a drain on the treasury and not at all an impediment to the nation’s enemies.”<sup>141</sup> In 1823, Francia admitted defeat and ordered the abandonment of Tevegó (the pardos returned to Tabapí); later that year, Francia “secularized all of the religious orders in his nation, and all monastery property, including large tracts of land at Tabapí, reverted to the state.”<sup>142</sup> Moreover, the pardos of Tabapí ceased to be “Freemen” and were now state property, meaning that they were government slaves.<sup>143</sup>

On one hand, Francia’s regime seemed to grant and protect the rights of blacks. For example, Francia opened Paraguay’s borders to those seeking asylum.<sup>144</sup> José Gervasio Artigas, the father of Uruguayan independence, fled with two hundred of his men, who were black *lanceros* (lancers), to Paraguay to escape persecution at the hands of Francisco Ramírez.<sup>145</sup> Additionally, blacks fleeing slavery in Brazil were allowed to seek asylum in Paraguay.<sup>146</sup> Francia’s affinity for asylum seekers benefited Artigas and

black runaways. On the other hand, the Tevegó debacle illustrates Dr. Francia's willingness to grant liberty to blacks just as he was to quickly rescind that liberty. Not until the dictatorship of Carlos Antonio López did Afro populations—more precisely, the children of slaves—witness a law that would grant freedom: the Law of the Free Womb.

### ***Whitening, War, and Black Survival***

Once Dr. Francia became *El Difunto* (The Dead One), Paraguay was embroiled in chaos because Francia did not appoint a successor. In 1844, Carlos Antonio López, however, would succeed Francia as Paraguay's second dictator. Carlos Antonio López, whose father was criollo and his mother was half Indian and black, was a benefactor of Francia's policy of mestizaje: Lazaro Rojas, a rich planter, selected Carlos Antonio López as his white step-daughter's mate because "he [Carlos] was a man of intelligence above the average and having some Negro blood to boast of the union would not be in violation of that law which Francia had promulgated..."<sup>147</sup> The union brought Carlos Antonio López wealth and prestige, paving the way for him to in time assume the presidency of Paraguay.<sup>148</sup>

During his dictatorship, Carlos Antonio López reversed some of the damages incurred under Francia's policies: López reestablished higher education and reopened Paraguay's borders to the international community. With regards to the Afro population, López enacted the Law of Free Womb in 1842 and commissioned the 1846 census that tallied the number of blacks in Paraguay.

The Law of Free Womb decreed children of slaves born after December 31, 1843, would achieve a status as “libertos de la República”, automatic freedom, once the ages of twenty-four and twenty-five, for females and males respectively, were obtained.<sup>149</sup> Williams states, “This law, contrary to some claims, did not end slavery in Paraguay, but merely the slave trade...”<sup>150</sup> As a side note, those who remained enslaved, in some cases, were able to manumit by way of a contract that would allow slaves to work to pay for their freedom. Subsequently, the commissioned 1846 Paraguayan Census would glean the number of “libertos” that benefited from the law.

According to Williams, although the census did not mention the mestizo population and “Indians appeared in the census only when their cultural patterns distinguished them from the mass of Paraguayans, pardos of all tones were invariably noted as such.”<sup>151</sup> The census did not establish the customary degrees of blackness that most Latin American countries did; whether African features were visible or not (the family claimed to be pardos when features were not visible) individuals were classified as black.<sup>152</sup> The census, however, did categorize pardos as either a slave, liberto, or free.<sup>153</sup>

The 1846 census illustrates how pardos were employed either as slaves or freedmen, and how many inhabited Paraguay. As discussed earlier, Paraguay’s estancia system had a large number of slaves that worked on the lands. In the regions south of Asunción, blacks were mostly engaged in ranching.<sup>154</sup> Besides ranching, blacks were house servants: an average Paraguayan household had a mom, dad, three children, and two servants (slave or free).<sup>155</sup> As far as the total number of pardos in Paraguay, 7.19 percent of Paraguay’s population was black, meaning 17,212 individuals.<sup>156</sup> That number,

however, drastically decreased after Francisco Solano López, the son of Carlos Antonio López, unwittingly entered Paraguay into a deadly war with Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil: the Triple Alliance War (1865–1870).

Francisco Solano López, Paraguay's third dictator, succeeded as president after his father's death. Even though his father had black ancestry in his blood, a dark skinned Francisco Solano López claimed that his skin tone was attributed to his Indian ancestry.<sup>157</sup> Francisco López may have denied his African ancestry, but he had no problems utilizing blacks in his military. Similar to Dr. Francia, Francisco López believed so much in the military prowess of Paraguayan blacks and mulattoes that he used them as shock troops in the war.<sup>158</sup>

What initiated the Triple Alliance War goes beyond the scope of this dissertation; rather the war provides a potential explanation for the erasure of black identity in Paraguay. In a mid-1866 battle of Tuyutí, black regular infantry battalions and cavalry along with other units were annihilated.<sup>159</sup> Desperate for more troops, the government asked slave owners to donate their slaves for the war. Ultimately Francisco López “ordered the capataces of all state estancias to send without delay to Asunción all state slaves and libertos from the age of twelve to sixty.”<sup>160</sup>

The war devastated Paraguay's population. Various accounts challenge the actual impact the war had on Paraguay's population.<sup>161</sup> Nevertheless, the consequences of the war prompt John Hoyt Williams to argue Lopez's war completed Francia's homogenization of the nation—thus, making black history meaningless after 1870 because only a handful of blacks survived.<sup>162</sup> Williams further posits, “Had it not been for

the war, a far different Paraguay would have emerged into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>163</sup> Without a doubt, I concur with Williams’s assessment the war has forever altered Paraguay’s future especially with regards to the Afro population; conversely, I disagree with the notion black history has no value. I believe Afro-Argentine and Afro-Brazilian soldiers settled in Paraguay, replenishing a portion of the population lost in the war.<sup>164</sup> John Gilmette remarks, “The Allies [Argentineans, Brazilians, and Uruguayans] stayed on in Paraguay for six years and fathered the next generation.”<sup>165</sup>

While the Afro population possibly increased in numbers, successive years included a rarely discussed civil war (1947), the Chaco War (a conflict with Bolivia from 1932–1935), and a parade of different leaders whether military or civilian as president of Paraguay. By 1954, Alfredo Stroessner’s ascension to power marked one of the longest dictatorships in Latin American history.

### ***The Stronato Years***

Alfredo Stroessner’s dictatorship ranged from 1954 to 1989. Stroessner’s dictatorship also known as the Stronato did not include policies nor decisions that targeted blacks. In 1967, Stroessner, however, confiscated land from Kambá Cuá. Thus, on the surface, a discussion of the Stronato seems futile. But, a discussion of the Stronato potentially provides insights as to why Afro-Paraguayans failed to mobilize in an era that Afro-Latinos witnessed the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement in United States and other movements such as Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism. These movements,



for most black communities in Latin American countries, incited action to organize and mobilize against injustice and social exclusion. Yet blacks in Paraguay remained acquiescent due to the methods of state violence enacted under the Stroessner. As Peter Lambert posits:

Colorado Party dominance was won on the battlefields in 1947 and in the ensuing repression. Henceforth, violence in its different forms was key in its maintenance of political power. This included not only the violence of poverty, inequality, and exclusion, but also coercion, repression, enforced exile and fear, as well as the constant threat of violence, as integral components of the *stroessner*. Such violence was accompanied and justified by assertions of national values, mythology, and identity, resulting in a hegemonic form of nationalism that has represented an integral component of Colorado Party vision, identity, and power.<sup>166</sup>

Previous dictatorial regimes deeply ingrained a tradition of severe repressive regimes into the national consciousness of Paraguay.<sup>167</sup> Paul C. Sondrol states, “These *caudillos* [strong political leaders] ruled during the formative generations of Paraguay’s history, perpetuating a traditional intolerance to opposition and dissent, political repression, exaggerated adulation of strongman leadership and political monism.”<sup>168</sup> Thus, Sondrol argues Paraguayans because of their political inexperience (no exposure to any other political systems), apathy, and xenophobia willingly accepted Stroessner. He fit seamlessly with a history of habitual dictatorships.<sup>169</sup> As a consequence, efforts to democratize continue to solicit fatalistic attitudes.<sup>170</sup>

Similar to his predecessors, Stroessner strove to command and avoid challenges to his rule instead of transforming social realities.<sup>171</sup> Sondrol states, Stroessner “possessed no ideology beyond social conservatism, rabid anti-Communism, maintaining and increasing his power.”<sup>172</sup> Sondrol further states, “Neither the collective Paraguayan

military nor the Colorado Party [Stroessner's political party] ruled Paraguay: Stroessner ruled." Hence, Stroessner's rule was unique within the framework of Latin American dictators, not just Paraguayan dictators.

As a means to maintain the loyalty of elites, cronyism and corruption flourished, leading to the emergence of a prominent black market.<sup>173</sup> Stroessner employed a spy system to uncover opposition from potential dissenters. Captured dissenters were either thrown from planes or disappeared.<sup>174</sup> Approximately, 1,000 Paraguayans died during the Stroessner regime, but the deaths never garnered national or international attention.<sup>175</sup> In 1989, a military coup finally ousted Stroessner. Prior to 1989, overwhelming fears quelled potential social mobilization, which further explains the need for military coup to exile General Stroessner. In fact, residents of Kambá Cuá did not organize to form the Asociación Afro Paraguaya Kambá Cuá (AAPKC) until 1999 as a reaction to the lands Stroessner confiscated in 1967.<sup>176</sup>

### ***Beyond the Dictatorships***

After Stroessner's ouster, the Colorado Party continued to rule consecutively. In 2008, the election of Fernando Lugo, however, signaled the end of 61 years of Colorado Party rule and, also, instilled a newfound hope for change. The former Roman Catholic Bishop, a member of the Alianza Patriótica por el Cambio (Patriotic Alliance for Change, APC), was widely known as an advocate for the poor. Lugo's background potentially implied receptiveness to the demands of Afro-Paraguayans. During a July 2008 press

conference, President Lugo stated the need for cultural inclusivity, “El cambio en Paraguay no seria autentico sin el cambio cultural [Change in Paraguay will not be authentic without cultural change].”<sup>177</sup> He further acknowledged the lack of inclusion of black and indigenous populations in Paraguay’s cultural project. Thus, Lugo’s presidency represented not only an amenable presidency but also made the government accessible to blacks for the first time.

José Carlos confirmed Lugo’s presidency permitted some inroads, particularly, with projects to improve Afro-Paraguayan communities. The inclusion of a census question regarding one’s African heritage occurred under Lugo’s authority. Yet the accessibility to the government was transient. In 2012, the police attempted to forcibly evict 150 farmers from a politicians land.<sup>178</sup> The clash turned deadly, killing seventeen people. Lugo received the brunt of the blame for the clash, leading to his impeachment. The election that ensued restored Colorado Party rule with Horacio Cartes winning the presidency. President Cartes’ election has raised significant concerns. José Carlos expressed those concerns to me, “My party [the Colorado Party] has never shown interest in hearing what I have to say when I bring up anything about my community. I’m not sure what’s going to happen!”

Granted, Cartes’ presidency presents uncertainty for Afro-Paraguayans going forward. Nevertheless, it is hard to ascertain the total numbers of (not all Paraguayans of African descent are willing to claim a black identity) for the reality that Afro-Paraguayans face. There is no data to provide a holistic understanding of the condition of black communities in Paraguay. In 2006, a census of Kambá Cuá, Kambá Kokué, and

Emboscada revealed a mixture of blacks located in urban and rural spaces. Especially, in Emboscada, the black populace is distributed almost evenly between rural and urban locales. Those individuals located in rural areas live without running water or proper sewage treatment to prevent potential health issues. Additionally, they have to travel to urban areas to have access to healthcare facilities. In general, access to healthcare, higher education, and so forth has not existed for Afro-Paraguayans. And, remains a central component in the struggle for rights as citizens.

The majority of Afro-Paraguayan women work as domestic servants while the men struggle for work. In Emboscada, men work in quarries, mining rock. Other than rock mining, Afro-Paraguayan men serve in various capacities within the service industry. Some men and women are farmers or are artisans. Because there are no local markets to sell their products, they usually have to travel to the city to find markets. Beyond the aforementioned, there are not many opportunities for Afro-Paraguayans. José Carlos has mentioned racial profiling and the impact it has had on employment: Paraguayans are required to submit photos along with job applications. Therefore, access to government is vital to Afro-Paraguayan progress.

### ***Conclusion***

As this chapter has illustrated, Afro-Paraguayans have endured years of discriminatory policies. Policies of *browning* and *whitening* sought to eliminate the presence of blackness in Paraguay. When the state's cultural projects failed to eradicate

blackness, the state resorted to violence to severely hinder Afro-Paraguayans' ability to subsist or to quell potential resistance. Despite the state's strategies, Afro-Paraguayans survived, albeit drastically altered socially and economically. Therefore, scholars have inaccurately proclaimed the demise of blackness. Undeniably, Afro-Paraguyan communities still exist and have certain demands of the state. Thus, the question is: how do we explain the persistent absence of Afro-Paraguayans from Paraguay's cultural landscape?

The next chapter explores the quotidian explanations for the erasure of blackness in Latin America—particularly, in countries such as Paraguay that assert a homogeneous mestizo nation. The explanations range from wars, high mortality rates, to under-enumeration of black communities. Those explanations evade the real reason for the absence of blackness in Paraguay. Hence, I offer the root cause is anti-black racism.

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<sup>76</sup> This chapter includes revised sections from a previous paper. See: Afro-Paraguyan Consciousness: A Journey to Ethnic Awareness and Social Movement

<sup>77</sup> (Trouillot 1997); (Wolf 1982)

<sup>78</sup> (Said 1994)

<sup>79</sup> (Trouillot 1997): xix

<sup>80</sup> The Chaco War (1932-1935) occurred due to a territorial dispute over the Chaco Boreal between Paraguay and Bolivia. The region was believed to have a rich resource of petroleum. The Chaco Boreal is the Northwestern, Southeastern, and Northern region of Paraguay, Bolivia, and Argentina, respectively.

<sup>81</sup> San Agustín de la Emboscada, another name for the town, includes the designated patron saint.

<sup>82</sup> In 1740, Governor Rafael de la Moneda founded Emboscada. The town's population was comprised mostly of freed mulattos; hence, the basis for the claim that the majority of Emboscada's current population has African ancestry.

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- <sup>83</sup> I received a copy of *El Rol de los Esclavos* via a friend. To my knowledge bookstores located in central Asunción sold the book, making it less accessible to a wider audience.
- <sup>84</sup> According to conversations with people, the original National Archive had burned down. Not all documents were salvaged from the fire. The salvaged documents were haphazardly placed into the current locale for the archive. There were discussions of plans to eventually go through all documents and digitize them.
- <sup>85</sup> (Pla 1972): p. 172
- <sup>86</sup> Nelson, Antonio, and I met with Ana María on a couple occasions to discuss her work.
- <sup>87</sup> (Trouillot 1997).
- <sup>88</sup> (Andrews 2004). In Chapter 6, Andrews attributes (one of the reasons for) the disappearance of Afro-Argentines to the false narrative writers of the country's history have created.
- <sup>89</sup> Alejo represents the Spanish spelling of his name. In Portuguese, it is Aleixo.
- <sup>90</sup> (Martínez 1999); (Pla 1972)
- <sup>91</sup> (Martínez 1999): p. 33
- <sup>92</sup> (Martínez 1999): p.33. Historians of the Río de la Plata region posit that the Africans originated from Angola, Congo, Mozambique.
- <sup>93</sup> Spanish colonizers used slaves to cultivate, particularly, yerba mate.
- <sup>94</sup> (Martínez 1999): p. 43
- <sup>95</sup> (Martínez 1999): p. 43-44
- <sup>96</sup> (Service 1951): p. 233
- <sup>97</sup> (Service 1951)
- <sup>98</sup> (Service 1951): p. 235
- <sup>99</sup> See Service's discussion on encomienda in Paraguay. The encomienda system was land grants with an indigenous population. The system was a form of social control. Indigenous people paid tribute or provided forced labor.
- <sup>100</sup> (Service 1951): p. 234
- <sup>101</sup> (Service 1951): p. 235
- <sup>102</sup> (Service 1951): p. 237
- <sup>103</sup> (Nagel 1994): p. 157
- <sup>104</sup> (Andrews 2004): See—Chapter 5: *Browning and Blackening, 1930–2000* in “Afro-Latin America: 1800–2000” for more information on browning in Latin America.
- <sup>105</sup> J. A. Rogers claims that the Negro strain was absorbed. See: (Rogers 1942); p. 150
- <sup>106</sup> (Cooney 1972)
- <sup>107</sup> John Gimlette states that Maximilien Marie Isidore de Robespierre was another hero of Dr. Francia. Additionally, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract* influenced Francia's rule. See: (Gimlette 2005); p. 162
- <sup>108</sup> (Rogers 1942): p. 62
- <sup>109</sup> (Rogers 1942)
- <sup>110</sup> (Rogers 1942)
- <sup>111</sup> (Rogers 1942): p. 62-63

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<sup>112</sup> Several things to note: Francia received his doctorate from the University of Córdoba in Tucumán and would teach at Real Colegio Seminario de San Carlos that opened in 1783 “to educate the children of the Paraguayan upper class and to provide clergy for the province.” A dispute with the Colégio’s authorities would force Francia to resign. See: (Cooney 1972); p. 413

<sup>113</sup> (Cooney 1972): p. 416

<sup>114</sup> (Williams 1972): p. 117

<sup>115</sup> (Williams 1972): p. 103

<sup>116</sup> (Williams 1972)

<sup>117</sup> (Cooney 1972): p. 426

<sup>118</sup> (Williams 1972): p. 115

<sup>119</sup> (Rogers 1942): p. 62

<sup>120</sup> (Gimlette 2005): p. 163

<sup>121</sup> (Gimlette 2005)

<sup>122</sup> (Williams 1971): p. 273

<sup>123</sup> (Gimlette 2005): p. 162

<sup>124</sup> (Cooney 1983): p. 426

<sup>125</sup> (Gimlette 2005): p. 162

<sup>126</sup> (Rogers 1942): p. 62

<sup>127</sup> (Cooney 1972): p. 408

<sup>128</sup> (Cooney 1972): p. 423

<sup>129</sup> (Williams 1977): p. 378

<sup>130</sup> (Williams 1977): p. 378

<sup>131</sup> (Williams 1977): p. 378–379

<sup>132</sup> (Williams 1977): p. 379

<sup>133</sup> (Williams 1977)

<sup>134</sup> (Williams 1977)

<sup>135</sup> (Williams 1977)

<sup>136</sup> (Williams 1977): p. 380

<sup>137</sup> (Williams 1971): p. 274

<sup>138</sup> (Williams 1977): p. 380

<sup>139</sup> (Williams 1977)

<sup>140</sup> (Williams 1971): p. 279

<sup>141</sup> (Williams 1977): p. 380

<sup>142</sup> (Williams 1977): p. 381

<sup>143</sup> (Williams 1977)

<sup>144</sup> (Williams 1972): p. 119

<sup>145</sup> Members of the community, Kambá Cuá, are descendants of the black lancers that fled to Paraguay with Artigas. See: (Williams 1972); p. 119

<sup>146</sup> In 1820, Dr. Francia gave an order to his commandant at Concepción to allow the runaway slaves to stay instead of returning them to their Brazilian slave owners. See: (Williams 1972); p. 120

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- <sup>147</sup> (Rogers 1942): p. 62  
<sup>148</sup> (Rogers 1942)  
<sup>149</sup> (Williams 1977): p. 381  
<sup>150</sup> (Williams 1976): p. 431  
<sup>151</sup> (Williams 1976)  
<sup>152</sup> (Williams 1976)  
<sup>153</sup> (Williams 1976)  
<sup>154</sup> (Williams 1976): p. 432  
<sup>155</sup> (Williams 1976): p. 434  
<sup>156</sup> (Williams 1976): p. 431  
<sup>157</sup> (Rogers 1942): p. 62  
<sup>158</sup> (Williams 1971): p. 273  
<sup>159</sup> (Williams 1977): p. 386  
<sup>160</sup> (Williams 1977)  
<sup>161</sup> See: (Kleinpenning 2002). Also, see: (Williams 1976); p. 436. He questions the validity of the 1846 census before the war began.  
<sup>162</sup> (Williams 1971): p. 273  
<sup>163</sup> (Williams 1977): p. 387  
<sup>164</sup> See: Crockett, "Neighborly Lesson: From Afro-Brazil to Afro-Paraguay."  
<sup>165</sup> (Gimlette 2005): p. 264  
<sup>166</sup> (Lambert 2006): p. 188  
<sup>167</sup> (Sondrol 1991): p. 613  
<sup>168</sup> (Sondrol 1991)  
<sup>169</sup> (Sondrol 1992): p. 130  
<sup>170</sup> Some Paraguayans feel the country was better under Stroessner because of less crime and drugs. Overall, the sentiment is the Stronato provided more security to its citizens regardless of accounts of Stroessner's brutality.  
<sup>171</sup> (Sondrol 1991): p. 605  
<sup>172</sup> (Sondrol 1991): p. 619  
<sup>173</sup> (Sondrol 1992): p. 131  
<sup>174</sup> (Gimlette 2005): p. 10  
<sup>175</sup> (Sondrol 1992): p. 142  
<sup>176</sup> (Durbin 2007): p. 27  
<sup>177</sup> "Foro Entregó Documento a Lugo," *ABC Digital* Domingo, 13 de Julio de 2008.  
<sup>178</sup> See: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/22/world/americas/paraguay-president-impeached.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FLugo%20M%C3%A9ndez%2C%20Fernando&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics&region=stream&module=stream\\_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=9&pgtype=collection](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/22/world/americas/paraguay-president-impeached.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FLugo%20M%C3%A9ndez%2C%20Fernando&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=9&pgtype=collection)



## ***Chapter II: Erasure, Denial, and Anti-Blackness—Fearing a Black Planet***

Several months passed with some progress. Nelson, Antonio, and I were intently peering through Martinez and Romañach's books, exchanging notes on the parts of Afro-Paraguayan history that interested us. Romañach's event still stung and I was not sure how Nelson was processing the event. Honestly, I did not ask because I wanted to move forward. Also, Nelson seemed undeterred, which put me at ease somewhat. Nevertheless, we developed a weekly routine: we met on Sundays, right after church, to plan our next movements or meet with other community members to discuss our project.

On Fridays, I travelled to the National Archives in Asunción and met with Don Cecilio, the archival specialist. Initially, my interactions with Don Cecilio were quite terse: I reviewed the catalogue for a document title that seemed relevant to Afro-Paraguayan history, indicated to Don Cecilio the next document for transcription, he gave me the previous week's request, and I paid him directly for his labor. This interaction never seemed to exceed more than ten minutes for almost six months. Thereafter, our interactions expanded. Don Cecilio took an interest in some of the documents and we briefly discussed them before completing our transaction.

Prior to allocating Fridays as the weekly encounter with Don Cecilio, the group and I met to discuss financing Cecilio's labor. I offered to pay because I was financially in a better position than Nelson and Antonio. My only responsibility was my upkeep whereas Nelson and Antonio had familial obligations. Additionally, Antonio worked for

a corrupt mayor who rarely paid his employees their wages on time. At this juncture, I believe Antonio had gone several months without receiving his pay. I often wondered how he was surviving. After a brief pause, the group reluctantly agreed to allow me to bear the financial responsibility momentarily. We did, however, agree we needed to put together a proposal for our project. The proposal would include a budget item for Don Cecilio's labor.

After a couple of weeks of laborious discussions, we developed a proposal detailing the group's mission, vision, and goals for the project. We reviewed the proposal together (I drafted the document and required Nelson's assistance to review the grammar to make sure the proposal was readable, and ensure our discussions were fully represented) and made a list of potential places for submittal. I cannot remember who made the suggestion; we decided to request an audience with the Vice Minister of Culture and Education. Honestly, I was not sure how the Vice Minister would assist us; but it was a logical move because of the nature of the project. Thus, an appointment was made to meet with him.

Unfortunately, Nelson could not get permission to leave work to attend the meeting with us. Although Nelson's absence was justified, it was somewhat disappointing. Nelson had a very engaging personality and had the ability to cogently explain our project to whomever we encountered. His absence, however, meant Antonio would do most of the talking.<sup>179</sup> Unlike Nelson, Antonio did not possess that desired charisma and, at times, struggled, because of nerves, articulating the objectives of the group and the project; yet I appreciated his dedication and passion for our efforts.

Antonio and I met at the municipality in Emboscada that morning to casually discuss our meeting and make sure that our proposal was ready and printed for submission. I hung with him in the Cadastral office until it was time to catch the bus to Asunción. Our meeting was in the early afternoon. Antonio and I were anxious to see where the conversation with the Vice Minister of Culture and Education would take us. We boarded the bus while making idle conversation to calm our nerves. I must admit: boarding and getting off buses in Paraguay took some time to get use to because the buses never seemed to come to a complete stop unless there was an elderly person or a crowd of passengers. On occasion you would hear stories of people injuring themselves attempting to get off the bus. We made our way to the neighboring town Limpio to transfer to the bus travelling toward central Asunción. Antonio and I continued to drift in and out of conversations about whatever seemed to pass the time. Depending on the buses, the trip to Asunción usually took about an hour or more.

Once in central Asunción, Antonio and I made our way to the plaza. The Vice Minister's office resided in that area. Even though we were early, we headed directly to the office. We found his assistant and announced our presence. The assistant politely instructed us to take a seat in the waiting area while she informed the Vice Minister of the arrival of his next appointment. I could hear the Vice Minister in the next room speaking to someone.

Antonio and I waited, and then we waited some more. We did not speak, just exchanged glances every so often to silently express our growing impatience. The assistant seemed to sense our impatience: she, occasionally, looked in our direction with

a forced grin. Because the Vice Minister's voice was so loud, I began to listen to ascertain whether his conversation with the gentleman was an important one or a *buddy-buddy* one. It was the latter. I gathered that Antonio was listening as well because, at one point, we exchanged a look of disbelief. After some time, the Vice Minister nonchalantly opened his door not to acknowledge us but to see whether we were still there. He, immediately, closed the door and carried on his *buddy-buddy* conversation. Antonio and I exchanged glances again and sighed.

The meeting now seemed ominous. Antonio and I, however, were not leaving until we had our audience with the Vice Minister. It was a principle of time and money spent: I knew Antonio was lacking in the latter and did not want his bus fare to have gone for nothing. In my head, I went through the various ways to mount a grammatically correct and polite decline, if the assistant were to give us the option to reschedule. Antonio and I both fidgeted in our uncomfortable seats. My back and bottom were reflecting the strain of logging some time in the chair. We were well beyond an hour from our scheduled appointment. When it seemed the Vice Minister's conversation was about to peter out, it would miraculously gain momentum and prolong itself. It was definitely obvious the Vice Minister was hoping that we would abandon our defiance.

My annoyance quickly converted to anger when the Vice Minister opened his door and peered once more to see whether we were there. Again, without acknowledgement of our presence, he closed his door and kept speaking to his friend. We had been there for almost two hours. Conceivably it was sinking in: Antonio and I were determined to see him. The Vice Minister opened the door again, but this time, another

gentleman emerged. The gentleman said his goodbyes to the Vice Minister and left. The Vice Minister retreated back into his office. This confused me. I was not sure whether the Vice Minister was preparing to speak with us or abruptly leave. I wondered if his office was equipped with a backdoor exit as a means to avoid undesirable audiences. He would not be bold enough to just walk past us without engaging us—*or would he?* His assistant reassured us a meeting was occurring, “He will see you now!” she said. The assistant opened the door to the adjoining office and gestured for us to sit on the couch.

I did my best to calm down. A few more minutes passed before the Vice Minister came in to speak to us. We exchanged brief introductions. Antonio proceeded to explain why we were there.<sup>180</sup> The Vice Minister interrupted Antonio’s spiel and said, “You don’t say? I did not know that people of African descent existed in Paraguay!” Antonio replied, “Yes, we do.” Vice Minister asked, “Where?” Antonio rattled off a list, “Emboscada, Fernando de la Mora, Paraguari...” The Vice Minister responded, “Wow! It’s very important to know our history!” His comment felt disingenuous but we continued. He turned his attention to me, “Where are you from?” I replied, “New York!” I gave a little more information as to how I landed in Paraguay. He said, “Your Spanish is good.” I feigned interest in his response. Then, he said, “Let me give you two a gift.” He got up from his seat, went to the other room, and came back with two CDs. “I want to give you this CD. The Minister of Culture and Education funded this project. It has the music of Paraguay,” he said. He handed us the CDs. We said, “Thank you!” I quickly glanced at the track listing and saw that one of the first few tracks had the drumming of

Kambá Cuá's orchestra. The CD had people of African descent performing drumming. This furthered my incredulity.

Obviously, the Vice Minister was not interested in assisting us nor *genuinely interested* in entertaining the notion of an Afro-Paraguayan populace. We ended our meeting. Once outside, I said to Antonio, "Did you see this?" I pointed to the Kambá Cuá track. He replied [laughing], "Yes, I did!" I stumbled out, "Then, how could he claim that he was unaware of Afro-Paraguayans?" Undeniably, the question was rhetorical at best. Conscientiously, we were aware of the answer. Antonio, however, indulged me, "I don't know, Lorenzo!" I quipped, "I can't believe this. All that time wasted for nothing!" Antonio just simply said, "I know!" We tried to find the humor in the experience to mitigate the sting; but, for me, it did not work.

This was an example of the micro-aggressive way in which the erasure of Afro-Paraguayan existence from Paraguay's cultural landscape occurred. The question remains: how did the systematic erasure of black bodies occur? In the previous chapter, Francia's closure of the borders to *browning* the population, the subsequent era of *whitening* under the Lopezes, and the devastation of the wars offered potential explanations for the disappearance of blacks in Paraguay. Do those reasons, however, provide sufficient explanations? In his discussion of the decline of the Afro-Argentine population—a group with a similar history to that of Afro-Paraguayans, George Reid Andrews offers other plausible explanations, which are applicable to this discussion, going beyond the general reasoning of wars, browning, and whitening of the population. Those explanations include: high infant mortality rates; sexual imbalance due to wars;

high mortality and census reporting; the city's census and vital statistics registers fail to accurately reflect racial realities; and the writers of history exclude people of African descent.<sup>181</sup>

Due to the lack of data, infant mortality rates and mortality rates are unable to add to the discussion on the disappearance of Afro-Paraguayans. It is, however, feasible to conjecture the following. As mentioned in Chapter I, blacks were used to protect the colonizer's material possessions against invading indigenous tribes that refused to submit to colonial rule; and blacks served as soldiers: either as the dictators' personal detail or as shock troops in the wars. Therefore, it can be deduced there were high mortality rates among black males, particularly. That high mortality rate consequently led to a sexual imbalance. According to romanticized accounts of the wars, Paraguay's population was severely decimated, leaving mostly women and children behind.<sup>182</sup> Thus, on a micro-level, the assumption here is the war adversely impacted Afro-Paraguyan communities similarly, paralleling the metanarrative of the war's impact on Paraguay.

With regard to census data, the 1846 census was the last commissioned census to collect data on race until recently. In 2012, the census reintroduced questions of race, soliciting responses whether individuals self-identified as having an African heritage.<sup>183</sup>

<sup>184</sup> In preparation for the census, the RPA held workshops in various communities to raise awareness about the importance of claiming one's African heritage. Subsequently, a small campaign "Che Kambá" was spawned to further instill pride in Afro-Paraguayans to exact recognition of a subculture. Additionally, the government provided training for census takers on how to effectively collect data from people.

Yet the 2012 census presented a challenge that may have led to the under numeration of Paraguay's black population. For instance, census takers in Emboscada approached a woman who self-identified as a person of African descent. The census takers, however, questioned her claims of an African ancestry because her newborn appeared to be white to them. Unable to reconcile their notions of what a black person should look like, the census takers proceeded to report "mestizo" against her best attempts to state her identity. Presumably, census takers made similar inaccurate assumptions with other Afro-Paraguayans, jeopardizing the validity and accuracy of the results. Therefore, inaccurately illustrated the racial realities of Paraguay.

The writers of history omitting the contributions of Afro-Paraguayans to the building of and sustaining the nation-state provide another plausible explanation. Nelson and others often lamented the omission of Black History from history books. At one point, Nelson proclaimed the government should provide retribution for such omission. Although I agreed with Nelson, seeking retribution seemed futile, at best. The government lacked empathy and would not entertain such demands.

Unlike Afro-descendent communities from neighboring countries such as Uruguay or Brazil, Afro-Paraguayans did not develop (to our knowledge) an intellectual class not only to serve as witnesses but also to document the state of blackness in Paraguay: essentially a counter discourse.<sup>185</sup> That void enabled Paraguayan elites to freely omit the presence of blacks without public contestation. When blacks do appear in historical documents it is from the colonizer's perspective, albeit limited. This is not meant to omit the various methods in which history is produced. Afro-Paraguyan history



has operated mostly as an oral one, depending heavily on elders—particularly in Kambá Cuá—to narrate stories of arrival, hardships, and survival. In this century, José Carlos and Lázaro Medina Benítez (José Carlos' defunct uncle) documented the histories of Kambá Cuá, Emboscada, and Kambá Kokué.<sup>186</sup> The histories of Emboscada and Kambá Kokué, mostly, still have glaring holes. Several years ago, a Jesuit priest gave documents to Kambá Kokué about the history of that community. Regardless, the point here is the following: this production of Afro-Paraguayan history has been relatively recent. Thus, the evolution of Afro-Paraguayan historians should eventually challenge the prevailing narrative, disrupting notions of a homogenous nation-state.

The wars, policies of browning or whitening, mortality rates, under numeration in census reporting, and writers of history seem to provide adequate, plausible explanations for the erasure of blackness in Paraguay. There is, however, a fundamental flaw in those explanations of erasure: Afro-Paraguayans did then and still exist now. Throughout the years, Kambá Cuá has attempted to increase its visibility among Paraguayans and the government, especially. The festival of San Baltasar is promoted through media print and television. Paraguayan journalists have written pieces on Afro-Paraguayan communities. Kambá Cuá has written and presented proposals to the government addressing socioeconomic hardships. Kambá Cuá members and Afro-Emboscadeños have at various points performed during government-sanctioned events celebrating Paraguay's diversity. Afro-Paraguayans have even performed on syndicated talk shows. Additionally, Afro-Paraguayans have utilized social media platforms such as Facebook to augment their exposure.

To no avail Afro-Paraguayans are persistently treated as foreigners. Therefore, the question persists: what is really fueling this perpetual existence of Afro-Paraguayans as foreigners? In the subsequent sections, I offer the following. Afro-Paraguyan's lack of visibility is not due to their inactivity rather it is Paraguayans' denial of their existence as a subculture of citizens. That denial is predicated on deeply ingrained anti-black discrimination.

### ***Denying Blackness***

Sofia worked for the Peace Corps in a supervisory role while I was a volunteer. I often sought her advice on projects (i.e. summer camp) for youth. I always appreciated her candor. Thus, when I returned Paraguay, Sofia was on the short list of people that I immediately contacted.

We made plans to meet at a café near Shopping Villa Mora. The café sat a couple of blocks from the main road, Mariscal López. Sofia and I had connected a week earlier when she came by the hostel I stayed temporarily. During that visit, I requested a formal interview with Sofia, which she gladly agreed to do. She had some knowledge of Kambá Cuá: as a supervisor of the youth development program in the Peace Corps, she had some interaction with Kambá Cuá's leadership. Presumably, Sofia brought a unique perspective.

I arrived a little early. The café was quaint and had a horseshoe-like structural design. Upon entering the café, a young woman greeted me. After reciprocating the

greeting, I sat somewhere near the front as to be visible to Sofia. She arrived shortly thereafter. Sofia demonstrated that usual gusto when she entered the café. We exchanged greetings. She suggested we move to a table around the corner to carve out a little quietness. Our waitress eventually made her way to the table. Sofia ordered some coffee and asked me if I would like a beverage. I declined. The waitress left the table to fill Sofia's order. She and I engaged in some small talk. A few minutes passed, I explained to Sofia in greater detail the purpose for our meeting that day: to get her take on Afro-Paraguayan mobilization thus far, and to gain her insights as to why they are not visible in Paraguayan society.

After asking some clarifying questions, Sofia delved into her narrative about Paraguayans and Afro-Paraguayan's lack of visibility. "Lorenzo, before joining the Peace Corps, I worked with the YMCA. That position involved travelling outside of the country, which allowed me to meet people of African descent. That was my first exposure to black people." She paused momentarily. I wanted to take a quick step backward: "I'm just curious before we get even further...how would you define what it means to be Paraguayan?" "Oh, Paraguayan means to be family oriented, speak Guaraní, catholic, and mestizo," she said. "I'd be considered the traditional Paraguayan. I have the features that represent that: a rounder face, brown eyes, the nose and black hair...more of a mixture of indigenous features. My brother, on the other hand, has blonde hair—more European features. Growing up, people could not believe that we were brother and sister because we didn't look alike." There was a visible smile as Sofia recalled the experience.

Sofia took a quick sip from her cup and continued: “There’s a book by Saro Vera called *El paraguayo*<sup>187</sup> you might find interesting. I think the book provides some insights on what it means to be Paraguayan. You know, Lorenzo, I once took an anthropology course at the university. On the first day of class, the class was so filled that there weren’t enough seats for all the students. Some were even standing off to the sides and back. I remember the professor told the class that they were mixed with Spanish and indigenous blood. That upset the students. The next class session, there were barely ten students. I guess they didn’t like being told that they were mixed with indigenous blood.”

A couple of thoughts ran through my head. Paraguay’s national discourse has promoted the idea of a Spanish and Guaraní mixture referred to as jopará. The mixture is most notable in language: Spanish infused with Guaraní words. Thus, the students’ rejection reflected a counter discourse—an elitist one, at best. From past encounters, I knew some Paraguayan elites did not identify with the indigenous culture because they thought it was barbarous. Additionally, I wondered: how would have the students reacted if they were told they were mixed with Spanish, indigenous, and African blood?

“Lorenzo, I knew Fernando de la Mora had a black population before I placed a volunteer there. I’ve known about Kambá Cuá for about twenty-plus years. They have been doing the same activities for a long time. I remember seeing them do the dancing and drumming. It’s time to change it up because what [Kambá Cuá] they have done thus far has not had the impact, I believe, they want!” she posited. I asked, “So, you believe they need to do something else?” She replied, “Afro-Paraguayans need to be more

visible. For example, the *campesinos* are very visible.” “The *campesinos* protest every year in the capital, correct?” I asked. “But how effective is their protest? Is the government responsive to them?” The answer to the question was obvious: although visible, *campesinos* were viewed as a nuisance and as a disruptive force—advisories would be sent warning people to avoid central Asunción—to Paraguay’s normalcy. Regardless, I wanted Sofia’s thoughts on whether that was a plausible route for Afro-Paraguayans to protest for their rights.

“I’m not saying Afro-Paraguayans need to do the same things as *campesinos*, but they need to do something more than drumming and dancing to make themselves visible,” Sofia posited. Another former Peace Corps’ supervisor would later echo Sofia’s sentiments. Undoubtedly, Afro-Paraguayans have relied primarily on cultural reproduction—dancing and drumming—as a means to increase their visibility. The festival serves a couple of purposes: first, it conveys to an audience a distinct ethnic identity, simultaneously promoting ethnic pride among Afro-Paraguayans while educating the rest of the audience; and second, it is culturally and politically subversive because it is antithetical to the traditional Paraguayan dance (polka) and music.

To Sofia’s point, however: is cultural reproduction enough to gain visibility among a populace that routinely operates in denial? For twenty-plus years (according to Sofia’s approximation), Afro-Paraguayans have continued to perform according to what the cultural hegemon permits: cultural reproduction—specifically, in this case, dancing and drumming. Yet Afro-Paraguayans have not made significant inroads to obtaining

rights as citizen. Thus, what is the alternative movement for Afro-Paraguayans? Is there a legitimate, nonthreatening way for Afro-Paraguayans to demand civil rights?

Sofia and I pressed our conversation forward. “Why do you think Afro-Paraguayans are not accepted?” I asked. “Afro-Paraguayans are not accepted due to ignorance and denial. Paraguay denies its diversity and there’s this strong belief in a homogeneous society—we are all mestizos. Paraguay has a diverse population, which is not acknowledged,” she stated. “Well,” I interjected, “does discrimination exist in Paraguay?” “Yes, discrimination does exist. Lorenzo, you know what...there is an anti-discrimination law that has been written; but, it is being held up due to homophobia,” she explained. The law had provisions that protected non-heterogeneous sexual identities, indigenous people, people of African descent, among others from discrimination. The provision, however, supposedly led to a heated debate—reflecting a deeply rooted homophobia among Paraguayans, preventing the passing of the law.<sup>188</sup>

Sofia paused and asked a series of questions, “What does the Red [RPA] want? Why did they form? What’s behind the Red? Or what’s on the table?” She seemed genuinely curious. Her body language (leaning in with anticipation) signaled a shift from the interviewee to the interviewer. Sofia awaited my response. “Honestly, I don’t completely know...but I gather the RPA would want some recognition from the government of their existence as a subculture and protection of their rights as citizens,” I responded. My response was somewhat hesitant: I knew the RPA was not functioning well. Several internal issues had halted the RPA’s progress. I did not reveal those issues to Sofia. I responded with what I knew via conversations and documents. I got the sense

the response did not completely satiate her curiosity. “Lorenzo, are Afro-Paraguayans part of any political party?” she asked. “I’m only aware of José Carlos is affiliated with the Colorado party. Beyond that, I don’t know,” I said. Sofia said, “The black volunteers that come to Paraguay are ten steps ahead of Afro-Paraguayans as far as social consciousness. Probably, you guys can continue to help!” I was not sure about the ten steps ahead, but I did understand her argument with regard to political organizing among African Americans and how our experiences may benefit a RPA struggling to maintain its network.

Even though I valued Sofia’s openness, she was not beyond anti-black prejudices herself. The conversation veered toward stereotypes of black men. I had heard beforehand from other individuals—black women, specifically—about Sofia’s take on black men. I was told that Sofia had a daughter and would not want her to date black men because we were incapable of fidelity. This is a position Sofia reaffirmed in the café. She looked at me and said, “You know how you [black men] are?” I feigned ignorance, “What do you mean by that?” Sofia smiled and made a gesture with her right hand analogous to a wink to imply I knew what she was referring to. Then she said, “You know black men are not faithful! You are players.” I replied, “Is that so?” “You know it is!”, Sofia said affirmatively. She laughed and I did my best to shrug it off. The following nugget of information would have not altered Sofia’s perception: I, personally, have been with the same woman for a substantial amount of time. I presume Sofia would have considered that nugget as an exception rather than as a rule.

We wrapped up our conversation. As usual, Sofía offered to assist in any fashion she could. She valued the work and felt Afro-Paraguayans needed more exposure. A conversation with her friend confirmed the need to tell the Afro-Paraguayan narrative due to its absence in Paraguayan literature; thus, she was more than willing to assist me in my efforts. We parted ways with me vowing to keep her apprised of my movements.

The conversation with Sofía brought up a critical issue. Afro-Paraguayans have not denied their own existence as citizens. Rather, state violence and other Paraguayans have denied Afro-Paraguayans access to basic, inalienable rights. In particular, the state has created and sustained a structure of systematic oppression that severely curtails Afro-Paraguayans ability to subsist. Yet, following Sofía's logic, Afro-Paraguayans own the responsibility to unveil themselves, educate the masses about their vital contributions to society, explicate (legibly) their socioeconomic hardships in a relatable way to their audience, defend themselves from criticism of reverse discrimination,<sup>189</sup> and demand inclusion through visible (acceptable) methods of protest; all the while, hoping their efforts will engage the state in a dialogue that eventually eliminates structural violence and grants full citizenship. Granted, this logic exists throughout the African diaspora; but, in reality, it is an absurd notion. That logic places the work solely at the hands and feet of the oppressed and releases the oppressor from the self-reflective moment that seeks to understand a fundamental question: why does anti-black racism exist?



### *Anti-Blackness in Paraguay*

The superficial reason for Paraguay's anti-blackness was unclear for a period of time. In 2003, I once pressed the issue with a journalist to ascertain the animus toward Afro-Brazilians. The journalist evaded the question and gave a bland response as to indicate there was no anti-black sentiment among Paraguayans. In fact, the individual reified the myth about Paraguayans' acceptance of everyone, including blacks. Personal experiences coupled with Afro-Paraguayan stories illustrated encounters with discrimination proved otherwise. An eventual meeting with historian, Margarita Prieto Yergos, gave some insight as to why blacks were feared and reviled.

Margarita lived in Asunción, near the Peace Corps office. She earned her doctorate in history from the Universidad de Asunción and was known for her narrations of Paraguayan history, particularly with regard to the wars,<sup>190</sup> and folklores. Compared to most Paraguayan women, she was tall and somewhat slender. Her features were more European. Margarita wore these wired, rimmed glasses that reminded me of my third grade homeroom teacher in the eighties. Although she was in her late sixties, her disposition did not support it: Margarita overflowed with energy and enthusiasm. For a person that constantly traveled, she never seemed exhausted. As a widow, she reveled in her independence and was not afraid to speak her mind. (On occasion, Margarita revealed a tumultuous, to state it tactfully, relationship with her deceased husband; thus, his passing gave way to certain independence that she embraced.) Therefore, I looked forward to our spirited discussions.

Whenever feasible, I scheduled visits to see Margarita while I was in Asunción. On this particular day, I walked from the Peace Corps office to her house. The walk usually took roughly ten to fifteen minutes. I cut down the street that passed by her house. Once in front of the gate, I clapped my hands to announce my arrival. She peered through the window to verify who her visitor was. In a loud voice, Margarita said, “Hola Lorenzo!” She gestured to me to open the gate and pass through. As I got closer to her, I exchanged the customary greeting and followed her inside. The inside of the house was deceptively more spacious than the outside seemed to indicate. My eyes, however, were only limited to explore the living room, which was immediately to the right from the entrance.

As per our routine, Margarita gestured for me to sit on the couch while she sat in a chair across from me. She offered a snack—a tray full of cookies, and something to drink. Afterwards, the next part of our routine would commence whereby I gave her updates on my progress working with the Afro-Paraguayan youth group. With legs crossed and arms folded, she listened intently. Even though Afro-Paraguayan history was foreign to her, the possibility of uncovering that history seemed to intrigue her. I finished recounting the past week or so. Margarita began, “You know, Lorenzo...did I give you a copy of my book about the war?” I responded, “I believe so, yes!” She continued, “When I was collecting stories for the book on the war I came across several ones about the black Brazilian soldiers. One story, in particular, involved Brazilian forces occupying the capital [Asunción] after gaining victory. The Brazilian general rode on a horse while the black soldiers accompanied him on foot. The general gave instructions to the soldiers to

pillage the town. To make an example the general decapitated one of the Paraguayan civilians. The black soldiers kicked around the head while the remaining Paraguayans watched in terror. Stories such as these are the reason why Paraguayans abhor Afro-Brazilians because of the way they acted after the war was won.” The black soldiers instead of the general / conqueror garnered Paraguayans ire. Stated another way, black bodies were terrorizing Paraguayans instead of Brazil’s elites, which was perplexing. That, however, would not be the last time I would hear about Paraguayans hatred towards Afro-Brazilians.

In 2012, when I returned to Paraguay to conduct more research, I stayed a night with an old friend, his wife, and son in Asunción. Years ago, I met John and Camila in Horqueta, a city located in the Department of Concepción, which is near the border to Brazil. John was from the United States and Camila was from Horqueta. They met and dated during John’s tenure as a Peace Corps volunteer. John and Camila seemed to compliment each other: he had a laid back West coast air about him whereas Camila had a passionate, very outspoken personality. The first time I met Camila, her seemingly nonstop energy amazed me.

The night blended a welcomed, slight breeze and temperate weather together. John and Camila’s apartment was a story up. The space was adequate for a small family. After a meal, Camila invited me out to the balcony to enjoy the night. The balcony had just enough space to fit three chairs for John, Camila, and myself. Camila sat in middle and I sat to her left. We made some small talk about music, engagement rings, and other matters. John and Camila were fully aware of my research from a previous conversation

over dinner. Camila shifted the conversation: “Lorenzo, it wasn’t recently that I began to identify myself as a person of African descent.” Due to her background, some would refer to her as *Brasiguayo*: I believe her father was Brazilian and her mother was Paraguayan. She continued, “It took a while to come to that awareness because it wasn’t discussed. It wasn’t until I met a professor and his wife that I came to that realization. The professor’s research focused on people of African descent in Mexico. I would help translate some of the research, and through that and conversations with his wonderful wife...I began to realize I’m of African descent.”

I asked some further details about the professor’s work and her involvement. I indicated to Camila I was interested in the reason why Paraguayans had disdain for blacks. Camila responded, “Lorenzo, I remember in school, under Stroessner’s dictatorship, they [teachers] taught us to hate black people. Seriously, they did! I remember it clearly.” Camila’s comments evoked Margarita’s explanation made some years ago.

Although Margarita and Camila’s comments are rooted in historical fact, it nevertheless ignores the following: anti-black racism existed before either the Triple Alliance War or the Stronato. As the previous chapter illustrates, Paraguay’s history is filled with anti-black racism. The Spanish Crown implemented anti-black policies to perpetuate racial hierarchies and oppression. After independence, Paraguayan dictators persisted with various forms of anti-black racism, further marginalizing or committing acts of genocide (i.e. utilizing black bodies as ‘shock troops’ in wars, designating uninhabitable lands for black bodies, etc.) against black bodies. Essentially, anti-black

racism is not a relatively new phenomenon. Vera posits Paraguayans inherit anti-black racism from the European colonizers. But, does that explain the perpetuation of anti-black racism?

Black scholars have explicated whiteness requires blackness to maintain a semblance of purity and superiority *ad nauseam*. Although Paraguayans claim to uphold an identity that encapsulates European and indigenous heritage, Paraguayans ultimately aspire whiteness or to possess the benefits that whiteness seems to yield globally. That aspiration has, at times, placed Guaraní culture in a perilous position. Paraguayan elites have opposed the speaking or teaching of Guaraní and have rejected practicing cultural traditions that assert an indigenous sentiment. Undeniably, Guaraní culture has endured episodic opposition. Yet claims of a proud Guaraní identity are disingenuous because Paraguayans value whiteness more.

Hence, to obtain whiteness the mechanism of anti-blackness is a necessary evil. Thus, words such as *kambá* or *negro* are pejorative.<sup>191</sup> Paraguayans associate blackness as ugly, dirty, criminal, undesirable, and so forth to complete the cycle that protects and projects whiteness as the utopian. Granted, Paraguayans have (at least to my knowledge) not produced a film similar to D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*,<sup>192</sup> perpetuating black bodies as the 'boogie man' and justifying acts of violence against black bodies. Nevertheless, the story Margarita recounted to me serves in similar fashion to that of the film: black bodies are casted as predators on the fears of Paraguayans. And, thus, black bodies are prone to acts of terrorism, jeopardizing the Paraguayan state's sanctuary. As a

consequence, Stroessner's exacting hatred for blacks becomes justifiable, allowing for the continuance of anti-black racism.

With that said, I would be negligent to not mention the following. Paraguayans simultaneously reject and desire black bodies. It is not usual to see a *comparsa* with Paraguayan males performing capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art. Additionally, more importantly, Paraguayans do seek black bodies for sexual pleasure. As bell hooks posits, the Other is an "alternative playground" to live out sexual desires without compromising one's mainstream positionality, affirming power-over in intimate relations with the Other.<sup>193</sup> Furthermore, sex with black bodies enables one to temporarily leave behind white "innocence" and enter the world of "experience."<sup>194</sup> Paraguayans view black bodies as promiscuous, consistently playing out their hyper-sexualized desires.

An interview with Walter, a black Peace Corps volunteer in Paraguarí, crystalized the aforementioned point. Walter recounted the following: "I just got a phone call from a volunteer last night. She was asking why is it that the guy I used to date always wanted to keep our relationship private, but in public he was always talking about this *rubia alemana* [German girl] that he use to sleep with or whatever...but every time he wanted to come over to my house...she's black...he wanted me to turn the lights off so no one would see him; and be like, 'Remember, you can't tell nobody!' Like, what's up with that?! So, we were talking about how they see race in Paraguay and the *rubia* is like wife material. It's the shit to get a *rubia*. And, if you get a sister...I mean...I don't know. My friend, Amber, before she left, explained to me that they see black women as easy here.

That they are just there for sex, but the *rubia* is wife material. That's something you want to marry.

It's the same way for me here too. They'll just come up to me and proposition me for sex and stuff. And it's like no I'm too old for that. It's not me. And they think just because you are gay that you sleep with whomever. That's not how it goes!"

In Paraguay, the alternative playground occurs in concealed areas, sparsely populated public spaces, or under darkness. Other experiences reiterate Walter's experiences. Once a Paraguayan male propositioned my beloved friend, Linda (a black female), in an aisle of a store in the mall. Without hesitation he asked Linda for a price for her sexual services. In another example, a Paraguayan male in his car saw me walking on the sidewalk at night. He pulled over to grab my attention. After asking me to attend a party, to which I politely declined, he boldly asked if he could touch my penis. Therefore, these examples affirm this dual positionality black bodies occupy within the Paraguayan context. Paraguayans reject black bodies due to their aspirations for whiteness; yet desire black bodies to unlock hidden sexual fantasies. The systematic anti-black racism permits this duality.

## ***Conclusion***

Although valid to a degree, the mundane explanations for the absence of blackness from the cultural landscape fail to engage with the issue of anti-blackness. As I have posited, Afro-Paraguayans are not invisible communities, per se. Rather

communities such as Kambá Cuá readily make themselves available to the media (i.e. television and print) and to the public through cultural exhibitions. The problem is: Paraguayans desire whiteness and perpetuate anti-black racism to preserve that desire. Yet there is this simultaneous rejection of blackness while playing out hyper-sexualized desires that involve the consumption of black bodies.

What remains to potentially materialize is a consolidated, politically organized black resistance to openly challenge anti-black racism. Afro-Paraguayans are still forming their cultural and political identity. That identity formation has struggled due to a lack of fidelity to national solidarity among Afro-Paraguayans. The subsequent chapter seeks to explore Afro-Paraguayan identity and a lacking moral economy blackness, which has impeded the Reds ability to mobilize for civil rights.

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<sup>179</sup> I assumed a passive role in meetings with organizations or government officials; mainly, because I felt, in the spirit of community development, *the outsider*, although there were some shared experiences, should not speak for *the native*. Thus, I encouraged Nelson to speak for the group unless a question was directed specifically toward me. Occasionally, out of curiosity, some would ask me mundane question about my origin.

<sup>180</sup> The proposal presentation had a few relatively succinct parts: first, the proposal included an unveiling, referencing Ana María Argüello Martínez's book to validate the discussion, of the existence of Afro-Paraguayan communities. This part of the presentation usually consumed most of the time due to the audience's penchant display of disbelief that would elicit a barrage of questions: Where are these communities? How many are there? How long have they been in Paraguay? Are you one? Ultimately, Nelson and/ or Antonio had to provide affirmation to the audience: "Afro-Paraguayans do exist because I am one!" Second, there was a fund request to cover the projected costs (i.e. archival transcription service, transportation, and equipment) of the investigation. And, third, if the presentation made it this far, an explanation of how the resources would be used to benefit not only Afro-Emboscadeños but also the rest of the community. The goal



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was to produce a document that educated people on Paraguay's African heritage: a subject largely ignored in society.

<sup>181</sup> (Andrews 1980)

<sup>182</sup> This explanation was provided as a reason for why infidelity was rampant among Paraguayan males. Because of the shortage of men, multiple women procreated with the same man as a means to repopulate Paraguay's depleted populace. Supposedly, the practice of men having more than one mate did not cease after replenishing the numbers. Rather, a male's infidelity became an acceptable cultural act. Whether the explanation is valid, it is troublesome because, without naming it, espouses male privilege.

<sup>183</sup> Afro-Paraguayan political activism coupled with nongovernmental entities influenced Paraguay's government to include the question about African ancestry.

<sup>184</sup> Prior to the 1846 census, censuses tallied the numbers of black people. Most Paraguayan newspapers reported, however, that the 2012 census was the first to ask a racial question.

<sup>185</sup> In the previous chapter, I argue the years of violently oppressive regimes explicate reasons for the lack of mobilization on the part of Afro-Paraguayans.

<sup>186</sup> (Benítez and Alfonso 2010)

<sup>187</sup> Saro Vera argues it is improper to refer to Paraguayans as mestizos. After generations of crossing and fusing genes, Vera explains Paraguayans have through a process of conformation (not hybridization) created a third ethnic culture that has "values and anti-values" from the original ethnic groups: Spanish and Guaraní. Paraguayan cultural identity is strong; therefore, foreigners eventually assimilate that identity. Vera, also, states Paraguayans are racist because they inherited feelings of superiority from Europeans. See: (Vera 2000)

<sup>188</sup> During President Horacio Cartes' 2013 presidential campaign run, he said that he would "shoot himself in the balls" if discovered his son were gay and later compared the LGBT community to "monkeys."

See: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/horacio-cartes-millionaire-criminal-business-titan-homophobe-the-next-president-of-paraguay-8580851.html>. The LGBT community protested. In 2014, the Paraguayan Senate rejected the anti-discrimination bill. See: <http://latincorrespondent.com/2014/11/paraguay-senate-rejects-anti-discrimination-law/>.

<sup>189</sup> In informal conversations with Paraguayans about communities of African descent, some would ask whether Afro-Paraguayans were attempting to separate themselves from the rest of Paraguayans—subtly implying, Afro-Paraguayans were discriminating against other Paraguayans.

<sup>190</sup> Margarita has published books on the Triple Alliance War and the Chaco War. From this point on, *the war* refers to the Triple Alliance War, involving Paraguay against Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay.

<sup>191</sup> (Vera 2000): p. 19

<sup>192</sup> The 1915 film portrays black bodies as threatening to whites, particularly white women, and unintelligent whereas the Ku Klux Klan assumes a heroic position.

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<sup>193</sup> (Hooks 1992): p. 23

<sup>194</sup> (Hooks 1992)

### ***Chapter III: From Kunta Kinte to Obama: Searching for a Collective Blackness***

As a boy, I remember watching Alex Haley's *Roots*. The film simultaneously evoked feelings of terror and rebellion. The terror: watching a black body, wrists bound together around a pole, awaiting the crack of the overseer's whip against his bare back. I shuddered with each windup, the whistling sound the whip made as it hurled through the air, to the eventual cracking sound as it forcibly met its destination: flesh. Similar to the witnesses in the scene, I averted my eyes from the spectacle only to re-center them upon Kunta after each scream to determine whether he still had breath in his body. This repeated until the spectacle ceased.

Adulthood re-envisioned the whipping of Kunta as a parody. *Dave Chappelle's Show* featured a skit with Chappelle as Kunta with a shell strapped to his back, experiencing the lash. The parody drastically differs from Haley's terrorizing scene. At the point of contact, Chappelle's Kunta jumps from the pole to instill fear in his cowering assailant and states, "See, I told y'all he was scared off me!" as the other fictitious slaves laughed. Chappelle's Kunta assists the assailant back to his feet and returns to the pole, unbounded with a smirk as to insinuate a change in the power dynamic: Chappelle's Kunta was in control. Unlike Chappelle's version, Haley's did not offer an easily digestible alternative. The rawness of the whipping scene terrorized Kunta and the witnesses. Nonetheless, the scene did reveal something else: the will of a black body to rebel. But, there were limitations to such rebelliousness.

With each crack of the whip, the overseer demands Kunta to speak his colonized name, Toby. Speaking the name, Toby, represents a transition to a dehumanized object: the property of his master. The overseer needs this spectacle to signify the transformation to quell any potential rebellion and more importantly to sever any connection or desire to reunite with Africa: the source of Kunta's rebelliousness. The overseer commands, "Your name is Toby! Say your name!" Kunta defiantly holds onto to his connection, "My name is Kunta...Kunta Kinte!" As the lash rips flesh from Kunta's body, I stand with Kunta. In fact, I need Kunta to delve further into his revolutionary suicide to provoke others (and myself) to rebellion. I thought erroneously, "Hold on Kunta...Africa, your freedom is right there!" Death seemed more like freedom whereas life meant a slow, painful existence in captivity—constantly subjected to predatory state violence.

The traumatic spectacle, however, proved too overwhelming for Kunta: his Africa irreconcilably dissipated. As a survival technique, Kunta uttered through exhaustion (the words I feared the most), "My name is Toby!" The overseer commands Toby to state his colonized name once more to affirm the colonizer's victory. I held on for one last-ditch effort of defiance. But, Toby was now the reality, signaling hopelessness. Toby (now a husband and father) continued to rebel cautiously, employing subtler methods confined within the institution of slavery. But, the connection to Africa was permanently altered: no longer possessing the spirit it once occupied. The occupation of black bodies was now complete, deterring any sense of a *true* liberation.

As full-fledged participants on the modern day slave plantation, Corporate America, my friends and I held onto an imagined Kunta Kinte. When the master/boss

beckoned one of our presences, we would hold a clenched fist in the air and defiantly say in hushed voice, “Don’t be Toby! Remember, Kunta Kinte!” Laughter would follow only to have thoughts interrupt it with a solemn realization, “Man, I bet you he’s Toby because we all are!” Undoubtedly, the connection to Africa had been severed. Yet summoning Kunta Kinte, particularly his memories, signified the ultimate reclamation project: Africa. I never imagined Kunta Kinte’s potential reach throughout the African diaspora. But, an Afro-Paraguayan would reveal how far Kunta’s story had traveled.

Areguá, the capital of the Central Department, has a deep but obscured history of people of African descent. During my first tenure in Paraguay, the potential existence of another Afro-Paraguayan community fascinated Antonio, Nelson, and myself. Thus, I decided to make a trip to Areguá to learn more. I rode the bus from Emboscada to Areguá. The town was well known for its artisan crafts. The north end of the center-square of town was filled with stores, selling various pottery products. The library, my destination, was located in the middle of the square. The library was a white edifice sandwiched between grass and a paved parking lot. Compared to the other libraries such as the one in Emboscada, this one was constructed well and was spacious inside.

I entered into the building and immediately encountered a noise-filled space. The schools in the area were touring the library. As my mother would say, “They’re touring their mouths more so than the library.” The high school age youth were occupying the left and right-hand side of the library, seemingly not paying attention to anything. To the right was a table. The librarian sat at the table struggling to maintain a sense of order. A small group of students were positioned around the table. The librarian was explaining to

them the resources the library had and the benefits of utilizing them. Once the explanation was complete, another small group would cycle to the table, repeating the process. I was there to speak to the librarian. I found a seat off to the side but within the librarian's peripheral view. Once an opening presented itself, I went over to the woman to introduce myself. By now, the noise level dissipated some. The librarian yelled, "Chicos, chicos!" while using hand gestures to calm down the remaining students.

The librarian was a heavy-set white woman with blonde hair. She was of German decent and was not originally from Areguá. We briefly exchanged information about each other. To break up the direction of the conversation I launched into the reason for my visit. I explained to her about the research conducted so far on blacks in Paraguay, particularly in Areguá. Before I could finish my explanation, she interrupted, "Yes, I know there were people of African descent here. This is of some interest to me. In fact, I want to introduce you to a friend who is of African descent." I replied, "Oh, really!" She continued, "If you have time, he'll be by shortly. He was a travelling musician." I indicated I was willing to wait a while.

Eventually, an older, slender man dressed in khakis and a short-sleeved collard shirt, wearing rimmed glasses, arrived. He did not approach the table; rather he stood in the corner within earshot over the remaining students. His features were different: they did not exemplify the Spanish and Guaraní mix. He had a darker skin tone and possessed some African features. The librarian said to me, "Oh, there he is!" The gentleman was a little flirtatious with the librarian, "Oh, you know I like to visit a beautiful woman!" I started eyeing the exit because I was not in the mood to witness the flirtatious exchange.

As she spoke to me more about the musician's background and what she knew about Afro-Paraguayans, the musician periodically chimed in, "Yo soy pariente de Kunta Kinte [I'm a relative of Kunta Kinte]! Kunta...Kunta Kinte!" Each time he said the phrase he raised his right hand with index figure pointed up to add emphasis. At one point, he asked me, "You've seen *Roots*, right?" I politely replied with a smirk on my face, "Yes, I have." Then he stated once more, "Well, I'm a relative of his!" I thought, "Yeah, I got it the first time!"

Before parting ways, we made plans to interview a gentleman the musician knew. The librarian stressed the importance of the musician's presence for the future date: unlike the librarian, the musician spoke Guaraní, which was a requisite to communicate with the gentleman. The musician reassured her, "Woman, I'll go wherever you tell me to!" He put his hand over his heart as to indicate she possessed it. I quietly remained seated, almost anticipating the musician to turn to me and say, "The gentleman is a relative of Kunta Kinte also!" Fortunately, that did not occur.

The encounter with the musician raised several questions. The musician purposefully chose Kunta Kinte. Thus, was the intent to establish an Afro diasporic connection? Did he consider me as his long lost brother? Were other Afro-Paraguayans aware of Kunta's story? Did the musician's black consciousness extend beyond a recollection of *Roots*? In other words, how were Afro-Paraguayans defining blackness? And, did that definition acknowledge or reclaim Africa?

I travelled to Areguá on three more occasions: first, to participate in an interview of older gentleman who identified a person of African descent; second, to introduce

Antonio to the musician to establish a deeper relationship as a means to locate more black communities in Areguá; and third, to accompany the musician to meet other Afro-Paraguayans. The third occasion was unsuccessful. Nelson, Antonio, myself, and two others drove to Areguá. The musician promised to introduce us to other Afro-Paraguayans living in particular part of the town; however, the musician did not appear. Thereafter, I never returned to Areguá due to a preoccupation with other matters. Hence, there was not an opportunity to probe for clarity to the aforementioned questions.

Regardless, the questions remain. Evoking Kunta summons an imagined Africa. Kunta's vivid memories vicariously reconnect black bodies to Africa, reinforcing the idea of Africa as the origin of familial beings. An origin possessing potential insights into an identity, a family that existed prior to the dispossession of black bodies that led to the creation of racialized commodities. Alex Haley's reclamation project was *Roots*. Kunta Kinte's story enabled Haley to retrace the mid-Atlantic route to his African roots. Haley travelled to The Gambia, conducted archival research in the United States, and collected oral histories to spawn his opus.<sup>195</sup> Yet Kunta's forced journey, whether facts laced with fiction, fails to engage with notion that the transformation to Toby creates a perpetual stranger: Toby is no longer the long lost brother.

In *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman travels to Ghana "to reclaim the, that is, to reckon with the lives undone and obliterated in the making of human commodities."<sup>196</sup> Hartman engages what Haley does not: the existence as the proverbial outsider. Hartman's encounters serve as a constant reminder that European colonization created



strangers: unable to reconnect as kin. Africa is no longer coveted as a site for liberation because white supremacy has marked the stranger as homeless.

Hartman's discourse helps to illuminate the following. Granted, Hartman narrates her experiences in Ghana. But, the condition as *the stranger* extends beyond Africa's boundaries. Black bodies function as proverbial outsiders within and outside of the African diaspora. The black musician in Areguá evoked Kunta as a means to establish a commonality: we were descendants of African slaves. Racial solidarity was superficial, at best. I was not his long lost kin. Instead, I was simply the stranger attempting to locate other strangers in Paraguay.

Even operating as strangers, there is a constant formulation or reformulation of blackness that, at times, contradicts itself. Afro-Paraguayans struggle to define what blackness means and the ramification of claiming a black identity in a mestizo-state that values Europeanized racial hierarchies. Simultaneously, Afro-Paraguayans wrestle with *the stranger* mentality among black communities that hinder solidarity and the establishment of a moral economy of blackness devoted to confronting Paraguay's racial ambivalence. Thus, the following sections discuss black identity formation, the lack of fidelity among Afro-Paraguayans, and the disconnection with the larger struggle people of African descent face.

### ***Che Kambá or Defining Blackness***

Antonio invited Anthony and myself to his house for Sunday lunch. Anthony was a young, tall, black male, Peace Corps volunteer, working with Antonio on various issues regarding Afro-Paraguayans. Before returning to Paraguay, Sofia virtually, via email, introduced Anthony and myself. Once in country, Anthony and I naturally gravitated toward each other: I wanted to know his insights on the current on-goings of the Red, and he wanted to know about my experience as a volunteer. Even though I told him several times why I had returned to Paraguay, he would incredulously ask, “Why? Why did you come back?” I answered, “To do research.” He would reply, “I hear ya! But, man, I can’t believe you are here! Why? I would’ve picked another country instead of dealing with this!” His bemused tone signaled Paraguay had worn down Anthony just as it did to me. Nevertheless, I laughed and said, “I know. I just didn’t want to have to start all over again!” My answer did satiate Anthony’s inquiry. Coincidentally, I was asking myself the same question: “Why? Why return?” At the core of it, I knew my answer to Anthony’s question did not even suffice me. Anthony’s inquiry was really asking: “You know what it’s like to be a black man in this country, so why return for more punishment?”

Anthony and I met in San Lorenzo to take the bus to Emboscada. I looked forward to spending the Sunday afternoon with Antonio and his family. The last time I saw Antonio’s wife, Benita, was the girlfriend. Back then she was shy but very sweet. I expected much had not changed except for occupying a status as mother and wife. Previous meetings with Antonio implied marriage and fatherhood had matured him.

Moreover, I relished the opportunity to meet Antonio and Benita's daughter, who was about five years old.

The conversation Anthony and I drummed up consumed our time on the bus. We got off the bus right in front of the empanada stand on the side of the highway. We followed the dirt path that was before us. On the right hand side of the first bend in the path resided Nelson's parents' house. Many Sunday hours were spent under the shade in the front yard discussing the objectives of the Afro-Paraguayan youth group. The path eventually met another dirt path that passed Antonio's house. From the intersection, we could see Antonio's modest accommodations. Anthony and I walked up to the wired fencing. Antonio was parked under the lone tree in his yard to shield himself from the baking sun. Even though Antonio saw us, Anthony still playfully clapped to announce our presence.

Antonio gestured for us to pass through the opening while he grabbed two additional chairs to place beside him within the shaded limits. As we directed ourselves to the chairs, Benita emerged. She looked as I remembered her: slender, average height, thick curly black hair that she kept pulled back, and darker skin tone with an introverted demeanor. Standard greetings were exchanged. Another individual emerged, clinging to Benita's leg. Their daughter had similar features to those of her mom's. Even though her mom encouraged her to greet us, the daughter hid behind Benita until Antonio beckoned her presence near him. The wife gestured for us to sit down and excused herself to return to the house to finish preparing the meal.

Antonio sat, combing through the newspaper. His daughter bashfully hid behind his chair until her mom called for her assistance. We casually joked with Antonio about his daughter insisting on running from one point to another. I asked whether he was preparing her to play soccer already. Antonio let out a laugh and calmly suggested that was a possibility. We made idle conversation, anticipating the chow bell to ring soon. Benita reemerged to set the table located on the patio. Afterward she gestured for us to come eat. As we ate, I traded looks with their daughter hoping to breakthrough her shyness. Every once in a while, a smile would appear signaling I was gaining a new friend.

The completed meal transitioned to an unknown encounter with another old friend. In the distance I recognized a familiar face. The years had aged Nelson to a degree, but he seemed to retain a youthful enthusiasm. We hugged and exchanged pleasantries. Because Anthony and Nelson did not know each other, they just shook hands. Benita pulled out another chair for Nelson. Nelson and I exchanged smiles. He began, "It's great to see you old friend! How have you been? I wondered what happened to you!" I replied, "It's great to see you too. I've been fine. How are you?" We continued to update each other on the present tales of our lives. Nelson spoke of his marriage and three year old daughter. Then he lamented, "Lorenzo, you know I haven't been as involved as Antonio has in advancing the Afro-Paraguayan cause. I work in Asunción. I come home and spend time with my wife and child. On Sundays, I do some work with the church, which does not leave me much time for anything else. Antonio knows that if he needs anything I am there to help him in any way I can. But, I've been seeing from a

distance the things that he has done with the youth as far as the drumming and dancing and I feel very proud that more and more youth are feeling comfortable about who they are!”

Although somewhat disappointed Nelson was no longer as involved as he once was, I understood he had prioritized certain activities according to his reality. I explained why I had returned to Paraguay and proceeded to delve into an informal conversation with Antonio and Nelson about what it meant to be an Afro-Paraguayan. I asked, “What does it mean to be an Afro-Paraguayan?” Antonio, without hesitation, answered, “Invisible!”

Nelson paused momentarily and spoke candidly, “Lorenzo, I’m not sure how to answer your question, because nobody has ever asked me before. I’ve never thought about it.”

Nelson shifted in his chair. The question obviously perplexed him. I decided to shift the focus as a means to buy Nelson and Antonio some time, “Well, what is to be Paraguayan?” In unison, they both laughed and quickly glanced at each other.

“That’s easy!” Antonio said. He rattled off a list: “Family oriented. Catholic. Loves soccer. Drinks tereré. Speaks Guaraní.” Nelson chimed in, “Likes [Paraguayan] polka!”

It was obvious their lists did not include indigenous or people of African descent. Benita assumed a seat on the patio with her daughter firmly planted on her lap. She listened intently as the conversation evolved. Anthony sat beside me, waiting for Nelson and Antonio’s responses.

Nelson, sobering up from his laughter, said, “Seriously, that’s a hard question because I’ve never had to provide an explanation. You can recognize when someone is of African descent by certain physical traits, right? I believe blacks are superior because of our strength. When I went through military training, I always felt different than the others. Compared to others, I did not struggle with any of the exercises. I could run faster and do more push ups and not feel tired. Everyone else seemed to struggle. I was physically stronger. But, I’ve always felt different and have been treated differently.”

Nelson’s biological superiority explanation drew from stereotypes that doubled as justification for why the harsh labor conditions on the plantation were more conducive to black slaves. The explanation did reveal a superficial reflection of what it means to identify as black in Paraguay. Yet I understood Nelson’s sincerity in acknowledging the deficiency in critically engaging with his definition of blackness.

Antonio interjected, “When I was younger, I use to play on the Olympic junior squad soccer team. I had to travel to Asunción. My family did not have a lot of money. I would travel to Asunción, get off the bus, and everyone would tease me because my uniform was dirty. I hated telling people I was from Emboscada. People automatically assumed everyone from here is a criminal because we have prison in Minas. I didn’t like travelling to Asunción.” He continued, “My father had to travel to Asunción to buy cement. People talked down to him; discriminated against him because he didn’t look like them. That traumatized him.” He paused and Nelson took over.

“Many of our elders have had similar experiences!” Nelson said. He said, “They never want to leave their familiar surroundings because of a fear of feeling

discrimination. You see...Lorenzo, I know we don't like to talk about things such as this...but I believe that a lot of elders need psychological help. Usually, people don't want to bring up mental health issues, but we need to address that trauma, right? They need to work through it so that they can feel proud of who they are!"

Antonio spoke up again, "You know what another thing that you can attribute to black folks? For example, I could pass by someone and you see that their house is visibly burning, you ask them how they are doing, and they respond with right thumb in the air, 'Al pelo [Everything is fine]!' (Nelson, laughed and shook his head in agreement)...How can you be fine if your house is burning? There's something deeply wrong with that...and we need to address that!" Nelson uttered through laughter, "I know, right?"

Benita interjects, "One day, our daughter came home from school saying that she wanted to be white. Her aunt asked her why she felt that way. She told her aunt the other kids at school were making fun of her because of her skin color and thick hair. She thought she was ugly. Her aunt told her that she is beautiful the way she is and should not want to be something else!"

A brief silence befell us. The reality: each one of us on the patio had similar stories, concealed in the deepest recesses of our memories that we could reflect upon. An encounter later on with Margarita, a young Afro-Emboscadeño woman with aspirations to be journalist, recounted a similar story: her classmates bullied and referred to her as *negrita*, leaving her to ponder her exclusion and possible desires to escape ostracism. Our color made us undesirable and that had a continuous traumatic effect. Nelson parted the silence, "We need to feel proud of who we are! I'm proud of the fact that I'm of African

descent. More and more of our youth identify as Afro-Paraguayans; and feel confident calling themselves that. I want my daughter to learn about her heritage. That's why I have a drum at the house so that she can learn a little bit about her culture. We need to know our history!"

Our conversation eventually ran its course. Antonio indicated his soccer game was commencing soon. Goodbyes were exchanged. Nelson accompanied Anthony and me on the route back to the highway. His house was along the way. When we came upon his house, we exchanged goodbyes with him. Anthony and I walked the remaining paces to the paved road. As we waited for the bus, we reflected on the conversation. Anthony wondered whether there was a way to involve Nelson more in the Red.

What lingered from the conversation was Nelson's positing the impact of anti-black racism on the mental health of black individuals. William E. Cross depicted five stages, referred to as the Theory of Nigrescence, for the evolution of black identity: *pre-encounter*, *encounter*, *immersion-emersion*, *internalization*, and *internalization-commitment*. The *pre-encounter* describes an old identity in a stage of deracination: the individual is unaware of racial differences and the ramification of those differences. The *encounter* dislodges the individual and exposes him or her to racialized perspectives.<sup>197</sup> *Immersion-emersion* involves the process of proving one's blackness to an eventual openness and critical analysis once the individual transitions from a self-involved exploration of blackness. *Internalization* signals an individual's comfort with his or her new black identity after dealing with anxiety with regard to one's blackness. *Internalization-commitment* involves the individual assuming the new identity, engaging



with other racialized identities, and promoting equality and justice for black communities.

Nelson's argument suggests the *encounter* gravely traumatized older Afro-Paraguayans. To the extent Afro-Paraguayans consumed with anxiety, regressed instead of progressing through the various stages of black identity development. Moreover, the *encounter* led to internalized notions of inferiority, fostering complicated mental health issues that persist without interruption. Because not every stage reaches completion, the comfort with the black identity or the commitment to promoting equality and justice for black community does not evolve. Consequently, preventing the formation of morally configured identities and communities.

### ***Moral Economy of Blackness?***

José Carlos requested that I meet him at Kambá Cuá's community center, which was a room on the second floor of the building. The center was located in Fernando de la Mora, right outside of Kambá Cuá's perimeter—that had been shortened over the years, but only several blocks from the main road that led to downtown Asunción. I arrived a little early to ensure punctuality. The building had an open concrete floor at the bottom that I assumed was used for local dance parties—a later meeting at that locale would confirm my assumption. On the other side of the opened floor, toward the back a little was a narrow staircase that led to the second floor. A few doors to rooms on the second floor were visible from where I stood, awaiting José Carlos' arrival.

After a short wait, José Carlos arrived in his car. As soon as he got out of his car, he yelled, “Hola, Lorenzo!” Then, he pulled a bag from the back of car. He gestured that we head upstairs. I followed behind him. Once up the stairs, he opened one of the doors. The room was a decent size with several desks, chairs, and a few computers. José Carlos explained the computers were donated and connected to the Internet; thus, if I should ever need a place to work, this locale presented an option. We positioned ourselves around a desk. José Carlos pulled out a notebook, a writing utensil, and drew three circles: “Lorenzo, as you know we formed the Red Paraguaya de Afrodescendientes shortly after you left. The members of the Red are Kambá Cuá, Kambá Kokué in Paraguari, and the group in Emboscada. The purpose of the Red was to unite the three communities first and eventually reach out to other potential communities: Areguá, Pirayú, and San Roque González. But, I wanted to strengthen the three communities first so that we could serve as a model to others on how to organize ourselves.”

José Carlos drew lines on the paper, connecting the circles. He continued, “Unfortunately, the Red is not functioning as it should.” Even though he attempted to put a positive spin on the situation, a sense of disappointment resonated in his voice: “For various reasons the Red is not functioning as it should. I’ve tried my best to hold it together, but it’s hard to reach each community on a regular basis to have constant communication. I have a job and familial obligations that prohibit me from going out to communities, as I would like to do. But, we need to find a way to get the Red functioning again.” By now, José Carlos was reinforcing the circles on the paper with the lines connecting them.

On a previous visit to Emboscada, Anthony and Antonio explained to me a conflict that occurred during Kambá Cuá's recent festival. José Carlos invited Antonio and the youth group from Emboscada to perform in the festival. The residents of Kambá Cuá protested their inclusion. The reason never seemed completely clear. Antonio repeatedly insisted he had no issues with Kambá Cuá, but they had an issue with him and his youth group's participation. Antonio speculated Kambá Cuá resented them because of a perception that the folks from Emboscada were stealing some of the spotlight. At the festival, José Carlos asked Anthony to speak the audience about the history of struggle in the United States and the importance of solidarity.

Another incident involved Emboscada and Kambá Kokué. There were plans to hold a festival in Paraguarí. The youth group from Emboscada was invited to participate, affording them an opportunity to exhibit their drumming and dance. The event was advertised via posters and local radio spots. Supposedly, people from Paraguarí complained to the mayor, stating they did not want thieves/troublemakers from Emboscada in their town. Thus, the youth group was disinvited. Anthony and Carl, another black Peace Corps volunteer who resided in Kambá Kokué, went to the mayor to ascertain the reason for the decision. The mayor claimed no responsibility for the decision. Adding further agitation to the situation, one of Kambá Kokué's leaders, Francisco, was a politician in the municipality. He did not contest the decision.

There were, however, deeper problems within Kambá Kokué, particularly involving Francisco. José Carlos cultivated a relationship with a young woman who eventually was in charge of the youth group in Kambá Kokué. He believed the young

woman represented a future leader that needed some mentoring: she was well connected within the community and the youth naturally followed her. Francisco, known as King Kong due to his physique, accused José Carlos and the young woman of breaking protocol (Francisco's approval was not obtained beforehand), which essentially meant he felt excluded. Granted, Francisco did not have the availability to devote to the youth. Yet Francisco employed his power of influence within the community. Francisco, essentially, disbanded the youth group, inciting confusion among the youth and the young woman. A community meeting occurred to clear the air. José Carlos attended. Francisco expressed feelings of exclusion. To appease Francisco the young woman begrudgingly renounced her position as leader of the youth group. The meeting, however, signaled a strained relationship between Francisco and José Carlos. According to Walter and Anthony, the Red had not returned to Paraguari for over a year and cultural activities for youth ceased.

This background served as the source for José Carlos' frustration. He wanted to salvage the Red. José Carlos believed his vision could still be realized. Thus, he asked, "Lorenzo, I could use your help to revitalize the Red." I appreciated the display of faith, but the task felt insurmountable with the potential time constraint that was in place. The conversation shifted streams. José Carlos spoke of his uncle who had served as leader for Kambá Cuá for years: "My uncle and I don't always agree. It doesn't matter if he gets mad with me. My goal is to better our communities. It's not about him or me. For example, Maria is in charge of the orchestra group. Right now, she has it as Maria and the Kambá Cuá Orchestra. That's not right. It should be the Kambá Cuá Orchestra. It's about the community rather than individual recognition."

I understood José Carlos' devotion to the ideals of community. Despite opposition from within his community, there existed a desire to bridge the communication among Afro-Paraguayans—essentially, building a strong network. Through their travels, Walter and Anthony encountered progressively minded individuals of African descent that could assist José Carlos with the development of a network. During another informal gathering outside of Kambá Cuá's community center, I broached the subject with José Carlos.

"I have a question for you," I started. "Are you open to working with people outside of the Red to form a network of individuals to develop and implement an agenda for Afro-Paraguayans? The reason why I ask is because Walter and Anthony have met some people that may be beneficial to you and your efforts." José Carlos seated to my left responded emphatically, "I'm willing to work with anybody! But, let me tell you something. I invited Margarita [the young, black aspiring journalist from Emboscada] to attend a meeting with me in Kambá Cuá. I thought everything was fine. She was there to collaborate with us. Later on, I find out my community is angry with me because I brought her with me." I interjected, "Seriously?" He quickly responded, "Yes. I could not believe it. They told me not to bring her back. Those meetings are reserved for members of Kambá Cuá only. I don't believe in that. We need to be inclusive if we are going to move forward." Now standing, he continued, "If you have a list of people who you think may be helpful, give it to me and speak to them! I'm willing to work with anyone."

José Carlos turned to walk to his car to retrieve an item. I turned to Anthony, who was to my right. "I guess...there's your answer," I said. Anthony responded, "Yep! I

didn't know about the situation with Margarita.” “It's a shame it went down like that. But, I suggest you give him your list of folks. He sounded genuinely interested,” I stated.

Although José Carlos was genuinely interested in collaborating with any individual devoted to advancing Afro-Paraguayan communities, an integral problem persisted: overcoming the territorial nature of these communities. The various Afro-Paraguayan communities function as closed entities, hindering the development of a collective identity that fosters solidarity. In other words, a moral economy of blackness seems to be absent.

In general, moral economies illustrate communal normative values that consist of equity, solidarity, sufficiency, and sustainability. These economies exist without knowing: communities do not realize that they have a moral economy until social and economic injustices threaten traditional communal values.<sup>198</sup> Within the confines of this dissertation, social and economic injustices refer to systematic anti-black racism that serve as cultural resources from which black identities are constructed and thus radicalize the moral economy, inciting organized resistance to white supremacy. Even though the literature on moral economies recognizes the potential dangers of the market on the community, it does not adequately address the limitations of solidarity with regards to the intersection of race, class, and gender.

A moral economy (emphasis on “moral” here) is that it is a set of constituted ethical behaviors that the community negotiates and accepts. It is not a utopia but it is predicated on compassion and understanding and achieves social discipline through a developed sense of autonomy, negotiation and compassion, and individuals take

responsibility.<sup>199</sup> Within a moral economy (emphasis on “economy” here), economic (I would add political also) relations and activity demonstrate certain norms such as rights, responsibilities, appropriate (I add here communal) behavior, and trust.<sup>200</sup> According to Christopher Lind, the basic principles of the moral economy are sufficiency (having enough to eat and resources to participate meaningfully in life), sustainability, equity (fairness in the distribution of resources), and solidarity.<sup>201</sup> Based on Lind’s use of “sufficiency,” we should note that “economy” for him as well as for E.P. Thompson<sup>202</sup> and James C. Scott<sup>203</sup> means subsistence. The implication of subsistence is that the community does enough to survive, minimizes economic risks, and does not generate a surplus that could lead to eventual communal wealth.

As Thompson and Scott posit, poor communities summon their moral economies in response to an attack on their customary rights.<sup>204</sup> Social injustice reinforces the moral economy and incites organized resistance. Building upon Thompson, Charles Price racializes and includes religion in the discussion of the moral economy. Price’s discussion of Rastafarians in Jamaica illustrate that the experience of racism, marginalization, dashed hopes, histories of uprisings, and so forth create cultural resources that black identities are drawn from and radicalize the moral economy.<sup>205</sup> Price posits that a racialized set of themes and values, called *justice motifs*, such as truth, righteousness, freedom, liberation, autonomy, and self-reliance inform a moral economy of blackness that provide the vehicle “to articulate grievances and alternate visions of their world.”<sup>206</sup> Furthermore, the moral economy of blackness moves “toward

radicalized and valued ways of life that include ideas about social welfare, tradition, community, and identity.”<sup>207</sup>

The process of becoming Rastafari involves “linking an acute awareness of oppression, a recognition of being a member of a maligned group, a realization that there exists a long-standing tradition of positive understandings of Blackness, an awareness that one’s cultural heritage has been hidden, and an insight into how White cultural hegemony had distorted one’s earlier understandings.”<sup>208</sup> Price provides this understanding with regard to Rastafari: religion serves as the foundation of the moral economy of blackness. Rastafari draw their set of convictions from religion, serving as a basis for contesting white supremacy.

In comparison to the Rastafari, Afro-Paraguayans in their various communities celebrate the designated patron saint. Kambá Cuá and Kambá Kokué have chosen black saints as representation for their respective communities. Afro-Paraguayans, however, practice Catholicism. Rastafari operates outside of and in contestation to the principles of the dominant culture’s religions whereas Afro-Paraguayans operate inside the dominant culture’s religious framework. Thus, black identity formation is not drawn from distinct religious practices. This is not to omit the possibility that Afro-Paraguayans have appropriated specific Catholic principles and radicalized them to establish a working black morality. But, I recognize Afro-Paraguayans’ understanding of social justice stem solely from sentiments of experiences of exclusion rather than experiences combined with a distinct religion that challenges white hegemony.



Setting aside religion, the idea of a moral economy of blackness falls apart for the following reason. Afro-Paraguayans are not yet devoted to a collective community that examines the various ways in which forms of discrimination operate and oppress people of African descent. Therefore, there is an issue with fidelity. Within the various communities, discussions around feelings of exclusion occur, but those discussions have not extended to a larger discussion—including the differing forms of black identity construction in Paraguay. Consequently, it is hard to imagine a strong political mobilization against anti-blackness unless Afro-Paraguayans go beyond rigid, territorial identities.

\* \* \*

It was late; but barely lit streets made it seem later than it actually was. José Carlos invited me over to hang for a bit. I stood outside his gate, clapping my hands over his barking dog. A door opened and he emerged, “Hola, Lorenzo!” I returned his reply. He unlocked the gate and gestured for me to pass through. Once inside the house, he pulled a seat from the table for me to sit on. José Carlos re-established his position on the couch in front of the small television, propped on a table. He was watching the news. José Carlos’ body language—posture slumped, foot rested on the coffee table before him, and right arm extended over his head with his hand playing with his left earlobe—revealed all the markers of a long, tiring day. I broke the silence, “Tired?” “Yes!” José Carlos replied.

We drifted in and out of streams of words. When we were not speaking, the chattering commentary emitted from the television supplanted our silence. José Carlos sat more attentive and said, “Lorenzo, I was walking with my cousin through the neighborhood the other night. He was carrying his drum. My father-in-law went to the church shortly thereafter. An older lady, one of my neighbors, told my father-in-law to be careful because there were thieves walking through the neighborhood with something suspicious. She was referring to my cousin and myself,” José Carlos said. He managed a sarcastic smile. I shook my head. “In my own neighborhood I’m a thief!”

He eased back on the sofa. A few minutes passed. José Carlos became animated once more: “You know, there was a convening for youth in the interior. We paid for two youth, Anna and Rico, from Emboscada to attend.” “Yeah, I know who you are talking about. I remember them when they were kids,” I told him. “Well, they went down there,” he continued, “and Rico told some guys he was Afro-Paraguayan and felt discriminated against because of his African ancestry. The guys told Rico there was no discrimination. Instead of standing his ground, he allowed the guys to persuade him. But, Anna stood her ground and gave a presentation about Afro-Paraguayans at the convening.”

Anthony told me about this event earlier; I, however, did not want to interrupt José Carlos’ retelling of what occurred with Rico. He explained, “I was told what happened when they returned. We had to sit him down and explain to him there was nothing to be ashamed of...he was of African descent, he should be proud of that fact, and should not allow someone to influence him!” According to Anthony, the experience altered Rico’s reality. After the experience at youth convening, Rico participated in a *Che*

*Kambá!* [I'm Black] campaign as preparation for the 2012 census that included a question that asked whether someone was of African descent. Anthony further told me Rico, who had developed a passion for hip hop music, wrote a rap about what it meant to be Afro-Paraguayan. The rap professed his sense of pride in his heritage.

“Years ago, the government commissioned a group of experts to study whether discriminatory practices existed here in Paraguay,” José Carlos stated. “I can’t remember for how long they conducted their study, but supposedly the study was quite extensive. I attended the meeting where they revealed their results. They concluded there was no discrimination. I sat there in disbelief. These were experts! I could not understand how they concluded there was no discrimination, and everything was fine. It angered me. It’s difficult making people see that discrimination exists here.” As José Carlos made that last statement, he reassumed the original posture he had on the couch shortly after I arrived.

Our conversation paused momentarily. We both fixated our eyes on the television. I half-heartedly paid attention to the news report. Rather, I reflected on José Carlos’ comments thus far. He interrupted our silence: “You know our community [*Kambá Cuá*] used to be bigger than it is now. Outside people are moving into the area. As you may remember, we practice our drumming on a regular basis. A gentleman, who lives near where Linda used to live, complained about the drumming. He said the drumming was too loud even though practice occurred during a reasonable hour. Lorenzo, how are we suppose to live?!” José Carlos was not looking for a response and I was not offering one except for a nod acknowledging his concern. “It’s part of who we are,” he asserted. “If we are not able to practice who we are, what will happen to us? We need to be able to do

the things that are a part of our culture! Man, it's difficult." In hindsight, his comments were reminiscent of Spike Lee's 'so called rant'<sup>209</sup> on the impact of gentrification of Brooklyn. Kambá Cuá's surrounding area had changed drastically. Across from Kambá Cuá, the university expanded, which seemed to draw more people to the area that Kambá Cuá once occupied. Gentrification disrupts and eventually erases the preexisting culture, which José Carlos feared would eventually occur to Kambá Cuá.

"I heard you are thinking about stepping down as the leader of the Red, is it true?" I asked. "Yeah, I think it's time for someone else to lead," he said. "I've been it for a while. I never wanted to be in charge this long. I wanted to rotate leadership among the communities; but no one was ready to take over. That's why I have been working with Antonio to prepare to take my place. Obviously, I'll still be involved but not to the level I have been."

José Carlos' statement concerned me. Antonio had grown significantly in his thinking since we worked together years ago. I believe, however, Antonio did not possess the political know-how José Carlos did. He spent several years working for the government. His experience exposed him to the inner-workings of the bureaucracy and, thus, developed acumen to navigate potential pitfalls. But, I kept my feelings about the potential change to the Red's leadership to myself.

"I believe it's time," he continued. "And, Antonio, I believe is ready. Besides, I've been thinking about devoting my time to other things." "Like what?" I asked. "I've thought about writing a book. A book about my experiences." "That would be good," I said. "We need stories such as yours out there."

“Yeah, I know,” he replied. “I’m hoping someone will take over soon so I can devote some time to it. If no one is ready to step-up, I will continue to serve as head of the Red to continue to move forward.”

Another minor lull ensued. I sat quietly. I started to feel uneasy in the chair. I assumed José Carlos was tired and I did not want to overstay my welcome. Thus, I thought of how to exit the conversation. José Carlos disrupted the lull. He reached for a folder on the table and pulled out a pamphlet. The pamphlet had a yellowish color with two black girls, roughly five or six, on the cover. José Carlos passed the pamphlet to me. I observed the pictures and read the cover. A section of the Paraguayan government had produced the pamphlet. The picture of the two black girls felt out of place. The girls had darker skin with pigtails, resembling the stereotypical image of African youth, usually, plastered on an UNICEF brochure. The whole pamphlet just seemed odd.

José Carlos seemed displeased. “Lorenzo, this is the material they gave us to promote the [2012] census. Look at the picture. They couldn’t have taken a picture of Afro-Paraguayans and put it on the brochure?! They have no understanding of what we are like!” I bemusedly asked, “Where did they get the picture from?” José Carlos responded, “I don’t know. But, it doesn’t make sense. Paraguay has communities of Afro-Paraguayans; but they rather have a picture of foreigners on the cover. That’s incredible! Man, this is difficult.” I quickly perused the rest of the pamphlet and returned it to him. He returned the pamphlet to his folder, and slid back on his couch. José Carlos seemed exhausted from his frustration. Thus, I informed him of my imminent departure and inquired about our next encounter.

Satisfied with a tentative date for our next conversation, José Carlos accompanied me to the gate. The night appeared exceptionally dark. I departed José Carlos' house in a quickened pace. I was tired also and did not want to belabor the walk to my rented room any more than necessary. I crossed the main highway. The rented room was only a few minutes from the road. As I navigated the dark pathway, I attempted to process the conversation with José Carlos. I was sympathetic to his concerns. Those concerns emerged due to insecurities surrounding black identity formation among the youth and adults while simultaneously dealing with a racially ambivalent state, claiming nonexistent racism or discrimination. Thus, José Carlos had a significant challenge: fostering solidarity among Afro-Paraguayans to reify and reinforce black identities while developing collective political strategies to confront anti-black racism. He believed an influx of black individuals from other countries could assist him in addressing the challenge. But, did other Afro-Paraguayans entertain the same logic?

### ***Obamanos***

"I could visibly see people of African descent. The first guy I met on the street...my community contact introduced me to him...and he said, 'You look like Obama!' I said, 'Oh, ok.' Then, he said, 'Well around here we are all Obama!' I thought that was very beautiful. It was touching. It was a lot different. The stereotypes I'd heard about people of African descent in my training community [Villeta]...even from my

training family...always having to fight over dinner about some off-hand remark,” Anthony recounted.

I invited Anthony to discuss his experience working with Afro-Paraguayans, particularly the Red. I was renting a small, enclosed quarter with a private entrance in San Lorenzo. Although small, the accommodations housed a refrigerator, twin bed, little table, and a cramped bathroom with a showerhead practically hanging over the toilet. Nevertheless, Anthony and I crammed into the space around the table to delve into themes, ranging from black consciousness to a lack of Afro diasporic connection and fidelity among Afro-Paraguyan communities.

“I expected them to be more advanced in their consciousness. One of the first things I did...it was the second day I arrived to my site...I went to an African dance practice and it was amazing. I loved it. It was very touching. And then, I started to notice outside of African dance...nothing else was being done...nothing else was being addressed. Someone can do African dance and not necessarily have pride in being of African descent. African dance was separate from an African Identity,” Anthony stated. I asked, “So there was not an internalization of what the dance meant?” “No! I saw the dance group from Kambá Cuá...and Emboscada saw that Kambá Cuá was successful with its African dance...so they were doing it in Emboscada. And, it had no connection to the African continent. It did foment or express itself in the view of: we are African people, so we are doing what our African ancestors did. We are Paraguayans...yes, we are Afro-Paraguayans who do African dance.

I want to also touch on something. I don't think they really consider themselves Afro-Paraguayans unless you badger them on it. For them, they are *pardos libres*. They are descendants of free brown people, which is something they only know. Because outside of Emboscada, even with other Afro-Paraguayans, nobody can really define what a *pardo* is," Anthony explained. I pressed further, "How do they [Emboscadeños] define *pardo*?" "Descendants of black slaves that mixed with the Spanish people to create brown, Anthony answered.

"Well do they make the connection that they are descendants of African people?" I asked. "No," Anthony continued, "I think the people in charge [of the Red]...yes...but the young people, the people carrying out projects, or living the daily life as someone in Paraguay who looks different because of darker skin, curlier hair, and different features...no. That was very troubling for me because I do. I come from a country [United States] where, historically, it culminated into people of many different colors and looks identifying as black and a piece of the African diaspora. And, I think the concept of the African diaspora is not present in Paraguay," Anthony posited.

"Do you think it's present with the leaders of Kambá Cuá?" I asked. "Yes, with some...very few. I think people are rigidly representatives of their respective communities. Someone from Kambá Cuá will trace it back to the black soldiers from Uruguay, and that's where, in my opinion, it stops. In Emboscada, they trace it back to the black slaves or black soldiers that were guarding the capital. With Kambá Kokué, it was the slaves that the Jesuits had. But, outside of this, as far as going back to the African continent, it doesn't go that far...I've heard them speak of *macumba*.<sup>210</sup> I haven't found



anyone who practices it. And, for them it's just for putting spells on someone. It isn't a system of beliefs. It isn't a religion," Anthony stated.

"For you, there's definitely a disconnect in the identity?" I asked. "Yes," Anthony replied. "And I don't think all their problems will be solved if they were to say they are a piece of the African puzzle...but the disconnect really shows within the communities. Everyone is very much a part of his or her own community. They are rigidly from Kambá Cuá, Embosada, or Kambá Kokué and that's it! Because they can't unify on anything, they can't see themselves as part of the larger picture. For instance, if someone is speaking badly of Brazilians, they are speaking badly about me," Anthony explicated.

I interjected, "What about Kambá Kokué? The Jesuits did not maintain any of the African traditions from the slaves?" "I think the closest thing is their Virgen del Rosario. It is also the patron saint of Pirayú, a city that also had a history of African slaves. Till this day in Pirayú, there are *afrodescendientes*: some of them identify and some don't. It is also the patron saint of *barrio*...what is known colloquially in Tabapy as Brazil-i. The *barrio* with the highest concentration of people of African descent is in the city of Tabapy. The Virgen del Rosario is the patron saint for many people of African descent throughout Latin America. So, that's what I would say is the closet thing. Outside of that...even in Paraguari...there are no foods they can point to and say this is an Afro-Paraguayan food, whereas as in Kambá Cuá and Emboscada there's something they can say is of the African tradition. In Paraguari, I don't see that," Anthony stated.

"Well after participating in some of the activities for some time now, how are you feeling?" I asked. Anthony paused briefly "Scared! I'm really scared because I want it

[the Red] to work. I'm putting a lot of pressure on myself to make this work. Because I feel I'm invested in it as a person of African descent working with other people of African descent. And, something I noticed later on is they weren't putting that pressure on me because they didn't view me as the long lost brother like I viewed myself. One of the first projects I threw out there was to do something that celebrated African and Afro-Paraguayans. I suggested we could make Ao Po'i shirts<sup>211</sup> with African colors. They looked at me as if I suggested we eat rocks. That showed me it's not what I think it is. After my first year, a series of events showed me that they are Paraguayan first. I never thought in a city where people were darker than me would call me Brazilian or Puerto Rican.

So, I got to my site [Emboscada] in 2010. Shortly after, the World Cup began. I will never forget there was a match between Tunisia and the United States. We were watching at the municipality. I told everyone I was going for Tunisia. Everyone asked, why? I was like...it's Africa. Whatever team has the most black people, I'll go for that team. I told them that's my rule. In my opinion, they never heard of anyone say it along those lines. To them it was unpatriotic. But, for me, it was very patriotic because I was speaking as person who considers himself black first, and whatever my nationality is, second," Anthony recounted.

The conversation with Anthony pivoted toward a discussion about the Asociación Afro descendientes de Emboscada. The question centered on whether the Asociación had considered activities outside of cultural reproduction that focused on material well-being or civil rights. Anthony revealed the group had occasional

discussions regarding college scholarships, parochial training, and health issues that arise from working in quarries without proper protection. Those conversations had not transformed into an actionable plan. Instead, the group considered the addition of dancers, the use of drums, and invitation to more venues to perform routines as progress. The connection between anti-black racism and the lack of rights and access to material well-being had not been broached.

According to Anthony, a source of consternation was with the territorial nature of the Asociación. Most of the youth members of the Asociación come from a particular *barrio* in Emboscada. Consequently, Afro-Emboscadeño youth from other *barrios* encountered resistance to their involvement due to their perception as outsiders. Anthony relayed two examples. One example involved a young woman suggesting to the group to explore language, religion, and traditions of Africa. The group, however, was neither receptive to the young woman or her ideas about connecting to their African roots. Another example, a young man desired to utilize hip hop to contemporize the group's performances. Similar to the young woman's experience, the young man's resulted in the same resistance. In both cases, reduced to *outsiders*, the young woman and man ceased participation in a group, supposedly, designated as a support group for *all afrodescendientes*. Anthony's examples further reiterated a lack of fidelity among Afro-Paraguayans. Additionally, the members' nonexistent desire to learn about their roots reinforces the idea of severed connection to the African diaspora.

The conversation with Anthony shifted. "I recall on the bus," I began, "you were explaining to me how José Carlos defined who was an Afro descendent. You said it was

troubling for you.” “Yes,” Anthony replied. I continued, “Let’s discuss that. José Carlos claims anybody who shares an experience...he’s not talking biological...does the practice...the cultural things...” Anthony interjected, “Lives in a [Afro-Paraguayan] community.” I chimed in, “They embrace...” Anthony interjected again, “They auto-identify...then they are Afro-Paraguayan.” “I remember you had an issue with José Carlos’ definition...what was the issue?” I asked. “I would feel uncomfortable applying that to any struggle I empathize with or celebrating. And, I immediately thought about the gay struggle in the United States. I love the fruits of it...the positive things that came from it. I love the expressions of the culture, and I feel for them; but could never identify as gay. That’s how I reacted. That’s what it [José Carlos’ definition] made me think of,” Anthony explained.

“So, blood makes an Afro-Paraguayan?” I asked. “Yes,” Anthony stated. He continued, “I would say...yes...but if they don’t identify...I’m not trying to force them too. It’s probably not even at that point yet.”

Edmund T. Gordon and Mark Anderson argument supports José Carlos’ definition of blackness in Paraguay. Essentialized notions of blackness that evoke the “one-drop rule” (an individual is black due to having a drop of black blood) inadequately illustrate black identity formation in the African diaspora. Gordon and Anderson posit an individual can claim blackness if he or she identifies with blackness and the struggle and shares common experiences.<sup>212</sup> In his essay, *What is Negritude to Me*, Aimé Césaire explains negritude is not of a biological nature rather “it obviously refers to something deeper, more precisely, to a sum of lived experiences which have defined and

characterized one of the forms of human condition made by history. Its common denominator is not skin color as such but the fact that we all belong in one way or another to a people who has suffered and continues to suffer, a people who is marginalized and oppressed.”<sup>213</sup>

Gordon and Anderson, Césaire, and Carlos’ argument theorize blackness as a fluid identity that certain individuals could assume if they exhibit specific characteristics. Those characteristics illustrate a greater understanding of black identity. Conversely, Anthony disagreed with blackness occupying a fluid status. According to Anthony, nonblack individuals cannot assume blackness. Their experiences do not contend with a state of anti-blackness, essentially death. Therefore, blackness is not fluid.

The conversation with Anthony spurred some other thoughts. Afro-Paraguayans perceive Obama, a half-white and half-black Kenyan, as a reflection of their identity as *pardos*. Again, *pardo* is a *brown* person: the result of a union between African slaves and Spanish colonizers. But, Obama represents more. As I have argued in this chapter, severing the connection to Africa has turned black bodies into descendants of Toby rather Kunta. And, as a descendent of Toby, Obama signifies a *hybrid* figure that has transcended racialized hierarchies. Therefore, Obama represents *the dream* that Afro-Paraguayans aspire to accomplish in Paraguay. Additionally, Obama’s presidency signified opportunities. I recall José Carlos sent an email immediately after Obama won his first term in office expressing hope because it potentially represented a change that could benefit people of African descent by disrupting white supremacy. Obama

presidency, however, had the opposite effect: white supremacy staunchly dug its heels in and responded with a surge of white anger.

Anthony's disappointment, however, stuck with me the most. Walter Rodney<sup>214</sup> and Keisha-Khan Y. Perry<sup>215</sup> discuss "groundings," fostering solidarity among those invested in a commonality that define roles and ideology in struggles for black liberation. Anthony's experience illuminates a *disjointed grounding*. Afro-Paraguayans did not see him as the long lost brother, but as a stranger. The stranger represents the difficulties in developing transnational, black liberatory mobilization. In general, Afro-Paraguayans have not consciously identified themselves as participants in a larger diasporic struggle for freedom, which reflected in Anthony's experience working with Afro-Paraguayans. I empathized with Anthony. I knew the sentiment all too well due to my time in Paraguay. Yet my experience differed from that of Anthony's. I experienced frontal rejection and endured the brunt of Paraguay's anti-black racism.

## ***Conclusion***

Two concurrent themes are central to this chapter. The first theme disrupts the notion of "grounding": finding commonality among black individuals throughout the diaspora. The lasting impact of the colonization of black bodies has been the severing of the connection to Africa, creating strangers. Hence, occupying the space as a stranger, made it difficult to forge an Afro diasporic link with Afro-Paraguayans that developed an understanding of solidarity, struggle for liberation, and resistance to white supremacy.

The second theme revolves around the notion of the lack fidelity among Afro-Paraguayans, impeding the possibility of forming a collective identity. Afro-Paraguayans will need to unify and evolve a black consciousness to eventually challenge, politically, the state. Without a collective identity Afro-Paraguayan political mobilization will most likely fail to advance the discussion of socioeconomic progress.

The subsequent chapter returns to this notion of the stranger. I recount my experiences in Paraguay and the encounters with anti-black discrimination. The personalized account further illuminates how racism occurs in Paraguay and the disjointed solidarity with Afro-Paraguayan communities.

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<sup>195</sup> In Chapter 120, Haley describes the research process that sustains *Roots*. See: (Haley 2007)

<sup>196</sup> (Hartman 2008): p. 6

<sup>197</sup> In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon states the *encounter* transforms a normal black child, having grown up in a normal family, into abnormal being once he or she comes into contact with the white world. See: (Fanon 2008): p. 122

<sup>198</sup> E.P. Thompson discusses the food riot in eighteenth-century England. Thompson states beliefs in defending traditional rights or customs and wider communal support legitimized the crowd's action, overriding motives of fear and deference. See: (Thompson 1971)

<sup>199</sup> (Powelson 2000)

<sup>200</sup> (Sayer 2006)

<sup>201</sup> (Lind 2011)

<sup>202</sup> (Thompson 1971)

<sup>203</sup> (Scott 1977); (Scott 1987a)

<sup>204</sup> (Lind 2011)

<sup>205</sup> (Price 2009)

<sup>206</sup> (Price 2009): pp. 20-21

<sup>207</sup> (Price 2009): p. 27

<sup>208</sup> (Price 2009): pp. 123-124

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<sup>209</sup> During a lecture at Pratt Institute in 2014, an audience member asked Spike Lee about the “other side” of gentrification. Lee passionately spoke about the impact of gentrification on Brooklyn. The media reduced Lee’s response to a mere rant. See: <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2014/02/spike-lee-amazing-rant-against-gentrification.html>

<sup>210</sup> A religion of African origin syncretizes European culture, Brazilian spiritualism, and Catholicism. See: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Macumba>

<sup>211</sup> The short-sleeved tunic is a traditional Paraguayan garment.

<sup>212</sup> (Gordon and Anderson 1999)

<sup>213</sup> (Césaire 1995): p. 13

<sup>214</sup> (Rodney 1986)

<sup>215</sup> (Perry 2009)



#### *Chapter IV: The Assassination of Lorenzo*

For some reason bus rides have a calming effect on me. I am not sure why. Probably, it is the disparate noises from mundane human interactions on and off the bus, strained gears shifting, wind howling as the bus pierces the air with ferocity, seats that creak as the bus passes over the most subtle craters in the road, windows that go up and down as passengers seek reprieve from either the various odors or to circulate air on an un-air conditioned rolling missile, people's laughter derived from contrived humor in an unapologetic oppressive world, coins that rattle in the driver's hand as he counts his change that eventually clank into a temporary holder, nasally sounding languages that periodically shift between the tongue of the colonized and the colonizer, breathes that have failed confrontations with the vicious and unrelenting heat, the occasional high-pitched kid's voice that seeks takers for certain items from the little box of candy and gum, and the thud from the bag of produce or various transportable items that hit the wooden or metal floor all converge into an organic, intentional, well-timed, harmonious symphony. Oddly, the power of this symphony is that it soothes, induces a trance-like state—I am able to, albeit briefly, spiritually center myself and reflect on daily mechanisms I used to survive yet another day—thus, avoiding annihilation.<sup>216</sup>

Today, however, the symphony struggled to emerge. Everything was a cacophony, resembling the unpleasantness of an orchestra's warm-up session before the conductor assembles and directs the sounds into unison. There was nothing unusual about

the bus ride. The same disparate noises occurred. But, I was different. Roughly seven years had passed since I had been to Emboscada, which was creating an internal conflict that I could not quell. Anxiety had reached beyond its boiling point, making that soothing, trance-like state unapproachable despite all attempts. I did not need to ask *why* I was feeling this way. I knew after the first time I left Paraguay back in August 2005. Honestly, I dreaded for years the prospects of having to return to the scene of the unwarranted assault on my identity. An assault that resulted in self-doubt, pain, fears, physical and mental exhaustion, hopelessness, (possibly) undiagnosed depression, mistrust of human decency, nihilism, hatred to rage!

It took years after my first departure from Paraguay to mask my anger. I had unjustly, silenced it. Friends, family, and strangers would make inquiries about my experience. To deal with those inquiries I enlisted a strategy of humor and quickly changed the conversation to avoid what seemed at times as an incredulous, sick joke. For those who pressed to gain superficial, insights, I became well versed in reticence—drudging up whatever few examples that I was willing to share from the tool kit—while simultaneously tempering the bubbling annoyance for individuals who were posing questions just to seem interested rather than wanting *to really know the truth*. The majority of the time I could not believe what transpired in Paraguay. And, I was ashamed of my experience because I could not speak glowingly of anything. Furthermore, I thought revealing the “real-*REAL*” would somehow perpetually mark me as mentally unstable or unable to reason with reality because this all happened in my head, *right? I must be mistaken?!*

As I sat in that hard-plastic seat, feeling each hiccup the tires made with each passing unpatched crater, I was recalling the odyssey that led to the thirst for my anger and anxiety around an inability to employ an effective coping mechanism to quench it. My first recollection was innocuous because it revealed what nonwhite bodies have known for centuries. In 2003, as a Peace Corps volunteer, I sat through a series of panels that involved current volunteers detailing their experiences in Paraguay. It would be an understatement to say that I did not look forward to these weekly meanderings into “this is me, and this is how I feel here.” Like clockwork, Wednesday arrived with the next group of panelists eager to divulge his or her status as the model volunteer—if they were not, then why would the powers that be ask them to speak to potential volunteers? This panel was comprised of volunteers that had elected and were selected to stay a third year. If we successfully completed the training, these were the individuals who would serve in an advisory capacity to us. Planted in a seat underneath a ceiling fan that thankfully speedily whirled air around us—it was another hot day in an un-air conditioned, squared room—I attempted to muster up some energy to half-heartedly listen.

Introductions started from my right to left. A young, white woman with reddish-blond hair introduced herself first. In the center of this panel, was Ron—one-half of the affectionately named the “odd couple.” Ron was a tall, slender but a little stocky, bald, boisterous, unfiltered white male from somewhere in the Midwest, I believe. Dressed in a beige linen shirt and khaki shorts, Ron had a one-gallon beverage cooler filled with water and ice in front of his chair. He prepped a guampa (a special rounded-out cup) filled with yerba (dried, processed leaves) to serve *tereré*. *Tereré*, a customary drink—especially for

hot days, is a cold bitter tea. Ron poured cold water into the guampa and passed it to the panelist farthest to his left first. That panelist sipped the yerba-water mixture through a bombilla (a metal straw). Once the water was sipped, the panelist passed the guampa back to Ron for him to refill it with water and pass to another panelist. The server is the last to drink. This process repeats until there is no more water left.

The introductions finally reached Jeff, the other half of the “odd couple.” Jeff was the antithesis of Ron. Jeff was shy and somewhat tactful, tall white male. But, Jeff and Ron were thick as thieves. Unlike previous panels, it was interesting watching the dynamics of Jeff and Ron’s relationship unfold before us. Ron would say whatever came to mind and Jeff would softly reel Ron in and carefully provide clarification to curb Ron’s statements—hence, the reason why they unapologetically wore the moniker, “the odd couple.” The panel was uneventful until Ron made one of his boldest statements, “White is gold down here!!” The crowds’ immediate reaction was an uneasy laughter. I felt some eyes look my direction to see my reaction. I was the only black in the room. I was indifferent. *What did Ron say that was incorrect?* I, however, quietly left the room because boredom was rearing its ugly head and I was increasingly combating discomfort from sitting in a seat with limited cushion for my behind. Unbeknownst to me, my attempt at a quiet exit unintentionally, I would find out later, resonated loudly with one of the panel participants: the white woman with the reddish-blond hair.

A week passed. I reached out via the phone to another black volunteer, Linda. I said, “Hey, how are you doing?” She responded, “Fine!” Even though we had only known each other for very short while, we quickly evolved into a brother-sister dynamic.

“Lawrence, I’ve been meaning to talk to you,” Linda said. “Oh, what’s up?” I hesitantly replied. “Well, I heard about the panel discussion you all had where one person said that white is gold here,” Linda stated. I laughed, “Yeah, that happened!” She asked, “Well, are you ok? I heard you got up and left after that comment was made.” I could hear in Linda’s voice the sincerity with which she posed her question indicating she was legitimately concerned about my well-being. I explained that I had left the room because of boredom; but, I was curious, “Linda, who told you about this?” She told me whom she spoke with. I confirmed, “Oh, her—the reddish-blond or whatever that is, girl?!” Linda replied, “Yes!” Then, Linda proceeded to explain, “Yeah, she called me and told me what happened. She thought the comment was fucked up and didn’t want you to think that’s how things are here. She was just concerned about how you took the comment because you had left the room.” My curiosity was really peaked, “Well, if she was so concerned, why didn’t she approach me after and ask me instead of pulling you into it?” Linda replied, “I guess she felt you would feel more comfortable talking to me!” “Why because you and I are both black and can ‘easily’ relate to each other—something along those lines, huh?” I quipped. Usually, when I encounter a situation such as this the explanation has been that *[white]* people, women in particular, are afraid to approach me: fear of the so-called angry black man. Linda laughed and said, “I told her you were alright but I just wanted to hear it from you!” I replied, “I’m fine, but I’m not sure what the big deal is...what did Ron say that wasn’t a reflection of the reality?” Linda concurred with my assessment. After a few more minutes of conversation, we hung up—leaving me to ponder the event that led to my interaction with Linda.

Probably, Ron's comments should have impacted me to a degree. His comments were not farfetched: society constantly ingrains in us the racial hierarchy, placing black bodies perpetually at the bottom of the well. In this world, whiteness remains a desired commodity. Paraguayans understand that. Past dictators enacted national projects that sought to whiten Paraguay's culture. Thus, white was and is gold. But, that did not trouble me as much as the following. I had become numb due to exhaustion. I wanted black liberation but the struggle had taken its toll. To the point that an unknown white woman had the capacity to experience anger over an inflammatory, one might say, but true statement whereas I could not even feel slight discomfort. Perhaps, the years have transformed me into a pessimist: black liberation is just a dream and nothing more.

The second recollection involved an encounter with a Paraguayan at a bodega a few blocks from a party I attended. Training had reached its conclusion: we were sworn in as volunteers, which provided grounds for a celebration. Ron and Jeff invited everyone to a house they were renting in one of the neighborhoods in Asunción. A few of us rode the bus together and walked the few blocks to the house. It was a small house, but adequate for two bachelors. As soon as we walked in I immediately saw that the living room had been cleared to provide a makeshift dance floor. Music was playing; however, no one was dancing. I guess the spirits had not taken full effect yet to induce awkward movements on the wood floors. Straight to the back was a kitchen on the left and, in the center, a door that led to the backyard. I made my way to the backyard, passing salutations along the way. Once in the backyard, there were more people engrossed in conversations. Immediately to the right was a grill where one volunteer was prepping to

grill chicken hearts. The backyard was a decent size; that plus the living room and kitchen area provided enough space to accommodate the traffic for that night.

As the night unfolded, I ran into a volunteer I had met previously. Sarah was going around collecting a crate and money to do a beer run at the local bodega. Previous encounters with her were cool. Sarah was part of the ‘welcome party’ that awaited our arrival outside the Asunción airport. After a few obnoxious encounters with other greeters, she approached me with a warm smile. Future conversations revealed that she proudly identified herself as white and Latina. Sarah spent some time in New York; thus, we had a similar connection to build on. Although I did not drink, I asked if I could accompany her on the run so she would have someone to help her carry the beer back. She gestured for me to go with her. Gabi, another newly minted Chicano volunteer from Chicago, came with us also because he wanted to grab a snack. On the walk to the bodega, we made small talk about what was next in the adventure. Nothing memorable, but it passed the time.

We reached the bodega. I immediately noticed the small-condensed space, which made the store feel cramped. The storeowner was to our left slightly behind the counter. He was a rounder, average height, burly, middle-aged gentleman. He had a lighter-brown skin tone with indigenous and European features. The storeowner wore a light, long sleeve shirt and shorts that appropriately reflected the climate: it was a gorgeous night with a slight breeze. A few feet from the entrance was another male who was having his own celebration of sorts—to put it lightly. Similar to the storeowner, his attire matched the night. He was shorter than the storeowner but had a muscular build with a darker skin

tone; and his features were more indigenous. He spoke loudly. Naturally, my usual city survival skills went into action: I listened to his ramblings just to rule him out as a potential threat. The shop owner occasionally, half-heartedly seemed to provide a mixture of verbal and non-verbal gestures to appease the gentleman's inebriated state.

As soon as we entered, I noticed Sarah skirted around the gentleman and made a beeline towards the coolers in the back of the store. Gabi and I followed suite. I provided her the crate as she quickly scanned and pulled the beverages she wanted to purchase. I believe she was on her third beer run for the night. Gabi briefly left our side to find a snack. Sarah filled up the crate with forty-ounce beers. I picked it up to head toward the register with her. She made it to the register but I did not. The inebriated gentleman had blocked my advancement. He scowled at me and began his inquisition. Meanwhile, the storeowner saw and verified how many beers were in the crate and completed the transaction with Sarah. Instead of assisting me to navigate the situation, Sarah and Gabi took the beer from my possession and exited the store. With my hands no longer occupied, the gentlemen forcibly took my hand and proceeded to educate me on how to properly greet, presumably, another Paraguayan male. After the demonstration, he did not relinquish his grip. Now, I was on edge and preparing myself mentally for an eventual showdown if his aggression did not lessen.

Unsatisfied with just the demonstration, he said at the top of his voice, "What are you? Brasileiro? Colombiano?..." He named whatever country, except for the United States, he could think of that someone of my darker skin tone could be from. Before I could mount an answer, he asked, "Can you speak Spanish? Say 'Si'! Count! Uno, dos,



tres, cuatro, cinco, seis!” He barked orders as if I were a child he needed to scold due to failing to properly learn rudimentary material. Increasingly annoyed with the accosting nature of this interaction, I tried to pull my hand away. He gripped harder. At this point, de-escalation seemed nowhere in sight. He continued to bark orders until the storeowner, realizing that he needed to take action, intervened to have the gentleman to release his grip on my hand. The storeowner placed one hand on the gentleman’s shoulder and another on top of our hands. He said, “Come on, let him go!” The gentleman, at first, did not want to let go. Therefore, the storeowner maneuvered his body in between us to break the undesired link. Once my hand was free, I hurried toward the exit. I made the left to head back to the house. I saw Gabi outside, waiting for me several feet from the store. The gentleman in the store went to the entrance and again yelled, “What are you? Colombiano?...” Gabi looked at me and said, “What’s his problem? What an asshole?!”

We made it back to the house. My heart was racing a little from the encounter and I was trying to calm down, but thankful the situation passed without major incident, which would have jeopardized my ability to be a volunteer even before it really commenced. Once at the house, I sought out Sarah to inquire as to why she left me there. I did not expect her or Gabi to intervene but rather to serve as witnesses in the event the situation escalated. We were repeatedly taught in training to support each other in threatening situations. She replied, “Well, I told you to come on!” and walked away. I returned to the backyard. Gabi told the other volunteers about what transpired. A white male volunteer approached me and said, “Hey, I heard what happened. I went into that store earlier and ran into that same guy. He was hugging me and kissing me on my neck.

You want to go back and get him?” I incredulously glanced at him and replied, “Naw, I’m good!” Hugs and kisses are a far cry from a threatening encounter.

I cannot fully explain *why*, but I hoped the encounter in the bodega was an aberration. No, I needed that experience to be an outlier. I desired to find a crevice in the world where I could exist, for once, freely without the daily reminders of my “otherness.” Past travelers painted Paraguay as a strange but friendly and happy<sup>217</sup> country. Although somewhat skeptical, I held onto a false sense of optimism that a strange country with a history of offering refuge to undesirables (i.e. former Nazi soldiers) could pose a similar option to me. Unfortunately, I was not the *right* kind of undesirable. Even though seemingly closed off from the rest of the world, Paraguay is no different: it operates in the same anti-black discriminatory practices that other nations perpetuate.

After a few months in country, I had an opportunity to spend more time with Linda. She was a black woman from the northeastern region of the United States. Linda had an average stature and wore her hair naturally. Her skin tone (mocha) resembled that of mine. I guess a colorist would probably argue a half-shade lighter than that of mine. Linda was very outspoken, which I greatly admired. The delivery of her speech—hurried, but stabbed with insightfulness—seemed comparable, I observed years later, to that of former MSNBC talk show host, Professor Melissa Harris-Perry. Moreover, Linda intrigued me on a couple of fronts: she lived in an Afro-Paraguayan community, Kambá Cuá, and worked with an Afro-Paraguayan youth group from that community. Through her I eventually developed a relationship with one of the youth group’s leader, José Carlos. Nevertheless, I greatly appreciated our gatherings because she along with another

black woman, Jasmine, offered me something invaluable that no one else could fathom: sisterly love with a side order of sanity!

One gathering in Asunción led Linda, Jasmine and me to Shopping Villa Mora's food court. Anyone was invited to tag along; but, we often preferred, at least I did, just us as to avoid mundane coded language that removed the rawness of our experiences, making it palatable to our white counterparts. Furthermore, I was tired of hearing, "Are you sure you're not being overly sensitive? Probably, they meant this...." Those conversations further marginalized my existence, forcing me to eventually silence my voice as an attempt to avoid the frustration. That day in the food court, however, left a lasting memory. I cannot remember how we arrived to the conversation—I believe Jasmine made reference to a previous conversation that she and Linda had had—Linda began to detail her experience in Paraguay to date. She was the most senior of us. At that point, Linda was in Paraguay for roughly a year and a half. I listened intently as she uncovered some of her lowest points in Paraguay.

The mood turned solemn. Linda explained, "I was on the bus one time and this woman just came up and spat on me!" Jasmine shook her head. I asked in disbelief, "Did you confront her?" Linda stated, "I didn't know what to do. I was in shock that someone could do that to me for no apparent reason!" She went on to explain that she spoke with other colleagues about the incident. One colleague, a white woman, inquired, "Well, what did you do? There has to be a reason for why she spat on you?!" Linda's colleague could not believe that a woman acted without provocation. We were all visibly disappointed with the colleague's reaction. Heinous acts inflicted on black bodies apparently are never

attributed to the nonblack aggressors; rather black bodies are the instigators and thus warrant such acts.

Although the incident occurred sometime ago, I still inquired about how Linda was coping. She reassured us that she was fine, but the incident took its toll. There was some back and forth amongst us. Linda revealed another experience. She was in a store shopping. A male in the store looked in her direction and eventually made his way toward her. Admittedly, I expected her to say the man accused her of stealing. Recently, in a store in Shopping Villa Mora, one of the store's employees followed me around the store. If I had slightly extended my elbow and quickly turned forty-five degrees, the young man would have been planted firmly on the ground: that was how closely he followed behind me. Linda, however, did not have the run of the mill story about someone suspecting her of stealing. Rather, the man assumed Linda was a prostitute and, thus, approached to proposition her.

Linda's stories would never leave me. I wondered whether any of the white women volunteers had been propositioned throughout their tenure in Paraguay. During a panel discussion I participated on later, one of the panelist, a brown-skinned woman from Hawaii, told an audience of new volunteers that a white woman expressed to her that she, because her whiteness made her supposedly highly visible in a mestizo culture, finally understood what it was like to be a non-white woman in the United States. This revelation came shortly after the panelist's husband recounted an experience in a cab where the driver told them they had the skin color of a terrorist. As an undergraduate, I experienced something similar with a white liberal woman's naiveté—to put it lightly.

Sitting on a bench located at the edge of the central square in Querétaro, Mexico, a friend—a slender, blond hair, blue eyed, relatively attractive woman—looked me square in the eyes with such genuine intent to express that her experience in Mexico gave her insights to what it meant to be black in America. Back then, I sacrificed reality to maintain a friendship, which I now believed was the similar move the panelist from Hawaii made to avoid destroying relations with a rare, so-called ally. There needed to be an intervention to disrupt this display of white privilege.

As the only black male in the room before a sea of white people, I felt ill-equipped to dismantle that privilege. Besides, my intervention would have fallen on deaf ears. If it were possible for white women to empathize with the experience of black or brown people, particularly that of black women, it would mean that white women were privy to dehumanizing experiences such as someone spitting on them, calling them ugly because of their darker skin, implying that they are a terrorist, propositioning them in store for sexual acts, or telling them that their relationship could only exist behind closed doors further hidden under the veil of dark nights while men claim during the day their desires for a blond hair, blue eyed white woman. This is not to imply that white women do not contend with an oppressive patriarchal society. Yet it is hard to swallow any claims of insights to the experience of the racialized other are easily obtainable as a foreigner in another country. Furthermore, conversations with and observations of Paraguayan males eviscerated any thoughts of a white woman as the *other*. On a bus ride once to Emboscada, a gentleman approached me to strike up a conversation. He asked where I was from to which I gladly responded. The gentleman further inquired if I were a

Peace Corps volunteer. I responded, yes, to his inquiry. Once the gentleman ascertained what I represented, he turned toward me with lit eyes and said, “The Peace Corps has a lot of *rubias*. I love the *rubias*! They are beautiful.” Literally, he seemed to be salivating thinking about those *rubias*. I guess my lack of shared enthusiasm for the *rubias* abruptly ended the conversation. Regardless, the gentleman’s statement was a reflection of a ubiquitous sentiment: white women were “gold” and many Paraguayans, men and women, revered them as such.

Here my recollections as Lawrence end and those as Lorenzo commence. Lorenzo was a conjured split personality. Yes, I chose the name due to its Spanish equivalency; ultimately, however, I had no control over shaping Lorenzo’s identity for society preordained it. Simply, I was forced to contemplate whether to embrace or reject Lorenzo. Lorenzo had none of the characteristics—loyal, hard working, intelligent, respectful, caring, etc.—that were instilled in me as a child and that I held dear in adulthood. Moreover, Lorenzo operated with a different nationality: Paraguayans automatically classified blacks as Brazilian.<sup>218</sup> The classification as Brazilian was coupled with stereotypes of blacks as unintelligent, criminals, stingy, violent, and so forth. Eventually, Lorenzo would assume an identity used to justify the shackles of black bodies: he was a descendant of the cursed; essentially, he was a child of the devil that needed to be removed.

There were many beautiful mornings filled with clear blue skies in Emboscada. Sometimes the sky exhibited various shades of reds and oranges as the sun crept its way to its fullest potential. Planted on a hardened dirt road (various roads throughout the area

were cobblestone but not this one), I often stopped to enjoy the vastness of the blue sky while the sounds of roosters episodically, overworked my eardrums. At times, early in the morning, there would be a slight breeze to enhance the pleasantness of the very brief moments. In the distance, I could faintly hear women busily preparing a meal for their families to consume to build up some energy to deal with the day. Mostly, the roads were vacant; but every once in a while there would be a passerby, accenting the air with an “Adios,” which would be met with an equal greeting from the women restricted to their respective spaces. Those transient morning moments were reserved to reflect on the wonderful design before me. More importantly, I could imagine *me* in a utopian world without limitations: the promise land that Baptist preachers always espoused if I dutifully gave my life to the Lord. Unfortunately, reality would rear its ugly head. My eyes would redirect themselves downward and an eerie feeling of black death would assume its regularly scheduled programming.

Plans were made with Clara, an elementary school teacher that I worked with, one particular morning to travel to Asunción. A week earlier, Clara approached me about the health of a young boy (probably about nine years old), who she described as sickly-looking with a baldhead, pale skin, and had a distant body odor. Obviously, I was approached because, presumably, I had the funds to cover the doctor’s examination. After a brief encounter with the child on the school’s grounds, I agreed to travel to Asunción with Clara, the boy, and his mother and to fund the examination. Clara lived a few blocks down from where I lived. Thus, we decided to meet at the intersection closest to me.

Clara was a short statured woman with more indigenous features than Spanish ones. Her short hair cut perfectly suited her round face. Clara often complained about her physical appearance—particularly her weight and teeth. She was in her mid-forties married to a man that I rarely saw around town. I gathered from my conversations with Clara that she was unhappy with the marriage and would divorce him if she could without experiencing the shaming of violating Catholic norms. Clara and I developed a working relationship that slowly transformed into a (at least I believed) friendship. When I arrived to Emboscada, she actively sought me out to ask for my assistance with her students, particularly in math. From there, we undertook other projects such as a summer camp. We worked well together and openly exchanged ideas.

Due to the projects we worked together, we naturally spent more time together to execute those projects to ensure success. I would later find out, however, there was a consequence for spending so much time together: other people in the town were gossiping that Clara and I were romantically involved and men were urging Clara's husband to fight me for disrespecting his marriage. That would not be the first or the last time I was linked to a romantic scandal. A brief encounter on the street with a high school teacher led to town gossip that her unborn baby was because of scandalous affair we supposedly had. I guess in the town's eyes, I was the *Magical Negro*. I must have been. That was the only feasible explanation. For I was still in New York City when she conceived the baby. But, I digress.

Clara and I exchanged customary greetings at the dirt intersection. We made small talk as we made our way to a canteen located on the right side of the road, just a



block away from the main highway where one could catch the bus to the capital. Clara wanted to grab some gum. I declined to enter the small space with Clara; besides, I was trying to inch out every bit of the pleasant weather before it turned hot. A gentleman exited as Clara entered. He glared in my direction and then approached me. He was a short stocky, indigenous man with a brimmed hat, short-sleeved shirt with the two top buttons undone, and cotton slacks. Occasionally, I saw this gentleman with a horse around the neighborhood. As he scowled at me, I extended my hand. He grabbed it and said abruptly, “Brasileiro?” I hoped this was not a repeat of the earlier encounter I mentioned previously. I said, “No!” Clara paid for her gum and exited the canteen. He turned toward her and repeated his question. Clara replied, “No. Americano!” The gentleman’s facial expression quickly changed from a glare to a welcoming half-cocked, smile once it was confirmed I was, in fact, not Brazilian. I pulled my hand away. He and Clara exchanged a few more words and we went our separate ways. My curiosity played the wicked guessing game: what would have happened if the answer to the question were, yes? Would the encounter have escalated to something else? What exactly do Paraguayans have against Afro-Brazilians? As soon as Clara and I met the young boy and his mother in the plaza, my thoughts quickly transitioned to the mission for that day. But, I could not shake the feeling that this was just the beginning of something.

As a volunteer, my primary assignment was to work in the Municipality of Emboscada. Through that assignment I befriended Mateo. Mateo was a contracted consultant with the nongovernmental organization, Chemonics. Mateo was a tall, chubby, passionate, kind man. I always counted on Mateo’s candor about his observations of the

inner workings of the municipality. If I needed to be hyper vigilant about something, Mateo would point to the issue, then take his right index finger and gently pull down his right lower eyelid, and say through a hushed voice, “Míralo [Watch it]!” That always indicated that Mateo found something unsettling and was thinking of how to address, if possible, the problem.

Mateo often mentioned a retreat, outside of Asunción, that he and his family along with invited guests escaped to during the summer to relax. Also, the retreat provided a pool for his children to cool off. Mateo invited myself and another volunteer, Elena, a white woman from the Midwest, to attend one weekend. Any chance to get away from Emboscada was welcomed. On the designated Saturday, I met Elena, and Tom—a white male volunteer who was visiting Elena that weekend, to make the bus trip to Mateo’s retreat. Tom and I made small talk to pass the time on the bus while Elena occasionally drifted in and out of sleep.

After a couple of hours of braving the heat while sitting on the bus, we got off and proceeded to walk the trail toward the house. Eventually, we made it to a two-storied white house that seemed somewhat out of place in comparison to what we observed on the trek. Mateo jovially greeted and expressed his gratitude to us for making the trip. We met his wife, children, and the other invited guest—other family members and a longtime friend. Mateo showed us around the grounds and explained that he was in the process of prepping the grill. He urged us to change into our swimsuits to take a dip in the pool to cool down from the walk. Elena jumped at the opportunity and went to the bathroom to

change. I did not have swim trunks and only planned to roll up my pants leg to dip my feet into the pool.

Tom, Elena, Mateo's niece, his two kids, and myself hung around the pool. There were no trees near the pool. Soon the sun was baking me. I made my way over to where the shade was. Mateo, his wife, and I struck up a quick conversation. I felt uncomfortable around Mateo's wife. Her responses were abrupt mixed in with quick glares. I would later over hear Mateo say, "He's not Elena!" to his wife. I presumed I did or represented something that disagreed with Mateo's wife. I was not sure, but Mateo's defense reassured me that underneath his reach I stood a chance of surviving the day.

The heat finally let up a little. Time was winding down and the return to Emboscada was imminent. Tom, Elena, and myself made our way to the house. A few feet from the house, we ran into one of Mateo's invited guests that arrived later. The guests acknowledged Tom and Elena's presence with a brief conversation. Not once did the guests look in my direction even though Tom, at one point, gestured in my direction: I was positioned immediately to Tom's right. Elena excused herself from the conversation to head into the house. Only Tom, a young gentleman, and myself were left from the original encounter. Tom continued the conversation with the young man for a little while longer. Defying my instincts, I stayed as an attempt to exact an acknowledgement from the young, more European-looking, gentleman. A few minutes passed. Tom indicated that he needed to use the restroom. The young man and Tom exchanged their final words. Tom left. The young man stood there for a brief second, still without a glance in my direction, and left without saying a word to me.

There were other experiences where a Paraguayan at least acknowledged my presence but made inquiries regarding me to the person who accompanied me. The presumption was that I could not speak the language, which in itself represented certain notions that black bodies did not have the intellectual capacity to communicate on a basic level. But, this was different. The young gentleman's actions reinforced who was desired and who was not. On the one hand, to be undesired was not new. The years have hardened sentiments of existing as an undesirable. On the other hand, blatant reminders of one's undesired state crack open festering soars that cannot fully harden despite the most arduous attempts. Even though I tried to resist the impulse, the young gentleman's denial of my presence stung. I had the whole bus ride back to Emboscada to meditate on the stinging feeling. I laid eyes on Tom and Elena as they freely slept the ride back to Emboscada. The day's activities privileged them, preserving their status. Yet I was left to wonder what was lurking around the corner.

To this day, I am unsure how it started: the demise of Lorenzo. A year was in the books. Here and there I encountered gossip that was too ridiculous to even engage. I laughed it off as people recounted to me the unbelievable tales of magical impregnations, home-wrecking, and countless sexual acts with young girls. But, unbeknownst to me, a storm was brewing and I was heading toward the heart of it. In hindsight, I believe what ignited the storm were two events. The first involved the theft of money. The curse,<sup>219</sup> a sanitary landfill project in Emboscada, had finally seen some movement after almost two years of idleness. The Peace Corps granted funds to build the landfill.

Following a much drawn out political battle between the mayor and the city council, we finally received approval to proceed with constructing the landfill. Plans were made for Pablo, the leader of the community organization in charge of collecting the trash, and myself to travel to Asunción to purchase the materials for construction. Pablo owned an older yellow car that he drove delicately. We met early in the morning to travel. Pablo and his wife owned the house I lived, which was located next to their house; therefore, I did not have far to go to meet Pablo. The day was scripted: travel to bank first to withdraw funds and then to a couple stores in the downtown area to order posts and wire for the electrical. The script, however, did not go as scheduled. Quite a bit of time was spent in the bank, withdrawing the funds. Due to the fact that most of the businesses closed for the day around noon, the time spent in the bank put us in jeopardy of making it downtown before the stores closed. Pablo claimed he was hungry after the bank run. Although I was hungry too, I reluctantly agreed to take some time to quickly eat across the street.

Time elapsed quickly. Unfortunately, not all of the purchases were made, which forced an uncomfortable decision. I needed to stay in Asunción to address a matter due to an upcoming trip back to the United States; and, I did not want to get on a bus with a bag full of money—potentially, risking the chance of someone attempting to steal the money. Thus, the presumably, less risky choice was to allow Pablo to transport the remaining money to Emboscada in his car. Pablo and I parted ways: my instincts were wrong that day. In hindsight, the riskier move would have been better.

Later that day, I received a phone call while on the bus. Lucia, who worked with another nonprofit organization assigned to the project, was on the other line, informing me of an incident: two individuals on bikes managed to force Pablo off the road, supposedly held him at gunpoint (Pablo told me later that one of gentleman held a knife to his side), and stole the money. My heart sank as Lucia apprised me of the situation. When I returned to Emboscada, a visibly shaken Pablo recounted the events. My daze worsened.

Eventually, rumors swirled surrounding who should be held responsible for the robbery: no one completely bought the sequence of events. The other co-leader of the community organization, Alberto, routinely stated, “Many times I have gone to the bank and brought money back to Emboscada and nothing like this has ever happened!” What made matters worse: Pablo acquired another car, increasing the perception that he was responsible. That prompted me to defend Pablo during a city council meeting. Probably, I should have scrutinized the situation more. Consider it naiveté: in my mind, it was impossible for Pablo to be a conspirator.

The storm eventually shifted directions: I was in the eye of it. Waiting on food in a local eatery in Emboscada, I overheard the mayor tell his two sons, “If you ask me, I believe he [me] had something to do with the money being stolen!” I was now a thief.

The second event, I believe, was born out of my frustration. Emboscada’s mayor was corrupt and seemed uninterested in improving the town. The year had worn on me and I initiated plans for life after the Peace Corps, which meant significantly less time spent within the municipality. Besides, before the robbery of the monies for the sanitary

landfill, my focus mostly turned toward working with Afro-Paraguayans. Thus, I enclosed myself off from Emboscada; only to emerge for routine meetings and weekly trips to Asunción to pick up documents from the National Archives.

The daily banter behind the house where I lived went as follows: “What does he do in there all day,” one gentleman said. “All I hear is the toilet flushing,” the other gentleman replied. At first, it was somewhat amusing how the neighbors created and disseminated mysterious stories of the inner-workings of my house. Other onlookers would occasionally stop to obtain a status: “What does he do all day?” The gentlemen would state as a matter of fact, “I don’t know what he does all day. I just hear him in the bathroom!” I would overhear the onlookers sigh reflecting some manufactured frustration.

Their frustration seemed implausible: my role was not to fully assimilate Paraguayan norms. That was inconceivable. The floating imagined notion that everyone is Paraguayan and strangers can assimilate Paraguay’s culture through language [Guaraní] and various other rituals seemed restricted to those who fit the ‘ideal’ or ‘desired’ *outsider*. I did not possess that privilege. My white foreign, colleagues—some with minimal command over the native tongue or loyalty to people with a differing culture—occupied fluid statuses: the ability to absorb when convenient certain cultural norms and abandon them to maintain a protected identity.

The banter around my supposed sanctuary eventually crossed some lines. “You see, those *negros* are like that...they are stingy,” a gentleman in a loud voice stated as he stood in front of the gate to the house. Normally, a statement such as that would find its

way to the mental annals of absurdity. This day, however, moved me to call my supervisor and express my anger: an anger that had been brewing for weeks due to the constantly fabricated stories that swirled outside a small, squared window, thin door, and uninsulated walls. It was this audacious proclamation that *todos los negros*, not just myself, were incapable of self-less acts—especially, after a year of devoting my energy to a community that constantly reminded me of my existence as the *other*.

My supervisor excused me from my site. I sought refuge in a hotel, off the beaten path, in Asunción. But, an escape was not imminent. Throughout the day and night, a young man, hotel attendant consistently repeated, “Él no sabe nada [He does not know anything]. Él no sabe como trabajar [He doesn’t know how to work].” It did not make sense. “Whom was he referring to?” I thought. As the night drew on, the answer became crystal clear: it was I who had committed some grand offense! A confrontation the next day confirmed the answer. Another volunteer was staying at the hotel. Somewhat sleep deprived, the volunteer confronted one of the hotel staff about what happened throughout the night. I overheard her tell the staff to speak with me, if I presented an issue to them. That never occurred and the young man refused to relent. Ultimately, I spoke with the hotel manager: “Your staff seems to have an issue with me for some reason. If I’m not welcome here, I’ll take my business elsewhere!” The hotel manager replied, “No one would say a bad thing about anyone here. We loved to have guests such as you here. Who would say something bad about you?” “I don’t know who he is, but it’s the young man,” I stated. “No, nobody messes with anybody here,” she said. Giving me a hug that felt



disingenuous, she continued, “You’re welcome here. Please stay and enjoy yourself!” Another hug followed. I halfheartedly entertained her attempt to placate my concerns.

Afterward, I no longer heard the young man. I presumed the manager quieted him as to avoid a potential negative impact on her business. But, there was a much larger issue looming: how did this young man know about me in the first place? Was he from Emboscada or did he know someone from there? Why would people even imply that *I did not know anything* or *did not know how to work*? On the surface, it did not make sense. Even though I was the perpetual *outsider*, I collaborated with several community members on several projects throughout the previous year. My body emaciated due to countless hours toiling under unbearable heat resembled that of a worker. Yet gossip trumped any visible evidence produced; thus, my existence in Paraguay was becoming ominous.

Gabriel, a close friend, invited me to his locale to get away for a few days. He was located deeper in the interior of Paraguay. On the bus ride, the gossip looped through my mind like a bad DJ unable to find the break to lay down that perfect scratch. I felt uneasy the whole ride, unable to shut my mind off even as exhaustion competed for my attention. I was almost uber-vigilant, consumed with paranoia, waiting for the slightest hint of a continued verbal assassination. Regardless of the state I inhabited, the trip passed uneventfully.

Only a few days were spent with Gabriel. With great pride, he gave me a tour of a community that seemed to fully embrace him. Gabriel identified as a Chicano and was a son of Mexican immigrants who settled in the Midwest. Paraguayans loved the way

Mexicans spoke Spanish: according to them, Mexicans have the ability to sing their Spanish when speaking. I marveled how Gabriel seemed to feel at ease in his surroundings; nothing appeared unfamiliar or out of place except for my presence.

During my brief visit with Gabriel, he did not deviate from his schedule. Besides, my intentions were not to disrupt his routine; rather I desired a trusted friend's company as a means to unearth what morsel of sanity that remained. Gabriel had a schedule that carved out time for working out in a makeshift gym with sparse equipment in his neighborhood. Although I did not bring any clothes to workout in, I still accompanied him as to avoid a small stretch of solitude that inevitability would have meant reflecting on the state of affairs in Emboscada. While in the space, a couple of curious, high school aged girls passed by. The constant giggling and blushing in Gabriel's presence signaled the girls had a crush on him. My attempts to lag back were thwarted when Gabriel wanted to make introductions. "This is my friend, Lorenzo," he said. I extended my hand to shake both of the girls' hands. One removed herself from the encounter once we shook hands while the other pressed on with questions. Looking in Gabriel's direction, she asked, "Where is he from?" "Well, why don't you ask him," Gabriel replied. The girl shyly looked in my direction, returned her gaze to Gabriel, and responded, "Well, where is he from?" Gabriel giggled and said, "He can speak Spanish...just ask him!" She mustered up some courage, "Where are you from?" I replied, "New York!" Immediately, she turned to Gabriel, frowning, "What did he say?" "You heard him," he retorted "he said New York!" She replied, "Oh, New York!" The other girl rejoined only to pull her

friend away, indicating they needed to be elsewhere. Both girls said goodbye to Gabriel and, partially, to me.

Supposedly, my accent, which various people have tried to pinpoint throughout my existence, cloaks the clarity of my Spanish.<sup>220</sup> Particularly for Paraguayans, my accent seemed impenetrable, hence, muting my ability to communicate coherently. A small minority of Paraguayans pushed through the barriers and attempted to converse with me. Yet I had lost confidence in the ability to be heard. Everything was questioned to a point where I tried to avoid basic conversations. I, however, took some solace in the fact that other black volunteers reported similar experiences: Paraguayans would direct questions or conversations to their nonblack counterparts even though the black volunteer was participating in the conversation and could speak the language. Which meant: it did not seem to matter what language level a black individual possessed; we were all susceptible to the same oppressive silence.

The day came: the return to Emboscada. My gut told me to abandon my post and seek sanctuary in a country where I also felt uncomfortable, but knew how to navigate better. The bus ride was long, though not long enough. As Emboscada got closer, I tried to snap out of me bewilderment to strategize on my next moves. Honestly, I was out of my element. No strategy had the potential punch needed to quail what was occurring in Emboscada; thus, it seemed a futile endeavor to quarantine the situation. I tried to use the darkness of the night to hide my return to buy me some more time. But, several Emboscadeños peered through the darkness and uncovered my presence, initiating the next phase of Lorenzo's assassination.

My tactic was simple: avoid staying in Emboscada as much as possible. I would leave early in the morning for Asunción and return late to Emboscada. When I could, I stayed overnight in Asunción at a peer's place. While in Asunción, I was scanning materials I obtained from the National Archive to create a digitized database of documents to eventually burn to a DVD. The plan was to make several copies and distribute them to Emboscada's library and Afro-Paraguayan leaders. The outstanding issue was: where do we store the documents to protect them (e.g. from moisture, weather, or theft) for future use?

The frequent trips to Asunción led to an encounter with a Paraguayan woman I dated the remainder of my tenure in Paraguay. Luz's presence in my life, at times, appeared intentional albeit coincidental. She instantly became a staunch supporter, a confidant when I was at my tipping point. To a degree, Luz understood my plight. She was the victim of malicious rumors within her community—a neighborhood not too far from the downtown Asunción. Luz worked in community health as well as served as a catechist for the local church. When several children had stomach parasites, Luz obtained medicine to address the problem: the medicine improved the health of the children. Yet some individuals spread rumors claiming she was distributing birth control pills. Consequently, members of Luz's community rejected her efforts and the local church renounced her position as catechist. This series of events severely hurt Luz. The day she recounted the story to me, the strain in her voice was visible and the pain still remained. She gave me the gist but ventured on to another subject when the details seemed unbearable to recall.

Occasionally, Luz ventured to Emboscada to visit me. I greatly appreciated, among the many qualities, her honesty, intellect, and devotion to her community regardless of what occurred in the past. Additionally, Luz made it absolutely clear to me that some traditional practices were archaic and needed to change. Usually, when a male or female visit each other the rule is that the event takes place in the open either in the front or back patio; or if it is in the house, the door remains wide open as to avoid potential misinterpretations. Inevitably, it did not matter how the visit transpired: people created their own narratives of the events. Luz was fully aware of this and, hence, always requested to have the door closed.

On one of the visits to Emboscada, Luz came to the house. As usual, the door was closed. After a while, she and I heard outside someone yell, “Ha’el haku [He’s horny]!” I instantly recognized the voice: it was that of Pablo’s wife, the owner of the house I lived in. At the north end of the house there were two small, triangular shaped holes in the wall, right above the sink. The holes provided direct line of sight to Pablo’s patio in the back. I saw the wife outside, hanging clothes on the lines to dry. She shook out a couple of clothes and hung them while yelling again, “Haku!” She yelled loud enough for anyone within an immediate radius could comfortably hear. In response to her, someone across the street stated something. I could not make it out. Luz, on the other hand, heard it clearly, “How can they say such things?” She now stood in the entryway that divided the bedroom from the bare room that had the main entrance. She shook her head. “I should say something to them,” she said. “What would that do? They won’t stop,” I replied. She concurred with my statement; but I could see her frustration with the

situation. I quietly celebrated the fact that the situation proved to someone else that I was not delusional: Luz legitimized my torment and later conveyed my concerns to my supervisor. I hugged Luz and thanked her for her concern and willingness to speak on behalf of the voiceless. We walked toward the highway to wait for her bus. Plans were made for another time to hang out, but this time in Asunción. We parted ways once the bus arrived. I wished I could travel with her. Instead, I felt alone, more so than ever before. The yells that surrounded my domain were portentous signs for what the community had in store for me.

Saturday nights I avoided like the plague. Music and drunken induced laughter and boisterous talk reigned supreme on Saturday nights. Those sounds, emanating from the center of town, cut through the sky committing the brashest assault on any eardrum remotely close. Sometimes fights would break out—seemingly, for no apparent reason. I preferred the safety net my meager accommodations supposedly provided as oppose to a random encounter that would elicit most defensive strategies to protect myself from someone out to prove how hyper-masculine they were. Especially now, I dared not even risk it: my relationship with the community was in a precarious state. But, one particular Saturday night stood out among the rest.

Since Luz's departure, I forced myself to make my way through the community to feign visibility even though my heart had located a breach in security to escape its imprisonment. Walks through the community invited indirect yet targeted assaults. A woman tending to the house chores yelled, "Sevo'i [Worm]!" It was a Guarani word that meant I was a worm, sleeping with every young girl in the community. Anytime I met

with a high school girl to assist with their English homework I made sure the meetings occurred in the utmost public settings to operate under the supervision of communal eyes. Regardless of my attempts to avoid scrutiny, my body was still hypersexualized: *I'm a black man, right? I have to be sleeping with every Paraguayan girl!* What was interesting, when I first arrived to Emboscada, people inquired about my relationship status. There was someone back home in New York, but nothing I could designate as a legitimate relationship. Once people heard this, men and women would offer to me the closest young, single Paraguayan woman. Now, as a *sevo'i*, I had deflowered all those young, single women.

The yell would alert the *informal radio* to commence. The loud chatter would loop: “Él no sabe como trabajar [He does not know how to work]. “Él no sabe nada [He knows nothing]. Nosotros sabemos como trabajar [We know how to work]. Qué tiene en su mente [What is he thinking]?” A few times I confronted the gossip to settle the matter; however, the individual would feign ignorance and claim I misheard them. Once I turned my back, the loop would restart. I asked my ‘so-called’ close friends about the rumors. The response was always the same: “What happened, Lorenzo? No, I have not heard anything about you!” Their responses left me confused and extremely paranoid that no one was trustworthy. I am from a culture where if anything such as this occurred a confrontation (sometimes deadly) would surely erupt to settle scores or clear the air. But, Paraguayan culture was different: direct confrontations were avoided; instead the strategy was to conduct verbal assaults around my immediate vicinity.

That Saturday night was no different. As usual, the music and rambunctious activities blared from the center of Emboscada. The music had a significant amount of base that shook the foundation of my house. I lived several blocks from the locale. The constant *boom boom boom* startled me out of my slumber because the music escalated with each *boom*. I could hear a muffled male's voice; the music, nevertheless, obscured my ability to understand. Then, the music stopped. The crowd quieted. A young girl—I assumed based on her voice—came to the microphone: “He’s not one of us. He needs to be gone. Afuera de Emboscada [Outside of Emboscada]! Afuera!” The crowd erupted in laughter. Inside my house was a different story. I grabbed a chair to place in front of the door as a means to reinforce the thin door. Additionally, I pulled out the chef’s knife I purchased from Mercado 4 a year ago. Sensibly speaking, there was no real threat of physical harm: previous evidence supported that reality. Yet exhaustion ruled my thoughts and my instincts had me on high alert. Thus, I stood in front of the door with knife in right hand and spoke the following, “Come get me motherfuckers!” That night dragged on. Eventually, the music ceased and I succumbed to my tired state. Sleep was a necessity for I was gearing up for war.

Naively, I thought a change in scenery would improve my disposition. A house on the other side of the highway was available for rent. Thus, without notice to the landlord, I moved to the other house in the early hours of the morning with the aid of a friend from the Peace Corps who had a truck. The move, however, did not change anything.

“Look at him. Look at him! He’s so ugly. He’s so dark!” the older lady on the property behind the new house proclaimed. Like other cultures, Paraguay’s culture



instituted colorism, which reared its ugly. Billboards, calendars, commercials, and so on marketed *blancos* as the ideal standard of beauty, which subconsciously planted the idea that anything other than *blanco* was meant to be discarded because it was un-Paraguayan. Hence, Paraguayans with darker skin were referred to as “negrito” or foreigners: Brazilian. Some Paraguayans would attribute darker skin tones to laborious days under the unrelenting sun. On occasion, Paraguayans would openly express desires to be white. Therefore, in a mestizo world desiring whiteness, my darker skin made me ugly. I was a reminder of what they did not want.

Subsequently, the informal radio transformed into an actual radio segment. Through happenstance, I overheard a woman, whom I assisted her daughter with a summer camp for children, mention to someone that she contributed funds to the segment. Feelings of betrayal were transient: I did not have energy for such emotions.

The music would start, people eagerly gather around portable radios propped up either on a chair or little table, and the radio personality would begin: “Ese negro...ese kambá de Cuerpo de Paz se llama, Lorenzo [This black (or nigger) from the Peace Corps called, Lorenzo]...Él no sabe nada. No sabe como trabajar.” With each segment of iterations, something was added: “Ese rapai no puede hablar portugués [This Brazilian can’t speak Portuguese]...cómo no sabe hablar en su lengua [How can he not speak his language]?” Shortly thereafter: “Él puede hablar inglés [He can’t speak English]!” Usually, the listeners erupted in laughter as the radio personality conjured whatever tale, giving people their monies worth. Supposedly, I told Luz, “I know you don’t have a dad; but I’m your daddy now!” She was infantilized. Although only a couple of years

separated Luz and myself, people thought she was a child because of her miniature stature in comparison to me. The only truth the gentleman told was that Luz's father was not in the picture.

When the segment first started, I wanted to retaliate. I penned a response defending myself and criticizing Emboscadeños for a lack of involvement in their own community. To be spiteful, I accused them of speaking a bastardized form of Gauraní (no one spoke Guaraní-Gauraní). My supervisor, a Paraguayan male, advised me the letter would not have the desired impact. The gossip would not cease. He further stated that the gossip was harmless and that I was safe. If he felt differently, I would be removed from Emboscada immediately. In other words, I had to endure the verbal assault.

At times, the broadcasts elicited an incredulous laugh even from me: each segment seemed more ridiculous than the previous one. "Why would people invest time and money in this stupidity?" I thought. It seemed as if I were unwillingly participating in an episode of the Twilight Zone. One would think I committed murder or something of that magnitude to garner such attention, recurring in the afternoon, daily. A couple of times, a stranger would approach to strike up a conversation with me: this was a test to pass judgment on whether I managed Spanish well. Seemingly, we would have an organic back and forth; ultimately, the person would leave me and tell their friends, "I didn't understand anything!" Consequently, I ceased entertaining their malevolent inquiries.

Inevitably, an incident completely severed the remaining trust I clung to and, more importantly, broke my heart. Sundays were still reserved for the Afro-Paraguayan

youth group. The project with Nelson and Antonio was the one substantial item that kept me engaged because, at the crux of it, was a fight to no longer be an outsider. Mistakenly, I thought we were forging an Afro diasporic connection that privileged our blackness over nationalistic ideals that excluded us from basic, inalienable rights that *all* citizens should have.

I arrived to Nelson's house for our regularly scheduled meeting. Nelson's mother was uncharacteristically short with me. I could tell something was off. She feigned a smile and went back to preparing a meal. Antonio arrived with Monica, another person who participated when she could. The meeting began. Our conversation competed with whispers among members about the radio segment and loud proclamations from Nelson's mother in the background: "He doesn't want to work, but he wants to come here to eat? We are going to eat?" I tried to talk through it, but I couldn't compete. Instead, I explained that my supervisor was aware of my activities: particularly, my devotion to their project. I proclaimed that I was going to work even harder for them because they meant a lot to me. Their demeanor, however, indicated their allegiance to me had swayed. The year of work with them and my loyalty to them garnered no benefit of the doubt clause: I was guilty of everything the radio personality falsely claimed.

Lunch was tense. We ate barely passing words to each other. Antonio and Monica departed, leaving Nelson, his brother, mother, and myself. I should have left, but I wanted to state my defense to the remaining individuals. "Probably, there's a way to assuage their anger," I thought. As he cut his brother's hair, Nelson intermittingly asked questions. I answered and capped each response, in a raised voice, "My boss knows

everything I'm doing and is fine with it!" Yet I was missing the obvious point: the accused cannot speak for themselves, someone has to do so for them. In this situation, my boss would have needed to openly defend me. That was not going to happen because he felt it was just people gossiping, which was true; but, not helpful in preserving my sanity.

Granted, this was a volunteer assignment that required no communal investment other than time to carry out projects that the community deemed as a need. Volunteering, nevertheless, had a different connotation for Emboscadeños (and potentially other Paraguayans). Expectations were that volunteers would create projects and raise funds to execute those projects. Philosophically speaking, that violates the spirit of community development, shifting the focus from the community to an *outside* individual. I firmly believed in community-generated ideas and ownership were the essential ingredients for sustainable development. Unfortunately, that was not what Emboscadeños wanted. As José Carlos explained later, intellectual labor, which was how the work with Afro-Paraguayans should be viewed as, was not valued. Intellectual labor was intangible and did not lead to a visibly, useful product that exemplified physical labor. Therefore, those *outsiders* who did not produce products—I was guilty of this—drew the ire, in some cases, of their communities.

All volunteers purported difficulties in their respective locales. White and nonwhite volunteers underwent scrutiny and faced the run-of-the-mill gossip. But, black volunteers, especially those of darker hues, endured something more. Additionally, those of us who chose to be unapologetically black, refusing to quell hard fought yet scarred identities, served as antagonists to a mestizo nation-state. Instantly, we were scandals

because we evoked simultaneous emotions of repulsion and desire. On the one hand, black bodies were repulsive because they were not gold: they were not white. On the other hand, black bodies elicited repressed erotic desires or the desire to consume, appropriate blackness. The erotic desires manifested themselves in various ways, hidden behind the veil of darkness. Whether it was a Paraguayan male hailing my attention from his car as I made my way home to ask for the right to touch my penis or a Paraguayan male demanding a black woman to manage a relationship behind closed doors while during the day professing his love for a blonde hair, blue eyed woman. The hypersexualization of black bodies was apparent. In Emboscada, the neighbor across the dirt road from the old residence once told me, “I love the music [hip hop] of your people. I like the beat and the style of the musicians. They do this blah-blah blah-blah (she made gestures with her hands, attempting to mimic a rapper she saw on television). I love the energy. I just love it!”

After the meeting at Nelson’s house, I was fully in the stage of repulsion. Thus, my response was to self-impose a quarantine in the new house. Luz frequently visited to provide human interaction to interrupt bouts of depression: I was far from the individual I used to recognize in the mirror. After her visits, I would hear the Mormons next door weave stories of sexual encounters inside my house. Once in a blue moon, Antonio would pass by, inquiring about my well-being. At first, I found the visits suspicious; nevertheless, Antonio appeared to want to maintain a friendship. Therefore, I trusted his gesture was genuine.

When the quarantine became unbearable, excursions to Asunción were made. Each excursion required the employment of refortification techniques. People would sit behind me on the bus to administer the *golpe*, which involved the usual gossip, against me. At bus stops, waiting impatiently for transfers, the following would ensue: “Why doesn’t anyone do something? No one defends him? They are assassinating him!” Or: “We don’t talk about him! We need to threaten him to force him to leave! He needs to change his mouth.” These were complete strangers that acted as if they had the right to make certain pejorative claims about my character. On very rare occasions, a Paraguayan would state to their friend: “Why do we care about him? He’s not doing anything to us!” Unfortunately, that voice would be overruled because the amusement of the *golpe* was desired more.

A couple of months passed. Worn out and down, I began to contemplate fleeing my prison, Paraguay, all together. My supervisor requested that I take some time to think it over. An eventual friend that worked with a different nongovernmental organization offered an alternative that involved moving to Asunción. A compromise was struck and the move was made. After a few weeks in Asunción, the radio eventually ceased, marking an arbitrary victory: I had outlasted the gossip. The quiet took some adjusting to: my paranoia was still heightened and I struggled to lower the defensive shield. Moreover, I was left to process and reflect on how I survived. I was so focused on examining that survival that I forgot an important issue: Luz’s survival.

“Was Luz an incidental casualty of the assassination?” I thought. “How was she coping?” I invited Luz to a gathering. My colleagues probed her, asking her how she felt

about my eventual departure. Luz graciously responded with defiance: “Of course I’ll miss him, but I’ll be alright!” I expected her answer to be nothing less than that. The gathering slowly trickled to a halt. As we left the restaurant, I asked, “How has it been for you...dating me?” Luz responded, “What do you mean?” I searched for the words to clarify my question, “Have your friends given you any flack about dating a black man?” I had visited Luz at her job and community on several occasions; therefore, it was no secret about who I was. Luz took a breath and began, “Well...yes, I’ve had some issues with people.” “My I ask what exactly?” I said gently. “Well, people asked why I was dating you...and told me that black men are bad and can’t be trusted...and you were deflowering me. People will think badly of me because I am dating you,” she said. “Luz, how come you never told me?” “I never told you because it was stupid. How can people even think things like that? I wanted to spend time with you and that was it,” Luz replied. Although I was appreciative of Luz’s resilience, the revelation of her experience saddened me. I respected it was Luz’s choice, thus her sacrifice; I just resented the barrage of ignorance she endured as a consequence of making that choice.

My first departure from Paraguay, to say the least, was anticlimactic. No grand *despidida* [goodbye], just a hug from Luz. A few weeks earlier, Luz and I traveled to Guarambaré to visit the family that hosted me when I arrived for training. My Paraguayan mother and Luz, to my embarrassment, went on this back and forth exchange about how such a good individual I was. In a true motherly fashion, mom tried to repair some of the damage she could. I adored her commitment to a non-biological son; however, the damage was irreparable. Hence, on that last day in Paraguay, I parted ways

with Luz bitter, holding a deep-seated resentment for Paraguay. Once I crossed, via car, the Paraguayan border into Brazil, I thought, “Good riddance!” Moreover, I vowed to never return. Obviously, that vow was broken.

It took some time to come to grips with what happened in Paraguay. After a seven-year separation, I did not know what to expect. The research included Emboscada, thus I had to return. As I sat on the bus, trying to assemble a sense of calmness, I tried to quickly reconcile the rush of emotions and those memories that fueled my angst. I did not want to be here: on this bus in Paraguay. The task at hand was the only thing that overruled my desire to cancel the airfare to Paraguay.

As the bus made its way up a small hill, a familiar face looked back and greeted me. It was a woman I assisted with doing a free summer camp for children. I inquired about her family: she had two daughters that were very young the last time I saw them. She pulled out her phone and showed me current pictures: her daughters had grown into beautiful young women. Our stop approached, we both descended the steps to the street. We crossed the highway. Immediately, on the other side of the highway to the right, was her residence that doubled as a canteen.

Her mother and daughter greeted me as I approached the house. The mother invited me to sit, to catch up briefly. “We wondered how you were doing?” she said. “We often think about that camp...the kids have nothing now to keep them occupied,” she continued. I wanted to say, “That was not my fault. I wanted to create something sustainable; but you guys chose to back away because of some stupid mess.” Instead, I replied, “Well, that’s a shame.” We spoke for a little bit more. I gave an explanation for



why I had returned. I clearly stated I was no longer with the Peace Corps and was there to research the Afro-Paraguayans.

I could not help but feel on display as people passing peered in my direction. After a while, I began to make my departure from the canteen. The mother told me, “Lorenzo, you need to learn Guaraní. You must!” I repeated one word I knew in Guaraní and playfully indicated that was all I could manage. She repeated again, “Learn Guaraní, Lorenzo!” Now, her words seemed to carry a warning, which I did not comply. The defamation of my character back in 2004 went beyond language: the attacks were infused with racial stereotypes. Hence, the idea that I deserved those attacks because I did not speak Guaraní was disingenuous at best. I knew of white volunteers who could not speak Guaraní (or spoke minimal Spanish) to save their lives and they did not incur the same wrath I did. They were holding me to a different standard.

I left and went to the municipality to reunite with Antonio. He seemed genuinely enthused to see me. Antonio led me to his office. I commented on how much had change since I was last there. He told me about his family. His work intermittingly interrupted our conversation. Eventually, Anthony, the current black Peace Corps volunteer who had been in Emboscada for a little over two years, arrived to participate in the conversation. Anthony and I communicated via email previously; therefore, this was our first opportunity to meet in person. “Lorenzo, we’ve made some progress with regard to Afro-Paraguyan,” Antonio said. “Oh, I have to go right quick, but I’ll be back. Tell him Anthony about what we have done.” Antonio left, giving Anthony full liberty to say in English, “I can’t believe you came back! Once I leave, I’m never coming back!” I

laughed and responded, “Be careful. I once vowed to never come back but here I sit in front of you!”

In hindsight, the reappearance in Paraguay perhaps would have been fine if I did not make a tactical error: going back to Emboscada.

“He does not know anything! He possesses no leadership skills. He has no will: no friendship. He’s a coward! He stays locked in his room. He’s a pig—I’ve never seen him wash his sheets. He must have a guard. Nobody wanted to rent to him that’s why he’s staying in a hostel. He had a Paraguayan girlfriend...and SHE WAS SIXTEEN! I heard he got her pregnant. See, when Mormons come here...they learn the culture and language. And he can’t even do that!

He claims he’s a student. LIAR! I have not seen him study or with one single book since he’s been here. He can’t even speak his own language...WHAT A BOBO! You know *los negros* aren’t intelligent, right? We know our culture and language. And, he says there are people of African descent here...THAT’S A LIE! I’ve NEVER seen a person of African descent in Paraguay. THEY DON’T EXIST HERE! No one understands what he’s doing here. No one sticks up for him. NO ONE!

He’s a thief. They say on the radio he stole money. I believe them. This *NEEEGGRO*...this *KAMBÁ!* His name is Lawrence Crocker...Crockett...wait its Crockett?! They say on the radio he does not know how to work! What a disaster! And, the Peace Corps still pay him money. UNBELIEVABLE! They [the US government] need to do something! He should not be here! We need to threaten him to get him to leave! When I see him, I don’t even want to greet him.

They say he's sick. I think he must be a diabetic; or he must be a drug addict—how can you lose that much weight that quickly. He's just sickly. He's gay...so it could be HIV! We need to get his cell phone and *golpe* his phone. Better yet, we should take his money away but no one knows his pin number. We need to do this *golpe* in his language: English! We should just physically hit him!”

After seven years, operation (which I refer to as) *Get Him Out!* was in full effect and it did not skip a beat. A group of Uruguayans ran the hostel I initially lived in when I returned to Paraguay. It never failed: the radio personality stated the daily gossip about me; the employees of the hostel listened; and then the employees provided their own loud commentary until late at night. Most of the time I drifted away with music, binge watched shows, or planned my next research move. Occasionally, I would, however, tune in to catch the latest chatter to keep myself up-to-date. Some of it was quite amusing because it was so unbelievable. For someone who did not know his language, I found it odd when an employee came to solicit my assistance with writing a response in English to a disgruntled former guest of the hostel.

Eventually, I found a very small accommodation in San Lorenzo. As before, the locale did not change anything. The re-assassination followed. In 2004, I wanted to be like the protagonist in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and retreat to some false underground sanctuary; or give up like Sun Ra in *Space is the Place*<sup>221</sup> because there was no winning this war: I was a strange man in a strange land. In 2012, the same thoughts crossed my mind. At a café within the new Shopping Center in San Lorenzo, a gentleman with passionate zeal conducted his own impromptu *golpe* when he saw me sitting alone.

His voiced strained as he repeatedly spoke at the top of his voice. The woman that accompanied him often chimed in with a “Claro!” Even though I paid more attention to the show I was watching (the café had Wi-Fi, which I did not have in the room I rented), at times I would peak over in their direction. I amused at the passion with which he spoke—so amused, I even tried to record some of it, but audio quality was not great because I was not close enough. Once he tired, he went over to the register, shook their hands, almost bowing as if he gave the performance of his life. It tickled me. After he left, the young ladies that worked at the café continued the *golpe*: “He must be an idiot?! How could he just sit there and not hear anything?”

Concerns for fulfilling a certain rites of passage in conducting research initially held me in Paraguay. A conversation with a friend in US helped me to determine that was not sensible way to sustain my sanity. The friend went as far as to joke, “The reason you are running into problems is that you are telling them that they black!” I let out a hysterical laugh at the notion. But, the statement possessed some truth. In Paraguay, and in the world for that matter, claiming blackness means creating an irreconcilable chasm with whiteness. Furthermore, it means coming to the realization that you are the perpetual *outsider*.

After much deliberation, I eventually exited Paraguay for the second and final time. This time, I am not angry. Rather, the experience shed some light on my existence in this world. I exist in a world without a *true* place to refer to as home. Whether in the US or in another country, the stereotypical ideas of blackness remain unchanged, placing me in a never-ending precarious position. Lorenzo’s persona was never my creation; and,

from a Fanonian<sup>222</sup> viewpoint, neither was Lawrence's my creation. The identities were conflated to embody the ideals white supremacy has imprinted on black bodies. I am not devoid of agency; yet, the identity I create is not legible to the society at large. What I create is silenced and quieted with violence when I have bouts of rage with daily injustices. What really happened in Paraguay was that all hopes of being me were assassinated and that Lorenzo was the legitimate entity: a nobody!<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Here, I am referring to Richard Wright's novel, *The Outsider*. Wright's protagonist, Cross Damon, in an existential moment, reflects on his position in the world. Consciously aware of his tenuous position, Cross understands his death is imminent. See: (Wright 2008)

<sup>217</sup> In 2014, Paraguay was voted "world's happiest country." See: <http://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/worlds-happiest-country-would-you-believe-paraguay-n110981>

<sup>218</sup> Paraguayans refer to black bodies as "rapai." The word means Brazilian, specifically Afro-Brazilian.

<sup>219</sup> The sanitary landfill project was problematic on multiple fronts. Period. The project lacked support from the community and local government. Moreover, there was always an issue affecting progress. After encountering multiple issues, I referred to the project as the "curse" because of the inability to move it forward.

<sup>220</sup> What was interesting was I have visited other Latin American countries and communicating was never an issue—obviously, to my knowledge. Only, in Paraguay, my language skills were questioned.

<sup>221</sup> The film released in 1974. Sun Ra argues blacks should settle on a new planet in outer space because the earth has failed to provide a just and equal society. Therefore, Sun Ra travels to earth to gather blacks on his ship and transport them to the new planet. In the film, Sun Ra duels with The Overseer to gain control over the fate of black people. Essentially, Sun Ra concedes white supremacy will not end.

<sup>222</sup> Fanon explains black is equated with "ugliness, sin, darkness, and immorality. In other words, he who is immoral is black." See: (Fanon 2008); p. 169. I am using Fanon to explain, whether Lawrence or Lorenzo, society concludes I am an immoral being regardless of my actions to prove otherwise.

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<sup>223</sup> I am borrowing the term from Marc Lamont Hill. Hill defines *nobody* as to be vulnerable, subject to State violence, abandoned by the State, and considered disposable. Nobodiness “is strongly tethered to race” and requires a thorough class analysis. Granted, class is not applicable here. But, what is applicable is the feeling of abandonment. My race made me disposable. See: (Hill 2016)

### ***Conclusion: Is Afroparaguay Gon' Be Alright? —Re-visiting the Dilemma***

In *The Rebel*, Albert Camus develops the concept of the absurd. As Camus puts it, “the final conclusion of absurdist reasoning is, in fact, the repudiation of suicide and the acceptance of the desperate encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the universe.”<sup>224</sup> Absurdism “admits that human life is the only necessary good since it is precisely life that makes this encounter possible and since, without life, the absurdist wager would have no basis. To say that life is absurd, the conscience must be alive.”<sup>225</sup> And, as we adopt absurdism, the world no longer divides “into the just and the unjust, but into masters and slaves.”<sup>226</sup>

Camus openly proclaims a belief in nothing and that everything is absurd; but he believes in his protest.<sup>227</sup> The protest Camus refers to is rebellion:

The first and only evidence that is supplied me, within the terms of the absurdist experience, is rebellion. Deprived of all knowledge, incited to murder or to consent to murder, all I have at my disposal is this single piece of evidence, which is only reaffirmed by the anguish I suffer. Rebellion is born of the spectacle of irrationality, confronted with an unjust and incomprehensible condition. But its blind impulse is to demand order in the midst of chaos, and unity in the very heart of the ephemeral. It protests, it demands, it insists that the outrage be brought to an end, and that what has up to now been built upon shifting sands should henceforth be founded on rock. Its preoccupation is to transform.<sup>228</sup>

Similar to Fanon's *wretched of the earth*, Camus' slave incites violence (as Fanon puts it) to reintroduce “mankind into the world.”<sup>229</sup> Thus, a rebellion elicits the following: the slave feels he is right and the master is wrong.<sup>230</sup> According to Camus, the rebel “confronts an order of things which oppresses him with the insistence on a kind of right

not to be oppressed beyond the limit that he can tolerate.”<sup>231</sup> Moreover, the slave, now the rebel, experiences simultaneously “a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights and a complete and spontaneous loyalty to certain aspects of himself. Thus he implicitly brings into play a standard of values so far from being gratuitous that he is prepared to support it no matter what the risks.”<sup>232</sup>

For Camus, a rebellion births awareness for the oppressed and potentially solicits empathy among non-oppressed individuals.<sup>233</sup> The non-oppressed individual does not psychologically identify with the oppressed rather he cannot bear to witness the suffering of the oppressed that the spectacle reveals.<sup>234</sup> But, does the non-oppressed individual engage with the suffering on the terms of the oppressed? I believe Baldwin provides an apt response to the question. In *The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy*, Baldwin expresses the following with regard to his interactions with Norman Mailor:

I was weary, to tell the truth. I had tried, in the States, to convey something of to listen: they wanted their romance. And, anyway, the really ghastly thing about trying to convey to a white man the reality of the Negro experience has nothing whatever to do with the fact of color, but has to with this man’s relationship to his own life. He will face in your life only what he is willing to face in his.<sup>235</sup>

As Baldwin illustrates, black suffering is unarticulated. Therefore, the non-oppressed individual’s response to the spectacle is limited to what the individual willingly confronts on his or her terms, but never *truly* ventures past the safety net of whiteness—avoiding engagement with black death.

Ultimately, Camus claims, “I rebel—therefore we exist.”<sup>236</sup> Rebellion awakens the conscientiousness, invoking and solidifying the slave’s worth. The slave has value and rebellion exacts recognition of that value. It is an undeniable, unapologetic



proclamation of one's existence. Consequently, the slave no longer compromises his existence and adopts an "attitude of All or Nothing."<sup>237</sup> How does, however, Camus's rebel wrestle with anti-blackness? How do black bodies interject their existence into a state that persistently uses violence to conceal the reality of black suffering and eliminate potential resistance? In *Seeking the Beloved Community: A Feminist Race Reader*, Joy James states, "According to the state, no suffering warrants rebellion, although 'freedom from tyranny' is one of its hallmark phrases. Perhaps what is explicitly meant, but only implied, is that no black suffering warrants rebellion."<sup>238</sup>

Essentially, rebellion or the right to rebel is a privileged notion. Rebellion is not permissible to everyone—particularly, in this case, the black body. For Camus' rebel, anti-blackness is incomprehensible. Black suffering does not include a compromise of one's existence. There is no choice. The state consistently institutes and reconstitutes systems of violence that perpetuate an existence of black death. If an agreement does exist, the choice before the black slave is whether to survive as a socially dead person with no recourse for justice or commit suicide. Suicide here has two meanings: either a black body does so in solitude or goes out in murderous rage (i.e. Nat Turner) that ultimately ends in physical death. As Baldwin<sup>239</sup> and Steve Biko<sup>240</sup> acknowledge, black bodies never had anything to lose. Stated further, the black slave does not insist upon the insertion of justice but seeks to destroy anti-black racism. Liberation cannot exist until that occurs.

By no means am I demanding Afro-Paraguayans choose suicide. Paraguay's population is approximately 6.8 million people. Scholars guesstimate the black

population is somewhere between 1 to 3 percent of Paraguay's total population—meaning, roughly, no more than 200,000 Afro-Paraguayans. Thus, any black rebellion would signify the end of blackness in Paraguay because the state would annihilate them. Rather, this recognizes Afro-Paraguayans' decision to pursue cultural reproduction, which on the surface is a logical action, as a means for survival. As a result, the decision elicits a moral dilemma: why continue to perform an action that does not remotely mitigate black suffering?

### ***The Moral Dilemma: An Irreconcilable Notion***

In *The Souls of White Folk* essay, W.E.B. Du Bois states:

I view them [white folks] from unusual points of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come, for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language. Mine is not the knowledge of the traveler or the colonial composite of dear memories, words and wonder. Nor yet is my knowledge that which servants have of masters, or mass of class, or capitalist of artisan. Rather I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know. This knowledge makes them now embarrassed, now furious! They deny my right to live and be and call me misbirth! My word is to them mere bitterness and my soul, pessimism. And yet as they preach and strut and shout and threaten, crouching as they clutch at rags of facts and fancies to hide their nakedness, they go twisting, flying by my tired eyes and I see them ever stripped—ugly, human.<sup>241</sup>

As I have illustrated throughout this dissertation, Afro-Paraguayans occupy and negotiate the space as foreigners, negating their integral role as participants in the development of the state. The historical role of black bodies extends to the early sixteenth century, before the establishment of Paraguay as an independent nation-state. Hence, the moniker as

foreigners is egregiously attached to black bodies. Afro-Paraguayans understand and contend with the Paraguayan state as natives, “bone of their thought and flesh of their language.”

As discussed in Chapter I, Paraguay underwent two stages of homogenization: *browning* and *whitening*. Under Francia, the intent of *browning* was to eliminate any traces of the colonizer and constitute the state’s culture as a distinct hybrid identity. The social construction of hybrid identity consumed blackness to near extinction, silencing any claims of racial/ethnic distinctions and discriminatory practices based on those distinctions. The subsequent dictatorships of the Carlos and Francisco López reopened Paraguay’s borders to European influences to modernize the state with *whitening* as the cultural phenomenon. Carlos and Francisco López valued whiteness whereas Francia abhorred it due to his exclusion from elite society based on his darker skin tone.

Whether *browning* or *whitening* the fate of Afro-Paraguayans was the same: they were never meant to survive.<sup>242</sup> But, Afro-Paraguayans did survive and continue to do so. For years, Afro-Paraguayans have attempted to disrupt Paraguay’s homogeneity. That disruption tries to recast Paraguay as a multicultural nation: a nation that recognizes and celebrates blackness as a subculture. Furthermore, a multicultural nation that grants Afro-Paraguayans rights as full-fledged citizens of the state. The issue, however, is not with the struggle to transform Paraguay to a multicultural state rather (as I have argued) it is the existence of anti-blackness that serves as the root cause of Afro-Paraguayans demise.

Again, the dilemma: what should Afro-Paraguayans do? Instead of cultural reproduction, Afro-Paraguayans elicit Marxist ideals by delving into a class struggle. A

class struggle reflects what Afro-Paraguayans value: material well-being. Additionally, a class struggle potentially unifies the majority of Paraguay's oppressed class. The class strategy potentially yields policies that slowly unwind the elites' control, enabling Afro-Paraguayans to gain access to healthcare, higher education, jobs, and so forth. A class struggle, however, does not abolish anti-black racism. In *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*, Angela Davis observes the following about the civil rights movement in the United States:

The civil rights movement was very successful in what it achieved: the legal eradication of racism and the dismantling of the apparatus of segregation. This happened and we should not underestimate its importance. The problem is that it is often assumed that the eradication of the legal apparatus is equivalent to the abolition of racism. But racism persists in a framework that is far more expansive, far vaster than the legal framework.<sup>243</sup>

In *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Cedric J. Robinson meticulously provides evidence that support Davis' observation of the persistence and vastness of racism. Robinson evokes the term "racial capitalism" to explain: "The development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology."<sup>244</sup> Basically, racism was not a derivative of capitalism, but preceded it. Therefore, we understand racism was deeply imbedded in the capitalist structure and continues to permeate that structure.

The problem with Marxism or reformulations of Marxist thoughts (i.e. Gramscian theory) is the inability to deal with the relationship between blackness and the state as an antagonistic one.<sup>245</sup> Marx, Gramsci, and Camus do not recognize that antagonism. Marx, in particular, deemed slavery as a necessary evil for the formation of the capitalist state

but does not consider slavery as part of the capitalist mode of production because there is no value exchanged.<sup>246</sup> According to Wilderson, the antagonistic relationship is irreconcilable.<sup>247</sup> This irreconcilability is the root of the dilemma. But, there may be a solution. As Wilderson states, “If we are to be honest with ourselves, we must admit that “the Negro” has been inviting Whites and civil society’s junior partners to the dance of death for hundreds of years.”<sup>248</sup> This dance of death means not only the destruction of whiteness but blackness as well, because whiteness cannot exist without blackness. What remains unclear, however, is how do we destroy whiteness and blackness?

The quest for black liberation becomes a farce if the state does not self-reflect, assumes responsibility for, or takes measures to dismantle white supremacy, which serves as the basis for anti-black racism. Additionally, civil society’s junior partners play a major role in disrupting systematic oppression. In *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, Martin Luther King Jr. points out the fleeting support of whites and junior partners:

The majority of white Americans consider themselves sincerely committed to justice for the Negro. They believe that American society is essentially hospitable to fair play and to steady growth toward a middle-class utopia embodying racial harmony. But unfortunately this is a fantasy of self-deception and comfortable vanity. Overwhelmingly America is still struggling with irresolution and contradictions. It has been sincere and even ardent in welcoming some change. But too quickly apathy and disinterest rise to the surface when the next logical steps are to be taken.<sup>249</sup>

What we can glean from King’s comments is there is another dilemma: the struggle between an aspirational society and a realistic one. Similar to the United States King speaks of, Paraguay projects an aspirational society that accepts and embraces individuals

regardless of race. The reality, however, is the existence of anti-black racism. Thus, Afro-Paraguayans are stuck in an irreconcilable antagonistic relation with state that perpetuates death without potential suitors to engage in the dance of death.

Moreover, are Afro-Paraguayans gon' be alright? The answer is far from simple. The brilliance and beauty of the black struggle has been the inherent ability to survive and stave off annihilation. Afro-Paraguayans have navigated and negotiated cultural projects with an explicit strategy to erase blackness. Yet, to continue their survival Afro-Paraguyan communities will have to move past individualistic notions to a collective struggle. As Davis puts it, the maturation of a movement must be a collective to avoid failure.<sup>250</sup> In essence, the RPA or some other vehicle will have to cultivate relationships among the various black communities while stressing the importance of encompassing the multiple formations of blackness (i.e. gender, sexual identity, etc.) and fidelity to the black struggle. As I have argued, that collective political identity will be critical for Afro-Paraguayans to experience progress.

### ***Conclusion***

Black liberation theory challenge traditional revolutionary movements (i.e. Marxism) as inadequate when considering the antagonistic relationship black bodies have with the state. Furthermore, those theories espouse utopic ideals of a dismantled anti-black state; however, what remains unclear is how we actually arrive to or the processes through which black bodies can achieve an utopia that ends black suffering and reimagines blackness as socially undead. Wilderson suggests we engage in a dance of

death, destroying whiteness as well as blackness. This dance of death confronts and eventually dismantles anti-black racism. But, how do we destroy whiteness and blackness?

It seems the issue stems from an inability to envision an “outside” that goes beyond the quotidian coerced logic that restricts prospects of black resistance and liberation. Similar to other blacks throughout the diaspora, Afro-Paraguayans do what they know (cultural reproduction, in this case)—essentially what the state deems permissible. As a consequence, their existence remains trapped in a perpetual state of anti-blackness and social death. Thus, how do Afro-Paraguayans unlock their physical and mental constraints to confront the state’s negation of blackness as an integral part of Paraguay’s culture? More importantly, how do Afro-Paraguayans influence the state to abolish anti-blackness?

This dissertation illustrates the historical and contemporary impact of anti-black racism on Afro-Paraguayans, black identity formation, and the absence of black solidarity. I do not pretend to have an adequate response to the aforementioned questions. I do, however, assume Afro-Paraguayans will continue cultural reproduction as the preferable method, yielding minimal change to the state’s anti-black discriminatory policies, until an event drastically alters their thinking. As a result, Afro-Paraguayans will have to collectively wrestle with a question that plagues all black bodies: where do we go from here?

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- <sup>224</sup> (Camus 1991): p. 29  
<sup>225</sup> (Camus 1991): p. 30  
<sup>226</sup> (Camus 1991): p. 27  
<sup>227</sup> (Camus 1991): p. 41  
<sup>228</sup> (Camus 1991): p. 41  
<sup>229</sup> (Fanon 1963): p. 106  
<sup>230</sup> Camus states, “Rebellion cannot exist without the feeling that, somewhere and somehow, one is right” (p. 46). Here, I am asserting the slave feels he is right. See: (Camus 1991)  
<sup>231</sup> (Camus 1991): p. 47  
<sup>232</sup> (Camus 1991)  
<sup>233</sup> (Camus 1991): pp. 50 and 55  
<sup>234</sup> (Camus 1991): p. 55  
<sup>235</sup> (Baldwin 1993): p. 221  
<sup>236</sup> (Camus 1991): p. 71  
<sup>237</sup> (Camus 1991): p. 50  
<sup>238</sup> (James 2014): p. 145  
<sup>239</sup> (Baldwin 1993): p. 217  
<sup>240</sup> (Biko 2002): p. 152  
<sup>241</sup> (Lewis 1995): p. 453  
<sup>242</sup> Here I am borrowing from Audre Lorde. See: (Lorde 2007), p. 92  
<sup>243</sup> (Davis 2016): pp. 16-17  
<sup>244</sup> (Robinson 2000): p. 3  
<sup>245</sup> (Wilderson III 2003a; Wilderson III 2010)  
<sup>246</sup> (Marx 1992)  
<sup>247</sup> (Wilderson III 2010): p. 831  
<sup>248</sup> (Wilderson III 2010): p. 380  
<sup>249</sup> (King Jr 1991): p. 557  
<sup>250</sup> (Davis 2016): See Chapter One.



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