

The Other Afro-Argentines: Racial Stories Among the South African Community of Patagonia in the 20th Century

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Abstract

Between 1902 and 1907, around 650 white South Africans (“Boers”) settled in Chubut province, in Argentina’s Patagonia region. Some of the families took black South Africans with them in ambiguous labor conditions. This paper traces the formation of ideas about race among the Patagonian Boers throughout the twentieth century, focusing on a series of stories about two black South Africans, Dumboy and Kokolas, who became legendary characters among generations of Argentine Boers in the areas surrounding Comodoro Rivadavia and Sarmiento. It analyzes the role of “racial stories” about Dumboy and Kokolas in the formation of ideas about blackness, whiteness, free labor, and slavery among the South African communities of Chubut, examining how these stories allow community members to assert belonging within an Argentine society broadly imagined as free of race and racism.

Keywords: History, Chubut (Argentina), 20th century, Boer community, slavery, racial ideologies and terminologies.

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Introduction

Between 1902 and 1907, around 650 white South Africans, mostly of Dutch descent (“Boers”), settled in parts of Patagonia, Argentina, mainly in the province of Chubut. Some of the colonists took black South Africans with them under ambiguous labor conditions. Stories about these South Africans persist in the memory of the Boer community of Patagonia, converging clearly around two black men known by the nicknames Dumboy and Kokolas. Although they became legendary characters among several generations of Argentinian Boers in the areas surrounding Comodoro Rivadavia and Sarmiento, little has been written about these “other” Afro-Argentines who arrived almost a century after the official end of the slave trade (DuToit, 1995; Edwards, 1998, Rivero, 2012).⁹ While the notion that the Boers took only two black Africans with them to Argentina persists in the community’s historical narratives, several photographs and archival documents suggest that Dumboy and Kokolas were not alone.¹⁰

This paper approaches the community’s oral memories about the black South Africans as “racial stories” (Alberto, 2016): repeated tales with specific characters, plots, vocabularies, and morals that reflect and reinforce dominant narratives of race and identity. Specifically, it analyzes the role of stories about Dumboy and Kokolas in the formation of ideas about free labor, slavery, blackness, and whiteness among the South African communities of Chubut, often expressed through tropes of territory, home, and community. Received from their parents and grandparents and passed onto future generations, the repeated anecdotes about Dumboy

⁹ Dumboy and Kokolas came from the indigenous Khoisan family (Damara and San, respectively). They most likely grew up among Boer families, probably in labor conditions resembling slavery (DuToit, 1995: 223-230).

¹⁰ See for instance the report by H. J. Piek, a Dutch Reformed Church minister in Chubut, which mentions “Blink boy,” a companion of Dumboy who died in Chubut. Available in English translation from Afrikaans at <https://aacollabarchive.humin.lsa.umich.edu/omeka/items/show/8>.

and Kokolas echo broader narratives about Argentina as a society supposedly free of races and racism and allow community members to assert their belonging within that society.

This project is part of a collaborative research initiative at the University of Michigan between 2014-2018 that grew out of a sociocultural and linguistic study of the bilingual Spanish/Afrikaans community of Patagonia, in which 87 interviews were collected in Spanish and Afrikaans. Among the 25 sociocultural interviews in Spanish, 21 speakers mentioned Dumboy and/or Kokolas--the subset on which this paper is based.¹¹ Our subset draws from interviews conducted in 2018, designed to follow up on clues about racial categories and about the presence of black South Africans that had initially emerged in more open-ended interviews from 2014. Most of the interviewees are third-generation (the grandchildren of the first South African colonists), ranging from ages 59 to 86. We cite these interviews below using a shorthand of bold letters (**A-U**).¹²

Enslaved or free? The question of legal status

During the interviews, participants responded to the following question: in what capacity did Dumboy and Kokolas come to Argentina? Four of the 21 interviewees explicitly used the term “slave” to describe Dumboy and Kokolas; three described them clearly as free laborers; and the remaining interviewees made no references to slavery or freedom in their responses. In three of the responses that did allude to slavery, interviewees implied that the men could have been enslaved in South Africa.

¹¹ In 2014, linguists Andries Coetzee, Lorenzo García-Amaya and Nicholas Henriksen formed the research project “From Africa to Patagonia: Voices of Displacement,” funded by the Michigan Humanities Collaboratory, to analyze the rich linguistic as well as historical, anthropological, and religious information contained in these interviews. The co-authors are part of this research team.

¹² The speakers’ demographic information (excluding their names), as well as the date and place of the interviews, are available at <http://umich.edu/~aacollab/losotros.html>

Slavery and other forms of coerced labor were indeed a central feature of South Africa's colonial society. Beginning in 1652, the Dutch colonists who arrived at the Cape of Good Hope with the Dutch East India Company introduced racial chattel slavery in the region (Scully, 1997: 2; Shell, 1994: xxxi-xxxii). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as the Dutch colonists expanded the colonial frontier into Khoikhoi territory, they seized numerous indigenous inhabitants of the region. The majority of these captives were young men and boys forced to work for Boer families under uncertain labor conditions (Morton, 1994: 1-2). By 1830, as British colonists reached the region, Dutch colonists extracted labor from individuals held in a range of dependent statuses. These included people described explicitly as slaves as well as legally free indigenous Khoikhoi and people of mixed African and European descent who worked in conditions analogous to slavery (Scully, 1997: 2, 9). Even after the British abolition of slavery in 1834, many indigenous South Africans would continue to labor under ambiguous conditions--indeed, the abolition of slavery in the Cape was one of the principal factors that provoked the mass emigration of "thousands of Dutch farmers," an exodus known today as the Great Trek (Watson, 2012: 1-2, 17-18, 24).

Over the course of the interviews, several speakers seemed reluctant or uncertain when discussing Dumboy and Kokolas' legal status. While several voiced their doubts, others stammered or hesitated. We read these pauses and hesitations as meaningful markers of the speakers' struggles to find language to describe concepts they found uncomfortable, difficult to express, or even unthinkable. As **A** noted, "My sense is that they ... they brought them as slaves from Africa, since there they had them as a slave [sic]." Meanwhile, **I** described Dumboy and Kokolas as "two slaves that they brought from South Africa as children." **B** affirmed that "[back] there they were slaves." One of the four respondents introduced a degree of ambiguity regarding the geographic limits of the status of "slaves." **T** said that her grandfather brought Dumboy and Kokolas to Argentina "to be their slaves," leaving open the question of whether

Dumboy and Kokolas were to be enslaved upon their arrival in Argentina, or whether they were already enslaved in their homeland.

Several speakers rounded out their answers to the question of status by expanding on Dumboy and Kokolas' legal status once they arrived in Argentina. Among the four interviewees who made explicit references to slavery, only one asserted that either Dumboy or Kokolas remained enslaved by the Boers who settled in Patagonia.

Interviewer: Did he remain a slave?

A: Yes, yes, yes, yes... Yes, as a... a *peón de patio* [unskilled household laborer] or something like that

Interviewer: But did they pay him?

A: N... No, no, no! They didn't pay him. No, they just gave him clothes and food, they didn't pay him.

Interviewer: Oh, ok. Just the basic necessities.

A: Yes, yes, yes! That's why... I'm telling you that they had him as a slave.

Yet the majority of these accounts construct a vision of Argentina as “free soil”—a land without slavery, or at least as a place with a very distant slaveholding past—which conferred freedom on Dumboy and Kokolas immediately upon arrival. This vision of Argentina contrasts sharply with interviewees' portrayal of South Africa, invariably associated with slavery and racial segregation. For example, **B** recalled that “Over there they were slaves. Here they're free if they came”, while **M** affirmed that “In those years in Africa, yes... [pause], but here they no longer came as slaves. No... they didn't have slavery here.” Finally, even for speakers for whom the men's exact juridical status remained unclear in Argentina, the strong presumption was in favor of freedom (in other words, slavery there was almost unthinkable):

Interviewer: And when he was here he was a slave?

I: No! A slave... he was a little on his own because... When I was young... he... he didn't eat with, with, with the family... They had him... they gave him food separately. But he lived... and worked for, for the... for the South Africans. He wasn't, no, they weren't... We aren't going to say that it was slavery. Because he had his money, he had his...

Interviewer: Oh, and they paid him.

I: Yes, they paid him. They paid him, yes. I think so, that they... I'm not really sure.

As these quotes suggest, compensation emerged as one of the key criteria that speakers considered when asked to define Dumboy and Kokolas' legal status in Argentina. While **B**, among others, maintained that the two men received compensation for their work, **A** and **I** affirmed the exact opposite or said that they did not know or remember if they received any form of payment. Although **A**, **I**, and **T** could not recall if the settlers remunerated Dumboy and Kokolas for their work, they stated that the men received basic necessities. **Q**, however, indicated that the Boers gave the men food and clothes out of charity ("because they felt pity for them"), and not as remuneration.

Beyond the lack of remuneration and the conditions of absolute dependency under which these men arrived, the terms speakers used to describe Dumboy and Kokolas' relationships with one or more Boer families suggest the possibly coercive nature of their labor arrangements. The most frequent terms speakers used to describe the employee/employer relationship were *peón* (unskilled laborer, farmhand) and *patrón* (boss). In general, speakers used these categories to convey a hierarchical relationship shaped by (free) labor, and not by race or legal status, thus distancing Dumboy and Kokolas from the shadow of slavery.¹³ Yet a few speakers deployed these terms ambiguously, as when **A** used *peón de patio* as a synonym for "slave," or when **F** used *patrón* interchangeably with *amo* (owner/master).¹⁴

The interviewees' descriptions of Dumboy and Kokolas' relationships to one or more Boer families also hinted at gray zones of racialized labor. While speakers often mentioned that one specific family (no consensus emerged as to which) had "brought" the two men to Patagonia, several explained that the shortage of laborers in the colony ultimately led several

¹³ A, B, F, L, M, O, and P described Dumboy and Kokolas' status within the *peón/patrón* logic. Interviewees also used the terms *empleado*, or employee (L), *trabajador*, or worker (M), and *conocido*, or acquaintance (T).

¹⁴ F: "seguro que serían sus amos, sus patrones, viste, no se." ("they were probably their owners/masters, their bosses, I don't know.")

families to rely upon Dumboy and Kokolas' labor.¹⁵ Within these narratives, which generally emphasized the men's freedom of movement and itinerancy, F offered a contrasting version, explaining that one of the two men "stayed with Myburgh until he died. He always loved his *patroncito* (master/boss). He never... he never left him."¹⁶

The interviewees' memories reflect a historical reality: the Boer settlers came from a land visibly marked by racialized coerced labor and colonialism and arrived in a country where slavery had been legally abolished by 1860 (and settled in a region with little or no evidence of slavery's previous existence). Yet the contrast between both places is perhaps too sharply drawn. The process of gradual abolition in the territory that became Argentina, beginning with the Free Womb Law of 1813, gave rise to new forms of labor coercion like the regimes of *patronato* ("apprenticeship") of freedpeople (Candioti 2010; Crespi 2010; Alberto 2019). Similarly, early-nineteenth-century free soil laws were unevenly enforced and only reaffirmed as a constitutional principle in 1860 (Castellano Sáenz Cavia, 1981: 60, 155-6). There is also evidence that slaveholders openly flouted laws surrounding both the gradual and definitive abolition of slavery, especially in regions far removed from Buenos Aires (Crespi 2010; Candioti 2019; Andrews 1980: 48–57). In such gray areas, some people remained in labor conditions analogous or contiguous to slavery. The respondents' narratives, with their categorical emphasis on the territorial boundaries between slavery (localized in South Africa) and freedom (in Argentina), mostly overlook these continuities or render them "unthinkable," even as the treatment of Dumboy and Kokolas may have constituted a form of enslavement on Argentine soil. It is important to note, however, that in a country that relegates slavery to a very

¹⁵ B, D, F, G. According to the interviewees, Dumboy and Kokolas performed tasks such as: short term jobs (*changuita*), "any minor job" (*cualquier trabajito*), chopping wood (*cortar leña*), fetching water, shearing wool, caring for children, peddling (*trabajar como mercachifle*), running errands (*mandados*), cooking, farming, and helping out around the house.

¹⁶ Several of the interviews also suggested that the men stayed with various families for longer stretches of time, becoming part of the extended household: see D, G, I, J, L, O, T.

distant past or ignores it altogether, the descendants of the Boer colonists are among the very few Argentines who confront the possibility that their ancestors (in their case, only one or two generations ago) might have been slaveholders.

Becoming Argentine: Ideologies and Terms of Racelessness or Racial Harmony

A second narrative emerging clearly from discussions of Dumboy and Kokolas in these interviews is that of the community's shift away from the marked racism that characterized South Africa and the first generations of settlers toward a more harmonious, inclusive, or race-blind set of attitudes. As in the stories about these men's legal status, this too is a narrative of Argentinization in which the local land, culture, and society are imagined as generating more egalitarian relationships among different ethnic groups.

Speakers are generally aware of the first and second generations' discriminatory attitudes and practices, both regarding black Africans and regarding Argentine locals. Indeed, the latter sort of discrimination is a theme in the body of interviews as a whole, as well as in the archival record dating from the earliest settlements. As historian Brian DuToit put it, "The Boers came from South Africa with heavy cultural baggage—and none heavier than racial prejudice [...]. There was a strong prejudice against those who were not of the elect, i.e., Afrikaans speaking, Protestant, or white. Thus they looked down on the Argentinians, particularly those of swarthy complexion" (DuToit 1995: 229). This included indigenous people, "criollos," and to a lesser extent immigrants from other backgrounds. These attitudes come through most palpably in recurrent discussions about the taboo on marriages outside the Boer community in the first generations of settlement (see also DuToit 1995: 229).

The stories through which interviewees describe these discriminatory attitudes among the first generations of immigrants do the important work of setting the baseline against which the community measures its progression toward greater inclusion and Argentineness. As **L**

succinctly put it, “The Africans [Boers] were very racist.”¹⁷ The terminology and hesitations speakers employed while explaining the early settlers’ construction of otherness is particularly illuminating. Recalling the restrictions on intermarriage in her (third) generation, **H** explained of some of her elders: “I think it must have been because of Apartheid, because they considered the Argentines to be just like blacks [*negros*]... for them, any Argentine was... was... n...*Spanjaarde* [Spaniard]. Like... as if they were Indians.” Elsewhere in her interview, **H** explains that for the earliest settlers (including her own mother), indigenous Argentines inspired “terror” as well racial derision: “the South Africans who came... uh... for them, it was as if the Indians were like the African blacks.” This extended equivalence among Argentines/ “negros”/ “indios” reflects the mostly dualistic (white/black) colonial racial order that became institutionalized as Apartheid in the 1940s—although despite Apartheid’s looming presence over these conversations, most interviewees implicitly acknowledged that segregationist attitudes and laws began much earlier. Finally, the equation of these terms with “Spanjaarde” suggests how Boer settlers conflated anti-black and anti-indigenous prejudice with the Black Legend anti-Spanish attitudes circulating among Dutch Protestants for centuries: resentment of Spain’s former control of the Netherlands, anti-Catholic, anti-Inquisition rhetoric, and portrayals of Spaniards as racial inferiors (Powell, 1971).

Yet many interviewees made it clear that these racist attitudes had waned over the generations, as the community became integrated into Argentine society. **L** said of the earlier generations, “Yes, I don’t know why but they always hold onto the idea that they’re better, you know, that the African [Boer] is better than... the *cast[ellano?]*... than the Argentine. It’s something like that, in a sense, always making the Argentine into something a bit less than the ... [Boer]. But those old folks almost don’t exist anymore.” Indeed, her own father proudly

¹⁷ See also Interview J.

claimed his Argentine identity: “Argentina gave me my whole family, gave me everything I have. So Argentina is my country.”

This “baseline” of stark anti-black, anti-Spaniard racism from which the community progressed toward integration appears clearly in the stories about Dumboy and Kokolas, specifically around the place of these two black men as itinerant workers in and around the Boers’ households. Several interviewees stressed that times had changed since the first generations, when settlers would not have allowed black men (or indigenous or *criollo* Argentines) into their houses. **M** explained, “Before... yes... if you’re referring to the time when the Boers arrived, then they... no one entered the house. [...] They would not have crossed the threshold. Never, never would they have entered the house [...] because [the settlers] came with their South African mindset.” But by the time he was an adult with his own household, “I had a *peón* [farmhand] and he entered the house, chatted with me, drank *mate* [...]. I think, in fact, [the community] became increasingly integrated ...because... the culture keeps progressing.”¹⁸ Several speakers explained that, with few exceptions, Dumboy and Kokolas were given good treatment in these homes, with what **O** called “good relations, [...]...excellent. No discord, no insults, no...”¹⁹ **D** recalled that even though Dumboy and Kokolas, like other farmhands, slept outside in separate quarters, they “lived together with [the Boers]. They worked together with the family, took part in their daily lives.”²⁰ **G** called Dumboy a hard worker and a “friend of the families,” and **J** noted that Kokolas helped her father with several

¹⁸ In several of these accounts, sociability around the table (or kitchen) with specifically Argentine foods (*mate*, *asado*, afternoon tea/coffee) recur as examples of cross-class and cross-ethnic integration, a literal melting pot (Pite, 2016). See also Interviews P, D; and Rivero, 2012.

¹⁹ Interview O attributes racist attitudes primarily to “Anglicized” Boers . See also Interview L, on the possibility of occasional “marginalization” of Dumboy in some households but good treatment overall.

²⁰ See also Interview O. But Interview I recalls that Dumboy ate separately, not with the family.

jobs, stayed for a time with her family (“lived” and “was with us in the house”), cooked for them when her mother was ill, and “had become very good friends with my father.”

In this sense, the presence of Dumboy and Kokolas not just inside the Boers’ homes but at the heart of familial relationships serves, in these stories, to flesh out the narrative of successive generations’ rejection of the racism of their forebears, and by implication, their increasing Argentinization. The clearest trope in this regard is the frequent description of these men as being good with children and deeply beloved by them in turn. **A** recalled that “Dumboy was very funny with children... the children loved him very, very, very much, for example, he made noises for them like a *guanaco*, or neighed like a horse, or imitated a pig. He did these charades for the kids and the kids loved him very much. How they would laugh!”. **K**, a woman, noted that Kokolas, for his part, “played the harmonica, and with his free hand he would steer you around and teach you to dance. He taught us [girls] to dance.” **J** similarly recalled Kokolas playing the harmonica with her and her brothers, whom she described as Kokolas’ “friends.” **G** recalled that her mother “adored” Dumboy so much (“she dearly loved that *negro*” who “took care of the children, was kind to the children, and was a very good person”) that later in life, after having moved out of town, she hopped on a bus to Comodoro when she heard that Dumboy was going to be visiting one of the Boer families.²¹

The intimacy of relations that several respondents describe between these black men and white families—friendship with parents and children, giving children piggy-back rides or holding them on laps,²² teaching young women to dance or play music, sharing meals at a table, and expressions of deep affection and even love—certainly stand in contrast with the kinds of separatist treatment speakers remembered (or imagined) as characteristic of South Africa or early generations of settlers. The close and affectionate treatment of Dumboy and Kokolas was

²¹ See also Interviews E, R.

²² Interviews G, T.

sometimes framed as part of a growing Argentiness among the community. **D** voiced a succinct version of Argentine ideas of racial harmony:

D: We Argentines—and the South Africans adopted the Argentine custom—...uh ... are very open. [...] Yes. It's an Argentine characteristic. Here, the Argentine, whether he is black, white, yellow, has no problem.

Interviewer: So then... with time... the South Africans became more Argentine in that respect.

D: Yes, yes, yes!

Although **D** is not a descendant of the original Boer settlers, but an Argentine woman who married into the community, the idea of increasing acceptance of, or even blindness to, ethnic difference as a feature of becoming Argentine echoes across many of these interviews.²³

Notably, when DuToit visited settlements of Boer descendants to conduct research in the 1980s, his interlocutors described Dumboy and Kokolas' integration into the community in the following terms: "in some homes, they 'became whites'" (Du Toit 1995: 229).²⁴ This view is consistent with widespread ideas about Argentina as a "crisol de razas" (melting pot) composed primarily of European immigrants, and with the almost complete mutual identification between whiteness and Argentineness since at least the early twentieth century (Briones, 2002). The idea of Dumboy and Kokolas becoming so assimilated into the community that they "became whites" also reflects another racial master narrative in twentieth-century Argentina: the idea that Afro-Argentines, relatively numerous in the colonial period, died off over the course of the nineteenth century due to wars and epidemics, and that the straggling survivors were absorbed into the massive waves of European immigrants (Andrews 1980, Geler 2007). Finally, this view also encodes what scholars of race and ethnicity in Argentina have identified as Argentina's unusually broad construction of whiteness, such that individuals (regardless of ethnic or racial background, or appearance) who performed

²³ The increasing intermarriage between Boers and non-Boer Argentines is itself a key part of that story, and a recurring theme across the corpus of interviews.

²⁴ Mrs. Nellie Blackie told DuToit of Dumboy, "'He became a white' who sat with them at a table during a meal.'" (DuToit, 1995: 228).

according to certain behavioral parameters could have their differences overlooked to become white/Argentine. In the case of Dumboy and Kokolas, these “whitening” behaviors included precisely the characteristics deemed praiseworthy and endearing in the above-cited passages: hard work, respectfulness, friendship, affection/quasi-familial ties, loyalty, and speaking Afrikaans and Spanish, among others.

Yet as scholars have also noted, for people of visible African descent, this inclusion into white Argentineness was always ambivalent, contextual, and ultimately insecure, oscillating between invisibility and castigating hypervisibility (Geler 2013; Frigerio 2013; Ghidoli 2016, Alberto 2016). So as the more recent generations of Afrikaans speakers became, by their own admission, increasingly “Argentine” and adopted these national master narratives about race, they also reproduced these ambivalent attitudes toward blackness. These racial ideologies, as refracted through the stories about Dumboy and Kokolas, marked these men as perpetual outsiders to the Boer and Argentine communities in ways distinct from (though not entirely unrelated to) the “racism” that some interviewees described for the earliest Boer arrivals, even as they invoked the nonexistence of racism in an inclusive Argentina.

Consider, for example, the recurrent anecdotes about Dumboy and Kokolas in which these men’s visible blackness (a common trait in the South African context) emerges as a source of curiosity, aversion, or even fear among the Argentine-born interviewees. **N** said of Dumboy, “Well, we were afraid of him because we were children... Since he was so... so ugly, you know [laughter]. We were always afraid of him.” **R** echoed this childhood fear of Dumboy, adding that it also applied to Kokolas, about whom children would shout “Here comes Kokolas! ;Kokolas!...”, although she stressed (laughing) that the fear passed once children got to know them. One anecdote, repeated by four different interviewees, echoes broader narratives of the

rareness of black people in Argentina.²⁵ In T's telling, as a child her aunt "wet her finger and brushed it like this [across Dumboy's face], to see if the blackness rubbed off. And the *negro* [Dumboy] laughed."²⁶ This sort of hypervisibility, though shaped by childhood curiosity, nonetheless expelled these men from the intimacy of the Boer families and communities (and from true Argentineness). Indeed, a recurring theme in the stories is that despite Dumboy and Kokolas' attempts to court white women,²⁷ they never married or had children.²⁸

The stories about Dumboy and Kokolas reveal transformations in racial terminologies across the generations, which parallel the broader story of increasing integration into Argentine society. Of particular note is interviewees' use of the term "negro." As scholars have demonstrated for the case of Buenos Aires in the early twentieth century, just as Afro-Argentines were understood to be well on the road to collective disappearance, "negro" took on a new meaning as a term denoting the purported vulgarity, poverty, coarseness, lack of education, and so forth, of the popular sectors or lower classes (Frigerio 2006, Geler 2016). A similar, though perhaps less explicit, expansion of the term's semantic field appears to be at work in these interviews. Almost all speakers used the term "negro" to describe Dumboy and Kokolas as "black" (as distinct from the white "africanos" or Boers).²⁹ But at times, the term's meanings became strained, unclear, or insufficient to describe these men. This was especially the case when speakers struggled to distinguish the specific African-origin blackness of Kokolas and Dumboy from a broader range of local people with dark skin, a situation that emerged when interviewers showed a photo of a man DuToit identified as Dumboy, but whom

²⁵ Interview S mentions that some of the black Africans who arrived must have gone to Montevideo, echoing another frequent trope in the stories of why Afro-Argentines "disappeared."

²⁶ See also Interviews A, I, E.

²⁷ Interviews I, J. In both cases, these attempts to court women were presented as comical and unrealistic.

²⁸ Interviews T, I, B, D, J.

²⁹ See especially interviews L, N, T, K, S.

several speakers thought might not be an African black man. **J**, for example, described Kokolas as “browner [*más marrón*]” and Dumboy as “darker, [...]... more *negro*.” In this sense, “negro” appears to be operating in the background as a broad spectrum, a matter of degrees (“more” or less), into which dark-skinned people of various ethnic origins might potentially be classified.³⁰ Some speakers used terms like “morocho,” “paisano,” “tipo criollo,” “uno de acá,” or (using a very local term) “descendiente de aborigen”³¹ (Rodríguez 2016) precisely to distinguish these dark-skinned people from people of African descent.

By the same token, some respondents felt the need to resort to terms beyond or in addition to “negro” to clarify that the person in question had African ancestry (as in the use of *negro negro* or *negro mota* documented for Buenos Aires). In these cases, the disambiguating term followed immediately upon the enunciation of “negro,” as when **U** said, “There were two black men [*negros*] here... *Kaffir*.” In this and other conversations, respondents sometimes reached for words in Afrikaans (imported from the South African context), like “swart” or “kaffir” (or “cafre,” in Spanish) to clarify that the individual was “black” in the Afrodisaporic sense.³² Other respondents used a more Argentine terminology, offering that Dumboy or Kokolas were “really *mota*” or “*negro mota*” and explaining that this meant tightly-curved hair, or looking for specific facial features.³³ They also sometimes resorted to phrases used to denote

³⁰ This expansion of “negro” seems different from the original settlers’ reported tendency to equate locals with South African blacks. That analogy did not erase distinctions in racial origins between the latter and criollos, indígenas. Speakers of the third generation seemed at pains precisely to distinguish African blackness from a more capacious local meaning that conflated various origins and focused instead on appearance and class.

³¹ Interviews J, C; Interviews K, J; Interview K; Interview J; Interview C.

³² “Kaffir” or “cafre” (a word in Afrikaans originally denoting black Africans, which became highly insulting during the twentieth century, especially after these speakers’ ancestors emigrated) also appears in Interviews N [interjecting woman, N’s daughter], R, M, K, S. It seems many members of the community were not aware of the extremely negative charge of this word in contemporary South Africa. “Swart” (the term for the color black) appears in Interview R.

³³ On “mota,” Interviews T, K; on “facciones,” Interviews J, C.

blackness in Argentina's past, as when **D** described these men as “two negros, two *personas de color*.” Or they found other ways to disambiguate “racial blackness” (Geler 2016):

R: [...] Dumboy... Black, black like this...

Interviewer: Black like the voice recorder?

R: Like your sweater.

It is likely that some of this disambiguation responds to the structures of the interviews (designed to prompt discussion of Dumboy and Kokolas and to attend closely to local racial terminology) and to the particular circumstance, for interviewees, of striving for cross-cultural clarity with foreign interviewers. Still, these interviews suggest avenues for further research into the many “provincial formations of alterity” (Briones 2005), and the extent to which expansions of “negritud” reminiscent of those documented for Buenos Aires may have taken place in parts of Chubut.

Final Words

Interviewees' memories about Dumboy and Kokolas, then, speak to the profound impact that these little-known Afro-Argentines made on the early Boer settlers of Sarmiento and Comodoro Rivadavia and their descendants. Yet these repeated tales and anecdotes are also racial stories that suggest the pervasiveness of broader master narratives about “Argentineness” among third-generation speakers. In particular, in these stories South Africa's stark history of slavery and colonization work to minimize or erase similar histories in Argentina, especially the Boers' own practices of coerced or non-salaried labor with Dumboy and Kokolas (and of settler colonialism). At the same time, the homeland's extreme racism works as a foil to highlight Argentina's racial harmony or racelessness. This rich corpus of oral histories, which our team is working to make publicly available in the coming years, provides fertile ground for more research on the trajectories of Dumboy, Kokolas, and other black

Africans in their situations, as well as of the shifting ideologies of race and ethnicity among this immigrant community.

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