Afro-porteño Newspapers and Journalists in the Late 19th Century

Lea Geler

University of Buenos Aires

National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET) - Argentina

Following the fall of Juan Manuel de Rosas in 1852, and increasingly throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the press played an important role in Buenos Aires and in the provinces as well. On the one hand, the press was considered a motor of social change – connected to ideas about progress, modernity, and civilization – the pillars of any society. On the other hand, as Sábato (1998) has shown, following Habermas,¹ print culture became an essential element of the public sphere, enabling communication within a society, mediating between civil society and the state, and sustaining a foundational, if sometimes feared public opinion. Pursuing a journalistic career in this period brought social prestige and popularity. In Argentina, working for one of the many newspapers or magazines that circulated in the cities or nationwide brought young people into the public eye and enabled them to enter the political life of the country.²

Within the broader context of this journalistic phenomenon, and specifically in Buenos Aires, there existed important circuits of popular newspapers and literature that had been active since the early nineteenth century.³ Newspapers published between 1873 and 1882 by Afro-porteños (African-descended residents of the port city of Buenos Aires) were part of these, and they form the documentary base of this study.

1. For Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere is the space where public opinion is formed. Although susceptible to being distorted and manipulated, the public sphere is at the heart of social cohesion, of the legitimation and delegitimation of politics; participation is open to all citizens, and it is a totally free discussion, with no pressures. When spaces are vast, communication requires means for transferring and influencing ideas, such as newspapers (Boladeras Cucurella 2001).

2. See Halperín Donghi (1985). On the journalism movement in general, the most thorough work of the period is that of Ernesto Quesada (1883).

3. On the development of the popular press, see especially González Bernaldo de Quirós (2001) and Prieto (2006).

Specifically, I draw from the 306 issues of the Afro-porteño press. They include the following publications: *La Igualdad* (a political journal created by Máximo Corvera and Pastor Gutiérrez), *La Broma* (owned by Dionisio García), *La Juventud* (created by Gabino M. Arrieta, Juan Pablo Balparda, Rómulo J. Centeno, and Gabino Ezeiza), *La Perla* (edited by Luis Ramírez, Camilo Olivera, and Guillermo Ramírez), *El Unionista* (which included Casildo G. Thompson and Froilán P. Bello as contributors), *La Luz* (edited by Juan L. Finghlay), and *El Aspirante* (edited by Nicasio de Latorre).⁴ These papers, written by Afro-porteños and aimed generally at the Afro-porteño community, appeared at different frequencies, but never more than once a week, and more typically every ten days.

The Apostles of Progress

Editors and journalists working in Afro-porteño publications fully shared the common sentiment in Argentina that the press was important for its relationship to progress and civilization. The press was understood to be the medium of enlightenment *par excellence*, and this is made clear in all the Afro-porteño newspapers. As *La Luz* declared in its very first issue: “There is no virtue without justice, there is no charity nor love without sacrifice, there will never be peace among men without abnegation, and there will be no education, civilization, or instruction without the press.”⁵

In the same manner, Afro-porteño journalists believed their newspapers to be critical tools for forging change – “the newspaper is a great medium to introduce profound modifications.”⁶ The press was essential, since they considered it crucial to their community’s footing on the path of “progress”:

It seems that our community is awakening from the lethargy in which it was sleeping. . . . This shows us that our labor is not barren. . . . We will sustain *La Broma* at any cost, because we know that it is necessary for doing battle in the ongoing struggle of the intelligent against the ignorant.⁷

4. Actually many more Afro-porteño newspapers were published in the last decades of the 19th century, including *El Látigo*, *El Obrero*, *El Deber*, *La Razón*, *El Artesano*, *La Regeneración*, etc., but I have not been able to find surviving copies. It is possible that even more Afro-porteño newspapers exist in the archives of the City of Buenos Aires, but they have not yet been identified as such, since it was common for such papers to make no allusion in their titles to the fact that they were meant to represent people of the Afro-porteño social group. Further, the many of the executive committees of the newspapers changed over the years. For more information on Afro-porteño newspapers, see Geler (2008a and 2008b).

5. *La Luz*, “Un palabra al público,” May 3, 1878.

6. *La Juventud*, “Las habladurías sirven al desorden . . .,” September 30, 1878.

7. *La Broma*, “Nuestra misión,” January 21, 1878.

Thus, Afro-porteño journalists felt that through their publications, they could influence the present as well as the presumed/imagined destiny of their community. They strove constantly for this, primarily through long editorial pieces that were didactic and stern in tone and which had the explicit intention of showing their readers the best path to “modernization.” Other sections of the newspaper, which consisted of lighter social columns, community news, literary works, gossip, jokes, etc., also had moralizing overtones.

Precisely because the journalists were so committed to their community and because the press played such an important role in nineteenth-century civil society, it seems particularly interesting to think about the editors and publishers of these newspapers through the figure of the “subaltern intellectual.”⁸

In the context of subalternity – such as that of the Afro-porteños – possessing a specific knowledge or understanding the manners, codes, or norms of the hegemonic group situates certain people in a place of higher status or privilege within their own group (Feierman 1990).⁹ These individuals position themselves as mediators between their group and dominant groups; they fashion themselves into the driving force of social change. We can see them as historical agents who, acting from particular interests (*acciones interesadas*), could modify – but also preserve – cultural categories, thus highlighting the contradiction in the role of the intellectual as mediator (Feierman, 1990; Mallon, 1995).¹⁰ In this sense, if nineteenth-century society worked according to the logic of exchange in the public sphere, whoever could obtain access – or even had the possibility of access – to that sphere could claim a larger share of power and prestige. And among the Afro-porteño journalists, as in any social group, conflicts arose over who should enjoy the visibility, prestige, and power conferred by controlling/steering what were considered the tools of social change.¹¹

8. According to Gramsci (1974), by analyzing the place that certain individuals occupy in the network of social relations, one can identify and define the intellectual; that is to say, one can analyze their activities in the context of a specific group, at a specific time.

9. Being literate, having a skilled trade, having certain contacts with people outside the group, holding a job in the state bureaucracy, etc. can be pivot points in the self-presentation of certain subjects and in their position in relation to their own community as well as to the rest of society (Feierman 1990).

10. In the process of defending the interests of their community, often in broader arenas of discussion, subaltern intellectuals can increase their visibility but also become drawn into ever more extensive debates, in which the use of hegemonic discourses binds them more strongly to networks of social control and discipline. This negotiation can transform them into agents of hegemonic power. Consequently, and keeping in mind that the impulses of hegemonic domination can only be effective if they partially incorporate or negotiate with counter-hegemonic impulses, the majority of subaltern intellectuals constantly inhabit a contradictory and difficult position between solidarity with their group and surveilling it (Williams 1980; Mallon 1995).

11. Intellectuals became visible not only through newspapers, but also other means: the publication of literary or political writing, poems and stories; by playing a musical instrument, composing, or conducting an orchestra; through dance or painting or sculpture; by directing an

Indeed, there were constant clashes between newspapers, which published complaints that could create or deepen animosity between journalists, which led to ongoing denunciations buried in their columns. One of the most common complaints was that a newspaper was trying to win public favor and influence certain decisions, such as how associations were formed or how best to deal with episodes of discrimination. Along these lines, Casildo G. Thompson, one of the most visible Afro-porteños of his time, wrote in a letter addressed to the editor of *La Perla*:

The mission of the journalist is misunderstood among us, or else it has been adulterated, if not completely transformed. Indeed, it has been corrupted by the rottenness of individuals, discredited by the absence of enlightenment, and most of the time totally invalidated by the ridiculous usurpation of men who do not have – and have never had – even the most simple notion of the duties that being a journalist entails. The press is a privileged platform where the most serious and most transcendental ideas should be expressed, and not a circus where buffoons incite popular merriment.¹²

Thompson's words recall what Halperín Donghi (1985) describes as the “apostolic mission of the journalist,” inherited from the French press, which exhorted journalists to embrace their duty to instruct readers, indeed to civilize them against evil (generally represented by some rival). This exalted task enabled the journalist to gain both visibility and social status. The Afro-porteños took up this debate about the mission of the journalist and how it was linked to the position of the intellectual, and were quick to denounce those who, in their view, did not fulfill it or distorted this ideal by reducing it to a contest for prestige and power:

Occasionally provoked by injustice and impropriety, we have not been able to resist the violence of the attacks. . . . And yet we understand perfectly that this is not the mission of the journalist. The press should never be used as a weapon to pick on one person, nor as a tool to advance oneself. Never for a single moment should we forget the common interest; to that we should be beholden.¹³

As we can see, even if journalism was held up as a type of apostleship for serving the community, the other side of this ideal was that newspapers were also

association of any type or holding position or office in the state or militias, etc. Such activities readily positioned them in full view of the bourgeois public sphere. But newspapers were a particularly effective means of accumulating and using power.

12. *La Perla*, “Esto es digno de imitarse,” October 6, 1878.

13. *La Broma*, “Notas editoriales,” January 13, 1882.

a vehicle for discussing and defending personal ideas, and this provoked ongoing debates and disagreements. In fact, reports about local happenings consisted largely of criticizing other newspapers and pointing out delays or errors in their publication or distribution, particularly a rival newspaper. They also reported resignations or changes in staff, or other information that might be relevant, in order to show that one newspaper was superior, with more subscribers than its competitors.¹⁴ In short, the co-existence of newspapers was anything but peaceful, and even though there were moments of cordiality, their rivalries were a constant.

Even so, journalists never stopped insisting that their newspapers were important for the common good. They often published information about cases of discrimination or abuse, with the hope that Afro-porteño voices would be heard more broadly:

We know that our voice is weak and that it will get lost without ever reaching where it is meant to go. But we will do what we have to! We are leaving a record of our protests and our efforts. . . . Even if we are preaching in the desert, at least we have thrown our complaints and our feelings of exclusion into the wind.¹⁵

As we can see, the circulation of these community newspapers (that were an essential part of a very particular public sphere) was restricted, and they rarely captured the attention of the newspapers or journalists in the broader bourgeois public sphere.¹⁶ This is reflected in the pages themselves: “Who, besides us, reads . . . the columns of our humble newspapers that never go beyond our own social circles?”¹⁷

The marginalization of Afro-porteño newspapers did not happen by chance. The exclusion of subaltern groups from the hegemonic (or bourgeois) public sphere is one of its constitutive aspects, contrary to the assertion that it is a space of free and equal access.¹⁸ Nancy Fraser (1992) uses the term “subaltern

14. At various moments in the ten years of Afro-porteño press that I am considering here, proposals were made to combine all the papers into a single community newspaper. The main argument put forth for this proposal was the ideal of unity, which proponents contrasted with the use of newspapers for personal purposes that resulted in “dividing” the community and causing confrontations among its members. For more information on this topic, see Geler 2008a, 2008b.

15. *La Broma*, “La ley . . .,” August 19, 1881.

16. An extensive network of associations also made up this bourgeois public sphere, for example.

17. *La Broma*, “Cosas que nacen y mueren en el misterio,” July 30, 1881.

18. Slightly altering his initial stance on the supposedly free and equal access that characterizes the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas explains that “the exclusion of the lower levels, culturally and politically mobilized, provokes a pluralization of the public in the process of its emergence. Together with the hegemonic public, and connected to it, it creates a common public” (2006: 6).

counterpublic” to refer to the public spheres of groups that are socially subordinate, such as women, people of color, the working class, etc. Among these alternative discursive arenas, counter-discourses develop and circulate, allowing oppositional interpretations of identities, interests, and needs. As Fraser writes, “. . . public discursive arenas are among the most important and under-recognized sites in which social identities are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed” (1992: 140, note 24).

The Afro-porteño community maintained a public sphere of its own, and its identification as a group occurred in large part through these channels of subaltern discussion. Yet they also followed the norms of sociability of the bourgeois public sphere, creating the conditions for, at least hypothetically, dialogue. The Afro-porteños shared society’s belief in the promise of social progress, and they certainly knew the rules of discussion in the public sphere. These rules formed part of what Sábato (1998) calls a “secular liturgy” and included certain formalities that the newspapers all followed.¹⁹ Thus, even though they addressed only a small audience and were generally marginalized from broader discussions, Afro-porteño newspapers adhered to the norms of correct behavior, moving parallel to the bourgeois public sphere, yet making it possible – as we will see – for the two to coincide.²⁰ Further, observing “correct” norms allowed the newspapers to educate their readers in the values of civility

19. One of the most important rules was that before a new newspaper was established, its editors sent a greeting to existing papers. Those papers then replied with an announcement of the new publication. “Greetings to the press” were practically obligatory and they appeared often in the Afro-porteño newspapers, though one rarely sees such greetings directed to the major newspapers, which didn’t seem to take notice of the Afro-porteño press. But there were exceptions. *La Nación* announced the reappearance of *La Broma* in 1880, which had been grateful in 1877 to *El Porteño* for giving similar notice. By contrast, mentions of the Afro-porteño population in the most powerful media provoked an immediate reaction by journalists of the community that was visible in the printing of the news, in the greetings, or in the refusal to verify or refute specific news. For examples of this, see *La Broma*, September 12, 1882 and January 27, 1881. However, beyond these specific examples that were imposed by journalistic etiquette, the Afro-porteño press was not inclined to make reference to newspapers outside of its circle. While it was clear that Afro-porteño editors and reporters read the outside papers and were well informed about local, national, and international daily news, their newspapers reported almost exclusively on happenings related to the Afro-porteño community. An exception can be found in the first issues of *La Juventud*, which published national and international news taken from other newspapers; however, this lasted only for a small number of issues. *La Igualdad* was also inclined to copy notices from other newspapers, but its purely political and proselytizing character differentiated it from other publications.

20. There were certain instances where the subaltern counterpublic and the hegemonic (or bourgeois) public sphere lined up, resulting in exceptional moments that caused symbolic readjustments in both groups. While subaltern counterpublics can regroup along the lines of identity, they are also fertile ground for organizing activities that are subversive to established leaders and the broader public. They thus contribute to an ongoing dialectic that pushes to reduce inequalities in the hegemonic public sphere, and this is where their emancipatory potential resides (Fraser 1992). It is also the key operational space for individuals who are in contact with, or even a part of, the bourgeois public sphere—that is to say the Afro-porteño journalists.

and civic participation. Indeed this was one of the main objectives of the Afro-porteño intellectuals who were fighting to make their opinions heard among the subaltern counterpublic and also – no matter how small the chances – in the bourgeois public sphere.

The newspaper business could lead to an improved economic situation for Afro-porteño journalists, in addition to being a way to build prestige, visibility, and influence. Among the accusations leveled against rival journalists, one of the most common was that they were seeking profits by taking part in the so-called “journalistic business” – which was frowned upon by the whole community and by society in general. “On top of everything, it’s said that we are learning the art of living without work – as if maintaining a newspaper, writing it, etc. did not count as work.”²¹ It was important to protect oneself from accusations of profit, but also to be free from political subsidies, thus ensuring the newspaper’s independence and its ability to support the mission of pursuing the common good:

Although the usefulness of the subscriptions is small, so small that it doesn’t even cover the expenses of publication, [the owner of the newspaper] doesn’t collapse, but rather perseveres in his work, demonstrating the will that enables him to serve the common interest of the society to which he belongs.²²

Afro-porteño newspapers were thus continually reminding readers that their operations were based solely on the economic support of their subscribers. However, a quick calculation makes clear that the accusations of profit could be fair, and journalists did recognize a possible livelihood in the business of publishing newspapers. There is very little data about the number of subscribers at that time. *La Broma* was the paper that most often alluded to those numbers, but their data was certainly inflated as a way to position themselves vis-à-vis other newspapers. On November 8, 1877, *La Broma* announced that it had 486 persons on their subscription list, supposedly the largest number of single newspaper subscribers in the history of the community. In the beginning of 1878, it explained that “the 500 subscribers who religiously support us are fully convinced, and convinced they remain, that this publication is necessary.”²³ On July 25, 1878, *La Broma* reported over two hundred subscribers, and later that year, the paper published a piece referencing a five hundred-copy printing.²⁴ In 1881, they claimed to have more than three hundred subscribers.²⁵ There

21. *La Broma*, “¿Por qué se llama *La Broma*?” October 31, 1878.

22. *La Broma*, “¿Por qué se llama *La Broma*?” December 25, 1879.

23. *La Broma*, “Un parenthesis,” January 3, 1878.

24. *La Broma*, October 10, 1878.

25. *La Broma*, March 6, 1881.

is also data for *La Perla*, which on May 8, 1879, partnering with *La Broma* for one jointly published issue, claimed 329 subscribers, a fact that encouraged its editors to strive for a weekly publication.

There are records that give some idea of the costs of publication. In June 1878, *La Broma* collected 400 pesos from members of the community to re-launch the newspaper. The editors made it understood that the money would support two runs and would ensure independence from political subsidies.²⁶ Thus, if we accept the number of subscribers reported and assume that each run consisted of three hundred copies, the printing of each paper would have been around 0.66 pesos. Supposing an average newspaper subscription of two hundred people, with a monthly charge of 10 pesos – the rate of the paper in 1879 – and four publications a month, printing three hundred copies, the cost of production would have been 792 pesos, while total income would have been 2,000. The difference between the cost and the income was such that some of the editors received, if not a full salary, at least a supplement to their monthly incomes. (By way of comparison, according to a budget prepared by the Legislature of the City of Buenos Aires of 1879, someone holding the position of orderly would receive a fixed monthly salary of 750 pesos.²⁷)

Newspapers were not, however, reliably profitable. Regular complaints about subscribers who failed to pay, threats issued to those whose accounts were overdue, and sudden disappearances of publications demonstrate the instability of the new business:

You can't get very far without good old cash. For example, with the current issue we have to pay the monthly fee to the printer, which is located in none other than Boca del Riachuelo. Despite the fact that we have to get there most days on foot, we still have to pay, religiously and on time, what we owe to the owner. And if we ourselves don't manage to get paid? 'Ecco aqui,' then we will have to take our music (read organ or accordion) elsewhere. . . .²⁸

In his famous study on the phenomenon of widespread newspaper publishing in nineteenth-century Argentina, Ernesto Quesada (1883) noted that, in general, the writing, management, and administration of newspapers was done for free since newspaper companies sought subscriptions simply to cover the material costs. According to Quesada, advertisements were usually the main source of income sustaining operations.

The Afro-porteño newspapers, too, regularly carried advertisements; in

26. *La Broma*, November 15, 1878.

27. *Actas de las Sesiones de la Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires en 1878* (1878: 349).

28. *La Broma*, "Varillazos," May 7, 1880.

addition, as I will discuss below, the newspapers charged to print articles sent in by readers. And they found other ways to secure income or save money – for example, the editors might do the printing themselves, thus saving money on wages. Finghlay, director of *La Luz*, was himself a typographer and worked in a print shop; the editors of *La Perla* were also printers and announced that they would produce the paper themselves. Editors also advertised their own parallel businesses – such as tobacco in the case of Balparda from *La Juventud*, or Carnival gear and dance shoes in the case of García from *La Broma* – and they exchanged this service, reprinting the same advertisements in various publications. *La Broma* reported that the editor and his collaborators would themselves manage distribution and subscriptions in order to avoid misunderstandings or scams. It is interesting, then, to note *La Broma's* article about how the *New York Herald* began to be distributed by its editor-printer. The article concludes:

Today, as everyone knows, the *New York Herald* is the most popular newspaper in the universe and its managing editor enjoys a large daily profit. . . . [W]e certainly won't reach that point, but we share this story because some people criticize our behavior when they see us carrying a beautiful packet of *Bromas* under the arm, distributing them to our clients/readers. We have said again and again, as long as we continue to enjoy the protection that we have, we have no objection to doing everything in our reach so that our community has a newspaper that meets its needs. *Tableau!*²⁹

Thus, in addition to personal disagreements, newspaper editors faced conflict over how to promote the common good, how to obtain prestige and influence, and ultimately, how to make a newspaper profitable – like the *New York Herald* – at least for some amount of time.

Signaling progress and civilization for the community, newspapers sustained a subaltern public sphere that was intended as a space of participation, education, integration, and discussion, with free and equal access – just as the bourgeois public sphere was intended. They said to grant this equal access offering a standing invitation to readers to send in their own writing. The number of subscribers to Afro-porteño newspapers, even if we take the lowest numbers, speaks to the interest of both men and women in access to information and to these public discussions, to participate, in the end, in the imagined community that was being created (Anderson, 1993).³⁰ Newspapers were in-

29. *La Broma*, “Noticias varias,” August 3, 1879, emphasis in the original.

30. The number of mass readers grew by leaps and bounds after the fall of Rosas when programs of literacy and education were put in place to achieve what was understood as necessary to create citizens capable of building a modern country (Prieto 2006). According to the 1869 census, the population in school in the province in Buenos Aires was still low (28.5%), but by

deed central to group communication and thus powerful sources of integration for the community.

Forms of Reading, Forms of Writing

As part of their task of educating and civilizing, newspapers invited their readers to participate in the press by sending in articles related to the common good. They especially wanted to provide associations – which were considered an important form of socialization, linked to progress and civilization (Sábato, 2002; González Bernaldo de Quirós, 2001) – space to invite their members to meetings, assemblies, elections, etc. They also accepted artistic work (poems, verses, short stories), opinion pieces, and personal letters. While they printed any announcements related to associations for free, the newspapers did charge for the more personal submissions and these fees seem to have helped them survive:

We've said it *a thousand times!* For those who wish their things to be published, if they don't come in the right form, meaning with their corresponding *Gastelumendis* [i.e., payments/cash], then we will not publish them.³¹

This matter of payment to publish was a first challenge to what is supposed to be equal access to the spaces of the subaltern counterpublic, and this also held true for the bourgeois public sphere. A second challenge was the difficulty of subscribing to newspapers in a community that, in general, had very little purchasing power.

Regardless of their poverty, readers developed strategies that enabled a large portion of the community to have access to this mode of communication, thus generating connections of solidarity and new practices of collective sociability. I am referring here to the phenomenon of *leer de ojito* (second-hand reading), reading a borrowed newspaper, or reading a newspaper in a group, or even reading over someone's shoulder. This "problem" – as the newspapers saw it – was referred to with much irony.

. . . in our last assembly . . . , it was agreed in the general guidelines to observe as a good rule of conduct not inviting anyone who is smoking. No one! This is a deadly blow to the smoker *de ojito* [those who take advantage

1887, after the enactment of the law of free and obligatory education, in the city of Buenos Aires the population in school rose to 80% for both boys and girls. In addition, forms of self-education became important at this time, especially among working classes that were starting to identify with a workers' agenda, as Thompson has shown in the English case (1989, 315).

31. *La Broma*, "Suelitos de costumbre," November 25, 1881, emphasis in the original.

of the presence of a smoker to smoke second-hand]. Oh!!! If we could just do the same with readers.³²

This behavior was common among the readers of *La Broma*, which was called *el chiche* (the toy) of the community:

. . . I am sure that even if all the ladies are not subscribers to *el chiche*, they certainly all read it. You know, in a house with two or more people, it's impossible that all of them subscribe to it, but for sure all of them read it.³³

This second-hand reading seems to have been widespread since it was so regularly denounced by the newspapers. And the newspapers were not alone in considering it a bad practice; some readers themselves condemned it. Those committed to supporting the publications called for initiatives to keep people from reading second-hand, as happened with a group of female readers of *La Juventud*, who agreed

with the largest possible number of people, NOT TO LEND, NOT EVEN FOR A MOMENT, an issue of *La Juventud*, thus obliging those who are interested in reading it to subscribe, or to buy a single issue, . . . no longer permitting anyone to read the newspaper second-hand.³⁴

La Juventud had recently returned to publication after almost a year, and subscriptions had generated the resources for the paper to resume printing. This was certainly the reason that its subscribers were particularly vigilant about the newspaper's continuation, and we see the high degree of allegiance (*fidelidad*) in the paragraph cited above.

So if we take as a fact the phenomenon of second-hand reading, we can multiply the number of readers of the newspapers, thus recognizing a much greater number of people becoming integrated into the counterpublic sphere. *La Broma* was aware of this when they calculated, not without irony: “. . . subscriptions have increased markedly, because if before fifteen hundred or two thousand people were reading [the paper], nowadays we can count on double the readers, for certain, eight percent second-hand.”³⁵

The readers of the Afro-porteño newspapers identified one way or another with these publications, and the papers thus gained the support and loyalty of their readers. How information about the community was shared is of course interesting, but I think an equally interesting way to approach the connection

32. *La Broma*, “Varillazos,” October 10, 1878, emphasis in the original.

33. *La Broma*, “Varillazos,” October 24, 1878, emphasis in the original.

34. *La Juventud*, “Hechos locales,” January 31, 1878, emphasis in the original.

35. *La Broma*, “Varillazos,” April 15, 1880.

between newspapers and their readers is to look at the language used in the articles. Editorials in particular were normally written in a severe and formal tone, with very few grammatical errors and a carefully chosen vocabulary appropriate to a didactic and corrective message. The rest of the paper, however, used more colloquial and ironic language that could include *voseo* (the *vos* form common to Río de la Plata Spanish) and a vast reservoir of popular speech that preceded the *lunfardo* (the famous slang of Buenos Aires) at a time when tens of thousands of immigrants had landed and the language was rapidly changing. And yet, we must note that nothing about the language in the Afro-porteño newspapers was haphazard. To the contrary, the editors checked each piece to be published and, if necessary, they corrected the writing sent in by readers.

We want to warn everyone who sends writing to be published in this newspaper that we'll do it, but they must be *correct*, because we don't have the time to *correct and rewrite* other people's work that is sent to us.³⁶

The care they put into editing can be seen both in the apologies about printing errors³⁷ and in editors' complaints about pieces sent in by readers:

These comments are for the reader. I would add, if you are not tired of so frequently SEEING the heading *invitaos*, rather than [the correct] *invitados*. Poor grammar, whose hands have you landed in!³⁸

We see similar evidence in the distancing proclamation that *La Broma* had agreed to publish "as is" poems by Tomás Rivero, whom they then ironically called *el vate* (the poet).³⁹ These poems did not follow grammatical rules and were full of orthographic mistakes:

I attended that dance/to which invited was me/and was sad that a rebuff/
soon I had to suffer//my love doesn't hold back from me/the passion of
an honorable guy/always the flower of a poet/will be, a sad and slighted
lover.⁴⁰

36. *La Juventud*, "Noticias Varias," January 1, 1879, emphasis in the original.

37. See, for example, *La Broma*, "Noticias varias," December 6, 1878.

38. *La Juventud*, "Conversación," March 26, 1876, emphasis in the original.

39. "Read, my beauties, read: Rivero charged me with taking great care of the composition, that we publish the verses as is in the original, without error, so that, according to him, they can be read." *La Broma*, "Varillazos," March 20, 1881.

40. *La Broma*, "Varillazos," November 22, 1877. The translation cannot quite capture the flow of grammatical errors in the verse. The original reads: "yo asisti adicho vaile / que me en vitaron ami / y era triste que un desaire / tuve pronto que sufril // mi amor no me sujeta / la pacion de un mosó honrrado / el continuo la flor de un poeta / sera, amante triste y desairado (sic)." Replacing the final 't' in a word with 'r,' such as in "sufril" [rather than "sufrir"] – was a characteristic of the so-called "brown talk" [*habla parda*], a form of speech among the poorest

During the years of *La Broma*'s publication, Rivero's poems were objects of ridicule and mockery. Readers even then viewed the orthographic and grammar mistakes as amusing, and they found the contents of the poems laughable:

Have pity on me, dear Rivero! To see you perk up your ears and open . . . your mouth to release your song, as sonorous and vibrant as a heehaw, rhythmical like the roar of the tiger, murmuring like the grunting of a pig, harmonious, like the bleating of the bull (no specific reference intended).⁴¹

The newspapers published Rivero's poems exactly as he wanted them to appear because he paid for this, as they made perfectly clear. We must assume that he did not write this in this stylized form simply to be funny. Rather, this was Rivero's language. Verses *en pardo* (see footnote 40), which appeared with some frequency, were not usually accompanied by an explanation that they had not been corrected or that they were being published verbatim at the author's request.

If the correction of typos and orthographic or grammar mistakes illustrates how the newspapers were carefully conceptualized, designed, and revised, the jokes about Rivero bring us back to the power newspapers wielded through their pages. Beyond bringing about ideas of change and progress, they had the power to mark someone, to denounce, insult, or criticize, to aggrandize or diminish both people and events. Denouncements in the newspapers had consequences, and thus those who wrote them exerted a large degree of social control.

The "Panopticon" of Regeneration

The extraordinary power that Afro-porteño newspapers accumulated as forces of change came at the cost of becoming a guardian of appropriate behavior. When we think about Foucault's panopticon (2005), we imagine an omnipresent center of vigilance that all can see, but whose function really begins when it becomes invisible, and its presence is generalized and internalized. I argue that the functioning of the Afro-porteño newspapers was something similar. In fact, Foucault's description of the vigilance and control of the panopticon emphasizes how, since the seventeenth century, this control has been amplified and distributed throughout the social body, and highlights its support for the consolidation of a disciplinary society in which the state acts with invisible

of the Afro-porteños. This "half language" [media lengua], as described by Rodríguez Molas (1962), was exalted in the years of Rosas. As I discuss in *Andares negros, caminos blancos*, "brown talk" included, in addition to words, broader uses and modalities than these specific forms.

41. *La Broma*, "Varillazos," June 16, 1882.

and disseminated power. For the readers of Afro-porteño newspapers, it was important to be mentioned in announcements about parties and dances, for instance, and it was crucial to be represented in a positive way – or at least without negative comments. Indeed, in issue after issue, the newspapers made an effort to single out individuals they considered to be behaving improperly, or outside the rules of the hegemonic groups. The idea that they had the right to denounce people, and that this right was being used to the benefit of the community, was made clear:

If we touch upon certain social issues, it's because we know them; these questions that get aired out in the appropriate sections share a common interest with our needs, and are thus perfectly warranted. They are aimed at people who know, to put it vulgarly, where the shoe pinches [*saben dónde les aprieta el zapato*-i.e., they know who they are] – and thus we believe that our services will satisfy our admirers.⁴²

Airing out (*ventilar*) social questions was something the Afro-porteño newspapers did with every publication, through various sections of social announcements. To be sure, those who gave information as well as those who were denounced “knew where the shoe pinched.” Both expressions, “*ventilar*” and “*aprieta el zapato*,” indicate how public denouncement was something the newspapers took on – with no hesitation – as part of their journalistic mission to guide social change.

This regular public signaling in the newspapers was sometimes explicit and sometimes by allusion, conveyed in ironic tones and mocking essays that mentioned names, initials, or pseudonyms. For example, *La Broma* sometimes published “dreams” that functioned in this way:

I dreamt that Pancho López/with his imposing bald head/was speaking to some girl/with his heart and soul.// And that this very guy wanted/to eat a certain fruit/that although it was forbidden to him/he always ate with pleasure . . . //I dreamed that the *chinito* Carlos/whose last name was Delzar/ came to be signed on/with a certain justice.//But seeing him, so *beautiful*/ Mr. Judge refused/to sign him up, and the *chinito*/took to the door and flew.⁴³

42. *La Broma*, “¿Por qué se llama La Broma?” August, 24 1879.

43. *La Broma*, “Varillazos,” December 2, 1881, emphasis in the original. We see in this example the discrimination of the justice of the peace against the “beautiful” Carlos del Sar, something that *La Broma* doesn’t appear to reject, drawing on modes of self-presentation that accord with ideas of progress and civilization promoted by the hegemonic groups. *Chinito* usually refers to a peasant-looking or mestizo person, and thus it being used to describe a black man is meant to be ironic. *Bonito* [Beautiful] is also being used ironically, since he is being portrayed as unrepresentable.

But denouncements were not always delivered in a joking tone. *El Unionista*, for example, offered this warning:

Warning, to whom it may concern. It has been confirmed . . . that a señora in charge of . . . certain objects meant for humanitarian purposes is inviting persons . . . to criticize most of the [donated] works. We will come back to this story, if necessary, with more information, to put a stop to these offensive abuses.⁴⁴

To make public an occurrence or a situation – to make a denouncement in the counterpublic sphere – was a source of power that the newspapers used explicitly. In a first warning, they did not include names, and those implicated seemed to understand the accusation. After denouncing someone for defaming a colleague, *La Juventud* then published a letter by the unnamed accused:

A repentant man . . . [W]e have received . . . a letter by the gentleman who so bravely cast an insult. . . . It states that he never did such a thing, adding . . . these words: “I, gentlemen, am a victim of an infamous lie. I am not one who dishonored a young man who will be respected by posterity.” If we are not publicly calling out [*lanzar a la picota*, “mounting on the stocks”] this person’s name, it is out of respect for his noble feelings.⁴⁵

You had to be careful with journalists. They could *lanzar a la picota* anyone they deemed needed it, illustrating the great power of public censorship that newspapers and their editors wielded. This power reinforced and strengthened controls in a society whose mechanism for “looking” was the newspapers. Their consciousness of this power is also clear in other sections of the paper – the humorous writings, stories, or reports – that could include dialogues such as the following:

Eduarda – Do I have visitors, Dorila?

Dorila – Yes, it’s the REPORTERS from *La Perla*.

Ramonita – Do I look okay, Dorila? Oh, I hope I don’t make it into the _____ [name of paper or section] nothing gets by them. . . .

Eduarda – You look perfect. I hope the train of my dress isn’t dragging. Please check, I wouldn’t want these people from _____ to have something to criticize.⁴⁶

44. *El Unionista*, “Noticias varias,” December 9, 1877.

45. *La Juventud*, “Hechos locales,” April 20, 1878.

46. *La Perla*, “Cosas,” August 25, 1878, emphasis in the original.

This was a warning, albeit in an upbeat tone, of the omnipresence of the newspapers. The publications had networks of reporters who went to as many of the community dances and festivities as possible, thus ensuring that the editors learned about and could evaluate all of the happenings. The lists of people attending the balls and detailed accounts of the events were a staple of the papers, and editors would admonish any organizers who didn't invite their reporters.

This power of disclosure was not always used to launch accusations. The editors also used the newspapers to applaud people for their actions or merits:

Our friend Nicasio F. de Latorre deserves our most valuable manifestation of esteem. Nicasio, active as he always is, got together a sum of money on Sunday to cover the costs of the funeral of D. Giles.⁴⁷

The newspapers were constantly publishing lists, whether of people who had supported the paper, or of individuals who had helped financially if someone fell ill, or a family experienced a death. Having one's name published in the paper increased a person's prestige, which in turn was an incentive to contribute to these community needs. It is clear that positive evaluations in the public sphere were quite strategic:

We will say it again: we expect philanthropy from our community. . . . We will periodically publish the names as well as the amount contributed by each person in this newspaper.⁴⁸

These lists were often initiated and circulated by the same newspaper editors who oversaw the materials to be published, and decided what would be printed and what would be discarded. They made modifications at will that could affect, or even anger, their readers:

. . . the anger of a certain gentleman who lives on Estados Unidos Street, brought about because the mischievous typesetters, for no apparent reason, struck his name from the list (of those who attended a dance).⁴⁹

Readers, too, with the full endorsement of the journalists, used this subaltern public space to point out others, to congratulate them or to accuse them, to send articles, poems, or gossip to the newspapers to be published.⁵⁰

Whether in jest or seriousness, writing in the newspaper gave one the power to judge or to promote judgments about people in the public sphere. The

47. *La Broma*, "Gran surtido de sueltitos," February 8, 1878.

48. *La Broma*, "Cumplamos con un deber," June 4, 1880.

49. *La Broma*, "Varillazos," September 3, 1881, emphasis in the original.

50. See for example, *La Broma*, "Suelitos de costumbre," January 4, 1882.

Afro-porteño publications constituted a circle controlled by a small number of people who accumulated and evaluated information about the community, who opened spaces of discussion and reintegration of identities, and who also censored and denounced whoever they saw as deviants. They instituted themselves as a panoptic device that generalized control and discipline at all levels of society, and thus facilitated the state's task of managing its subjects (a relationship that I explore in *Andares negros, caminos blancos*). The influence and power that journalists exercised in their communities, besides coming from the prestige of the newspaper itself, stemmed from the fact that the counterpublic sphere set up by the newspapers had enough capacity at any given moment to connect with and influence general public opinion – that is, to overlap with the bourgeois public sphere – and to make known their own needs and demands. The subaltern intellectuals knew the rules of the game and how to use them, just as they knew how to mobilize their readers who, even though few in comparison to other readerships, were not insignificant in number. We can see how this unfolds in a case of discrimination against Afro-porteño society that took place on the eve of Carnival, 1879-80.

A Case of Convergence between Public Spheres

The discrimination against the Afro-porteño population that occurred in 1880 is a singular example of how the Afro-porteño public sphere could converge with the hegemonic public sphere. This convergence, I argue, made it possible for the Afro-porteño intellectuals to influence the course of events and to provoke changes in their own community as well as in the rest of society. Here, I do not focus on the fact of discrimination per se (for a full discussion of that, see chapter 8 of *Andares negros, caminos blancos*), but rather on how the newspapers covered the story, citing each other, which was not the usual practice. The newspapers that participated in the coverage and discussion of events were *El Porteño* and its editor, Héctor Florencio Varela, and *La Tribuna*, edited by Héctor Varela's brother, Mariano – both of them daily publications that circulated in the bourgeois public sphere – and *La Broma*, which at that time was being published weekly.

Accounts of the events

On December 25, 1879, *La Broma* – based on what its editors had read in *El Pueblo Argentino* – reported that blacks and mulattos had been prohibited from entering the main ballroom of Jardín Florida for Carnival festivities. In the very next issue, however, the Afro-porteño newspaper retracted the story, explaining that “what truly happened was that people poorly attired were not

permitted entrance, whether they were blacks, whites, or others. Each one of us knows where the shoe pinches.”⁵¹ In this way, *La Broma* chose to reinterpret the situation and redirect the problem back to the community as a whole.

The following issue (January 10, 1880) did not mention the event at all. However, on January 15, *El Porteño* published a front page article entitled “People of Color,” in which it stated that “two of the public establishments that host dances and masquerade balls have prohibited the entrance of people of color, but to be even more clear, *of blacks and mulattos*.”⁵² This article highlighted the constitutional illegality of denying such entrance and asked all Afro-porteños to gather at the hall, purchase tickets, and enter by force. The next day, January 16, *La Tribuna* repeated this news and also appealed to the constitution. The editor added: “We cannot permit, in a democratic country like ours, threats of this kind against Argentine citizens who are equal to others by law and who can pay just like any white.”

On January 17, *El Porteño* published another front page article under the headline “Blacks and Mulattos,” in which they questioned the lack of police intervention in this matter. They claimed that “in this land where millions of blacks and mulattos have contributed to freedom and progress, the authorities cannot consent – without compromising themselves – to the presence of a businessman of the masquerades who denies them entrance.” An issue of *La Broma* that appeared the same day expressed agitation about the subject, claiming that *El Porteño* and other local and national newspapers had actually published announcements that entrance would be denied:

One day we looked through . . . *El Pueblo Argentino* . . . when we were surprised by news that made us want to throw the paper away. It was the notice from a company called Jardín Florido, announcing that they would deny entrance to *people of color*. The next day, we read the news in *La Prensa*, . . . the National Circus would also deny entrance to *blacks and mulattos*! For God’s sake! We asked ourselves with shock, where are we? Do they want to trample the democratic laws of the country where we were born? But this was not all. Another announcement, even more cruel and reactionary, plunged us into despair. Reading the illustrated columns of *El Porteño*, our hearts broke completely; a resolution was being discussed about the “Skating-Rink” that also closed its doors to people of *color*.⁵³

That this news appeared in *El Porteño* was particularly hurtful to the editors of *La Broma*, since they considered Héctor Varela, the chief editor of the newspa-

51. *La Broma*, “Noticias varias,” January 1, 1880.

52. Emphasis in the original.

53. *La Broma*, “Indigno proceder,” January 17, 1880, emphasis in the original.

per, a “protector and defender, as he has always been, to all of the helpless sons of these people.”⁵⁴ Given their feelings about Varela, the editors of *La Broma* made the following decision: “Profoundly indignant and unable to sustain further denigration and vehemence directed at us, we have decided to address ourselves directly to [Varela]”⁵⁵ in writing. They published both the letter they sent to this famous newspaperman and his response, in which he apologized for not having been aware of the notice and, further, condemned it. Froilán Bello, who had signed the letter for *La Broma*, then asked Varela to defend the “society of color.” They reprinted the articles from *El Porteño* (of January 15) and *La Tribuna* (of January 16), and added in the “Última Hora” section:

ULTIMA HORA – Our youth stands up! Our aims will be accomplished! We call for a demonstration of appreciation for citizen Héctor F. Varela. We will meet at the society Estrella del Sud tonight, with the goal of planning this occasion.⁵⁶

Finally, in the section “Varillazos,” they asked people to ignore *El Porteño’s* call for locals to enter by force, adding:

We are in our own country and let’s not be fools about this. With no insults, no scandals, we are going to enter the *Skating-Rink*, and the *Saint Skating-Rink*, if there is in fact anything more *pure and sanctified* than the one on Esmeralda Street.⁵⁷

On January 19, *El Porteño* reprinted *La Broma’s* article from two days earlier, on the front page under the title “To *La Broma*.” Its editors added: “We reply. The brothers who wrote those lines do not have to thank us. In taking their defense, we have accomplished a duty.”

On January 21, *El Porteño* and *La Tribuna* returned to the theme of segregation in the ballrooms. The day before, delegates from the Afro-porteño community had presented a request to the municipality, asking them to forbid the owners of those establishments from denying blacks and mulattos entrance. *El Porteño* and *La Tribuna* printed this request verbatim. *La Tribuna*, apparently countering the call from *El Porteño* for people to use force, added, “In this way, people of color unite to teach a lesson to the white entrepreneurs. Instead of organizing a hostile manifestation against those aristocratic people, they thought

54. *La Broma*, “Indigno proceder,” January 17, 1880.

55. *La Broma*, “Indigno proceder,” January 17, 1880.

56. This “Última Hora” was originally published completely in bold, bringing attention to this part of the paper.

57. *La Broma*, “Varillazos,” January 17, 1880, emphasis in the original.

it more fitting to write a communication, both reasonable and fair, to the president of the municipality.”⁵⁸

On January 23, in a very brief piece entitled “The Chief of Police,” *La Tribuna* informed its readers that the municipal official had sent a spirited letter to the business owners of the ballrooms, admonishing them for their behavior. They reprinted the letter in the January 24 issue in two pieces: “Between the Lines” and “People of Color”:

Our political Constitution does not recognize social hierarchies . . . , and it cannot be accepted that theatre companies put limitations on those rights . . . The cited resolution produced true unhappiness and agitation among the people of color who believe they have been stripped of a right, and who are campaigning with the authorities now, to reclaim that right. In addition to the good and loyal services that the country owes to the class of color, whose members have shed their blood for public freedom and national honor, winning the right to be respected just as other men, these measures entail serious dangers to public order, and the authorities must hasten to get rid of them in a timely fashion. For these reasons, I warn you that the police will not enforce any measures taken by the theatre companies against men of color . . . José Ignacio Garmendia

As we can see, in addition to characterizing the “class of color” as loyal and heroic, and “believing” it was being stripped of a right, the chief of police expressed warnings of insecurity and danger in light of the angry reactions of the Afro-porteño community. An editorial in *La Broma* on January 24, 1880, also reflected this social unhappiness among the Afro-porteños (the issue was actually distributed on Monday, January 26, having been delayed in order to include the most recent updates):

We must not keep silent before such a wicked attack if we don’t want to see the day come when we are deprived completely of the enjoyment of all our rights, until we are excluded from the land where we were born in a happy state of freedom achieved by the lives and blood of our ancestors. We publicly protest, asking the pertinent powers to disavow the taking away of this fundamental right. We shall all gather in a “meeting” and raise our voices for the first time to ask for what is ours. . . . Let’s go, stand up, all society of “color!” Do not allow a stranger to come and insult us in our home. Let us go with restraint, with order, and with all of the corresponding moderation . . . so, stand up, men of “color.”⁵⁹

58. Emphasis in the original.

59. *La Broma*, “Movimiento social,” January 24, 1880.

Here, I want to highlight the appeal to nationality as a means of protest and warning, as a form of identification with the rest of society, and as a sense of community through the memory of participating in patriotic wars. Further, it is important to note the call to publicly demonstrate “for the first time,” to fight for rights in a sphere beyond their immediate community. They went on to thank Garmendia, as chief of police, for confronting the businessmen; they thanked the press in general, Varela in particular, and the municipality. They also called for a demonstration in gratitude to Héctor Varela, and reported that a committee had been formed to coordinate this. Toward the end of the issue they published a piece about another demonstration that they “no longer believed was going to happen,” but they didn’t offer any details. They confirmed, however, in an “Última Hora” notice, that the committee in charge of expressing acknowledgement of Hector Varela was continuing its work.

On January 25, *La Tribuna* published the municipality’s resolution, which was sent to the chief of police to be presented to the delegates of the Afro-porteño community. The resolution indicated that Garmendia should let the local businessmen know they did not have the right to impede entrance to their public establishments. In this same issue, a piece entitled “To the people of Buenos Aires” called on all citizens to participate in a public demonstration:

Citizens of color, sons and inhabitants of this soil, invite those who sympathize with the cause, whose victory we managed to win from the capable authorities, to come on Monday the 26th of this month at 7 pm to Lorea Square to show their public support.

It was this public and non-sectoral demonstration through the center of the city that *La Broma* had referenced as at risk of not happening. We learn more about the cancelled demonstration in *El Porteño* on January 25, where an announcement in “Última Hora” entitled “The Prohibited Demonstration” made clear the level of activity/activism around this issue in the community. The proposed route for the prohibited demonstration started at Lorea Square (now the Square of the two Congresses) and ended a few meters from the House of the Government, thus parading all through the city center. The paper printed the note from the organizing committee, adding:

The blacks and mulattos . . . want to organize a demonstration believing they are in a free country, and they are told *you are not doing it!* Fantastic! Just dandy. Meanwhile, men of color have stopped all preparations for tomorrow’s demonstration. They met in the evening and decided to write a pronouncement to the public and to present an *album* signed by all of them to citizen Hector F. Varela.⁶⁰

60. Emphasis in the original.

From that moment, we can only follow events through *El Porteño*, since *La Tribuna* stopped publishing news about the matter. And there was no further news from *La Broma* until its next issue on February 7. So, on January 28, *El Porteño* printed on its front page an article entitled “Demonstration for H.F. Varela,” the very piece that *La Broma* had published, calling people to the public gathering that was to take place that same day, but follow an alternate route that would end in Belgrano:

The demonstration will take place today, Wednesday, at 6:00 p.m., starting from Victoria Square, at the Belgrano tramway, and going to Varela’s villa, in that area.

It is interesting to note here that “that area” of Belgrano was quite a distance away from the originally planned route—at that time it lay outside the city limits of Buenos Aires.⁶¹ On January 29, in an “Última Hora” piece entitled “Demonstration for Varela,” *El Porteño* described the gathering and procession in detail, emphasizing its good order, education, and culture shown by those from the community who were present. The “secular liturgy” (Sábato 1998), mentioned above, which characterized all public demonstrations of the time, is obvious in the description. All of the appropriate elements were in place: the formation of an organizing committee, a meeting in a public place, the departure from a predetermined location, walking in an orderly fashion, with the organizers carrying a lectern, pre-ordained speeches, applause, and routes through the streets, among other things.

On January 30, *El Porteño* ran an article on its front page entitled “Demonstration of People of Color,” and publicly acknowledged the demonstration in honor of its editor; on February 1, also on the front page, one of the speeches was printed in its entirety. With that, *El Porteño* ended its coverage of the topic.

La Broma, whose publication schedule prevented it from publishing news close to the actual event, nonetheless published two more issues that referred to the proceedings. On February 7, they too printed the whole speech that was read, and on February 14, *La Broma* published the readers’ comments.

So these were the events as reported in this press. Although I did not reproduce the articles in full, I wanted primarily to show the chronology of events, the prohibition of the original demonstration, and the ways the facts were told and retold by these particular newspapers.

A negotiated victory

As mentioned earlier, the subaltern public sphere and the bourgeois public sphere converged at particular crossroads. These were exceptional moments

61. Today, Belgrano is a northern neighborhood within Buenos Aires.

that provoked readjustments and realignments in both symbolic spaces, and I believe the events around the segregation of the ballrooms and the failed demonstration constituted one of those moments.

Although the Afro-porteño *La Broma* initially minimized this instance of discrimination, it was taken up by other newspapers of the porteño elite. Indeed, when Varela, an editor from *El Porteño*, saw himself as directly responsible for publishing the announcement of denial of entrance to blacks and mulattos, he proceeded to generate interest in the affair. This attention projected the events into the bourgeois public sphere, which perhaps triggered the “first time” open resistance from Afro-descendants. It was precisely these positive repercussions that the Afro-porteño community wanted to recognize and acknowledge with the demonstration in honor of Varela. The articles that went back and forth between the newspapers, being printed and reprinted in the bourgeois public sphere, portrayed the Afro-porteños in a positive light, referencing their heroic participation in national wars, and their “humbleness” and “kindness”, for example. News articles emphatically highlighted the republican spirit of the constitution, the law of universal male-citizenship, and – especially in *La Broma* – nationality. This confluence helped to affirm for the Afro-porteño community that their “historical” belonging to the nation was a plausible way of obtaining recognition in that other broader public sphere, which gave them a terrain from which to fight for their rights. Racial discrimination at the ballrooms ultimately introduced Afro-porteño society into the hegemonic public sphere – even though this was exactly the opposite of what the businessmen of the ballrooms had intended when they issued their exclusion notice.

If subaltern counterpublic spheres offer fertile terrain in which to organize subversive activities, and thus have emancipatory potential (Fraser, 1992), it was this struggle that Chief of Police Garmendia foresaw – and feared – when he wrote to notify the ballroom businessmen. As Sábató (1998) explains, the problem of maintaining public order was a serious challenge at this time, especially after the events of the Paris Commune in 1871. The specter of social disorder was constantly present, and the possibility of demonstrations was a recurrent preoccupation in all the newspapers, including those of the Afro-porteño community. In this context, the state considered one of the Afro-porteño demonstrations – the one set up to march through the city center – dangerous enough to forbid it. Although *El Porteño* opposed this move, it was unable to create the conditions for that demonstration to go forward. The Afro-porteño society itself does not seem to have insisted on it, referencing the failure of the original demonstration in the speech for Varela (during the demonstration in his honor), but not giving it much attention in the newspapers. In fact, we only know about the prohibition of that march thanks to *El Porteño*. *La Broma* never gave much space to more combative approaches of aggrieved citizens, and we can perhaps suppose that not insisting on the original plan was a consensual

move of the community toward preserving peace and order, something this newspaper consistently valued, not only during these events but throughout its years of publication. The result was that the Afro-porteño community accepted the prohibition, but only after the municipality had ordered Police Chief Gardemia not to permit segregation in the ballrooms.

Here, we should take note of the hegemonic process, which is always under construction and negotiation, always variable and contradictory (Eley 1992). We can only understand the events of this episode through this process of constant negotiation: the Afro-porteño community succeeded in abolishing the denial of entrance to the dance halls through bureaucratic means and also by threatening public order; it gained “argentinidad” (*argentinidad*), by giving up on the demonstration; the community momentarily reduced the inequality of access to the bourgeois public sphere, but in so doing it also, paradoxically, lost visibility. What was possible – presenting the album to Héctor Varela in his home in Belgrano as a way to acknowledge his actions – took the community far from the city’s center, where demonstrations generally took place and where the prohibited demonstration would have taken place.

On the one side, the Afro-porteño intellectuals formally complained to the municipality of Buenos Aires, at a time when the bureaucratic-institutional systems were being created as parts of a big machine that would later be consolidated. On the other, the Afro-porteño intellectuals demanded the hegemonic newspapers to publicly defend the values granted by the constitution. As mediator between the state and civil society, the bourgeois public sphere could shape responses to the concrete demands of citizens such as Afro-porteños. In this case, Afro-porteño intellectuals succeeded in both their approaches: to the State – who acted in their favor – and to the hegemonic publications. In fact, without the support of the bourgeois public sphere, I believe the prohibition of segregation at Carnival issued by the Police would, at the very least, have been delayed. Nevertheless, the State’s discourse that Afro-descendants had effectively disappeared ran head-on into the possibility of a demonstration that would have shown the very public presence of a community that identified as non-white, even though its call to demonstrate had been made in a general way to the “people of Buenos Aires.” The center of the city was where all public institutions were located and by parading through those streets the Afro-porteño community meant to make itself visible before the state. In this instance, the state allowed the Afro-porteño community to demonstrate “out of sight” (*fuera de la vista*), while prohibiting it from parading through the city center. In doing so, it intervened directly in shaping the “public space” and in its definition as “white-European.”⁶² The state thus removed the imminent danger, the threat

62. On the intervention and definition of the state in the porteño public space at the end of 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, see Gorelik (1998). According to him, Buenos Aires, the city that represented Europe in America, started to shape its metropolitan

of a “disorder” that carried symbolic weight, since it stemmed from the anxieties around the possible revolt by blacks and mulattos present in the city during slavery (which had ended not long before), and was possibly reinforced by news of the recent events in Paris.

There is no doubt that the role of *La Broma* in these events was crucial. Its defense of the freedoms granted by the national constitution led to the initial outcry and to the direct appeal to the municipality. In light of its influence and interest in civic rights, the name of the newspaper changed from *La Broma Weekly Newspaper* to *La Broma Social Newspaper*. It is precisely in these actions – making a problem visible and achieving social mobilization – that we can appreciate the effectiveness of subaltern intellectuals as mediators. Those individuals connected to the newspapers – whether as editors, founders, or simply collaborators – demonstrated a precise knowledge of the legal strategies that could be used to achieve their goals and of the rights guaranteed by the constitution. They understood the broad readership of the newspapers that circulated in the city, the rules that should be followed in matters of public order relating to demonstrations, as well as what was required by the secular liturgy. These intellectuals knew whom to address, and how, when circumstances demanded. Far from the image of victim that has been asserted for “poor black” Argentines over decades (Geler, 2007 and 2008a), these men were full historical agents, and further, quite competent ones. This case shows that the Afro-porteño community recognized the advantages of making themselves heard in the dominant public sphere. To achieve this, it was of course necessary that the bourgeois public sphere granted them access, and that they then knew how to behave there. Those agents used their knowledge in ways the broader public sphere permitted, knowledge likely acquired thanks to the long Afro-descendant history of political involvement (see chapter XII of *Andares*). Their knowledge was bolstered by symbolic capital⁶³ that consolidated the influence and status of some individuals vis-à-vis the rest of the community, and gave them the possibility of being heard and of being accepted as valid interlocutors – even if temporarily – by society as a whole.

It is interesting that this exceptional moment, in which subaltern intellectuals promoted a change in the course of events, also provoked a change in the discourse of elites in their newspapers. From their apparent oversight in publishing a discriminatory announcement, they moved to defending the

public space thanks to the direct intervention of an increasingly strong and disciplinary state, which built a public space designed to mold society. Although I consider it impossible to impose a process totally from above – with the exception of explicit violent coercion – the city of Buenos Aires was planned as a political project that would clearly define the people who would inhabit it.

63. Bourdieu defines symbolic capital as “any property (any kind of capital, physical, economic, cultural, social) when it is perceived by social agents whose categories of perception are such that they can know (can distinguish) and recognize them, giving them some value” (2002:108).

Afro-porteño community and its rights. A group normally unconcerned with the conditions of the subaltern community repositioned itself and became involved. This influenced decision-making at the state level, shaping how the Afro-porteño demands arrived before the state and establishing an alliance between the state, dominant sectors, and the subaltern Afro-porteño community. In their turn, subaltern intellectuals promoted organization in their community, helping their people to identify with a cause and a fight, and thus drove their counterhegemonic impulses to the limits of what was possible.

References

- Anderson, Benedict. 1993. *Comunidades imaginadas. Reflexiones sobre el origen y la difusión del nacionalismo*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Boladeras Cucurella, Margarita. 2001. "La opinión pública en Habermas," in *Anàlisi*, 26: 51-70.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2002. *Razones prácticas. Sobre la teoría de la acción*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Eley, Geoff. 1992. "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun, pp. 289-339. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Feierman, Steven. 1990. *Peasant Intellectuals. Anthropology and History in Tanzania*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 2005. *Vigilar y castigar. Nacimiento de la prisión*. Madrid: Siglo XXI.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1992. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun, pp. 109-142. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Geler, Lea. 2007. "¿¡Pobres negros!?. Algunos apuntes sobre la desaparición de los negros argentinos," in *Estado, Región y Poder Local en América Latina, siglos XIX-XX. Algunas miradas sobre el estado, el poder y la participación política*, ed. Pilar García Jordán, pp. 115-153. Barcelona: Publicacions i Edicions de la Universitat de Barcelona.
- . 2008a. *¿"Otros"? argentinos. Afrodescendientes porteños y la construcción de la nación argentina entre 1873 y 1882*. Tesis de Doctorado. Universitat de Barcelona.
- . 2008b. "Guardianes del progreso. Los periódicos afroporteños entre 1873 y 1882," in *Anuario de Estudios Americanos*, vol. 65, 1: 199-226.
- González Bernaldo De Quirós, Pilar. 2001. *Civilidad y política en los orígenes de la Nación Argentina. Las sociabilidades en Buenos Aires, 1829-1862*. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Gorelik, Adrián. 1998. *La grilla y el parque. Espacio público y cultura urbana en Buenos Aires, 1887-1936*. Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1974. *La formación de los intelectuales*. Barcelona: Grijalbo.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 2006. *Historia y crítica de la opinión pública. La transformación estructural de la vida pública*. Barcelona: Gustavo Gili.
- Halperín Donghi, Tulio. 1985. *José Hernández y sus mundos*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana.

- Mallon, Florencia. 1995. *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Prieto, Adolfo. 2006. *El discurso criollista en la formación de la Argentina moderna*. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores.
- Quesada, Ernesto. 1883. "El periodismo argentino (1877-1883)," in *Nueva Revista de Buenos Aires*, año 3, tomo 9: 72-101.
- Rodríguez Molas, Ricardo. 1962. "Condición social de los últimos descendientes de esclavos rioplatenses (1852-1900)," in *Cuadernos Americanos*, vol. CXXII: 133-171.
- Sábato, Hilda. 1998. *La política en las calles. Entre el voto y la movilización. Buenos Aires, 1862-1880*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana.
- . 2002. "El fervor asociativo," in *De las cofradías a las organizaciones de la sociedad civil. Historia de la iniciativa asociativa en Argentina 1776-1990*, ed. Roberto Di Stefano, Hilda Sábato, Luis Alberto Romero, and José Luis Moreno, pp. 104-131. Buenos Aires: Gadis.
- Thompson, Edward P. 1989. *La formación de la clase obrera en Inglaterra*. Barcelona: Editorial Crítica.
- Williams, Raymond. 1980. *Marxismo y literatura*. Barcelona: Península.