

Book Review

*Hiding in Plain Sight: Black Women, the Law, and the Making of a White Argentine Republic*  
by Erika Denise Edwards

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In *Hiding in Plain Sight: Black Women, the Law, and the Making of a White Argentine Republic*, Erika Denise Edwards answers the question of the disappearance of black Argentinians. Argentinian exceptionalism celebrates that unlike most other Latin American countries, the nation has a heterogeneous European population. When asked what happened to the black population, the standard response is that they “disappeared.” Erika Denise Edwards argues that it is not that black Argentinians passively disappeared but rather they actively sought to and eventually did attain whiteness. She further argues that African descendants “ascended” to whiteness by forming partnerships with civic and ecclesiastical authorities. Church leaders and Civil administrators sought to “whiten” Argentina through education and familial bonds.

Edwards focuses her study on women of African descent living in the provincial capital of Córdoba, in the heart of Argentina. In Spanish tradition, women were the guardians of the home and the family and in return her family would provide for her. There were three major ways a woman could attain whiteness for her family. First, a woman could marry someone whiter than herself. During the Colonial period, if a woman married a Spaniard, she achieved the status of *doña* regardless of her previous position and enjoyed the trappings of being Spanish. Second, while the system of *castas* relegated Indians to a lower class, their freedom was protected under Spanish law. If a woman of African descent could establish Indian ancestry, it would confer freedom to her and her children. Third and finally, the early leaders of the Argentinian Republic emphasized the role of motherhood in “institutionalized grooming.” People needed to learn what it meant to be a citizen of the Republic and if you taught a woman the appropriate behavior, then she would

teach it to her family, or so the argument goes. As such, women were afforded access to education more readily than men were, which led to a further whitening for her family or her future family.

Edwards divides *Hiding in Plain Sight* into six chapters that fall roughly into two sections. Chapters one and two chronicle the development of the system of *castas* in Colonial Argentina and their adaptation in early years of the Republic. Together, the first two chapters establish the institutional and familial worlds designed to maintain a social hierarchy. The remaining four chapters serve as case studies demonstrating the various ways that Afro-Argentines navigated the world of the *castas* and how they used those systems to secure their benefit.

In chapter one (“Miscegenation, Marriage, and Manumission in Córdoba”) and chapter two (“Regulating and Administering Freedom in Córdoba”), Edwards follows the changes of the use of the term “black” and “white” from one that is focused primarily on skin color to its contemporary usage. Chapter one covers the early and middle colonial period highlighting the development of the system of *castas*. Spanish law reserved education, trade, and political office for “Spaniards” and tried to make sure that people married within their own status. Despite the ban, miscegenation was the norm rather than the exception in Córdoba. The church also provided Afro-Argentines a certain level of social mobility by intervening to ensure slave families stayed together. Families were then able to accumulate wealth and purchase freedom for certain members who then moved up in the caste system. As a result of two hundred years of miscegenation, the line between the *castas* became blurry.

Chapter two “Regulating and Administering Freedom in Córdoba,” discusses what Edwards refers to as “social grooming.” Two hundred years of miscegenation introduce more variety than the system of *castas* could handle and a large free black population. The “Edict of Good Governance”

passed in 1785 attempted to incorporate the free population into society as subjects and then as citizens of the Republic. Through education and sumptuary laws, African descendants were encouraged to emulate “white” behaviors and customs while condemning “black” behaviors and customs associated with slavery.

In chapter three, “Her Best Performance: From Slave to Señora” and chapter four, “A Women of her Class: Contested Marriages,” Edwards discusses how women of color used legal and illegal means to gain status and privilege. A lawsuit brought up against a priest, José Lino de León, and an enslaved woman, Bernabela serves as a case study for how a woman could use an illicit relationship to gain status. The reason the couple were brought to court was not because the two were having an affair but because José Lino was treating Bernabela like a *señora*. The two were cohabitating and she wore clothing that was generally reserved for nobility. Being a priest, José Lino could not marry Bernabela but Edwards uses this case study to demonstrate how illicit relationships could confer markers of status for women of African descent.

As the decades progressed, the Spanish court tried to make interracial marriage more difficult by granting parents final say in their children’s marriage. In chapter four, Edwards examines how women used the courts to remove the stain of “mala sangre” or having an enslaved ancestor. The most successful tactic was to demonstrate Indian ancestry which would confer freed status on them. If a woman was successful in defending her identity as a free person, the court could overrule the parent’s refusal and the couple could be married.

In Chapter five and six, Edwards focuses on motherhood and the whitening process. Chapter five (“(En)gendering Freedom”) discusses freedom suits in matters of inheritance. The most successful women appealed for their freedom based on years of faithful service and not necessarily for themselves, but that their children might be freed. In chapter six, “Lessons of Motherhood”, Edwards studies the process of “institutionalized social grooming” in the early years of the Republic. Thinking that slavery was out of step with republican values, early Argentinian leaders set up segregated schools for girls of African descent. The point of these schools was to encourage civic (code for white) behavior that the girls would then pass along to their families when they became mothers. The integration project apparently successful because in 1858 the segregated schools were replaced by schools that served commuter students (which tended to come from poorer neighborhoods) regardless of skin color.

*Hiding in Plain Sight* contributes much to the historiography of Argentina as well as Latin America. Edwards challenges the notion that Afro-Argentines simply and passively disappeared in history. She argues that people of African descent sought to and succeeded in attaining the privileges conveyed by whiteness and became agents in their own erasure. There will be a few readers who critique or lament

what can be construed as traitorous behavior of women of African descent. Edwards pre-emptively counters such criticisms in her conclusion by reminding us that “people have to make choices from the options they are given,” and we should not disparage people seeking to improve their own position as well as the position of their family.

Edwards also augments the historiography of Latin America picking up where Ann Twinam left off in *Purchasing Whiteness* (2015). Like Edwards, Twinam looks at whitening but at an administrative level and in the Caribbean. Twinam looks at subjects who petitioned, and purchased, a white label to gain a position reserved for Spaniards. Since Erika Denise Edwards focuses on a single provincial capital, Córdoba, she is free to explore how whitening affected the everyday life for the women she studied, something that is absent in *Purchasing Whiteness*. Women who were successful could wear clothing reserved for a *señora*, perform the duties of a *señora*, and most significantly (for them) ensured a better life for their children.

*Hiding in Plain Sight* is suitable for a Latin American history class. The book not only discusses what the Spanish system of *castas* was but also how it was created as well as the cracks in the system. However, it is often hard to tell if the case studies presented are exceptional or normal. In the affair between the priest José Lino and his slave Bernabela, the latter was considered attractive by European standards which was one of the reasons the priest pursued her so vigorously. When available, Edwards makes good use of census records to paint a broad picture of options available to women of African descent, but the case studies seem exceptional rather than normative. The fact of the matter is that Argentinian women of African descent did attain whiteness by one way or another and disappeared themselves from the historical narrative.

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