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Abstract

This thesis explores how Room 24, the Argentine art room, of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (MNBA, National Museum of Fine Arts) in Buenos Aires, reinforces racial relationships within the national culture. Two works of art in particular – La cabeza de esclavo (The Bust of a Slave), 1882 by Francisco Cafferata and the 1892 La vuelta del malón (The Return of the Raid) by Ángel Della Valle – and their relationship to the rest of the works in the room exemplify how race was and continues to be constructed in Argentina. Their position as the only two works featuring Argentines of non-European descent in the National Museum of Fine Arts warrants investigation. More intriguing, the works sit next to each other in a room dedicated to exemplifying the best of Argentine art and culture. Using a combination of visual analysis, history, and museum theory, I will seek to clarify the complicated and often conflicting ways in which these works function as poles on which to orient racial discourses in the national rhetoric. Focusing on the little known history of Afro-Argentines, I will argue that Room 24 is part of a national project to organize and fortify racial hierarchy.
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Introduction

Buenos Aires is often called the “Paris of Latin America” and Argentina has a reputation of being set apart from the rest of the continent as a more European country. This so called “myth of white Argentina” has been actively perpetuated since Argentina gained independence from Spain in 1816. Other newly independent Latin American countries promoted themselves as mestizo countries, the results of mixing between European colonists and the indigenous population. Argentina from the outset, however, preferred to think of itself as a white country.\(^1\) To bolster this claim, the ruling elite chose to ignore and actively deny the existence of the non-European sections of the population that did survive. In the Argentine art room of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (MNBA, The National Museum of Fine Arts), Room 24, this process of denigrating non-white populations so that the myth of a white Argentina may be perpetuated is clearly visible. I will deploy a careful examination of the two art works depicting the indigenous and Afro-Argentine populations in Room 24 to expose the ways through which this identity myth came to be accepted as fact.

Room 24

The National Museum of Fine Arts in Buenos Aires displays ten works of Argentine art from the nineteenth century in Room 24. The choice to have just one room dedicated to Argentine art in the National Museum of Fine Arts in the capital of the country is intriguing in itself, yet the choice of these specific works to represent the best of Argentine art proves even more so. Brian Durrans argues that there is often a difference in how one desires to be perceived

and how one actually lives, a phenomenon I argue is evident in Room 24. The Argentine art room displays how Argentina desires to appear on a global stage – as a white country. To make such a case, it presents important works to Argentine art history such as *Sin pan y sin trabajo* (Without Bread and without Work), 1893, by Ernesto de la Cárcova, *El despertar de la criada* (The Awakening of the Maid), 1887, by Eduardo Sivori and a work by the museum’s founder, Eduardo Schiaffino, entitled *El repaso* (The Rest), 1889. These works speak to the making of modern Argentina. They explore the history of the Argentine working class, the industrialization of the country, the social role of the artist, and contemporary European trends to widen the variety of acceptable subjects to include the working class and the poor. *Without Bread and without Work* (fig. 1) shows the struggle of a poor couple sitting at a table in a neatly kept, spartan home. The woman breastfeeds an infant while she looks towards her husband. He, in turn, is actively looking out the window towards a factory, his right hand gripping the windowsill. His left fist is pressed to the table, propelling him slightly out of his chair, and tools lay on the table, within easy reach. By contrast, Room 24 employs the nonwhite subjects in the room as negative poles against which Argentine society is constructed. However the very inclusion of these subjects demonstrates that Argentina is not, in fact, a white country and never has been.

Among this overture to the making of modern Argentina, two works immediately differentiate themselves from the others in the room, although in them we may also view the making of a nation state. Ángel Della Valle’s *La vuelta del malón* (The Return of the Raid) (fig. 2) is by far the largest painting in the room. It measures at 6 x 9.5 feet and draws the eye

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immediately. To the left of this painting sits La cabeza de esclavo (The Bust of a Slave), 1882, by Francisco Cafferata. Together these two works form the only representations of Argentines of non-European descent. They also form two-thirds of the general representation of non-Europeans in the museum’s permanent collection of over 688 major works and 12000 sketches and minor works, or roughly .0016% of the total collection. The third and final work featuring a non-European subject is the 1892 Gauguin Vahine no te miti (Woman by the Sea), which will be discussed in greater detail later. The visual language employed by Gauguin to depict his Tahitian subject aligns closely with the logic seen throughout the museum of typifying nonwhites in order to designate them as external to Argentine identity. The abysmal statistic presented above is enough to warrant an investigation into MNBA’s collection but the visual language in these works, standing as the only depictions of nonwhite Argentines, leave much to be desired.

The Return of the Raid activates an eerily familiar role for the native peoples of Argentina. In this work, Ángel Della Valle fully adheres to the trope of the “savage native” in this monumental painting. It depicts a band of bare-chested natives on horseback returning from a raid, the spoils of their looting held high in triumph. The central male figure holds a gilded cross high above his head, as one would a standard. Directly behind him another man holds an additional item of religious significance: a golden thurible, used to burn incense in Catholic ceremonies. The greatest spoil of war, however, is a white woman. In her captor’s arms, she sits draped across the side of the horse, her pristine white dress torn to bare her breasts. The lightness of her skin glows, drawing our attention to her exposed and vulnerable body. Dichotomies of light and darkness repeat thrice in the work: the woman sitting atop a black horse, the native man holding the cross on a white horse, and the turbulence of the black storm clouds contrasted with the light far on the horizon. With the addition of the religious symbols, the painting depicts a
moral battle as well. Darkness and evil are conflated with the natives’ brown skin while the woman stands for light and, therefore for good. In this colonization narrative, the battle between “civilization” and “barbarity” is moralized to become one between good and evil. *The Return of the Raid* actively constructs a narrative of colonization as God’s will. Europeans are positioned as the rightful holders of God’s favor, symbolized by the religious objects present in the work. The natives are demonized in opposing visual language. Rather than seen as protecting their territory, they are portrayed as defiling all that is good. Such a relational framework positions the colonization of what would become Argentina as both God’s will and a divine punishment for the savages. To understand the visual language employed by Della Valle in this work, I turn to a brief examination of the tradition of the “raiding savage” in Argentina.

In the nineteenth century, the Mapuche Indians, of what is now Argentina and Chile, launched a series of *malónes* (raids) on *las estancias* (large farms) that were spreading across *la pampa* (the Argentine countryside). These raids were surprise attacks directed at the farms to obtain horses, livestock and other provisions.\(^3\) The Mapuche’s tactics were quick and uncomplicated, allowing them to strike without notice. Such attacks were so common that the *malónes* came to represent the barbarity of the native ‘savage’ in nineteenth-century discourse. Esteban Echeverría, the founder of the literary and intellectual group called the Generation of ‘37, wrote an epic poem in 1837 called *La cautiva* (*The Captive Woman*) which detailed the savagery of the Mapuche. This poem exemplified Argentine nationalist ideology at the time and became the formative representation of the Mapuche Indians in the fledgling Argentine self-consciousness. The predominate ideology of the time, visible both in *The Captive Woman* and *The Return of the Raid*, is the belief that the founding of Argentina was a battle between

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civilization and savagery. One of the key ways to ensure the triumph of civilization was to promote European immigration to occupy the territory. Juan Alberdi, the author of the Argentine constitution, said “to govern is to populate…the vast territory is the cause of disorder and backwardness, rendering impossible the centralization of government and generating anarchy.”

Another member of the Generation of ‘37 and the seventh president of the nation, Domingo Sarmiento, stated, “above all, we would like to remove the savages from all American social questions, as for them we feel, without being able to remedy it, an unconquerable loathing, and for us… they are no more than disgusting Indians, who we would have hanged.”

The ruling elite in the foundational period of the republic were these men of the Generation of ‘37. It is their ideas of progress, through European immigration and decimation of the native savage, upon which the Argentine republic was founded. Central to the establishment of the nation, was the denigration and decimation of indigenous people in favor of white Argentines, even if that population needed to be imported. The Captive Woman is the story of a white woman who was kidnapped by savages. As women were the means through which the state would reproduce itself, any violation of white Argentine women by the “savages” was seen as a violation of the state itself. During the time of the Generation of ’37, when maintaining and growing the population was central to nation building, The Captive Woman was taken up as a manifesto against miscegenation. Two means to connect the poem and The Return of the Raid are the work’s given title and the woman depicted in the painting. The word malón has a history implicitly tied to violent racial discourses and practices. By employing this word and its connotations in the title, Della Valle connects The Return of the Raid to a particular history during the founding of the nation. Similarly, the woman’s exposed breasts sexualize the scene.

4 Ibid., 67-68.
and serve as a warning against inappropriate sexual conduct.

The dichotomy between the natives and the Europeans is not all-encompassing however in *The Return of the Raid*. Both the woman and her captor are bare-chested, creating a strange equalizing effect between the two that begins to complicate their relationship. Her European clothing would designate her as civilized but, in showing her dress torn down to the waist, she is visually comparable to the raiders. Her ripped dress both sexualizes her and speaks to how flimsy that marker of civilization is. That this woman can be so easily stripped of civility and at the mercy of the raiders heightens the anxiety in the work and reveals the fears of miscegenation on the borders of the emergent Argentine civilization.

In contrast, Della Valle’s *El juego del pato* (The Game of the Duck), date unknown, (fig. 3) depicts the famous *gaücho*, the rancher/cowboy figure of *la pampa*. The *gaücho* is an important romantic figure in Argentine history that represents masculine valor and the heroics of the frontier days. The *gaücho* is the symbol of the civilizing process. This work forms a striking visual contrast when compared to *The Return of the Raid*. Although formed by the same hand, *The Game of the Duck* presents none of the high stakes present in *The Return of the Raid*. Replacing the dark and violent sky of *The Return of the Raid*, is a soft blue sky filled with white fluffy clouds. The gauchos relax with a game, unconcerned with the greater stakes of the nation as it constructs itself through and around them.

Cafferata’s *Bust of a Slave* (fig. 4) is similarly a negative stereotypical portrait of an Afro-Argentine man. It is unknown if Cafferata sculpted the bust after a model or if the work is purely an imaginative artistic exercise. The slave’s head is thrown back, he appears exhausted and his brows draw together in worry and agony. His face is a map of wrinkles while his mouth is slightly open to show his teeth in a painful sneer. The nostrils seem to flare, as if in this
moment he is experiencing extreme physical discomfort. Finally, the shoulders are hunched forward, making the man seem as if his body is trying to escape whatever pain is plainly written on his face. The meticulous detail with which the slave is rendered divulges a Cafferata’s almost photographic interest in his subject.

Study in Europe under a great master was considered essential to an artist’s formal education. The aesthetic preference for social realism that is evident in Room 24 is verification of the great impact Italian models had on Argentine artists. The Bust of a Slave was in fact created during Cafferata’s time abroad. Cafferata studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome under the sculptor Urbano Lucchesi, along with his fellow countryman and personal idol Lucio Correa Morales, who is known as the father of Argentine public sculpture. Morales had a strong influence on Cafferata’s subjects in his early work.

In the Palermo garden in the center of Buenos Aires, La esclavitud (Slavery) (fig. 5) is one of Cafferata’s works from just a year before Bust of a Slave. Quickly we notice that the face of the man depicted in both works is identical. In contrast to Bust of a Slave, Slavery depicts the Afro-Argentine man’s full body. He sits hunched over in the nude, his wrists in shackles. His face shows the same expression as the Bust of a Slave. It seems that Cafferata has quite literally taken the head off of this early sculpture to create a bust. Such a choice to remove and isolate the head was influenced by the ethnographic typing movement that his colleague Morales participated in.

Morales was known to take exhibitions into the interior of the country with ethnographers and anthropologists to document different ethnic types. According to Morales’ friend, the art

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6 Ibid.,130.
critic Julio A. Payró, upon his death Morales had an extensive collection of photographs of the faces of indigenous peoples that he had taken on expeditions to the Chaco region and the Sierra de la Ventana with ethnographer Juan Bautista Ambrosetti, anthropologist Florentino Ameghino, and the naturalist and explorer Francisco P. Moreno. Morales’ collection of photographs of native peoples can be situated in the larger trend of photography as a means of classification.

Since the invention of the daguerreotype in August 1839, photography has been understood to have a closer relationship to documentary “truth” than any other form of man-made representation. By the late nineteenth century in Europe, the abundance of criminal portraits formed a bodily archive, giving rise to two comparative philosophies of the body: physiognomy and phrenology. Both purport that the surface of the body, and the head specifically, contains clues about the inner character of a person. Inherently comparative, these two disciplines set out to document all of human diversity. It was photography of the head – portrait photography – that fueled such movements. Cafferata’s *Bust of a Slave* presents an interesting divergence from the paradigm of clearly differentiated lines between ethnographic and traditional portraiture. By isolating the head from the body that he had previously created in *Slavery*, Cafferata’s *Bust of a Slave* participates in the physiognomic insistence on facial and cranial difference. The bust serves to create a “generalized look” of a slave; an ethnographic type. Otherness was not just located in the body, but in the head specifically. This association with deviance changed the connotations of portraiture from that of a primarily upper class activity to one, at the very least, just as closely associated with the underlings of society.

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9 Ibid., 13.
distinction, therefore, was drawn between photographic portraits and traditional portrait paintings and busts. These new forms of portraits subverted all of the privileged previously assumed with portraiture. Through such physiognomic practices, photography in general came to be associated with the other to “define both the generalized look – the typology – and the contingent instance of deviance and social pathology.”  

The social other effortlessly became associated with a racial other as well. As Cafferata’s inspiration Morales demonstrated, ethnographic portraits were rooted in the same ideas of documenting the “generalized look” of the other. The nature of Cafferata’s chosen medium, a bust, complicates the matter, however. For, while photographic portraits were associated with the social miscreant, busts retained their association with the upper echelons of society. It seems that Bust of a Slave simultaneously generalizes and individualizes its subject. What we see here is a traditional portrait manifestation of an ethnographic type. Although slavery was abolished in Argentina in 1853, Cafferata chose to create the Bust of a Slave almost thirty years, a generation, afterwards. In 1882, when this sculpture was created, there were no slaves in Argentina. Cafferata chose to create an image not of ‘a man’ or ‘a man, formerly a slave’ but ‘a slave’. The designation of this man as simply ‘a slave’ erases all of his individuality. Such an unflattering representation is undesirable for any minority group struggling for equality but, as the only depiction of an Afro-Argentine, the work perpetuates a caricature of an entire people, enshrined in the national museum without challenge.

Nineteenth-century Museums and the Establishment of MNBA

Like other museums established in the nineteenth century, the MNBA was established by

10 Ibid., 13.
11 Ibid., 14.
liberal individuals interested in “progress”. Nearly all museums opened in this time had the express mission of educating the working classes. They attempted to do so by presenting a higher culture that the visitor was to absorb and emulate. Founded in 1884, The Pitt-Rivers Museum is paradigmatic of the ideology of the nineteenth century museum. Lt- General August Pitt-Rivers donated his collection to the University of Oxford and explicitly saw his museum as educating the lower classes. In an 1891 lecture at the Society of the Arts he stated, “the masses are ignorant…the knowledge they lack is the knowledge of history.” Pitt-Rivers envisioned that his museum would be a strong didactic force to the masses and provide them with historical knowledge. However the history presented in the museum is a very specific and Eurocentric one indeed. Nineteenth-century museums served to underline the differences between groups and to fortify and reproduce discriminatory power relations. Displays were organized to racialize understandings of difference and promote a western (moral, cultural, and technological) superiority by quite literally using displays to create an evolutionary progression, culminating in objects from whichever (Western) society the museum represents. The huge vitrine of shields in the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford exemplifies this practice by placing shields from ancient Sub-Saharan Africa, the South Pacific and modern Plexiglas shields used by London police force next to each other.

Twelve years latter and thousands of miles away, the National Museum of Fine Arts opened its doors in 1896. The primary collection consisted of 163 Argentine and European art works, primarily from France, Italy and Spain. Established by a decree of President José Evaristo

18 Coombes, "Museums and the Formation," 236.
Uriburu in 1895, MNBA’s first director was Eduardo Schiaffino, who occupied the position until 1910. Schiaffino, a painter himself as well as an art critic and historian, had been the foremost proponent of the visual arts in Argentina for twenty-one years before he was appointed director in 1895. Schiaffino and his contemporaries belonged to an era known as the Generation of ‘80. Rising to power in the moments of great urban expansion, the Generation of ‘80 were the ruling elites in Buenos Aires from 1880 to 1910. They modeled themselves on the Generation of ’37, the founding fathers of modern Argentine society, who had established a strong precedent of looking toward Europe and North America for models of economics, culture and politics.

This era is often touted as the golden age of Argentine history. Continuing the precedent set by the Generation of ‘37, modernization and Europeanization of the country were one and the same. In that era of the Generation of ‘80 the modernization of the nation began and the ideals of the previous generation were realized. With the clear direction of the ruling class, the system of public administration was organized, the first political parties were established, and Buenos Aires was declared a federal district. It is also in this era that some 15,000 square leagues (about 178,780 miles squared) of land controlled by the indigenous people was “recuperated”, grossly hastening the demise of that population. As industry soared, vast droves of European immigrants, mostly Spanish and Italian, came to Buenos Aires and a socially conscious porteño identity, a city identity as differentiated from that of rural populations, began to develop. Characterized by

such beliefs in themes of progress and the growth of Argentine civilization, the ideals of the Generation of ‘80 influenced artistic production and the establishment of the MNBA as well.

The fundamental esthetic of Argentine art was solidified around 1880 when Schiaffino established the Sociedad Estímulo de Bellas Artes (Society for the Stimulation of the Fine Arts) in 1876, which organized local fine art exhibitions, hosted lectures, and gave classes. Schiaffino along with Ángel Della Valle founded El Ateneo in 1893. It was there that Schiaffino began to imagine a national museum of fine arts and began to ask his friends, like Della Valle, to donate works of art towards that end.\(^23\) Schiaffano also wrote art criticisms for El diario (The Diary) and La nación (The Nation), both still regarded as the premier journalistic publications of Argentina.\(^24\) Via the cultivation of a taste for art in a time where there were no public museums or schools of art, Schiaffino created those institutions and strove to modernize and civilize Argentina.\(^25\) With the creation of the MBNA, the Generation of ‘80 created a place for art in Argentina, modeled on their views of progress and growth.

On December 25\(^{th}\), 1896 MNBA opened its doors to the public for the first time. Located in the heart of the city, on Florida Street, the museum was housed in the Bon Marché, a space originally designed for department stores.\(^26\) Until 1900, the works of the museum were not organized in any particular didactic way. Schiaffino viewed this abandonment of the evolutionary chronology so common in nineteenth-century museums as a flaw, “the lack of our own building has forced the direction to sacrifice the chronological order of the works in favor of organization based upon genres.”\(^27\) The collection grew three times larger in 1907 when

\(^{23}\) Herrera, "El Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes,” 7.
\(^{24}\) Pancheco and Snyder, “An Approach to Social Realism”, 126.
\(^{25}\) Herrera, "El Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes,” 1.
\(^{26}\) Ibid., 8.
\(^{27}\) Ibid., 3.
Schiaffino traveled to Rome to purchase the entire collection of John Bayle. The Bayle collection was handled by antique book dealer Dario Rossi and supposedly contained works by Raphael, Michaelangelo, Guercino, the Carracci, Rembrandt, Rubens, Murillo, and Le Brun. However the authenticity of these works was immediately questioned upon their arrival in Buenos Aires. This controversy, along with doubts about how exactly Schiaffino purchased the works, led to his dismissal in 1910. Nevertheless, such an expansion of the collection required a new building and the MNBA moved to its second location in 1910. A palace of steel and glass, the Pabellón argentino (Argentine Pavilion) was exhibited in the Universal Exposition of 1889 in Paris before being reassembled in the Plaza San Martin in Buenos Aires. The MNBA occupied this space until May 23, 1933 when it moved to its present building at 1473 Avenida del Libertador (Liberator Avenue).

Declared by a presidential decree, the MNBA has been intimately tied to the authority of the state since its inception. Its first dedicated building, the Argentine Pavilion, was previously a representation of the entire nation of Argentina to the world. Truly a temple to the muses, the current building of the MNBA adheres to traditional museum architecture in all aspects except for one conspicuous element; the color pink. Although white marble is the traditional standard for these temples of secular knowledge, the association between the color pink and important buildings is not unheard of in Argentina. La Casa Rosada, The Pink House, is the seat of the Argentine federal government. As its name suggests, just as the White House is white, the Pink House is pink. This visual association between the museum and La Casa Rosada undeniably gives the weight of national authority to MNBA and through this visual association the program of the museum becomes enmeshed with the power networks of the state itself, giving the history

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presented in the museum the weight of a nationally sanctioned history. This relationship between the state and the museum signifies the prestige the museum has in Argentine society. The MNBA is indeed a museum that is dedicated to serving the tastes of the established class. Established museums are interested in conventional, academic art and, of course, the established; they are the guardians of high culture. When the museum opened its doors in 1896, the established class was the Generation of ‘80. The works of Argentine art in Room 24 were part of the initial seed of 163 works, collected by Schiaffino and guided by the principles of his generation.

Constructing Hierarchies and the Evolution of Room 24

In 2005 MNBA underwent a major renovation. Guided by new curatorial direction, the museum added three new rooms to permanently house displays of Pre-Columbian art, Spanish colonial art, and, in Room 24, the works of Argentine artists of the nineteenth century. Room 24 is the first permanent display of Argentine art in the museum. María Florencia Galesio, María José Herrera and Valeria Keller explain that the curator sought to provide a more comprehensive panorama of Argentine Art with the remodeling of the museum. They note that Room 24 was

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46 Ibid., 211.
organized as a milestone in the institutionalization of the arts that began in 1876 with establishment of Schiaffino’s Society for the Stimulation of the Arts.\textsuperscript{47} It is quite literally a monument to the Generation of the ‘80 both in practice and in intention. The curators seemed to understand that Room 24 would play an important role in shaping national identity for they say, “to begin developing the script for the permanent Argentine art room, the first question was what kind of collection does the MNBA have, what is its identity?” Furthermore they go on to say, “public museums are the representation of the relationship between the citizen and the state as benefactor… In this sense both what is displayed in a public museum and what is not shown is significant.”\textsuperscript{48} \textsuperscript{49} Clearly ideas of identity and nationhood were part of the conception of Room 24 and yet simply having an Argentine art room seemed to be the primary concern. Questions about what constitutes the Argentine identity were not considered. The lack of a permanent display of Argentine art in the National Museum of Fine Arts in the capitol of the country for over a century is simply astounding but this may be symptomatic of the complicated Argentine self-perception as an extension of European society.

The dichotomy of the noble, sophisticated, civilized European contrasted against a brutal and brutalized non-white evident in Room 24 functions to construct a racial hierarchy in Argentina. The room serves as a visual representation of how the modern Argentine state was formulated and conceptualized. To return to Brian Durrans, the room depicts how Argentina

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\item \textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 215.
\item \textsuperscript{48} “Para comenzar a elaborar el guión de las salas permanentes de arte argentino, la primera pregunta fue qué tipo de colección tiene el MNBA, ¿Cuál es su identidad?” and “Así, los museos públicos son la representación de la relación entre el ciudadano y el estado como benefactor… En este sentido tanto lo que se muestra en un museo público como lo que no se muestra, es significativo”
\item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 212.
\end{itemize}
would like to be seen and now how the country is.\textsuperscript{50} In Room 24, Argentine identity is predicated on European colonial racial hierarchies that have been appropriated and shifted to fit the purposes of the Argentine state.

Stepping out of Room 24, the layout of MNBA itself creates a tautological narrative that positions Argentina as rooted in European culture and as the continuation and extension of that culture in the New World. The visitor is immediately struck by the grandeur of the classically-inspired Greco-Roman façade as she/he walks up a flight of steps to pass between four oversized columns to enter the reception area. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine note, “museums do not simply resemble temples architecturally; they work like temples, shrines, and other such monuments. Museumgoers today, like visitors to these other sites, bring with them the willingness and ability to shift into a certain kind of contemplation and learning experience.”\textsuperscript{51} This liminality of the visitor approaching these modern day temples is the key that the MNBA relies on to shape and influence the perception of Argentine national identity. The connecting thread between museums, temples, and shrines is the perception of authority. The divine authority of a temple or shrine becomes a curatorial authority in museums. The relationship between visitors and the authority in each case is the same: it is one of unequal power relations. Similarly, the flow of knowledge is unidirectional: the visitor learns from the authority.

Visitors enter into the first gallery off to the left of the entryway. As in other typical nineteenth century museums, the galleries are set up in such a way as to lead visitors through a progressive narrative in which Argentina is the culmination. The first gallery contains European art from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, in the second are European works from the fifteenth to

\textsuperscript{50} Durrans, “The Future of the Other: Changing Cultures of Display in Ethnographic Museums,” 225.

seventeenth century, in the third European art until the eighteenth century and so forth until the visitor enters the final gallery and the historical narrative culminates in Room 24. Although most galleries in the museum are arranged chronologically, there are notable exceptions. Room 5 is dedicated to Mannerism and Baroque art, including El Greco’s Jesus in the Garden of Olives, c. 1600 as well as works by Rubens. Works by Francisco de Goya are housed in their own gallery and there are a few galleries containing the collection of specific donors. The visitor literally walks through a timeline of European greats, passing by important European artists one by one in chronology. In the rooms leading up to the Argentine art room, European culture and art is given preeminent status as the pinnacle of human artistic achievement. Through the layout of MNBA “art history displaces history, purges it of social and political conflict, and distills it down to a series of triumphs, mostly if individual genius.”53 The triumphant narrative presented by the museum is that of European culture.

Argentina, however, is not geographically a European country, of course. The long journey through the history of European art, gives the visitor the context through which the museum wishes the visitor to view the Argentine art room. Walking through these galleries, the viewer’s gaze is educated before it is turned upon the Argentine works. Within this preamble the racializing work needed to move from a dichotomy of “west vs rest” to one of “white and nonwhite” present in Room 24 takes place.

Paul Gauguin’s Vahine no te miti (Woman by the Sea) (fig. 6), 1892, is the only other representation of a nonwhite person in the museum. Located in the gallery dedicated to Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, it depicts a Tahitian woman sitting naked on a beach, her back turned towards the viewer. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s philosophy on the stages of human

53 Karp and Lavine, Exhibiting Cultures, 92.
society strongly influenced Gauguin’s understanding of Tahiti and its inhabitants. Gauguin paints his Tahitian subjects under the guise of the *société naissante* (nascent society); removing all the traces of modernity that he surely would have encountered after a century of Protestant, Catholic, and Mormon missionary activity on the island from his compositions. Instead, he figures his subjects as removed from time and history. By the time Gauguin arrived in Tahiti in search of the sexual paradise free of western values, his “paradise” no longer existed, or, to put it simply, the women were no longer running around naked. The vast majority of his subjects are nude Tahitian women, however. He quite literally removes his subjects from the processes of history and modernity and situates their bodies in a timeless imaginary realm. This shrouding in particular visual language of what is viewed as exotic or savage and non-European is evident in the *Bust of a Slave* as well. Rather than represent how a contemporary Tahitian woman may have appeared to him, Gauguin represents the woman as he chooses to envision her to better suit his purposes in search of an imaginary society. Similarly, choosing to imagine and represent Argentina as a white country necessitated that elites had the power to represent non-Europeans in Argentina to suit this myth. With this power to arrest time and represent non-Europeans, Cafferata was able to envision and create an image of a slave, more than a generation after all Afro-Argentines were freed in Argentina.

Arguing that colonizing processes, which called for the appropriation of the land of the colonized and the exploitation of their labor, required the ideological construction of racism, Walter Mignolo highlights the key to establishing hegemony that privileges one group of people. European colonists established this hegemony that classified otherness in order to appropriate

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55 Ibid., 334.
lands and resources from those deemed less worthy than the colonists themselves. After former colonies won their independence from imperialist countries, as Argentina did from Spain in 1816, the racial hierarchies remained in place, now serving the “white” rather than the European. Mignolo explains that:

white creole and mestizo elites, in South America and the Spanish Caribbean islands, after independence from Spain adopted a “Latinidad” to create their own postcolonial identity. Consequently, I am arguing here: “Latin” America is not so much a subcontinent as it is the political project of creole-mestizo elites. However it ended up by being a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it created the idea of a new continental unit...on the other hand, it lifted up the population of European descent and erased the Indian and the Afro populations.

Argentine society was stratified in such racial ways: whites held the top rungs of society, their race providing them unquestioned legal superiority over nonwhites. The native population lived under separate law that occasionally afforded them more rights than blacks. Enslaved populations decidedly occupied the humblest positions and mulattoes and mestizos occupied a lingering space somewhere in the middle. This process of carving out a place for some while simultaneously subjugating others is one that can still be seen in the National Museum of Fine Arts.

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The Obfuscated History of Afro-Argentines

Room 24 shows us the creation and modernization of the Republic of Argentina; a process that entailed the subjugation of indigenous peoples and Afro-Argentines, first articulated by the Generation of ‘37 and continuing today. To say that there are no blacks in Argentina and of Argentina is false. To understand why this claim is so widely circulated, however, we must step back and examine the history of slavery and Afro populations in Argentina. Seven years after the first founding of the city of Buenos Aires in 1536, the Spanish crown granted the first royal permit to import slaves into the region in 1543. Special royal concessions were granted to specific people to import slaves. However, only 288 of the 12,778 slaves entering Buenos Aires from Brazil between 1606 and 1625 did so legally.61 In the colonial era, Argentine society was strictly divided into two distinct strata: the gente decente (decent people) and the gente del pueblo (the common people). Codified by Spanish colonial legislation, race was the biggest determinant of social class.62 Slave labor was crucial to the development of the fledgling Argentine economy but there were ways in which a slave could win his/her freedom, the so-called siete partidas (the Seven-Part Code). Among the ways a slave could be free were if she/he married a free person with the master’s knowledge and consent, and if the slave was made tutor of the master’s children.63 Slavery continued more or less unchallenged until 1813 with the issuing of the Ley de libertad de vientres (Law of the Freedom of the Wombs), which declared that all children born of slave mothers after January 31, 1813 were free. This freedom, however, was highly regulated. These children, known as libertos, were still required to live in the house

61 Ibid., 24.
62 Ibid., 17.
63 Ibid., 42.
of their mothers’ owners until they either married or reached the age of majority (age 20 for males or 16 for females). If they chose to stay in the household after the age of majority they were paid one peso a month. Although such laws effectively allowed the practice of slavery to remain unchanged until 1829, census data shows that between 1810 and 1827 the general percentage of the black population living under the control of whites dropped from 82.9 to 73.7%. The percentage of black families living under control of white households dropped from 68.4 to 51.5%. It was not until Argentina issued the first constitution in 1853 that all slavery was abolished.

In 1838, the 150,000 Afro-Argentines accounted for in the census comprised almost 25% of the total population in Buenos Aires. But in 1887, the next year of the census, the population was only 8,000 or 2% in a city of 433,000 people. Today the exact number remains unknown. Such a drastic decline is a result of social, educational, economic, and political discrimination and genocide. The Afro-Argentines were most affected in the middle of the nineteenth century by European immigration, which increased economic competition, and by the policies of the provincial Governor Juan Manuel de Rosas. Rosas’ racial discriminatory policies drafted Afro-Argentine men disproportionately into war after war, both international and civil, effectively killing off the population. During his campaign, Rosas had specifically sought out the support of black Argentines by attending community events and allowing black men to enter into the officer corps of the general army. However this alliance had a devastating effect on the Afro-Argentine community. The series of wars Rosas engaged in caused large numbers of black men to be absent for long periods of time and many of them killed. Additionally, Rosas’ political enemies

64 Ibid., 48.
66 Ibid., 96.
seized upon his alliance with Afro-Argentines to fuel an anti-black backlash.\textsuperscript{68} Outside pressures on the black community mounted and the government of Argentina actively courted European immigration as a way to replace blacks, indigenous and mixed race individuals, whom they viewed as lazy and useless. The percentage of foreigners grew from 41\% in 1855 to 72\% of the total population in 1895.\textsuperscript{69} These immigrants competed with Afro-Argentines for jobs, housing and even women. This latter matter was especially sensitive and was remarked upon in 1880 in \textit{La broma} (The Joke), an Afro-Argentine publication, when the editor wrote a scathing condemnation of those black women marrying Italians. He also touched on the sexual imbalance in the Afro-Argentine community due to Rosas’ wars, which may have led to such marriages.\textsuperscript{70}

\textbf{The Contemporary Situation of Afro-Argentines}

To enshrine one particular view of the status of race in Argentina inside the National Museum of Fine Arts has greater implications outside of the realm of fine arts. The founding fathers of Argentina, the Generation of ’37 and the Generation of ’80, great modernizers, strove to make Argentina a white country through the decimation of native populations and European immigration. Still today, Argentines prefer to think of themselves as an entirely white nation. This, however, was never the case. The portion of the population that was European-born or descendent never reached above 60\% at its height in the 1920s but the CIA World Factbook describes the Argentine population as 98\% white.\textsuperscript{73} A significant reason for this misconception is that up until recently the government has simply chosen to ignore its Afro-Argentine population. Census officers claimed not to include a question on race on the census of 1895 because they

\begin{itemize}
  \item Ibid., 25.
  \item Ibid., 26.
  \item Chamosa, "Indigenous or Criollo," 77.
\end{itemize}
believed that the majority of the participants would identify as white. They added, “the racial question, so noticeable in the United States, does not exist in Argentina, where it will not take much time for the population to become completely unified, creating a new and beautiful white race produced by the contact among all the European nations, made fruitful in the South American soil.” With the sharp decline of the Afro-Argentine population from 1838 to 1887, it seemed the predictions of the census officers were warranted and, until 2010, the census did not include Afro-Argentine as a category. In such a climate where the very existence of a people is ignored, representation and visibility is key in shaping views.

Much of the reason that Argentines believe that there is no racism in the country has to do with this belief that, as the census officers said, the population has become completely unified and that Afro-Argentines no longer exist. This however is not the case; over 200 million Argentines have black genetic markers. In Argentina, the term negro is problematic because it stands in for both those of African heritage and for anyone with darker skin. George Reid Andrews relates a telling story about Afro-Uruguayan actor Ray Charol’s experience in Argentina in *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*:

The Afro-Uruguayan actor Rey Charol recalls an incident when he was casually talking with some white friends in a Buenos Aires bar and one of them began complaining about “all those negros” Charol protested immediately, whereupon the friend hastened to reassure him “But no, morocho, I wasn’t saying it about you…I really like you morochos, what bothers me are those negros, the cabecitas negras.” *Cabecitas negras*, meaning “little black heads” is a derogatory term that is used to describe rural

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74 Ibid., 77-78.
77 Ibid., 210.
migrants into Buenos Aires. These people are the scapegoats of Argentine society; they are the lowest rungs of society and have the worst jobs. They live in the villas miserias, the slums (literally miserable villages), that are dotted throughout Buenos Aires and form a large portion of the population. In designating them as cabecitas negras, a racializing has occurred that clashes with the myth of an all white Argentina. Just as in the colonial era, the gente decente and the gente del pueblo are distinguished in terms of race. Negro is still the prevailing term used amongst white Argentines who use the term to apply to all people of darker skin. “Afro-Argentine” or “people of color” are relatively new and only used by those who identify with those terms. The tendency of white-Argentine society to lump all those of darker skin together and the utter lack of concern to differentiate between individuals speaks to the visual tendency in MNBA as well.

Museums often think of their viewing publics as blank slates upon which they may imprint their chosen message. All persons come to museums with individual sets of prejudices, assumptions, and experiences, which will impact the ways in which they move through the museum. Museum exhibits are the termination point of the curator and as such they represent a closed system to the viewer with no possibility to change the display. There is no opportunity for comment or reflection; the viewer is intended to do only that: “view”.

Feedback is an essential part of the equation in creating a new and more acceptable representation of Afro-Argentines in MNBA. If we are to continue to place so much social capital in institutions such as museums, museums must be a place that reflects and celebrates the diversity of the society in which it is situated.

78 Ibid., 210.
80 Sandell, Museums, Prejudice, and the Reframing of Difference, 391.
81 Ibid., 219.
Stakeholders and Audiences

In 2010 Fundación TyPa, in collaboration with the United States Embassy, held the first (and to date the only) symposium on the representation of Afro-Argentines in museums in Buenos Aires. Appropriately, it was called Visible/Invisible. Founded by the previous director of the MNBA, Américo Castilla in 2004, Fundación TyPa is an organization based in Buenos Aires that strives to “preserve existing and future artistic capital and to promote artistic creation and cultural debate by establishing links between Argentine artistic production and that of other regions in the world.”\(^{82}\) The symposium included museum professionals from around Argentina, the United States and Uruguay. Breakout discussions included: the state of Afro-Argentines, society & representation, investigation of Afro-Argentine communities, diversity in museums, and a roundtable of some prominent Afro-Argentine organizations.

The category “Afro-Argentine” was added to the census that same year, inaugurating a wave of publicity and interest in Afro-Argentines, Américo Castilla noted. However museums were slow to engage with the discussion. To spark this conversation, Visible/Invisible brought together a diverse group of both local and global museum professionals and Afro-Argentine community organizers. Many of those in attendance were in the beginning stages of creating community-based museums in Argentina, who were grappling with the mistaken belief that Afro-Argentines have no cultural patrimony with which to build their museums. Deborah L Mack, an independent museum consultant who has served on the Scholarly Advisory Committee for the Smithsonian Institution’s National African American Museum of History and Culture since 2005, organized one activity to combat such a belief that can be utilized in MNBA as well.

Mack arranged for the lights to be cut off in the Museo Histórico Nacional (the National History Museum), allowing the participants to wander the halls only with flashlights. The purpose of the exercise was to physically illuminate the history of Afro-Argentines by shining a light whenever they appeared in the museum, as principle characters or occupying the background. The exercise literally made visible what was previously invisible or overlooked.

Key to this exercise is the participation of the audience. Such a simple act as walking around with flashlights allowed the visitors to the museum to interact with the exhibitions in a new way that was not influenced by the vision of the curator. In fact – besides the choice of what is exhibited, which is perhaps the most concrete representation of the curator’s vision – the constructed narrative of the museum took a backseat in favor of the narrative the visitors illuminated with their flashlights. Mack noted that “the very idea of a National museum is a colonial inheritance” and that the most powerful way to disrupt this imposing heritage is through direct participation with the very exhibitions themselves. The content of an exhibition, she argued, does not necessarily have to change to create a radically different story than what is presently presented.

Artists such as Fred Wilson have shown this to be true with his interventions into established museum collections. Wilson’s Mining the Museum involved him physically moving objects from the collection of the Maryland Historical Society to construct an alternate history. Given free access to the collection, Wilson placed objects in conversation with each other that

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83 Deborah L Mack, in discussion with the author, March 2013.
84 Furthermore the strong representation of community-based museums at the symposium highlights the move away from colonial institutions and hierarchies.
85 Ibid.
highlighted stories once concealed or glossed over. In once instance, Wilson placed objects used in the service of white society around the same time, slave shackles and fine silver dining ware in the Baltimore repoussé style. This contrast between the beauty of the silver and the harsh utilitarian simplicity of the shackles brings to light the practices which made such a lifestyle that could utilize this fine dining set possible.

The MNBA can take one concrete step in overturning these hierarchies by first acknowledging the complicated history of Afro-Argentines and the indigenous population in relation to the state in Room 24. The Bust of a Slave and Return of the Raid are accompanied only by their descriptive labels, no history of these two populations is given at all. Providing historical data would allow visitors to start questioning the role of the works themselves. In the case of Bust of a Slave, simply providing the date slavery was abolished would spark visitors to ask why this bust of a slave was created thirty years later. Room 24 could similarly benefit from an intervention from interested parties and stakeholders. Such activities like a Wilsonian intervention or those actively involving visitors to re-imagine the narrative of the museum can prove vital to disrupting the potential damage MNBA causes with its stereotypical representations of racial minorities. These activities cause fractures in the perceived impenetrable, polished finish of national museums. Once visitors have a way to impact and influence exhibitions, the exhibition and the museum at large becomes a project of individuals not nature. This allows space for even bigger questions to be asked, such as “What is a nation?”, “Who determines what is fine art?” and “How and why am I being represented?”

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87 Ibid., 157.
Illustrations

Figure 1. Ernesto Cárcova, *Sin pan y sin trabajo* (Without Bread and without Work), 1894, Oil on Canvas, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Figure 2. Ángel Della Valle, *La vuelta del malón* (The Return of the Raid), 1892, Oil on Canvas, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Figure 3. Angel Della Valle, *El juego del pato* (The Game of the Duck), unknown date, Oil on Canvas, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Figure 4. Francisco Caffarata, *Cabeza de esclavo* (Bust of a Slave), 1882, Bronze, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Figure 5. Francisco Cafferata, *La esclavitud* (Slavery), 1881, Bronze, Parque tres de Febrero, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Figure 6. Paul Gauguin, *Vahine no te miti* (Woman by the Sea), 1892. Oil on Canvas, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina
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