

Book Review/Reseña

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Edwards, Erika Denise. *Hiding in Plain Sight: Black Women, the Law, and the Making of a White Argentine Republic*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2021.

In *Hiding in Plain Sight: Black Women, the Law, and the Making of a White Argentine Republic*, Erika Denise Edwards researches how black people in Argentina disappeared from the city of Córdoba in the early 1800s. Edwards starts her study with brief comments on her time in Córdoba during a study visit in 2002. She learned that there were no black people in Argentina during this period based on her inquiries. To better understand how the black people of Argentina disappeared from Córdoba, Edwards subsequently explored city censuses; notarial and probate records; criminal, ecclesiastical, and civil court cases; marriages and baptisms records; and newsletters.

Hiding in Plain Sight uncovers the recorded histories of many African-descendant women, and Edwards contends that invisibility was attained by specific actions taken by black women in Argentina who were able to overcome ethnic and social class designations that assigned them to the lower rungs of the social ladder in Córdoba. She argues that there is no gain in saying that the black population simply disappeared, when many attained whiteness by civically partnering with elites in the society, as they purposefully sought to redefine their racial classifications and destinies.

Edwards notes that in the colonial period, black women who were officially wives had more influence than mistresses did. Still, black women in both categories found their way out of solid racial limitations and controlled the servants in their homes. They enjoyed great privileges after attaining whiteness, thereby challenging the racial hierarchy and often making the Church and Crown uncomfortable. However, these black women strived to break barriers, and their ability to not conform to racial barriers emphasizes the inconsistency of the colonial segments.

Hiding in Plain Sight's primary focus is on black women in Córdoba. In general, women in Spanish culture took care of their families, and, in return families gave them everything they needed. Women attained whiteness by marrying those whose skin was whiter than theirs. If a woman married a Spaniard, the status of "*doña*" was achieved, despite her initial position, and she would have the privileges that came with it. Even though the *castas* system put Indians at the bottom in terms of social status, Spanish law safeguarded their freedom. When a black woman claimed Indian heritage, she and her children could be protected.

Edwards points out that black women who married elite men had the name of their children recorded in Spanish, in the hope that their progeny would be regarded as white, with the consequent freedom and privileges. By the 1770s, the Crown had grown intolerant of black women achieving whiteness through marriage, hence the Royal Pragmatic (1776) authorizing families to deny their children permission to marry people of African descent and to disinherit them if they disobeyed. While most parents adhered to the Crown's directives, Afro-Argentine women reacted and sought various ways to prove that they were of Amerindian and not African descent.

Going further, Edwards explains how the government was able to put an end to slavery and how it ended progressively. She notes that the racial hierarchy of the colonial era became very weak, which led to a general agreement on a nonwhite category referred to as *pardo*, in contrast to the colonial terms *mulato* and *mestizo* that were used to describe people of African and Amerindian lineage. The government made investments in education to enlighten the *pardos* and "civilize" them regardless of their former status. These diverse factors, according to Edwards, eliminated divisions between the people of African descent and those of Amerindian heritage, which led to the disappearance of Afro-Argentines from history.

Hiding in Plain Sight is a good match for any class in Afro-Argentine history, looking at how well-researched the book is and how Edwards focused her research on Córdoba rather than Buenos Aires. The publisher touts the book as the first comprehensive study in English of the history of African descendants outside of Buenos Aires in the late colonial and early republican periods.

Edwards provides readers with clear explanations of the *castas* system in Argentina, its origins and limitations. She grounds her observations in pertinent case studies, generating interest in documented historical narratives. She details, for example, the infamous legal scandal in 1793 in Córdoba when Spanish vicar José Lino de León kept his enslaved African-descended black woman, Bernabela, as a privileged concubine.

Edwards's careful use of diverse historical resources brings to light numerous race-based decisions by black women and makes her case studies extraordinarily interesting.

Hiding in Plain Sight serves as a rich resource for anyone researching race in colonial Latin America. It is a treasure trove for graduate students and anyone interested in Latin American history.

In terms of historical scholarship, *Hiding in Plain Sight* has garnered numerous important recognitions:

- Winner, Association of Black Women Historians, 2020 Letitia Woods-Brown Award for the best book in African American Women's History
- Winner, Western Association of Women Historians, 2021 Barbara "Penny" Kanner Award
- Finalist, Harriet Tubman Book Prize, 2021
- Finalist, Berkshire Conference of Women Historians Book Prize, 2020

Raymond Okechukwu Ejikemeuwa is a PhD candidate in History at Georgia State University, Atlanta, focusing on Africa and the African Diaspora, migration, and Atlantic history. He completed a BA in History and International Studies at Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria, where he was president of the History Students Association, and earned an MA in History from the University of West Florida, where he served as president of the Graduate Student Advisory Board and was designated the 2023 Outstanding Graduate Student Leader. He is president of the Association of Historians at Georgia State University and a Senior Martin Luther King Ambassador for the 2025–2026 academic year. He is currently writing his dissertation on "Strategies of Identity in Igbo Diaspora: Migration, Gender, and Preservation in North America during the Eras of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Biafran War."
