
The Road to Recognition

Afro-Uruguayan Activism and the Struggle for Visibility

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5.1 Introduction

In 1912, the American paleontologist William Jacob Holland traveled to Uruguay. As director of the Carnegie Museum, his job included installing replicas of sauropod dinosaurs around the world. Holland kept a journal of his adventures, commenting on notable aspects of the nations he visited. Uruguay seemed to particularly capture his imagination, and his commentary on race in the nation was of particular note. In *To the River Plate and Back*, he explained that one of the “matter[s] of remark” about Uruguay was the “absence of negroes . . . there were no people of African races visible.” In fact, he noted that “Uruguayans pride themselves upon the fact that racial questions are not likely to trouble their republic in the future. ‘Ours,’ they say, ‘is a white man’s country’” (Holland 1913, 94).¹

Although just a visitor, Holland picked up on a longstanding aspect of Uruguayan identity that denied racial difference and extolled the country’s heritage as stemming from European descent.² This myth of

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¹ Brazilian anthropologist Dacey Ribeiro also classified Uruguay, in 1969, as part of the “transplanted historico-cultural configuration” which was based on the idea that its population came almost entirely from Europe and thus, created a European-based culture in the country. See Ribeiro (1969), as translated in Sans (2011, 195).

² This claim was repeated time and again, including in Fitzgibbon (1954, 265–266), where he claimed that the “Negro population [was] small . . . Uruguay escapes whatever problems would be presented by the presence of that large, ethnically alien element. The country has few Negroes, Montevideo almost none.”

homogeneity persisted long past Holland's trip. In fact, until 2011, official statistics cited Uruguay's Afro-descendant population as a mere 4 percent of the country. It was only after the census conducted that year explicitly asked citizens whether they self-identified as "Afro o Negra" that these estimates changed.³ The results revealed the actual numbers were more than double previous projections, at 8.1 percent (Uruguay Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2011).

This chapter argues that the remarkable path that led from an overwhelming denial of Afro-Uruguayans as part of the country's national identity to a census that officially recognized the demographic makeup of almost a tenth of the population was the result of grassroots mobilization from the Afro-Uruguayan community, combined with a more progressive left-leaning government that responded to domestic and international pressure. While scholars have noted the extraordinary nature and outcome of the 2011 census, they have not yet explored the history of how the census was linked to a larger push for recognition within a country that, for over a century, extolled its European heritage and promoted a myth of homogeneity (Arocena 2013). Overall, scholarship on Afro-Uruguayans is relatively scarce, reflecting their invisibility for much of the country's history. When studied at all, works tend to focus on either Afro-Uruguayans' recent contributions to literary works, socio-economic disparities, or the deeper connections between Afro-Uruguayans and *candombe* – a Uruguayan dance with rhythmic music adopted from slave traditions.⁴ A historical analysis of the road to the census law and its aftermath in both a national and global context, however, offers an important addition to this emerging scholarship on Afro-Uruguayans from a political mobilization standpoint.⁵ This chapter argues that the 2011 census in Uruguay is part of a three-decades-long organizing effort that pushed against a hegemonic narrative of whiteness, and finally found a receptive audience when it combined with

³ The exact question was "¿Cree tener ascendencia ... afro o negra; asiática o amarilla; blanca; indígena; otra?"

⁴ Bucheli and Porzecanski (2011), Lewis (2003), and Persico (2015). An exception is the historical monograph by Andrews (2010b) and recent work by Mónica Olaza in Spanish, by Olaza (2009, 2017) and in English, Townsend-Bell (2021).

⁵ In addition, integrating Uruguay into the more voluminous history of race in Latin America offers a distinct story that analyzes the specific treatment of Afro-Uruguayans during the dictatorship and a hard-fought process of overcoming invisibility. For some of the foundational texts on race and Latin America, see Andrews (2004), Chasteen (2004), de la Fuente (2001), Fox (2006), Hooker (2005), Wade (1997), and Yashar (2005).

a larger global push for state-sponsored multiculturalism in the twenty-first century.

In many ways, efforts for official recognition stem from the depths of the country's military dictatorship, which lasted from 1973 to 1985, as the military government targeted Afro-Uruguayan communities in ways that were particular to the small Southern Cone country.⁶ During the dictatorship, the military sought to eliminate perceived leftist subversives, often exerting its control through political imprisonment, torture, and disappearances. Afro-Uruguayans were victims of these endemic human rights violations that affected the entire nation; but they also suffered high rates of internal displacement as the military targeted historic Afro-descendent communities as part of the capital city's gentrification process. In these cases, the military forced Afro-Uruguayans out of their communities, oftentimes with no compensation, dispersing them to the literal and figurative margins of the country. This systemic displacement was largely excluded from the human rights definition and advocacy that emerged in and about Uruguay during this time period (Sharnak forthcoming[a]).

With the fall of the regime in the mid-1980s, however, black civic mobilization surged. As debates raged over what a newly reconstituted democracy would look like, Afro-Uruguayan leaders organized against the conditions that had rendered them vulnerable both during the dictatorship and more broadly during so much of the country's history. They formed organizations, founded newspapers, and protested against racism and discrimination – injecting a discourse about race into the national conversation that had previously been confined to the Afro-communities. In this way, the Afro-Uruguayan push for visibility led to the creation of a vibrant civil rights movement that empowered its citizens and argued for inclusion and racial equality. In subsequent decades, these efforts produced tangible changes in governmental policies, including measures like the inauguration of a Black Heritage month and an affirmative action law. These initiatives were promulgated from the country's legislative bodies which, starting in 2006, had a leftist coalition majority in the form of the *Frente Amplio* (Broad Front). As this chapter will show, though, these changes can be more closely linked to a longer history of pressure from below, in the form of Afro-Uruguayan mobilization in the aftermath of the dictatorship, and from

⁶ See Loveman (2014, chapter 7).

above, as a result of a larger global shift toward support for state-sponsored multiculturalism in the twenty-first century. Thus, this chapter situates Uruguay within the regional and global trends of state multicultural recognition, but specifically looks at Uruguay's unique path that stemmed from its treatment of Afro-Uruguayans during the dictatorship and a larger centuries-long history of denying the existence of *Afro-descendientes* and their influence in the country.

This chapter explores this transformation by, first, analyzing the myth of Uruguayan whiteness against the country's strong Afro-descendent history that rendered Afro-Uruguayans to the margins of the nation's identity for much of the country's history. It then examines how the country's military government specifically targeted Afro-Uruguayan communities during the dictatorship. Lastly, the chapter considers the period of mobilization against continued marginalization during the country's transition back to democratic rule in the 1980s, finding the roots of current advocacy in this period of contentious democratic politics. While notable for the immediate impact this organizing had in mobilizing Afro-Uruguayan voices as part of a national project, the biggest effect of these late 1980s efforts can be found in the last decade when domestic activism combined with a global push toward multiculturalism. Ultimately, this chapter spotlights Uruguay's distinct path toward official recognition of its Afro population, understanding the reasons that visibility was so important to Afro-Uruguayans based on the country's history of promoting whiteness and marginalization during the dictatorship.⁷

5.2 Denial and Erasure in Uruguayan History

Travel books and historical monographs often describe Uruguay as the "Switzerland of South America" (Gillespie 1991, 19; Latin America Bureau 1980, 22; Roniger and Sznajder 1997, 57; Weinstein 1975, xiii; 1988, xv; Weschler 1998, 92). This exceptionalist label derives from the country's social welfare history, which dates to the first half of the twentieth century when Jose Batlle y Ordoñez was president. Batlle

⁷ This chapter largely focuses on both discrimination and activism in the capital, Montevideo. While a large number of Afro-Uruguayans live on the border with Brazil, particularly in the Department of Rivera and Cerro Largo, the research and sources focus on Montevideo where 50 percent of the Uruguayan population resides. That being said, research on Afro-Uruguayans in the interior is much needed.

ushered in a strong centralized state that aimed to protect its citizens. His progressive policies included measures such as the separation of church and state as well as promoting women's rights, educational opportunities, and eight-hour work days (Bértola 2008; Churchill 2014, 29; Ehrick 2005, 70–88; Weinstein 1975, 90–91, 1988, 23–25). With these advances and protections for traditionally vulnerable populations, Uruguay acquired a reputation as a place of relative acceptance of different genders, religions, and races that held remarkably consistent until the nation's dictatorship began in 1973.

This narrative of tolerance, though, often rendered problems of discrimination and racism “invisible” within the nation's borders by denying the very existence of diverse populations (Arocena 2013, 140; Rodríguez 2003).⁸ Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Uruguay promoted a process of “*blanqueamiento*” or whitening of its population – an image that stressed its large population of immigrants from Western and Southern Europe as proof of its modernity and racial progress (Arocena 2013, 140; Cottrol 2013, 16–17, 113–142; Hernández 2013, 20; Loveman 2014, 208–209; Quijano 2000, 562–563)⁹ Official histories of the country largely ignored the tens of thousands of slaves brought to its shores from Africa as well as its Indigenous groups (Bucheli and Porzecanski 2011, 113).¹⁰ These populations were referred to as small or non-existent, pushed to the margins of national consciousness.¹¹ This characterization of a “white” Uruguay has proven remarkably persistent. History textbooks used in primary schools in Uruguay as late as the 1980s reinforced a strong European lineage and the whiteness of Uruguay's population, relegating Afro-descendants and Indigenous

⁸ Even famous Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano noted the origins of this invisibility dating back to the country's origins when he wrote in his vignette-laden historical overview of Latin American, *Faces and Masks*, “From Buenos Aires come the first settlers, fifteen young people, nineteen children, and a few slaves who do not figure on the list – black hands for the ax, the hoe, and the gallows, breasts to give milk, a voice to cry wares” (Galeano 1987, 21).

⁹ Latin America was impacted by negative discussions of race and society in the United States; for some discussions of the transnational effects, see Hooker (2017) and Wade (1993, 12).

¹⁰ The current number of Indigenous in Uruguay is about 5 percent. Indigenous groups were subject to physical erasure during the nation's founding due to diseases, wars, and aggressive campaigns to expel them from the territory, see Cabella et al. (2013, 16), Abella (2010), and Sans (2011, 197–198).

¹¹ Anecdotally, time and again, people refer to the enduring idea that Uruguay, until very recently, was characterized as “a white, European country that did not have a black population.” See Cottrol (2013, 124) and Laviñ (2013, 113).

groups to the fringes of society and historical memory (*Brecha* 1985a). Many scholars studying this phenomenon have concluded that Uruguayans tend to accept the myths of “racial democracy, homogeneity, and equality of opportunity” (Bucheli and Porzecanski 2011, 116). The construction of the nation’s white identity fit both Indigenous and Afro-Uruguayans into what anthropologist Peter Wade has called “structures of alterity,” an otherness that in different ways produced discrimination and ignored their historical and cultural contributions to the country (Wade 1997, 36–37).¹²

Despite this dominant narrative, Uruguay has a rich African heritage. Starting in the colonial period, Montevideo was the official port of entry for African slaves for the entire Rio de la Plata region. While many slaves were shuttled to Argentina, approximately 20,000 stayed in Uruguay. Other slaves came by way of Brazilian ports and made their way to Uruguay by various methods that included attempting to escape from slavery in Brazil where the institution lasted decades longer than anywhere else on the continent (Sans 2011, 198). On the eve of independence in 1825, almost 25 percent of the country was estimated to be African or Afro-Uruguayan (Andrews 2011). As almost a fourth of the population, Afro-Uruguayans came to influence the city’s cultural fabric in a myriad of ways (Borucki 2015). For example, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, *candombe* was an integral part of the city landscape. Many of the more well-to-do families would go watch *candombe* on Sundays in the city center, viewing it as a destination or “spectacle” to partake in (Chasteen 2000, 48).

The slave trade ended in 1830 and slavery itself was abolished in 1842. At the turn of the next century, a massive wave of Southern European immigrants arrived. These three developments ultimately resulted in the relative dwindling of the relative Afro-Uruguayan population. Although some younger Afro-Uruguayans sought to assimilate in the latter part of the nineteenth century, many continued to face pervasive discrimination and prejudice (Chasteen 2000, 48). These conditions frequently relegated Afro-Uruguayans to low paying employment opportunities such as cleaning out latrines, raggicking, and garbage collectors. These were jobs

¹² Jeffrey Gould has studied the “myth of mestizaje” in Nicaragua, explaining how the demise of Indigenous ethnic identity had a devastating effect on the surviving Indigenous community through the creation of a culture of repression. Gould explains how, by ignoring these groups, local and national governments in Nicaragua were able to ignore rights to land and inclusion in social policies by deeming Indigenous communities non-existent. A similar phenomenon occurred in Uruguay, not only to the Indigenous communities but, as this article shows, to Afro-Uruguayans as well (Gould 1998).

that had traditionally been occupied by slaves and, by the 1860s, remained associated with Africans or Afro-Uruguayans (Borucki 2015, 27–28). Even in the military, an institution that had historically afforded leverage for claims of citizenry and equality, Afro-Uruguayans often faced violent forced conscription rather than opportunity for social advancement (Andrews 2010b, 32–34).

A lack of opportunity produced high percentages of Afro-Uruguayans who faced poverty in the twentieth century. Further, there were few routes out of these poor living conditions. Even those who attended university often struggled to find jobs afterwards as they faced discrimination in various professional fields such as law (Andrews 2010b, 40–42). Political organizations and businesses regularly excluded Afro-Uruguayans. Further, Afro-Uruguayans were frequently barred from places of public amusement (Andrews 2010b, 43). Such informal and formal segregation compelled Afro-Uruguayans to create parallel political and social clubs, as well as a black press. These important institutions allowed for a vibrant and important community to develop, but it also meant that Afro-Uruguayans continued to operate at the physical, social, and economic edges of society.

Despite persistent marginalization, the community maintained a vibrant Afro-Uruguayan culture. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, Uruguay boasted one of the most active black presses in Latin America (Andrews 2010a, 83–84). For instance, *Nuestra Raza* (1917, 1933–1948), one of the longest running black newspapers, fostered black consciousness and attacked the norms of the period. They published creative and critical pieces by black authors and created space to celebrate black achievements in Uruguay and advance the black community (Lewis 2003, 28–31; Young 2002, 87). *La Conservación* (1872), another prominent paper, highlighted everyday instances of racism that Afro-Uruguayans endured, painting a complex picture of Uruguayan society and identity through the lens of its black citizens (*La Conservación* 1872; Young 2002, 84, 2004, 33). Meanwhile, *Bahía Hulan Jack* (1958–1999) was a long-running black newspaper that advocated against racism, discrimination, and segregation in the country (Young 2004, 91). Indeed, throughout the twentieth century, black organizations, social clubs, recreational groups, as well as the country's first black political party, surfaced across Uruguay.¹³ While these organizations played

¹³ It must be acknowledged that white poet and anthropologist, Ildefonso Pereda Valdés in many ways established Afro-Uruguayan studies in the 1940s as a reaction to the

a significant role in establishing an Afro-Uruguayan identity, it was a segregated community, and not recognized as part of the broader Uruguayan national identity whose self-image privileged the country's Eurocentric heritage. As Carroll Mills Young notes, when acknowledged at all, Afro-Uruguayans were considered a source for low paid labor or at best "a toy of the elite to be played with during carnival" (Young 2002, 84). Overall, discrimination and marginalization proved the norm.

Mario Benedetti, one of the country's most famous writers, acknowledged this broader problem. In 1960, he published a famous essay, *El país de la cola de paja*, which explained that, in Uruguay, "we repeat the chorus that here, there is no racial discrimination, without paying notice to the movie theaters and bakeries in the center of the country that do not allow negros to enter" (Benedetti 1970). Benedetti explained that the state embraced a discourse that denied official racism in the twentieth century and helped "create the impression that Afro-descendants were not a distinguishable or meaningful social group or category that had its own specific problems and dynamics" (Bucheli and Porzecanski 2011, 116). While voices around the country acknowledged that this legacy left problems of discrimination and racism "invisible" within the nation's borders, there was little recourse (Rodríguez 2003). Meanwhile, Afro-Uruguayan communities demonstrated the economic implication of structural exclusion, recording a poverty rate more than double the rest of the population even before the country's military rule began. Therefore, from the turn of the century until the dictatorship, claims of racial acceptance in Uruguay crumble under close scrutiny.

5.3 Forced Displacement and Dictatorship

The nature of this discrimination and segregation, however, changed during the country's dictatorship, which lasted from 1973 to 1985. In this period, Afro-Uruguayans endured the same treatment as the rest of

blanqueamiento movement, which helped elevate the presence and work of Afro-Uruguayans. Yet, overall, the dominant narrative of invisibility and exclusion remained. See Andrews (2010b, 99–100), de Carvalho Neto (1954, 235–238), Holmes (1944), and Valdés (1941, 1965).

the population, which included torture and political imprisonment as the military regime's main modes of repression against the entire population.¹⁴ In addition, Afro-Uruguayans were victims of internal displacement as a result of the military's demolition of historic Afro-Uruguayan-occupied housing.¹⁵ Most Afro-Uruguayans in Montevideo had settled in *conventillos*, a type of planned housing tenement building in neighborhoods such as Barrio Sur and Palermo. Thus, a majority of Afro-Uruguayan residents within the capital city lived in a concentrated area, particularly in comparison to the rest of the city.¹⁶ Former residents of *conventillos* also describe the housing in terms that often stressed their cultural importance. As Vannina Sztainbok notes, many Afro-Uruguayans remember them as "a site of family solidarity, hardship, and very humble beginnings . . . cultural heritage sites" that featured frequent candombe and were places of Afro-community and culture (2009, 2–3).¹⁷

The military threatened these traditional living quarters. As part of the regime's neoliberal policies, it promoted massive gentrification projects in the central part of the city as a way to attract foreign investment and private capital (Ruetalo 2008, 39–40). The military government held particular interest in these primarily Afro-Uruguayan neighborhoods because, over time, they had become prime real estate. Prices for land in these areas increased and many stood to benefit from the construction of new homes in the neighborhood that would enhance the city and further Montevideo as a banking center. Rent in these buildings had also been controlled since 1947, and thus remained artificially low (Andrews 2010b, 142). This dynamic produced a situation where landlords decided not to invest or maintain these buildings, leaving decaying housing structures Afro-Uruguayans occupied, many of who had a strong cultural connection to the area and oftentimes could not afford to leave.

¹⁴ See, for example, da Luz de los Santos in Laviñ (2013, 21–22).

¹⁵ For more on the effect of authoritarianism and the rollback of rights and freedoms more broadly, see Franz (2018, chapter 7), Haggard and Kaufman (2016), Meng (2017), and Svulik (2012).

¹⁶ These tenements were mixed race and integrated but stood out for their strong Afro-Uruguayan presence and the cultural importance that Afro communities place in the housing structures.

¹⁷ Other descriptions of *conventillos* explain them as "a community and culture" for Afro-Uruguayans (Ortuño 2008).

With the permission of the military government, the city responded to both the decay and the potential real estate opportunity by passing laws in 1978 that allowed landlords to evict tenants from buildings that were in a “state of emergency,” which the government defined as being “covered with filth and moral degradation.” This racialized discourse was based on long-held prejudices that dehumanized Afro-Uruguayans by linking them with racist stereotypes of decay, filth, and unsafe conditions. Scholars such as Joao Costa Vargas have shown how, even in the absence of mentioning race explicitly in these contexts, these tacit descriptions reinforce stereotypes and justify discrimination.¹⁸ This phenomenon occurred in Uruguay, which allowed the military to target these areas for eviction as part of the economic plan and “civilizing mission” of the dictatorship’s practices (Benton 1986, 35–52). Newspapers, which were heavily censored by the military government, explained that the buildings were a “danger to the occupants,” attempting to frame the removal as protection for a community unwilling or unable to protect itself. Instead, these papers justified the removal as a “community decision” rather than a policy by the military to remove the Afro-Uruguayan population from the city’s center by decree.¹⁹ As a result, the *conventillos* were destroyed – literally bulldozed – and their residents were displaced. These evictions often occurred through brutal force (Rodríguez 2001). As activist and politician Romero Jorge Rodríguez notes, more than 1,200 people were evicted during this project, the majority of them Afro-Uruguayans (Rodríguez 2003, 61). Beatriz Santos Arrascaeta, a writer and activist, also explained that the experience of eviction felt connected to her ancestors’ similarly dehumanizing removals from the continent of Africa.²⁰

Scholars debate the intent behind the military’s intervention in these neighborhoods. Historian George Reid Andrews argues that the *conventillos* had been in extremely poor condition, and thus there was “little if any direct connection to questions of race” that prompted residents’ eviction” (Andrews 2010b, 142–144). Other scholars, however, such as Sztainbok, locate the importance of *conventillos* as Afro-Uruguayan

¹⁸ For a comparative study of how this occurs in favelas in Brazil that shines light on this process in Uruguay, see Vargas (2006, 49–81). Costa Vargas explains how this racial discourse gave voice and support to structural discrimination against Afro-Latin populations.

¹⁹ “Último candombe en el “Medio Mundo”: por decisión comunal será evacuado el martes,” *El Diario*, December 2, 1978, 20, Archivos de Biblioteca Nacional.

²⁰ Author interview with Beatriz Santos, September 8, 2014, Montevideo, Uruguay.

spaces of blackness within Uruguay, and thus offer a window into the way that their destruction by the military government can be understood in both effect and memory as a fundamental removal of a minority population from the center of the city to the peripheral margins (Sztainbok 2009). This analysis is particularly poignant considering that, after displacement from cultural centers and communities in the *conventillos*, tenants were not offered adequate housing or any other compensation. These historic centers of Afro-Uruguayan life were gone, its residents dispersed to far-flung neighborhoods scattered on the margins of the city, which created a sense of double exile from both their African heritage and also their Uruguayan birthright (Lewis 2003, 124). Many of these new “homes” also lacked many basic services. In one case, former residents were brought to what had once been stables, a group of sheds in Barrio Sur. In a play about the eviction, Afro-Uruguayan playwright Jorge Emilio Cardoso depicted a character explaining that the dictatorship had sent former tenants of the *conventillos* “to the corrals where for a long time, beasts had slept” (Cardoso 1996, 41). Cardoso here makes the connection between how the military government viewed and treated Afro-Uruguayan citizens, like animals. Once in this new “housing,” conditions did not improve. Afro-Uruguayans were told to make new homes “out of cardboard and other found materials” (Benton 1986, 44–45). In another case of the razing of a *conventillo*, Afro-Uruguayans were kicked out of their homes and taken to an abandoned factory that some scholars have described as having concentration camp-like conditions. These actions erased blackness from the city center and further segregated an already marginalized population (Sztainbok 2009, 73).²¹ While transnational human rights groups focused on the military dictatorship’s violations of political imprisonment, disappearances, and torture, these injustices that Afro-Uruguayans suffered remained outside the narrow, emerging human rights definition or any advocacy efforts (Sharnak forthcoming[a]). They remained hidden and ignored.

Without anyone protesting the harsh treatment, the military regime continued to deny that any racial problems existed. The president, Juan Maria Bordaberry, reinforced the myth of racial homogeneity by first claiming that Indigenous people were “nonexistent” in Uruguay. He then ignored the nation’s history of slavery and denied any conflict with what

²¹ It is important to note, though, that periodic evictions had occurred before the nation’s military rule. Blaming the treatment of the Afro-Uruguayan community solely on the dictatorship elides a much longer history of marginalization of this group in Uruguay.

he called the small Afro-Uruguayan population.²² In 1973, the military government shut down *Negrocán*, an Afro-Uruguayan musical project that celebrated Afro-culture with candombe shows and music (Olaza 2009, 22). The military government did allow a historic black organization, the *Asociación Cultural y Social del Uruguay* (Social and Cultural Association of Uruguay [ACSU]), to remain open throughout the dictatorship, but this was done mainly to boost the military's own image (Andrews 2010b, 145). The ACSU was traditionally conservative, did not challenge the military, and posed little threat to the government.²³ Bordaberry cited its continued operation as evidence of the nation's acceptance of its Afro-Uruguayan population. In reality, however, the military governments' actions and rhetoric during its rule pointed to the contrary.

Ultimately, during the dictatorship, Afro-Uruguayan discrimination and marginalization was amplified. Although the population had largely been denied and excluded throughout the country's history, this invisibility had new implications during the military's rule. Citizens endured eviction from their homes and communities, and they had no recourse through domestic activism because of the repression nor support from international pressure. The international human rights movement was focused on a narrow set of violations taking place under the military government – disappearances, torture, and political imprisonment. Internal displacement and forced evictions were not on the emerging transnational human rights network's radar. When the military finally fell after twelve years, this experience motivated many Afro-Uruguayans to advocate for a way to be visible, in part so that this treatment could not occur again, and in part to address historic structural violence and inequities that continued to affect their communities. This push for visibility ultimately found full expression in a vibrant civil rights movement that advocated for inclusion in the cultural citizenship of the country.

5.4 Activism in the Post-Dictatorship Period

After more than a decade of repressive rule, Uruguay transitioned back to democratic rule in March 1985, opening up new opportunities for organizing and activism among Afro-Uruguayans. Without the brutal

²² Bordaberry, letter to Kenneth Golby, February 12, 1975, reel 5, NACLA Archives, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT.

²³ The ACSU membership was also generally drawn from a small group of wealthier Afro-Uruguayans. See Uriarte (in Laviñ 2013, 35) and Rodríguez (in Laviñ 2013, 41).

dictatorship that had enveloped the country for so long, citizens shifted their focus to discussing the contours of who was included in the definition of citizenship in the renewed democratic state (Tulchin and Ruthenburg 2007; Yashar 2007, 60).²⁴ While social and welfare rights were not achieved as part of the transition, they were hotly debated among activists. It was during this time that there became a greater space for public articulations of ethnic identity and demands on the state against continued invisibility and discrimination (Yashar 1996, 87).

Indeed, in the post-dictatorship period, many younger and more politically left-leaning Afro-Uruguayans organized in response to the plight of those who had been displaced during the dictatorship and the continued racism their communities faced (*Brecha* 1985b, 2).²⁵ Across the Southern Cone, a growing black consciousness was a critical part of discussions about democratization in the region and the renegotiation of the relationship between states and citizens in these newly reconstituted democratic state (Kenny 2018, 64–65; Loveman 2014, 266–267). Afro-Uruguayans visibility grew during these larger conversations in the 1980s as citizens utilized the transitional environment to vocalize collective dissent and to advocate for a broad range of social, political, and economic inclusion. Many were influenced by international movements. For example, some activists brought their ideas for how to improve the lives of Afro-Uruguayans back with them from their time abroad during the dictatorship. Romero Jorge Rodríguez had been jailed and tortured by the military regime and, after his release, fled into exile in Brazil in the mid-1970s.²⁶ In Brazil, he studied with professors who focused on ethnicity, race, and African civilizations. These classes first exposed him to organizing around racial consciousness. During his time in exile, he was part of a black activist movement advocating for a decolonized, anti-imperialist, and Pan-African political agenda which included declaring a Black consciousness day in Brazil. Rodríguez drew on this experience upon his return to Uruguay from exile as he began to advocate for an Uruguayan racial consciousness.²⁷ Similarly, Beatriz Ramirez, *una desalojada* (a

²⁴ Yashar, however, has also argued that Indigenous movements during this time questioned whether the nation-state was a legitimate basis for extending and defining citizenship rights and responsibilities.

²⁵ “Las dificultades para insertarse en una sociedad blanca” (*Brecha* 1985, 2).

²⁶ Author email from Rodríguez, January 24, 2019.

²⁷ Author interview with Rodríguez, October 9, 2014, Montevideo, Uruguay, see also Rodríguez (2003); for more on Brazil’s racial consciousness during this time, see Cottrol (2013, 241–265).

woman evicted from the *conventillos* by the military dictatorship) studied the US civil rights movement and the South African anti-apartheid struggle which informed her ideas of organizing around racial identities. Both of them were deeply influenced by international movements and ideas, utilizing their experiences abroad, transnational connections, and the study of Pan-Africanism to focus on recognition in an Uruguayan context (Sztainbok 2009).

Activists such as Rodríguez and Ramírez were also part of an emerging group of organizers who paved the way for a resurgence in black mobilization as Afro-Uruguayans discussed ways to rescue their own histories, culture, and identity in this transitional period (*Brecha* 1986, 12). At particular stake was the historic absence of an Afro-Uruguayan population in the way that the state promoted the nation's image as historically homogenous, European, and white (Ferreira 2003, 7). In response, this new generation of Afro-Uruguayan activists rejected the white-washing of their contributions to Uruguayan civil society and reclaimed identities that more directly drew a connection to their African heritage. After seeing the effects of this erasure during the dictatorship, activists focused on ways of promoting their visibility and recovering their historic contributions to the country. At a time in the nation when debates raged about the future of what democracy would look like, activists utilized the shifting and precarious political environment to advocate for inclusion (Ramírez 2011). For example, they founded new organizations in 1988 that invoked their identity as Afro-descendants. Most prominently was *Organización Mundo Afro* (Organization of Afro World), a group that also published a newspaper of the same name. *Mundo Afro* served as an important advocacy and organizing center for Afro-Uruguayans, while the paper served to publicize *candombe* performances, African art exhibits, and talks, while also publishing articles on the history of Afro-Uruguayans and global issues facing African populations from the formation of the Organization of African States to the plight of Afro-Haitians (*Mundo Afro* 1988). Fundamentally, *Mundo Afro* was formed to be, in the words of Rodríguez, one of its main founders, "an Afro-Uruguayan voice, which analyzes and communicates the thoughts and feelings of an essential component of our national formation. A voice which expresses the desires of the black community of Uruguay, our existence, its particular role in the projection of a national reality" (Rodríguez 1988, 3). Other important groups formed under the umbrella of *Mundo Afro*. These affiliated groups focused on particular populations within the community, such as *el Grupo de Apoyo a la Mujer Afrouruguaya* (Support Group to AfroUruguayan

Women [GAMA]) and *Movimiento Juvenil Afro* (Afro Youth Movement) (Andrews 2010b, 146–147). In the subsequent years, even more organizations surfaced which centered on specific issues such as black education or black cultural identity through *candombe*, such as UAFRO, Mizangas, Asociación Civil Africanía, and the Asociación de Arte y Cultura Afro Uruguaya (ADACAU) among others. These groups organized parades, protests, and ultimately worked to bring Uruguay's Afro-population to a broader national conversation about discrimination and structural racism.

Centrally, these groups focused on measures to address the historic invisibility of Afro-Uruguayans, as well as continued economic and social disparities as a response to their experiences during the dictatorship (Uriarte in Laviñ 2013, 35). For much of the country's history, the absence of Afro-descendants as a legitimate force within the country had allowed for false claims of racial tolerance and homogenization to exist. It is part of what had led to the displacement of these groups during the dictatorship and these groups were determined to challenge this status quo. Due to the sustained organized political activism which emerged, these denials were no longer possible. And much of it began with the pressing need to address these inequities after military rule had brought them into such stark focus. As Romero Jorge Rodríguez notes, the basis for the movement “came out of the dictatorship . . . its excesses, its horrible [policies] that left black neighborhoods empty.”²⁸ Similarly, singer and activist Chabela Ramírez explains that, after the dictatorship left her community with nothing, she decided “to be an activist” so that people could know what Afro-descendants had gone through and she could begin to work to solve some of the most pressing problems facing Afro-Uruguayan communities (Brown 2013, 183). The experience of invisibility and violence during the dictatorship, combined with a propitious political climate during the transition and influences from abroad, fomented the emergence of a strong and vibrant Afro-Uruguayan activist emergence in the country.

5.5 International Influences

While originating from this domestic impetus in the 1980s, Uruguayan racial activism also connected with a larger movement and discourse dedicated to issues of racial equity that emerged on a global level, amplifying their concerns and placing additional pressure on the state to institutionally

²⁸ Author interview with Rodríguez, October 9, 2014, Montevideo, Uruguay.

respond to these concerns. The first influence at a global level came from transnational activists' exchange of ideas. As described in Section 5.4, many activists in exile had been exposed to ideas and organizing abroad, and they brought these ideas and connections back with them to Uruguay in the aftermath of dictatorship that continued over the following decades.²⁹ In groups of friends, activists such as Alicia Esquivel Rodríguez recounts that they discussed and shared information about Brazil, South Africa, apartheid struggles, and US notions of black power. These experiences oftentimes became inspirational to a new generation of activists in Uruguay to fight for their own struggles (Rodríguez in Laviñ 2013, 40).

In the twenty-first century, these ideas were also amplified by a growing concern by states and multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations, as multiculturalism became a global cause célèbre. Shifts in this thinking emerged, first, through an expanded definition of human rights. Although human rights were narrowly defined during the 1970s and 1980s as largely focusing on torture, political imprisonment, and disappearances, by the twenty-first century, the international human rights regime had evolved and developed in a way that addressed a range of social, economic, and identity rights, which included espousing protection of minority rights as one of its central tenets (United Nations Minorities Declaration 1992; Kaclem 2008, 531–552; Loveman 2014, 267). Implementation of these ideas reached a key apex in 2001 when, under UN auspices, Durban, South Africa hosted the World Conference against Racism. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, hosted the conference as delegates from around the world came to discuss the unfair treatment of minority groups. Romero Jorge Rodríguez represented Mundo Afro as part of the Uruguay delegation to the conference, arguing forcefully for Uruguay to officially address Afro-Uruguayan invisibility and exclusion from the state.³⁰ Here, Romero and other activists who had been working domestically for fifteen years, connected with activists from around the world and raised the issue not just domestically but internationally. This work also garnered support from global agencies and networks, in addition to inspiring the production of international reports, documents, and support of

²⁹ Yashar explains that this is the globalization approach as one component to understanding the rise of ethnic mobilization (Yashar 2005, 15–19).

³⁰ Other attendees included the Minister of Education and Culture, Antonio Mercader. For an articulation of what Rodríguez presented to the conference, see Rodríguez (2003, 109–115).

multiculturalism within states that recognized and supported diverse populations (Carballo in Laviñ 2013, 121; Loveman 2014, 274).³¹ After the conference, the Uruguayan state was motivated to acknowledge its Afro-Uruguayan history both due to a larger trend in the region and internationally to celebrate its multiculturalism as part of promoting its status as a civilized state in a community of nations, as well as for fear of being embarrassed on an international stage by continuing to deny the country's minority populations. Activists had brought complaints to the international stage and Uruguay began to respond.

This change started in a substantive way soon after the conference. In 2003, the capital of Montevideo passed a municipal law that created the *Unidad Temática por los Derechos de los Afrodescendientes* (Thematic Unit for the Rights of Afro-Descendants), aimed at investigating and creating programs that would focus on racial equality in the city. At a national level, in 2004, Parliament adopted Law 17.817, which declared it a national interest to combat all forms of discrimination. Furthermore, the law provided for the creation of an Honorary Commission against Racism, Xenophobia, and all forms of discrimination which listed its responsibilities as monitoring and reporting on anti-discrimination and developing proposals to create greater compliance with anti-discrimination.³² In this way, one can see an immediate response at the local and national level to recognize the country's Afro-decedent population and make rhetorical commitments to securing equality.

One of the most tangible outcomes of this renewed organizing and international pressure found its expression in efforts at including race in the national census. The only time a Uruguayan census had taken account of race was 1852 – a mere ten years after slavery was abolished. Since then, no official part of the census sought to account for the ethno-racial component of the population.³³ This allowed the state to make

³¹ Some of these reports include, UN Human Development Report: Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World, 2004, available at: http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/265/hdr_2004_complete.pdf, last accessed October 16, 2020, and National Human Development Report Brazil: Racism, Poverty, and Violence, 2005, available at: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/national-human-development-report-brazil>, last accessed October 16, 2020.

³² "Lucha Contra el Racismo, la Xenofobia y La discriminación," Ley N. 17.817, available at: <https://legislativo.parlamento.gub.uy/temporales/leytemp1016698.htm>.

³³ Loveman explores how early censuses were part of modern state-building projects of the early republics, but that race fell off as a category of inquiry with the discrediting of race as a scientific concept (2014, 28, 41).

claims for over 150 years about its “nonexistent” Afro population. By the turn of the twenty-first century though, Afro-descendent civil society groups across the Americas launched concerted campaigns to increase their visibility through disaggregated data which could improve recognition of distinct identities as a way to combat inequality, fight discrimination, and protect vulnerable populations (*Mundo Afro* in Romany 2001, 179–181; Lennox and Minott 2011; Loveman 2014). The movement stemmed from the idea that being included in official surveys was a way to denote recognition and citizenship in an era when social scientific surveying grew in prominence.³⁴ Within Uruguay, many organizations that were founded in the dictatorship’s immediate aftermath hoped that a consciousness about the complexity of Uruguay’s racial demography could overturn the notion of Afro-Uruguayans absence in the country. A census was seen as a tool to erase the social invisibility that manifested in Afro exclusion from culture, participation in politics, and unrecognized contributions to the nations’ social and cultural fabric (Lennox and Minott 2011; Loveman 2014). Further, studies have traced social invisibility to economic marginalization and disproportionately high levels of poverty and unemployment, as well as lower levels of education – statistics which all bore out in Uruguay. Afro-Uruguayans argued that if a census could recognize these disparities, it could also help combat the entrenched inequality and spur action to address these issues. Activists succeeding in having race be included on the 1996 and 2006 household surveys – representative sample surveys across the nation that collect information about the population. Previous estimates had placed the Afro-Uruguay population at only 4 percent of the population, but these surveys pointed to a higher percentage of the population. The first recorded 6 percent of the population identifying as Afro-Uruguayan, and the second was 9 percent (Bucheli and Cabella 2006; Cabella and Porzecanski 2015). This incomplete but illustrative information provided activists with data to advocate for inclusion of the question on the full census to get a more complete accounting of the ethnic makeup of the country.

Due to this evidence and joining a chorus of voices across Latin America that argued for the importance of accounting for ethno-racial classification of citizens, Afro-Uruguayans made a concerted effort to have the government include race in the long-planned 2006 census.

³⁴ For two regional comparisons about the importance and challenges of being “counted,” see Igo (2007) and Nelson (2015).

Yet, the nation's planning for the census lacked any racial accounting, and therefore Afro-Uruguayans staged protests and lobbied to postpone the census until it took account of the racial makeup of the country. Bolstered by a post-Durban international movement for multicultural recognition, the mobilization succeeded in stopping another year of non-inclusion (Bucheli and Cabella 2006; Cabella and Porzecanski 2015). The census was delayed for five years to develop a tool to ask about the country's racial-ethnic composition.

In the meantime, other measures were taken to increase Afro visibility through different avenues. First, in 2005, Edgardo Ortuño became the first Afro-descendent elected to Parliament since 1932.³⁵ He had grown up as an activist in the aftermath of the country's dictatorship, advocating for the liberation of political prisoners and fighting against the country's 1986 amnesty law for members of the military. This activist experience ultimately led him into politics (Ornoz 2015). His election to Parliament coincided with a national leftward sweep, when his party, the Frente Amplio, won the presidency for the first time.³⁶ In office, he worked with this new left majority and a vibrant group of activists to shine a light on the history and culture of a long-denied population. For example, he helped establish a "National Day of Candombe, Afro-Uruguayan Culture, and Racial Equality," which he believed could be similar to Martin Luther King Jr. Day in the United States or the Brazilian Black Consciousness Day (Casa de la Cultura AfroUruguaya 2012). Ortuño explained that the law aimed to reclaim Afro-Uruguayan identity and culture after a long history of discrimination (Ortuño in Laviñ 2013, 56). The day was also intimately linked to the displacement of Afro-Uruguayans during the dictatorship – it is celebrated on December 3. That was the day in 1978 that the dictatorship violently forced residents of the famous *conventillo Mediomundo* to leave for good. Now every year on December 3, there is a national celebration of Afro-Uruguayan culture with parades, lectures, shows, and *candombe*.

Pushes for visibility also occurred through various modes of using public events and controversies to mobilize national debates about race

³⁵ There is some evidence that suggests that Alba Roballo, who served as a senator from 1958–1968 and 1971–1973, was also black (Andrews 2010b, 164–165). Afro-Uruguayans, however, remain under-represented in Parliament (Riguetti 2019).

³⁶ The Frente Amplio was created in 1971 as a challenge to the political deadlock prior to Uruguay's official period of military rule. It started as a coalition political party of Communists, Socialists, Christian Democrats, leftist independents, and those leaving the two traditional parties. See Luna (2007, 5).

in the country. For example, in 2011, this process involved using the country's favorite sport, *fútbol*, to promote a race-based consciousness. During an English Premier League game, Luis Suárez, Uruguay's most popular and best player, engaged in a physical and verbal dispute with Senegalese-born Manchester United player, Patrice Evra. Evra filed a complaint against Suarez for using the word *negro* in the fight, which violated league rules of using "abusive and/or insulting words and/or behavior contrary to FA [Football Association] rules" that included "a reference to the ethnic origins and/or colour and/or race" (FURD 2011). Suarez's defense against the complaint rested on his claim that *negro* was a "descriptive and sometimes affectionate term for blacks or even for people with dark hair or dark complexion" (Renfrew and Snyder 2016, 32).³⁷ The explanation proved unconvincing and the decision ultimately resulted in an eight-match ban and £40,000 fine. Afro-Uruguayans saw the international controversy as a way to shed light on the ways that racism existed in the country. Ernesto Rodríguez, a member of Mundo Afro, told anthropological researchers that, while some Uruguayans think of racism only in terms of slavery, whippings, and lynchings, those categorizations elide structural racism within societies (Renfrew and Snyder 2016, 336). In Uruguay, prejudice was often expressed in daily forms of public discourse and discrimination. The Suarez controversy was one way for Afro-Uruguayans to begin to discuss this topic and bring implicit racism to the fore of national dialogues and advocate for the importance of policies to address this discrimination.

The year of this incident also coincided with the results of the updated 2011 census and activists utilized the controversy as a way to center the conversation about the results. After Afro-Uruguayans successfully mobilized to include race on the questionnaire, the census itself reflected Afro-Uruguayan visibility, stating that the inclusion of the question to self-identify "represented another fundamental step towards the recognition of minority populations as subjects of rights, enabling the construction of a more just and inclusive society" (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2011). Further, when the results of the census became public, it recorded that instead of the long-assumed 4 percent of the population, Uruguay actually had a population of 8.1 percent Afro-descendants –

³⁷ Suárez offered another defense based on a misunderstanding of the Spanish language in his memoir. See Suárez (2014).

more than double official previous estimates.³⁸ The census also reflected significant gaps in the socioeconomic statuses between Afro-descendants and the rest of the Uruguayan population. Immense disparities existed in terms of the average number of years completed within the education system, wage discrepancy, illiteracy, higher education, and poverty rates (Cabella et al. 2013). These stark differences, finally brought to light in their full form from the census, demonstrated that inequality was linked to race in each and every department across the country. With the census thus came newfound visibility and data which civil society groups could use to advocate for meaningful policy changes to address these issues.

Advocacy efforts on behalf of the census transitioned into mobilization to address the inequalities that the census laid bare. One of the most notable outcomes came in the form of an affirmative action law in 2013, which had three main provisions.³⁹ First, the law mandated teaching about Afro-Uruguayan history which, until the law, had been completely left out of public schools' curriculum, to account for Afro visibility. Second, it granted Afro-descendants more scholarships and access to vocational training to help produce higher rates of graduation. Lastly, the law set up a quota in government employment, requiring that 8 percent of vacancies be set aside for Afro-Uruguayans (Carrillo 2012, 2). It also gestured toward the need for private industry to do the same. These measures were instituted to last for 15 years. The bill passed both chambers of Parliament unanimously. Explicitly noting the reasons for the law, the first article states that the "the Afro-descendent population that has inhabited this country has historically been the victim of racial discrimination and stigmatization since the time of slave trafficking and the slave trade . . . this law contributes to making amends for historical discrimination" (Parlamento Uruguay 2013).

Debates in the Senate similarly focused on correcting the historical injustice, which acknowledged the structural racism that had been ingrained in Uruguayan society since the slave trade. However, some senators, responding to the fears of opponents of the law, questioned

³⁸ As scholar Robert Cottrol notes, there is a long history of individuals across Latin American that attempt to minimize or deny African heritage, so census numbers might actually significantly undercount in a self-reporting system such as Uruguay (Cottrol 2013, 274).

³⁹ The idea for an affirmative action law dated back well over a decade as a way to redress student access to education, discrimination in industry, and a lack of representation in higher education and professional jobs. See Santos (2003) and Rodríguez (2003, 117–126).

whether positive discrimination might occur in new hiring practices, or whether there might be potential for the policy to create a stigma around the hiring of Afro-Uruguayans.⁴⁰ Despite these reservations, others claimed that doing nothing would be more detrimental. Rodríguez stressed in his testimony before the Senate, “The absence of a policy would itself be a policy,” where the government would continue to endorse pre-existing structural discrimination. Afro-Uruguayans viewed an affirmative action law as a way to transform law from being a tool of oppression and racial subordination into one that would help dismantle a historic system of racial hierarchy and invisibility. The argument clearly had force, as the bill finally passed the senate in August 2013 (Olaza 2017). It marked a clear victory for Afro-Uruguayans that began in many ways in the transition back to democratic rule in the 1980s but had finally found official recognition and redress almost thirty years later. Over this period, Uruguay’s evolution on multiculturalism and equal rights initiatives had been gradual and influenced by a confluence of grassroots activism, a rising international minority rights regime, and governmental responses to both factors that eventually resulted in marked policy changes.⁴¹

5.6 Conclusion

In the six years since the affirmative action law passed into law, there have been few studies that evaluate the effects of the affirmative action law. However, vast disparities still exist. While Afro-Uruguayans equal 8.1 percent of the population, they are 26 percent of those who qualify for Tarjeta Uruguay Social (TUS) benefits because they live under the poverty line. In addition, quotas were established to have 8 percent of government jobs go to Afrodescendants. The state’s five-year report indicated that through 2018, numbers reached 3.29 percent, which, when broken down by state agency, equaled fourteen out of thirty-eight

⁴⁰ Quotas have indeed been politically explosive, particularly in Brazil. Historian George Reid Andrews notes their “questionable constitutionality” and that they can “do the anti-racism cause more harm than good” (Andrews 2009, 191–210). For more on pushback against the law, see Sharnak (forthcoming[b]).

⁴¹ It should be noted that explicit references were made to international standards and the Durban conference in Parliamentary debates that argued for the importance of the law. See “Diario de Sesiones de la Cámara de representantes,” 59th session, October 17, 2012. Available at: <https://legislativo.parlamento.gub.uy/temporales/70784335268641.PDF#pagina18>, last accessed April 8, 2020.

organizations managing to reach the 8 percent quota (Isgleas 2019; *La Diaria* 2017). Uruguayan government officials noted that “there was still a long way to go before [the quota] was fully achieved.” Thus, they sought to implement awareness campaigns and trainings for 20 percent of state agencies on how to increase their numbers (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination considers report of Uruguay 2016). So far, the law’s biggest success came from the number of grants awarded to attend school, which helped keep students in the educational system instead of being forced to leave at an early age to contribute to making money for their households (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination considers report of Uruguay 2016). It remains to be seen whether official recognition will make a substantial impact on discrimination or significantly impact standards of living. These early statistics demonstrate the difficulty of implementing these laws and early limits of legislative policy to change long-standing structural discrimination. Scholars such as Charles Hale have demonstrated how neoliberal governments embrace limited forms of multiculturalism to control broader or more radical forms of empowerment, and it is still to be determined whether Uruguay’s affirmative action law was a form of control and impression management or an earnest attempt to change the lived experience and material wellbeing of the Afro-Uruguayan population (Hale 2002, 2006, 47–82).

Despite these lingering problems, the sustained activism of Afro-Uruguayans has provided a unique and powerful example of rising racial visibility, transnational activism in the Western Hemisphere, and its effects in one country. Afro-Uruguayans’ contributions to the sociopolitical progress and cultural fabric of their country had largely been denied for the majority of the nation’s history and this invisibility was exacerbated during the country’s military rule. Yet, as a result of that particular experience, Afro-Uruguayan mobilization surged during the country’s transition back to democratic rule. Advocacy for visibility and inclusion in the national narrative, which can be traced to this period, ultimately found some success in the twenty-first century, when combined with a global movement for ethnoracial recognition, a politically left-leaning state implemented far reaching measures such as days of recognition, inclusion in the census, and an affirmative action law.

In many ways, Uruguay has been a beacon of social progressivism in the region. The government not only addressed affirmative action, but it also passed laws to legalize abortion, same sex marriage, trans-rights, and

the sale of marijuana – leading some observers to call the country a “utopia” (Goni 2016). It is easy to see some of the abovementioned steps taken on race as part of the socially liberal policies of this broader leftist platform of the Frente Amplio government. However, when examined closely, it becomes clear that these important steps are the result of a combined set of factors, including decades of concerted advocacy by the Afro-Uruguayan community that finally got political purchase under a leftist government with the added effect of an international push toward multiculturalism. Perhaps most notably, this overturned a national narrative of whiteness that dates back two centuries. Afro-Uruguayans brought visibility about their contributions to the country, which existed since Uruguay first adopted *candombe* as a national tradition, but until recently were ignored. It is this change that provides a radical shift in terms of thinking about previous national histories of complete invisibility to one where there is official recognition and celebration of Afro-decedents and their influence in the country. While disparities and discrimination still exist, sustained mobilization created a road to recognition and a path for change in policy – one that stemmed from the depths of dictatorship but ultimately provided opportunity and impetus that is finally bearing fruit.

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